

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.