

Block Party

Once again, Chris Block joins us to give us the lowdown on what's up with the Rockford IceHogs.

I was asked a few weeks ago by your estimable editor to provide some insight in regards to the Chicago Blackhawks minor league affiliate Rockford IceHogs, its season thus far, and the prospects who toil there. Being that we've just past the halfway point of the AHL season and the league's own All-Star game is a mere five days in front of us (Monday in Worcester, Mass.), I thought now would be a good time to tackle the subject. Instead of boring you with the plot that in the Rockford IceHogs' second AHL season, I thought we'd simply address the top prospects one-by-one.

Petri Kontiola [C] (2004 – 7th round, 196th overall)

Not nearly as impressive as his numbers or AHL All-Star status may indicate. Kontiola has just 3 goals in his last 24 games and 2 assists in the last 12. He skates void of inspiration some nights and all-out others. Was cut from September's camp after one in-game look reportedly due to a poor work ethic. Dropped to the second line with Mike Radja and Peter MacArthur for much of the last two months in an attempt to spread the Hogs' scoring amongst a few lines. It hasn't worked. He hates it in Rockford and his recent production shows it.

Jack Skille [RW] (2005 – 1st round, 7th overall)

He's fast; he's throwing his body around more than ever and actually putting his body into harm's way for the sake of scoring chances. What Skille hasn't done is vary his offense. He's still has his patented skate over the blue line, dip the right shoulder and throw a sixty-foot shot on net. That being said, I don't know that keeping him in Rockford will make him any better. It may be time to give him another chance. Currently out with an 'upper-body' injury.

Pascal Pelletier [LW] (trade w/Boston for Martin St. Pierre July 24, 2008)

A great AHL player.

Evan Brophey [C] (2005 – 3rd round, 67th overall)

A breakthrough season. Moved up to the top line with Jack Skille and Pascal Pelletier in December, Brophey has thrived in the role. He's not great at anything, and his numbers won't wow you (9g,13a,43gp), but he is a solid all-around forward. Maybe he gets a good look in next year's training camp.

Jake Dowell [C] (2004 – 5th round, 140th overall)

Head coach Bill Peters loves to use Dowell as his checking center and Dowell has done much better since moving back there from the wing, where he played a lot early this season. He's not any different from what we saw in Chicago last year.

Bryan Bickell [G] (2004 – 2nd round, 41st overall)

Currently sidelined through the rest of the month with a broken thumb. His conditioning appears to have improved and he's brought the skating up a notch as well. But he was outplayed early on and passed on the depth chart by veteran Rob Klinkhammer, and has been stuck underneath him since. He's a better prospect than Michael Blunden was at this point. Bickell will drop the mitts, but it's not an area he excels in. He was a scorer in junior with Ottawa and had a fantastic playoff with Windsor before turning pro but he's found the net just 4 times in 30 games this season. He's a third-line winger at best if he's given the chance to improve.

Antti Niemi [G] (free agent May 5, 2008)

Scotty Bowman's favorite Blackhawk netminder through November hit a bad streak which really began with a shaky start at AllState Arena on December 6th. He's never recovered from that one. There's been the occasional good start, but he hasn't been able to put a string together. Niemi, 25, was pulled for the second time this month (4 starts) last night in Des Moines after giving up four goals on ten shots in the second period. Perhaps he's homesick? This is the first time he's played away from his homeland Finland. He speaks English amazingly well though.

Corey Crawford [G] (2003 – 2nd round, 52nd overall)

Much like Cristobal Huet, Crawford is a positional goalie who thrives at making the initial save. Rebounds have been a nemesis throughout his pro career and he's improved in that area. While there numbers were similar through the first two months, Niemi was decidedly the better goalie. However, Crawford has since completely turned the tables in that respect.

Niklas Hjalmarsson [D] (2005 – 4th round, 108th overall)

In case you missed it, Hjalmarsson was recalled yesterday after that pitiful performance from Johnson, Barker, Campbell, and Wisniewski the other night. I can't tell you he'll be much better, but he certainly can't do any worse. Made the Blackhawks out of camp in part because he was more reliable defensively than Barker in exhibition play, and because Dale Tallon couldn't find a calculator on July 1st. Colton Orr ended his experience early after a hard check into the boards along the Hawks' bench at Madison Square Garden. I can tell you the Hawks love Hjalmarsson and see him contributing in the near future. The depth in the system though should prevent them from making the mistake they did with Barker. Hjalmarsson needs a year at the lower-level to log a ton of minutes and get to the point where he's dominating games before he's asked to step into the Hawks' lineup permanently.

Jordan Hendry [D] (collegiate free agent March 18, 2006)

His season ended last spring after one playoff game with Rockford in a freak accident that saw Hendry fall backwards onto the ice and crack his skull open. Didn't show the confidence with the puck or in the corners and was returned here in late October after eight games with the Hawks. There's really nothing good or bad to say about Hendry's thirty-one games in Rockford this year. He's decent but not much better than Rockford contracted defenseman Andrew Archer. Hendry is a reliable penalty-killer however. Unless a rash of injuries hit the blue line on Madison, I don't think we'll be seeing Hendry again.

Jimmy Sharrow [D] (trade w/Vancouver for conditional draft pick December 10, 2008)

One of the 'Hogs best blue liners since coming over last month. He's a big guy (6-2) who skates well forward and is confident, sometimes too confident, with the puck. I guess he's biggest drawback is that he sometimes doesn't skate within his own limitations.

Adam Pineault [RW] (trade w/Columbus for Michael Blunden January 10, 2009)

We're five games and one period into the Pineault experience and so far it's not looking good. Pineault picked up his first point last night against the Iowa Chops. Body-type and skating-wise he reminds me of Troy Brouwer two years ago. In case that reference doesn't strike you, that's not good. Pineault's a year younger than Brouwer and two years behind skill-wise. Finesse is his biggest adversary. He's slow and lumbering and can't play

with anyone but the top two lines. Rockford needed scoring and ultimately these deals aren't made with the affiliate in mind, but for what makes the IceHogs better right now; maybe they can re-trade.

Tim Brent [C] (trade w/Pittsburgh for Danny Richmond July 17, 2008)

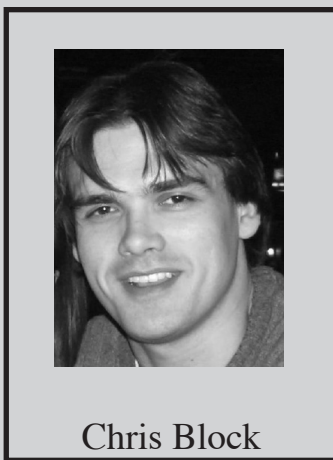
Rockford's captain has missed the last ten games with a concussion. He's a nice minor-leaguer. Enough said.

Nathan Davis [C/W] (2005 – 4th round, 113th overall)

Penciled in as a two-year project, Davis has dressed in 40 of the team's 44 games as a fourth-liner. Most of which he's served as the centerman. He's quick but not shifty. Davis is easily checked because he skates in a straight-line with the puck and waits too long to dish it. Still, there's talent there and next season he'll be asked to do much more. With a strong off season, I could see him starting next season as Igor Makarov's center, should Makarov decide to leave home.

Dan Bertram [RW] (2005 – 2nd round, 54th overall)

Rockford lists him at 5'11". He's not a hair above 5'10" and that's what you immediately notice about him. Tough kid who's always got the legs moving. He's dropped the gloves with much bigger players as well. If this has you thinking Adam Burish you're not too far off.



Chris Block