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Home ice feels nice

Mark Messier returns triumphant to the New York Rangers.

By Susan B. Shor

Three years after a less-than-friendly split with the New York Rangers, team captain Mark Messier is back.

In his first stint with Madison Square Garden as home ice in 1994, the center led the once-thought-cursed Rangers to their first Stanley Cup in 54 years. New York's diehards loved him for it. But, alas, the love affair was not to last.

By 1997, Messier wanted more respect, and more money, but the Rangers were loath to give them. So like a taken-for-granted spouse, Messier went where the appreciation (and \$20 million) was -- to the Vancouver Canucks. But he was used to glory. He had spent 12 seasons with his hometown team, the Edmonton Oilers, skating with Wayne Gretzky and picking up five National Hockey League championships not only because of his skilled skating both ways but because of his ability to rally the troops as an inspirational all-around good guy.

Three seasons in "rebuilding" Vancouver, without a playoff appearance to show for it, took its toll on the athlete used to success. So when his old Oilers coach, Glen Sather, who last month left the team's G.M. post to take the same job with the Rangers, called, Messier was ready to go home again.

Messier's departure from New York had been hastened by a nasty split with former G.M. Neil Smith and Madison Square Garden president Dave Checketts. With Smith out of the way and Sather, who had signed Messier to his first NHL contract, in, Checketts was also ready to bring back the talent.

It didn't hurt Messier's case that the Rangers had also learned their lesson. Without him, there were no playoffs for them, either. Suddenly, with Checketts and Sather salivating over Messier's return, the man who once accused the team of lowballing him was looking at a contract from that team worth a reported \$10 million to \$11 million for two years -- more if he hits his incentive targets.

There's no arguing over his talent. Only three NHL players have ever scored more goals than the 39-year-old, who has played 21 seasons. Last season, he missed 15 games with a knee injury, but he insists he's not looking at the move as a steppingstone to retirement. In fact, after accepting the captain's mantle back from Brian Leetch, who reluctantly wore the C on his jersey in the real captain's absence, Messier promised to return the Rangers to their mid-'90s glory.

"I'm not coming here resting on my laurels," Messier said. "I didn't come here resting on the five Cups I won in Edmonton. I'd like to re-create some magic, but it's more than that. It's a lot of blood, sweat and tears.

"I'll guarantee you we'll make the playoffs," he said. "I don't think anybody will be disappointed in the next two years."

Wow, applause for bravado, or is it just confidence? Whatever. Thursday in New York, if you were a hockey fan, it didn't matter. The occasion was so joyous that the hatchet was buried, literally. A glass case filled with dirt was hauled into the press conference announcing his return so Messier and Checketts could make the symbolic move.

Who can blame the prodigal son for breaking down several times during the press conference? "Oh man, this is ridiculous," Messier sniffled. (And, after all, who wouldn't cry if their tribute video soundtrack was Ozzy Osbourne's "Mama, I'm Coming Home," Billy Joel's "This Is the Time" and the theme from "Welcome Back, Kotter"?)

Messier had left New York three years ago feeling that his contributions were undervalued by the team management for whom he had given his all. He knew the team just wasn't the same without him -- and not only needed him back but had to swallow its pride to get him back. So when his sweet dream of vindication came true, it's not surprising he blubbered a little.

Now that the tears have dried and the moment has passed, New York fans are thinking, "Now let's see if he can come through."

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About the writer Susan B. Shor used to play hockey in the street in Queens, N.Y., and make the cars wait while the team moved the net. She is not a Rangers fan.