

New Jersey Devils Exorcised Early from Playoffs (yet again)

Written by Brent Lemon

Tuesday, 27 April 2010 22:41 - Last Updated Thursday, 29 April 2010 12:31



What the #%& is up with the New Jersey Devils?

While the NHL playoffs are always frustratingly/awesomely capricious in nature, a full dozen of the 13 experts on Dobber's Expert's Panel selected New Jersey to defeat the Philadelphia Flyers (props to Ryan Ma, the sole dissenter). And while excuses are for sissies, one can perhaps forgive those who thought the Devils would prevail.

After all, the underwhelming Flyers barely snuck into the postseason, requiring a shoot-out

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victory in their last game of the year to earn a berth. Meanwhile the Atlantic Division-winning Devils finished second in the Eastern Conference; only the class-of-the-league Washington Capitals accumulated more points. Who would have thought that a team with players like Zach Parise, Patrick Elias, Jamie Langenbrunner, Ilya Kovalchuk, and Martin Brodeur, would earn the dubious honour of being the first team bounced from the playoffs?

Looking back, maybe we all should have known better.

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In a previous article, I speculated that the Devils' troubles after the Kovalchuk trade weren't entirely the Russian newcomer's fault. To support this, I showed that for the past several seasons, New Jersey's play had significantly fallen off during the tail-end of the season, and in each case the Devils had gone on to do poorly in the playoffs. At the time that article was published, there were 14 games remaining in the Devils' schedule. They went 7-3-4 in those remaining matches. So not so bad, but some might argue that New Jersey fans should just stop watching their team once Groundhog Day rolls around – the best has already happened. At the very least, they might avoid this repeating playoff hell that they seem to be mired in.

Changes to Come in Newark

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In the April 12th issue of *The Hockey News*, Ryan Dixon wrote a great opinion piece on why he just can't stomach selecting the San Jose Sharks in the postseason anymore. Dixon argued that "anybody capable of taking a hint can no longer look a friend in the eye and predict the Cup will land in Northern California until the Sharks prove they don't actually live in a no-championship zone." Now, I'm not saying that Brodeur

et al

are deserving of

Thornton-esque

levels of disdain, but there is no question that New Jersey is starting to look a lot like San Jose (with apologies to residents of beautiful northern California).

Perhaps the only reason that the Devils haven't received more static is because the Sharks have maintained the media's momentum as playoff whipping-boys. But it wasn't so long ago that the Detroit Red Wings were the reigning champs of disenchantment. So Devils be warned: if the stars align and the Sharks actually go on to win something, then the mantle-of-supreme-chokitude could easily shift east to Newark.

Lou Lamoriello must be furious.

The venerable general manager of the Devils had this to offer after his team's most recent early exit from the playoffs, "this is not something that is acceptable or would ever be accepted. We'll have to look at it. This is a time when you take a step back, no different than we've done other years. Try to evaluate and correct."

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Lamoriello's comment reminded me of a section in Jimmy Devellano's recent book, [*The Road to Hockeytown*](#)

. Among other delicious insider tidbits, the respected Red Wings exec discussed the repeated disappointments following the Wings' back-to-back championships in 1997 and '98. Similar to the Sharks and Devils of late, the Wings would dominate in the regular season but then disappear in the playoffs. Devallano talked about the need to bring in something new to break the cycle of dismay. To borrow Lamoriello's term, one of these "corrections" was none other than Domink Hasek, who was brought in for the 2001-02 season. The Wings didn't do as well in the regular season that year, but things went pretty well for Detroit in the playoffs. Hello, Mr. Stanley.

One could draw the lesson from Devellano that even if things look like they *should* work, but repeatedly *on't* d
, then a change is required, maybe even a bold change.

So maybe some changes are needed, but the Devils face a tough challenge in the salary-cap era.

There is no question that Kovalchuk was a luke-warm addition to the Devils in the opinion of many. His critics tend to suggest that he never "found his game" in New Jersey. Yet, he was the Devils' leading scorer in the playoffs with six points. Regardless, Lamoriello want to keep him, explaining that Kovalchuk "has been everything we've asked of him. He's been a solid citizen. He's bought into the program and given the effort. There is no question that we would like him to be a Devil."

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Despite Lou's love, [Kovie has stated that he plans to test out free-agency on July 1st](#), so it is unclear where the Russian sniper will end up, or if Lamoriello will get his way.

One change that we do know is coming in New Jersey is the arrival of a new head coach. Jacques Lemaire has retired, citing a lack of energy as one of his reasons to move on. The Devils have already been through five coaches in five years, and now with a sixth one on the horizon, its easy to wonder if a lack of stability may be contributing to the Devils' playoff problems.

Finally, no discussion of the Devils is complete without addressing super-stopper Martin Brodeur. Undeniably, the soon-to-be 38-year-old from Montreal, Quebec is their most storied player and once again, Brodeur has been nominated for the Vezina trophy. But many wonder aloud whether his best is behind him.

The fall from grace at the 2010 Winter Olympics has been a popular point of evidence in the case against Brodeur. Further, many have argued that the Devils' recent early exits from the playoffs derive largely form the fact that Brodeur is played too often in the regular season and is exhausted by the time the playoffs begin. For the record, Brodeur played an unbelievable 77 games this year.

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Was this year's exit Brodeur's fault? Perhaps not. It seemed to many that offence was the Devils' biggest problem this year in the playoffs. The Devils only scored nine goals over their five games, and a scant three in the final three matches. Not exactly an offensive machine at work.

John Fischer at *In Lou We Trust* offered an [extremely detailed analysis of each of the 15 goals scored against Brodeur](#) in the 2010 playoffs.

Fischer argued that only three were soft goals, and that blaming Brodeur in the wake of the series loss was an easy story that ignored deeper problems. Plus, don't forget that the Flyers beat the Devils five out of six times this past season.

The good news is that the Devils aren't the first good team to find themselves scratching their heads over repeated early playoffs exits. The Sharks are still doing it. But if the Devils are going to reverse their fortunes, changes may need to be made, even changes that might threaten their regular season success. But it can be done, and it has been done before. Maybe someone in Newark should pick a copy of *The Road to Hockeytown*.

Happy summer reading Lou (and maybe you too).