

Bears gymnasts show well in Hamilton — p. 16

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Tough meet for Bear swimmers — p. 17



Alan Small

Espo rocks Big Apple

With the trading deadline for the NHL come and gone for another year, it is now the time for every sportswriter in Canada to give his views on the various transactions.

Here's mine.

How about that Phil Esposito? Trader Phil has been busy all year long, and did not disappoint as the trade deadline came near. As a guy who was involved in the biggest trades in the history of the NHL, he obviously has no qualms about unloading some of his players for fresh talent.

The soon-to-be legendary Marcel Dionne was obtained by the Rangers for Tom Laidlaw and Bobby Carpenter. First Espo got a 40-goal man in Walt Poddubny for practically nothing from the Leafs, and now he's pried the second best scorer this league's ever had for a journeyman defenceman and a malcontent center. Carpenter and Laidlaw are last and second last in the Rangers plus/minus stats, while he plucks a 90 point man for his lacking offence. Rogie Vachon must have been sleeping when he made this deal.

One other Esposito trade comes to mind. Remember when he got Bob Froese out of Philadelphia for the huge Kjell Samuelsson?

Froese is now in one of the best one-two goalie combos their side of the ole Miss. Now when the Rangers play the Flyers in their traditional first round playoff battle, Froese should stone his old teammates and make Trader Phil look like a genius and Bob Clarke less than that.

The Rangers were a couple of scorers from the Stanley Cup last year. The only difference between them and the Canadiens were that the Canadiens had two guys that could score while the Broadway Blueshirts did their imitation of the Canadian Olympic squad.

Esposito has corrected those problems. After a rough start, he took control over Ted Sator and built his team with banished players like Poddubny, Pierre Larouche, and Tony McKegney. They are one, three, and six in Ranger scoring this year.

If Froese and John Vanbiesbroeck play as well as I think they're capable of, and the defence remains as stable as it was during the playoffs last year, the Rangers will be the team to watch during the playoffs.

People with visions like Phil Esposito will prove it so. He's been a take-charge GM and coach throughout this year. He was exactly what the Rangers needed after the long line of Casper Milquetoasts they've had running their team.

They're the team to watch for in the Prince of Wales conference now, and for years to come.

Leclair peaks in senior year

— 17 has found a place in Drake's good books —

by Mark Spector

As far as five year veterans go, Denis Leclair isn't exactly your average cat. The Edmonton born leftwinger has followed one of the rockiest paths possible during his career here, but has found his pot of gold finally.

Leclair is enjoying his best ever season in an Alberta uniform, and believe you me, he deserves it.

"I've paid my dues," agrees the lanky number 17, but his dues turned out to be akin to paying W.C. Fields' bar tab. At 16 he tried out for the Saskatoon Blades of the Western Hockey League, but spent all but a handful of games on their SJHL Tier Two farm team. After sticking with the Blades for the first half of the next year, a new owner wanted to send him back down. A phone call from Bob Tessier was Leclair's cue to join the Sherwood Park Crusaders of the AJHL. The next season he made the Golden Bears.

Then came a career move that many agree may have hindered rather than helped the good natured Phys. Ed. student. "I felt that I hadn't given juniors a good chance," he explains. So he left the Bears to attend the training camp of the Peter Pocklington-owned Kamloops Oilers.

After accumulating "around a point a game", the 6'3", 198 pounder was dealt to his third WHL squad, the Seattle Breakers. That spelled it out to him clearly — Denis Leclair was once again university bound. But when he returned, things weren't exactly as he had left them.

"Offensively, I had a really good season that first year," he remembers. "But when I came back for my second year, it was like starting all over again. I was a rookie all over again. And there were guys like Dave Otto there, Dennis Cranston... Craig Dill and Bill Ansell were both in their second year. The team had a good nucleus."

And Leclair wasn't part of it.

Jeff Helland could see it. "I think this thing with Denis... (pause) Ever since he came back it's been an uphill battle for him." Helland, who evolved into a typical Clare Drake-coached penalty killer and defensive specialist, has become perhaps Leclair's closest teammate.

Leclair halved his time between the stands and the ice surface early last year before an ankle injury sidelined him for the second half of the season and the playoffs. This season began much the same way before he was able to slip into a groove just before Christmas.

"He hasn't missed a shift since then," said Drake, "and he's responded quite well. In the past Denis hasn't been consistent, but this year we feel he's one of our best players." This coach/player relationship has been of the complex variety, but with the old master, that's nothing new.

"You spend the first two years trying to figure him out, then you spend your last two years trying not to worry about it," reasons Leclair. "He's always thinking, he's a smart man."

But the bottom line has remained the same. "When you're sitting out you take it personally," says Leclair. "It's hard to perform in that situation," agrees Helland. "When you're in the stands you lose confidence."

"I don't know the reason (why he sat), but for himself, he's played really well," says Sid Cranston. "He's proved to himself and everyone that he's capable of showing (his stuff). He's really picked up his role and he's been building all season, getting better and better."

As for Drake, he's mum on whether the year away housed Denis with the dogs. "Those things are hard to judge," he said. "I think that had it been a more positive experience... it was an up and down year.

"He's the only one that can answer that question."

But those days are passed, and after some good production at the Universiade Games, Leclair is ready for the nationals, which begin in one week's time. He will turn 24 the same day.

"When you get to this position it's like the whole world stops," he says of the CIAU's. "All that matters is hockey, and your school work tends to suffer."

These are his fourth nationals, and although he didn't play last year, that was the only ring he has collected.

"Naturally I'd like to go out in style," he says. And deep down, you want him to.

Doghouse Denis has paid his dues, and with his best season now behind him, a championship would cap things off very nicely, thank you.



Denis Leclair has enjoyed his best season in this his final year on the Golden Bears. He'll turn 24 on the same day that the nationals open at Varsity next Thursday. After sitting out last year with an injury, he'll try to go out in style with a championship ring.

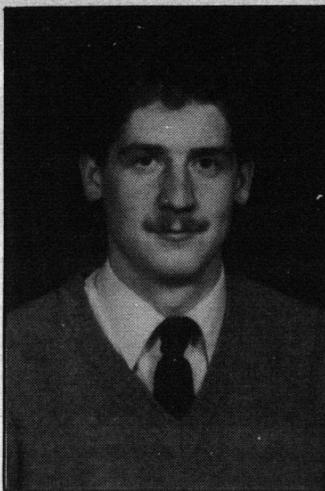


photo 'Hoop' Spector

1070 Gold cuts coverage, CJSR back into the picture

by Mark Spector

CKST has informed the Department of Athletics that they will not do all of the Golden Bear games in the CIAU hockey finals which begin next Thursday.

In what Station Manager Doug Shillington refers to as "An agreement that we agreed to change," CKST informed Athletics last Thursday that they will air only the opening game for the Golden Bears, which takes place on the first night of the tournament.

Shillington denied comment when asked what prompted the scheduling change. The St. Albert station, more commonly known as 1070 Gold, had originally intended to broadcast all of the Alberta contests. Shillington did say however that the station's commitment to

the Edmonton Trappers, whose spring training begins around the same time, had nothing to do with the move.

Meanwhile, CJSR, who were initially disturbed when Athletics inked the contract with CKST, has planned to do Alberta's second game of the round robin as well as the final should the Golden Bears reach that point.

"Our commitment (to Athletics) is really strong," stated CJSR Station Manager Brent Kane. "We didn't turn around and say 'Why should we do the games since we were the second choice?'" Kane also intends to approach Sports Director Blaine Ostapovich, whose resignation from CJSR is effective March 15th, to return and do the play-by-play for CJSR.



Blaine Ostapovich — "If the price is right."

When contacted, Ostapovich said, "My job at CJSR ends on the 15th. I would return on a freelance basis to do the play-by-play if the price was right." He would not comment, however, on what his fee may be.