

Block Party

Second-itis

Watching Blackhawks fans wilt under the anxieties of an 82-game NHL season is fascinating. Let's just hope the guys on the ice are handling this a little better than the fans in the stands. However, what's especially amusing amidst this team's best season in 17 years, is Hawks' fans overwhelming urge to foreshadow and pinpoint a scapegoat for yet another Chicago sports team's predictable demise.

I suppose you can't blame them really. This is a town of losers and classic underachievers. Only the hardcore White Sox fans seem to recall that organization's World Series win of 2005, its only league championship in the last 92 years. The Bears were in the Super Bowl just a few years back, but aside from the opening kick off, the city would largely like to forget that game ever took place. The Cubs will never win, that's a fact, but that's okay because it fits the 'Cubbies' place on the sports landscape as most endearing losers in sports and entertainment. Aside from basically a nine-year run of greatness from the Bulls, this town doesn't know what winning feels like and is apparently intimidated by the role. And to be honest, we were too in awe of Michael Jordan to thoroughly understand how great and well-rounded those teams were to appreciate them and once he was gone, there were a few million less basketball fans locally.

A byproduct of inhabiting the nation's "Second City," an underlying insinuation as 'second-rate' everything, Chicagoans embrace the underdog. Lost between business and entertainment capitals, Chicago is a town of great food, sights and people, but is rarely mentioned in the same breath as New York or Los Angeles. The result is something akin to middle child syndrome. Desperate for spotlight, we're a town of frontrunners, Monday morning geniuses, and conspiracy theorists. Hence why virtually every backup quarterback has always been favored over the Bears' number one QB. In the minds of the deranged, Kyle Orton is a folk hero, Jerry Krause was a moron, and Scottie Pippen was over-rated. We pick our favorites and build them up to mythical heights, only to tear them down once they cash in on their achievements. You're next, Duncan Keith.

It's hard not to have some sympathy for Cristobal Huet. Those front-running theorists and newly adorned geniuses are gunning for him. The Hawks are great and on-ice results so far tell you they're destined for at least a return to the Conference Finals, but these middle child running around the UC with the blinkers on these days have it stuck in their shallow minds he's useless and unworthy of their love.

To understand how we reached this point you have to go back to how Huet became a Hawk. After three disappointing seasons, Nikolai Khabibulin was entering the final year of his 4-year, \$27M contract just as the Hawks were beginning to make waves again in the NHL. Intent on earning a playoff spot for the first time in seven years, while also affirming the new regime's insistence that all things now were 180 degrees different from the Bill Wirtz led Blackhawks, Dale Tallon was ordered to go out onto the free agent market to plug the team's biggest needs and money was no concern. Tallon did just that, obtaining the puck-moving offensive defenseman who, whether you like him or not you should acknowledge, single-handedly changed the way opponents attacked the Hawks, giving the defense time and space to lead the attack. The other uncertainty at the time was in net. Khabibulin was often injured and performed up or down to the level of his opponent in his first three seasons as a Hawk. The decision by Tallon was to sign Huet, who was stellar in 20 games the spring prior with the Washington, before the Flyers got to his glove hand late in the opening round of the East playoffs. The plan all along was to move Khabibulin, even to the point of barring him from training camp while they attempted to find him a new home. But, a deal with the Kings fell apart after LA got cold feet and Khabibulin was suddenly part of the picture again.

The most over-looked aspect of the 2008-09 season was the Hawks goaltending. What could've been a season-killing disaster turned into the team's strongest position as in the aftermath of humility, Khabibulin rebounded through motivation to prove Tallon wrong and earn himself another large contract. He started last season hot and by the quarter-pole, was Joel Quenneville's number one man. Huet went from being the answer to a part-time gatekeeper.

Lost on Huet critics today is the fact that while Khabibulin started all but the final game of the Hawks 2009 post season run, they made it into the Western Conference Finals with the "Bulin-Wall" being very average on most nights during those playoffs. And if its widely accepted that the Hawks lost to the Red Wings due to inexperience and a lack of discipline, specifically in Game 4 at home, why all the angst for Cristobal Huet? Especially since it was Huet, not Khabibulin, who turned in the Hawks best goaltending performance of last spring, stopping 44 shots in a season-ending 2-1 overtime loss at the Joe.

History tells us the goalies with the best numbers don't necessarily hoist Lord Stanley's Chalice each spring. Chris Osgood owned the league's best goals-against-average in 2007-08 and Ed Belfour had the best save percentage in 1998-99,

but those are the only two times in the last 12 seasons the leader in either category during a single season went on to win the Cup.

Case in point, last year the Pittsburgh Penguins somehow won the Cup with Marc-Andre Fleury between the pipes. His numbers during the regular season were very average. 23rd overall in GAA (2.67) and 21st in save percentage (.912). When the aforementioned Khabibulin led Tampa Bay to a Cup in 2004, it came on the heels of a regular season he'd posted the 21st best GAA and 27th best save percentage.

And some goalies are just good enough and other get hot at the right time. Remember how great Cam Ward played in 2006? He was Martin Gerber's backup that season, and not a very good one at that. A 3.68 goals-against and abysmal .882 regular season save percentage were distant and forgivable memories once Ward was awarded the Conn Smythe.

Chris Osgood has been an on and off again brain damage in Detroit for years, but along the way he was competent enough to backstop two of the Red Wings recent four Stanley Cup teams. Much like Huet, Marc-Andre Fleury is notorious for at least one bad goal a game. And yet the Penguins emerged champions in his wake. Both had their moments, but Tom Barrasso and Grant Fuhr were very lucky men to be apart of teams who could've won with me in the goalie pads.

With Khabibulin off to Edmonton this year, this became Huet's team. The only issue with that hasn't changed from the day he was originally signed, Huet has never been a franchise's number one goalie from beginning of a season to its end. He's split time in LA and emerged from the backup role in Montreal, but he's never played in more than 52 games during a regular season anywhere, and at 34 years of age, he's been the starter for just two playoff teams, both bowing out in first round exits.

After a bad start, head coach Joel Quenneville has been overly cautious with Huet's schedule and managing his confidence. He set a horrible precedent back on October 14th when he started Niemi against the returning Nikolai Khabibulin at the UC. In doing so, Quenneville showed he was terrified of Khabibulin standing on his head and beating his old mates, not trusting Huet to outduel his predecessor. Q has pulled that trick other occasions too. Starting Huet in Edmonton on the November road trip instead of Vancouver the next night; Niemi got call's usually reserved for No. 1's in Pittsburgh and against Boston in December. The result is feeding the anti-Huet frenzy, while affecting Huet's confidence and the team's in him as well.

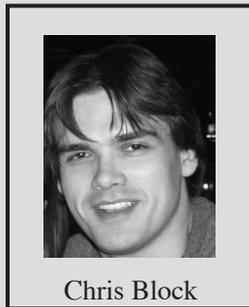
For everyone quick to hand the reigns over to Niemi consider the situation in Washington currently. You think the Hawks have a goaltending problem? Bruce Boudreau yanked Jose Theodore after one bad performance in last year's playoffs and went with rookie Simeon Varlamov. It worked for awhile but the kid hasn't been the same since the league figured him out and Theodore is about as inconsistent as goalie's come these days.

The difference between being a number one goalie in the NHL and the guy who plays once every four games or so is dramatic. Often the coach spots his backup for nights he senses or anticipates his team having a letdown to hopefully have them refocused. A subliminal thing, players 'protect' the backup while the No.1 is expected to stop pucks players will just shrug their shoulder if they get by someone like Niemi.

Don't get me wrong. I like Niemi. Not quite as much as Scotty Bowman does apparently, but one step at a time. You'd have to be a fool or stubborn not to be impressed with most of his season so far. But there have been some fish out of water nights too. If you have him out there 3 out of 4 nights instead of the reverse, those begin to stand out and Indianhead Nation will suddenly be pining for Huet again. Duncan Keith and Brent Seabrook weren't ready to handle what they can now during their first three years in the league. As good as Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews were in their rookie seasons, experience has made them mentally stronger players now in year three. Niemi can learn a lot from sitting where he is now, and spotting appearances here and there. If you believe in the guy and foresee him the goalie of the future, you'd probably not want to crush him under the weight of expectations and pressure coming with this Hawks' season.

Much like Red Wings, Penguins and Oilers, the Blackhawks' successes won't depend on Osgood, Fleury, Ranford, and Fuhr as much as the wealth of talent skating in front of them. The Blackhawks are a puck possession team. Well, they haven't been good at it lately. Turnovers in your own zone and errant breakout passes isn't how its drawn up on the dry erase board, but once they get back to their strength, one bad goal a night, no matter who is letting those by, shouldn't be a reason the Hawks can't be competing for a championship in late May. And you shouldn't be affording them that cop-out.

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