To quote the now former Head Coach of the New York Rangers “Well that happened”. Of course at that time David Quinn was referring to his star center Mika Zibanejad dropping five goals on the Washington Capitals last March. Now, I think that quote encapsulates the 2021 Rangers season which had to be the strangest one in my living memory, and not just because of the circumstances it was being played under.

On the ice it was hard to complain. After a rocky start the Blueshirts eventually found their footing, and made a push for the postseason despite being one of the youngest teams in the league in what was the toughest and most competitive division in the NHL. They would ultimately fall short of the playoffs finishing in fifth place (27-23-6 60 points) however some of us may argue that they were a better team during the regular season than some of the teams that qualified for the playoffs in different divisions.

Going into this strange, truncated season I set my expectations low. The team was still young and solely in a division that had a number of teams that at some point in the last five years were all considered to be legitimate Stanley Cup contenders at the very least. And this team who’s average age was 25.23 second only to the division rival New Jersey Devils. The difference was that the Devils sold off their veterans and are still in the midst of their rebuild while the Rangers are in the twilight of their rebuild phase and are looking to turn the corner.

And this team looking to turn the corner has some bright stars to line Broadway. There’s guys in their prime like Mika Zibanejad and Artemiy Panarin who are point producing machines combined with young guns like Kaapo Kakko and Alexis Lafreniere who as the season went along made tremendous strides in their development. On the back end what else is there to say about Adam Fox? He should be a front runner for the Norris Trophy (best defenseman) and is quite possibly the best Rangers defenseman since Brian Leetch. Additionally, rookie K’Andre Miller certainly didn’t look like a rookie while being paired with Jacob Trouba making a fantastic second pairing, and oh by the way there’s more young blueliners on the way. Lastly, in goal after a rough start Igor Shesterkin eventually found his game and reminded us why he was long considered the heir to King Henrik’s throne.

So with all that good going on, what made this season so strange? Well pull up a chair because we’re about to go on a ride.

The easy place to begin is training camp. For about 90% of camp we heard no news about Mika Zibanejad, only that he was going to be out for some time. He finally skated with the team as camp was about to break a few days before the season opener. It was soon revealed that Zibanejad was sick with COVID-19 for that time. And while he was physically on the ice he was largely invisible on the scoresheet and was completely off his game due to the combination of missing camp and the after effects of COVID. He would eventually hit his stride and have a fantastic season (56GP 24G 26A 50 Pts) but that start was worrisome.

At this point is where we transition from reality in 2020-21 to glorified soap opera that is stranger than fiction. The Rangers having Tony DeAngelo on their roster was always a hot button issue in the hockey world due to his checkered past (bullying teammates, abusing officials, etc), a controversial podcast and his presence on social media (at one point said he’d join Parler). For a time that was all avoided because of how he was performing on the ice which included him being fourth in the NHL in scoring among defensemen in 2019-20. Unfortunately the lid couldn’t be kept on forever and everything boiled over on the night of January 30 as the Rangers played host to the Pittsburgh Penguins. As the story goes, backup goaltender Alexandar Georgiev and DeAngelo had a miscommunication behind the net which led to a turnover and the eventual overtime winning goal by Sidney Crosby. On the way to the locker room after the loss DeAngelo said something to Georgiev resulting in a physical altercation between the two. That incident was the straw that broke the camel’s back as DeAngelo was placed on waivers the next day and hasn’t played a game since. No other team was willing to trade for the defenseman so he is awaiting a buyout at home.

About a month after the DeAngelo incident we got blindsighted with the downright strange. For those of us who follow the sport of hockey and its players rather closely we were aware that Artemiy Panarin was always a vocal opponent of the government in his native Russia, and if you know anything about global politics you know the Russian Government isn’t exactly kind to its opponents. So in late February, seemingly out of nowhere, it was announced that Panarin was taking a leave of absence from the team. The leave came after a former coach of his in Russia who is known for being mentally unstable and a vocal Government supporter accused him of striking a woman in a bar 10 years ago. What raised eyebrows was that the accusation came from the coach instead of the woman, and everyone allegedly involved in the incident denied everything about the story. We may never know what exactly Panarin was dealing with during that leave but what matters is that his family that is still in Russia is safe.

And of course what sundae would be complete without a cherry? It all started May 3 in the second period when Washington Capitals forward Tom Wilson decides to cross check Pavel Buchnevich’s face into the ice while he was already down, Panarin rushed to his teammate’s defense and for his trouble Wilson rag dolls him to the ice which would effectively end Panarin’s season and started a fallout that could be felt for years to come. The NHL’s Department of Player Safety decided to only slap the repeat offender Wilson with a $5,000 fine which is the maximum allowed. Hours later the Rangers social media released a statement condemning the move and calling out department head George Parros in an unprecedented move.

And if that alone didn’t set off alarm bells, the next morning it was announced that President John Davidson and GM Jeff Gorton had been fired which also caught everyone off guard. The official reasoning was because ownership felt the team underachieved but anyone who knows or has worked for James Dolan has an idea of what really happened. The idea being Gorton and Davidson told him they wouldn’t release that thunderous statement and because they went against the bossman’s wishes they paid the price. Soon after, to no one’s surprise at this point, Head Coach David Quinn faced the same fate as the brain trust who hired him.

The new man in charge will be Connecticut naitive and former Ranger captain Chris Drury, who’s vision isn’t too far removed from that of JD and Gorton. He will have a busy offseason dealing with finding the right coach to guide these youngsters, navigating an expansion draft and finding the right pieces to supplement this young and exciting core. All I can hope for at this point is that ownership doesn’t get too antsy and that the Rangers get aggressive but not stupidly so. This is the most delicate stage of the rebuild, all I ask is that Drury handles it with care.