Vernon centre would be worth taking



by
Jim Judd
Daily News
Sports Writer

There have been a lot of theories about how best to put a winning team together on the ice but by far the one that makes the most sense is the one that says if a team is strong up the middle they are almost always in contention.

As a way of illustrating this simple point, one need only look at the accumulated plight of the centre-poor Vancouver Canucks over the years. For some reason it has never dawned upon the Canucks' scouting staff to go after the top-notch centres in the June amateur player draft. The teams that do generally build up a contender in short order and enjoy many years of entertainment from their high profile teams.

Even teams that struggle in other areas, for instance the Winnipeg Jets, are almost always ahead of the Canucks in the standings for one primary reason — they have centre Dale Hawerchuk. And, though he plays a somewhat lesser role, centre Laurie Boschman. Hawerchuk nets more than a hundred points every season, Boschman is equally strong and subsequently their team finishes higher in the overall standings each season.

In recent years the Canucks have tried to bolster this position through trades and the acquisition of both Barry Pederson and Greg Adams has certainly been a step in the direction of prosperity.

However, few teams are willing to part with a priceless commodity such as a 100-point a year centreman so the free-agency-trade-market area contains only a few lesser lights at best. The best thing to do is to rely on the June draft to acquire the centre-ice talent. Again, this has been a low point in the history of the Vancouver franchise.

At the same time, it's always been a mystery to pundits of the BCJHL that the Canucks' scouting staff has never had the good sense to look in its own backyard before the draft rolls around in June. At least if not in the early rounds, certainly in the bargain-bin later rounds. Others have foraged into the BCJHL in recent years and in the near future there could be some dandy hockey players in the big leagues who were graduates of the country's most Westerly junior A loop.

For instance, Calgary Flames' Brett Hull went in the late rounds of the 1984 draft. Maybe it was only a struggling junior A league at the time, but you have to figure a kid with Bobby Hull's genes and a pair of hands that can score 115 goals in a single season has to be worth at least a minor risk in the ninth round!

Apparently the Canucks didn't see it that way. In fact, an attempt at personally bringing Hull to the attention of the Canucks' General Manager met with a predictable result.

Hull, of course, scored 98 goals in two brief seasons of NCAA hockey, has 25 NHL goals at this point in his rookie season, and will likely score 40 before the year is out.

Just for the record, though it veers slightly from the subject, we also tried to enlighten the Canucks of the presence of Ian Kidd in his final year with Penticton Knights but met with no more success than we did with Hull. Last year the Canucks, now suddenly filled with admiration for the BCJHL graduate, filled Kidd's pockets with cold, hard cash to get him out of the NCAA and into a Vancouver uniform.

Don't say we never tried.

Which all brings us around to the question of one Dallas Drake who currently is on a collision course for a BCJHL scoring title in his first season of Junior A hockey.

Drake has played just 45 games this year but he hardly turned a wheel in the first half dozen he was in. So, in roughly 40 games this season he has scored 35 goals and added 84 assists for 119 points. He has picked up 17 points in his last three games which only goes to show that not only is he something of a late bloomer but also that his potential is still in the distant future.

As an 18-year old in this league Hull only just reached the 100-point plateau in the BCJHL. As a 19-year old he came within a game of getting 200 points.

Drake, on the other hand, will in all probability finish the regular season with about 125 or 130 points, not to mention a scoring title. Were he to play in this league as a 19-year old, which is extremely doubtful at this point, he'd probably surpass Hull's high-water mark too.

In Junior B hockey he picked up 135 points. In Junior A hockey he'll do the same. If he played major junior hockey next year there's little doubt he'd do the same. The bottom line is, a kid with a set of hands like Dallas Drake, will pretty much do the same thing at any callibre of competition.

Naturally, it's unlikely that the Canucks, or anybody else for that matter, will look at Drake when June rolls around.

Just as well, I suppose, because it means that like Kidd, Drake will be able to fill his pockets when the right time arrives.

In the meantime, he plays centre for the Vernon Lakers. Feel free to go out and watch him perform anytime.