

Third Man In

Not So Savvy

We can't tell you how ace it is to have Chris Block from Third Man In in tonight's issue. For those who might now know, Third Man In is the best Hawks blog going. If there's anything you ever wanted to know about the West Side Hockey Club, go there (www.thirdmanin.com)

Since I was a little kid nestled in my first balcony Stadium seat, I reserved a special place in my hockey-loving heart for Denis Savard, the mustachioed French Canadian who once lifted 17,300-plus equally as freakishly-facially haired Chicagoans with dazzling speed and pond hockey antics, to the brink of almost-greatness consistently during the mid-80's.

He's the same guy who was sacrificed in 1990 for the enhancement of the on-ice product and then returned for an immeasurable, astonishing playoff run five years later. Awarded the opportunity by Bill Wirtz to be a Blackhawk for life, Savard quickly accepted an assistant coaching position he was both unworthy and not fit for five months following his retirement in 1997.

And so it began. A long-running dialogue between hardcore Hawk fans that challenged their loyalty to a man they so-highly regarded, at times bordering that regard with contempt.

We wanted to believe Savard was putting his heart and soul into a second hockey career behind the bench and wasn't just collecting a paycheck to support his lifestyle. This wasn't a man easily despised. We figured he was too dumb to trick us. After all, he was a Blackhawk through and through. That's why we maintain such a high level of affection for the man.

But Savior Faire no longer resides in such a place with me.

Twice now this franchise has told Savard he's not good enough to win a championship with. First it was Mike Keenan who couldn't wait to get rid of Savard in 1990 when he sent him to Montreal for Chris Chelios. For most fans it was a harsh veracity in the ever-changing landscape of pro sport. Still, while it stung to see him go, most knew it was for the best.

Now, we have similar feelings.

Wednesday night, November 12th was host to a special moment, unplanned and reserved for only the most-revered professional athletes. On a night when fans gathered in appreciation of Hall of Famer Pierre Pilote and the late Keith Magnuson, it was Savard who was the recipient.

In his first public appearance since the October 16th firing, Savard gathered with other Blackhawk honorees Stan Mikita, Bobby Hull and Tony Esposito at center ice to welcome Pilote and the Magnuson family in their special club. Evident from the moment he stepped onto the ice, the crowd was ready to erupt for Savvy and when his name was announced, they did just that. Players too. A long, sustained ovation brimming with both admiration and pity.

Blackhawks' fans knew Savard had been wronged. In the first glimpse of disdain for this new era in Hawks' management, those same fans understood the reason; John McDonough takes you for a bunch of simpletons.

McDonough felt he couldn't enact Savvy's axing until he had reasonable cause to purvey to the hockey populous. In his mind he couldn't simply do what was right for his business and worried what the returning fan base would think of such a thing.

Savard is simply a harmless, chain smoking twit whose as huggable as Mickey Mouse and as dangerous as Adam Burish's wrist shot. He's a caricature of a man, quirky enough to warrant adaptation into cartoon form and now John McDonough plans to do just that.

McDonough knew Savard wasn't good enough to lead the Hawks to greatness (well, Scotty told him), just as Keenan discovered in the late 80's, and realized Savard's worth in the long run tripled in value as long as

he disassociate Savvy with the on ice product.

But Savvy wasn't treated like a man. He was lied to, deceived and taken advantage of. His fate was sealed the day Scotty Bowman was hired. No matter what the Hawks tell you, Savard was fired before this team ever got to training camp. This was Bowman's first act as senior advisor and it was intensely swift behind the scenes.

Joel Quenneville was brought on board as a professional scout over the summer, just as mysteriously as Marc Bergevin sold his San Diego home before training camp and moved to Chicago. I suppose because the winter's are nicer here.

Mike Keenan spent two years building a case to convince Bill Wirtz and Bob Pulford his team couldn't win with Savvy. Scotty Bowman had Rocky and John after one lunch.

Savard's willingness to accept this franchise's rejection is troublesome. He took the demotion like a scolded child. He whined a bit, stood defiantly when the Hawks weren't looking but ultimately did exactly as they asked. McDonough repeatedly said he wished Savard would forgo coaching and stay on board in a different capacity.

An athlete's allegiance to one franchise in this era is refreshing and honorable, but Savard is no longer an athlete. He's a professional, a professional coach. Or at least we thought he was. Unfortunately, he was the fraud we feared he was all along.

A real coach would've dusted himself off and gotten right back on the horse. (Or found an analyst job on television) But that's just the problem, Savvy never was a real coach. He just had some of us fooled.

Savard will be McDonough's west side version of Ernie Banks. Waiting in the wings while today's 'Mr. Hawk' Bobby Hull treads one step closer to his ever-impending death, Savard will soon be front and center as the Blackhawks lovable-loser, tagging along with the Ice Crew to every team function and corporate sponsor kowtow to glad hand, smile and nod to the tune of a lucrative, six-figure per ambassador deal.

Was McDonough right to fire Savard? You bet he was.

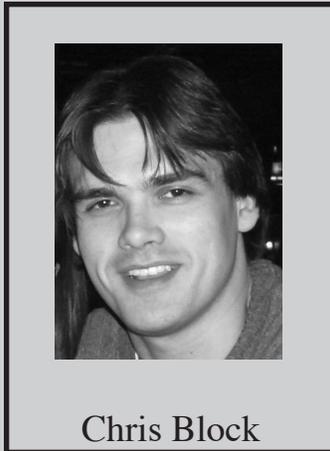
Did he go about it the correct way? Certainly not. The right time was over the summer when the organization originally came to the decision, but McDonough's a marketing man, not a ballsy decision maker.

So, why all this scorn for a man once one of my hockey heroes?

On the day he was fired Savard had an opportunity to prove all the naysayers wrong, and not just McDonough and Bowman. Coming off a season in which he led the Hawks through a seventeen point improvement and just three shy of a playoff birth but failed to receive a single vote (not first, second or third) for the Jack Adams trophy, the Hawks front office weren't the only people divided on Savvy's worth. Yet, he had what every organization looks for in a new head coach, recent success. Also, by all accounts, his players loved playing for him. Savard wouldn't have been on the sidelines long. He probably would have had to take another assistant's spot or lead in the AHL, but the point is work would have found him.

I still wanted to believe in him. One more time. A man I was too big and clumsy to spin 280 degrees into a backhand roof shot Saturday afternoons at the park district rink, but surely thought had as much pride as I would've if put in the position he was this past October. I guess not.

Savard will continue to be what he's been every day since retiring a Blackhawk in 1997; a company stooge. It's all he knows. But hey, he's committed.



Chris Block