

# Block Party

## Strange Thoughts On This Nervous Night

### Tallon Over Troubled Waters

Should Dale Tallon, if he's even steering the ship at this point, not be able to move Dustin Byfuglien and/or Brent Sopel for draft picks this summer, the Hawks' salary cap issues will only worsen next season. The \$12.75M in contracts everyone thought would be exiting stage left as little as four months ago, now figures to be just Nikolai Khabibulin's \$6.75M, as Martin Havlat is reportedly wrapping up talks on a new deal to keep him in an Indian Head sweater for at least two more seasons.

Cam Barker will be negotiating a new contract this summer, as will Dave Bolland and Kris Versteeg. All will be due sizeable increases in pay. Bolland (846k) and Versteeg (490k) will see their salary's at least double, possibly triple (Versteeg's may quadruple) in size, depending on term. Barker will likely come in at the same cap number he is now, 2.7 million, only from now on that will be guaranteed.

Havlat's new contract will be noteworthy. You'd figure he'll have to shave some points off his deal to make it worth while for the Hawks. Not that they don't need Havlat, because all you need to do is watch a few games when Marty's interested and you'll see he's this team's second-best forward behind Toews. But with the Blackhawks having to plan for Kane and Toews second contracts over the next sixteen months, not to mention Duncan Keith's, and the league embroiled in financial uncertainty, John McDonough and Rocky Wirtz simply can't risk handing Havlat another six million a-year, for any length of time. Havlat has stated he'd rather re-up with the resurgent Hawks than test the market. I guess Chicago's a great place to rehab a shoulder?

2008 first-rounder Kyle Beach (6'3 – 220) is expected to sign his entry-level deal this summer and begin a pro career in the fall. The Hawks anticipate him earning a second or third line spot in training camp, which if that were to happen, would absolve this team of any need for Dustin McByfuglien. After Beach's contract, that leaves little space for free agents.

Dale Tallon has suggested all along he wasn't interested in trading for a rental and since bringing in Samuel Pahlsson has reiterated his stance. We project he'll have approximately two million in the coffer after the above-mentioned negotiations to address next season's center ice situation, and he may be left with no other choice after finalizing Bolland's new paper but to re-sign Pahlsson or a cheap, journeyman middle-man with similar characteristics.

To say its essential Tallon orchestrate a reversal of his own wrongdoings and find new homes for Byfuglien and Sopel would be an understatement. If he can't, don't be shocked when Columbus overtakes the Hawks in the standings in '09-10.

### Huety Duty?

Corey Crawford practiced yesterday with the Hawks at the Edge in Bensenville, taking Cristobal Huet's place in the optional team skate. Apparently Huet left in a huff after being told he was injured and Nikolai Khabibulin would be starting in net for the fourth straight time tonight. How exactly does one get injured sitting on the bench with his arms folded modeling a skull cap?

Before you start thinking the Hawks should move Huet and re-sign Khabi; exercise that short memory of yours. Even in this, his best season as a Hawk, Khabibulin has proven at his age, 36, he can't stay healthy. If it weren't for this team having the luxury of another overpriced above-average starting goaltender lurking the player's bench, the Hawks would be fighting for the eighth spot, not the fourth, just as they were twelve months ago, Quenneville or not.

The humor in all of this is the Hawks made a splash and dually filled a need when they lured Huet off the free agent market with a ludicrous four year, 22.5M contract on July 1st. The move signified the organization's dismay with Khabibulin and they continued to highlight that discontent by banning him from training camp two and a half months later. Dale Tallon reportedly had a deal in place with Los Angeles (which is why Antti Niemi was still with the team on final cut day), to move Khabibulin the first week of October only to have Kings' GM Dean Lombardi talked out of the deal by members of his hockey staff -- one rumored to be recent Hawks' assistant coach Mark Hardy. Thus, Tallon was stuck with the most-expensive goalie tandem in NHL history and obliged to say it was his master plan all along.

Since then, Khabibulin has been the better performer overall and won the confidence of the organization to the point he's, for the moment anyway, been picked to handle the workload down the stretch and into postseason. Huet will be counted on to not screw things up next year, which is precisely what Tallon and Quenneville are afraid he'll do this spring. Making any sense? Here's the deal. Tallon is under immense pressure to push this group as far into the playoffs as possible. As great as things have been this season, the Hawks are spending a ton of cash to permeate an image of vivacity into the local sports culture, and coupled with last year's losses and economic doom; Rocky is hungry to turn a sizeable profit. The fact they've chosen

the guy to shoulder the load on his way out over their franchise goalie in such a crucial period, tells you all you need to know about how they feel about Huet.

### Down Along the Cove

If the Hawks' power play keeps you up at night, try watching the Rockford IceHogs. The Hawks' farm squad is 2 for its last 52 with the man advantage. The elusive two in question were tallied by Petri Kontiola (fleeced by Bob Murray) and Tyler Mosienko (Bill Mosienko's midget grandson).

Jack Skille scored his second goal in as many games in Wednesday's loss to fifth place Iowa. Cool down, he only managed two in his previous eighteen games. Some point soon the Hawks will decide whether Skille is more valuable to them in a Hawks' uniform, or as an asset on the trade market. Other than foot speed, nothing he does stands out, and everything he does, Kris Versteeg does better. Skille's not as big as you think, and his offense is too predictable.

Two players to keep an eye out for in September are Evan Brophey and Bryan Bickell. Brophey has showed the biggest gains in his second pro season coming out of Plymouth (OHL). A one-dimensional offensive player in junior, Brophey is transforming into a responsible two-way center in Rockford. Bickell has turned his game up several notches since returning earlier this month from a broken thumb suffered in a fight on New Years Eve and seems intent on making up for lost time.

Bickell scored in his each of his first two games back. He's a big kid (6'4 – 225) and possibly a contender for Ben Eager's spot on the fourth line next fall. Both are restricted free agents this summer.

### Calling Scotty

Am I the only Blackhawks' observer annoyed with Scotty Bowman persistent contact and consulting of Red Wings' head coach Mike Babcock? Undeniably a conflict of interest, Bowman and Babcock defend their regular discussions insisting they're just good friends.

So let's get this straight. The Blackhawks employ the greatest hockey coach of all time... but he doesn't want to be a coach. Bowman's perhaps the most knowledgeable and instinctive hockey mind in the business.... but he doesn't want to be the GM. So, he sits in his Tampa home half the season collecting a Rocky Wirtz' signed paycheck and two or three times a week advises the brain trust of the

hated Red Wings? How is this acceptable?

### What the Wiz?

So you're a big James Wisniewski fan, are ya? No Wiz = No Wins? Hardly.

If missing a marginal – on his best day – blue liner is chiefly responsible for your team's recent woes, then the Hawks have deeper issues than any of us could ever know.

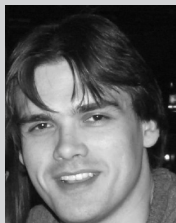
Yearning for number 43 is akin to getting dumped by a girl with the Clap, false teeth and prosthetic arms then crawling into bed, balling yourself to sleep every night for a month. I'm sure she was a nice girl, but how much pleasure were you getting out of that relationship, really?

But if you insist this team can't go on without "the Wiz," you must also be in that group of fans who believe the Hawks will never win a Cup as long as Travis Moen, Kyle Calder, Patrick Lalime, Todd White and Anton Babchuk are wearing opposing sweaters.

Good young players don't get traded for rentals. And when's the last time Bob Murray made a great trade? He got his job sucking up to Brian Burke and the Samueli's in four seasons, with his lone claim to brilliance as being the architect behind the Francois Bechemin acquisition. Come on, even a 200 pound hooker finds a John.

Wiz fans, don't confuse activity with accomplishment. That's how Adam Burish jerseys get sold.

*Chris Block writes the impeccable Third Man In (thethirdmanin.com), which is your one-stop shop for all the Hawks info you could ever want. He also writes an NHL-wide blog called Puck Chatter (puckchatter.blogspot.com). Can't get enough Chris (and who could?), he's also the latest guest on the Hockee Night Puckcast, where we've occasionally washed up. You can find that at hockeenight.com.*



Chris Block