

Block Party

A Pair To Beat A Full House

So in the Blackhawk organization's latest installment of treating its fans like assholes, the team has recently swept another controversy under the rug. Good thing for them a rare playoff appearance has most everyone distracted.

A week and a half ago while on assignment playing for Hawks' AHL affiliate Rockford IceHogs, 2008 1st round pick, and noted trouble-maker, Kyle Beach along with his pal and highly-controversial 2007 2nd round pick Akim Aliu, managed to get themselves into an irresolute incident between games resulting in both being kicked off the team and sent home.

Officially neither the Blackhawks nor Rockford has commented on the issue much less specifics of the incident. The term 'embarrassing' has been thrown around. Both Aliu and Beach's bios were quickly removed from Rockford's web site and references to those players were avoided as much as possible during the IceHogs' playoff broadcasts, almost as if Beach and Aliu were never there to begin with. It was made clear they weren't welcome back this season. Ironically, Aliu was arguably the IceHogs' best player at the time of his departure. Both played in game one of Rockford's opening round series with Milwaukee (in which they were swept 4-0) before being dismissed from the team the following day.

In choosing to ignore the incident, the organization has left itself open to ridicule and afforded an avenue to fan bloggers and message board enthusiasts galore to bathe themselves in bombastic speculation. Everything from underage drinking to hooker-ing has been suggested. Both are unfounded and off-base.

Still, the Blackhawks should have avoided the rumor-mongers by simply addressing the issue, if only vaguely describing the altercation, detailing the effective course of action and moving on. Instead, and this decision obviously came directly from someone high on the totem pole, the team has chosen to keep the matter entirely internal, while going the 'no comment' route publicly. Thus the organization just had their two best prospects disappear from its pro-development squad overnight and everyone was left with no explanation, with only being aware the two "violated a team rule." Bad news is not news in the eyes of the Blackhawks apparently. Hawks fans deserve better.

Not everything has changed for the better on West Madison. These Blackhawks have some maturation to catch up on. And I'm not just speaking of Beach and Aliu.

On this week's HawkCast, a semi-regular audio program on the Blackhawks web site, web producer Adam Kempenaar and assistant GM Stan Bowman answered select fan questions and referenced both Aliu and Beach in a segment recorded this week while in Calgary, though both were under strict orders to not address the Rockford incident. Bowman referred to Beach as "a warrior-type player" and complimented Beach's intensity level while also noting he expected Beach to compete for a roster spot in training camp. Aliu was mentioned in passing later on as someone who just stepped into the AHL and played very well. But that was it.

This is a touchy situation for the Hawks since both Aliu and Beach have sordid pasts. From the day each was drafted, hockey operations have defended and stomached their behavior, trial after trial.

It's not the first time this year either have been in trouble. And it's not the first time this season Akim Aliu has been dismissed from his team for disciplinary reasons. Actually, it's the third time. And in this most-recent case, Aliu seems to be the one catching the most heat.

After high marks for a strong Hawks' rookie camp in July and signing his first professional contract with Chicago in late August, Aliu showed up at his junior team's training camp (London, Ontario) in early September treating practices like a joke. After loafing a drill, London Knights head coach and former NHLer Dale Hunter sent Aliu home. He returned after a few days and participated for only a few more before the Knights and Aliu decided it was best he traveled to Chicago early and not be apart of Knights' camp. Aliu bought into his own built-up hype and even told the London media "hopefully my junior career is over."

But Aliu's Chicago training camp didn't turn out as he planned and was a major disappointment for him personally, as a groin injury sidelined him and his chance to prove he was ready to make the jump to the pros. Subsequently he returned to junior a malcontent and managed only three games before earning a 5-game suspension for multiple incidents in an Oct. 30 game he was kicked out of at Windsor. Then, after the junior hockey Christmas break, Aliu was kicked off the London Knights for good after getting into an argument with coach Hunter. Aliu was traded to his old team, the Sudbury Wolves (where he also had trouble with his coach), two weeks later.

Dale Tallon was quoted early December in the London Free Press saying Aliu "has a good attitude now." That was a few weeks before being expelled from the Knights and traded to Sudbury.

Both Aliu and Beach have had a couple 'shape up' conversations with Blackhawks' management this year alone. Those apparently have fallen on deaf ears.

Remember, Jonathan Toews, the second-year team captain of the Blackhawks, was sentenced to a conditional 10-day jail term, 30 hours of community service and a \$425 fine just two years ago after a second violation for underage drinking while a student at North Dakota. Now he's turned out just fine. But he'll also become of legal drinking age this coming Wednesday, which also happens to be Jay Cutler's birthday. Look out State and Division.

Aliu aspires to be a power forward in the vein of Rick Nash, who Aliu's trained with during off seasons.

Truthfully, Aliu resembles Boston bruiser Milan Lucic arguably closer than any other prospect in hockey. He's a fast north-south skater, big, and tough as nails. But he's also strong-willed, stubborn, confrontational, at times full of himself, and Aliu also doesn't mind calling out teammates in the media.

Kyle Beach is a sucker for the spotlight, loves the camera and has a flare for flamboyancy. While it's Aliu you can expect to see in brightly decorated suits, Beach struts his stuff on the ice. A nice, well-mannered young man off the rink, Beach is a hot-dogging, cheap-shot artist on it. Both have a tendency to selfishly lose their cool at the most inopportune time. You'd compare him closer to Dino Ciccarelli with size than a Al Secord-type winger. While Aliu spouts his top usually at officials and opposing trash-talkers, Beach has a history of getting even late in games and attacking his targets when they're not looking. Beach isn't a great fighter and settles some of his battles with his stick and blindside checks. A comparison to notorious NHL villain Sean Avery is fair and appropriate considering Beach's history. Beach never shuts up on the ice. Which after this first round series, means he'd probably fit right in.

While with Lethbridge this season, Beach was suspended three separate occasions. Once for shooting a puck into the crowd at the conclusion of a game in Red Deer and injuring a fan; a month later for jumping a much smaller player from behind and pummeling him during a rout at Medicine Hat, and then in the playoffs for cross-checking a Saskatoon defenseman in the face. Not to mention the brawl he ignited just after being traded from Everett in January when he gallivantly struted his way to an empty-net goal, infuriating the Medicine Hat Tigers.

Before signing an amateur try-out contract with Rockford, Beach spoke with Blackhawks' management about maintaining a high-level of professionalism in his first taste of the pros. He lasted barely a week.

Aliu isn't all bad. As we covered here in this space a few weeks ago, Aliu has a strong character and staunchly preserved his morals in the face of rookie initiation hazing as a sixteen year old kid in Windsor. Born in Nigeria and a native of Kiev, he speaks fluent Russian and presents himself as highly-educated. It's his hot temper and social skills that need some work.

Kyle Beach won't turn 20 until next January so it's Chicago or bust this coming training camp. Due to an agreement between the AHL and Canadian junior organization, 18 and 19 year olds cannot compete in the AHL until their junior team's season has completed. Aliu turned 20 yesterday and there are no plans for him to return to Sudbury, even though he would fit under the rules of an overage exemption.

The larger concern the Blackhawks are concentrated on internally now is how these young players will fit into this group of young Blackhawks going forward. The theory that current Blackhawk leaders like Duncan Keith, Brent Seabrook, Patrick Sharp and Jonathan Toews wouldn't allow personalities like Beach and Aliu to corrupt the Hawks' locker room is simply a myth.

Ask the Dallas Stars and their leaders how much control they had over Sean Avery. Marty Turco, Mike Modano, Sergei Zubov, Jere Lehtinen and Brendan Morrow couldn't earn Avery's respect. When apples turn rotten, no matter how you slice them, they still aren't edible. Jonathan Toews was guilty of being the big eighteen-year old hockey star on campus who went out and got drunk in places he should have never been. Kyle Beach and Akim Aliu are repeated offenders of being tyrants on and off the ice. They've been lectured and warned time and again and the results have been the same up to this point. This time they've embarrassed themselves and the organization to the point everyone has gone mute.

You'd figure two individuals who will have a lot to say before any further hockey decisions involving these two are made are John McDonough and Rocky Wirtz. Based on recent actions and both players' history, neither Aliu nor Beach fit into the new brand of Blackhawks and the image portrayed to the masses.

They may be great players and surely would be fun to cover, but are they worth the trouble? How many strikes are there in hockey?



Chris Block

ChrisBlock@TheThirdManIn.com
TheThirdManIn.com
PuckChatter.net