

# Block Party

## Strange Thoughts On This Nervous Night

What a difference a few days make. Last Friday, before the Hawks-Avs game in Denver, when mentioning Dave Bolland's omission from that night's line up, the Blackhawks' PR staff claimed the team's number two center was suffering from "Nothing serious, same nagging upper body thing." Two days later Joel Quenneville floated the possibility Bolland would need to undergo surgery to correct a lingering back issue which prevented Bolland from participating in much of the preseason and had kept him out of most practices as of late. A timetable for recovery at first was labeled two months but after Bolland came out of surgery Tuesday, doctors marked a full recovery between 3 and 4 months.

So this sidelines Bolland, a true difference maker at center ice for the latter two-thirds of the 2008-09 season with Martin Havlat on his wing, likely until the first week of March. That pinpoints his return immediately following the two-week league hiatus accommodating the Winter Olympics. Bolland hasn't been near the player awarded a 400 percent raise by former GM Dale Tallon and Caponomics major Stan Bowman as he was a year ago. Injuries are a piece to the puzzle, the absence of Havlat is too. Before this, the money was on Bolland reaping the benefits of the Marian Hossa addition, likely being asked to anchor and cover for Hossa and Patrick Kane on the Hawks' "second line." With Bolland down, the question becomes who will take his place?

Romanticizing about Kris Versteeg dippy-doodling, parading, or whatever it is he does about center ice is fool's gold. He's too much of a lunk head. Too little discipline both defensively and emotionally (though Bolland has his own "Killer" instincts in that regard) and while Versteeg is fun to watch, most nights he's the epitome of sound and fury signifying nothing. Andrew Ebbett can give the Hawks some minutes, but so could you or I. He's a first or second line minor leaguer showing up at the United Center dressed as a Blackhawk, two weeks now after Halloween. Tomas Kopecky is an option and perhaps the one Joel Quenneville will look to, but there are others.

With Stan Bowman in no position of power at the trade table now with Bolland on the long term injury list, don't look for any significant trade in hopes of filling the slot. Peter Forsberg's name will continue to surface because he'll come at a somewhat reasonable price and won't cost Bowman anything off his talent roster. Forsberg talked with the Hawks last year too before opting out of another late-season NHL comeback and this time last week rumors had his NHL options down to Detroit and Chicago. You can bet his price just went up a few hundred thousand. Potentially a few hundred more than the Hawks can afford. Regardless, Forsberg hasn't played anything resembling a full hockey schedule in four years and the Hawks would be daft in believing he would now.

As a coach with limited options, Quenneville's best option is Patrick Sharp. Outside of the game-winner against the Canadiens, Sharp hasn't hit a net in three weeks. It's not that he's not finding the puck or getting his chances, he is. He's simply snake-bitten and you can see it's gotten to his head now. Sharp had been a center up until two years ago when he was moved to the wing permanently when his goal production steadily improved and the decision was made to free the way for Bolland's development.

Sharp showed little interest in playing the position last season when asked but now as a team leader and alternate captain, he should do what's best for the team. A return to the position would change his focus temporarily to a redefined role and drastically different responsibilities. He's very capable of filling the spot if he were to put his mind to it. If he is unwilling, maybe it tells you all you need to know about his future with the Blackhawks?

ly honest and remarkably thorough in his version of his own personal history.

So far I've come away with the impression he's someone who has convinced himself he's clean and clear of all his demons, but the tone he sets in a lot of his drug and party stories is, while remorseful, borderline brag-gadocios throughout.

His recollection of his stint in Chicago is particularly of note. Add Theo to the list of players who hated the late Bill Wirtz. The "old asshole" Fleury called him. While he is very forthright about his two-day drug binge a week prior to the opening of the 2002-03 season, his only as a Hawk and last in the NHL, his mind blanks when the scene shifts to the infamous strip club incident and beat down he took the following January, less than two months after being released from the NHL's substance abuse program.

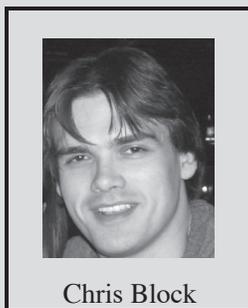
Fleury gives a blow-by-blow (pun intended) detailing of his actions from October 1-3, 2002. What set off the chain of events was an argument with his live-in stripper turned love-interest Stephanie. That night Fleury bolted his Belmont Harbor apartment with nothing on his mind but getting loaded. He hailed a taxi and had the driver bring him to a liquor store where he could score a bottle of Grey Goose. Fleury asked him to wait and when he returned swigging his vodka, prompted the cabbie to take him a place where he could buy some cocaine. A hundred bucks got Fleury to the projects where he'd spend the next several hours snorting and buying all the coke the wad of cash in his pocket could support. Fleury comes across clearly proud of being a shrimpy, openly rich white guy hanging line for line with large gangster drug dealers well into the night inside an abandoned housing project. The next morning he checked himself into the Drake Hotel where he'd hide out drinking and getting high for the next 24 hours while his girlfriend and the Blackhawks were left wondering if he was dead or alive. He'd return home the next day only to find his AA Sponsor (who the Hawks gave a \$200,000 salary job and a free luxury apartment

to during the season solely to be Fleury's professional babysitter) and head coach Brian Sutter awaiting his return. The two-day high-ride cost Theo the first two months of the NHL season, a trip back to AA and \$1.2M in salary.

But for all his honesty and vivid memories in that case, Fleury claims to recall nothing about the incident at the Pure Platinum strip club in Columbus, only recounting what was written in the papers. Strange since he was open about his strip club visit near season's end on the east side of the Mississippi outside St. Louis that led to the final strike against his NHL aftercare program and league expulsion, doing blow with strippers and gambling at the Casino Queen until 6am in the wee hours before a game with the Blues.

-As hard as this may be to believe, maybe Tampa knew what they were doing when they signed ex-Hawk Matt Walker to a four-year \$6.8 million contract on July 1st? Walker leads all Lightning players in plus/minus at a plus-7, averaging 18 minutes a night. That plus-7 rating puts rates him five and six points better than Tampa's top d-pairing of Mattias Ohlund and rookie Victor Hedman and three points ahead of Steven Stamkos and Alex Tanguay, both sitting at a plus-4 heading into tomorrow night's game with the Minnesota Wild.

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-I'm two-thirds of the way through Theo Fleury's autobiography *Playing With Fire*, and while it wouldn't be prudent at this juncture to do a full review, I can proclaim it a must-read for any hockey fan. Fleury is refreshing-