

Top rookie defenceman has sights on playing for Team Canada

Ryan Merkley led all Ontario Hockey League rookies in scoring this season

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Ryan Merkley laughs as he's reminded of his trainer's recent tweet with a clip of the Mississauga defenceman performing on-ice drills, followed by the hashtag: "He wants Dahlin." It was in reference to Rasmus Dahlin, the talented Swedish defenceman who played for his country against the many of the top 19-year-olds in this year's World Junior Hockey Championships as a 16-year-old.

Merkley hopes to show that he can display a similar skill set as he prepares for the 2018 NHL Draft.

"He [Dahlin] is obviously a top guy in our age group," said Mer-

kley, who led all Ontario Hockey League rookies in scoring with 55 points (12 goals and 43 assists) this season.

"I haven't seen him yet, so I'd like to see him and see what he's all about."

There's a chance they could meet in the World Under-18 Hockey Championships in Slovakia from April 13 to 23, since Merkley is trying out for Canada's team as one of six underage players given that privilege by Hockey Canada.

As someone who has done so well in his first year, Merkley holds himself to a high standard and wants to play against the world's best teenagers.

"(The tournament) is going to be high-end," Merkley said.

"Every single player is very skilled and (among) the best in their league too. It's not just another team, it's the best of the best in every league."

A lot was expected from Merkley after he was picked first overall by the Storm in the 2016

OHL Priority Selection Draft and he's growing into a leader in the eyes of Guelph assistant coach and former NHL player Luca Caputi.

"That's what we need him to be," Caputi said. "He's one of the core members of our youth movement and toward the end of the year you could see he became a more vocal leader, holding people accountable, and that's what we want all of our guys to do."

Approaching last year's OHL draft, Merkley was highly touted for his speed, vision and awareness, facets of the game that have helped him make a solid transition into the major junior loop.

His reputation as a dynamic offensive defenceman is obvious, but he's continuously working on his defensive repertoire and believes adding more muscle to his 5-foot-11-inch, 165-pound frame will help in that regard.

While he registered a poor plus/minus rating of -41 last season, Caputi feels that's a mislead-

ing stat since Guelph went through some hardships as a rebuilding team.

"We played with four D for two weeks at one point and he was a 16-year-old playing 30-plus minutes and that's not easy," he said. "We thought he had a great year overall, really matured and played the right way."

Despite struggling en route to the OHL's second worst record (21-40-5-2), Merkley

points out that nine rookies suited up for the Storm and he's excited to grow with them.

"It's obviously a tough time and being the youngest team in the league it's not going to be fun some nights, but it's all about the future."

