

Block Party

How Could It Have Gone Any Better? Can It Get Much Better?

It's what Hawks fans should be asking themselves today. In a season in which the 8,000 or so who braved through the last ten years can only describe as a "bi-zarro season," the Blackhawks are on top of the NHL world. Attendance has shot up at an unfathomable rate. TV ratings and local awareness has reached all-time levels. The organization appears, at least most days, to be fan-friendly. Rocky Wirtz spends money, the team is young, talented, and healthy. And in theory, they have as much chance to drink from Lord Stanley's Cup as each of the other fifteen teams ticketed for postseason.

On the crust of this group's renaissance is an ever-improving foundation of young defense. As little as two seasons ago Duncan Keith was a mess. Now he's the most well-rounded Hawks' blue liner and has fans and league pundits wide jumping the gun touting him as a Norris Trophy finalist. Cam Barker gets better every game and is a season away from running the first power play unit. He already leads Hawks' d-men in points with the man-advantage. Ever since Drew Stafford's hit on Keith in mid-January, Brent Seabrook has been a monster. If this continues, together with Brian Campbell, the Hawks will boast one of, if not the, best top-4 defensive units in hockey a year from now.

Sure, Dale Tallon overpaid for Brian Campbell. Everyone knew he'd have to. The Hawks weren't the darlings of the NHL on July 1st and Campbell was the premier puck-moving backliner on the market, one the likes Chicago hasn't seen since Doug Wilson's perm patrolled the Stadium. Campbell's first season has been predictably inconsistent, as are most professional athletes trying to live up to a contract they themselves know is slightly ridiculous. He's sometimes unfairly criticized by paycheck-envious fans for not being able to do everything, when we knew when he arrived what he was, and what he isn't is Chris Chelios circa 1993. The day will come when Keith gets his big payday. And if it is with Chicago, his supporters will suddenly be spying for the things Keith doesn't do, instead of those he does.

A year later the Andrew Ladd-Tuomo Ruutu deal can be argued two ways. Undeniably, Ladd has brought a respectable and consistent two-way game. He's an anchor on the team's third line, and this year's most-reliable trio with Dave Bolland and Marty Havlat. But Ladd's ceiling on a great team is the third line. He's able to make cameos on the scoring lines, but doesn't have the scoring touch to exist there on a nightly basis. Best analogy when discussing his abilities is former Hawk Stephane Matteau. Not bad.

Ruutu, on the other hand, is flourishing on Carolina's top line, setting career marks in goals, assists and points (26-28-54). It's a spot he couldn't hold onto a year ago, returning from bouts with lingering ankle and groin injuries, Ruutu had enough trouble keeping his balance as he did providing scoring depth. He was miscast by thespian head coach Denis Savard and needed a change of scenery as much as the Hawks needed a two-way forward they could rely on. In that respect, the trade benefited all parties involved. Ruutu's has missed just three games this year and is finally developing into the player he was projected, though he'll never be what the Hawks shyly hyped him as, the next Peter Forsberg.

There shouldn't be much to complain about when the name Patrick Kane surfaces. Only 20, the kid is an unbelievable talent poised to be the face of USA Hockey for the next fifteen years. But in Year Two, his numbers are nearly identical to those of his rookie season. Kane's shooting more (though not of late), but that hasn't resulted in more goals. With Kane's big contract negotiations an offseason away, he enters the summer with one purpose: get stronger. If Kane can improve his pull-away quickness through endless leg workouts this summer he'll add twenty points to next season's stats easily. Thirty-five goals and ninety-five points will be a starting point.

Dale Tallon has had his ups and downs as head of the talent division. He showed little foresight last January when he locked up Brent Sopel for another three years and seven million. The veteran mulleted-one was clutch last year, but when he signed his extension he was also just three months removed from Detroit training camp without a contract. Too much money to give a guy who was going to get bumped out of the top four in the first year of his new deal by emerging youngster Cam Barker and UFA headliner Brian Campbell.

And Tallon must've had his keyboard-warrior cap on the day he decided to give restricted free agent Dustin Byfuglien 3 years and \$9 million. An unfathomable contract to a guy who had zero leverage to work with, Byfuglien will never get the benefit of the doubt nor have the desire to live up to the deal he signed.

Now Tallon enters an off season he's faced with the challenge of ridding himself of those mistakes. Further challenging, he'll somehow have to accomplish this feat without taking in any bad contracts. Yeah, are you thinking what I'm thinking? See you in September Big Buff, Soaps.

But Tallon's worst move of all was one some believe wasn't his to begin with. Just about everyone was left scratching their heads on July 1 when the Hawks announced, minutes after spending \$56.8M on Campbell, they'd also signed Cristobal

Huet to a 4-year deal that would pay him \$5.625M annually. All this while maintaining the \$6.75M Khabibulin was on board too. We'd learn a few days into training camp that was a lie. Tallon feverishly attempted to get rid of the Bulin Wall unsuccessfully and was forced to replicate his fictitious tale in lieu of failed trade attempts.

Nikolai Khabibulin responded by figuratively egging Tallon's house this entire season by beating out the big free agent signing for the starting job. Now, as the Hawks play the most important games of the season, the head coach has put his trust in Khabibulin, who will certainly walk away from Chicago this summer. Next year, Joel Quenneville will have to deal with rebuilding everyone's confidence in Huet, and Huet's as well.

On the other hand, Tallon has made his share of good moves. Avoiding a bad money deal with Jason Williams, who seems to play well only for the first couple months after he's traded to a new team, is near the top of that list. There were the obvious ones in dropping Koci, Zyuzin, Perreault and Kevyn Adams. He chose to move Rene Bourque to Calgary for a draft pick. No matter how well Bourque was playing there before he got hurt, he wasn't playing that way here and Bourque and Ladd essentially fill the same role. In Ladd, Tallon made the correct choice.

Wisely, he trimmed some fat at the trade deadline. Fans besieged Tallon with scorn upon James Wisniewski's one-way air voucher to Duckland. Wisniewski on his best day is a marginal depth defender. Not great in any category, barely good at anything, damaged goods, and not the 'team guy' most perceive him as. Tallon avoided an eventual arbitration battle with a big-headed 'Wiz', and what was almost certainly going to be another bad, unmovable contract. In turn he picked up a playoff-hardened veteran, underrated center icemen who excels in an area every center, save for the captain, flares; faceoffs. Good move.

For the first time in many years, the Hawks have eluded serious injuries. Brent Sopel's season-sidelining elbow surgery in hindsight was a blessing both on the ice and on the team's salary cap. Fans cringe every time Marty Havlat nears contact, but somehow he's skirted to obligatory shoulder injury and missed just one game this year. Keith was out four games after carelessly putting himself in a bad spot against the Sabres. Patrick Sharp has missed much of the last two months with leg injuries and Kane has played through pain, though that was a mistake, but other than that the team has been very fortunate.

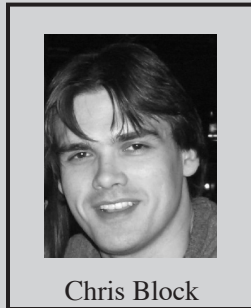
On the horizon is the organization's first foray into the NHL's second-season in exactly seven years. Considering negotiations with the team's best player, Havlat, still unsettled, and questions as to how much better this team will really be next year if it's without he and the '08-09 version of Nikolai Khabibulin, its not unreasonable to wonder if this really IS the Hawks' chance?

The Central is going to improve again next year. Columbus will be at least as good as the Hawks and probably better. Detroit will still be great. St. Louis is ready to take the next step and Nashville will be good enough to hang around, even if they don't get Alexander Radulov back. Chicago can't afford any missteps if they want to keep pace in what will be the league's best division.

Deeper concerns are in development. Rockford isn't the breeding ground it was thought of this time last year. Brouwer, Brent, Pelletier, Hendry, Dowell, Bickell and Berti won't help much. Blunden's gone and his replacement (Adam Pineault) is a bust. The Hawks will choose between Crawford and Niemi and let the other walk. There are no pipe-tending studs in waiting otherwise. Kyle Beach will step right in on the Bolland line next fall and the hope is Akim Aliu will be ready, too. Their presence will bring some much needed muscle and team toughness. It should also spell the end of Brouwer and Byfuglien. If Burish wants to stick, he'd better work on his faceoffs.

Havlat (at no more than \$5.5 a year), Barker, Bolland, Pahlsson, Eager and Versteeg! will all need new paper. Plans accordingly will be made for the following year when big money will be dished to Kane, Toews, and Keith. Though at least one of the latter two could be done by this summer's convention.

As magical as this season's been, next year is no guarantee. With a little luck and a 2004-like goal line stand from the Bulin-Wall, they could make a nice run. But will they be any closer to a Cup in September than they are now? Interesting question.



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