In sports we are always weary of the R-word, which is rebuild. A lot of teams do what they can to avoid it as much as they can but at times it becomes necessary when an aging core just can’t get the job done anymore or star players leave town. Tearing the team down is the easy part, when you sell off said veterans for prospects and draft capital, the hard part is weathering the storm at the professional level while the prospects develop in hopes of a brighter future. All too often teams fail to get the most out of their prospects which can get them caught in a ‘forever rebuild’ where they can never turn the corner and become a legitimate playoff team. A few teams come to mind in an instance like this but one that’s intriguing to me is the New Jersey Devils.

It was a slow, steady decline for the Devils after their Cinderella run to the Stanley Cup Final in 2012. Soon after that run, top Center Zack Parise and integral Winger David Clarkson signed massive free agent contracts and the next season leading scorer Ilya Kovalchuk ‘retired’ to play in Russia. Which meant the biggest pieces of the puzzle left two seasons later were a 41 year old Martin Brodeur and a 37 year old Patrik Elias, to which GM at the time Lou Lamoriello decided to add a bunch of old guys to which got the team nowhere, and eventually Lou would step aside to go to Toronto.

When Ray Shero took over as GM in 2015 and brought in a fresh faced coach in John Hynes with him it was seen as a dawning of a new age in Jersey. In the end, what that regime provided was a mixed bag. The biggest highlights of that era in team history were winning two draft lotteries in a three year span and acquiring Taylor Hall who, along with goaltender Keith Kinkaid, dragged the team to the playoffs with a performance that would win him the Hart Trophy (MVP) in 2018 which was the team’s first playoff berth since their 2012 run, and also their most recent.

The next season Hall was plagued with injuries and only played 33 games and the wheels came off the wagon and the team fell into last place and eventually Hall would force his way out of town and be dealt to Arizona. However, it wasn’t long after the deal was made that Hynes was dismissed and Shero was canned and replaced by Tom Fitzgerald. Not long after he was fired in New Jersey, Hynes was brought on board in Nashville where the Predators made the playoffs in each season he’s been there and are currently second place in the Central Division.

The last two seasons have started out similarly for the Devils with Fitzgerald and the latest Coach, veteran Lindy Ruff. They’ve started off hot looking like they could be a potential darkhorse and finally turning the corner, until they hit a wall and struggle mightily and fall towards the basement.

This season their fall has been quite spectacular. A month ago, they just defeated the two time defending champion Tampa Bay Lightning 5-3 and sat in the second Wild Card spot in the East. Since then, they haven’t defeated a team not named the Philadelphia Flyers with only the disappointing Islanders behind them in the Metropolitan Division. And when I attended their matchup against the Vegas Golden Knights last week there was a brief but apparent “Fire Ruff” chant up from the upper sections of Prudential Center. The coach will always be the first one to blame but I believe it’s much deeper than that.

I’m going to start with what I feel is their most obvious flaw when I watch this team. For many years one of the most decorated goaltenders of all time donned the horns and tail, and since then it's been a struggle to find a number one guy. Brodeur’s immediate replacement was Corey Schneider who was acquired at a steep price of a top ten draft pick (Bo Horvat) at the 2013 draft. Early on the younger Schneider outplayed Brodeur which eventually caused him to retire but not long afterwards Schneider’s play fell off a cliff which coincided with a lot of injuries and a lackluster team defense. It got to a point where the team gave a 22 year old kid named MacKenzie Blackwood a shot in 2017-18 and he impressed out of the gate (.918 SV% 2.61 GAA). The next season he followed that up with a .915 SV% and it looked like the Devils found their guy. Not so fast. Blackwood’s number’s took a dive last season and they haven’t recovered (.902 SV% both seasons) which tells me teams have figured him out and he hasn’t adjusted his game accordingly.

So where do the Devils go from here? Difficult to say since Blackwood’s backup Jonathan Bernier is currently injured and even when healthy is better suited as a 1B/backup. The other options are in the AHL where the tandem of Akira Shmid and Nico Daws put up video game-esque numbers but haven’t been able to replicate that in the show.

The other main issue in North Jersey comes from the inexact science that is scouting and drafting because they’ve struggled with getting regular NHL service out of their first round picks really since Adam Larsson was taken with the 4th pick in 2011. Most notably they whiffed on their 2015 (Pavel Zacha) and 2016 (Mike McLeod) picks and the laundry list of players taken after them is staggering.

To me though the most intriguing one is the 2017 draft because that was the first time the Devils won the draft lottery and had the number one overall pick. Going into that draft there were two players who were the consensus top picks in Nolan Patrick and Nico Hischier. In the end the Devils decided on Hischier while their rivals to the south in Philly took Patrick with the second pick. While it turned out New Jersey made the right decision between the two players, Hischier has a hard time staying healthy and didn’t develop into the impact number one center the team thought he would be in order to compete. And to add a cherry on top it’s not a good look when the next three picks in that same draft become cornerstone players (Dallas: Miro Heiskanen, Colorado: Cale Makar, Vancouver: Elias Pettersson).

As luck would have it the team would get a mulligan two years later and win the lottery again and earn the right to select the consensus top pick in Jack Hughes. While it’s too early to draw any conclusions Hughes’ development has been uneven at best and also has a hard time staying healthy and given the team’s drafting and developing track record I am skeptical especially since Hughes recently signed on for $64 million over the next 8 years.

Being an avid supporter of the New York Football Giants I know a thing or two about how many years of poor drafting slowly festers and can ruin a once proud organization and it can take a long time to fix. Only time will tell if Tom Fitzgerald can instill a culture where all the blue chip prospects the Devils have acquired can develop but recent history has me skeptical about it. But by all means ‘Fire Ruff’ because it’s on him that the team is devoid of top end talent.