

Block Party

We Said We'd See You Again

We're now two big victories away (one in Detroit, another in Chicago) from the long-awaited 1995 Conference Finals rematch between the Red Wings and Blackhawks. I know, there's much work to be done before we begin previewing that potential series, but both teams now own 3-2 series leads coming out of each's respective game five's and both appear to be teams trending upward while their opponents exhibit the opposite.

In the last 22 years (significant because that goes back to the point the NHL advanced to the all 7-game, 4-round playoff format), Chicago and Detroit have met in postseason just four times, with the two splitting the match-ups.

Chicago was an awful team in 1987 when they were swept by a Red Wings team that would go on to lose to the eventual Stanley Cup champion Edmonton Oilers in the Campbell Conference final.

1989 was a different story as the Hawks, led by Mike Keenan in his first season as head coach, deflated the regular season Norris Division champion Red Wings in the first round four games to two. It was the Hawks that year who would go on to lose to the eventual Stanley Cup champion Calgary Flames in the conference final.

The Red Wings owned the best record in the Campbell Conference in 1992 when the Hawks swept them in four straight in the Norris Division Finals (2nd round) on their run to the Stanley Cup Finals and those mighty Pittsburgh Penguins.

But 1995 was a heartbreaker. The Blackhawks were one of the NHL's best teams in that lockout-shortened season up until Derian Hatcher took out Jeremy Roenick's knee right in front of the Hawks' bench and a national television audience on April 2nd. Roenick tore his ACL, and would not return until Game 2 of the conference semi's series with Vancouver, missing the seven-game first round joust with Toronto (including a home ice Game 7 that most Hawk fans regard as the greatest night in this building's history, as far as hockey goes). Roenick's absence prompted the reacquisition of Denis Savard (ironic, because it was the arrival of Roenick in 1989 that led to Savard's original exit), who went on to one-last unforeseen, and remarkable run of greatness in a Hawks' sweater. Chicago swept the Canucks and moved on to the conference finals for a meeting with heated division rival Detroit.

Scotty Bowman was in his second season as coach of the Red Wings, a team, at the time, who hadn't one a Stanley Cup in forty years. Darryl Sutter led arguably the best Blackhawks' squad in a period since the mid-80's until today. Ed Belfour was at his very best in those playoffs, coming off three overtime wins against Vancouver and forced Detroit into three more, including two double-overtimes, though all were losses. Vladimir Konstantinov ended game 3 at the UC midway through the second overtime with a long wrist shot that Belfour misplayed, and Slava Kozlov ended the series in another 2OT game at the Joe. All four of the Wings' victories in the 1995 series with Chicago were decided by one goal.

Both teams struggled through injuries. Steve Yzerman and Sergei Fedorov each missed time with knee and shoulder issues respectively. Roenick never should've come back on the bad knee and couldn't return to his usual form, and the Wings as a whole were much too quick for Hawks' forwards like Brent Sutter, Dirk Graham and Bernie Nicholls.

Chicago Blackhawk fans are used to seeing their beloved stars run up against teams with two dominant centers in the post-season. Gretzky/Messier, Lemieux/Francis, Yzerman/Fedorov, Sakic/Forsberg – you know how the story ends. Pavel Datsyuk, Henrik Zetterberg, Johan Franzen and Marian Hossa – I expect this go-around to be no different.

Which side is Scotty Bowman on?

Red Wings' coach Mike Babcock admitted again in his Game 5 post-game press conference Sunday he and Scotty still discuss coaching strategy on a regular basis. This was largely considered as Bowman's role within the Red Wings along with having a voice pertaining to advance scouting and evaluating players. Essentially his position within the Detroit organization was opulent and expendable when Scotty last summer decided he wanted to spend more time with his son Stan, who was in remission for Hodgkins. But evidently Scotty now claims a paycheck from the Blackhawks for largely doing nothing other than undermining the GM while advising the Red Wings bench boss pro bono.

Duncan Who?

First it was Brent Seabrook emerging as the dominant backliner carrying his team through the first round against the Flames and now it's Brian Campbell who has lifted the Hawks in the second round.

Ever since he missed the final game of the regular season, something has gone noticeably wrong with Duncan Keith. He's a mess in the defensive zone and is lacking his patented first-step quickness to recover from miscues and poor decisions. After studying his every move very carefully in Game 2 of the Calgary series, I went on record (which I realize means little) believing Keith is skating on a bum left foot or ankle, or possibly a bad left knee. Whatever the case, he gingerly uses his left skate and his balance and first step quickness are obviously off.

Campbell's taken his share of criticism this season, both fair and not. Rocky Wirtz didn't airmail Campbell's agent a blank check and tell him to fill in the zeros. The Hawks went into unrestricted free agency seeking a much needed puck-rushing defenseman and power play quarterback. Campbell was the best option on the market to fill both roles and the Hawks had to outbid other teams, most notably the San Jose Sharks and New York Rangers to get him. Yes he's overpaid, but UFA's almost always are, and the only other options were Wade Redden, Mark Streit or Ron Hainsey. Dale Tallon made the right choice.

While he struggled through February and most of March, Campbell is playing his best hockey as a Hawk in the playoffs. His check in game two on Pavol Demitra knocked the Canucks' forward right out of the series. Campbell's teammates rely on him to lug the puck every time he's on the ice and they should, he's been near flawless in 11 playoff games. He ended that horrid fifty-game scoring drought in the series-clincher at Calgary and showed his shooting eye and confidence may indeed be back when he sent a laser past Roberto Luongo in Game 3.

Keith was very good all through the regular season and I'm not attempting here to take any of that away from him. It's hard to believe he's the same guy who couldn't clear a puck around a pylon three seasons ago. But he's not hovering around greatness just yet.

The Duncan Keith admiration society would be bleeding members if Keith were earning four or more million dollars a season. Aside from his quickness, 'active stick' and maybe his instincts, there isn't much of anything to his game that separates him from any of his defensive teammates. Maybe he will be the second-coming of Brian Leetch one day, but that day hasn't come yet.

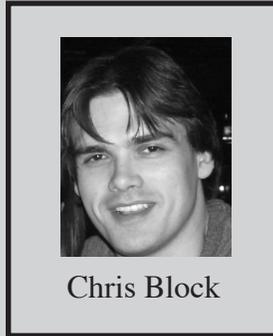
Tip-ins...

As speculated here a couple weeks ago, Akim Aliu is taking the brunt of the heat for his April dust-up with Kyle Beach which had the two swiftly kicked off the Rockford IceHogs during the AHL playoffs. He's on his official/unofficial final warning..... Jeremy Roenick told XM Radio/NHL Live last month he'd make a decision on whether or not he'd return for one more season in June. When asked if the Boston Bruins (his hometown team) and Blackhawks were to meet in the Finals, who he'd root for Roenick said he'd be cheering for the Blackhawks. Could J.R. be angling for a possible return?... Say goodbye to Martin Havlat. His agent and the Hawks are no longer discussing a new contract. Both sides say they will resume talks once the season ends, but 95% of the time, when a player gets this close to unrestricted free agency, he jumps into it. At 27, Havlat's next contract will be the biggest of his career. Unless the Hawks have a plan to move players like Byfuglien or Barker who will occupy significant cap hits of their own going forward, the Hawks probably won't have the room to match an offer Havlat is likely to receive out on the open market. They could go the route Detroit did with Zetterberg and Franzen, front-load his deal and extend it seven to nine years with him earning a million per season on the back stretch, but that's a big commitment to a guy who until this year has never proven he can stay healthy. Havlat's affection for this team and the city will be tested. Hometown discount or bust.....

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