

Block Party

At Some Point, This Shall Not Pass

Redefining the brand that is the Chicago Blackhawks so far has gone more swift or smooth than anyone could've ever imagined. But rougher waters remain ahead and key decisions on highly-touted prospects and their easily-detectable imperfections are, in some cases, only months away.

To date, the following passages may quickly be discerned as rookie mistakes or crossing the learning curve. However, warning signs are clear and evident. Dale Tallon has drafted several players of questionable character during his tenure as Blackhawks' GM and those individuals' arrivals are on the immediate horizon.

One prospect at the forefront of those concerns is Akim Aliu, who we'll pertinently deem "The Nigerian Nightmare." A fearsome force on the ice, Aliu was born in Okene, Nigeria on April 24, 1989 but was raised until the age of eleven in Ukraine, where his mother hailed and father was an athlete. By 12, Aliu and his family moved to the Toronto area. Until then, Aliu did not know the sport of hockey existed. By the age of 16, he played on elite midget teams in Toronto and was a teammate of future Edmonton Oilers' 2007 1st round pick Sam Gagner. And in four short years, he'd become one of Canada's hottest young prospects.

Aliu's junior hockey career began in Windsor as a 16-year old rookie in the Ontario Hockey League. But his stay there would be short after a rookie hazing incident orchestrated by team veterans, including current NHL agitator Steve Downie, befell a major team blow up.

On a bus ride back from Sept. 9, 2005 preseason game in London, Ontario, Downie and other vets ordered the rookies (reportedly six or seven), including Aliu, to strip nude and cram into the rear bus bathroom, which was the equivalent in size of an airplane laboratory. Aliu refused, as he did for any subsequent rookie 'initiation' rituals. In some eyes, Aliu's actions were seen as insubordination. Others saw a young man steadfastly guarding his morals.

Tensions between Aliu and Downie escalated to a boiling point later that month when the two exchange words during a practice leading to Downie charging Aliu from the bench and cross-checking the rookie in the mouth, chipping three of Aliu's teeth. Aliu received brief treatment before returning to the practice and challenging Downie to a fight. The two brawled and both suspended by the team. Downie never played for Windsor again and Aliu was eventually traded to his second OHL team, Sudbury, and his second of four stops in four OHL seasons.

Perhaps the lingering stain on Aliu's reputation in Windsor was his father Tai's accusation that his son's teammates frequently threw racial slurs in the younger Aliu's direction, including allegedly referring to him as "8 Ball." After another OHL investigation, those accusations were dismissed.

But Aliu has created his own troubles as well. He's walked out on coaches on multiple occasions and has been sent home for team disciplinary reasons more times than even Antonio Alfonseca's hand can signal.

This spring Aliu was sent away from the London Knights' preseason camp to "get his head straight." After an impressive summer rookie camp in Chicago, where Aliu arguably turned in the Hawks' best performances, Aliu too believed his own hype. As he told the Canadian Press in August, "Hopefully my junior career is over."

Knights' head coach, and former Washington Capitals' center, Dale Hunter was none too impressed with Aliu's effort in the ensuing OHL preseason camp, accusing Aliu of saving himself for upcoming Hawks' camp and half-assing drills. As a veteran entering his final season of junior eligibility, Hunter couldn't accept Aliu's behavior and dismissed him from London's camp and put Aliu on a plane to Chicago four days earlier than planned.

When Aliu's NHL camp was derailed by a groin injury, Aliu returned to London with mixed emotions and fought back and forth with Hunter. Things came to a head after the Christmas break when Aliu was unwilling to adhere to coach Hunter's rules and was again, for the third time in four months, sent home. Aliu was traded back to Sudbury two weeks later and recently finished his junior career there after a first round playoff loss to Belleville. Aliu was then assigned to Rockford by the Blackhawks. In two games he has seen limited time on the third line and has already been booted from a game for verbally abusing a referee.

Aliu is a tremendous prospect though with an amazing upside if he can allow himself to be led by the best teachers and compadres in the game. He's strong-willed and defiant, but now he's arrived to the pro-level and maybe he's ready to learn? Or will the Nightmare's reign be just that?

Kyle Beach however, for sure, is trouble in waiting. Kyle's on-ice behavior has observers and scouts split into two schools of thought. Either Beach is a childish, irrational egotist or a staunch believer in the Sean Avery-school of antagonism. Take your pick.

It's not like Beach is a bad kid. From all reports, he's a stand-up person in the dressing room, always available to the media and never avoids the tough questions.

He's a spotlight guy and relishes in being the focus of attention. There's nothing inherently wrong with that (unless you're someone who prefers your hockey players be the dumbed-down farmboy rednecks Hockey Canada unknowingly portrays them as) as long as his on-ice discretions don't get in the way of the team's goals. But in Beach's case, you can debate they have.

Arguably his most deplorable 2008-09 suspension (of three) played out near the end of a blowout loss at the Medicine Hat Tigers on Feb. 21. Beach (6'3 - 220), entering the play off a line change, snuck behind diminutive Tigers' center Brennan Bosch (5'7 - 169) and jumped the unsuspecting skill player, pummeling him with fists to the back and side of the head before wrestling him to the ground. It was a scene which could've easily been reminiscent of the infamous Todd Bertuzzi/Steve Moore episode (the right hand to the back of the head that ended Moore's career) had Bosch not seen Beach approaching in a split second's notice. Beach received a three-game suspension for his actions. A full-out line brawl ensued.

Beach started this season with his original junior team, Everett Silvertips.

He was traded to the Lethbridge Hurricanes on Jan. 6 as the 'Canes stacked up for a playoff drive. He didn't take long to make an impression.

In his first seven games with Lethbridge, Beach scored seven goals and three assists. The last of those seven though was the most notable; an empty-net shot that ignited a good 'ol teenage-line brawl. As Beach strode alone into, again, the Medicine Hat zone, he slowed down, turned towards the oncoming 'Hat checkers and eventually fired the puck into the empty Tigers' goal with more emphasis than was necessary. In response to this, a Medicine Hat player hurled his stick at Beach resulting in everyone on the ice converging into the space Beach had picked to celebrate. All gloves were dropped and each hammered his frustrations on the other. Beach was not suspended.

But three nights later karma caught up with the controversial centre. After the regulation clock timed out in a 5-3 loss at Red Deer, Beach erroneously fired a wicked slap shot over the glass and into the crowd, injuring a male fan. For that, he received a three-game suspension. Beach most recently was suspended for one playoff game for cross-checking Saskatoon Blades defenseman Jyri Niemi in the head on Mar. 20.

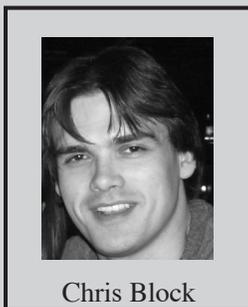
Bill Peters, now the head coach of Chicago's AHL affiliate Rockford Ice-Hogs, was fined last year by the WHL for being quoted as saying Beach was a "high maintenance guy" as well as saying Beach's on-ice behavior is simply "a charade" and "schtick." Peters was the head coach of the Spokane Chiefs, an intra-state rival of the Everett Silvertips (Beach's junior team up until this past January), at the time. Ironically, he may be more right than mistaken in his assessment.

2008 third-round draft pick Shawn Lalonde, a wiry slick-skating offensive defenseman, quit his junior team, the Belleville Bulls, for a day in late February after a dispute with his coach over how Lalonde, 18, felt he should be used. After the disagreement, Lalonde chose not to join his teammates for a bus trip to Brampton, and a first-place showdown game the next day, leaving an already injury-depleted Belleville group another player short for the all-important game. When Belleville returned home after the Brampton game, Lalonde met with his coach and agreed to return to the team with both sides suggesting he never "quit" the team.

Lalonde told the Belleville Intelligencer, "I looked at everyone of my teammates and told them I wouldn't do anything stupid like that again. I told them, that yes, I may be mad at [head coach George Burnett] sometimes but I can't take it personally and I have to move on."

2005 sixth-round draft selection and University of New Hampshire co-captain Joe Charlebois was ruled academically ineligible in January by the NCAA for the second half of his senior season. Charlebois, who turned 23 in February, is a right-shooting defensive defenseman who led all UNH Wildcats in plus/minus last season. For his 'efforts' Charlebois was rewarded with an amateur-tryout contract with Rockford in February and has appeared in eleven games so far, registering one assist, thirteen penalty minutes and an even plus/minus rating.

Don't dismiss these insubordinations and trials or think they're going unnoticed by those in the Hawks' front office with more pull than Dale Tallon. At some point, a message will be sent to these and all Blackhawks' prospects that behavior like those outlined above will not be tolerated. John McDonough's background is in promoting a fun, friendly environment both on and off the field of play. Aliu and Beach in particular skate in stark contrast to current flag bearers Messrs Kane and Toews. Their anticipated fall arrivals to the NHL club will test the Blackhawks' locker room chemistry, if not McD's patience.



Chris Block