

NINA MOINI: The Minnesota Wild opened their season next week. And this year, there's a new person on the team who could have a very unusual job on game night. Peter Tommy is the Wild's new EBUG, or Emergency Backup Goaltender.

For years, EBUGs have typically been local hockey players or fans who volunteer to suit up in the extremely unlikely event that a team loses both of their regular goaltenders. But the NHL is changing the way it handles that rule this season, with every team now having a designated EBUG as part of its staff. Peter Thome again is here to tell us how the rule works, how he ended up with this job, and what happens if he actually has to play. Peter, thanks for being with us.

PETER THOME: Yeah, thank you so much for having me, Nina.

NINA MOINI: So for starters, for folks who aren't as tuned in to professional hockey, can you talk a little bit more about what an EBUG does? I mean, how has this role traditionally worked. And just how often do people end up getting on the ice in this position during an NHL game?

PETER THOME: Yeah, absolutely. So the role has evolved this year than-- it was different than it was in the past, where in the past it was a volunteer basically. The payment was you got free tickets and, I believe, maybe a jersey if you were lucky.

So the rule changed where the league wanted mandated full-time team employees. That's where the rule changed a little bit, where I think previously EBUGs were-- some of them would practice with the team in a pinch. A guy's sick, and they can't call up a goalie from the minor league team fast enough, or a goalie played the night before and just wants a rest day--

NINA MOINI: Sure.

PETER THOME: --that goalie would sometimes practice. But now that'll be a full-time part of my job. So I'll be available for every practice they have. If it's a heavy practice and they don't want to overtax the goalies, or maybe there's an injured player rehabbing who wants something a little more exciting than an empty net to shoot on, I'll go out there and give him something to try to miss.

And same goes for players who are out of the lineup on a game day who are getting conditioning work. It's always easier to keep them engaged when they're shooting on a real person as opposed to an empty net.

So that's a big piece of it. And then, obviously, knock on some wood, God forbid this never happens, but if both goalies are unable to play, then I'll step into NHL action, which is pretty wild, to be honest with you.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, exactly. What led you to this position? And, I mean, how are you involved with the team already? Have you been meeting up with folks? Have you been practicing? How much involvement are you expecting that way?

PETER THOME: Yeah, it's funny. So I worked for a different NHL organization two years ago. I was working for the Seattle Kraken's minor league team in Coachella Valley. And before I left that, this was something that was in the pipeline for a long time.

The teams knew that this rule change was going to come this year, a few years in advance. And they had mentioned, well, if we brought you up to Seattle, would you maybe be interested in doing this?

And I left the professional hockey world two years ago, moved back home here to Minneapolis, where I'm from with my wife and daughter, and didn't really give it a second thought until this summer when I just randomly was thinking, I wonder if the Wild have anybody, and reached out to someone that I knew had some connections in the organization.

And I guess they were interested. And it worked out. So I was just working a normal 9 to 5 job and decided to give this a try. And also along with my roles as an emergency backup goalie, I'll be working in the analytics department in the front office, assisting with different kinds of analysis and all sorts of different research and development projects.

NINA MOINI: A full time gig. A full time gig here. Well, good for you for taking initiative and reaching out and making that happen. That's a good takeaway for everybody. I mean, if you have been in the situation, you're sitting there, on the sidelines, and, obviously, heaven forbid something happened to someone, but as that's going on, what's going through the EBUG's head? Are you just thinking nobody get hurt. Do you want to get out there? Obviously, taking away someone being injured out of the equation, are you like, I want to get out there?

PETER THOME: Well, I've never done it. The preseason, my services are not needed. So I have not actually been in that spot before. So I'll watch the game in the press box. And if there's an injury, I'll race downstairs and get dressed and be ready in case there's another injury.

What will be going through my head is probably don't get hurt. But I think it would obviously be a really cool experience. And number one, I just hope everyone stays healthy for their sake, for the team's sake, and for the fans who paid money to watch a real professional play hockey and not some guy like myself.

But, yeah, I guess it would be exciting. I mean, it's quite rare. It's happened, I believe, twice in the last 20 or so years, where someone has actually come in and played meaningful minutes. I think there's been some times where in a not close game, a coach has put in a EBUG in the last minute or two of a game that's out of hand. But-

NINA MOINI: So what is game day like then? You just mentioned you'd be up in the higher seats, you wouldn't get dressed until at least one person were to get injured. What does your day look like or will it look like?

PETER THOME: Yeah, so I'll be available for the morning skate. Whether that's participating in the actual morning skate or a session with the players who are out of the lineup after the morning skate, I'll be there for that.

And then I'll go back to the team office, and whatever projects I'm working on, work on those. And then when it's time for puck drop, I'll head over to the Grand Casino Arena and settle in for the press box and try not to think about what might happen if both guys get hurt.

[LAUGHTER]

NINA MOINI: It's an incredible thing to be around the thing that you love. I'm assuming you love hockey so much. I know you mentioned there were a couple years where you were out of the game, doing an office job. And I wonder how it feels to be in your passion again.

PETER THOME: Yeah, no, it's great. Hockey was a huge part of my life. I grew up playing here in the cities and played junior, played college, played a little bit of pro four years ago and worked in it two years after I retired and loved it and made a family decision to move back home and get into something more stable.

And it's been really great to be back around hockey. And everyone at the Wild from the front office to the players to the coaching staff, trainers, equipment guys have all been just like so welcoming. And it's been a really, really fun three weeks. And hoping it continues that way.

NINA MOINI: What do you think people misunderstand about the EBUG role. I know some people had said, oh, let's keep it unofficial. Our friend over here or this guy-- I don't know-- I mean, I assume you have to have a lot of experience still to even be considered for an EBUG role. But what do you want fans to understand about it?

PETER THOME: Yeah, I think a lot of it's the practice element. You think of an EBUG as someone, again, who comes down from the stands and puts on the gear and just-- it's this guy who's just finds himself in National Hockey League game. And that's great. That is an awesome story. Scott Foster and David Ayers are the other two. Great stories. And that's something that in a perfect world would be awesome to stay.

But a lot of it's the practice element, where an NHL team, most teams are only carrying two goalies. And those goalies have now 84 games to play. And there's a lot of days where they need rest and they maybe can't do a full day of practice, or if it's a hard practice where there's going to be a lot of shots, they need extra rest. And that's where having a third guy who maybe-- well, it's definitely not at the same caliber as the other two but looks the part and in a pinch can give the shooter at least something to try to miss.

NINA MOINI: What a unique role, truly. We're so happy for you. Congratulations, Peter. Is your family going to be with you at the games, or are you-- you mentioned your wife and your child. Do you think folks are going to be coming out to see you?

PETER THOME: No. Definitely not. They'll be coming out for the--

NINA MOINI: Not even the first one?

PETER THOME: They'll be coming out for the real players. But hopefully the paying customers never have to see me in the net. But if they do, I'll promise I'll try my best, but--

NINA MOINI: Peter, thanks so much. Congratulations. Thanks for coming by.

PETER THOME: Yeah, thanks so much for having me.