

## **Desperate times call for desperate measures: Flyers blueline woes** **Sporting News**

The Flyers are looking to put this nightmare of a month in the rearview, as they hit the road for tomorrow night's tilt at Tampa Bay. With their first three-game win streak in hand, the Orange and Black are finally enjoying a refreshing change in momentum, after starting the season with a four-game winless streak and a rattled blue line that just can't seem to catch a break.

This coming on the heels of a regrettable ragbag situation on the backend—an issue that's been hanging over this team's head since news of Kimmo Timonen. And now with the loss of Coburn and MacDonald to some ill-fated lower body injuries, general manager Ron Hextall is finding his options are limited.

Facing some glaring residual cap issues from his predecessor's reign, Hextall was forced to sit on his hands through the offseason, and to refocus the agenda on rather building through the farm system. Above all, he maintains the key to long-term success is patience—allowing players to develop and grow at their own pace, in an appropriate environment. Unfortunately, circumstances have changed and the Flyers blue line is thinning.

These circumstances now dictate Philadelphia's flight plan, which starts with the recall of 21-year-old blue liner, Shayne Gostisbehere. There's been a lot of hype surrounding the young defenseman, following a stellar performance leading tiny Union College to the Frozen Four and against all odds, the NCAA championship.

Gostisbehere made his highly anticipated NHL debut on October 24 against the Red Wings, at the chagrin of a surely frustrated Ron Hextall. Having to pull out a 5' 11", 170 lb rookie, who's got maybe a handful of professional games under his belt, just to throw him straight into the trenches goes against every fiber of his vision. Especially, having to do so this early in the season, with just a couple of AHL games to evaluate prospects is less than ideal. But then again, everything about Philadelphia's start to this season has been less than ideal.

Gostisbehere, or as he's been dubbed "the Ghost," entered Saturday night's contest to begin his NHL career with a real baptism by fire, in every sense. His debut threw him against a thrifty Detroit offense that played a dominant game, managing to keep tremendous pressure on the Flyers defensive unit for painfully long stretches.

At the end of the night, the scoreboard may have read 4-2 in favor of the Orange and Black, but the shot count told a very different story. The Wings led Philadelphia 37-17 in shots on goal, outshooting the Flyers 24-8 by the end of the second frame—a nonetheless fruitless effort to Ray Emery's credit, and to the credit of Detroit's less than stellar special teams. To say the least, the first two periods left a lot to be desired defensively, and really was quite telling of Philadelphia's apparent inability to play a full 60.

Gostisbehere's role in the night's performance, or lack there of, contributed to a relatively steady yet uneventful debut. Skating 5:36 less than his fellow blueliners, the Ghost tallied but one shot and finished with a plus/minus of -1.

Ghost's second night on the job was no more momentous, but definitely indicative of a burgeoning confidence. He finished the night with another -1 rating and was charged with a pair of giveaways in each of the first two frames. But the 21-year old rookie certainly looked more confident in himself and his abilities, from blocking shots to actively contributing on a couple offensive rushes, to working the weak side—the importance of which head coach Berube has been repeatedly stressing based on the past few lack-luster performances.

Certainly high off this new-found confidence, Gostisbehere drew some sharp gasps from spectators with some risky play in front of the net. But how much of it can be scoffed off as "a rookie mistake" and how much of it was actual foresight and confidence? There's the age old adage in hockey: "never pass the puck in front of your own net." But when the boards have been taken away, as they expectedly will be, by a strong forechecking team, like Los Angeles, the only options are to either: a) pass up the strong side anyway and risk the inevitable interception or b) out skate the forwards down low, and play the puck right

down the middle. Gostisbehere, in this case, chose the latter and successfully so. But aside from that brief chill inducing jolt to the nerves, the Ghost's second night in Beantown was just as unremarkable. With an average of 12 minutes a game, the kids still getting his pro legs under him so for now, the jury's still out.

But it looks like time may not be on his side. On Wednesday, the Flyers recalled 24-year-old Brandon Manning to presumably replace Gostisbehere on the lineup, as they head out on a two-game road trip down to the Sunshine State. Manning, a much more physical and aggressive player, has quite a bit more experience having spent three seasons in the AHL with the Phantoms, and a total of 10 NHL games with the Flyers.

Manning, aptly nicknamed "Mandog", has been an integral part of the Phantoms defense and special teams. More specifically, Manning played a vital role in the Phantoms league-leading penalty kill last season. And at 6' 1" and 190 lbs, he has definitely proven himself to be a looming presence, on the ice and, often times, in the box.

And in a recent development, it's being reported that Hextall might even be looking to acquire a free agent to fill the holes left in the team's patchy defense. The only other option, other than promoting from within, is looking into the trade market, which due to a lack of cap space is not likely to be a viable opportunity. However, the Flyers front office has admitted that it has not taken anything off the table. Desperate situations call for desperate measures, and it looks like the Flyers strategy now might just come down to throwing everything at the wall and waiting to see what sticks.

## **Ron Hextall: The Mr. Miyagi of Hockey** **The Sporting News**

From day one, Ron Hextall's vision remains the same, and it all just boils down to one word: "patience."

The irony of the Flyers front office preaching patience to a fan base that keeps its pitchforks and torches on standby is not lost on me.

But in this case, the only thing Hextall is preaching is common sense. Erring on the side of caution and enabling a young player to grow and develop at his own pace in a proper environment is key to Hextall's greater plan for the Flyers. You need to learn to walk before you run.

His agenda is constructed around this concept of building through the farm system. With the salary cap in the state it's in, in the aftermath of Holmgren's reign, there's not too many other options on the horizon for the Flyers to really experiment with. A majority of the cap issues stem from the recurrent theme of mortgaging the future to fill a temporary need to compete from year to year.

Now, the Flyers' GM is looking to build his legacy, taking away quite a bit from both men he worked under before his ascent to this coveted position: Paul Holmgren— who is to hockey what Terrie Hall is to smoking; and Los Angeles Kings' Dean Lombardi, who's got himself a ring for each hand and a longterm plan.

This focus on drafting and the development of homegrown players creates players who rise up through the ranks with an unparalleled loyalty, Dean Lombardi explained during the on-ice celebration after the Kings won the 2014 Stanley Cup Championship at Staples Center in Los Angeles on June 13, 2014.

"Look at it this way," Hextall said to me, one morning at Phantoms practice, as we sat through another bag skate, "no kid has ever been hurt or harmed by being sent down to juniors or to develop in the American league. Whereas, look at the amount of players that have been hurt being thrown into the NHL too early. History shows a trend there."

Unfortunately, due to both bad luck and worse timing, Ron Hextall and the Flyers front office now find themselves in an awkward position between a rock and a hard place. The Flyers' struggling blue line is nothing new, but starting the season without Timonen, losing Coburn and MacDonald to lower body injuries, losing Sam Morin one of the more promising prospects to a fractured jaw, and having effectively no cap space, the Flyers have no choice but to be a little impatient.

Which brings us to last week's decision by the Flyers to recall 21-year-old Shayne Gostisbehere, and this week's subsequent decision to recall a more experienced Brandon Manning. With very little room to maneuver under the cap, options on the trade market are limited, and that leads Hextall with one other viable option— free agency.

Hextall's reaching attempts in working through the trade and free agency markets, is basically to preserve his original vision.

Making the jump to professional hockey, from both college and junior hockey, is tackling a whole different beast. Playing an 82-game schedule is quite an adjustment for a lot of the college guys coming in off of a 42-game season, and even the juniors players that come in off of only 72. On top of an intimidating schedule, they're competing with and against a whole new caliber of players, on a very different kind of stage, with much greater physical expectations.

One of the Flyers' top prospects from last season, Nick Cousins, came in off a 103-point season with the Sault Ste Marie Greyhounds of the Ontario Hockey League, leading the team in scoring and ranking third in the league. However, in just his first few months with the Phantoms, the struggle to find consistency ensued— the struggle that inevitably plagues a lot of young, eager and easily frustrated young guys.

Cousins and rookie line mates, Petr Straka and Brandon Alderson, were, as Phantoms head coach Terry Murray put it, “a roller coaster ride.” Over the course of the majority of the season, the line was just unable to find solid footing.

“[They] have been our best line at times, and have also played like our fourth line,” an exasperated Murray addressed the media in March.

I sat down with 20-year-old Cousins, early last season, to discuss the drastic highs and lows of his game and how he was dealing with the rocky transition from juniors to professional hockey. Within a matter of three to four months, his demeanor had visibly changed from the unabating confidence he exuded in training camp to a resigned humility in facing the reality of the adjustment period.

“It’s definitely a huge leap,” Cousins said. “The guys aren’t just older—they’re bigger. They’re faster. And the expectations to play a two-way game is higher on both ends of the ice. That takes some getting used to. It’s been a big adjustment for me.”

Every player has a different threshold for the strains of transitioning, and has to find his own footing. Whether it’s physical, mental or emotional, allowing each individual to grow into his full potential at his own pace, is essential in developing a valuable resource. And this vested interest in developing homegrown players feeds into a larger, more long-term plan of success.

**Blackhawks-Canucks Game 7 Preview**  
***The Sports Bank (blog)***

There was time (not more than two weeks ago) when it was dicey whether the Hawks would even have a post season, and now they're the giving this year's President's Trophy winners a run for their money. Could this be the third year in a row the Hawks end the playoff run for the Canucks?

Only three other teams have made a comeback from a 3-0 hole to win a series: Toronto in '42, Islanders in '75 and Philly last year. In other words, Captain Serious should probably start looking into Botox for those impending worry lines.

Recap:

"We didn't want to look at the big picture," Coach Quenneville said Monday. "It was ugly at the time, and we just wanted to win one hockey game and try to see where the momentum took us. I still think we have the momentum going into the game, but the excitement that we didn't have going into games 4, 5 and 6." Ah, momentum. Straight out of the hockey PR playbook: 'When in doubt, or you have nothing else productive to add and need to fill the silence, refer to the momentum.'

Sunday night, Smith notched his third of the series (15:30, OT) to takes the much needed 4-3 win for the Hawks. But of course the shining star of the team so far in the playoffs, Crawford, made gloved all the right biscuits—32 overall, and 12 in overtime. If Vancouver can't come up with better play in front of the net and stop trying the same snipe from the point, glove side, they can kiss their dignity good bye because... 'Mericuh.

"Anything can happen in Vancouver," Smith told reporters. "I'm just trying to take a deep breath every once in awhile. They've got some great players." On a side note, kudos to the Hawks PR staff who clearly got to the kid in time. Shortly after, I believe, Patrick Kane smashed a full budweiser into his head and had to undergo concussion testing. Results are inconclusive but I believe the CAT scans actually came back positive for OBS (Obnoxious Bro Syndrome), a common affliction of young men who have never faced the wrath of minor league bag skates. It is believed he will be fit to return to the ice but unfortunately for Vancouver, Goldie Locks will live.

Referring to the Smith's game winner "I got a piece of it with my knob and I'm not sure exactly what happened," Canucks' goalie Luongo said, "I think Smith just chipped it over me on the rebound."

To clarify, Roberto, what happened was that your men in front of the net let you down, buddy. And the entire city of Vancouver let out what can only be described as a collective welp.

***Game-day Notes***

This morning, in Rogers Arena, when the Canucks took the ice for morning skate, the scoreboard read 5-0 in favor of the Hawks. Now, I'm not superstitious but if I were Luongo, I'd go wabbit hunting, because he's going to need all the luck he can get against a team as hungry as the Blackhawks right now. And I'm not talking about Kaner's hangover cravings. Some Mickey D and a Powerade and there's nothing stopping this guy. Not only is he nearing the 70-point mark on the season, his two-way play, forcing those turnovers like he was stealing candy from Nick Leddy, is like watching tennis on steroids.

Tonight, there are going to be at least three line-up changes for the Canucks: 1) Keith Ballard, one of their pricey new acquisitions will take the ice again after being a healthy scratch for the last two games, 2) Tanner Glass is expected to return after being benched for one game in place of rookie Cody Hodgson and 3) Sami Salo, who left Game 6 injured might not return to the ice tonight.

This would leave Vancouver with only three natural centers: Sedin, Kesler and Lapierre, who are already eating up the ice time like it was Skinny Cow ice cream. Bet they regret not adding depth to the roster now eh? See, overworked players become tired players, and tired players are what we in the biz like to call "crap."

As for Chicago, either rookie Marcus Kruger or veteran Fernando Pisani will take Bickell's place on the lineup with his ongoing wrist surgery. We are told it was definitely a hockey-related incident, and nothing else. But we at The Sports Bank, don't judge regardless. You do you Bry guy. You do you.

He will be missed though. People don't give this guy enough credit. So far, Bickell has been great for the Hawks. He has given the Hawks one of their greatest advantages: secondary scoring. Take notes, Gillis. He has a tepid two goals in the series but well-timed ones nonetheless, one of which opened up Game 4 as a turning point in the series. Bickell's line with Frolik and Smith have outscored the second, third and fourth lines of the Canucks, *combined*.

Woof. That roster is almost more shallow than one can only expect the Sharpest looking man in Chicago to be. See what I did there? If you didn't, please reread it because it was funny.

With Bickell out, who knows what it'll do to the chemistry? Not Pierre McGuire who was apparently too busy, after last night's win, giggling over Toews' retro mutton chops, which I got to say is maybe trying just a little too hard to bring disco back. There's only one man who can bring the 80's back, if just for a game and that man is none other than the epitome of the mullet/muttonchop combo, Jaromir Jagr, or as his teammates like to call him "the cool Uncle".

But at this point, there's not much to shake up this some would say over-confident Chicago team. And let's not forget Chicago's record for when it has a chance to eliminate an opponent in the playoffs: 6-1. Because I'm sure you knew that right off the top of your head. If you did, you're a better man than I. Mainly, because I'm a woman.

"I still feel all the pressure's on them. They're the ones who were up 3-0, they're the first seed in the West, they were kind of predicted to win the Cup this year and go really far," Patrick Kane told the Tribune.

Because of course he did. And fortunately for you Hawks fans, he is right. The Stanley Cup Hangover might end here for the Hawks, but there's not enough Powerade in the world for Chicago's favorite bro.

**With NHL's Superstar Missing the All-Star Game, Who Will Shine?**  
***The Sports Bank (Blog)***

Only 23 years old and he's already got a Stanley Cup, two Messier Leadership Awards, a Rocket Richard trophy, an Art Ross, a Lester Pearson, a Hart Memorial, basically any trophy named after a man with slamming flow (before you argue, look up Art Ross' fabulous updo). Not to mention, he was the youngest player in NHL history to record 100 points in a season and has earned two Lou Marsh trophies because one's just the loneliest number.

Unsurprisingly, he has been an All-Star since the first one in 2007, and daddy's favorite since 1984.

Don't get me wrong; I am anything but a die-hard Crosby fan. But the madness has got to stop now. Face it hockey fans, Sidney Crosby is Superman on ice, and his kryptonite—concussions, and according to him, anything clad in black and white stripes. I hear he's wildly allergic to zebras.

But looks like this year, Superman's out of the game with a nasty concussion. You smiled when you read that, didn't you, you sicko? Concussions are terrifying and rightly so. So, regardless of you pre-conceived notions about the Great One 2.0, wipe that smirk off your face and go blog about how this affects your fantasy league. I propose tiny rear view mirrors to either side of the bucket, like the ones in the dentist's office. You know what I'm talking about. Copyright pending.

On the bright side, with Crosby out, Eric Staal finally gets his chance to sit in the big boy chair at the head of the table. The 2011 NHL All-Star Game will proceed with captains Eric Staal (East) and Nicklas Lidstrom (West). Forgive me but this is bull sh\*t. If you are anything like me, picking a side will have you cowering in the corner the room, rocking back and forth, contemplating what you're life has become. Maybe a little dramatic, but that's what they pay me for. Just kidding, they don't pay me. Ah, internships— more commonly known as legalized versions of indentured servitude. So why do I do it you ask? Partly, it's because the world is cruel. But more so, because I get to watch hockey and put my opinions out into the blogosphere for "class credit," and never look back.

So this year, my loyal followers (all seven of you), the NHL has decided to cut me a break and make things interesting. The league has apparently decided to let the players draft their own teams. Two days before gameday, Staal and Lidstrom will select their teams in a live 18 round draft, based on a coin flip. Each team will have three goalies, six defenseman and twelve forwards.

"If I'm not picked last, then I think it's a great format." Flyers' Claude Giroux aptly put.

It's like kickball during recess all over again. The question on everyone's mind now is: who's going to be the loser who "didn't want to play with you jerks anyway"?

***Pierre McGuire Moment: Meet The Parents***

Eric Staal, in his seventh season, who also happens to be the captain of the host team—the Hurricanes, is a three-time All-Star pick and a member of the 2006 Stanley Cup team. And in addition to earning MVP honors at the '08 All-Star game, he holds the Hurricanes' franchise record for most hat tricks in a season ('08-'09), and most career post-season points. He was born in Thunder Bay, Ontario on a sod farm with 3 younger brothers, one of whom he might have the pleasure of not drafting this year.

Behind door 2, is of course the man that makes the blue line look like a drum line, because this guy doesn't miss a beat. *The* Nicklas Lidstrom. One of, if not the best defensemen

in the league, a man many of his younger teammates grew up worshipping to an unhealthy level. The six-time Norris trophy winner hails from Krylbo, Sweden, which may or may not sound like whale food. In 13 seasons, the six-time Norris trophy winner has never finished lower than 6<sup>th</sup> in voting. Six-time. On top of that, he has four Stanley Cups under his belt and is one of the highest paid players in the league, hitting a cap of a little over 6 million dollars. What the heck do they put in Swedish water? Or as my man, Cherry, would say "But he's not Canadian."

"This guy is the man," Kris Letang, of the Pittsburgh Penguins, said of Lidstrom. "Totally another class." Smart move kissing up to the guy that decides whether your fate will be sealed as Mr. Irrelevant—a moniker all too familiar for any Penguin who's name doesn't begin with a "Sid" and ends with a "ney Crosby."

"Lidstrom was a no-brainer," NHLPA divisional player representative Steve Webb said. "The first couple guys I was calling right out of the gate were saying Staal. I think they recognized with Sidney — his name was always in there — but they always added Staal with Sid maybe not being able to appear."

### **QUESTIONS STILL REMAINING**

With a stud-packed 42-man roster, who will shine?

Who will cry?

Will big brother Staal choose his kid brother? Or will this become a battle of the long-awaited battle of the Staals?

How is Patrick Sharp's hair so shiny?

Does Jonathan Toews ever smile?

Is Pierre McGuire turtley enough to be in the Turtle Club?

Are we sure Zdeno Chara isn't actually a man standing on another man's shoulders under that uni?

And more importantly, how many people are just now going to discover that Carolina (I'm assuming both Carolinas have come to an understanding and realized how silly this whole north/south business is) has a hockey team?

As always, my lovely puckheads, comments, questions, concerns, shoot me a line in the discussion below.

## **Ohio State Suspends Coach Tressel Two Games for NCAA Violation - The Sports Bank (News Release)**

Ohio State University has fined longtime football coach Jim Tressel \$250,000 dollars, in addition to a two-game suspension after uncovering that Tressel had prior knowledge of his players' NCAA violations.

Vice president and director of athletics, Gene Smith; head football coach, Jim Tressel, and president of Ohio State University, E. Gordon Gee addressed the media Tuesday at 7 PM, regarding the issue and ongoing NCAA investigation.

Athletic Director Gene Smith began the conference by clearly reiterating the University's support of Coach Tressel and dismissing any rumors of Tressel's resignation.

"He is a coach of young men and we trust him 100%," Smith said, "...he is our coach and we trust him implicitly."

Smith went on to underscore the separation of the players' infractions and the NCAA investigation of Tressel's negligence. The appeal process, he stated, is still ongoing and was not discussed.

In fact, it was discovered that his players' infractions were within Tressel's knowledge, as long back as April—not December, as he and the university had originally stated.

This case, which was under federal investigation, involved six of his players. This star-studded list includes starting quarterback Terrelle Pryor and leading rusher Dan Herron, both accused of selling memorabilia and accepting 'gifts' in serious breach of NCAA rules.

Investigation on Tressel began in January, and was ongoing when Yahoo! leaked a story, citing an anonymous source, reporting Tressel as having prior knowledge of the players' involvement in the federal investigation.

Allegedly, Tressel had received emails from a source, that has chosen to remain confidential, informing him of the involvement of two of his players, last spring. Confidentiality, Gene Smith reiterated to the packed conference room, is "seriously critical in a federal investigation".

"Quite honestly, I was scared," Coach Jim Tressel addressed the media, "...As we sit at home, we talk about how we are going to take care of these young people and we're going to treat them like they're our own."

He spoke quietly but with a stern demeanor, "Admittedly, I did not give quite as much thought to the potential NCAA part of things...I was primarily concerned about the well-being of the young people."

Tressel went on to establish that he was not looking for anyone's pity and was taking full responsibility for his actions.

"The most pathetic thing is a leader who's looking for self-pity," Tressel said, quoting ex-president George W. Bush.

The president of the University, E. Gordon Gee, spoke as well, reiterating Smith's statements on the school's support of Coach Tressel.

"As president, it is unusual for me to be here but he is an unusual coach..." President Gee said, "Jim Tressel has dedicated the last decade of his life to this university. Indeed, he's had great success on the football field and we applaud that... and I think equally importantly, he's had great success in the building of the character and reputation of this university, for which I'm entirely grateful."

Before concluding, Smith again took the podium to clarify that the school recognizes Tressel's negligence to report the information as a violation of NCAA rules, and are fully in cooperation with any and all investigation. As a result, Tressel will pay a fine, accept a two-day suspension and attend a conference-approved compliance seminar.

"At the end of the day, Jim Tressel is our football coach," Smith said, "All the speculation about him being terminated is pure speculation, which in this case is not warranted."