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NHL Draft Profiles: Rocco Grimaldi

At just 5-foot-6, **Rocco Grimaldi** is not going to stand out in a crowd. Put that crowd on skates however, and you may not be able to keep your eyes off him.

"You come to the rink and he's the first guy you notice because of his speed," says Ron Rolston, Grimaldi's coach for the U.S. U-18 National Team Development Program (USNTDP).

Despite his size, Grimaldi can navigate around bigger competition with ease.

Grimaldi is a blur from goal line to goal line, but it's his quickness in close quarters that separates him from the pack. For those measuring under ideal NHL size, speed, acceleration and agility are not just assets, they're a means of survival when hulking D-men close in for the kill. And Grimaldi hasn't just mastered the art of elusion, he's also using his top tool to exploit bigger, but slower skaters.

"You've got to be a smart player, use your size effectively and not put yourself in situations where it's a weakness for you," says Rolston, who sends Grimaldi over the boards in every game situation, including the penalty kill. "He's slippery, whether it's going wide in the offensive zone or down low."

The evidence is found on the score sheet. Last season, playing with the USNTDP U-17 team, Grimaldi racked up a team-high 40 points in just 36 games before getting the call to play on the U-18 squad as an underager. The leap barely slowed him down. He accumulated 23 points in 26 games, including 18 points in 14 international contests. Grimaldi even capped off the team's gold medal game with the final goal in the 3-1 win.

Though he considers himself a Michigander, after his family relocated to find him some better competition in 2005, Grimaldi is yet another of the highly-skilled skaters born in Southern California. He even started his hockey career by competing

against former USNTDP teammate -- and fellow NHL draft prospect -- **Matt Nieto**, a native of Long Beach. The duo began learning the game with balls instead of pucks at their local YMCA.

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In August, more than a decade removed from those days at the Y, Sports Illustrated tapped the forward as one of its Stars of Tomorrow, comparing him to the newly-named captain of the Montreal Canadiens, Brian Gionta.

In today's NHL, size is no longer the entry barrier it once was. As the game has opened up after the lockout, speed, like that exhibited by Grimaldi, has become a prized asset. Indeed it served Gionta and the vertically challenged Canadiens well as they surged past the Washington Capitals and Pittsburgh Penguins in the playoffs.

Talent evaluators are already impressed by Grimaldi's Flash-like footwork. "His skating is very good, maybe you'd even rank it as excellent," says one Western Conference scout. "He's good in traffic and he's elusive. Once you get by how he looks, his height, and see what he gets done, you realize that he's making things happen every shift."

But if speed is what has turned Grimaldi into one of the top prospects in the 2011 NHL draft class, his work ethic is what could mould him into something much more.

"The gym is very big for me," Grimaldi says. "I'm one of those gym freaks that loves being there, and I'll be in there for like 3-4 hours."

Grimaldi served as captain for part of his time on the U-17 team, but says he's not much of a vocal leader. Instead, he likes to lead by example. "Hopefully guys are

feeding off the positive energy I bring to practice every day," says Grimaldi, who's committed to the University of North Dakota next year. "It's about picking and choosing when to be serious and when to have fun. You want to have fun playing the game you enjoy, but at the same time you're trying to accomplish something and get somewhere."

And for Grimaldi, that somewhere will likely be a prime spot in June's NHL draft.

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