

A 60-Minute Effort, Where Art Thou?

The Washington Capitals used to be known as a “very hungry and talented team,” a description by Ted Leonsis of the Atlanta Thrashers after last night’s 4-3 (OT) win by the red, white and blue.

“It is so interesting to see a team that has a bunch of young hungry players and some gritty role players that lost their big money super star player now be a tough team to play against,” the owner penned on his blog.

“They played really well, skated well; they didn’t give us much of a chance to breathe [early],” Coach Bruce Boudreau opined.

That moniker (or something like it) belonged to the Caps during the “lean” years -- first when GM George McPhee was trading away high-priced players to prepare for the strike and also during Alex Ovechkin’s early years on the team. Further back, it described the Caps in the 1980s under then-GM David Poile and the Murray brothers as coach.

Today, the Caps are known as “skilled” and difficult to play against because they’ve got a deep roster of scoring threats. They can score at will against most teams and—by that virtue, some timely defense and pretty good goaltending—they captured the President’s Trophy last season and set all kinds of records along the way.

Alex Semin is the epitome of this transformation. He registered his fourth career hat trick last night, but the Boudreau focused on the fact that he was playing hard.

“He played hard,” Boudreau said of Semin. “The consistency has been there for sure. It’s eight games in, but there have been no real lapses and [Saturday] he got rewarded for playing a good game.”

It’s hard not to keep harping on the fact that the impact of last spring’s playoff loss to the Montreal Canadiens has carried over to the beginning this season: teams completely changed their approach to playing the Caps and began employing an old-school neutral-zone trap to throw the Caps off their game. The Caps’ ease is replaced with frustration and frequent lauding of opponents.

Case in point: last week’s double-loss to the Boston Bruins ended with players complimenting Tim Thomas’ effort between the pipes.

“His lateral movement was just phenomenal [Thursday],” Mike Knuble said after Thursday’s 4-1 loss at TD Garden. “I don’t know if he was playing back in his net, but he was getting across the ice.”

“But in the second period they started to move their legs and win battles,” Brooks Laich added. “Defensively, we weren’t moving our legs. We were standing, still not picking up our assignments. They had one shift where they really holed us up in our zone and they scored

their second goal on that shift and that might have been the turning point in the hockey game.”

So far this season, the Caps have been outworked in nearly every game. Their skill is no longer enough to overcome opponents and cruise to easy victories. Ovechkin continues to stand out, but he’s had bad games already in the small eight-game sample. Mathieu Perreault, recalled from Hershey earlier in the day, stood out last night and showed chemistry with Semin, a rare feat for any center not named Nicklas Backstrom.

The Caps’ skill will not disappear, but they must channel their hard-working ancestors. If they do, they are beyond capable of capturing the franchise’s first Stanley Cup. If nothing changes, though, it’s hard to predict anything other than a repeat of past playoff disappointments.