

OPINION

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What Makes for an Effective NHL General Manager? Try Kent Hughes' Playbook

Published 10/10/23 09:30 AM ET | Updated 2 hr ago

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It's a busy time for sports fans. Major League Baseball is now in its post-season, while the National Football League regular season is well underway, moving toward the [Super Bowl in February](#). The National Hockey League (NHL) regular season kicks off on [Tuesday](#), with eyes focused on the Chicago Blackhawks' phenom, [Connor Bedard](#), touted as the next superstar.

NHL general managers have been busy over the summer signing free agents, negotiating new contracts, and reorganizing their rosters to be competitive — and perhaps even win the Stanley Cup.

It took the [Las Vegas Golden Knights](#) just five seasons to win this coveted prize. In contrast, teams like the [Buffalo Sabres](#) have never won the Cup since they joined the league in 1970.

It can be said that it is even worse for teams in Canada, where hockey has traditionally reigned supreme. A [Canadian team has not won the Stanley Cup for 30 years](#) since Montreal did so in 1993. Montreal fans bemoan this plight, yet think about their counterparts in Toronto, which have come up dry for 56 years, or Vancouver, which has never lifted the Cup.

Indeed, professional sports is a ruthless business.

Assembling championship-caliber NHL teams is more than just signing the best players. It is about assembling a team that can be successful and signing all the players to contracts that, in total, stay under the [NHL salary cap](#), which at times seems to require advanced degrees in economics and mathematics. This objective should naturally breed a killer mentality amongst general managers.

Or does it?

Enter [Kent Hughes](#), the Montreal Canadiens general manager, who is building a team much like how he served as a player agent. [Hughes](#) never played in the NHL, topping out as a solid college hockey player. He did, however, earn a [law degree](#).

The most critical objective of player agents is to build relationships and take care of their people. That means negotiating contracts that are in the players' best interest, focusing on them first as a person with a life and second as a player with the talent to play hockey at the highest level.

Hughes' handling of the [Jeff Petry trade to the Detroit Red Wings](#) in August exemplifies such objectives.

[Petry](#) is from Michigan. He played college hockey at Michigan State. His father, [Dan Petry](#), played major league baseball for the Detroit Tigers. For him, playing in Detroit is a homecoming party.

Hughes seems to have focused on Petry, the person, first, rather than Petry, the asset. That does not mean that Hughes gave Petry away for nothing. In the trade, he accumulated a mid-round draft pick and obtained a younger right-shooting defenseman that may provide depth in the team's farm system, with the possibility to develop into something more in the future.

Waiting for better assets in the trade would have been a reasonable business strategy, one that [Hughes has been quite adept at](#) during his short tenure as general manager. However, the price to pay for this to Petry, the person, was not worth the modestly higher return that waiting could have produced.

Winning championships is more than just talent — it is about winning the trust and the hearts of the players. Player agents are successful when they achieve this.

What Hughes lost with the Petry trade he will likely gain in his relationship with players, both those on his current roster and those he may sign in the future.

Sometimes, winning requires losing along the way. Expecting every trade, every transaction, to be a winner is unrealistic and naïve.

Sports provide a metaphor for life. There is preparation, practice, competition, teamwork, painful defeats and joyous victories. Professional sports take life to yet another level, with greater visibility and public attention.

For fans who analyze and, in some cases, criticize a general manager's every move, remember that he is not playing a board game with inanimate pieces but, rather, is overseeing a professional sports team with people who have lives, families and emotions, just like all of us.

Being the general manager of a professional sports team is a difficult job without the incessant fan scrutiny and criticism it attracts. It becomes nearly intolerable when such extra attention is added to the calculus.

Every professional sports general manager should take notes on Hughes' playbook. If successful, it will be a formula to emulate and set a new standard for building sustainable success that every team desires.

Much like how [analytics](#) can give teams an edge on the playing field, valuing players as human beings can give sports executives an edge in the front office.

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