

# NHL grows coaches from within

If you aspire to be a National Hockey League coach, it's better to stop along the way in Kamloops, B.C. or Freiburg, Germany than Boston College or the University of Maine.

Actually it's impossible to be certain of that, but a review of the credentials of current NHL coaches suggests that entering the college ranks isn't the best path to an NHL coaching job. Of the NHL's 30 head coaches, only three have college coaching experience, and all three of those coaches (Mike Keenan, Barry Trotz and Dave King) did their college coaching in Canada.

That's not exactly major news in the hockey world, considering that the late Bob Johnson (Wisconsin) is probably the only former U.S. college coach in recent memory to make a major splash at the NHL level. Even revered American coaching legend Herb Brooks, returning to coach the 2002 U.S. Olympic team, didn't have a lengthy career as an NHL coach.

But a review of the current coaching roster does show some trends are changing in the NHL, particularly regarding the recycling of coaches.

Despite the fact there are a host of experienced coaches on the sidelines, including Stanley Cup winners Jacques Demers, Pat Burns and John Muckler, there are 16 coaches (out of 30 teams) who have their first NHL head coaching jobs. Scotty Bowman, Pat Quinn and Keenan are the only coaches in the league who have coached for three or more NHL teams.

Clearly, NHL general managers now seem more inclined to promote a NHL assistant coach or minor league coach.

In fact, today's general managers seem to prefer their coaches at least have some minor league head coaching experience. Twenty-two of the league's coaches have had some head coaching experience in the minors.

The work of Lindy Ruff in Buffalo and Joel Quenneville in St. Louis certainly has helped the cause of those looking to move up from an assistant's job, while Colorado's Bob Hartley and Nashville's Barry Trotz have shown NHL general managers that coaches who climb through the minor league system can do the job at the NHL. What's interesting about Hartley and Trotz is that neither played in the NHL, thereby putting another dagger in the tired notion that NHL

players would have difficulty respecting coaches who hadn't been in their skates.

Why do general managers seem more willing to hire minor league coaches or assistants? Most say it's due to a variety of factors, not the least of which is salary. With budgets very tight in most NHL cities, and coaches' salaries rising, it's less expensive to hire a newcomer than a proven veteran. Secondly, the sophistication of NHL coaching has reached the point that the coach's approach/philosophy, system and work habits are more important than his NHL credentials.

One GM says flatly that minor league coaches usually come more prepared for their interviews because they feel they have to outwork those who already have NHL credentials. They come across as hungrier, says the GM.

Even playing in the NHL isn't as important to a resume as it used to be, as 13 of the current NHL coaches never played in the NHL.

The arrival of Ivan Hlinka (Pittsburgh) and Alpo Suhonen (Finland) is also changing the perspective about European coaches.

It was Hlinka who coached in Freiburg. Lemaire also picked up some valuable experience coaching in Switzerland.

Truthfully there is no one formula that would assure anyone of a guaranteed rise to the NHL. But based on a study of the league's coaching resumes, the best chance for an NHL coaching job would come for a former NHL player, who has served as an NHL assistant and a minor league head coach. It would be preferable if he was in his early to mid 40s. There is

a fair chance he has coached Canadian junior hockey.

The NHL seems to be moving toward younger coaches, based on the fact that only 10 are over 50 now and only Bowman, 67, is over 60. Only Paul Maurice (Carolina), Michel Therrien and Trotz are the only NHL bench bosses in their 30s.

One other piece of advice if you want to coach in the NHL: Don't tell anyone you were a goaltender. Ron Low is still the only former goaltender who is currently a NHL team.

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