

# Block Party

Provided Marian Hossa is returning sometime soon, and Patrick Kane's "lower-body" issue is indeed a three-week injury, these recent Blackhawks injuries are a blessing in disguise.

Up to this point, the only thing a healthy Blackhawks roster has proven to be is mediocre. They lack consistency, desperation, or a sense of urgency. You could foresee some of these issues popping up on the heels of a Stanley Cup victory, but this is also the same group of players who deny there's a Cup hangover.

So, what's the deal? Are the Blackhawks that much worse after the off season changes? Were Burish, Byfuglien, Fraser, Huet, Ladd, Madden, Niemi, Sopel and Versteeg so essential to the mix of the championship crew? Did Stan Bowman mis-identify his "core"?

For sure, the Hawks miss Byfuglien and Ladd. The rest of those characters are better off gone, with Niemi being a possible exception going forward. While Turco and Crawford have been just adequate so far, goaltending hasn't been a main source of this season's woes.

If Kane misses three weeks, that puts him out of a minimum of seven games, all against conference opponents with better winning percentages than Chicago.

For reasons too hard to compute, although assuredly having little to do with a certain former number thirty-seven, Dallas rides in tonight with the second-best record in the West. After tonight, the Hawks fly out to San Jose and Colorado this Saturday and Monday for two games that should be tough even with a full roster. Then, they return for a five-game homestand with the Avalanche, Red Wings, Kings, Predators and Blue Jackets.

I've been hammering this for several weeks now, but it still remains true and bears repeating: Due to the amount of games every team in the West except for the Ducks have in hand on the Hawks to date, if you project today's standings out over 82 games, Chicago would be on the outside of the playoffs looking in. Even on their current pace (15-12-2) the Blackhawks are targeted for 90 points. That won't be good enough. As of now, and keeping with last year's 8th place finisher, 95 is the number the Hawks would need to claim a spot in postseason.

Hence, this stretch to close out December is crucial. While January and February don't appear as tough as the final six weeks of 2010-11, the position the Hawks least want to be in next, or any month is point-chasing. The Hawks must capitalize in a month that sees 9 of 13 games in their home building.

Someone needs to ignite a fresh fire under this group. With no 81 or 88 to pass off to, responsibility and accountability should spread and unite this team. Troy Brouwer, Viktor Stalberg and Jack Skille now must produce. No excuses. Its now or never for Bryan Bickell. The Blackhawks may not be a playoff team if Tomas Kopecky can't crack 20 goals and Fernando Pisani may be looking for a new home if he doesn't get cracking as soon as he returns. Sharp can't do it alone, Toews must be better. Dave Bolland, well, nevermind.

Stan Bowman will know a lot more about his supporting cast and have all the information he needs going forward to make the appropriate modifications to ensure his team has the right mix to not only reach postseason, but succeed in it. This isn't the apocalypse. The Hawks still have a lot of talent, its just time that talent responds as champions do. Trust me, as long as the big guns are back and 100% in January, this can be a good thing.

## **Fabulous Mistake**

Admittedly, when I stated the case repeatedly in days, weeks and months following the Dustin Byfuglien trade, Byfuglien > Bolland, I had no idea I'd be proven right this quickly.

I had been among those understandably frustrated with Byfuglien's inconsistent production and non-commitment to his defensive responsibilities in the regular season. But unlike those who choose to ignore Byfuglien's coming-of-age postseason, I took notice. Byfuglien is a rare mix of size and skill that very few teams in this league have an answer for. Ask the Canucks, Sharks, and Flyers. If that means nothing to you, and playoff performance means nothing, then you might as well take that shiny new Stanley Cup banner down then.

Invariably, every argument made against Byfuglien by every one of his naysayers is Byfuglien's stretches absent from the scoreboard during his first three NHL seasons, dismissing his transition to a position he'd never before played. Most of those detractors will further try to portray Byfuglien as "lazy", which based on statistical evidence has no basis in fact. Last season Byfuglien led the Blackhawks in hits (215), ranked 5th on the team in takeaways (48) and 4th in shots on goal (211); all categories regularly used by those same pundits to gauge a player's "effort."

Byfuglien's off to an incredible start with the Thrashers; 10 goals, 29 points and 5 game-winning goals prove his 2010 playoff was no fluke. Granted, Thrashers coach Craig Ramsey has flipped Byfuglien back to his natural rushing-defense position, and taken all the creativity out of poor Tobias Enstrom's game because of it, but that's immaterial to the noted argument - It's December, and Byfuglien's producing, in

a big way.

On Sunday, Dave Bolland's two goals (one an empty-netter) broke a drought of 16-games without a goal. That's 16-game string of futility (literal in a Bolland sense) is an 'achievement' Byfuglien did not reach last season. Meanwhile, Bolland sucks the life out of every power play unit he's apart of and he seemingly hasn't improved his most-glaring weakness, faceoffs, in five years as a pro.

Since the Blackhawks are routinely compared, and supposedly modeled, to and after the Detroit Red Wings dynasty, ask a Red Wings' fan this question: Tomas Holmstrom or Kris Draper? Who meant more to the Red Wings' success?

Maybe Stan Bowman secretly holds an underlying reason why he chose to cut bait on a skillful 6'4" 260lbs power forward over a third-line center with limited offensive skill and a bad back. Or maybe he made one fabulous mistake?

## **World Juniors**

When Team USA Under-20 team reunites later this month in Buffalo to defend last year's World Championship, it figures to have a little Blackhawks' flavor. Nick Leddy has been the most consistent defender in Rockford, while Jeremy Morin is the IceHogs' top scoring threat. Both have initially been cleared leave for the pre-tournament exhibition games and selection camp starting on December 16th. With Hossa and Kane now out, the Blackhawks will ponder their option to hold Morin out of that tournament.

In typical Chicago sports fan augur, it is Blackhawks fans want to anoint the 19-year old Morin a new deity of local sports lore based off brief glimpses of promise and little or no results. All indications are Morin will be a good Blackhawk, one day. His game isn't perfect and rushing him does no one any favors. International experiences are what shaped Toews and Kane's quick transition from the amateur ranks to the pros. Morin is mistake-prone at the AHL level and if he can't carry that team's offense, why should anyone expect him to cover for Kane and Hossa while they're sidelined? Morin was an integral part of last year's gold medal roster (while still a member of the Thrashers' organization) as an 18-year old, and will be expected to lead this year's team.

On the Canadian side, Brandon Pirri and Minnesota-Duluth defenseman Dylan Olsen are the Blackhawk hopefuls. Last year, both Olsen and Shawn Lalonde were invited to Canada's camp but did not make the team. Pirri is a long-shot, brought in to this mix if only because he's on a pro roster. Canada is looking to build a roster chalk-

full of grit and role players. They want to be tougher to play against than past teams and Pirri won't fit that mold. Pirri's chances were made even tougher yesterday when Los Angeles agreed to loan center Brayden Schenn to Canada. And there's still a good chance Boston will send Tyler Seguin to Canada (providing temporary cap relief while they activate and pursue a new home for Marco Sturm). Dylan Olsen is almost a lock to make the team now that Brandon Gormley dislocated his kneecap.

2010 2nd round draft pick Ludvig Rensfeldt was named to Sweden's roster. Rensfeldt, a left winger, is now 4th among scoring leaders (14gp, 14g, 14a) in the Swedish U20 Elite League.

The only recent Blackhawks representation on the U.S. roster has been back-up goalie Josh Unice in 2009 (Jimmy Hayes was on this team as well), back-up Joe Palmer and Billy Sweatt in 2008, while the 2007 bronze medal team had Sweatt, Jack Skille and an undrafted Patrick Kane.

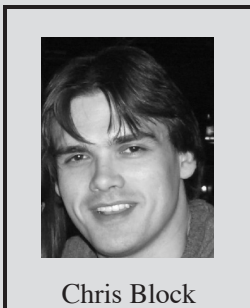
Canada hasn't had Chicago representation since 2007, when Jonathan Toews and Dan Bertram (released by the Hawks last year) skated for them. The year prior, a soon-to-be 3rd overall pick Toews, Cam Barker, Bertram, Michael Blunden, Dave Bolland all were apart of the 2006 gold medal winners in Vancouver.

## **On Down I-90**

Kyle Beach was a healthy scratch on Friday during Rockford's 2-1 road win in Houston. This three weeks after Beach was benched for an entire period during a game at San Antonio. Knowing he was not going to be in the lineup at Friday's morning skate, Beach worked out on the ice an extra thirty-five minutes after his teammates went to the locker room.

While the Blackhawks often brag about the depth they perceive to have within the organization, results so far in Rockford tell a different story. The IceHogs (9-11-0-3) heading into tonight's game with Texas (ironically the Stars' affiliate) own the second-worst record in their conference and third-worst overall in the AHL. But there's more to that story, while Leddy and Morin stand out as certain future NHLers, and Beach if he ever gets his head on straight, there is little else to be excited about at this point. Igor Makarov is learning how to be a role player. While its easy to point out how young the season and some of these prospects are, the IceHogs are repeating the same mistakes over and over again and are slow in responding to head coach Bill Peters.

*ChrisBlock@TheThirdManIn.com*  
*BlogTalkRadio.com/TheThirdManIn*



Chris Block