

From USA Hockey Magazine

A Fine Line

Finding The Right Chemistry Is Key To Creating A Great Line

By Bob Schaller

Though it may not be rocket science, there is a certain science to making a great line: Chemistry.

The great lines of hockey history, some with catchy nicknames like the GAG (Goal A Game) Line in New York (Jean Ratelle, Vic Hadfield and Rod Gilbert), the Production Line in Detroit (Sid Abel, Ted Lindsey and Gordie Howe) or Buffalo's French Connection (Gilbert Perreault, Rene Robert and Rick Martin), all featured great players who, when teamed up with the right partners, were downright explosive.

"You can be successful in your own right, and remember that success has a different connotation for every player based on their skills," says former New York Islanders great Bryan Trottier.

"So Rick Martin gets 30 goals and 40 assists, Robert has 25 goals and 60 assists, and Perreault had 100 points. Who was more successful? They all were. The key to that, and other great lines, is that one person's skills complement the others', or make up for a certain skill another linemate doesn't have as much of. That's the big thing, getting all of the skills together on the line working together well."

The Punch Line in Montreal consisted of Toe Blake, Punch Imlach (who later created the French Connection in Buffalo) and Maurice "Rocket" Richard.

"The intangible key factor is chemistry," says former Montreal forward Ralph Backstrom, who now runs his own team, the Colorado Eagles of the Central Hockey League. "That's what happens when three maybe average guys are put together and play so well as a unit."

The Production Line: Lindsey, Howe, Abel

Though Jean Beliveau was far from average, he did team with Bert Olmstead and Bernie "Boom Boom" Geoffrion to form an incredibly solid line that Backstrom remembers watching as a kid at the Forum in Montreal.

"That was a tremendous line," Backstrom recalls. "Olmstead was the digger, Beliveau the playmaker and on the right side was Geoffrion, who was a tremendous shooter.

"Again, though, I think chemistry was the key, because it seemed like those guys had eyes in the back of their heads. What they did was so spectacular that you wondered how they did it."

The shift to defensive-minded hockey in the era of the neutral zone trap seems to have taken the focus off of getting offensive firepower assimilated on the same line.

In Detroit, however, the focus is and has been back on offensive production, which could lead to a new era of memorable lines once the league's labor problems are worked out.

According to Red Wings assistant coach Barry Smith, there will undoubtedly be another up-swing in offensive production — like defense, it is cyclical, and offense is in a “lull” right now.

“We play a different type of hockey — we're more of a puck-possession team, so we aren't big on dump-and-chase and forechecking as much as other teams,” says Smith, who worked under the legendary Scotty Bowman in Motown.

“We're not afraid to hold onto the puck. And players respond to that; most good hockey players want to have the puck, and not chase it for 60 minutes.”

In the modern era, a number of factors — free agency, media attention, the urgency coaches feel to win — has limited the proliferation of lines that take on such personalities or monikers, though the Legion of Doom line — Eric Lindros, John LeClair and Mikael Renberg — in Philadelphia did garner some attention, but it came apart as fast as it was pulled together. In fact, that line isn't anywhere near the “LCB” line of wingers Bill Barber, Reggie Leach and center Bobby Clarke that brought the Flyers a pair of Stanley Cups in the 1970s.

“Legion of Doom had, what, two good years?” questions Trottier. “There was such a uniqueness about those lines, those players from so long ago in the (1940s-70s). And the days of those players, and those lines, staying together for a long time might well be gone.”

It's been far more common to have two great players team up with another journeyman or have a borderline standout join them on the wing, such as during Wayne Gretzky's run with Jari Kurri in Edmonton.

According to Smith, the two-stars plus one lesser-known wing is the wave of the present, and probably the future.

“Why change one winger? Because the responsibilities of the line change a little — maybe you're playing against a team with better defense, or you need someone more physical,” Smith says. “You won't have these GAG Lines because players are rotated in and out, off and on. The ‘third winger’ is rotated based on game situations.”

Another benefit, according to Smith, of the “two plus one” winger approach is that only two forwards are needed on penalty kill. Since penalty kill, by design, includes just the two forwards, a third star player would be wasted several shifts a game. So by breaking up a Gretzky-Messier or Glenn Anderson format, players would be kept fresh and still be able to stay in not just the regular rotation, but penalty kill rotation as well.

“I learned that from Scotty — if you have two forwards on every line who play penalty kill, you will have a better team offensively and defensively,” Smith says. “Good penalty killing usually indicates good defensive instincts.”

Former Colorado Avalanche Head Coach Tony Granato agrees, saying the special “tandems” are much more the norm than the three-player lines in terms of getting attention.

“You get guys like Peter Forsberg and Joe Sakic on the ice at the same time — guys who won't play together regularly because they both play the same position — at a critical point in the game, and that's something special,” says Granato.

The “other winger” on the Gretzky-Kurri line was usually a lesser known, lesser talented player who was deemed to be a mucker, a young up-and-comer and even the occasional enforcer. Ditto for center Stan Mikita and sharpshooter Bobby Hull.

And Mike Bossy and Trottier went through a number of wingers in New York with the Islanders.

“But, those two guys though, were better than just about any three guys in the league at that time,” points out former NHLer and U.S. Olympian Ed Olczyk.

However, Clark Gilles proved himself a worthy linemate, and to this day Trottier says Gilles doesn’t get the credit his performance deserved.

“Our greatest success as a line was with Clark,” Trottier recalls. “And Clark really did have all the skills: terrific puck handler, good playmaker and an excellent shot. He’d go to the net. He did a lot of the heavy work. He was solid all the way around, an underrated guy who brought a lot to the line.”

Though the greatest player Gretzky ever played with was Mark Messier, the two were both natural centers, and never clicked as linemates. In fact, Gretzky’s greatest pure line may have come later in his career, when he was with the Los Angeles Kings. He had Granato, a good shooter and finisher, on right wing, and the talented irritant Tomas Sandstrom, who could muck and dig and finish, on left wing.

“Anybody in the world could play with Gretzky and he’d make them better,” says Granato, who did just that for five years. “He was such a scorer and playmaker, so well rounded that he was a complementary player to anyone, and he made everyone around him better.”

Having such diversely talented players — with different skills — can lend itself to a special line.

“I think ideally what brings a line together is the guy in the middle who really is so adept to be able to be the setup guy and the finisher, who can work both ends of the rink extremely well, and distribute the puck,” says Olczyk, who as coach of the Pittsburgh Penguins understands more than ever how important great lines can be.

“But you have to have a guy or two who would rather give than receive — guys who don’t worry about who is scoring most of the goals.”

Though it should also be pointed out that some of the best centers in the game — Phil Esposito, Messier and Steve Yzerman — have put up Hall of Fame numbers and won Stanley Cups with a hodgepodge of wingers at various times. And Espo was aided by a great playmaking, finishing defenseman by the name of Bobby Orr who was as talented an offensive player as any winger.

The era of the great line, Backstrom says, has been replaced by the great player. And even role players on good lines with better players see their own stock rise as they put up bigger numbers. That leads to bigger paydays — but usually not better numbers — in another city.

“Keep in mind the tremendous turnover in hockey nowadays with free agency, and everything else,” says Backstrom. “You can’t keep these great lines together, because one or two of the players are constantly moving onto greener pastures — and when I say greener, I mean money.”

Bob Schaller is a freelance writer in Colorado Springs, Colo.