1965 to 1969: Founding a franchise

Before the Penguins, Pittsburgh had been the home of the NHL's Pirates from 1925 to 1930, and the Hornets AHL franchise from the 1930s to 1967. Both the Pirates and Hornets had multiple playoff runs, with the Hornets playing in the final series seven times and winning three championships. In the spring of 1965,Jack McGregor, a state senator from Kittaning, devised a plan to bring an NHL franchise back to Pittsburgh. McGregor's plan involved lobbying some of his campaign contributors (who were avid sports fans) and community leaders. The group focused on leveraging the NHL as an urban renewal tool for Pittsburgh. The senator formed a group of local investors for the Pittsburgh franchise that included H. J. Heinz Company heir H. J. Heinz III, Pittsburgh Steelers owner Art Rooney, and the Mellon family's Richard Mellon Scaife. The 1967 NHL Expansion depended on securing votes from the then-current NHL owners; to ensure that Pittsburgh would be selected for expansion, McGregor enlisted Rooney to petition votes from James D. Norris, owner of the Chicago Black Hawks, and his brother Bruce Norris, owner of the Detroit Red Wings.

The effort was successful, and on February 8, 1966, the NHL awarded an expansion team to Pittsburgh for the 1967–68 season. The Penguins paid $2.5 million for their entry in to the NHL and $750,000 more for start-up costs. The Civic Arena's capacity was then boosted from 10,732 to 12,500 to meet the NHL requirements for expansion. The Pens also paid an indemnification bill to settle with the Detroit Red Wings, who held the rights to the Pittsburgh Hornets. The investor group named McGregor president and chief executive officer, and he represented Pittsburgh on the NHL's Board of Governors.[1]

After deciding on the "Penguin" nickname (which was inspired by the fact that the team was to play in the "Igloo", the nickname of the Pittsburgh Civic Arena),[2] a logo was chosen that had a penguin in front of a triangle, which symbolized the "Golden Triangle" of downtown Pittsburgh."[3]

The Penguins' first general manager was Jack Riley. His team (along with the other expansion teams) was hampered by restrictive rules that kept most major talent with the "Original Six". Beyond aging sniperAndy Bathgate and tough defenseman Leo Boivin, the first Penguins team was manned by a cast of former minor leaguers. On October 11, 1967, league president Clarence Campbell and McGregor jointly dropped the ceremonial first puck of the Penguins opening home game against the Montreal Canadiens.[1] The Penguins would go 27–34–13 that year, missing the playoffs; however, the Penguins were a mere six points out of first place in the close-fought West Division. Still, there was a great moment in their first season: on October 21, 1967, they became the first team from the expansion class to beat an Original Six team, as they defeated the Chicago Black Hawks 4–2.

Though Bathgate led the team in scoring, both he and Boivin were soon gone. Former player George Sullivan was the head coach for the club's first two seasons until being replaced by Hockey Hall of Famer Red Kelly.

[edit]1970–1974: Tragedy of Brière and triumphs of first two playoff seasons

With the exception of a handful of decent players such as Ken Schinkel, Keith McCreary, agitator Bryan Watson, and goaltender Les Binkley, talent was otherwise thin, but enough for the Penguins to reach the playoffs in both 1970 and 1972.

In the 1969 draft the Penguins discovered a diamond in the rough with the selection of Michel Brière who although being chosen 26th soon was drawing comparisons to Phil Esposito and Bobby Clarke. Joining the team in November, he finished as the top rookie scorer in the NHL with 44 points (57th overall), and third on the Penguins. He was only slightly edged out for the Calder Trophy honors to future Hall of Fame goalieTony Esposito. The team finally had its first home-grown superstar in the making.

The 1969–70 season only got better as Pittsburgh celebrated its first NHL Playoff berth since the 1928 Pirates. Besting the original franchise the Penguins recorded the first NHL series victory in the city's history, defeating the Oakland Seals in four games. A series away from the Stanley Cup Finals, the defending conference champions St. Louis Blues got the best of the club during six games, but the Penguins had shown the hockey world that Pittsburgh was on the rise. The club was just the fourth expansion team to win an NHL series. The rookie Brière was even more impressive as the post season got underway, recording five goals (including three game winners) and eight points in just 10 games. Most dramatically he scored an overtime goal to win Pittsburgh its first NHL Playoff series in California. With the franchise two games shy of the Stanley Cup Finals and a promising rookie getting better with each game the future looked incredibly bright.

Tragedy struck the Penguins just days after their playoff heroics. On May 15, 1970 Briere suffered head trauma in a car crash in his native Quebec. After two brain surgeries and never fully recovering from a comotose state for over a year, Briere died in a Montreal hospital. His jersey, number 21, was the only one retired by the franchise other than owner and Hall of Famer Mario Lemieux's 66.

The next season the Penguins managed almost the same record as the 1969–70 campaign but finished five games out of the playoffs. Pittsburgh bounced back strong in 1971–72 with a playoff berth only to be swept by the Chicago Blackhawks in the first round. All the promise that built up in the franchise in the last few seasons was slowly unraveling with age getting to the older expansion draft players, the low draft picks and the tragic death of what should have been the Penguins superstar Brière.

The Penguins battled the California Golden Seals near the division cellar in 1973–74, Riley was fired as general manager and replaced with Jack Button. Button traded for Steve Durbano, Ab DeMarco, Jr., Bob "Battleship" Kelly, and Bob Paradise. The personnel moves proved successful, as the team's play improved. The Penguins just barely missed the playoffs in 1974.

In early 1975 however the Penguins' creditors demanded payment of back debts. It forced the team into bankruptcy. The doors to the team's offices were padlocked, and it looked like the Penguins might fold or relocate. In early 1975, rumors had begun to circulate that the Penguins and California Golden Seals were to be relocated to Seattle and Denver respectively, the two cities that were to have been the sites of an expansion for the 1976–77 season. Through the intervention of a group that included former Minnesota North Stars head coach Wren Blair, the team was prevented from folding and remained in Pittsburgh.

[edit]Summer of '75 to 1982: Seven playoffs in eight seasons

Beginning in the mid-seventies, Pittsburgh iced some powerful offensive clubs, led by the likes of the "Century Line" of Syl Apps, Jr., Lowell MacDonald and Jean Pronovost. They came tantalizingly close to reaching the Stanley Cup semifinals in 1975, but were ousted from the playoffs by the New York Islanders in one of only three best-of-seven game series in professional sports history where a team came back from being down three games to none. As the 1970s wore on, the Penguins brought in other offensive weapons such as Rick Kehoe, Pierre Larouche, and Ron Schock, along with a couple solid blue-liners such as Ron Stackhouse and Dave Burrows. But the Pens' success beyond the regular season was always neutralized by mediocre team defense. Goaltender Denis Herron was a stalwart in goal, later sharing the Vezina Trophy while with the Montreal Canadiens in 1980–81.

Aldege "Baz" Bastien, a former coach and general manager of the AHL Hornets, later became general manager. The Penguins missed the playoffs in 1977–78 when their offense lagged, and Larouche was traded for Peter Mahovlich and Peter Lee. Bastien traded prime draft choices for several players whose best years were already behind them, such as Orest Kindrachuk, Tom Bladon, and Rick MacLeish, and the team would suffer in the early 1980s as a result. The decade closed with a playoff appearance in 1979 and a rousing opening series win over the Buffalo Sabres before a second-round sweep at the hands of the Boston Bruins.

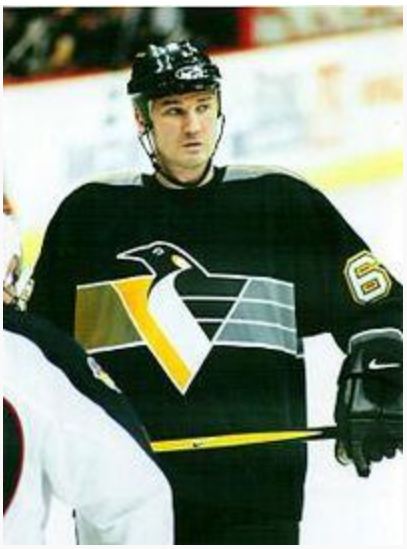
The Penguins began the 1980s by changing their team colors. In January 1980, the team switched from wearing blue and white to their present-day scheme of black and gold to honor Pittsburgh's other sports teams, the Pirates and the Steelers, as well as the Flag of Pittsburgh. Both the Pirates and Steelers had worn black and gold for decades, and both were fresh off world championship seasons at that time. The Bruins protested this color change, claiming a monopoly on black and gold, but the Penguins defended their choice by stating that an early hockey club in Pittsburgh also used black and gold as their team colors. They also argued that black and gold were Pittsburgh's traditional sporting colors. The NHL agreed, and Pittsburgh was allowed to use black and gold, a color scheme since adopted as well by the Anaheim Ducks when that team changed their uniforms in 2006.

On the ice, the Penguins began the 1980s with defenseman Randy Carlyle, and prolific scorers Paul Gardner and Mike Bullard, but little else.

During the early part of the decade, the Penguins made a habit of being a tough draw for higher-seeded opponents in the playoffs. In 1980, the 13th seeded Penguins took the Bruins to the limit in their first round playoff series. The following season, as the 15th seed, they lost the decisive game of their first-round series in overtime to the heavily favored St. Louis Blues. Then, in the 1982 playoffs, the Penguins held a 3–1 lead late in the fifth and final game of their playoff series against the reigning champions, the New York Islanders. However, the Islanders rallied to force overtime and won the series on a goal by John Tonelli. It would be the Pens' final playoff appearance until 1989.

[edit]1983 to 1988: Rebuilding for and with Mario Lemieux

The team had the league's worst record in both the 1983 and 1984 seasons, and with the team suffering financial problems, it again looked as though the Penguins would fold. Mario Lemieux, one of the most highly touted NHL draft picks in history, was due to be drafted in the 1984 NHL Entry Draft. Heading towards the end of the season ahead of the New Jersey Devils, who were placed last, the Penguins made a number of questionable moves that appeared to weaken the team in the short-term. The Penguins posted three six-game winless streaks in the last 21 games of the season (out of which they won only three) and earned the right to draft Lemieux amidst protests from Devils president Bob Butera.[4] Pittsburgh coach Lou Angotti later admitted that a conscious decision was made to end with as the team with the worst record, stating in an interview with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette that a mid-season lunch prompted the plan, in light of the fact that there was a high chance of the franchise folding if Lemieux was not drafted.[5] In particular, Angotti gave the example of a game the Penguins were winning 3–1, at which point general manager Eddie Johnston asked the coach "what are you doing?" in the first intermission of the game that was eventually lost 6–3. The Penguins were still, despite losing ten of their last twelve games, only two games away from losing Lemieux to the Devils.[5] However, Angotti stated that he did not feel comfortable with the plan, even though it worked and saved the franchise. Other teams offered substantial trade packages for the draft choice, but the Penguins kept the pick.



Mario Lemieux played for the Penguins from 1984–94, 1995–97, 2000–06.

With the first overall pick in the 1984 NHL Entry Draft Pittsburgh selected Quebec Major Junior Hockey League superstar Mario Lemieux. He paid dividends right away, scoring on the first shot of his first shift in his first NHL game. However, the team spent four more years out of the playoffs after his arrival.

In the late 80s, the Penguins finally gave Lemieux a strong supporting cast, trading for superstar defenseman Paul Coffey from the Edmonton Oilers (after the Oilers' 1987Stanley Cup win) and bringing in young talent such as scorers Kevin Stevens, Rob Brown, and John Cullen from the minors. Also, the team at last acquired a top-flight goaltender with the acquisition of Tom Barrasso from Buffalo.

All this talent had an immediate impact in helping Lemieux lead the Pens. The 1985–86 Pens team roared out of the NHL cellar, being a playoff contender until the final day of the season and missing them by one game as three teams with lesser records qualified. In 1986–87 the Penguins played hard and competitive all season, missing the playoffs by just two games and seeing four teams with equal or worse records qualify. 1987–88 saw the team again come agonizingly close to the playoffs. Missing them on the last day of the season by one game in the leagues toughest division. The fact that six western teams with worse records qualified for the post-season given the leagues playoff format was all the more heartbreaking.

[edit]1989–2001: A dozen of playoffs and two Cups in 13 seasons

Finally by 1988–89 Pittsburgh broke through, played consistently all season and made the playoffs, and made them big. The Pens shocked the New York Rangers sweeping them in four games and outscoring them 19–11. The second round they met their Pennsylvania rivals, the Philadelphia Flyers for a playoff classic that went seven games and saw Mario Lemieux score five goals in the fifth game. It was a breakout season for Lemuiex in other ways, leading the league in five offensive categories including

goals, assists and points as well as the infamous night of December 31, 1988 becoming the only player in history to score all five ways in a single game.

Though amassing 123 points, Lemieux missed 21 games in 1989–90 due to a herniated disk in his back, and the Pens slipped out of the playoff picture, the only time they would miss the postseason from 1989 to 2001.

In 1990–91, the Penguins reached the top of the standings. They drafted Czech right-winger Jaromir Jagr in the 1990 NHL Entry Draft, the first player from his country to attend an NHL draft without having to defect, and then paired him with Lemieux to form the league's biggest one-two scoring threat since Wayne Gretzky and Jari Kurri on the Edmonton Oilers of the 1980s. Mark Recchi arrived from the minors, Bryan Trottiersigned on as a free agent, and Joe Mullen, Larry Murphy, Ron Francis, and Ulf Samuelsson landed in Pittsburgh via trades. The Penguins finally became the league's best team, defeating the Minnesota North Starsin the Stanley Cup finals in six games. After the 1991 Stanley Cup Finals, the Penguins visited the White House to meet President George H. W. Bush. They were the first NHL team to ever visit the White House.[6] The following season, the team lost coach Bob Johnson to cancer, and Scotty Bowman took over as coach. Under Bowman, they swept the Chicago Blackhawks to repeat as Stanley Cup champions in1991–92.

Cancer nearly dealt the Penguins a double whammy in 1993. Not only were they reeling from Johnson's death, but Lemieux was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. Only two months after the diagnosis, his comeback was one of the league's great "feel-good" stories of all time, missing 24 out of 84 games, but winning his fourth Art Ross Trophy as scoring champion with 160 points scored, edging out Pat LaFontaineand Adam Oates for the award. Despite the off-ice difficulties, Pittsburgh finished with a 56–21–7 record, winning the franchise's first (and still only) Presidents' Trophy as the team with the most points in the regular season; the 119 points earned that year is still a franchise record. After Lemieux's return, the team played better than it ever had before, winning an NHL-record 17 consecutive games before tying the New Jersey Devils in the final game of the season. Despite all of this success, they were still eliminated in the second round by the New York Islanders in overtime of Game 7.



The first Penguins Stanley Cup banner.

The Penguins continued to be a formidable team throughout the 1990s. The stars of the Stanley Cup years were followed by the likes of forwards Alexei Kovalev, Martin Straka, Aleksey Morozov, Robert Lang and Petr Nedved, and defensemen Sergei Zubov, Darius Kasparaitis and Kevin Hatcher. The Pens would use this talent to reach the first round of the playoffs in 1994, the second round in 1995 and in 1996 take the Florida Panthers to seven games in the conference finals to determine who would advance to the Stanley Cup Finals.

1997 saw the franchise's playoff success continue but with a five-game first round exit to their cross-state rivals the Philadelphia Flyers and Mario Lemieux's announced retirement. Because of Lemieux's achievements over the course of his career, the Hockey Hall of Fame waived its three-year waiting period and inducted him as an Honored Member in the same year he retired. The captaincy was passed to Jagr and for the next 4 seasons, Jagr won 4 consecutive Art Ross Trophies. However, the Penguins were unable to match Jagr's individual success with a sustained playoff appearance, with a first round exit in 1998 despite being the second seeded team in the east followed by a second round exit in 1999 this time from eighth seed. In 2000 the Penguins stunned the highly touted Washington Capitals 4–1 in the first round only to fall to Philadelphia 4–2 in the second round.

Mario Lemieux shocked the hockey world by deciding to come back as a player on December 27, 2000, having gained a stake in ownership of the franchise in 1999, becoming the first player–owner in NHL history. Lemieux helped lead the Penguins deep into the 2001 playoffs, highlighted by an overtime victory against the Buffalo Sabres in Game 7 of the second round. Kasparaitis scored the series-clinching goal to

advance the Penguins to the Eastern Conference Finals, where they lost in 5 games to the New Jersey Devils. No one realized at the time but it would be an end of an era.

[edit]2002–2006: Economic pressures, new leaders and a playoff drought

To understand the fall that began in the 2001–02 season it is important to understand the back office dramas of the seasons preceding it. Even in the glow of late 1990s playoff runs, the Penguins were in the midst of a battle for their survival. Their free-spending ways under a two groups of owners in the 1990s came with a price; ownersHoward Baldwin and Morris Belzberg (who bought the Penguins after their first Cup win) had asked the players to defer their salaries. When they finally came due, combined with other financial pressures, the Penguins were forced to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in November 1998. Mario Lemieux was the biggest creditor owed and devised a way to save the franchise and his salary, he would convert the $30 million outstanding to equity and buy into the team's ownership (teaming with supermarket magnate Ronald Burkle to complete the purchase), saving the franchise on the eve of the 1999–2000 season.

This financial save by Lemieux only bought time, the Penguins still needed to cut costs, especially now that the huge salary of Lemieux had been added. Controversially, Jagr, their stalwart for the last four years, was traded to the Washington Capitals along with Frantisek Kucera for prospects Kris Beech, Michal Sivek, and Ross Lupaschuk, and $4.9 million in the summer of 2001. The absence of Jagr proved devastating to the Penguins, and in 2002 they missed the playoffs for the first time in 12 years. Further financial difficulties saw them trade fan favorite Alexei Kovalev to the New York Rangers the next season, quickly followed by the departure of Lang in free agency. The Penguins slumped in the standings finishing tied for third-to-last in the conference in 2001–02, second-to-last in 2002–03 and finally last in the Eastern Conference in 2003–04.

In the 2003 NHL Entry Draft, the Penguins picked with their first-overall selection goaltender Marc-André Fleury. However, given that the 2004 Draft contained the likes of Alexander Ovechkin, the 2003–04 was expected to be a rebuilding year for the Penguins. The highly rated Fleury did not play most of the season for the Penguins for this reason. The Penguins signed new head coach (and former Penguin and commentator) Eddie Olczyk. Lemieux suffered a hip injury early in the season, and he sat out the rest of the season to recover. The Pens then traded Straka away to the Los Angeles Kings. The Penguins finished with the worst NHL record having won just 23 games, but were unable to secure the first overall draft pick as they lost the draft lottery for the 2004 NHL Entry Draft to the Washington Capitals. Alexander Ovechkinwent to Washington, but the Penguins did select Evgeni Malkin with the second overall pick, a pick that would help to propel them back to a competitive level in future years.

The Penguins have suffered small-market syndrome for most of their existence, and cost-cutting prevented another collapse into insolvency. Financially, the team was one of the better-managed NHL

franchises between its 1998 bankruptcy and the 2004–05 NHL lockout. Thanks to significant post-season runs, the Penguins broke even in 2000 and turned a small profit in 2001. Failure to make the playoffs in the next three seasons hurt the team's bottom line, but the shedding of contracts (such as Jaromir Jagr and Martin Straka) kept the team afloat as other franchises, like the Ottawa Senators, faced significant losses or declared bankruptcy. In the 2003–04 season, they had the lowest average attendance of any team, with just 11,877 fans per game.

However, by 2005, the Penguins had paid off all of their creditors, both secured and unsecured. In fact, the court approved Lemieux's plan largely because it was intended to pay everyone the team owed.

With the 2004–05 NHL season canceled due to the NHL lockout, several Penguins signed with the club's American Hockey League affiliate Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins, while experienced players like Aleksey Morozov and Milan Kraft honed their talents in the elite European leagues. Morozov and Kraft would stay in the elite European leagues after the 2004–05 NHL lockout.

The Penguins won an unprecedented draft lottery – where owing to their poor performance over the last few seasons they were given highest possible weighting out of all thirty teams – on July 22, 2005, for the 2005 NHL Entry Draft. The Penguins chose highly touted junior league player Sidney Crosby from the Rimouski Océanic of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League.

With a new Collective Bargaining Agreement signed by the owners and players to end the 2004–05 NHL lockout, the Penguins began rebuilding the team under a salary cap. They signed big-name free agentsSergei Gonchar, John LeClair, and Zigmund Palffy, and traded for goaltender Jocelyn Thibault. However, Evgeni Malkin, the Penguins' 2004 NHL Entry Draft selection with their 2nd overall pick, could not come to Pittsburgh immediately due to a dispute with his Russian league.

The team began the season with a long winless skid that resulted in a coaching change from Olczyk to Michel Therrien. Palffy announced his retirement due to a lingering shoulder injury while the team's second-leading scorer. Then on January 24, 2006, Lemieux announced his second retirement, this time for good, after developing an irregular heart beat. He finished as the NHL's seventh all-time scorer (1,723), eighth in goals (690) and tenth in assists (1,033), but also with the second highest career points per game average (1.88), which is second to Wayne Gretzky's 1.92.[7][8][9]

As the poor season continued, Crosby had a highly productive rookie season. On the Penguins' final game of the season, Crosby scored a goal and an assist to become the top scoring rookie in Penguins history with 102 points (eclipsing Lemieux who previously held the record), despite losing the rookie scoring race to Russian superstar Alexander Ovechkin, who had, unlike Malkin who was also set to debut this season, been able to make his way to the NHL. The Penguins posted the worst record of the Eastern Conference and the highest goals-against in the league. They received the second overall draft pick after losing the lottery in the 2006 NHL Draft and picked Jordan Staal, the third of four Staal brothers in

hockey. The team announced on April 20 that the contract for General Manager Craig Patrick would not be renewed. Patrick had been GM since December 1989. On May 25, Ray Shero signed a five-year contract as General Manager.

[edit]2006–present: Playoff streak and Cup finals

A real change for the Penguins came on October 18, 2006, young Russian superstar Evgeni Malkin played his first NHL game : scoring a goal. He went on to set the modern NHL record with a goal in each of his first six games. On February 27, 2007, the Penguins acquired Gary Roberts from Florida and Georges Laraque from Phoenix. Malkin continued scoring points as the Penguins earned points in sixteen straight games with 14 wins and 2 overtime losses in early 2007. The streak ended on February 19 with a last-minute loss to the New York Islanders.[10] It was the second longest point streak in club history.

The Pittsburgh Penguins have had to deal with a number of threats to relocate. As early as the mid-1970s, with the Penguins struggling to make the playoffs, the ownership group experienced cash flow issues and sought to sell the team, even if it meant relocation. A decade later, a similar financial situation faced the team. As recently as the 2006–07 season, nearing the end of their most recent draft rebuild, the franchise ownership sought alternatives that would provide a return on their investment. Various prospective owners sought to buy the team; however, the Lemieux Group eventually decided to keep ownership rather than move the team to the highest bidder, thus resulting in the Penguins being set to remain in Pittsburgh. As in the mid-70s and 80s, the fanbase and local government officials were successful in persuading the ownership that Pittsburgh and the surrounding region were capable of meeting the needs of a modern NHL team. The possible relocation sites about which there was the greatest speculation and discussion wereHouston, Kansas City, Oklahoma City and Hamilton, Ontario. The decision to keep the team in Pittsburgh proved favorable, as the Penguins enjoyed franchise-record home sellouts throughout the 2007–08 NHL season and 2008 Stanley Cup playoffs – which were more successful given the presence of young superstar Evgeni Malkin – in some cases, their home playoff games were sold out in less than 15 minutes.[11][12]

On March 13, 2007, in a joint announcement by Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato, Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl, and Mario Lemieux of the Pittsburgh Penguins ownership group, it was made public that an agreement had been reached between the parties. A new state-of-the-art multi-purpose arena, the Consol Energy Center, will be built, guaranteeing that the Penguins will remain in Pittsburgh. Following the announcement of this plan, the Lemieux ownership group announced that they no longer have plans to sell the team.

On June 8, 2007, a $325 million bond was issued and the Penguins signed a 30-year lease, binding the Penguins to the city of Pittsburgh for the next 30 years, and the lease agreement was signed on

September 19. On May 6, 2008, the Pittsburgh planning commission unanimously approved the final design. The arena will include a glass atrium overlooking downtown Pittsburgh and rooftop lights shining into the sky. The new $290 million dollar arena is expected to open in time for the 2010–11 NHL season.[13] On August 14, 2008, the ground breaking ceremony for the new arena was held, thus officially beginning construction on the new facility. On December 15, 2008, it was announced by the Penguins they had entered into an agreement with Consol Energy on a 21 year deal for naming rights to the new arena.

The Penguins finished the 2006–07 season in fifth place in the Eastern Conference with a record of 47–24–11, totaling 105 points, only two points behind the division winner, New Jersey Devils. It was the franchise's first 100-point season in 11 years, and represented a healthy 47-point leap from the previous season. In the first round of the 2007 Stanley Cup playoffs, the Penguins were defeated 4–1, by Stanley Cup runners-up, the Ottawa Senators. At the season's end, rookies Evgeni Malkin and Jordan Staal were finalists for the Calder Memorial Trophy, awarded to the Rookie of the Year, which Malkin won.

After a mediocre start to the 2007–08 season, Crosby and starting goaltender Fleury were both injured long-term due to high right ankle sprains. In their absence, the Penguins flourished due to the play and leadership of center Evgeni Malkin and backup goaltender Ty Conklin. The Penguins markedly improved in January, and fell no lower than the third seed in the East from that point onward. On February 26, the Penguins would acquire Atlanta star right winger Marian Hossa and forward Pascal Dupuis at the NHL trade deadline, relinquishing Colby Armstrong, Erik Christensen, Angelo Esposito, and a first round pick in the2008 NHL Entry Draft. The Penguins also acquired defensemen Hal Gill from the Toronto Maple Leafs for a second round pick in the 2008 NHL Entry Draft and a fifth round pick in the 2009 NHL Entry Draft.

On April 2, 2008, the Penguins clinched the Atlantic Division title—their first division title in 10 years—with a 4–2 win against rivals the Philadelphia Flyers. However, they closed the season with a loss to the Flyers on the next night, relegating them to the second seed in the East behind the Montreal Canadiens. The Pens had spent most of the second half going back and forth with the Habs for first place in the East. Evgeni Malkin finished the season with 106 points for second place in the league just behind Washington's Alexander Ovechkin and become a finalist for the Hart Memorial Trophy. The team launched into their first extended playoff run in many years, beating Ottawa 4–0, defeating the New York Rangers 4–1 and then defeating the Philadelphia Flyers 4–1 to clinch the Prince of Wales Trophy. Pittsburgh went on to lose the2008 Stanley Cup Finals to the Detroit Red Wings in six games, finishing the playoffs with a 14–6 record. Sidney Crosby finished the playoffs with 27 points (6g, 21a in 20 games), tying Conn Smythe-winner Henrik Zetterberg (13g, 14a in 22 games) for the playoff scoring lead.

[edit]2008–09 season: Third Stanley Cup

Main article: 2008–09 Pittsburgh Penguins season

In the 2008–09 season, Malkin had won the Art Ross by narrowly defeating rival Ovechkin in the points race and a candidate for the Hart Memorial Trophy for MVP. Crosby finished third in league scoring with 33 goals and 70 assists for 103 points despite missing 5 games. The Penguins' record dipped mid-season but lifted after head coach Michel Therrien was replaced by Dan Bylsma and defenseman Sergei Gonchar returned from injury. The effect was almost instantaneous and the Penguins recovered enough to secure home ice advantage in their first round matchup against the Philadelphia Flyers, who the Penguins defeated in six games. The next round was highly publicized due to the presence of Crosby, Ovechkin, and Malkin. The series took all seven games for the Penguins to win, sending them to the Eastern Conference Finals where they beat the Carolina Hurricanes in four games. After defeating the Hurricanes, the Penguins earned their second consecutive trip to the Stanley Cup Finals against the Detroit Red Wings, to whom they had lost the previous year. After losing Games 1 and 2 in Detroit, the Penguins won Games 3 and 4 in Pittsburgh. Each team won on home ice in Games 5 and 6. In Game 7 in Detroit, Max Talbot scored two goals and the Penguins won 2–1 to earn their third Stanley Cup.[14]