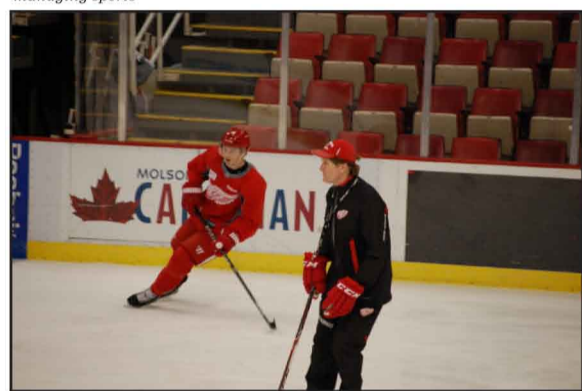


The streak: twenty-three and counting...

Red Wings fight to sneak into playoffs, continue decades of NHL supremacy

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SCORE: (clockwise) Detroit Red Wings head coach Mike Babcock instructs one of his players during a scrimmage in practice. Babcock spends most of his time during practice on the ice interacting with his players. Red Wings goalie Jimmy Howard attempts to make a save during an offensive drill in practice. Babcock calls his team to the center of the ice to give instructions regarding the next drill and the rest of practice. The players will finish practice, but stay at Joe Louis Arena to prepare for the next days game.

After over a decade of being one of the more dominant teams in their conference, as well as the NHL, the Detroit Red Wings have spent the past two seasons in dog fights to find themselves in the final eight in the NHL conference standings. Last season, the team squeaked out a seven seed en route to a surprising playoff run, nearly knocking off the eventual champion Chicago Blackhawks. This season, the Wings found themselves in a similar situation, fighting to make it to the playoffs for an incredible 23rd season in a row.

On Thursday, March 13, the Wings (29-23, ninth in Eastern Conference at the time) were preparing for a game with the Edmonton Oilers (22-35, fourteenth in Western Conference at the time). Head Coach Mike Babcock has spent years winning conference Championships, Olympic gold medals, as well as Stanley Cup championships, but this year, as well as last, he finds himself coaching in a different environment: not focused solely on winning championships, but simply making the playoffs.

“Do I think we’re out of shape?” Babcock said. “Absolutely not. Do I think we don’t try? No. But under the gun we don’t execute as good and when you look at our lineup, we don’t score!”

Babcock, however, does not seem to be phased by the fact that at this point his team would be out of the playoffs.

“I told our guys today when I talked to them this morning, the standings aren’t our issue at all,” Babcock said. “The only issue we have is between our ears. It’s not the other teams that are in our way, we’re in our way.”

These are exactly the ideas Babcock tried to reinforce at practice.

When someone enters Joe Louis arena for a Red Wings practice, it’s not the glamor that affects them. The stadium is old and outdated in many ways. It’s not the look of brand new bleacher seating, or brand new jumbo-tron, or state of the art restaurants peppered throughout the arena. No, it’s none of this. What gets a fan when they enter “The Joe” is the countless banners hanging from the rafters of the arena. Divisional championship banners to conference championship banners, until finally, the 11 Stanley Cup championship banners hanging up above. It’s not the look of “The Joe” that gets people, it’s the prestige, the atmosphere, the history of one of the Original Six, whose success has continued decades after its founding.

Midway through the Red Wings’ practice,

Babcock and his other assistants are out on the ice with sticks and pads, getting right into it with the players. The practice is intense and especially fast paced. The Red Wings were coming off a loss to the Blue Jackets, and were feeling more and more pressure as the end of the season comes closer and closer, and with their record still not good enough for the top eight. To an uneducated hockey fan, the drills look like many condensed (in size and in time) scrimmages. For example, for a period of time there were two offensive players attacking and trying to score on one defender and a goalie, using only about a quarter of the rink. These drills would continue for a few minutes at a time before Babcock would bring the team back together, and a new combination of players would partake in their “mini-scrimmages.” At one point, the team broke into a full on scrimmage for a few minutes and at another time they ran half of a scrimmage using half of the ice.

Later, Babcock called the team into a circle and the players laid down on the ice and stretched. Babcock was vocal throughout the entire practice, barking instructions and advice to his players. The speed and intensity of the Red Wings’ practice was impressive, considering the team was in the middle of a grueling season.

“I think [the intensity and pace] is just the expectation here,” right wing Luke Glendening said. “It’s expected from the players and coaches and it’s expected from the captain. Obviously you have days where you don’t really want to work, but that’s when other guys are there to pick you up. You gotta come to practice every day putting your best foot forward.”

However, not only are these practices impressive because of the pace, they are also impressive because of the lack of depth the Red Wings have had for most of the season. With players seeming to “drop like flies” at times, the Wings have looked to younger talent, but are still missing the veteran leadership and savvy that they would have, especially around playoff time.

“I went in the weight room before practice today,” Babcock said. “Not dressed for practice today was Datsuyk, he’s a center man, Zetterberg, he’s a center man, Helm, he’s a center man, Wise, he’s a center man and Anderson, he’s a center man. That’s five center men.”

That’s five injuries at only one position, and the injury bug doesn’t end there for the Wings.

“Injuries are part of the game,” Babcock said. “The question I have is why, why are we injured all the time? I don’t like the fact that we have so many guys injured, it makes it real hard to do as good of a job, and you can’t be as good of a team as your capable of being.”

Once practice ended though, the day was not done for Red Wings players. Not only do they often lift in the weight room, they often spend a lot of time watching video footage of previous games, or of teams they will play in the future. Former Red Wing great and now Special Assistant to the General Manager Kris Draper talked about how the implementation of video footage into sports as a whole, especially in hockey, has changed how players and teams prepare for games immensely.

“Now with technology it’s amazing the things we can do,” Draper said. “As soon as the game’s over, [our video coach] downloads all the footage to the coaches’ computers. There’s nowhere to hide now [due to video footage improvements]. When I first started playing, we used video a little bit but now there’s so much more teaching going on.”

With improvements in video technology, Red Wings front office members and coaches can now watch any player in the NHL or minor league player with just a few mouse clicks. This allows organizations to be much more educated on players when they are considering drafting them or picking a player up through free agency.

“The way people watch games and scout players is very impressive,” Draper said. “We’re always learning.”

After a long day of work for Red Wings players, their sole focus becomes the game the following day. Will the hard work the team put in lead to a rewarding win, and reach another step closer to a playoff berth? Will the team rise above the countless obstacles they have had to face this season: the injuries, the time off from the Olympics and the pressure of a timeless streak possibly coming to an end? Only time would tell, and all this work and adversity did seem to pay off as they won the game against Edmonton. However, something much more important occurred a few weeks later. The Wings fell in overtime to the Pittsburgh Penguins by a score of 4-3, however, this gained them the essential one point in the standings that they needed. This meant that, yes, the Detroit Red Wings would be going to the Stanley Cup playoffs, and, yes, the remarkable streak of 23 consecutive playoff appearances would carry on, and live to fight another season.