

Back-to-Back!

Have you ever wondered why the truly great get there, stay there, and have a level of continuity that is seemingly unmatched? Our beloved Penguins have just won back to back Stanley Cups. I'm extremely superstitious, so I won't bore you with my playoff rituals, as if my idiosyncrasies would have anything to do with the outcome of a game – who knew I had such power? It's an awesome responsibility! I'm certain no one else has any.

We here in Pittsburgh are truly blessed – although we seem to take the presence of greatness with a grain of salt. Let's focus on Sidney Crosby for a moment. When Mike Sullivan was asked what makes Crosby so good on the ice he made this observation: 'he is the hardest working player on the team'. Now as a sports fanatic, former college athlete and high school coach for more than 20 years I can tell you I look at that comment with some degree of skepticism. Until you listen to Sullivan describe why he makes that comment about the Kid. He is constantly working on his speed, his stick handling skills, his game tape review, his love of the game, and his commitment to the sport. He knows more about his opponents and studies them too!!! This is the best player in the sport today – not by the fans perspective, or some lame reporter who thinks he knows the game, or some other unofficial aficionado. That acclaim comes from his peers. And not just his teammates who all hold him in extremely high regard. That's from his opponents, especially those poor defenders who had to mark him on the ice. Some did a good job of keeping him off the score sheet, others not so much. But to a person they each have said he's the reason the Penguins are who they are right now. One individual who believed that through hard work and dedication he's make a difference, even when he didn't have to.

But let's dig a little more into why. He's one of the first guys on the ice during practice and one of the last ones off. He is constantly pushing himself physically during practices knowing that once he is in the game much more is going to be required of him. And, unlike some athlete in other sports, he has never allowed his success to go to his head – aka – I'm so good I don't have to work on my skills and abilities and certainly the rest of the team needs me, they have to rely on me, I'm 'the man'! that's not Sid, nor will it be. Perhaps it because he was mentored by another great – Mario Lemieux – who lived and acted the same way – and overcame cancer to continue his career in an unbelievable manner. Sid never complained about the concussion protocol he had to withstand a couple of years ago, or the fact that he lost most of his teeth from a puck shot to the face a few years back as well. He very quietly and without fan fare continues to work harder than the rest behind the scenes – where it counts knowing that when needed he can deliver.

He lives only a few miles from our home here. It's a nice place, but not overly ostentatious. In the village, a couple blocks down the street from his mentor and friend. As the captain of the team he gets to 'host the cup' for the first part of the cup possession. What did he do when he got off the plane from Nashville yesterday? He took the cup around to all of the businesses in the village. His favorite little grocery store – Safran's, the local drug store, the restaurants, the shops. He walked around the downtown business area in the village and shared the most prized possession in all of sports with the people in the village. His quiet gesture of thanks to the fans who allow him to be a villager and not some Hollywood – hey look at me social media empty hat. That should tell you something about this kid from Canada, who has become a Pittsburgher through and through.

So let me ask you, are you constantly working on your craft every day, even when no one is watching? Are you aware of the challenges that may be ahead, are you preparing for them? When some major setback hits you, as it does all of us, what are you going to do next? Are you better today than yesterday? What have you read today, written today, presented today, advised about today, solved today, that you didn't do yesterday? Maintaining the status quo isn't maintenance at all. It's stagnation, the beginning of atrophy, and

in due time obsolescence. We all of the opportunity to be great at what we do, it just takes constant diligence.

One of the other unsung heroes has also been the head coach Mike Sullivan. Two Stanley Cups in less than two years of coaching. Talk about a fast start. What you don't know is all of the journeyman hours and talent evaluation and line changes he's developed in order to take advantage of the skills of his team, while always keeping the opposing team off balance. He's a tactician, but just as important, a strategist. Always calm, always thinking of the next shift and the next opportunity. I believe we're witnessing one of the great ones finally demonstrate what all that preparation and all of those hours working in obscurity pay off. Think about it. More than any coach this year or last he's been able to get the best out of each of his players, not just the superstars. Guentzel, Rust, Bonino, Hornquist, Fleury, Murray, Hagelin, Malkin and the rest.

When was the last time someone said to you 'here's thirty gifts – take them and make something of them and when you are done bring them back to me. Sullivan more than anyone has been able to take this team and get the best out of each one of them. That I believe has made all the difference. His ability to assess talent and then acquire them, and then, most importantly, blend them into a highly productive team, that is a management feat very few companies appreciate nor master.

Finally, let's think about succession. This year's team is different than last year's as will next years be different than this one. Why? It's a sport, and one thing you can absolutely be certain of there will be injuries, drafts, expansions and retirements. The personnel are going to change. The most critical skill is the ability to assess talent and then manage and motivate that talent to perform. I believe that Sullivan understands that better than most. He's already beat some of the best coaches in the game. Why? Not because he believes he is a better coach, although I'm certain he has some degree of confidence otherwise he could never do what he does. Truth is he understand talent assessment, talent acquisition and how to motivate that talent to perform. If you are in a supervisory or management role those skills are most important to your success – not because of what you do, but because of what your team can and will do for you!

Congratulations Penguins! I'm so glad you kept the cup here in our home town. I'm even happier that you demonstrate some of the most successful human capital skills essential to success in any setting.

BTW – Sid – if you're looking for a pool to have a party in with the Cup and a few of your friends – the water is warm up here over the hill. Just saying