

THE NHL'S SECRET WEAPON? WOMEN'S FIGURE SKATERS (SERIOUSLY)

By Tal Pinchevsky | Feb 13, 2015
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A former figure skating star and a struggling NHL player seems like a strange partnership. But world champ Barbara Underhill and Lightning center Brian Boyle ended up being an excellent pair.

After a decorated figure skating career that included a pairs world championship in 1984 and a stint as a TV analyst in her native Canada, Barbara Underhill was back on the ice in 2010. And in Foxborough, Massachusetts, of all places.

She had arrived to coach her newest pupil: 6-foot-7, 244-pound New York Rangers forward Brian Boyle. There were no tassels and no sequins, and the 4-foot-11 Underhill definitely wasn't there to teach him how to pirouette.

This was all business.

Coming off a disappointing season in New York, Boyle had been sent to Underhill to improve his skating. Skeptical at first, the towering Boyle could barely walk by the time they were done.

"I knew by the end of one session that I got him. He felt something different. He felt like, 'This feels easier,'" Underhill said of Boyle. "I think that was the kicker. He realized, 'Maybe she can teach me something.'"

Shortly after their final session, Boyle called her from Rangers training camp in panic. He was speeding by opponents with far less effort. It felt strange and unnatural.

"That means you're doing it right," Underhill reminded him.

Boyle established career highs that season with 21 goals and 35 points. This past summer, despite a busy schedule that included his wedding and a Rangers run to the Stanley Cup Final, Boyle still made time for Underhill.

"I did two sessions with her in a summer where I didn't skate as much as I'd like," said Boyle, who signed a three-year contract with the Tampa Bay Lightning in July. "It was good to get it before I started to hit the ice hard."

It's an unlikely path for Underhill, who started as a hockey consultant in 2008 with the Guelph Storm of the Ontario Hockey League, a team co-owned by her husband, Rick Gaetz. Now a consultant with the Toronto Maple Leafs and Lightning, she's become one of the most sought-after skating coaches in hockey. And she's not the only former figure skater helping hockey players add a little grace to their grit. In fact, the practice of NHL players consulting with figure skaters -- usually women -- has been happening for years, with great results.

The same summer that Underhill first worked with Boyle, San Jose Sharks forward Joe Pavelski worked with former figure skater Cathy Andrade. Pavelski finished third in the NHL last season with 41 goals and is now among the NHL's most consistent scorers while Andrade is a fixture in Northern California's emerging hockey community.

Other NHL teams have since hired former figure skaters. In September, the Edmonton Oilers added 2002 Olympic champion David Pelletier to their staff as a skating coach.

But the road from salchows to slap shots hasn't always been easy.

"I remember walking into a rink and visiting a team and the dads looking at me and shaking their heads and going, 'This is going to be a waste of time,'" Andrade said. "By the end of the time, those are the ones chasing you in the parking lot going, 'Hey, can you give me private lessons?'"

It wasn't by design, but this movement was pioneered by Laura Stamm, a former figure skater who was still wearing figure skates when she started working with the Rangers in 1972 after being discovered training at their practice facility.

Everything changed when Stamm began working with New York Islanders prospect Bob Nystrom, who went on to become a key contributor to the dynasty that won four straight Stanley Cups in the early-80s.

As a courtesy to the hard-nosed Nystrom, Stamm kept the arrangement very hush-hush.

"I never told anybody about it. At that time, you didn't have a girl coaching a pro hockey player," Stamm said. "He went on to tell everybody that if it wasn't for me he wouldn't have made it in the NHL."

In the years that followed, Stamm worked with some of the best (and scariest) players in the NHL. She helped turn a flat-footed prospect named Luc Robitaille into a Hall-of-Fame player. She helped mold Ken Daneyko and his signature snarl into a three-time Stanley Cup champion. She even worked with Nick Fotiu, an amateur boxing champion-turned-Rangers fan favorite.

Stamm's guidance was even passed down from one hockey generation to the next. After working with her for years, longtime NHLer Doug Brown invited Stamm to his private party after he won the Stanley Cup in 1997 as a member of the Detroit Red Wings. So when his son, Patrick, started looking for skating help before playing collegiately at Boston College in 2010, the family didn't look too far.

"[Doug Brown] asked, 'What will you charge me?'" Stamm remembered. "I said, 'Nothing, we're family. We go back to the 70s.'"

Perceptions have changed since the 1970s but the kind of skepticism Boyle first felt with Underhill remains throughout the hockey world. For the women charged with helping these players find their inner Boitano, it's all just part of the job.

"I switched over to hockey skates right away. That's really important. They don't want to listen to you if you have figure skates on," said Marianne Watkins, a former consultant with the Anaheim Ducks and Florida Panthers who now works with the Pittsburgh Penguins' top prospects. "Honestly, all these big guys are just little boys. They want to be patted on the back and praised for what they did good. You have to sell them on it. It's funny."

Boyle, for one, was quickly sold on the new skating regimen. So when he signed his contract with Tampa Bay last summer he was excited to find that Underhill was working with the team. After spending three of the past four summers working with her, Boyle is looking forward to a reunion.

"We haven't seen her yet this year but hopefully she can get down to Tampa," Boyle said. "Because even if it's just mentally, half an hour with her helps a lot."