

Gretzky just looking to play a part

By THOMAS CULLEN

Before Wayne Gretzky went out of the lineup with a herniated disc, the Rangers were 23-28-7 and seemingly out of the playoff hunt. In the Great One's absence the Blueshirts have turned it around, going 6-2-2 and having the final post-season spot in their sights.

Frustrating for Gretzky? You bet it is. No, not the fact that the Rangers are playing so well in his absence, it's disappointing that he's not part of it.

"I hate not playing, that's the frustrating part," Gretzky said yesterday at Rye. "We have a great group of guys here, and our leadership is really good, guys like Adam [Graves] and Michael [Richter] and Brian [Leetch], they really make sure that each and every guy is part of this team."

A team that right now doesn't include the greatest player ever to lace up the skates, on the ice or the practice rink, with no set date for his return.

Up until Monday, Gretzky couldn't move his head to the right because of blockage in his neck. The blockage started to break after doctors gave him an injection last week. On Monday, Gretzky actually felt it starting to ease up and he was finally able to move to his neck left and right. The injection is intended to clear up the inflammation around the disc and over time the disc will set back into place.

This Monday Gretzky will see



WAYNE GRETZKY
Reassessed Monday.

his doctor, to get reassessed, and is looking for the green light to start skating harder. This is not the type of injury where if you feel 80 percent you can come back, for fear of doing permanent damage.

"From now until Monday when I meet the doctor, I'm kind of on my own as far as riding the bike and skating lightly," said Gretzky who has been following his team's progress from Box 1066 in the Garden. "[I'm] at a point where I can kind of start working out on my own, doing things that have

some kind of physical exertion that I haven't been able to do the past three weeks."

As for the Blueshirts success in his absence, Gretzky had nothing but praise for his teammates and the way they have taken it to the next level.

"It's a nicer feeling that you don't have to race and come back too early and be of no benefit to yourself or the team. I'm proud of the guys they have all worked extremely hard and they should be proud of what they have accomplished."

As for his future and the rest of this season, Gretzky is doing the only thing he can at this point which is following doctors orders. "I've found over my twenty years in this league that they [doctors] seem to know what they're talking about," said The Great One, who in the past six years prior to this injury, had only missed three games. "If you follow their direction that things will work out and that is the attitude I've taken."

The Rangers did not practice yesterday. John Muckler cited the nice weather for the day off, to give his players a break from the daily routine.

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