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## Cole thrilled to be coming to Montreal

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By Arpon Basu - Managing Editor LNH.com

**BROSSARD, Que.** -- The Montreal Canadiens' two primary needs were quickly filled on the first day of unrestricted free agency when General Manager Pierre Gauthier signed power forward Erik Cole and goaltender Peter Budaj.

The Canadiens desperately needed to add a big forward who can score, as well as a backup to star goaltender Carey Price.

Gauthier nabbed both by the time free agency was 3 1/2 hours old, inking Cole to a 4-year, \$18 million deal and Budaj to a 2-year, \$2.3 million contract.

The more significant move would have to be getting Cole, a true power forward who had 26 goals and 26 assists while playing in all 82 games for the Carolina Hurricanes this past season.

"It's a player that fills the needs of our team," Gauthier told reporters at the team's suburban training facility on Friday evening. "He's fast, he's big, he likes going to the net and he's a nice complement to our finesse players."

Cole, 32, watched the Canadiens religiously as a kid growing up in Oswego, N.Y., and when Gauthier made the call to agent Steve Bartlett as soon as the clock struck noon, he couldn't have been happier.

"I don't think I've been shy about saying what my favorite building to play in is," Cole said in a conference call with reporters. "The city just has an aura about it."

Throughout his time with the Hurricanes, Cole would regularly make life miserable for the Canadiens. He had 14 goals and 11 assists in 28 career games against Montreal – his highest point-per-game average against any opponent – and Cole said the energy in the Bell Centre was a big reason for his elevated play.

But now that he will play there 41 times per season, Cole isn't worried that feeling will start to wear off.

"No, I'm more worried about having to go on the road, and not every building will be that exciting anymore," he said, laughing. "I said to my agent, 'Man, I'm going to be a heck of a homer, because every time I go on the road it's just not going to feel all that great.' No, I'm just kidding."

Gauthier said Cole's success against the Canadiens was not necessarily a determining factor in the signing, but that it did allow their evaluation of the player to become much clearer.

"When you have to constantly watch out for a player," Gauthier said, "you learn more about him."

When Gauthier said Cole fills a need, he wasn't kidding.

The Canadiens' top forwards are mostly of the smaller variety, and Cole is not only 6-foot-2, 205 pounds, but he had the most hits among this year's crop of unrestricted free agent forwards with 225. The Canadiens also finished 26th in the NHL last season in 5-on-5 goals and 23rd in goals overall, meaning that Cole, who scored 22 of his 26 goals at even strength, will be a welcome addition.

"I don't think it's any secret that the last couple of years Montreal's had a bit smaller average height than a lot of other teams in the League," Cole said. "While I'm not the biggest body on the ice, I play a harder-nosed game than some guys. I try to use my skating to be a big and strong player, try to be effective along the walls and be able to take the puck to the net and open up ice for other guys."

Cole said he had a long chat with Canadiens captain Brian Gionta -- a fellow Bartlett client -- who sold him on some of the non-hockey aspects of Montreal, particularly knowing if the school system would be good for his daughter Bella, 10, and son Landon, 7. He said once that aspect was settled, signing with the Canadiens was a no brainer.

"Honestly, I'm thrilled," Cole said. "Just the feeling you get when you're in that city and the passion in that arena, I don't think it's matched anywhere in the NHL."

Though line combinations are obviously a long way off, Cole should be able to slide into a spot on the right side of Tomas Plekanec and opposite Michael Cammalleri on Montreal's top line. With Max Pacioretty fully recovered from a cracked vertebra in his neck – an injury Cole suffered himself in 2006 – and expected to play on the left of Scott Gomez and Gionta, it gives the Canadiens a true power forward on each of their top two lines.

Andrei Kostitsyn should also benefit from sliding down to a potentially high-scoring third line with sophomores Lars Eller and David Desharnais, who would face more favorable match-ups from opposing coaches concentrating on stopping the top two units.

If anything, it will also allow the Canadiens to better absorb any injuries to a top forward because Cole greatly improves the team's depth up front.

Plus, Gauthier felt Cole should fit right in with the team, having played with both Gionta and Gomez on the 2006 U.S. Olympic team.

"It's positional needs, and also chemistry needs," Gauthier said. "There's different ways to make additions to help the club, and Mr. Cole, as a power forward, was a good addition."

Another important addition in Gauthier's eyes was that of Budaj, the most attractive feature being the former Avalanche goaltender's extensive experience at the young age of 28 with 242 games under his belt.

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-- **Erik Cole**

"We wanted a goalie of that age because we didn't want to be changing goalies every year," Gauthier said. "You need two goaltenders who are competent, because every game is so important. Whether he plays 10, 20 or 40 games – there may be injuries, touch wood – the standings are so tight."

Budaj has been in this situation before – he backed up Craig Anderson for the better part of the past two seasons in Colorado – and knows exactly what the score is on his new team.

"Carey's a great goalie, and I know the situation in Montreal," he said. "I know he had an amazing year last and he's playing really well. I'm just going to be focusing on what I can do to contribute to the team."

Having signed his power forward and his backup goaltender, Gauthier said he is not necessarily done tinkering with his club, but he is happy with what he has. He mentioned the return from injuries of defensemen Andrei Markov and Josh Gorges – who remains unsigned as a restricted free agent with arbitration rights – and the growth of his young players like Pacioretty and P.K. Subban.

But Gauthier also said that after a complete overhaul two summers ago – only five Canadiens players remain from the end of the 2008-09 season – it is time to give the team some time to get stronger as a group.

"This is still a very new team," he said. "So there comes a point where you have to start becoming a team. We've actually done very well considering all the changes we've made, but we can be better just by stabilizing things, strengthening the bonds, strengthening the chemistry and the identity of the club. I think that's in large part what dictated the plan for the offseason."