

Block Party

Once again, we're delighted to have Chris Block from The Third Man In (thethirdmanin.com) and Puck Chatter (puckchatter.blogspot.com) join us to provide way too intelligent commentary on the Hawks for this publication. Hopefully, he won't notice.

If the first half of the 2008-09 season showed us the Blackhawks were head and shoulders above 80% of the league but not quite at the level of the top five or six Cup contenders, then the second half will lead us down an even more intriguing path.

With the pressure turning up for all but two Western Conference teams with legitimate chances at making the postseason (sorry LA and St. Louis) and playoff intensity about to hit, the question is will the Blackhawks continue to fly in that zone underneath the Detroit's, Boston's and San Jose's of the world, or will the pressure pull them back to the pack? Time will tell.

What's quite certain after 43 games is the Blackhawks will participate in postseason hockey for the first time since 2002. At this point, it would almost literally take an act of God to prevent them from it. Once they arrive, the Hawks will attempt to win a playoff series for the first time in twelve seasons.

Of the current top three seeds in each conference (San Jose, Detroit, Calgary, Boston, Washington and the New York Rangers), Chicago has not fared well. The Hawks are 3-5-2-3 (separating the latter two into overtime and shootout losses, respectively) against the top seeds in each conference with all three victories coming against the Flames. They're 0 for 10 if you exclude Mike Keenan's crew.

It's not as if those squads have blown the Blackhawks out of the building. Well, the Red Wings did twice but San Jose needed overtime on Thanksgiving Eve and a little luck after messing around and getting away from their system ten days earlier at the UC.

Boston is very much like Chicago is some ways and drastically opposite in others. The Bruins can skate with any team in the league but they can also bang you all night long (insert Doug Gilmour babysitter joke here). They won't be bullied because more often times than not, they are the ones doing the bullying.

Drew Stafford's hit on Duncan Keith and the aftermath last week showed us two things.

First, the Blackhawks now are willing to stand up for themselves and their teammates, a trait lacking on the West Side for many years. Ben Eager, especially given the 3-1 score at the time, was right to immediately respond by attacking Stafford. No matter what anyone thought of the hit (it was clean), it resulted in a teammate having to be helped from the ice and that alone is cause for retribution.

It's also beginning to highlight how touchy this team has become to handling the physical game. They like to dish it out, but are ready to take it?

Detroit established a trend in how opponents should be approaching the Blackhawks. There were glimpses prior to the Dan Cleary hit on Patrick Kane at Joe Louis Arena last month (that resulted in the high-ankle sprain the Hawks are risking their season allowing him to play through), but the way the Wings pounded players like Kane, Toews and Campbell that night has set a precedent for the rest of the league to follow. Clean, consistent physical aggression while not getting caught up in any payback antics.

Saturday in St. Louis was no different.

Patrick Sharp dropped the gloves for the first time this year after Jay McKee put Patrick Kane on his can just inside the Hawks' blue line. Perhaps this impressed some, but to say it was an overreaction on Sharp's behalf is putting it mildly. At the end of regulation Kane took a jab at Blues' defenseman Barret Jackman, who responded, not in kind, prompting the Hawks to swarm Jackman almost leading to a fight between Jackman and Matt Walker, who are best friends off the ice.

As the conference battle tightens games will get more physical and

individual battles will get nastier. Are the Blackhawks physically prepared for that? Mentally?

Toews and Kane will take a beating every night from here on out. Campbell, Keith and Seabrook can expect the same. The Blackhawks will either learn to play through it, or allow it to consume them and get swallowed under the pressure. They can't fight everyone who lays a finger on the two wonder boys.

Twelve straight days on the road with two swings through traditionally tough waters lies ahead. Another litmus test for a young group of men finding being, and staying good in this league won't be easy.

It was only two months ago this team appeared apathetic and over-matched in Los Angeles and Anaheim, dropping both games at the end of the annual November 'circus' trip. Chicago began three games in four nights dropping a tough overtime decision to the Sharks in the toughest building to win in on the road. Follow-up losses to the Ducks and Kings only compounded the heartache.

Next week the Hawks return to the scene of the crime only this time they'll start in Anaheim and finish at the Shark Tank. Again, three games in four nights all in buildings Chicago has had a tough time earning

points in recently. The Blackhawks have lost four in a row at Honda Center and their last nine meetings with the Sharks in San Jose dating back to March 19, 2003, a 3-2 overtime win thanks to Theo Fleury. Staples Center hasn't exactly been a skate through Millenium Park lately either.

After some time in the California sun, the Hawks will take another swing in western Canada against the Oilers, Flames and Canucks.

Usually a barometer of which the rest of the season will be judged, mid-December's trek through Alberta and coastal B.C. seemed surreal to those of us who've kept in close contact with this team through the last decade. What are the chances the Hawks will take all six points again?

The final two games on the road trip will come after the team has a chance to unwind for two days at home in Chicago. Atlanta should be an easy two points seeing they are one of only four teams (all in the East)

with losing records at home. And oh yeah, the Thrashers are pathetic.

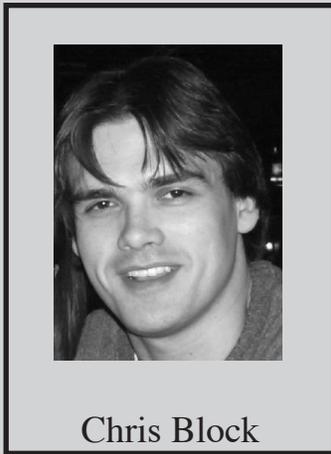
The final stop on the trip brings the Hawks back to St. Louis, where the Blues have put up a good fight in spite of a flock of injuries. With Dallas looming the next night in the team's return to home ice, the February 13th meeting with the Blues has all the makings of a trap-game.

Following tonight's game, twelve of the Hawks' next sixteen will be settled away from the United Center. After this weekend's All-Star festivities, Joel Quenneville's team will play eleven of their next twelve on the road. Even a three-game southern-swing with invites from the Lightning, Panthers and Stars won't present any two-point gift baskets.

February's road warriors will reap the returns in March though when the Hawks can rack up the points with a home-laden schedule. However, getting to that point in the position they're in now and not fighting every night with the Canucks, Oilers, Ducks, Stars and Preds for playoff positioning will be the truest test of how far this Blackhawks team has come.

Anaheim and Vancouver will be the only two teams capable of ascending beyond Chicago in the Western standings and probably two teams the Hawks would like to avoid in the first round or at least have home ice against. If the Hawks falter in the second half, expect both to leap frog them.

As foreign as this may be to Hawks fans, it is the truth; the Blackhawks will control their own destiny. But can they handle the load?



Chris Block