

Block Party

Starting Early This Year

Is there a week that goes by around here anymore without some degree of controversy? Blindside hits, goaltending carousels, a potential coaching crisis in progress and missing persons reports – just another week of fun at the Madhouse.

First off, let's all get to the same page.

Niklas Hjalmarsson was suspended two games because he hit Jason Pominville recklessly and illegally. Checking another player before that player gets to the puck, or the puck arrives, is against the rules. You can call it interference. But when the point of contact is an arm and shoulder to the number on the back of that player's sweater – we call that checking from behind.

Hjalmarsson didn't maliciously skate to the boards with intent on injuring Pominville, but he did arrive at that spot with intent on taking Pominville out of the play. Hjalmarsson was mostly guilty of mis-timing the hit. The result though was a serious injury and just as in life, there must be repercussions for Hjalmarsson's actions.

The indiscretion intensifies because Pominville was near the wall with his hands down waiting for the puck, unaware and unable to defend himself. Unaware both because he shouldn't need to worry about getting walloped when he doesn't have the puck; and two, because the Hawk defender was coming at him from a blind spot.

You can say Pominville looked over his shoulder towards Hjalmarsson prior to the contact, but you'd only be assuming he saw Hjalmarsson and effectively processed Hjalmarsson's intentions. Even so, it doesn't matter. The responsibility was Hjalmarsson's to respect Pominville's well-being in that situation. He didn't and both paid a hefty price.

Ryan Miller is right when he suggests the NHL needs to change the culture around hockey in regards to these types of hits and player safety. It sounds sensible. However, that "culture" specifically begins with coaches and fans, and the expectations both have of players and the game played on the ice. Don't bet on changes any time soon. Not until a mis-timed check or collision results in a player being paralyzed or killed. And even then, some jackass will say the check was "more from the side than it was behind" or that the victim "didn't defend himself."

-For all the talk of Marty Turco fairing better behind the Blackhawk defense, his flip-flopping sieve-ness is still ever-present.

Even in a dominant performance last night in Columbus, Turco found a way to suck the joy out of the second period and kick the puck into his own net.

For the first thirteen minutes of the season opener in Colorado, Turco looked great, but then things started to fall apart. He did stop 37 of 41 Avalanche shots, but three of those goals were goals Turco shouldn't have let in. His positioning on the Chris Stewart 2 on 1 was comical and both of Stastny's goal should have been stopped. The Hawks managed a point, but they should have come away with two.

If Corey Crawford starts tonight, that will mean he and Turco have evenly split the duties through six games. The Flyers, Red Wings and Sharks (just 2 games played) are the only other teams who have two goalies splitting starts at this early stage. On Thursday though, Joel Quenneville, after starting Corey Crawford back-to-back on Monday and Wednesday, denounced any debate and avowed Turco as his number one goalie.

Judging by Marty Turco's recent comments, not even he believes Joel Quenneville's declaration to the pecking order in the Blackhawk net.

Turco told ESPNChicago, "We have a crazy, busy schedule. So we'll just totally get immersed in this and figure it out when the dust settles."

On Wednesday, after word came down of Crawford getting the call versus the Preds, Turco seemed to relay a message he was getting from his coach after giving up seven goals and going 0-1-1 in his first two starts; "There's an emphasis on winning here and it's still my most favorite thing about the Blackhawks."

Still? He's been here, what, all of four weeks?

The fact is, Marty Turco is only a Blackhawk because he came cheap. He's just here for this year. He'll hope to play well, see a lot of action and try to earn a bigger contract to play elsewhere next season and beyond when he turns 36. Because of this, the Blackhawks won't show him much loyalty, nor should they.

If Niemi couldn't fit in under the Hawks' salary cap and Turco had to be a Blackhawk, to me, Turco is simply insurance for this season.

Turco's an aging goalie coming off two bad seasons. He's never won anything and he has a decorated history of choking against Chicago's most-hated division and conference rival.

Due to player contracts essentially being public record nowadays to anyone with an internet connection or directions to a public library, there's an over-emphasis on player compensation. You'll hear things like "Marty Turco's a great signing – for the money." Well, "for the money" doesn't win games.

"For the money" won't help Stan Bowman with Fernando Pisani or John

Scott now.

No one should be surprised Joel Quenneville is open to giving Crawford an equal opportunity. For the second consecutive season, Q's lost his playoff netminder and last year he exhibited little trust in Huet from the beginning. Even though the separation and deciding factor between Khabibulin and Huet in 2009 came down to prior playoff experience, Quenneville was hesitant to show faith in Huet a few months later after Khabibulin had gone. Now, it appears Turco is under a similar stead.

-Should the Hawks win tonight, they'll be on pace to post a 95 to 96 point season. And that's without Brian Campbell or Dave Bolland having shown up to play in a game yet this season.

Dave Bolland? Certainly you've heard of him?

For the record, here's what the list of former Hawks are up to so far: Andrew Ladd (1g, 2a), Ben Eager (1g, 1a), Dustin Byfuglien (0g, 2a), Brent Sopel (0g, 1a), Antti Niemi (1-0, 2ga, .938), Kris Versteeg (1g, 1a).

While nary a one of the departed championship members are lighting things up at their new homes, Bolland was supposedly kept around because he meant more to this team's future than any of those former Hawks. While we can easily dismiss a slow start if Bolland heats up quickly, there's no getting around the point Bolland's one assist in five games and second power play unit duties is a contributing factor to the Hawks 2-2-1 start.

-While there is a groundswell of criticism emerging in regards to Joel Quenneville's coaching thus far, I'm not ready to go there.

If among your main complaints are the excessive amount of minutes Duncan Keith is playing this early in the season and conversely, the ice time Viktor Stalberg and Jack Skille are lacking, you can look at those issues a different way.

With Duncan Keith playing more than half of each of the first four games, Quenneville is sending a clear message to management that his hands are tied; he needs better options.

Q's job is to win games. Captain Serious wants to win every game. It wasn't all that long ago the Blackhawks supposedly fired a head coach because he got off to a 1-2-1 start. Like any good coach,

Quenneville is playing his best players and giving the team its best chance to win every night. Right now, he's short-handed and seriously lacking in quality of depth in certain areas. There are small things you can pick at, but for the most part, Quenneville is doing the right things.

While most people see the good in Nick Leddy, Niklas Hjalmarsson is clearly hemorrhaging so far teamed with Leddy in having to carry the load on the second pairing without Brian Campbell. When Nick Boynton is the Blackhawks 3rd best defenseman right now, that's saying all you need to know about the state of the defense.

I'm not surprised fans are calling for more shifts for Skille and Stalberg. They've played fine to better than fine for the most part. They're fast. Skille hits people. But where are the results? As good as they may look at times against the opponent's third and fourth lines, Skille and Stalberg still just have 1 goal and 1 assist between them to show for it. Their rush seven minutes into the second period last night in Columbus is the rule more than it is an aberration – Stalberg gains the blue line; falls down; passes to Skille, who fans on the one timer. Classic stuff. In a way, you're right. I'd much rather see that, and less Patrick Kane or Marian Hossa. Or not.

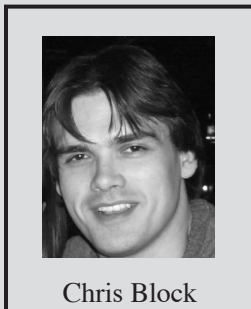
Quenneville's stubbornness with Stalberg in particular I must commend. After all, Stalberg, by most keen observer's judgment, lost the pre season competition with Jeremy Morin for the theoretical "final" roster spot, yet still stuck around while Morin was sent to the minors.

Stalberg coasted through much of his exhibition action. As a newcomer on a defending Stanley Cup Champion team no less! He should be held to a higher standard and no one should be gift-wrapping ice time for him based on tough luck and guessing what he might do against the opposition's better lines.

If the duo can string together another week of solid efforts in limited 15 shift outings, then I'd give them more time. Right now, until they start putting the puck in the net against their current level of competition, they're best utilized strategically in spot duty for their speed and pressure forechecking.

Until then, keep your head up. Last time the Sabres were in this building, Drew Stafford hunted Duncan Keith down in open ice and knocked the future Norris king into the land of confusion. Keith missed five games with a concussion. Chicago won the game 4-1.

What are the chances the two sides call it even and stick to hockey tonight?



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