

Block Party

Looking Ahead, And Back

It's that time of year. College basketball's season is mere days from its apex, baseball parks around the country are about to host this year's first pitch, football fans are pontificating as if they were experts over collegiate stars they've most likely never seen play and the National Hockey League is about to host another two months of arguably the most exciting and intense sporting events of the year, that of course no one will pay attention to - the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Wait a minute. Did I just say playoffs? We're just 12 days now from the start of the NHL's 'real' season. And for the first time in seven years, the Chicago Blackhawks will participate.

Yes, the Blackhawks, a historic and symbolic patriarch of the 91-year hockey association have been absent from Sir Stanley's spring struggle since 2002 and competed in just once in the last TWELVE YEARS. The same Blackhawks, until 1997, who earned the NHL's second-best longevity streak by qualifying for postseason in 28 consecutive seasons (1970-97), one less than the Boston Bruins' all-time mark of 29 (1968-96). Of course Boston won two Stanley Cups during their run. The Hawks made the Finals three times (71, 73 and 92), losing to the Canadiens twice in hard-fought match ups and getting swept by Pittsburgh in a series that was closer than the record book would indicate.

Recent events have exhibited this group of young Hawks may not only lack the experience necessary to put up a strong fight against the league's best post-82, but March's spring-swoon followed by losses to Vancouver and Montreal this week solidified many observers concerns suggesting the Blackhawks simply don't have the tools needed endure a climactic postseason run.

In reality, this year's team resembles the 2002 Blackhawks in many ways. Soft on the outside and suspect up the middle. A defensive-six who can be spectacular tonight and outright pathetic the next and a goaltender(s) with better than respectable numbers, yet you can't ever seem to store your faith in.

The Chicago teams of the early to mid nineties had the flair, swagger and balance needed to strike fear in opponents and brew believers amongst the masses. This group of Hawks is headed is winding this season down exhibiting none of those characteristics.

The 1990-91 President's Trophy winning Blackhawks were destined to meet either Boston or Pittsburgh for NHL supremacy seemingly from the start of the New Year, but a plague of boneheaded selfishness struck the Hawks' locker room as their first round series with the Minnesota North Stars began and Jon Casey bloomed into Jacques Plante just in time to send the Hawks and their inflated egos home after a brief six-game showing.

A year later head coach Mike Keenan waged a war with his squad and turned over 11 positions, bringing in veteran workhorses Steve Smith and Brent Sutter as well as young defenders Igor Kravchuk and Bryan Marchment, and 'do-a-little-of-everything' winger Stephane Matteau in meticulously, but brilliantly, building a team poised to steamroll through postseason. But we all know how that ended. Keenan also rode a 21-year old Jeremy Roenick to his first 50-goal season and Chris Chelios elevated expectations of every one of his successors to date in his own imitable do-it-all, and at the highest-level, brand of defensive hockey.

1995's Blackhawks were arguably the best of all the 90's Hawk teams, but a knee-on-knee collision with Derian Hatcher on Sunday April 2nd at the UC cut Jeremy Roenick's regular season short and when he returned three months early from a torn ACL for game two of round two against the Canucks, he was a fraction of the player we'd know. Ultimately however the stacked Red Wings were much too much for the Hawks to withstand in the Conference Finals and it signaled the beginning of the end of a fun, yet brief Chelios-Belfour-Roenick era on West Madison.

Since then Chicago has seen one star, newly-beloved or accepted face after another leave on uncompromising terms. And with each exit, from Roenick to Belfour to Chelios to Amonte and even Nicholls or Sullivan, the Blackhawks have drifted farther and farther from relevancy, let alone a chance to sip from Lord Stanley's chalice.

But now by the grace of this franchise's decade-long futility or simply happenstance (honestly it's probably a good mixture of both), the Blackhawks are back in the mix. Exactly what "mix" they're in or how they'll fair three weeks from now is honestly anyone's guess.

Questions are rich and abundant. Will either Cristobal Huet or Nikolai Khabibulin have the ability, or the stones, to stand up and rip the starter's job from the other in time for it to matter? Is soon-to-be 21 year old Jonathan Toews ready to carry a team on his back in his first professional postseason? Does Patrick Kane still play for the Blackhawks? When the puck drops, will Patrick Sharp be interested? Is everyone's defensive darling D-Keith in a slump or are his skills appraising in a galley of reality as game's tighten and the spotlight intensifies? What purpose does Adam

Burish serve? Can Dustin Byfuglien put the fork and bottle down long enough to serve sixty minutes of consistent, determined effort? And will Coach Quenneville go forth with this team's high-tempo, attack brand of hockey or will he pull in the reigns and handcuff his offense for the sake of 'playoff hockey'?

Ill-fated contracts to players like Byfuglien, Huet and Brent Sopel prohibited GM Dale Tallon from juicing his team at the trade deadline. A fault of his own, one that could cost him his job if this team gets embarrassed in the first round, Tallon has no one to blame but himself in that regard.

However, this team should be plenty capable of beating anyone in the Western Conference aside from San Jose or Detroit. Their fate will be decided on a mixture of three factors; will, coaching and leadership.

The Hawks best players must be their best players. Period. It's not Dale Tallon's fault if Patrick Sharp stands around waiting for the puck to hit his stick for five or six games in the first round. Ditto if Campbell and Keith continue their turn-over zombie ways. It's time for Barker, Keith and Campbell to stop acting like Karpovstev, Spacek and Housley. Time for Khabibulin or Huet to elevate their game above that of T-Bo. And if Patrick Kane doesn't wake up and stop feeling sorry for himself sometime over the next week, he'll be as much to blame as anyone.

These next six regular season games are the utmost of importance. For if the Blackhawks lose home ice in the opening round, no matter the opponent, their talons will be cooked.

Playoff hockey sure is a must-see, and a long-time coming in this city. But be on the safe side and secure your place for home game A or B, or it could be 'wait till next year' time on the West Side.

I'll leave you with some "last times".....

Last Blackhawks' playoff series: 2002 Conference Quarter's (vs. St.

Louis 1-4)

Last Blackhawks' series victory: 1996 Conference Quarter's (vs. Calgary 4-0)

Blackhawks' single-game playoff victory: Game 1, 4/18/2002 at St. Louis (2-1).

A Blackhawks scored a playoff goal: Steve Sullivan, Game 5, Conference Quarter's, 4/25/2002 at St. Louis (3-5 Loss)

Blackhawk scored a playoff goal at United Center: Tony Amonte (SHG) 1997, Game 6 of Conference Quarter's vs. Colorado (3-6). That goal gave the Hawks a 3-0 in the first period. Of course the Avs blasted Chicago and Jeff Hackett with six unanswered and ousted the Hawks from the playoffs.

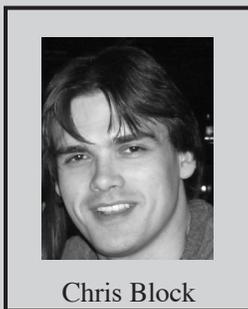
Blackhawk goaltender to win a playoff game: Jocelyn Thibault (34 saves) 4/18/2002 in game 1 at St. Louis. Thibault got yanked after he bumbled a puck he was attempting to pass to Phil Housley in game 3 at United Center, as Scott Young took the puck away from T-Bo and wrapped it around into any empty net. Steve Passmore would play the final seven periods of the series, allowing six goals.

Blackhawk goaltender records playoff shutout: Ed Belfour, 4/19/1996, Conference Quarter's vs. Calgary. Belfour owns the last three Hawks' playoff shutouts.

Blackhawk to score a hat-trick in the postseason: Gary Suter, "Rock Your House" 04/24/1994 vs. Toronto. Jeremy Roenick's overtime goal (the last Hawks' goal scored at Chicago Stadium) would give Chicago the victory and tie that series 2-2. Tony Amonte, in his second month as a Blackhawk, scored 4x on the Leafs the night before. The year prior, Brian Noonan scored all three Hawks' goals in Game 1 of the '93 opening round series at Chicago Stadium against the Blues. Noonan had a knack for killing the Blues.

Blackhawks' postseason overtime game: 4/20/1997, United Center vs. Colorado - Sergei Krivokrasov beats Patrick Roy at 11:03 of second overtime to score Hawks' first win of that series. Chicago would win and send the Avs home two nights later with a series tied 2-2 only to get blown away 7-0 in game five and 6-3 back at the UC for game six.

Chris runs the incomparable [The Third Man In \(thethirdmanin.com\)](http://thethirdmanin.com), the most info-filled Hawks blog, and [Puck Chatter \(puckchatter.blogspot.com\)](http://PuckChatter(puckchatter.blogspot.com)) his league-wide blog. You can find him at thethirdmanin@sbcglobal.net



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