



Stuart Gradon, Calgary Herald

Mari Ahvensalmi is considered a strong skater, despite having only played hockey for five years.

Cougars blueline adds Finnish flavour

Physical play surprises Ahvensalmi

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CALGARY HERALD

The Mount Royal University Cougars' women's hockey team will have an international dimension to their defence this year.

Mari Ahvensalmi — better known as Finland to her teammates — wanted to get a little ice time on a school exchange from Helsinki so she contacted head coach Scott Rivett to get the 411.

And as it turned out, the 24-year-old defenceman could skate and skate well, so who was he to turn her down?

"She obviously came over not really having any idea of what Alberta and everything was all about," said Rivett, whose team was the 2008-09 Alberta Colleges Athletic Conference runners-up. "There's no question the game's a little more physical than she's used to."

"She has a ton of skill and she's a strong skater, which is really important when you're playing overseas because all of the ice-surfaces are kind of that Olympic-sized ice. That's definitely one of her biggest strengths."

Ahvensalmi may be a game-time decision for Friday's season opener

against the SAIT Trojans (7 p.m., SAIT Campus Centre Arena) after suffering a concussion a few weeks ago in an exhibition clash against the 2008-09 ACAC champion University of Calgary Dinos. But already, she's enjoying herself.

Because her degree in management and marketing requires a year of studying abroad, Ahvensalmi chose Mount Royal University — where she knew she'd be able to play. Back home, she played in a Finnish women's league made up of eight teams that competed for a national championship.

Although Ahvensalmi has only played ice hockey for five years, she knows the game well enough and can skate thanks to playing in-line hockey at a national level and years of playing ringette.

"I think our game is a bit faster but their game is a bit more physical but not too big differences," said Ahvensalmi, who is currently living in Mount Royal residence with three other exchange students. "They think about the system more, that was new for me. We don't think about it that much."

"It's a bit different but not too much. They play more body here than we do in Finland in some cases."

Next week, she'll also get a chance to catch a National Hockey League game for the first time — not to mention watching her fellow Finns Mikka Kiprusoff and Olli Jokinen in action — as she'll attend next weeks' between the Flames and Oilers.

"Everybody has been really nice to me and has made me feel comfortable," she said.

Including Ahvensalmi, the Cougars' roster features eight new faces as well as three forwards and two defencemen who are rookies.

Meanwhile, there are 13 returning players, including returning leading scorer Sharina Filion and fellow veteran Chelsey Morrill, who are still stinging from last year's loss 1-0 Game 5 loss to the Dinos for ACAC supremacy who gained inclusion back into Canadian Interuniversity Sport competition.

"Coming one goal short last year set the stage for our returners throughout the summer," noted Rivett, whose club finished last in ACAC standings, going 5-3-16-1 in the regular season. "They came to camp with high expectations for themselves and the team this year and that's a good place to be."

The Cougars will host SAIT at Centennial Arenas at 8:45 p.m. on Saturday for their home opener.

Ice Chips

The University of Calgary Dinos host the University of Saskatchewan at the Olympic Oval on Friday at 7:30 p.m. and Saturday at 3 p.m. at Father David Bauer. After a seven-year stint in the ACAC, the Dinos played their first CIS games last weekend, splitting a two game road-trip at UBC.