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TY SMILANIC IS SET FOR COLLEGIATE CAREER AFTER BEING DRAFTED BY FLORIDA PANTHERS

By Heather Rule, SportsEngine, 12/03/20, 3:45PM MST

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Members only: The former Colorado Thunderbird, who was taken in the third round of this year's NHL draft, is playing for Quinnipiac University this season. Smilanic recently made the 100 NCAA hockey players to watch list from The Hockey News at Sports Illustrated.



Ty Smilanic (above) developed his hockey skills with the National Team Development Program in Michigan in addition to the Colorado Thunderbirds. Smilanic now continues his playing career at Quinnipiac University. Photos courtesy of Rena Laverty/USA Hockey

Ty Smilanic always heard that NHL Draft Day is one of the most exciting, but also most nerve-wracking days of a hockey player's life.

"I never really understood that," Smilanic said. "I thought they were over exaggerating. But it turns out they weren't."

Smilanic was projected to go in the first or second round of the 2020 NHL Entry Draft this October, according to many scouts and news outlets. But round one came and went, and he didn't hear his name. On day two, his name kept sliding down the board. It was hard to watch, he said.

The Florida Panthers selected Smilanic in the third round — 74th overall.

"It's just a number, and I'm ready to get started," Smilanic said.

Instead of hearing his name called while at an NHL arena, walking on stage, and putting on his new team's jersey, Smilanic watched the draft with his parents, brother and sister at a hotel near his Quinnipiac University campus in Connecticut. The draft was originally meant to be held in Montreal, but was postponed and later turned into a virtual experience, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Spending the day with his supportive family to hear his name called was a special feeling that Smilanic said he wouldn't forget anytime soon. To cap a crazy few weeks for the 18-year old, 6-1 center from Elizabeth, Smilanic was also named in November to The Hockey News on Sports Illustrated's list of the 100 NCAA hockey players to watch, coming in at No. 19. He's coming off two seasons with the U.S. National Team Development Program (NTDP), and prior to that he played with the Colorado Thunderbirds.

As it goes in 2020 amid a pandemic, Smilanic heard from the Panthers' general manager, Bill Zito, and team scouts, but Smilanic hasn't traveled to Florida. The team also sent him a draft jersey and some Panthers swag, trying to make the best of the situation, Smilanic said.

"[The Florida Panthers] said they were surprised they got me that late," Smilanic said. "They're extremely happy to have me. So for me that's really cool as a player to go to an organization that couldn't be happier to have you and think you're a big part of their future."

The Quinnipiac men's hockey staff also sees Smilanic as better than a third-round talent, said associate head coach Bill Riga. He added that Smilanic might end up being the best player the Panthers took in this year's draft.

"I think Florida got a steal in the third round," Riga said.

"You take it for granted when you're just showing up to the rink every day. But when that's taken from you, you realize how much you take it for granted, and how much of a treat it is to play hockey every day and get to play at such a high level."

--Ty Smilanic on COVID-19 impacting his collegiate debut

Injuries likely played a role in Smilanic's draft stock falling. He missed time last season with three illness or injury-related issues, starting with mononucleosis shutting him down for five or six weeks to start the season. Then came a high-ankle sprain in practice right before flying overseas for an international tournament. He played anyway, which prolonged his recovery time (a total of four or five weeks), but he added that his NTDP team won gold in the tournament, so he has no regrets. Later in the year, he missed three weeks with a broken finger before finishing out the season playing with a cast.

Before last year, he said he never missed a game because of an injury.

"I would have preferred that it wasn't my draft year, but such is life," Smilanic said.

The adversity Smilanic faced last year, while frustrating, has helped make him a better person and player. He described last season as being on a mental roller coaster as he balanced the frustration with making the best of it.

It also opened his eyes to a gratefulness when it comes to playing hockey.

"You take it for granted when you're just showing up to the rink every day," Smilanic said. "But when that's taken from you, you realize how much you take it for granted, and how much of a treat it is to play hockey every day and get to play at such a high level."



Ty Smilanic

This fall, Smilanic practiced and worked out with his new Quinnipiac team. A routine like that isn't out of the norm, but not playing games until mid-December because of scheduling issues amid the pandemic has been a little strange. He's making the best of it, he said.

That attitude spills over to academics, where the first two months of classes for Smilanic at Quinnipiac were in a hybrid model (half online, half in-person) but switched to fully remote learning as more COVID-19 cases developed.

He's also happy to be a part of what he calls a national-championship caliber team this season.

"I think his personality and his temperament are going to lead him to success here right away, and then over time, I think the improvement and his work ethic will take over," Riga said.

Ask coaches, or Smilanic, and they'll tell you his greatest asset on the ice is his speed.

Angelo Ricci, Thunderbirds executive director and Smilanic's U16 coach, called him extremely explosive when he is on skates. Smilanic focuses on that aspect the most in his game, since he plays his best with lots of speed, he said, along with having a good shot and passing skills in his toolbox.

"He's a rink rat," Ricci said. "He loves to be on the ice. I would compare him right up there with some of our top players we've ever had in terms of his skill set and his ability to play at a high level."

The skills and the talent are there, and he'd like to work more on becoming more physically engaged in games and being a 200-foot player. Developing that 200-foot game was something the Thunderbirds staff worked with him on as well, Ricci said.

"He's really good now in terms of getting between the dots and creating offense," Ricci said.

For Riga, the speed and skill level are obvious when watching Smilanic. But it's the battle level on offense that hockey fans can really look for with him.

"When he sees a loose puck, he can't wait to get it," Riga said. "Because he wants to be able to make those plays."

Smilanic's road to Quinnipiac and becoming an NHL draftee started when he was about 5 years old, while learning to skate at the Family Sports Ice Arena, the practice facility for the Colorado Avalanche. But his love for the game started even earlier, or so he's heard from stories, at the age of 2 and 3 years old. His parents plopped Smilanic on their laps at Avs games, and the youngster sat just watching the puck, Smilanic said.

Once he learned to skate, he took the opportunity and ran with it, he said.

"Never looked back and kind of fell in love with the game from the moment I laid eyes on it," Smilanic said.

Smilanic's time with the Thunderbirds was split, starting from age 10-12. Then he moved to Michigan, playing hockey there for a couple of years before returning to Colorado to play with the Thunderbirds U16 team for two seasons before going to the NTDP, where he scored 27 goals and 60 points across 88 games.

Playing for the Thunderbirds gave Smilanic the chance to develop his game as a scorer, leader, passer and become a dominant player at the youth level. Playing up (starting the U16 team at age 14), he helped his team win two state championships, and the Tier 1 Elite League title in his first season on the U16 squad.

Smilanic scored 10 goals and 30 points in 32 games in his first year with the 16U Thunderbirds and came back the next year (2017-18) with 25 goals and 60 points in 37 games.

With the NTDP's U18 team, he got experience playing against college teams before he ever put on a Quinnipiac jersey. Those games, representing his country with high expectations, prepared him for the college hockey season, he said. He was successful there as well, winning gold at the Five Nations tournament in 2019.

Besides his own game the past few years, Smilanic also helped out with Thunderbirds summer camps, helping younger hockey players work on stickhandling, checking and other skills.

Smilanic was already a gifted hockey player, and the goal of a program like the Thunderbirds was to help him develop some off-ice and on-ice tools to help his game, according to Ricci.

"But in the end, that's what's rewarding is having a player like Ty reach his goal to get drafted," Ricci said. "Now that's what it's about."

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