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Blues have made genuine effort to win back fans

By Bernie Miklasz
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
09/30/2007



Sports Columnist Bernie Miklasz
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Sunday in Pittsburgh, the Cardinals will complete a brutally difficult and disappointing season with their first losing record since 1999.

The battered Rams are 0-3, and snarling fans already have turned on young head coach Scott Linehan, wanting him gone only 19 games into his employment. Now the Rams are in Texas to take on the Dallas Cowboys, who may be the NFC's best team. Prepare for a long day, and a long season.

This is a special time for the Blues, who open the NHL regular season at Phoenix on

Thursday.

The Blues have a unique opportunity to move up in the St. Louis sports marketplace. They can become the darlings of fans looking to embrace something fresh and optimistic.

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After being off the radar screen for a while, the Blues have a chance to regain status and prominence, and that's an important step. Interest here was all but killed by the wipeout of an entire season due to labor strife, and the dreadful and depressing ending to Bill Laurie's term as owner.

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In the process of re-emerging, the Blues can reposition themselves and catch fire.

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Chairman Dave Checketts, team President John Davidson, coach Andy Murray and the hard-working new regime at Scottrade Center are reviving hockey in this town.

In some ways, this is the real rollout of the brand-new Blues. Yes, I know Checketts and his group purchased the team in the summer of 2006, but they didn't have time to fully restart the franchise. This season is the real startup, because it's the first full season of the Checketts, Davidson and Murray leadership.

"This is an unfolding," Checketts said. "And it's an exciting time, because we can see the progress. I don't know what the results will be on the ice, but last year at this time we were still trying to figure out what we bought, and where we were. Now we feel a lot more confident about what we're doing. I consider this our real opener."

The new bosses made mistakes last season in raising ticket prices and retaining Mike Kitchen as coach, but at least Checketts and staff made course corrections to get on the right track.

And there's still a lot to be done. It's not as if the Blues will compete for the Stanley Cup this season. The 2007-2008 Blues are still under construction. Money has been spent on the likes of free agent winger Paul Kariya. The scouting-drafting pipeline has delivered potential cornerstone defenseman Erik Johnson and other rising stars. Incremental improvements are being made.

The Blues are probably a borderline playoff contender, but the future seems bright. It can be fun and satisfying to watch a team rebuild, grow and take off. The Blues aren't quite ready to take off, but they are accelerating.

Off the ice, this organization is doing things the right way. Earlier this month, the Blues touched hearts in this community when virtually every player and member of the organization turned out for a Red Cross blood-donation drive in the Central West End.

The Blues chose a spot near Wendy Pleau's hospital room, so she could look down from her window and wave to fans, friends and supporters. Wendy Pleau, wife of good-guy Blues general manager Larry Pleau, is in a fierce battle with cancer. And the scene below her clearly raised her spirits. It was a touching scene.

The Blues didn't do this for good publicity.

They did it because they are good people.

In my opinion, this franchise has the most fan-friendly and sincere sports presence in town, and that includes Blues players. The Blues are making a genuine effort to win back old fans and make new friends.

If any team deserves your sports dollars, or at least a second chance, it's the Blues.

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