

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.