

The Sharks did not win in the NHL draft lottery Sunday, but General Manager Dean Lombardi was just happy they did not lose.

When the Boston Bruins were announced as the winners in the pingpong ball drawing in New York, the Sharks were assured the No. 2 pick in the June 21 draft. The Bruins will almost certainly grab the brightest prospect, center Joe Thornton.

But center Patrick **Marleau**, expected to go second, is more than a consolation prize.

"If there's any pure talent player in the draft, it's certainly **Marleau**," said Frank Bonello, the director of the NHL's scouting service, which had **Marleau** ranked right behind Thornton all season. "**(Marleau)** is so fluid; you see him handle the puck or make a play, and by the time the game's over, he has two goals and two assists.

"Let's face it: It has taken an extremely good junior player to beat him."

That's why Lombardi wasn't terribly disappointed the Sharks missed on their 21 percent chance to nab Thornton. He was more relieved that they did not fall to No. 3, where according to many junior coaches and NHL scouts, the talent level dips and the choice becomes muddled.

"If somebody gave me a choice of getting a chance at No. 1 but risk dropping to No. 3; or just be assured of No. 2, I would have taken the No. 2," Lombardi said.

"I'm just glad that we're at where we're at. It would have been nice to move up, but we certainly didn't want to move down."

Lombardi said he "has a guy in mind" for the pick, and because of his concern about dropping to No. 3, it is pretty clear he wants **Marleau**. That would fall in line with the thinking of others who have seen Thornton, **Marleau** and the other top junior players.

"Actually, he's more gifted offensively than Thornton," said Peter DeBoer, general manager and coach of the Detroit Whalers, who are in the same division as Thornton's Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds. "He just doesn't have the size (**Marleau** is 6-foot-1, Thornton is 6-4) or play the power forward game that Thornton does. But both kids are going to do well in the NHL."

Marleau, who scored 51 goals in 71 games for the Seattle Thunderbirds of the Western Hockey League last season, is the youngest player in the draft. Had he been born Sept. 16 instead of Sept. 15, 1979, he could not have been drafted until next season.

"He's basically just a 17-year-old kid," Thunderbirds coach and former NHL player Don Nachbaur said. "But he's driven. He has excelled at every level and knows what he wants in life."

Marleau is quiet and mature for his age, by all accounts. He grew up in a small town in Saskatchewan, much like Sharks wing Jeff Friesen, who made the jump directly from junior to the NHL as an 18-year-old.

In fact, there are many similarities between **Marleau** and Friesen. Saskatchewan hockey reporters say their demeanor and skating styles are about the same, and that they even look a little alike. **Marleau**'s statistics mirror Friesen's in his last year of junior. **Marleau** had 51 goals and 125 points in 71 games; Friesen had 51 goals and 118 points in 66 games for Regina, also a WHL team.

Many scouts and junior coaches say Thornton is the only draft prospect who is ready to step into the NHL next season. Lombardi said a Friesen-like jump is rare.

"It's never fair to say a kid can step in right away," Lombardi said. "Friesen was unique. But he came in with no expectations to start him right away. Whoever we draft will come to training camp and evaluate then. It's not smart to count on (the pick playing with the Sharks next season), but I'm not saying it couldn't happen."

Lombardi also isn't ruling out a trade. Boston will receive some tantalizing offers for the top pick, and Lombardi also will hear some sweet names dangled on the other end of the phone line. Thornton may be the most highly touted offensive prospect since Eric Lindros in 1991, but **Marleau** isn't far behind.

"If we do make a move, it won't be generated for a quick fix," Lombardi said. "It would have to be for something that fits in down the road as well as now. But I'm not saying we're going to trade it."

The Sharks intend to do their homework on Thornton, just in case Boston stuns everybody and takes **Marleau**, who has earned glowing reviews from Bruins management.

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