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## A Blues Revival

# In a year's time a new management trio has transformed a rock-bottom team into a winner -- and a hot ticket -- in St. Louis

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An official team portrait hangs in the lobby of the St. Louis Blues offices, which would hardly make the organization unique among NHL teams if there did not happen to be 122 people in it. From goalies to gofers, from stay-at-home defensemen to moms with careers, the franchise is standing up -- except for those in the front row -- for the idea of collective accountability.

Not that the Blues had an option. Early last season there weren't 122 fans sitting in the lower bowl of the Scottrade Center.

That, of course, is an exaggeration, but despite having the lowest ticket prices in the league, including 2,300 priced at only \$7, St. Louis usually had as many empty seats as it did occupied ones. "The disconnect between this team and this great sports city was huge," says team president John Davidson, the popular former goaltender and broadcaster, who is the most public face of the franchise. "We needed to earn the trust back. It was up to everyone in our organization."

After worthy displays of marketing, groveling and, yes, even hockey, the Blues are back. The new ownership group, which took over in June 2006, stumbled early by raising ticket prices 8% for what had been the NHL's worst team in 2005-06. But they learned. Last February principal owner Dave Checketts rolled back prices and apologized, earning major civic points. Now the club has taken advantage of an opening in the St. Louis fan base left by the tumbling Cardinals and feckless Rams to reposition itself in the market. In addition to the Blues' on-ice misery last season -- as well as the continued disaffection of fans from the lockout -- the team was overshadowed by the Cardinals' new stadium and their trip to the World Series. The Cards' playoff run and the team's new seat-licensing policy, says Checketts, "took a lot of money out of the market."

The new motto of the organization is Whatever It Takes, and the Blues have already done enough that on Oct. 30 there were 14,222 in attendance to see a team that had won six of its first nine games. That was still 5,000 short of



Hard workers like Lee Stempniak (12) and Murray, Checketts and Davidson got the Blues off to a 7-5 start.

David E. Klutho/SI

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capacity but, says Davidson, one of Checketts's first hires, "last year, on a Tuesday in October against Phoenix, we probably would have had six [thousand]." Revenue from tickets sold this season has already surpassed the ticket revenue from all of 2006-07, a solid start for a team that was 7-5 through last Saturday.

The resurgence truly began last winter when the Blues hired the person with the foresight to include every employee in the team picture: coach Andy Murray.

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When Murray succeeded Mike Kitchen last Dec. 11, the Blues were 7-17-4 and 30th in the NHL overall standings. "Because you can't actually go to 31st," Murray says, "I think people were willing to listen." Under Murray, who led St. Louis to a 27-18-9 record to wind up 10th in the Western Conference, quickly made an imprint by shifting Keith Tkachuk, among the NHL's most prominent left wings for more than a decade, to center. Even though the 6' 2", 232-pound Tkachuk gave the Blues the requisite size to compete against the big centers in the West, the move seemed counterintuitive. Tkachuk always had been a finisher, a crease banger who lacked a playmaker's pedigree. Yet his unconventional job skills have not prevented Tkachuk, shipped to Atlanta at the trade deadline last February and traded back to the Blues in June, from centering one of the NHL's most productive lines. Tkachuk, newcomer Paul Kariya and Brad Boyes (acquired from the Bruins last February) had combined for 41 points.

"I thought at first I'd do it to kind of take one for the team," says Tkachuk. "Now I actually like it. It has helped my game, gotten me skating more, made me more physically involved. But if I'm the one handling the puck through the neutral zone, we're in a little trouble."



Newly minted center Tkachuk (7) and wingers Kariya (center) and Boyes had 17 of St. Louis's first 33 goals.  
David E. Klutho/SI

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Tkachuk works diligently to improve his stickhandling. Every day he and rookie winger David Perron practice slaloming a puck in close quarters. Perron is magic. Tkachuk is a veg-o-matic. On a team with a breezy camaraderie, the players rib Tkachuk so unmercifully that assistant coach Ray Bennett has asked them to back off before one of their stars gets discouraged.

The Tkachuk tutorials come at the end of practice -- perhaps one that Murray has designed to last precisely 39 minutes. If wins don't always come like clockwork, it is not because of a lack of structure. Murray is in his office by an NFL-like 6 a.m. His assistants are usually there for meetings before seven, which has prompted goalie coach Rick Wamsley to threaten to arrive in his pajamas. Even on the road, Blues days start early, and sometime during the night Murray will have personally slipped one of his Andygrams under the hotel room doors. The single-sheet Andygram, chocked with information pertinent to the upcoming game, might not be required reading -- there are no written quizzes -- but a player who merely skims one does so at his peril.

"At [a morning meeting] on the first road trip this season Andy asks [center] Jay McClement the difference between the Kings' neutral-zone forecheck and ours," Kariya says. "McClement answers that the Kings move up their right [defenseman] to lock up the middle. I'm sitting there thinking, I have no idea and it's lucky Andy didn't call on me. He usually asks the younger guys."

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If signing the rambunctious Tkachuk on the day before he could have opted for free agency provided a cornerstone -- "My wife was so happy I signed back here that I could have done anything I wanted for a week and gotten away with it," Tkachuk says -- the signing of free agent Kariya lent priceless buzz. Whatever It Took was \$18 million over three years for a 33-year-old left wing who had been unable to carry the Predators into the second round of the playoffs in his two seasons in Nashville. "When we signed him, we thought something good would happen," Checketts says. "We didn't know how good it would be. That's when the tickets started moving... [so far bringing in] about what we're paying Paul [this year]."

Kariya was drawn to rebuilding St. Louis at least in part because of Murray, who led Canada to the gold medal at the 2007 world championships and is a candidate to coach the host country's Olympic team at the 2010 Games in Vancouver, Kariya's hometown. (There is nothing wrong in having an advocate in high places for Kariya, a two-time Olympian who was not selected to play last year in Turin.) He remains, in Davidson's words, "a professional's professional" who, in the second half of his career, seems to be extracting more of the fun from hockey without sacrificing his trademark studiousness and preparation. Each day he asks Mike Caruso, the vice president of public relations, "What are you doing today to help the St. Louis Blues to win the Stanley Cup?"

"I'm on the ice, coaching my kid's team," Caruso said when Kariya called him last month.

"I don't see how that's helping the Blues win the Stanley Cup."

"Well, what are you doing right now?"

"I'm driving home."

"And how exactly is that helping the Blues win the Stanley Cup?" Caruso demanded.

"I'm training my eyes. Looking left. Looking right."

The eyes of St. Louis, if not yet the NHL, are being refocused on this franchise. Last year the Blues got some notice, and drew 17,868, for its Jan. 13 free food game against Los Angeles -- the approximate cost of 47,000 hot dogs and 22,000 chicken wings, etc., was \$250,000 -- but this season the attention is on something with fewer calories and more substance: workingman's hockey. There will be some bumpy times until St. Louis gets better quarterbacking on the power play and its promising defense matures, but the big picture, like the one on the office wall, looks fine.

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