Written by Jeff Ponder Tuesday, 19 February 2013 01:26

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The Columbus Blue Jackets have learned that the best way to get to the top is to take tidbits from teams that have grown into Cup contenders.

The Jackets did this in a very literal sense.

The central Ohio team traveled south to find an organization to mirror. The St. Louis Blues, last year's Central Division Champions, have been the face of rebuilding since the 2004-05 lockout. After finishing dead-last in 2005-06, the Blues brought in new management, loaded up on draft picks and built a team from the ground up. In 2012-13, they are heralded as a top NHL team with high Stanley Cup aspirations.

Under the command of owner John P. McConnell, the Blue Jackets have allowed former Blues property to infiltrate every level of the organization. From the players to the team president, the Blues have had some type of influence on the rebuild of the Blue Jackets.

President – John Davidson

The Blues' rebuild started with former owner Dave Checketts hiring a new face for the franchise. With Chris Pronger traded and Al MacInnis retiring the season prior, the Blues seemed to have no identity within the baseball-dominated city. Davidson, the Hall-of-Fame broadcaster and former Blues goaltender, was brought in to shake up the front office and give the Blues fans someone to believe in.

Davidson made Scottrade Center a more hospitable building to enjoy a hockey game, as the team started offering free food games and more ways to receive discounted tickets. Under Davidson's reign, the Blues attendance jumped from 12,520 in 2006-07 (30th in NHL) to 18,809 in 2011-12 (9

th in NHL).

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The health of the franchise also improved directly under Davidson, as he hired former Stars GM Doug Armstrong as the Vice President of Player Personnel in the summer of 2008. He then succeeded Larry Pleau as the GM in 2010 and was named the GM of the Year for the 2011-12 season. Davidson was not finished there, as he also added former Kings great Dave Taylor as the Director of Player Personnel (named last summer as the Vice President of Hockey Operations).

Some say that the final piece to the Blues' puzzle was the addition of Head Coach Ken Hitchcock, a former Stanley Cup winner and a well-renowned hockey personality.

Under Davidson, the Blues added some nice pieces through the years. Bill Guerin signed with the Blues in 2006 as a 35-year old in 2006 and revived his career with the Blues, scoring 28 goals with the team before being traded to the San Jose Sharks for a few roster players and, most importantly, the #13 pick in the 2007 draft. The Blues selected Lars Eller, who would eventually be traded for current starting goaltender Jaroslav Halak.

Davidson was likely behind the signing of Manny Legace, the longtime backup goalie in Detroit. Legace found his game in St. Louis, earning a spot in the 2008 NHL All-Star Game. Legace's successor was Chris Mason, who gave the Blues two solid seasons before signing with the Atlanta Thrashers when Halak was acquired.

Davidson was the man in charge while most of the current roster was assembled. The most notable transaction in his time is the deal that took place on February 19, 2011, when the Blues traded former first overall pick Erik Johnson and center Jay McClement to the Colorado Avalanche for right-winger Chris Stewart and stand-out defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk. Since this trade, the Blues have posted an amazing 69-39-14 record.

Davidson and the Blues parted ways last summer, allowing the Blue Jackets to sign him into the same position at which he thrived in St. Louis.

General Manager – Jarmo Kekalainen

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Davidson announced last week that Scott Howson would no longer be the Blue Jackets' GM and that Jarmo Kekalainen, native of Tampere, Finland, would now hold that position. Kekalainen is the first European-born GM in NHL history.

Prior to joining the Blue Jackets, Kekalainen served as the Blues' Director of Amateur Scouting for eight seasons. The 2003 NHL Entry Draft was the first time that he was slotted in the public eye. In that draft, Kekalainen selected current Blues captain David Backes (2nd round, 62 nd overall), and Flames right winger Lee Stempniak (5 th round, 148 th

The same amount of credit that goes to Davidson for the success of the Blues should go to Kekalainen. The core of the Blues' roster exists because of the 46-year old. He drafted players such as T.J. Oshie (2005; 1st round, 24th overall), Patrik Berglund (2006; 1st round, 25th overall), David Perron (2007; 1st round, 26th overall) and Alex Pietrangelo (2008; 1st round, 4th overall). His final draft with the Blues could prove to be his greatest service, as in 2010 he selected Jaden Schwartz (1st round, 14th overall) and Vladimir Tarasenko (1st round, 16th overall) and Vladimir Tarasenko (1st round, 16th overall).

Kekalainen left the Blues after the 2010 Draft to become the General Manager of Jokerit in the

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SM-liiga, Finland's top league. He had an opt-out clause in his contract that allowed him to take an NHL GM position if it became available.

Assistant Coach – Dan Hinote

Hinote was named an Assistant Coach for the Blue Jackets on July 1, 2010. His playing career included nine seasons and one Stanley Cup Championship with the Colorado Avalanche in 2001.

He signed with the St. Louis Blues as a player in July 2006.

Hinote quickly became a fan-favorite in St. Louis, due to his comedic interviews and his willingness to hit anyone on the opposing team. Because his favorite #13 was taken by Bill Guerin, Hinote selected #58. He said his decision was made because #58 is "the ugliest number that adds up to 13."

Hinote, now 36, was a member of the Blues for three seasons, registering 11 goals and 25 points in 150 games.

The native of Leesburg, Florida had problems staying healthy, likely due to his aggressive nature on the rink. He had constant shoulder problems, causing him to retire after the 2009-10 season.

Player - Nikita Nikitin

Drafted by Kekalainen in the 2004 Draft (5th round, 136th overall), Nikitin was acquired from the Blues in exchange for defenseman Kris Russell on November 10, 2011.

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The trade occurred just three days after the Blues hired Ken Hitchcock, who was a consultant for the Blue Jackets before the hiring.

Nikitin was considered a good prospect for St. Louis before playing in his first NHL game on November 6, 2010 against the Boston Bruins. Nikitin bounced around between the Blues and their AHL affiliate, the Peoria Rivermen, during his time with the club. Nikitin's most memorable stretch of games came after being called up in late January 2011, when he finished out the season for the Blues. In that time, Nikitin became one of the team's best surprises, recording 16 points (8G-8A) and a plus-8 in 26 games.

Nikitin battled consistency problems to start the 2011-12 season, which likely was what sparked the trade to Columbus. Nikitin has proven useful for the Blue Jackets, rounding out a solid defensive core that includes Jack Johnson and James Wisniewski. He has posted 35 points (8G-27A) in 65 games for the Blue Jackets, averaging 22 minutes, 41 seconds of ice-time per game.