Contrary to the letter put out on February 12 by the owners of a certain Florida franchise, I think the future (and that includes next season) is very bright for the core of this team. While change is almost always needed from year to year, "significant change" may not be.

Maybe the authors of "the letter" fell victim to unrealistic expectations. The team currently sits six points out of the final playoff spot in the East with 17 games remaining. Did anyone honestly expect this Panthers squad to be a lock for a playoff spot this season? I certainly didn't. Florida lost the final playoff spot to Montreal on a tiebreaker last season. Sure I thought they would probably be in the mix this year and I that they might be a little closer in the standings, but with arguably their two best players (Booth & Horton) missing a combined 59 games to injury and the loss of their top defenseman (Bouwmeester) for nothing HAS to cost you a few points.

So why the letter? Are the owners afraid of losing more of the fan base? Average attendance is

down, but only about 500 per game (15,621 vs 15,186 - yeah "paid" attendance!?). Whatever the reasons, here is a look at their building blocks:

Surely one of the key players going forward has to be **David Booth**. The 25-year-old left winger is under contract until the end of the 2014-15 season. Booth averages the third most overall time on ice (18:35) amongst forwards on the team, behind Horton and Weiss. He also receives the second most average power play time (4:06) on the team. Only Bryan McCabe receives more time with the man advantage.

Booth has seven points in the four games since the Olympic break, but had only two points in his previous seven games (since coming back from the concussion). It's not like he was off to a tremendous start this season, Booth only had three points in nine games before the devastating Richards hit knocked him out for 45 games.

Last year, Booth had a breakout season scoring 31 goals and 60 points in 72 games. He was supposed to build on that this season. Now it looks like he will have to wait until next year.

Nathan Horton is only 24-years-old and when he's in the line-up, he has been averaging 20:32 in ice time per game this season. The former third overall selection in the 2003 entry draft was scoring at a 74 point pace, but injuries have cut short what should have been another step in his development. He is scheduled to return mid-March from a broken leg.

Steady **Stephen Weiss** is 26-years-old and averages just over 20 minutes per game. His 23 goals are already a new career high and he is on pace for 29 goals and 63 points. That would better his previous best by two points. He is miscast as a number one centre, though. Weiss would make an ideal number two pivot.

Florida has another young up and comer that has nice offensive upside. **Michael Frolik** is averaging nearly 18 minutes (17:51) per game, 2:56 of it coming via the power play. The 22-year-old Czech had 138 points in 97 major junior games and surprised many by making the leap directly to the NHL last year with a 45 point rookie season. Frolik is on pace to equal that feat this season. Florida’s season has been disappointing, so for Frolik to stay status quo points-wise should be taken as a positive.

With the trading of two of Florida's top four defensemen, 19-year-old **Dmitry Kulikov** now draws into the top four by default. He was taken 14th overall in last year's entry draft and had 62 points in 57 QMJHL games in his only major junior season. You really hope that he's a quick learner because there's nothing like trial by fire to see if your young prospect has what it takes at the NHL level! In the four games since the break, Kulikov has averaged well over 23 minutes of ice time, including 3:00 on the power play.

The next prospect to make the leap could be **Michal Repik**. The 21-year-old has 21 goals and 41 points in 48 games this season with the AHL Rochester Americans. Last season as an AHL rookie, Repik had 49 points. In his final junior year, he scored 61 points in 51 games.

Shawn Matthias is currently playing with the big team right now, but is only getting between 11:00-15:00 of ice time per game. He has nine points in 38 NHL games and had 13 points in 27 AHL games this year. Last season, his first as a pro, Matthias had 20 points in 61 AHL games. In his last year of major junior hockey, he recorded 32 goals and 79 points in 53 OHL games. All the ice time the 22-year-old gets this year will only benefit him next season.

Now with all this young talent on the ice and in the system, it's hard to argue with the potential of this offensively improving group.

With all the hubbub caused by the Cooke/Savard hit, has anyone noticed that **Bryan McCabe** was recently named the NHL's third star of the week? McCabe has a five game, ten points streak on the go. He's on pace for 44 points, but if he continues scoring at his recent pace, he might put a scare into 50 points.

Rookie defenseman **Jason Garrison** has been getting top four ice time of late, averaging nearly 20 minutes over the last three contests. The 25-year-old has NHL size (6'2", 220 pounds), but is still finding his way offensively. Last season, he recorded 35 points in 75 AHL games. This season, he has 19 points in 38 AHL games, but only three points in 22 NHL matches. Even in his best year in college, he only had 14 points in 26 games.

One-Timers

Since coming over in a February 4 trade, **Niclas Bergfors** has six goals and eight points in ten games with the Thrashers.

In his last 42 games, **Scott Gomez** has 39 points, a 76 point pace. He's still overpaid, but at least he's producing at a decent clip.

On Tuesday night, **Steve Downie** had his ten game point streak broken by Montreal. He had 13 points, 35 penalty minutes and was a healthy plus-9 during that stretch.