

# Block Party

## Last Call

Idol worship can be a tricky thing. And in regards to a professional sports fan's affinity for their favorite athletes, such adoration tends to grow even more so conflicting.

Whether its one's allegiance to a star player moved on to a rival organization, or another's out-of-competition activities looming suspect and compelling his admirers to question further devotion; there will always be turning points in the athlete-fan "relationship."

And then of course there's the athlete who doesn't no when to say when.

On Tuesday, former Detroit Red Wings, Chicago Blackhawks, and Montreal Canadiens defenseman Chris Chelios signed a professional "tryout" contract with the Chicago Wolves of the American Hockey League, the minor league affiliate of the Atlanta Thrashers. Chelios has been practicing with the Wolves on and off for the past week prior to his long-rumored signing.

A first-ballot Hall of Fame lock, Chelios boasts an astounding 25-year NHL career which began before all but seven of tonight's Blackhawks were even born.

Chelios, 47, has been hinting, not so subtly, his main motivation in training and competing in hockey the last few years is playing past his 50th birthday. To achieve this, Chelios would not only need to find work this season, but for two more after it and play in a game on or after January 25, 2012, the day he turns 50.

For decades, hockey's glorified ironhorse has always been the legendary "Mr. Hockey" Gordie Howe. Ironically, Howe was forced out of the NHL after his twenty-fifth season, albeit to injury, in 1971. Two years later the fledgling WHA came calling and enticed Howe with enough dollars and zeros to come out of retirement and play with his sons Mark and Marty Howe for the league's Houston franchise. Gordie and his sons skated and were all top stars with the Houston Aeros for four seasons, winning two championships before all fled for the New England Whalers in 1977 and until the WHA and the Whale folded into the NHL in the fall of 1979. Gordie stayed on one more year at the age of 59 for a generous season-long send-off in the league he helped build that ended days before his 60th birthday.

While Chris Chelios's historical significance is considerably less substantial, he's in a similar situation today.

The league Chelios has made his name and will be forever heralded by appears to have no use for him any longer. For a period of time he can be a draw on the minor league hockey circuit, but for how long and to what extent?

In Rosemont, home of the Chicago Wolves, his presence will boost ticket sales through Christmas, but taper off steadily unless the Wolves put a winning product on the ice. Marketing Chelios is also tricky. He's in this (a Wolves uniform) strictly for his own personal gain and nothing else. His hope is an NHL team suffers a serious injury or two on their blue line and his name once again surfaces as a viable option on the big stage. Long ranging Chelios promotions at this point are foolish since his cell phone will almost certainly be on vibrate in his hockey pants while he skates at the Allstate Arena. While his objectives could appear to root him on the buses, commercial flights, and Holiday Inns the AHL has to offer for some time, his drive for 50 faces its challenges both on and off the ice.

But his obsession with a Howe-esque legacy could keep him around anyhow. Chelios's oldest son Dean, 20, just began his freshman year with the Michigan State Spartans this month. He has no points so far playing in three of the Spartans' four games.

Younger son Jake, 18, is in his first season with the Chicago Steel (USHL), (which you can see play their home games at the Edge Ice Arena in Bensenville) and has 2 goals and 5 points in the Steel's first five games of the 2009-10 session. Both Jake (whose official Steel bio lists his favorite NHL player as Sean Avery) and Dean are considered late-bloomers by elite youth

hockey standards and neither are on NHL scouts radar currently as priority prospects. At this point, both appear headed to careers bouncing around the minor leagues.

Should Dean fulfill his commitment to Michigan State his father would be 50, turning 51 when he turns pro. Jake has yet to commit to a university but appears headed that way. It's not a good bet father Chris can remain healthy enough after consecutive seasons in Detroit with stints on the LTIR to hang around another four seasons. Unless of course he takes a year off and then comes back. Which in today's game, isn't the best idea either.

So the question becomes why is Chelios doing this? Selfishness? Maybe. Piety and the game he loves? Perhaps. Self-absorbed interests? You think?

Is it too much to ask of a great athlete to simply know when to say "this is enough"? When the zeros and then numbers on the contracts continually dwindle and then general managers stop calling, is this not a sign your time is up?

In other entertainment venues artists can live long past their prime because their artistry is not nearly as demanding nor must the paying fanatics endure in moments of pain or regret during the performance.

Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Pete Townshend, Roger Daltrey, and even a personal favorite Bob Dylan can still draw an audience because their larger than life presence can repress reality for a simple two hours enough to give their fans an avenue to relive an experience they can't seem to let go of.

In music, it's possible for a greybeard to hang out long past their usefulness because they can still provide a rush so few others are able to stimulate. Based on his last two seasons

in Detroit, moments like those will be few and far between on the roads ahead of Chelios. On the ice, Chelios simply does not belong.

It's not a harsh valuation, more so a sad one. The day that Pete Townshend can no longer torch his Stratocaster with his trademark windmill strokes will be depressing, too. But when that day comes, I also won't root for him again to try either.

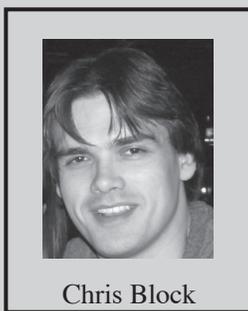
There's still a decent chance injuries could incite a call to Chelios before the year's out. But what for? Another week or two playing six minutes a game then seeing shots of Chelios watch games from March on from the press box? Not for me.

Was it 'cool' to see Chelios on the ice (forget about for which team) at Wrigley Field playing in a professional outdoor game at the age of 46? Sure, until it was obvious his day in the old ballpark would conclude after a few gratuitous early period shifts and then out of the way of the Wings' main objective - winning a hockey game. Personally, that was the moment I felt dignity should have taken Chelios over. Obviously not.

It's time to say "when", Cheli. You've put forth an amazing career with three of the best and most storied organizations in sports, and you did so, or 95% of it, at the highest level possible. Watching you go out in a rinky-dink cement box in front of 2,300 fans on a Wednesday night is not the way this should be.

Will I be lured into a game Chelios plays at Allstate Arena or one of the surrounding franchise's buildings? Oh yes. I know I won't be able to help myself. If I had to draft a defenseman, I would model him after a late 80's to late 90's Chris Chelios. And as a fan, for ten years, I've been rooting for him to be that player again. And I will still. Even though I clearly see the calendar is a few tears away from 2010. This will be painful.

Cheli, you're one of the very best ever. Go out like one. The only shame is you're not.



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