

# Two [ Boston: 33-8-4 San Jose: 33-6-5 ] Strong



Three years after a trade that led to the remaking of both teams, the **Bruins** and the **Sharks** are winning like never before. The two best lines in hockey have plenty to do with that

BY MICHAEL FARBER

Photograph by Don Smith/NHLI/Getty Images

**T**HE BRUINS traded center Joe Thornton to the San Jose Sharks on Nov. 30, 2005, a day that, in Boston, seemed destined to live in infamy. In a city that created a sustainable industry out of the Curse of the Bambino, the exiling of the Bruins captain for three middling players was custom-made to be the source of more sporting hoodoo. The Jinx of Jumbo Joe? When Thornton was named the NHL's most valuable player the following June, the vote couldn't have been more galling to the Hub of hockey if Bucky Dent had been tabulating the ballots. ¶ Three years later that shocking trade has helped produce two torrid, first-place teams: Thornton's new club and, surprisingly, his old one.

At the 2008-09 All-Star break, conference leaders San Jose and Boston stand as exemplars of intelligent redesign. Stale after three straight second-round playoff defeats, the Sharks revitalized themselves and roared through their first 24 home games with 21 wins and just one loss in regulation while making a persuasive case for being the NHL's most complete team. Without dismantling an already formi-

dable core, general manager Doug Wilson tweaked the team last summer by trading for puck-moving defenseman Dan Boyle, signing veteran blueliner Rob Blake and hiring a new, upbeat coach, Todd McLellan. Although the Detroit Red Wings still stalk

**JOE IMPACT** Boston's dealing of Thornton (19) to San Jose has allowed Marleau (12) and Savard (above) to thrive.



JAMES GUILLOU/US PRESS WIRE (SAVARD)

# Not Half Bad

At the league's winter pause, a look at some of the players, coaches, teams and punches that have left a mark in 2008-09

**IS CARPE DIEM LATIN FOR "STOP THE PUCK"?** A mid-December groin injury to Red Wings goaltender Chris Osgood was the entrance point for journeyman backup Ty Conklin, an undrafted player on his fifth team in four seasons. The 32-year-old Conklin (*right*) then went 8-1-1 with four shutouts through Sunday, meaning that even with Osgood back, Conklin will get some time between the pipes.



**NO HARD FEELINGS** Long before the madcap Lightning even thought of firing coach Barry Melrose (it happened 16 games into the season), the Blackhawks, off to a 1-2-1 start, dumped third-year coach Denis Savard. Choosing between life behind the bench (that is, lining up a job as an assistant or coaching junior hockey) or with the Chicago organization, Savard decided to stay in the family, becoming a team ambassador. He was even part of the Blackhawks contingent that joined with former Cubs to sing *Take Me Out to the Ball (Hockey) Game* at Wrigley Field during what passed for the seventh-inning stretch in the Jan. 1 Winter Classic.



**SID UNLEASHED!** The season's most surprising meltdown came on Jan. 3 when, with the Penguins trailing 4-1 in the second period, frustrated captain Sidney Crosby jumped Panthers center Brett McLean after a face-off (*left*). Not long after his second career fight, Crosby tangled with center Gregory Campbell. Sid the Kid picked up 21 penalty minutes in the match, killing his Lady Byng hopes.

**DUDE, THIS GUY COULD BE IN OUR BAND** Also on Jan. 3—go figure, a full moon was still eight days away—the Capitals' unlikely pugilist Alexander Semin wound up on top of Rangers defenseman Marc Staal and began flailing away with the technique of a first-grader who's had his lunch money stolen. Semin's fistic style was likened to a bongo player's, an insult to every beatnik who ever lived.

**FOR BETTER, AND WORSE** Of the 100-plus players who switched uniforms for the start of the 2008-09 season, no one—including former Penguins and current Red Wings forward Marian Hossa and his 45 points in 45 games—has had a greater impact on his current and former team than Islanders defenseman Mark Streit (*right*). A shifty puck-mover, the former Canadien was tied for first among NHL blueliners with 20 power-play points and has been a rare bright spot for the moribund Long Island franchise. Without Streit manning the right point in Montreal, the Canadiens' power play fell from leading the NHL last year to 29th before rallying to 23rd at week's end.



**READY FOR A SERIES PREMIERE?** The Blue Jackets have never come close to reaching the playoffs in their seven seasons, but behind 20-year-old goalie Steve Mason (*box, page 48*) coach Ken Hitchcock's team can see the promised land: It's just one point out of eighth place in the Western Conference. Some injured Blue Jackets—including scoring leader Rick Nash—are getting healthy, and Columbus plays 20 of its 35 games after the All-Star break at home, where the team is 13-7-1. —M.F.

the Sharks—they were three points behind San Jose through Sunday—the Wings realize that the road to consecutive Stanley Cups will likely take them through the Shark Tank, the Western Conference's most inhospitable arena.

Given its more modest portfolio and lower expectations, Boston, which has not won a playoff series since 1999, has been even more impressive. The Bruins were having their best season ever, with 70 points in 45 games, including an NHL-best 16-5-3 road record. They have capitalized on a first-rate power play, defenseman Zdeno Chara's return to elite form, the sturdy goaltending of Tim Thomas and Manny Fernandez and the breakout of second-line center David Krejci to forge a nine-point lead over Washington in the Eastern Conference. (Of the players obtained for Thornton, only winger Marco Sturm, out for the year after having knee surgery last week, remains.) The Bruins still lag behind the city's other teams, but at least hockey season in Boston is no longer defined as the time between the Patriots' last snap and the date that Red Sox pitchers and catchers report.

Beyond the standard qualities of success—strong coaching, special teams and goaltending, plus depth—the Sharks and the Bruins are connected through Thornton, who, since joining San Jose, ranks second in the league with 1.33 points per game. With Thornton's three-year, \$20 million contract off the books, new Boston general manager Peter Chiarelli pounced in the summer of 2006, landing free agents Chara and center Marc Savard, whose dazzling play has stopped the fretting over the loss of Thornton. Indeed, the superb performance of both teams can be attributed largely to their No. 1 lines, the two best forward units in hockey this season. Thornton and linemates Patrick Marleau and Devin Setoguchi had combined for 145 points, 24 more than Savard and wingers Phil Kessel and Milan Lucic. The three Bruins were a combined +63, and Savard, suddenly committed to defense after a career of ignoring it, leads the league at +30. The three Sharks are +57.

The differences between those Bruins' and Sharks' lines are visually striking. Savard and Kessel are compact enough to squeeze into the backseat of a VW Beetle, and fit even more comfortably alongside the rampaging Lucic, whom Thornton

calls, "the prototypical Bruin." Savard's on-the-tape passes and Kessel's Mach 3 skating and whoosh of a shot allow the line to do most of its damage on the rush. The Sharks' trio—6' 4", 235-pound Thornton, 6' 2", 220-pound Marleau, 6-foot, 200-pound Setoguchi—does its job by relying on bulk and raw skill. Thornton's line is more effective than Savard's in the offensive zone because it can wear down defenders and score off the cycle.

**TWIN ENGINES** Though undersized, Kessel (81) and Savard baffle opposing teams with their dash and ingenuity.



## Savard has been the center of a paradoxical question: If he takes such joy in passing, how can HE BE CONSIDERED SELFISH?

Yet the lines are curiously alike in other ways. Each has a glorious playmaker. Each has a natural center, Marleau and Kessel (now suffering from a bout of mononucleosis), playing the wing. Each has a complementary second-year winger in Setoguchi and Lucic, who at week's end was day-to-day with an undisclosed injury. The most intriguing commonality is this: Together the lines boast some of most disparaged high-end players of their generation. Thornton, *uninspiring*. Marleau, *undependable*. Kessel, *soft*. And Savard? *Selfish*.

**T**HE DAY after Game 4 of Boston's first-round playoff series against Montreal last April, Bruins senior adviser Harry Sinden, in a wide-ranging interview with *Boston Globe* columnist Dan Shaughnessy, declared that Savard was not his kind of player, likening him to a baseball player who hits .300 but doesn't drive in runs. The sentiment was hardly groundbreaking for a player who has always been keenly aware of his own offensive statistics—Savard has often piled up points but was a minus player in seven of his eight seasons before coming to Boston—but the source and timing were astounding. For one

of our best players in a seven-game series showed a lot to his teammates."

Of course, Savard, 31, had always been the center of a paradoxical question: If he takes such joy in passing the puck, how can he be considered selfish? "I see my son play, and all the kids want to do is go coast-to-coast and score, but ever since I was little I've always passed the puck," Savard says. "My mom said that's why other parents always wanted me to sleep over."

Moms loved him. Coaches and teammates . . . well, not as much. There's an oft-told story from when Savard played with Calgary in the early 2000s—maybe it's even true—that when a scuffle broke out in a game and several players paired up, one Flame told his opponent, "I'll let you go if you promise to beat up Savard." ("Yeah, I've heard that one," says NHL Network analyst Craig Button, then Calgary's G.M.) At the time, Savard's disdain for back-checking and for staying in shape rankled coach Greg Gilbert. After one particularly productive offensive game by the creative center, Button recalls, Gilbert was asked if Savard was out of his doghouse. The Zen-like reply: "A dog has more than one paw." (Translation: "No.")

If Savard, who has played for the Rangers and the Thrashers, has been the bane of conditioning coaches—"If a player showed up here like he did with 19 percent

body fat [at his first Bruins camp]," says one NHL strength coach, "we would have told him the audition for *The Biggest Loser* was next door"—he has been an asset to his right wings. Savard set up Jarome Iginla in Calgary (career-high 52 goals in 2001-02), Ilya Kovalchuk in Atlanta (career-high 52 goals in '05-06) and now a rejuvenated Kessel, who already has 24 goals this season, after his celebrated playoff benching last spring. Savard is a lefthanded shot, which means he instinctively dishes to his right on his forehand. "He's one of those guys that you think you have him, you think you have him, and, *wham*, he makes a quick

"When he got hurt before the playoffs, everyone in the room was kinda, 'O.K., what's Savvy going to do? Is he going to sit out or come back?'" says Chara, the Bruins captain. "His playing hurt, and being one

# SI's All-Stars

A lineup with only one Canadian (four were voted in by fans) is matched with an unheralded goalie and his single-Wing offense



## EASTERN CONFERENCE

G **Tim Thomas**, *Bruins*

D **Zdeno Chara**, *Bruins*

D **Andrei Markov**, *Canadiens*

C **Evgeni Malkin**, *Penguins*

◀ LW **Alexander Ovechkin**, *Capitals*

RW **Alexander Semin**, *Capitals*

## WESTERN CONFERENCE

G **Steve Mason**, *Blue Jackets*

D **Dan Boyle**, *Sharks*

D **Shea Weber**, *Predators*

C **Pavel Datsyuk**, *Red Wings*

LW **Patrick Marleau**, *Sharks*

RW **Jarome Iginla**, *Flames*

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play and there's an open net for someone else," the Ottawa Senators' Daniel Alfredsson says of defending Savard.

The menacing Lucic—at 6' 3", 228 pounds he was second in the NHL with 3.85 hits per game—provides the right environment for the two artistes to work. In applying classical techniques to line construction (playmaking plus shot-and-speed plus physicality), Julien overlooked Lucic's lumbering skating. When Savard dumps the puck into Lucic's corner, the center figures

**A**S McLELLAN looked forward to taking over behind the San Jose bench, he looked back to his 2007–08 job as an assistant with the Stanley Cup–winning Red Wings. Detroit coach Mike Babcock had paired superb centers Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg, nominally designating Zetterberg as a left wing. McLellan employed the strategy with San Jose's top centers, Thornton and Marleau, who had seemed uncomfortable when former Sharks coach Ron Wilson tried him

accepted a third-line checking role in the 2004 World Cup; the Sharks in the season of the trade—but his winning the Hart Trophy didn't spackle the holes in his reputation caused by spotty playoffs and a deference to his skills that hasn't always served him well. Thornton has often looked as if he wanted to play a hockey game rather than dominate it, passing up quality shots while tripping merrily through a career that has been impressive yet unsatisfying. ("Every shift," says McLellan when asked how often he still urges Thornton to shoot more.) As marquee players with smudges on their résumés (Thornton has only 48 points in 70 playoff games; Marleau's defensive gaffe helped cost a series against Detroit in 2007) they have more in common than similar skill sets.

By putting his two dominant forwards on one line, McLellan was also dangling a carrot in front of the team's right wings. The job as Thornton and Marleau's wingman would come with a built-in 60 points for anyone who'd buzz on the forecheck, pick up rebounds and get into the seams for Thornton's dreamy passes. Setoguchi, whose muscular shot is sometimes a trigger for the line, passed the audition late in the preseason.

Says Thornton, "When you take three good players—and we are—and you play them together, you have a chance to get three great players."

Still, Setoguchi views his spot on the line as a privilege. "At any time that I don't play well," says Setoguchi, who already has more goals (20) than he had points (17) in

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to get it back because Lucic will either dig it out or steamroll a defender off the puck and leave it free for Savard. "I've seen so many [defensemen] bail when they've seen Looch coming," Julien says.

Because Lucic can control the puck while shielding defenders, Savard can survey the ice to see who's open rather than waiting until a pass reaches his stick to take a peek.

In a city that has always embraced the passer—Tom Brady, Bob Cousy, Adam Oates—Savard has found a home.

on wing at the start of the 2007–08 season. Marleau's relationship with Wilson had soured, but under McLellan the captain was getting a fresh start. Why not at a different position? "I wanted Patty to feel good about it," says McLellan, who before making the move discussed it with Marleau. "I thought he and Joe would make each other better."

Thornton has made others better throughout his career—linemate Sergei Samsonov in Boston; Team Canada when he cheerfully

44 games last season, "I know there are guys here who can step up and win that spot."

McLellan has occasionally separated Thornton and Marleau on the theory that almost any line can be shut down in the playoffs, and he might have to spread the offensive wealth. "If I do have to split them up in the postseason, their experience playing apart now will be valuable," McLellan says. "I'll be tinkering as the year goes on."

NHL coaches will always hunt for perfect line combinations. Sometimes all it takes are the right imperfect men. □

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