

NEW SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

NHL experience is no longer a prerequisite for a coach or GM. The back door can be opened, and information is the key

BY MATT LARKIN

JOHN CHAYKA AND Kyle Dubas have a lot in common. They became high-level executives with professional sports teams in their 20s; they climbed their respective ladders by evaluating talent with advanced statistics; and if they sat down for coffee together, they couldn't compare scars from years playing elite-level hockey. They represent a new regime of generals with no front-line battle experience.

When we see the rise of whiz-kid hirings across the NHL, with Arizona Coyotes GM Chayka and Toronto Maple Leafs assistant GM Dubas being the most significant, it's natural to wonder if it's a fad. The rise of sports management education at the grassroots level, however, suggests Chayka and Dubas are merely the first of many. A generation of deep-thinking sports minds has spawned, and that's why we're seeing courses, conferences and seminars sprout up like crazy, training academic thinkers to follow the sports path.

Imagine a fresh-faced 22-year-old with a business degree chatting up someone of legendary Boston Bruins GM Harry Sinden's ilk once a week, picking his brain for tips on how to become a better talent evaluator. It would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. Now, it's part of the standard curriculum if you enroll in a program like Sports Management Worldwide. Dr. Lynn Lashbrook, an NFL player agent and former athletic director at multiple NCAA schools, founded SMWW as a conference circuit and virtual university. The program covers dozens of sports and, on the hockey end,

includes courses called Hockey GM & Scouting and Hockey Analytics. A wannabe GM can learn from Sinden in weekly real-time audio chats. Someone interested in statistics can consult with Peterborough Petes GM Mike Oke.

Lashbrook believes pro sports are undergoing a "democratization of information." Hockey isn't as advanced as baseball or basketball yet, but it's trending that way. "Analytics provides another penetration point to become a GM someday," Lashbrook said. "Before, it was your letterman jacket. If you didn't play the

BEFORE, IF YOU DIDN'T PLAY THE GAME, YOU DIDN'T HAVE THE CREDENTIALS

— Lynn Lashbrook, SMWW founder

game, you didn't have the credentials. Now, there's a lot of people coming through the back door."

The coaching revolution is different. It requires hands-on experience, but the strategic element is evolving. That's reflected at modern coaching conferences. "I know everybody thinks it's power play and penalty killing, but lots of times things will come up like player development, relations to the media and using statistics," said Vancouver Canucks coach Willie Desjardins, a regular guest speaker at TeamSnap, a conference advising coaches across every echelon.

What it means to be a coach is transforming. The next generation of bench bosses must be more media savvy. In the Twitter generation, when every last word can be publicly picked apart, Desjardins champions honesty. That way, he says, you'll never be trapped weeks later for saying something inaccurate.

Up-and-coming coaches typically embrace analytics, too. Mike Sullivan's Pittsburgh Penguins won the Stanley Cup with a north-south, speed-game approach, and as more and more teams try to win with the possession game, that philosophy will be drilled into new coaching recruits. "As a coach you have to be careful," Desjardins said, "because it's one thing to run a system with one team, and then all of a sudden you have different personnel, and the system won't work with different personnel. You always have to adjust what you're doing to your personnel. Just because it's worked for one team it doesn't mean that system will work for you."

Instead of copycats, we may see customized approaches to analytics as forward-thinking coaches rise up the ranks. Oke is a big proponent of Statstrack, an iPad app created by Sudbury Wolves associate coach and ex-NHL defenseman Drake Berehowsky and his sister Danielle. To them, controlling the puck and suppressing shots matter as much as generating the attempts, and Statstrack can depict how well teams and players do it. "I believe just because a player's shooting pucks on a net, that's not telling the whole story," Berehowsky said.

See the trend? It's information. A lot of it. If there's one takeaway about the next wave of team management and coaching, it's that the times are more inclusive than ever. No philosophy or statistic is unwelcome. The best candidates are judged less on their athleticism or gender. And the brightest young brains, those who never would've had the opportunity to get involved in hockey in the past, haven't even arrived yet. **H**

DID YOU EVEN PLAY, BRO?

Half the cadre of NHL coaches and GMs played the game at its highest level. That's a trend expected to change in the coming years.

