

Block Party

Say A Prayer For The Dying

The Chicago Blackhawks 2010-11 season has entered the ICU.

Many of us saw this coming. Yet, it's a bitter pill to swallow when reality comes knocking. The Vancouver Canucks come to United Center Sunday night looking to put the fatal wound in the 2010 and defending Stanley Cup champions' repeat bid.

The Hawks simply cannot skate with Vancouver, the league's best team. They're doing all they can just to keep up. I'm certain Kane, Sharp, or Toews will show up this week and the Hawks will win a game or two, but it'll be too late. The Hawks have not come back to win a series after dropping the first two on the road since 1968. Sixteen series with the exact scenario have gone by since and the Hawks 0 for 16. The Flyers did it to Boston last year, but this year's Hawks don't compare to last year's Flyers.

Cap constraints, turnover, new faces, and questionable maneuverings had the defending Cup champs behind from the start of training camp.

Logic figured the Hawks would be a very good team all season, hit a wall at some point and fall short of its 'One Goal'. They were, somewhat and they did - and now the Canucks are here to make certain of the latter.

What we didn't expect out 2010-11 was for the team to take steps backwards. Brent Seabrook, Niklas Hjalmarsson, and Duncan Keith in particular have made so many mistakes it's hard to recall a time when they were dominant blue liners on a great team. The Hawks are stuck with Keith, who for this season anyway is one of the most overpaid players in Blackhawks' history.

If Jonathan Toews ran out of gas a month ago it's understandable. He's carried the team on his back dating back to mid-November. However, since people started shouting "MVP" from every street corner of the city a month ago, Toews has disappeared. 2 goals and 3 helpers over his last 14 games and while fighting for a playoff spot isn't MVP material.

This Blackhawks season peaked in mid-March after a brief period (Feb 20 - Mar 14) that saw them roll off eight consecutive victories and 20 of 24 points. Toews was dynamite in those games. Looking back, the stretch saved their season and it almost wasn't even enough to get them back to the playoffs.

But after the March 14th tail whoopin' of the San Jose Sharks the Blackhawks reverted back to their mediocre, plodding form. Mediocre, usually followed by confused, rundown, and listless.

The Hawks showed up for games 1 and 2 of this series with the Canucks wearing all four hats.

Toews has been a great playoff performer in his brief career. He's already in the franchise leaders in playoff goals (14) and points (42). Patrick Kane has more goals (19) and just as many points as Toews. So its not like those can't be counted on moving forward. They'll be heard from in some form before this series is over and they'll be better next year.

I'm not sure the same can be said for the rest of this cast though. Patrick Sharp looks like a winner. A few others in the "core" are trying, but they, like Toews, seem to have little left in the tank.

We've excoriated the Hawks' supporting cast and the decisions made assembling it. At this point all that matters is taking what you've learned and salvaging anything worth keeping. And that's where this season stings the most. Of the new players brought in, based on merit and ability, who is there to get excited about moving forward?

Michael Frolik? Yikes. Ryan Johnson? No. Bryan Bickell? Please go away. Chris Campoli? As a sixth defenseman. Viktor Stalberg? If he'd accept a fourth line role.

Unfortunately Stan Bowman is in the exact same position he was a year ago. The team will return in September looking vastly different to the one that it will terminate with this week. He'll have little money to work with if he can't dump salary and he'll lean heavily on a few unproven kids again next year. So what's to say the results will be any different a year from now?

As much as he may not like it, Bowman can't get rid off all his dead weight. He'll have to keep a handful of a RFA's and Troy Brouwer's name is atop that list. He'll be on the prowl for a second-line center and either Niklas Hjalmarsson or Dave Bolland could be the bait. Whether Hjalmarsson is back or not, Bowman must improve the depth on defense.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the season is in regards to Joel Quenneville's handling of the defense. Keith's game turned around in mid-February when he was paired with Nick Leddy. Turned in a positive direction because Keith was forced to refocus and adjust to compensating for the overmatched Leddy. Seabrook and Keith in particular have been pushed to their limits though and we can see the effects on the ice against a team the caliber of the Canucks.

Whatever Bowman does this off season, his prime focus should be refin-

ing his defensive six. When you look at Keith today its not hard to explain why he consistently makes the same mistakes over and over. No matter how badly he plays, Quenneville plays Keith because he has no better option. In fact, the funny thing is, when Keith and Seabrook are bad, it routinely results in them seeing more ice time. Keith played almost 28 minutes in Game 2. Figure that out.

Dissecting Duncan Keith's game over the years is an interesting study. The question on everyone's mind in these times is just who is he and what can we expect from him going forward. One would think Keith surely isn't as bad as he's showing currently. However, his mistakes and habits aren't newfound. He's too erratic and tightly-wound to be a quick fix. That much is obvious. The answer lies somewhere in between. Whatever that is though, is it worth another \$54 million over the next eight seasons?

Marian Hossa, 32, was brought to Chicago as a hitman with his sights set on the Hawks win-at-all costs Stanley Cup run of 2010. They would have been very good without him, but Hossa was the insurance policy. Did it pay off? Well, the Hawks won the Cup. Hossa scored 3 of the Hawks' 78 goals on their run to the Cup. In 24 playoff games with Chicago, Hossa has three goals and 12 assists. Tomas Kopecny has more postseason goals, 4, as a Blackhawk. With another \$39.5M due Hossa over the next five years, are the Hawks getting an adequate return on investment?

Contracts like the ones given to Hossa and Keith are convenient for a high-revenue team looking to compete at the highest level and spend to the cap every year. The risk, however, is if those players don't live up to those contracts you're stuck with them. There are only four or five other teams in the league that can afford heavily front-loaded contracts like Keith's or Hossa's. And those organizations are already operating at or near the cap.

The Duncan Keith were witnessing now is comparable to Dion Phaneuf in Toronto - A player who has all the tools to be great, but is lacking something between the ears to make it all operable. Trouble being, Keith and Phaneuf won huge paydays based off a small body of work and the expectations they could sustain a certain level moving forward six to twelve years.

If Keith, and Seabrook, don't get their acts together over the off season, the Blackhawks will be at this level and in a dogfight to make the postseason again next year.

Where's the help coming from?

Nick Leddy is akin to a Moserati that arrives fresh from the factory without power steering. But instead of sending that luxury car back to the plant, there's its owner, behind the wheel trying to weave in and out of traffic. It's not Leddy's fault he's being pushed too soon. He was just beginning to handle the top defensive workload in Rockford when he was rushed to the NHL by Stan Bowman.

New Hawks fans have put the cart in front of the horse and penciled Leddy in as a future Norris Trophy winner. 'Poise' is a term people throw around when they don't have anything else nice to say. Yes, there are certain comparables to Keith early on in his career, but few remember (because there were only 10,000 people here and another 10k that lie and claim they were) it took Keith four years of learning through mistakes in relatively inconsequential NHL games to come into his own as an emerging top NHL defenseman and then a Norris Trophy candidate.

Brian Campbell had a great year. Anyone telling you different is a fool. He should be on the scoresheet more for a player of his caliber but when you consider he's been carrying the weight of Niklas Hjalmarsson all season, you can cut him a little slack.

One small matter of consequence will come up in July. That's when Scotty Bowman's contract expires. Whether right or wrong, the common perception is the elder Bowman is the one pulling the strings in hockey operations. At the very least its hard to argue the impact Scotty Bowman has had in his three years in the Blackhawks' front office. After all, the demotions of Denis Savard and Dale Tallon were his handy-work. But its time for Scotty Bowman to step aside and to allow Stan to sink or swim on his own. Stan may or may not become a good GM, but as long as Scotty's looming over hockey operations Stan will never get the credit he deserves if he does retool and attain new success. If he wins, he'll have to share the spotlight with daddy. If he fails, he'll take all the heat.

It's difficult enough to be a GM and build a career in hockey. A GM is only as good as his scouts and the staff he surrounds himself with. Stan deserves better. So do Kevin Cheveldayoff, Marc Bergevin, Mark Kelley and others in hockey ops. Believe me, I'd much rather see playoff hockey continue on well into the spring. It will; just on the out of town scoreboard.

Crossing that bridge with the lessons I've learned.

There's a light through that window. It's next year. See you then.

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