

Block Party

When Everything Smells Like Horseshit, Down Here On The Farm

Each year about this time the esteemed editor of this publication asks me to rundown the current works of the top Blackhawks prospects applying their trade for the team's minor league affiliate, Rockford IceHogs. So without further ado, let's do this. The Hogs have been better of late, just getting back to .500 (12-12-1-4) but remain last in their division.

Jeremy Morin, 19 (W)- [19gp/7g-4a/+2/34pim] Morin has routinely been Rockford's most dangerous weapon offensively, but it went to another level last weekend after his most recent demotion to the IceHogs. Each time Morin touched the puck the home crowd erupted, sensing something good was about to happen. Morin is the youngest player the Blackhawks have under contract and he's also the youngest player in the AHL. His hands aren't elite-level, but they're special and his instincts are great. His neutral zone coverage still needs some work and he has that coast and reach knack when backchecking that still plagues Patrick Sharp from time to time. Next fall Morin replaces Brouwer or Stalberg on the left side.

Nick Leddy, 19 (D)- [22gp/2g-8a-/7/2pim] If Leddy's to become a Phil Housley type defenseman some day as Scotty Bowman suggests, it's going to take some work, and the wheels are in motion. While Leddy's game was solid, yet non-descript in his first ten games or so after being reassigned from the Blackhawks, lately he's made adjustments. Whether on his own or at the behest of coaches or other Hawks' staff, Leddy's game has taken an assertive and experimental turn. On breakouts, Leddy is challenging opposing forecheckers one-on-one from his own zone and leading the rush when he can. The results are mixed. His speed and mobility allows him to do it, but once he gains the blue line he doesn't seem to know where to go from there. He's better than Duncan Keith was at 19, but the stakes are higher at the next level than they were when Keith started as a pro. It's an interesting debate as to where he fits long term. Leddy likely can't be a top pair guy in Chicago. Dylan Olsen ultimately will skate beside Campbell. Hjalmarsson won't live out the life of his contract in a Blackhawks sweater. Does Leddy spend two years in Rockford training to fill Campbell's role, or will Leddy one day make Keith expendable? Its clear Stan Bowman sees Leddy as a top four guy eventually.

Kyle Beach, 21 (LW)- [28gp/5g-7a-/13/72pim] Beach turns 21 in eighteen days. Of his 72 penalty minutes, not one is a single minor for what would be considered a 'hockey penalty'. Kyle has been in six fights, had his hand raised once. Other than that he's busy slashing, boarding, roughing and mouthing off. Beach is a game in and of himself. Occasionally he pops in with an effort to drool over, but those have been too few and far between. He's struggled with consistency and he's too easily side-tracked. Beach had been benched for an entire period and a healthy scratch for on-ice disciplinary reasons already this year. His best play is to watch tapes of the latter half of Brendan Shanahan's career, after he dropped the silly stuff. Beach can be that kind of player. But he must focus. Eighty percent of his shots are from forty feet out or poor angles along the half wall. And he should concentrate on drawing penalties with his size, driving to the net, instead of his mouth and stickwork behind the play. His speed is average but he's slow to the puck and too easy to knock off the puck down low. A lot of work to be done yet in Rockford.

Mathis Olimb, 24 (C/W)- [11gp/3g-3a/E/10pim] Turns 25 on February 1st. Olimb is now in his 4th pro season and is older than seven Blackhawks regulars. A passer; nice hands. A teammate of Dave Bolland briefly on the London Knights, Olimb is beginning catch the AHL pace after 11 games and being sidelined with reconstructive shoulder surgery this summer. He's currently a fixture on the first line with Potulny and Taffe that's been carrying the Hogs in terms of production and consistency.

Brandon Pirri, 19 (C)- [25gp/5g-7a-/7/18pim] Reminds me of Tyler Arnason. Pirri's all-offense and little else. And Colin Campbell would call him "a little faker."

Ben Smith, 22 (W)- [28gp/5g-5a-/8/6pim] In mid-October Smith was Rockford's best forward outside of Morin. His instincts are good in every zone. He's small (listed 5-10), but solid. Problem is he's proving not to be a finisher and Peters has since dropped him from the PP unit when he has a full boat. Although Smith and Klinkhammer are the first over the boards regularly when the PK is called upon and they've been terrific in that role. The pace of the pro schedule, after four years at B.C., may have caught up to Smith.

Rob Klinkhammer, 24 (W)- [25gp/4g-9a/+2/31pim] Klinkhammer is at his best, as he was in the IceHogs last game against Lake Erie, when he's using his size (6-2, 210) to dive-bomb corners on the dump-in-chase and in front of the net. He's a solid AHL guy; nothing more. Lack of touch around the net kills his prospectus. Klinks recently

ended a streak that saw him scoreless for a month and a half. Still, he's good enough to keep around and a cheap option for recall when needing a fourth-line energy-type.

Evan Brophey, 24 (C)- [23gp/2g-2a-/1/17pim] Brophey has now gone 19 games without a goal, a streak that dates back to before his NHL debut in October. Missed four games recently due to a lower body injury. There's no other way to describe it than Brophey is playing his way out of the organization. Four years ago he was James Neal's center on the OHL champion Plymouth Whalers, a team that beat the London Knights team with Kane, Gagner, Sergei Kostistyn and Steve Mason in the OHL conference finals. As a pro, Brophey's skating deficiencies prompted him to transform into a defensive centremen. But he was a 16 and 14 goal scorer the previous two seasons in equal playing time. This year he'll be lucky to flirt with double digits.

Igor Makarov, 23 (W)- [28gp/3g-9a-/9/16pim] On pace for an eight goal season, Makarov is learning to become a role player as he adapts to the North American game. A regular on the third PK unit, the Blackhawks have clearly identified Makarov as a player whose talents will never be enough to crack the NHL roster's top six, should he ever get there. Early returns show his skills don't project high end, and his ceiling is clearly as a third line checker with some offensive skill. It will take some time though.

In the offensive zone, Makarov is indecisive and fumbles with the puck too much. He recently snapped a stretch of 17 games without a goal and has been dropped to the 4th line in his last two. He'll throw a check but he can't take one. If Makarov is on the wrong end of a collision with any kind of oomph behind it, action stops for a minute or two until Makarov decides if he'll live through it.

Brian Connelly, 24 (D)- [29gp/3g-18a-/3/21pim] Rockford's leading point-getter for the majority of the season, Connelly has been the team's steadiest performer. It's kind of a shame, if he were four inches taller he'd probably be the Hawks 5th defenseman, or at least getting a look there. Like Jordan Hendry, Connelly went undrafted and the Hawks picked him up after his career at Colorado College concluded in the spring of '09.

Shawn Lalonde, 20 (D)- [24gp/3g-11a-/4/25pim] A three-year project; which is fine, since Brian Campbell isn't likely going anywhere over the next three seasons. Lalonde mostly sees the opposition's 3rd and 4th lines, and he's still a train wreck in the Hogs' half of the ice occasionally. The thing that was always mentioned about Lalonde in junior was his skating. He's a good skater, but his booming shot is his best attribute and he's just now starting to use it more on Rockford's power play.

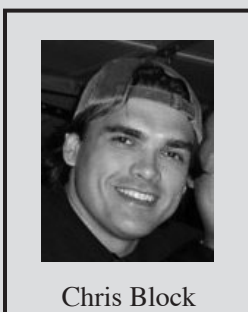
Alec Richards, 23 (G)- [.906, 2.73gaa, 7-7-1-1, 1so] While Hannu Toivonen has largely been really good or awful, Richards' steadiness has earned the more starts. At 6-4, Richards is among the new breed of huge netminders. He was mentored by Mike Richter at Yale, former NHL goalie Robb Stauber back home in the summers and Wade Flaherty in Rockford.

Simon Danis-Pepin, 22 (D)- [17gp/1g-2a-/1/18pim] I don't understand why this guy doesn't get more ice time. You can't teach his size (6-7, 230) and he's improved his footwork. He's a stay-at-home guy who would work well with puck-pushers like Leddy, Connelly or Ivan Vishnevskiy. For much of the season, the lineup card has come down to a Lalonde or SDP. Danis-Pepin gets the call mostly when Rockford's opposed by a strong power play.

Pete Leblanc, 22 (C/W)- [8gp/5g-2a/+1/0pim] It's easy to be high on this guy right now. Leblanc has scored a goal in five of the six games since his recall from Toledo (ECHL) earlier this month. Two of those were game-winners. Leblanc is a well-rounded guy who is currently making the most of his opportunity. He's bounced around the lineup, but produced each time. Currently he's centering the fourth line, but skating on the wing on the second power play unit. His goals are no fluke as he displayed great composure and a nice touch finishing off Lake Erie in OT on the 18th. Originally drafted in the 7th round of the 2006 draft, the Hawks chose not to use a 50-man roster spot on him this summer after graduating from UNH. Free to go anywhere, Leblanc chose to stick close to the Hawks by signing an AHL contract with Rockford. The problem as an NHL prospect is with his size. At 5-10 and 175 pounds he's a midget pitted against most fourth lines and likely not quick enough to keep up on a team's checking line. Still, if he keeps any semblance of the pace he's on, he'll take Brophey's spot on the 50-man next year if another team doesn't swoop in and pick him up first.

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