

Extreme Makeover: Washington Capitals

Before you think the following is about who the Washington Capitals should trade, know that there is only one person that will fall into that category. For the most part, though, this is about what the Caps can or should do to break out of their funk and get back to playing winning hockey:

1. Trade Alex Semin: Let's get the most obvious out of the way first. Semin, who was a healthy scratch tonight against the Phoenix Coyotes, has been underachieving all season and is currently the second-highest paid player on the roster at \$6.7 million. Also, it's increasingly unlikely that he'll be back because GM George McPhee is not willing to give him another pay raise and his spot on the team is becoming more tenuous.

Semin only has nine points (four goals, five assists) on the season, his ice time is decreasing and he's in yet another dormant period. In fact, **he's scored just 18 goals in calendar year 2011**—a total he matched in the final three months of 2010 alone. Yes, he scored 28 goals last season, but 12 of those tallies came in November. Finally, he took nine hooking and six tripping penalties last season—and he's got four of each already this season. He's making Matt Bradley seem like a prophet.

2. Pick Another Captain: Alex Ovechkin is the face of the franchise and the most influential player on the Caps without question. However, since he was named captain on Jan. 5, 2010, Ovie has declined. In his first full season as the team's on-ice leader (2010-11), he experienced his worst season statistically since entering the NHL and watched as his team was swept by the Tampa Bay Lightning last spring.

It would be great if Gary Bettman handed the Stanley Cup to Ovechkin if and when the Caps win the championship. But, at this rate, the team isn't getting anywhere close to achieving that goal. By many accounts, Ovie and Coach Bruce Boudreau aren't seeing eye-to-eye and No. 8 is having trouble adjusting to a more balanced, two-way style of play. Dale Hunter wasn't the Caps' best player when he was captain, but he was the team's unquestioned leader. It might be time for Ovechkin to relinquish that responsibility and get back to concentrating on hockey -- something that needs a lot of improvement.

3. Listen to Boudreau: The coach knows what he's talking about. He's one win (entering tonight's contest) from capturing his 200th NHL win (in just about four seasons since taking over in November 2007). But, for some reason, the Caps don't seem inclined to follow orders and stick to the system.

"Sometimes I think we did maybe too good of a job of moving on [from a loss], we didn't learn from our mistakes from the game before," winger Troy Brouwer said in this morning's Washington Post. "You do need to learn and progress as a team. I think it's really hitting the guys right now that something needs to change, and it starts with our work ethic."

Boudreau's had some great quotes (and excuses) about this issue over the years, but the

Caps are well beyond lip service. It's time for a team that's won its division four times in a row to take the next step. McPhee has done a good job of making moves at the right time—and sending Semin out of town is the next logical step—but, this season, most of the makeover needs to be made internally.

4. Play For Each Other: This is perhaps the most telling sign of a true Stanley Cup contender. It's a team that always talks about helping each other, and not about personal goals or accolades. This starts with the captain (see above) and stretches all the way to the last person on the bench—or the first recall from the AHL. When McPhee traded for Jason Chimera and Scott Hannan the last two falls, he was trying to acquire players that made an impact in those areas. But in order for the 2011-12 season to truly complete the transformation, the team needs to approach everything differently.

“It's not the team with the best players that always wins, it's the team that plays best together,” Brooks Laich said after the Caps lost, 7-1, to the Toronto Maple Leafs Saturday night. “At times tonight we were disconnected, we were on an island a little bit. When we're successful it's all about support, short passes and five-man units on the ice.”

The Caps need to adopt that mantra every night, or things won't change. As Albert Einstein famously said, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”