

Block Party

The Time Is Now?

Shootout wins and the NHL's ridiculous three-point overtime system acknowledged, the Chicago Blackhawks today will complete what, point accumulation wise, will amount to the best regular season in this franchise's somewhat storied 82-year history.

Although Rocky Wirtz and team president John McDonough will be on hand today to accept their share of adulation, they too know the Hawks haven't accomplished anything yet. The only successful outcome to this season is raising a Stanley Cup.

There isn't that sense of pressure just yet from observers outside the organization because let's face it; if you take Michael Jordan out of the equation, Chicago isn't exactly a breeding ground for sports greatness. As Blackhawks fans have proved ever since the Olympic break, a great percentage of the fan base is anticipating something to go wrong, because in Chicago sports, something always goes wrong.

The Hawks ride up to the United Center today with the league's second-best record and with a win, can claim the top spot in the Western Conference. If it were to happen, it would be the first time the Hawks would have earned that honor exactly, having only been in existence since 1993-94. But don't you dare call them Western Conference champions until Jonathan Toews, with his hands tied to his hips, is hovering over the Clarence Campbell Bowl in late May.

2009-10 so far has been an exhilarating ride. From Patrick Kane's off ice escapades to his emergence as this franchise's first truly great star since Roenick and Chelios, this has been a coming of age season for him specifically.

Last season proved to us Duncan Keith and captain Jonathan Toews were very good, but their follow-ups kept the team on the rise and made them very rich young men. Under-rated team heroes and breakout seasons from Niklas Hjalmarsson and Troy Brouwer can't be ignored. Marian Hossa is, well, Marian Hossa. Brent Sopel was seemingly everybody's whipping boy until he took the ice in October. It's been a lot quieter ever since. All reasons for the record-setting season.

And while we could wax poetic about this season's long-and-winding road for pages, it was not without a major black spot. Joel Quenneville's colossal mis-management of the number one goaltender position is a storyline that may wind up costing this team a championship.

Whichever side you stood this season on the Huet/Niemi debate is ultimately irrelevant. While Niemi did outperform Huet and is undeniably the right choice at this point, Quenneville's reluctance to pull the trigger on the 26-year old Finnish backstop until a few weeks ago leaves a measure of uncertainty to Niemi's ability to carry the workload for the next two months and 20 to 28 games it will take to become champions. The question isn't so much is Niemi talented enough as 'is he ready?'

Imagine Hawks' GM Stan Bowman's frustration at the trade deadline to be put in a situation by his head coach where he not only didn't know who his go-to goalie would be in the playoffs, but had little evidence to show either's capability to be said "guy". In Detroit, Mike Babcock went to rookie Jimmy Howard exclusively in January and made him the Red Wings undisputed workhouse based on his mid-season evaluation. Quenneville could have done the same with Niemi but instead played a game of cat and mouse.

Niemi's been as mediocre as he's been spectacular. He's avoided being bad and thus has the nets. He's not without holes and advanced scouting at this stage of the year will look to exploit those. As we've painfully witnessed the past week, Niemi is incompetent when handling the puck out of his crease. And once teams figure out he leaves a whole lot of twine to shoot at when attackers get him moving side to side - look out!

Quenneville does deserve a ton of credit for implementing structure, accountability and guiding now, two young groups through terrific regular seasons. Yet his playoff record leaves something to be desired and his performance in particular in last spring's Conference Finals was embarrassing.

Still, there is not a team in the West that the Hawks cannot defeat in a seven-game series. Only three, Detroit, San Jose and Vancouver can

even be considered dangerous. All others are only a challenge in the minds of the paranoid or uninformed.

Should the Hawks finish first and draw Colorado, we could be looking at a first-round sweep. The Avs hung onto a playoff spot simply because they were the best team in the West through November, riding the back of former Hawk, Park Ridge native and Barrington High School graduate Craig Anderson. But these Avs look nothing like those and the long season has taken its toll on a young group as well as Anderson, who started 70 games in his first season as a number one.

Phoenix is superbly coached by Dave Tippett and play a sound team-centric system, but they won't score enough goals to beat the Hawks. Not to mention shootouts are no longer an option and that's how the Coyotes have done a lot of their damage. Ilya Brzygalov is an impressive wild card but unless he's allowed to jump into the rush on the NHL's 3rd-worst power play, Jerry Reinsdorf's new business venture will be one and done in a first-round matchup with the Red Wings.

Los Angeles could cause the Hawks fits, especially in a first round matchup without Brian Campbell or Kim Johnsson on the blue line. Aside from last month's shutout win, recent trips to Staples Center haven't been pleasant experiences and the Kings' size upfront will trouble the Hawks defense. Still, the Hawks have the home ice-advantage in a potential series and they're too good not to get at least one in LA.

Quick inclination would be to fear the pesky Nashville Predators but the truth is the Preds are awful on special teams and as long as the Hawks stay disciplined, that's another quick series.

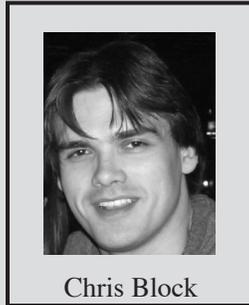
As much as I've forsaken Joe Thornton in the playoffs, a duel with the Sharks still figures to be a war of attrition based on the talent involved. However, I trust the Blackhawks best players far more than I do San Jose's and you should too.

If the Hawks draw the Red Wings at any point this post season, they'd better hope it's late. Like them, respect them or not, the Detroit Red Wings are professional ass-kickers.

They're too experienced and too damn good to go quietly and all the elements exist still for another mid-round emotional freak-out as happened against the Wings last May. For the Hawks to handle their hated adversaries, they'll need to beat them at their own game. Disciplined, great special teams and puck-possession is the only way to get it done and the Hawks will need Brian Campbell to make that easier.

And for those waiting for a Blackhawks in 1991 versus the North Stars or 1993 against the St. Louis Blues style abrupt falling to pieces bust out, you're best chance would be Vancouver. A goalie capable of winning a series all by himself in Roberto Luongo; 3 lines that can score; and combustible elements -- guys like Alex Burrows, Ryan Kesler, Kevin Bieksa and Rick Rypien seem to bring to the table -- all while the Sedins, Demitra and Samuelsson take care of business on the power play are all reasons that January 23rd game in Vancouver was no anomaly.

Even Mario's Penguins and Gretzky's Oilers had some tough battles on the way to hockey supremacy. It won't be easy. Should the Blackhawks get through the West, the Penguins, Capitals or Sabres will likely be awaiting them. And those are probably all tougher matchups than anything the Hawks will see out here. But all winnable if the Hawks are up to the task. They claim to be. Remember, "One Goal."



Chris Block

ChrisBlock@TheThirdManIn.com
BlogTalkRadio.com/TheThirdManIn