

This Old Team Part I: Reigniting the Lightning

Written by Matt Bugg

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Home improvement shows are all the rage these days. So why not take the same approach with a hockey team? In Part I of this rebuild-a-thon, we take a look at the steps the Tampa Bay Lightning could take from a scouting and development perspective to bring the team back into Cup contention. Some of these same principles can be used to help you rebuild your keeper league team.

The Toronto Raptors have undergone an incredible rebuild in a very, very short period of time. Thanks to some innovative work by wunder GM Bryan Colangelo, talent has been culled from every nook and cranny of the basketball world. The results have been obvious. Once the laughing stock of the NBA, Canada's only pro basketball team sits second overall in the Atlantic Division and is among the Eastern Conference's top four teams.

While not every GM can be 'BC', some valuable lessons- and practices- can be culled from the team's incredible transformation.

The four major keys to Toronto's turn-around have been:

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- Hiring respected figures**
- Putting an emphasis on character**
- A 'Look Everywhere, Anywhere' philosophy**
- Exploiting geographical weaknesses**

1. Hire Respected Figures

This is hardly a ground-breaking idea, but it's so simple that it's so amazing how often it's screwed up. There are certain men in hockey you never hear a bad word about- St. Louis' Jarmo Kekalainen, Detroit's Jim Nill, and Anaheim's David McNab come to mind. Having had the great fortune to meet with two of the three, I can tell you they come by it honestly.

Teams too often try to massage their fanbase by hiring hockey *names*. That's not the point. You want administrators who work behind the scenes to power their teams and their success. Columbus did this with former Edmonton Assistant GM Scott Howson. Having spoken with him also, I'd say he perfectly fits the mold.

Tampa needs to overpay to acquire someone like this.

2. Put an Emphasis On Character

St. Louis is one of the best teams in the NHL at this facet of scouting. Their front office staff exudes a joy for the game, a willingness to work hard, and a great, great attitude. I'd kill to work for that group. They're going to build something great.

This attitude is required if you're going to wear a note. Brad Boyes, Lee Stempniak, Steve Wagner, Doug Weight, Keith Tkachuk and draft choices like David Perron, T.J. Oshie and Ian Cole are all successful because they love to show up at the rink.

This is not to say that the Lightning don't have such players. But if you're going to win on a consistent basis, that needs to be the culture. Look at the Wings- it's the worst city in the USA but yet players kill to play there.

3. Look Everywhere, Anywhere

Bryan Colangelo single-handedly revolutionized the NBA by using every single pro-calibre league at his disposal to find gems. The Spanish and Italian leagues, the Harlem Globetrotters and D-League teams have all yielded contributors.

It may not seem like it, but the world of hockey is expanding all the time. Kazakhstan, Great Britain, Denmark and Slovenia are the next hotbeds. China, Japan, Hungary and Mexico may be on the horizon.

Pro-active scouting does not wait for such countries to become established sources of talent. This is why Detroit was able to draft Lidstrom, Fedorov, Konstantinov, Datsyuk and Zetterberg.

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You'll come across a lot of crap, but as the Great One once said, you miss 100% of the shots you don't take.

4. Tear Up the Blacklist

Switzerland is full of lazy one-dimensional forwards. Finland is a land of two-way forwards and goalies and powerplay QBs. Russia is undraftable. As the saying goes, common wisdom is commonly wrong. At one time or another, all of the above stereotypes held true. But stick around too long, and even labels become stale. The Lightning need to exploit such weaknesses in order to fill roster holes below-cost.

Using the above points, we can create practical practices for fixing the franchise.

1. Hire a Nill/McNab/Kekalainen, A Savvy Wordsmith and HHOFer

Accountability starts at the top. Grab a respected, intelligent hockey man, provide a former NHL star to be his right-hand man and pick up a well-known and well-quoted media machine to be the face of the operation. This will also fill the second need: front office people who can evaluate character. At the 2007 Draft, President John Davidson, GM Larry Pleau, AGM Kekalainen and VP Hockey Ops Al MacInnis were the core group that evaluated talent.

Using that template, I'd go with:

President- Doug MacLean

GM- Jim Nill

VP Hockey Ops- Dave Andreychuk

2. Hire (Insert Russian Legend Here) As Director of Player Development/Build Moscowtown

It was the worst-kept secret in hockey: Pavel Bure was eligible for the 1989 Draft, and not 1990 like his documents claimed. Enter Igor Larionov. The Vancouver Canucks couldn't pierce the Iron Curtain on their own, so they got some help from a fellow countryman who had made the transition. A little clandestine digging later and the Nucks had the most prized prospect of the 1990 class a year early.

Russia has once again been turned into a land of mystery, this time thanks to the transfer agreement. Teams have begun pulling their scouting contingents from the country all together.

By hiring a Larionov or Fedorov to some front office position, the Lightning can take advantage of this new grab-bag of talent- both prospect and pro. Buoyed by a legendary former Russian hockey player's credibility and insight, the Lightning could potentially lure Aleksey Morozovs along with Alexei Cherepanovs. This could be the start of a Wings-esque run in Russia.

Now, as we all know, money factors in. This is where building a culture comes in.

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Russian millionaires want to show it off. They want hot women. They want fame. They want exotic weather. Guess what location has all of that? Hell, the place is CALLED St. Petersburg. Hire a staff of Russian culture experts and make the Lightning into the most comfortable environment a Russian player would ever want to be.

Prospal-Lecavalier-St. Louis
Zaripov-Richards-Morozov

Boyle-Atysuhov
Ranger-Kuba

Ramo
Koshechkin

3. Look Anywhere

What do the Mestis, the Prairie Junior Hockey League and Canadian Interuniversity Sport have in common? Nobody scouts them! While it's usually for a good reason, there's talent everywhere, so why not have eyes everywhere? I've personally scoured the PJHL, AtIJHL, Mestis, Finnish Junior Tier II, Slovenian and Belarussian leagues for interesting prospects. Spain even has a pro league now. Spain!

Even if you were to estimate that together every non-traditional hockey country produced one NHL player a year, a five-year run through Kazakhstan, Great Britain, Austria, Poland and the Netherlands would yield five NHLers you didn't have before.

So how can this help your keeper league team? Well, obviously, you usually won't have a staff like NHL teams do. And you can find all the gems you want, but if they never get their chance, you've wasted a roster spot. But learning to assess the character of prospects can help you avoid the Jason Bonsignores of the world, and identify the Lee Stempniaks. And you can still look anywhere; just have a very strict time limit on how long you wait for success. This requires some diligence on your part, but it's worth it in the end.