

Block Party

Odds, Ends, Rants

The randomness of my mind is something that haunts and affects me in all different types of situations and in the strangest of ways. In today's case, it's centering in on a topic for this column. Or simply a tone.

For example, given the farce NHL commissioner Gary Bettman laid down to the Board of Governors this week in regards to the Phoenix Coyotes/IceEdge Holdings intent to purchase fiasco, I considered using this space to paint an NHL universe in which all 30 teams played 15% of home games in markets other than their own. The Lightning in Tuscaloosa; Predators in Stevens Point; Red Wings in Albuquerque, or Penguins in Texarkana? Or how if Bettman would put as much time into pressuring his television partners to upping their production as he did into keeping Jim Balsillie out of his, the NHL would be exponentially better for it. My other thoughts ranged from the naivety of Hawks Nation (we'll broach that in a moment), how John McDonough's crusade against obesity has been temporarily derailed by a slight battle with it of his own on down to how no matter how many different ways I tried put on my right sock this morning, my big toe managed to run out the front of it.

I also brainstormed and prepped a Team America Olympic roster prognostication and evaluation earlier in the day only to abandon it when the notion hit me that this Blackhawks team is rolling through the first stretch of this season much like the tragic figures of the 1990-91 Blackhawks. If you weren't a fan or don't recall, the Hawks steamrolled through and finished the regular season strong as Norris Division (former Central) champs and earned the President's Trophy as the league's top team points earner. Those accomplishments meant little two weeks later though when Dirk Graham, Chris Chelios and Wayne Presley lost their minds and led the local heroes down a path of self-destruction in a six-game opening round loss to the playoff team with the worst regular season record, the Minnesota North Stars.

-Hawks enthusiasts are having a lot of fun at Detroit Red Wings fans expense of late. It's hard to understand why. Despite a cascade of injuries the Red Wings today occupy the 8th spot in the West and trail the Hawks in the points column by just four. The Blackhawks do have two games in hand but with a home-and-home (it is for the Wings, the Hawks have San Jose sandwiched in between) set over the next five days, Hawks' fans may not be so cocky come Christmas.

Injuries and time-off for players such as Johan Franzen, Niklas Kronwall, Valterri Filppula, Jason Williams, Dan Cleary, Jonathan Ericsson and now potentially Henrik Zetterberg can be seen as a blessing in disguise for the weary Wings. Back-to-back Finals appearances have taken its toll and with the Olympics coming to boot, Detroit could use some relief. Before this season, several experts predicted all the games and hard minutes would catch up to Detroit towards the end of the season and the Wings would be ripe for a first round playoff upset. Now it appears those fortunes have blurred.

Much as in the case of Marian Hossa, whose shoulder troubles and subsequent procedure sidelining the all-world winger until late November, several key Detroit skaters will return healthy and refreshed, sharpening up to pick off and unsuspecting rival in mid-April.

For all the fist-bumping and Chelsea Dagger-ing going on around the UC these days, remember, the Hawks haven't accomplished anything yet. The Stanley Cup is the ultimate goal and anything less this season should be considered a failure. Specifically recognizing the truck-dump Stan Bowman will perform on the Draft Floor in June, shedding Barker's, Byfuglien's and Sharp's salary quicker than Gary Bettman can turn off fans in Arizona. And there could be your lovable Wings, standing at the entrance to the post season, rejuvenated and tasting blood. Barring a bus crash, Detroit will be good enough to earn at the very least one of the last two playoff spots whether injuries continue to be the nemesis or not. An incredible gift to the league it would be should the Hawks and Wings meet to kick off the 2010 post season. I don't care what happens in the regular season, the Hawks can't claim to be above the Wings until they surpass them when it really counts.

-- How inconvenient is it for Hawks' Nation to have Cristobal Huet steal Antti Niemi's glory in riding momentum set by Niemi's sterling performance on Sunday and benefitting from a true defensive team shutout Wednesday against the Blues? Hasn't anyone clued Huet in yet that this is Chicago and no matter how

good the regular is, his back-up is far superior and more apt to lead this city to a championship than he is? Stan Bowman should get with the program and return Huet to Montreal for a real back-up like Jaroslav Halak before it's too late.

-- Before I go I must address this city's longest tenured hockey scribe, the Daily Herald's Tim Sassone. To be honest, this is a tough one. You see, I doubt I'd be writing about hockey or attempting to keep track of it as much as I do if it weren't for the influence of someone like a Sassone. The meat of my adolescence was spent growing up in the northwest suburbs and on my doorstep each morning was that day's Daily Herald. I always admired Sassone's knowledge, frankness, and what I always took as his astute analysis.

True story. Everyone does grow old. Tired, apathetic, bored, or lacking the enthusiasm once present in their chosen vocation. I don't know what the deal is with Sassone. Is he too caught up in the present fervor or basking in the delight for once in having a cooperative public relations staff? Where's the in-depth story; the tough question the guy next to him or McDonough-endorsed dope on ESPN.com won't ask?

Two weeks ago, shortly after the press conference to officially announce contract extensions for Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews and Duncan Keith, the veteran hockey writer used his blog to essentially profess the specifics as to how Stan Bowman fit these three extensions in under the CBA were too complex for him to ascertain, constituted an exhibition of effort the likes of which an accredited member of the media such as he was far above and furthermore, even if he did do his due-diligence, the explanation of how it was done would spin so fast around you, the reader's head, you'd puke in your cereal.

Actually, hid didn't say any of that exactly, but his 'tone' was an overwhelming, "Who cares guys?" What he actually said was this:

"Whatever the NHL's formula is for "tagging room," the Blackhawks were within the rules, which allowed general manager Stan Bowman to sign Duncan Keith, Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane to contract extensions at this point in time."

Translation: Who cares? I care Tim. A lot of people care. The salary cap, and the circumventing of, is the very foundation of how NHL teams operate in this era. One of which, the Blackhawks, you get paid to cover. Every aspect of those extensions, how they came about, why it took so long, how it affects the team this week, next month, and next season along with mathematical equation to how it got accomplished is a HUGE news story you glossed over. To be fair it wasn't just Tim. One of Canada's supposed elite NHL experts Bob McKenzie stumbled all over the story, all week long, clearly having never spent the five minutes it would've taken him to find a pdf of the collective bargaining agreement online and read rule 50.5 that explicitly stated the formula for "tagging" current player's extensions to next year's salary cap.

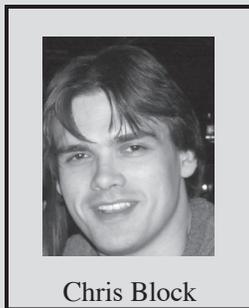
At least I tried. Granted, my breakdown at first was off by an estimated at \$400,000 and noted within an hour of its posting by a Blackhawks' source based on the fact in my spontaneous haste to determine the exact equation while at my real job, since literally no one else in the print or electronic media was bothering to, I grabbed Keith's base salary from last season by mistake.

Regardless, I don't make much more than a handful of dimes covering the Blackhawks and I felt incumbent upon myself to get to the root of the story for the purpose of informing whatever small crowd chooses to read me or pimple-faced message board geek needs to steal my work and claim as their own. Sassone was ambivalent. Next time Tim, do your fucking job!

-- I'll return to this space this Tuesday the 22nd with a review of Theo Fleury's auto-biography *Playing With Fire*, this Christmas's best hockey-related stocking stuffer. Unless you're one those unfortunate folks with a family member who believes the annual summer creep-a-thon otherwise known as the Blackhawks Convention is a great way to spend a weekend. In closing, if this column offended anyone, it was not my intention.

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