

# Callahan's Leadership: Goals and Bodychecks



Jason Szenes for The New York Times

Ryan Callahan celebrated with Anton Stralman after scoring the first goal in the Rangers' Game 1 win over Ottawa a.

By CHRISTOPHER BOTTA  
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Eleven years ago, Ryan Callahan, a determined but seemingly unexceptional teenager from Rochester, was the beneficiary of a favor between an agent and a coach.

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In the spring, Steve Bartlett, Callahan's agent since he was 15, called Jeff Jackson, the coach of the Guelph Storm of the Ontario Hockey League.

"Steve had this kid from upstate New York who really wanted to play in the O.H.L.," said Jackson, now the coach at Notre Dame. "He said he was asking for a favor but I wouldn't regret it. He said I wasn't that big and didn't have the hardest shot, but nobody would do more to help our team win. He wanted me to draft him."

With their last pick, in the 15th and final round of the 2001 O.H.L. draft, the Storm selected Callahan, then 16, who was coming off a 13-goal season for the Buffalo Lightning of the Ontario Provincial Junior Hockey League. Two years later, Callahan [scored 36 goals for Guelph](#). Two years after that, he had 52.

"He deserves all the credit for being a self-made star," Jackson said. "A lot of kids in hockey turn out to prove people wrong, but few have come as far as Ryan."

On Thursday, Callahan, now 27 and the [Rangers'](#) captain, was the best player in their [playoff-opening 4-2 victory](#) over the Ottawa Senators. At 12 minutes 1 second of the

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"He is a huge piece to everything we do," Coach John Tortorella said of Callahan, top right.

first period, Callahan scored the [first goal of the game](#). He blocked shots, was relentless on the forecheck and rammed his body as often as he could into Erik Karlsson, the Senators' elite playmaking defenseman.

He demonstrated just what the 2004 report about him from the N.H.L.'s Central Scouting Bureau said: "Most of his points came from his drive and determination in going to prime scoring areas in the offensive zone. He will not be intimidated when confronted in a tough, physical game."

The Rangers drafted Callahan in the fourth round that year, with the 127th overall pick, as he continued to be undervalued.

"I was with another team at the time," said Gordie Clark, the Rangers' player personnel director, who was with the Islanders. "Me and the scouts around the league, we'd watch Callahan's play skyrocket and take comfort in knowing that we all blew it."

The scouts are still shaking their heads. This week, Clark is in St. Petersburg, Russia, with scouts from every N.H.L. team at an international tournament of prospects.

"We've all had our hits and misses," Clark said. "I'm telling you, I didn't draft Ryan Callahan, but his is the name that always comes up. Everyone marvels at what he's accomplished. He's listed at 5-foot-11, but he plays like he's 6-3."

Callahan, who joined the Rangers in 2007 and played for the United States team at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, had a career-high 29 goals in the regular season, second on the team behind Marian Gaborik. He tied Brad Richards for [the team lead in game-winning goals](#), with nine.

Before the start of the playoffs, Rangers Coach John Tortorella gushed over Callahan's value to the Rangers.

"He is a huge piece to everything we do," said Tortorella, who appointed Callahan captain after the team parted ways with Chris Drury last summer. "He is our identity. Offensively and defensively, I look up and down the bench for him."

Tortorella also seeks Callahan's counsel when the game is over.

"He's still a young man wearing the 'C,' and I wasn't sure how he was going to be," Tortorella said. "I've gotten to know him better. It's a bit of a conduit from coaching staff to player. He doesn't say much. It's gone really well that way."

As a leader, Callahan listens more than he speaks. He prefers to let his work during games and practices serve as an example to his teammates. But he will talk when it is warranted.

"Part of the job is speaking up," Callahan said. "The key is to pick your spots. I'm not a rah-rah guy, but if a little motivation is needed or something has to be corrected, I'm not going to hesitate to say what's on my mind. Not every move I make is going to be perfect. But luckily for me, there's no shortage of leadership in here. I learn as I go."

Forward Mike Rupp, who is in his first year with the club, said, "I know 'leader by example' can be a cliché in sports, but Cally's the ultimate."

The former Rangers goaltender Kevin Weekes, now an analyst for "Hockey Night in Canada," is not surprised by the impact Callahan has made on the franchise, noting his maturity and desire to learn.

"The Rangers had been known for a while as the flashy team from the city, a team that needed stars," said Weekes, who played with Callahan in 2007. "But the emergence of Cally completely changed their culture and made the Rangers a contender that will be around a while. Cally brought the blue collar to the Blueshirts."

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