

Block Party

Gramps

Monday, November 2nd, is the 16th anniversary of the "Steve Larmer trade." Seeing the Hawks had done nothing to improve their team two years removed from a Stanley Cup Finals sweep at the hands of Pittsburgh and upset over the direction head coach Darryl Sutter was taking on the ice, Larmer requested a trade shortly after the Hawks were swept by St. Louis in the opening round of the 1993 playoffs. A contract extension similar to one he would eventually sign elsewhere was turned down by Larmer.

Bob Pulford and director of player personnel Bob Murray, also a former teammate of Larmer's, reportedly promised Larmer they would honor his wish and have him with a new organization prior to training camp. Especially concerning to the Hawks' ability and willingness to strike a deal in a timely fashion was the existence of a historical feat, to which Larmer was within striking distance. When no deal came to fruition by Labor Day, Larmer skipped Blackhawks' camp hoping to force a deal.

What followed is a-typical of the Bob Pulford/Bill Wirtz era. Although they had promised to trade Larmer during the off season, Pulford was incensed at Larmer for holding out of camp and vowed to make an example of him.

For Larmer, his mind was already made up. At the conclusion of the '92-93 campaign, Larmer put his suburban home up for sale, indicating he'd decided long before requesting the deal that '92-93 would be his final season as a Blackhawk, and returned home to Peterborough, Ontario awaiting word of where he'd next be playing.

At the time of his trade request, Larmer was on schedule to break one of professional sports's most staggering records, Doug Jarvis's consecutive-games played streak. At 884 games, Larmer was 80 games shy of the Jarvis milestone and with his reputation for toughness and ability to endure pain, Larmer appeared poised to break the record. Had he kept healthy and remained in Chicago, Larmer would have tied the Jarvis' record on April 5, 1994 at St. Louis and eclipsed it three nights later in a rematch at Chicago Stadium.

As the summer dragged on and training camp approached, Larmer began to show frustration with the Hawks for failing to make a deal and went public with a few reasons for wanting out of Chicago after 11 full seasons and 891 games.

Larmer told The Hockey News in September of 1993, "How long can you spend in one place before it's time to move on? To get stimulated and excited again, I feel a change of scenery is necessary."

For his part, Larmer has never revealed his true reasons for wanting to leave Chicago but his relationship with friend and 80's teammate Darryl Sutter had grown sour after the coach publicly criticized Larmer prior to the '92-93 season, Sutter's first after taking over for Mike Keenan.

"I really don't want to go into why I want to be traded publicly because that wouldn't do anybody any good. Nothing ever gets accomplished that way," Larmer told THN.

Bombarded by questioning Blackhawks' fans and media, puzzled as to why one of the greatest and most popular players in franchise history was willing to walk away from the storied Original Six organization, owner Bill Wirtz attempted to suppress the escalating turmoil by addressing the media during training camp, the first without Larmer since 1979.

"When you go public with [a trade demand], you put Bob Pulford in a tough situation. But we respect Larmer too much for that," Wirtz told Sun-Times writer Herb Gould in September of 1993. "He's one of the finest people ever to wear a Blackhawk sweater, somebody you'd love to have as a brother or a son.

"It's unfortunate that we didn't know earlier," Wirtz said. "It would have made [trading Larmer] a lot easier. But I don't think Steve knew himself until the season was over."

What knowing before May of '93 and how it could've made any difference is unknown. Chicago was competing for the President's trophy in the spring of '93 and a favorite to win the Campbell (now Western)

conference. It's hard to believe Larmer, who scored 35 goals and 70 points (third best on the team) and a first-line right wing in '92-93 as a Blackhawk, would've been dealt down the stretch.

Bob Pulford though had a tougher time dealing with Larmer's demand and jostled with his agent Larry Kelly in the fall of 1993 before eventually pulling the trigger on a deal with the Hartford Whalers.

Having started '93-94 slowly at 5-7-2, Chicago finally caved and dealt Larmer along with defenseman Bryan Marchment to the Whalers for defenseman Eric Weinrich and emerging French Canadian power forward Patrick Poulin. At the time it looked like a great deal for the Hawks. Weinrich brought the Hawks another puck-moving defenseman, something the team lacked and Poulin was a young left wing with a powerful build and a lot of potential. While Weinrich was a top-four defenseman with the Hawks for six seasons, Poulin was a bust and continued his career with stops in Tampa Bay and Montreal as a player who never realized his full potential.

Hartford though never intended on keeping Larmer as they turned right around minutes later and sent him to the New York Rangers (who had been trying to acquire Larmer all summer), who now had Larmer's former coach Mike Keenan commanding their bench, with rugged winger Nick Kypreos in exchange for defenseman James Patrick and center Darren Turcotte. Rangers' GM Neil Smith tore up the final year of his Chicago contract (in the days a team could do such a thing) valued at \$790,000 and signed Larmer to a new-three year deal with payments of \$1.2, \$1.3, and \$1.3 million. Smith told the media he had been actively trying to trade for Larmer since July of that summer but was unable to broker a reasonable offer talking with Pulford and Murray.

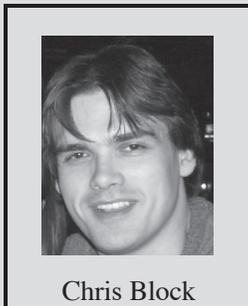
Long before Chris Chelios donned the winged-wheel, Larmer almost became a Detroit Red Wing. The Hawks were reportedly close to a deal in September that would've brought Mike Sillinger to Chicago. Sillinger, 22 at the time, was a top center ice prospect stuck behind Steve Yzerman, Sergei Fedorov and Keith Primeau. Chicago lucked out because Sillinger turned out to be a journeyman career third-line center. Larmer also admitted he was considering retirement had the Hawks chosen not to trade him and made him sit out, which was talked about briefly.

Larmer's new coach, Mike Keenan, had also left the Blackhawks in November of 1992 in a dispute over power. Keenan, as general manager, wanted complete autonomy on all hockey decisions and he wasn't about to get that with Pulford in the front office, so he resigned (as it was announced) and took the head coaching job with the Rangers the following summer. The truth was Pulford resented Keenan and Keenan himself was too rebellious and loose with Mr. Wirtz's money too last in the "Pulford seat."

The Blackhawks' company line was to flippantly state Keenan suffered from "coaching withdrawal pains" and would pursue opportunities to coach elsewhere. It was a bitter split on both sides. Keenan himself denied the Hawks' claims and insisted he was fired after refusing to sign a five-year contract extension he initially agreed to, only saying he had second thoughts against tying himself for multiple years with no chance of returning to coaching. Bill Wirtz went to great lengths to point out Keenan had been difficult to deal with and was "unreasonable" in asking for more power than any previous GM had held with the Hawks. In other words, Keenan didn't like having to clear all hockey decisions with Senior VP Bob Pulford and that, in Bill Wirtz's estimation, was "unreasonable".

Refusing to get into a war of words, Larmer has never outwardly criticized the Blackhawks for how they handled his departure and cost him a shot at the Jarvis' record or keep their promise to him. When asked, he would say he'd been disappointed of how everything was handled but he knew [leaving the Blackhawks] was the best thing for his career.

It wouldn't take long for those words to ring prophetic. Larmer made his Rangers' debut a day after the trade against Vancouver at Madison Square Garden and registered three goals and six points in his first three



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games with the team. He was stimulated again. His career was rejuvenated in Manhattan scoring 21 goals and 60 points in 68 games in '93-94. Larmer joined an ensemble cast mostly made up of ex-Blackhawk and Oilers' players and helped end the organization 54-year Stanley Cup drought with dramatic playoff run cumulating with a game seven Finals victory over the Canucks at MSG. Larmer contributed 9 goals and 7 assists in 23 post season games in earning his place on the Stanley Cup.

Larmer scored his 1,000th career point as a Ranger; March 8, 1995 against New Jersey and played in his 1,000th game on April 20, 1995 against Hartford.

Although no one knew it at the time, Larmer would make just one more appearance in Chicago, as an opponent two and a half months after being traded, at the soon-to-be demolished Chicago Stadium.

As it was, an eagerly anticipated January 16th meeting between the Hawks and New York Rangers, Larmer's next and final NHL game in Chicago almost didn't happen.

Eleven days prior to the game, Larmer broke the pinky finger on his right hand and underwent surgery to correct it which included placing pins in the finger. After the procedure, Larmer privately told teammates he'd be back by January 16th (the game at Chicago Stadium) regardless of doctor estimations.

Eight days after surgery Larmer practiced with his teammates for the first time since the surgery and boarded the Rangers' charter flight to Chicago without clearance from Rangers' doctors.

"It wasn't really talking his way into the lineup," Mike Keenan told the New York Times. "He just said he was playing."

Larmer was supposed to be out of the Rangers' lineup for three to four weeks, but he was back in eleven days. He shouldn't have. Larmer took the ice that Sunday night at Chicago Stadium with a swollen right hand but apparently not even the risk of injuring himself further and potentially missing the remainder of the regular season would keep him from a final opportunity to step on the Stadium ice or play against his former teammates.

The Stadium crowd met him with the kind of raucous salute brimming with admiration and gratitude that's reserved for only the city's greatest athletes. Larmer was of little factor in the first fifty minutes of the contest and the Rangers were outclassing the Hawks by a score of 4-1 late in the third period when Mark Messier and Larmer broke free on a breakaway from center ice towards Chicago goalie Ed Belfour. Steve Smith, the lone Chicago defender near the onslaught, made a desperate attempt to prevent a prime New York scoring opportunity by hurling his stick at the puck as he fell to the ice. Smith's stick clipped Larmer as he attempted to play the rubber biscuit and the former Hawk was awarded a penalty shot.

In a truly amazing scene, the overflow Stadium crowd stood in unison cheering, though not for the Hawks' netminder stop the penalty shot – but to see Steve Larmer score a goal one more time in the "Old Grey Lady" – though this time against the Hawks.

With the roaring approval of the fans who never wanted to see him go, and seemingly more-angered at Hawks' management for robbing Larmer of a chance to break Doug Jarvis's record than he was, Larmer took stride from center ice and lifted a 25-foot shot past Belfour whipping Chicago Stadium into a wild frenzy.

Larmer's tally would close the scoring and New York would head home with a convincing 5-1 victory. It was a triumphant night not only for Larmer and Keenan, but also former and returning Blackhawks Mike Hudson and Greg Gilbert.

Two months later, Chicago would trade wingers Stephane Matteau and Brian Noonan to the Rangers for Tony Amonte and forward prospect Matthew Oates. Matteau and Noonan would join former Hawks' teammates Larmer and Gilbert and all four would be integral figures in the Rangers' 1994 Stanley Cup Championship. Eddie Olczyk was also a member of that team but saw limited action during the season and appeared in just one play-off game. Mike Hudson did not see any time during the Rangers' run to the Cup.

Larmer would play just two seasons in New York before surprisingly announcing his retirement after the lockout-shortened '94-95 season. By hockey standards, 34 is an early age for a player to intentionally call it quits, but Larmer forfeited the final year of his 3-year deal with New York, also skipping out on a 1.3 million dollar payday citing nagging back problems and an inability, as he saw it, to compete at the level he had for thirteen years.

After his playing career, he took on roles within the NHL Player's Association and served as head of player relations from 1998 to 2005.

He resigned from his post in November of 2005, just months after the NHL and NHLPA settled on a new collective bargaining agreement following the lost '94-95 season. Uncharacteristically, Larmer blasted his union brethren on his way out.

"I am resigning because this organization has taken a giant step backward, back to the days of Eagleson where a select few made decisions for the group," Larmer wrote in his resignation letter.

Ultimately Larmer quit over a suspicious union vote to hire new executive director Ted Saskin after ousting Bob Goodenow from the position in the July of 2005.

The statement went on to compare the Ted Saskin to former and first union head Alan Eagleson (who Larmer cited in his letter), who was forced to resign as director after he was found to have embezzled money from the players' pension funds and defrauded the union and his own clients of money. Eagleson was great friends with Bill Wirtz and Bob Pulford, the latter of which Eagleson got his start in hockey representing and conspired with Wirtz in 1976 to bring Bobby Orr to Chicago.

Larmer returned to an active role within the NHLPA in September of 2008 when he was unanimously elected by the Union's 30-club player representatives to a newly-formed advisory board. Larmer is currently serving a three-year term and then be subject to renewal. One wonders how he assesses the union's latest misguided implosion..

Steve Larmer was no hockey player. He was a hockey technician. And yet, as great and well-respected he was among fans, media and his peers, Larmer never won the Selke trophy nor was he voted into an NHL All-Star game. In fact, he only participated in two. Still, there are only two Blackhawks alumni left with legitimate arguments as to having their sweater's immortalized up in the rafters of United Center: Doug Wilson and Steve Larmer.

"Gramps," as he was known to his teammates, was honored by the Blackhawks last December. While Larmer himself seemed pleasantly humbled by the experience, anyone could tell he couldn't wait until it was over and he could bolt out the nearest exit, drive down the street to the bar, smoke a pack of cigarettes and down six beers. Not much has changed in 16 years. That's Gramps for ya.

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NHL LEADERS

Goals				Points			GAA			SV%					
Player	Team	G		Player	Team	P	Player	Team	GAA	Player	Team	SV%			
1	A. Ovechkin	WAS	13	1	A. Ovechkin	WAS	22	1	Ryan Miller	BUF	1.60	1	Ryan Miller	BUF	.944
2	A. Kopitar	LA	10	2	A. Kopitar	LA	21	2	I. Bryzgalov	PHX	1.77	2	C. Anderson	COL	.940
3	M. Gaborik	NYR	10	3	D. Penner	EDM	19	3	C. Anderson	COL	1.97	3	I. Bryzgalov	PHX	.929
4	P. Marleau	SJ	10	4	M. Gaborik	NYR	18	4	M. Fleury	PIT	2.07	4	J. Theodore	WAS	.922
5	D. Penner	EDM	9	5	P. Marleau	SJ	17	5	M. Turcho	DAL	2.26	5	M. Fleury	PIT	.921
30	Patrick Sharp	CHI	5	52	Patrick Sharp	CHI	10	6	Cristobal Huet	CHI	2.32	27	Cristobal Huet	CHI	.897