

Coming around again After a summer of extensive training, hockey great Mario Lemieux is back on the comeback trail as captain for Team Canada.

By Chris Snow
Staff Writer

I'm claustrophobic.

That was the thought **Mario Lemieux** voiced as he looked at a chamber 3 feet wide and 3 feet off the ground, with a zipper down the middle, a place he was supposed to enter.

It looked better suited for lugging golf clubs than holding the world's best hockey player.

"But he got in there and was in there two hours every day," said T.R. Goodman, who runs Pro Camp, a training center for pro athletes at the original Gold's Gym in Venice, Calif.

The contraption was a hyperbaric chamber that pumps high levels of oxygen at intense pressure. The oxygen liquidizes, enters the blood and accelerates the healing process, Goodman said.

It was in that chamber, and that gym, that Lemieux genuinely relaunched this, his fourth comeback to the NHL.

He made his exhibition debut Wednesday vs. the United States at Ottawa's Corel Centre, assisting on a goal in a 3-1 Canada victory before a sellout crowd. Twice he set up breakaway opportunities that teammates could not convert. He centered Brad Richards and Martin St. Louis on the second line.

But it is what Lemieux did in California the last three months that suggests that No. 66, who turns 39 in October, might not be here simply to wave goodbye.

Humility, dedication.

Lemieux, who last played in the NHL on Nov. 1, 2003, had hip surgery in January. Knowing that the clock ticks for him, he followed a path this summer previously traveled by many top-end athletes. That path was to Goodman's door.



Lemieux has always been one of the ultimate specimens in hockey. He's 6-4 and has played at about 230 to 240 pounds, so naturally blessed that his talent has carried him to 1,701 points in 889 NHL games.

But he had never pushed himself to the limit in the gym, as he did in Venice, Goodman said.

For two hours a day he climbed into the chamber, a contraption sometimes used to treat burn victims. It's also big among NFL players. Philadelphia receiver Terrell Owens has his own.

``In Mario's case, it helped regenerate spinal fluids, to help him recover from workouts, to help injuries heal," Goodman said. ``He still had scar tissue in his back. We broke that up."

Some of that had been in his body for years.

``This guy hasn't started to scratch the surface," Goodman said.

Lemieux worked out mornings, received therapy, napped, then did it all again. He streamlined his body to about 215 pounds. He's already committed for next summer, Goodman said.

``His mind is incredibly strong," Goodman said. ``So is his ability to understand what you're asking him to do, and maintain his focus to execute the exercise really well, and persevere whatever kind of burn or pain is associated with it.

``He has tremendous humility. You would think he was a rookie."

If in top shape, Goodman said of Lemieux: ``It's sick what he could do."

That's something, because at his best, Lemieux had a gear on the ice unavailable to lesser men, which meant everybody except Wayne Gretzky.

One season, Lemieux put up 199 points.

One night, he scored at even strength, on the power play, shorthanded, into an empty net and on a penalty shot. No one had ever done that. No one may ever again.

Except maybe Mario himself. Consider: Lemieux looked Father Time in the eye at the end of the 1997 season and nodded in agreement. He came back in 2000 and set up a goal on his first pass on his first shift.

Smiling, skating

His teammates on Team Canada have noticed Lemieux's newfound elan for practice. In the past Lemieux was like a balloon. He'd float around most of the time, and at some point, go pop. He'd score but not skate.

``It's not the case this time around," Canadian goalie Martin Brodeur said.

Even Lemieux is a bit stunned.

“I feel a lot better than I thought I would,” he told reporters Tuesday. “Speedwise, I feel like my speed is back where it was a couple years ago.”

He has played only 77 games over the past two seasons, but in that time has put up 100 points.

“For our team, he brings more to this than just playing for us,” said Gretzky, Team Canada's executive director. “He's a captain and our leader, and he's on top of issues with guys in our locker room. And he takes a lot of pressure off players on our team.”

So here he is once more. Lemieux has long traveled on an orbit, passing us once in a while, then going away.

“A lot of us probably thought we'd never see him again,” said Canada coach Pat Quinn. “Not in his mind.”

“When you're a great player, they're the first ones to say: ‘You know what? I'm not good enough for myself.’ And they'll know when it's time to back away. Mario's not there yet.”

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