



MISSING LINK: Penguins GM Ray Shero's addition of Bill Guerin was a smart move. The 21-year veteran has scored over 400 goals in his career and looks like the winger Sidney Crosby has been waiting for. BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

A tale of two GMs

Decisions critical in Penguins, Canadiens late-season fortunes

By **KARL YU**
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When it comes to a team's success, you need not look any further than the general manager's role.

Under the guidance of Pat Gillick, the Toronto Blue Jays took back-to-back World Series titles in 1992 and 1993, and although he stepped down as GM of the Philadelphia Phillies, he is largely responsible for the team's World Series win last fall.

Ken Holland, GM of the Detroit Red Wings, is credited with the remarkable consistency Hockeytown's team has displayed over the years.

Now, late in the NHL season two of the league's most prominent franchises—the Pittsburgh Penguins and Montreal Canadiens—show how a GM's decisions affect the team's fortunes.

Fans in Pittsburgh were sounding the alarm bells in mid-February

as their beloved Penguins were in danger of missing the playoffs less than a year removed from representing the Eastern Conference in the Stanley Cup finals.

The Pens were 27-25-5, in 10th spot, and coming off a 6-2 loss to the Toronto Maple Leafs when GM Ray Shero decided to fire coach Michel Therrien and replace him with farm team bench boss Dan Bylsma.

The players have taken a liking to the new coach as the Penguins have reversed their fortunes going 13-2-3 as of Thursday, good enough for sixth place.

As Bylsma told the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, "When a team sees Pittsburgh on its schedule, we want to keep making that one game a team circles and says, 'Boy, that's going to be a tough task.'"

And thanks to some deadline deals by Shero, if Pittsburgh wasn't tough before, they certainly are now.

Bill Guerin was acquired from the New York Islanders and has contributed three goals and seven assists for 10 points in 10 games.

Chris Kunitz was acquired from the Anaheim Ducks for defenseman Ryan Whitney and has averaged a point a game in 13 games since joining the Pens.

Guerin and Kunitz together with Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, and Jordan Staal give the Pittsburgh Penguins the horses to run all the way to the Stanley Cup again.

Habs stumble

While the Penguins scored at this year's trading deadline, the Montreal Canadiens gaffed last year's trading deadline when GM Bob Gainey dealt away goalie Cristobal Huet—a move that still haunts the team as it tries to secure a spot in this year's playoffs.

Last year's Huet deal was made because Gainey believed 20-year-old goalie Carey Price was ready for a full-time duty. The jury's still out on him but down the stretch this year, a veteran goalie would be a Gotsend for the struggling Habs.

In his last 21 games, Price has gone 6-15 while fellow Montreal netminder Jaroslav Halak has gone 13-7 in his last 20, but has lost three in a row.

Despite owning a better recent record than Price, Halak isn't the answer for the stretch run and playoffs. He only has two postseason appearances under his belt with a 0-1 record and save percentage of .889.

Price's confidence looks shot and the rabid Montreal fans are in a state of panic.

"Canadiens playing like they've already quit" reads a headline from the Montreal Gazette, and the fans have taken to chanting the name of former coach Guy Carbonneau, who was fired and replaced by GM Bob Gainey on March 9. Under Gainey, the Habs are a mediocre 2-3-2.

Gainey felt he had all the pieces of the puzzle in place at the trade deadline. But a new signing or two would have reinvigorated his lackluster team. Don't let Tuesday's 6-3 victory over the hapless Thrashers fool you.

The Habs are ready to fall like a house of cards and with goaltending a major question mark as well as the team's recent lackluster play (8-13 in their last 21 games), they will be on the outside looking in come mid-April.

With this being their centenary season, missing the playoffs would be considered a total disaster.

Japan wins World Baseball Classic in thriller

Japanese and Koreans developing a world-class rivalry

LOS ANGELES (Reuters)—Japan retained the World Baseball Classic title by beating bitter Asian rivals South Korea 5-3 in a pulsating 10-inning battle at Dodger Stadium on Monday.

Seattle Mariners right-fielder Ichiro Suzuki belted a two-run single up the middle in the top of the 10th for his fourth hit of the game to lift Japan to victory over the Olympic champions and repeat their triumph from the inaugural tournament in 2006.

Japan took a 3-1 lead in the eighth but South Korea battled back with one run in the bottom half of the inning and another with two outs in the ninth on an Lee Bum-ho RBI single to left field that sent the game to extra innings.

Ichiro, the record holder for most hits in a season with 262 in 2004, had been quiet at the plate during the WBC but picked the perfect time to break out.

The dynamic right-fielder fought side-arm reliever Lim Chang-yong through an eight-pitch at-bat with runners on second and third before he drove a 2-2 pitch into center field to give Japan their winning margin.

Daisuke Matsuzaka, who notched the victory in Japan's semifinal victory over the United States, was named MVP of the Classic, repeating the honour the Boston Red Sox hurler claimed in 2006.

"It's not something that everybody can experience, and it's not something that everybody can earn," Matsuzaka told reporters. "So I feel that I'm very lucky. I'm really thankful about the MVP. I didn't think that it was going to be me at all."

Jubilant Japanese

Yu Darvish, a 22-year-old hard-throwing starter, came on in relief in the ninth and yielded the game-tying run after struggling with his control before shutting South Korea down in the 10th to register the win and set off joyous celebrations.

Darvish was mobbed on the mound by his teammates, who clustered in the infield to hug each other after easing the pain of an Olympics that left them out of the medals.

Manager Tatsunori Hara was tossed into the air by players on the jubilant team as 2006 Japan manager Sadaharu Oh watched on. They later paraded around Dodger Stadium holding a giant Japan flag and waving to fans.

"We became number one in the world," Hara said.

"The fact that two Asian countries were able to play against each other in the finals is something that



WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS: Japan's Ichiro Suzuki celebrates his nation's victory over South Korea on Monday in Los Angeles. KEVORK DJANSEZIAN/GETTY IMAGES

we and the Koreans can be proud of."

It was the fifth clash between the two teams during the 16-nation WBC tournament and a rubber-match after the rivals had split their first four meetings for their only defeats in the competition.

Japan controlled the action, threatening throughout the early innings but failed to cash in opportunities as the Olympic gold medalists turned three double plays to escape danger despite being out 15 to 5 in the contest.

Japan broke the ice with a run in the third on a single by Michihiro Ogasawara that scored Hiroyuki Nakajima, although they failed to add to the total despite loading the bases.

Choo Shin-soo, who plays for the Cleveland Indians, tied the game with home run to left-center leading off the fifth.

Single runs in the seventh and eighth put Japan ahead before the late rallies by the determined Koreans spoiled the brilliant starting performance by Hisashi Iwakuma and sent the game to extra innings.

Tiger's No. 1 ranking in jeopardy

LONDON (Reuters)—Tiger Woods is in danger of surrendering his position as world number one to Phil Mickelson in two weeks' time.

Woods has been on top for 198 consecutive weeks but his commanding lead was whittled away as he spent eight months on the sidelines following reconstructive knee surgery after his U.S. Open triumph in June.

The number one is now only 0.20 points ahead of his rival, and if Woods fails to win this week's Arnold Palmer Invitational in Florida, victory for Mickelson at the following week's Houston Open would put the lefty on top.

Mickelson, who has never been number one, is taking this week off.

"It is astonishing someone can effectively take around a year off, because after the U.S. Masters in April he only played again at the U.S. Open in June, and still hang on to the number one spot," Ian Barker, who manages the official rankings, told Reuters on Monday.

Woods was also top for 264 consecutive weeks between 1999-2004. The next longest run is Australian Greg Norman's 96-week spell as world number one from 1995-97.

United's struggles revive title race in Premier League

Specter of 1997-98 collapse lingers

LONDON (Reuters)—Manchester United, who could have been 10 points clear of Liverpool if they had beaten them just over a week ago, could find themselves in second place in the table when the Premier League resumes in two weeks' time.

An astonishing weekend of results that saw United lose 2-0 at Fulham, Chelsea go down 1-0 at Tottenham Hotspur, and Liverpool crush Aston Villa 5-0, blew the title race wide open again with Manchester United's seemingly rock-solid grip on the championship trophy pried apart.

United, champions for the last two seasons and bidding for an 18th crown—which would equal Liverpool's all-time record—are still favourites to triumph. They lead the table with 65 points from their 29 matches—one point more than Liverpool who have 64 and have played one more match. Chelsea are third on 61 points from 30 matches, with Arsenal fourth, a further six points behind.

But despite their position at the top and their renowned steeliness when the chips are down, United will be wary of buckling under the pressure being exerted by Liverpool—as they did when they were chased down by Arsenal 11 seasons ago.

In 1997-98, Manchester United let slip a 13-point lead over Arsenal, who stormed to the title by a point and clinched the "double" after beating Newcastle United in the FA Cup final.

Alex Ferguson, whose men are in the hunt for five trophies, but who have now lost successive league games for the first time in nearly five years, seemed alarmed by their display at Fulham.

United, thrashed 4-1 by Liverpool at Anfield on March 14, were disappointing in the first half and had an afternoon to forget as Paul Scholes and Wayne Rooney were both red carded.

"When you lose games in March and April it can cost you," the manager told Manchester United's



HAT TRICK: Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard indicates how many goals he scored last Sunday against Aston Villa. PAUL ELLIS/AFPP/GETTY IMAGES

TV channel MUTV.

"Fortunately we have a slender lead, but it is not a lot. The home game with Aston Villa is absolutely crucial."

Rooney, Scholes, and Nemanja Vidic, who was sent off in United's 4-1 defeat to Liverpool, will all be suspended when United resume the title race against Aston Villa on April 5.

Ferguson concerned

Villa, who were in a Champions League spot for three months but have now slipped back to fifth, were crushed by a rampant Liverpool last Sunday as Steven Gerrard scored his first Premier League hat-trick, including two goals from penalties.

However, if Villa prevents United from winning when they meet at Old Trafford after the international break, and Liverpool beats Fulham at Craven Cottage on the same weekend, Liverpool will be top for the first time since mid-January.

While Ferguson looked concerned, Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez, while not exactly crowing, was pleased with his team's performance—even though he

said they could have done ever better.

"Don't get me wrong, we could have played better on the counter-attack, but I am really happy," he told reporters.

"We needed to do our job and wait for United to make mistakes and that is what happened. They are still in a much better position but we will keep pushing them. What do I think of United's wobble? I don't know. Ask Mr. Ferguson."

Chelsea also wobbled by going down 1-0 to Spurs at White Hart Lane as temporary manager Guus Hiddink saw his team beaten for the first time in the Premier League after four straight wins since he took over from Luiz Felipe Scolari.

Hiddink refused to concede the title race and said: "We won't give up, but if you are chasing you cannot afford to do what we did, especially with Manchester United losing. It is very disappointing. These are the moments when the players know they must strike. Liverpool and Chelsea cannot afford to drop a single point."

Neither for that matter can Manchester United as the title race moves into its final stages.

Big game pitcher Schilling calls it quits

BOSTON (Reuters)—Curt Schilling announced his retirement Monday after six All-Star appearances, three World Series championships, and a reputation as one of baseball's best big-game performers.

"This party has officially ended," Schilling wrote on his blog (38pitches.weei.com).

"After being blessed to experience 23 years of playing professional baseball in front of the world's best fans in so many different places, it is with zero regrets that I am making my retirement official."

Schilling, 42, last pitched in 2007 when he helped the Boston Red Sox defeat the Colorado Rockies in the World Series.

The right-hander, who also played for the Baltimore Orioles, Houston Astros, Philadelphia Phillies, and Arizona Diamondbacks, had a career 10-2 record in the postseason.

He closes out his career with a 216-146 record, a 3.46 ERA, and 3,116 strikeouts. But he was at his best when it mattered most, compiling a 2.33 ERA in 19 postseason starts.

"To say I've been blessed would be like calling Refrigerator Perry a bit overweight," Schilling said of the rotund former defensive tackle of the NFL's Chicago Bears.

"The things I was allowed to experience, the people I was able to call friends, teammates, mentors, coaches, and opponents, the travel, all of it, are far more than anything I ever thought possible in my lifetime."

Shoulder problems prevented Schilling from playing last season. He played for the World Series,



ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT: Curt Schilling won three World Series titles. ELSA/GETTY IMAGES

winning Diamondbacks in 2001 and Boston's championship teams in 2004 and 2007.

"The game was here long before I was, and will be here long after I am gone," he said. "The only thing I hope I did was never put in question my love for the game, or my passion to be counted on when it mattered most."

"I did everything I could to win every time I was handed the ball."

MEN'S GOLF RANKINGS

Player	Avg. Points
1. (1) Tiger Woods (U.S.)	8.86
2. (2) Phil Mickelson (U.S.)	8.66
3. (3) Sergio Garcia (Spain)	7.53
4. (4) Geoff Ogilvy (Australia)	6.36
5. (5) Padraig Harrington (Ireland)	5.91
6. (6) Vijay Singh (Fiji)	5.86
7. (7) Camilo Villegas (Colombia)	4.94
8. (9) Robert Karlsson (Sweden)	4.88
9. (10) Henrik Stenson (Sweden)	4.87
10. (8) Kenny Perry (U.S.)	4.83
11. (15) Steve Stricker (U.S.)	4.37
12. (13) Paul Casey (Britain)	4.34
13. (11) Jim Furyk (U.S.)	4.31
14. (12) Anthony Kim (U.S.)	4.28
15. (14) Lee Westwood (Britain)	4.17
16. (16) Ernie Els (South Africa)	4.16
17. (17) Rory Mclroy (Britain)	3.93
18. (18) Stewart Cink (U.S.)	3.73
19. (19) Mike Weir (Canada)	3.67
20. (23) Martin Kaymer (Germany)	3.46

Rankings as of March 23. Previous week's ranking in parentheses.