Winning In Style

Changing the color of his pads was just one step in the remaking of Pittsburgh goalie Marc-André Fleury, who now plays the puck with more confidence and is keeping the Penguins on the road to the finals.

BY MICHAEL FARBER
Photographs by Lou Capozola

Extreme Makeover, NHL Edition: The long and ultimately colorless story of Marc-André Fleury’s transformation—the Pittsburgh Penguins goalie was flashing a high-wattage smile and a sparkling 540 playoff save percentage through Sunday—began last autumn in the Ottawa home of Janet Leduc. Although a committed Senators fan, Leduc is foremost an optometrist. (As you are no doubt aware, there is no eye in team.) After being driven to distraction for years while watching Fleury flash his trademark taxicab-yellow pads on TV, Leduc permitted professional judgment to supersede hometown loyalty and said enough was enough, much as Fleury did last Friday when he shut down the Philadelphia Flyers 4–2 in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference finals after allowing two first-period goals. In November, Leduc sent letters to the Penguins’ owners, coaches and general manager Ray Shero, explaining that yellow is the color most easily distinguished by the human eye—a nifty graph was enclosed—and recommended that their goalie switch to white pads to better blend with the ice and end boards. As Leduc said by telephone:

On the Marc With 30 saves and the help of a key goal by Maxime Talbot (above, left) on Sunday night, Fleury gave Pittsburgh a 2–0 series lead over Philadelphia.
Like Him Now?

With a spotless postseason run, Detroit’s Chris Osgood was erasing the notion that he was the worst goalie to win a Cup

LIKE AN air traffic controller or Britney Spears’s publicist, Detroit Red Wings goaltender traditionally has been among America’s most thankless jobs—a fact not lost on incumbent Chris Osgood. The 35-year-old Osgood, who stoned the Dallas Stars 2-1 in Game 2 of the Western Conference finals last Saturday, has been a Red Wing long enough to know that in Detroit, skaters win Stanley Cups and goalies lose them. He shrugs at the skewed logic. “That’s changing,” says Osgood, who improved to 8-0 since relieving Dominik Hasek during the first round against Nashville. “I think people realize now that we win and lose as a team.”

Osgood has been perceived as the worst goalie to backstop a Cup champion, which raises this possibility: In June will he be dismissed as the worst goalie to lead a team to two Cups? The thought is as absurd as the original conceit that Osgood was just along for the ride with the title-winning ’98 Red Wings when he put up a 2.12 goals-against average and a .916 save percentage in the playoffs. In 13 seasons, 10 with Detroit, Osgood has won 363 regular-season games (16th all-time) and 33 in the playoffs through Sunday. His regular-season winning percentage of .631 ranks first among the top 20 goalies in career wins. “Toss out those numbers without a name, add the Cup, and 50 percent of people would say that’s near Hall of Fame credentials,” Detroit winger Darren McCarty says. “Then say it’s Ozzie, and the number’ll drop to 50 percent. Or less.”

The negativity can be blamed on some of Osgood’s memorable low points, starting in 1984 when he was left sobbing at his locker after his giveaway led to a shocking series-winning third-period goal by San Jose’s Jamie Baker in Game 7 of the first round.

Yet Detroit thought it needed an upgrade and, in 2001, acquired Hasek and waived Osgood, who was picked up by the Islanders. Osgood helped New York, and then St. Louis (2003-04), reach the playoffs, but he returned to Detroit in August 2005 a new man. During the ’04-’05 lockout Osgood reinvented his style, a remarkable act by a 300-win goalie of whom Wings GM Ken Holland says, “He was an NHL goalie who had high school technical skills.” Osgood introduced some butterfly into his repertoire and improved his speed. The stream of pucks that once leaked through him slowed to a trickle.

While the old Ozzie—baseball cap tugged down, eyes averted—has receded beneath a calm and confident demeanor, so has the hoary notion that he is a mere passenger on the Detroit bandwagon. “Not his fault we have a good team,” goalie coach Jim Bedard says. Cocooned by a puck-moving, rebound-clearing defense that allowed 21 shots or fewer in six of his first eight playoff starts this spring, Osgood keeps inching from mockery toward belated stardom. “I don’t brag about myself,” he says. “I don’t have to be a star. I just want to be part of the Red Wings.” The now great and powerful Oz has spoken. —M.F.

STAND-UP GUY Well, sometimes. Osgood helped himself by mixing in some butterfly.

Other dodgy goals followed, notably Jamie Langenbrunner’s overtime shot from a different zip code in Game 5 of the ’98 conference final in Dallas. Forgotten is Osgood’s shutout that eliminated the Stars in Game 6.

S EVEN M I N U T E S into the first period of hockey’s Pennsylvania primary—think Obama versus Clinton, only with crosschecks and face washes—Flyers forward Mike Knuble was bearing down on the puck just to the left and rear of the Pittsburgh crease. Fleury took two strides behind the net, corralled the puck, looked off the intruder and then switched to his backhand, rimming a 10-foot to a defenseman to start a Pittsburgh breakout. For a puck-moving maestro like, say, the Dallas Stars’ Marty Turco, this pass would have fallen at the
midpoint of the spectrum between ho and hum, but for Fleury, who used to treat the puck as if it had cooties, his élan in making the play was wondrous.

Ignore for a moment the cosmetic pad change. The essence of this makeover is the guts of Fleury's game, which has evolved dramatically since he returned from his ankle injury. "It's almost like two different goalies the way he's playing now," Pittsburgh defensemen Sergei Gonchar says. "He's much more comfortable." The difference is as stark as black and white, you know.

Fleury has always been a dervish in net, boasting hockey's quickest legs when he entered the NHL in 2003-04. In the crease he was like a duck whose legs were paddling furiously beneath the water's surface, churning constantly and often uselessly. Fleury is still nimble - midway through the second period of Game 1 he read a tricky bounce and butterflied swiftly to make a pad save on an attempted stuff-in by Philadelphia's R.J. Umberger - but now he usually waits for a shot to find him, rarely taking himself out of position to make a stop. "Sometimes he'll get there too quick and sort of slide by the shot."

not intercepting pucks and thus not relieving the pressure from the Senators' furious forecheck. Ottawa would angle dump-ins to the corner to Fleury's right, obliging the gala of Pittsburgh defensemen with left-handed shots to play the puck on their backhands while being mashed into the glass. Fleury was mostly a bystander to the carnage, although hardly innocent.

But as they might say in the optometry business, there was more to Fleury's reticence in handling the puck than meets the eye. There was a sad, almost secret backstory. Late in the 2004 World Junior Championships final against the U.S., Fleury came out to pokecheck Patrick O'Sullivan, who was hurtling in on a breakaway. The goalie played the puck, but it struck teammate Braydon Coburn in the back of the leg and caromed into the net for the Americans' winning goal, a Bucknerian moment in Canadian junior hockey history. As Fleury sat shirtless in a trainer's room earlier this postseason, his omnipresent smile dimmed. "I just didn't want to make mistakes anymore after that [goal]," he said. "I decided I would just focus on stopping [the puck], not worry about making plays; I didn't want to mess up again."

Forget Dr. Leduc. Paging Dr. Freud.

FLEURY NEEDED time, and coaching, to heal the pain. Often he has not received the support he deserved from an organization that drafted him at No. 1 in 2003 — the formerly cash-strapped franchise didn't even have a full-time goalie coach until Gilles Meloche, then a Penguins scout and goalie consultant, took the job two years ago — but now help has come from all directions. Meloche has drilled Fleury on the nuances of the position and injected more poise. And, blessedly, backup netminder Ty Conklin has a Zabucksie gunk mover. Fleury improved during his injury hiatus simply by observing Conklin and pestering him for tips.

After Meloche instructed Fleury to move three feet closer to the goal when the opposing team crossed the red line, the goalie also found the time to go behind the net to set-

You've heard of a stay-at-home defenseman? Fleury was a STAY-AT-HOME GOALIE. "I didn't want to mess up," he says.