

Block Party

Suggestion Box

One thing struck me going back and watching last Friday night's broadcast of the Hawks-Senators game that I felt shined a spotlight on what's wrong with the Blackhawks this season.

In breaking down and assessing blame for the Senators' power play goal at the start of the first period, Eddie Olczyk put Fernando Pisani under the bus for doing the very thing that has been missing since June 9th - being aggressive.

On Daniel Alfredsson's goal, 49 seconds into the middle stanza, Olczyk ranted on and on over Pisani putting too much pressure on Sergei Gonchar as the top pointman quarterbacking the Sens' power play. How soon we forget how these things were done for the last three years. Olczyk tried to make the point that Pisani's overpursuit of Gonchar disassembled the Hawks' zone coverage. If Joel Quenneville and his staff have instructed their penalty killers to sit back in a passive box, then Olczyk is factually correct in this case.

But I wouldn't be so quick to take Olczyk's word for it. After all, what experience did he ever have playing in his defensive zone? And ask Mark Recchi how much he thinks of Olczyk's hockey acumen.

First of all, even if Pisani went into business for himself on the play and pressured the point man against Quenneville's wishes, it is still the responsibility of the weak side forward (in this case Jonathan Toews) to adjust and keep the box intact. If that forward, Captain do-no-wrong, takes a stride and a half forward into the passing lane, Pisani's aggressiveness probably leads to a turnover or a zone clear.

Pisani did everything right on that play. He stepped up, forcing pressure on the last guy back (Gonchar). In doing so, Pisani positioned his stick to his left, sealing off the return pass to Alfredsson along the half wall. What Olczyk failed to point out, or perhaps didn't understand, is that Pisani's pressure left Gonchar with two options. What he wound up doing which was a 35 foot pass to the top of the left circle where Erik Karlsson was positioned for a feigned one-timer, or force the puck through the middle of the ice where the Hawks defense would outnumber the Sens at least initially.

This was a textbook example of how Blackhawks penalty kill units of the past three years would pounce on their opponent's power play and create offense with their aggressive defense, even when they were outnumbered. At the very least Toews needs to adjust to Pisani's push on Gonchar and step up into the middle and keep the Hawks' box (passive or not) in tact until Pisani can readjust. Or, seeing that Gonchar is being forced by Pisani's pressure into the long pass to Karlsson, Toews could make a play to intercept and for an odd-man break the other way or simply a dump-in so the Hawks could change and reset with four fresh skaters. Instead, Toews stood still and watched a Gonchar-to-Karlsson-Alfredsson passing series turn into another PPG against.

There are many issues with the penalty kill right now and its not entirely Jonathan Toews, Duncan Keith or what style of "box" the Hawks set up in. Mike Ribeiro's game-winner last Wednesday night wasn't the result of an unfortunate bounce of Niklas Hjalmarsson's knee. Had Hjalmarsson had his stick in that passing lane, that 50 foot feed from Brad Richards would have never made it to Ribeiro and that puck would have been cleared. Keith's lazy foot in cement, two-handed axe-handle attempt as Brendan Morrow was trying to settle a puck that had just struck him in the face exemplified his lack of enthusiasm for protecting the front of the Hawks net. Bad bounces and bad breaks happen. But not like those last Wednesday or in Toews' case on Friday. Those were gifts of laziness.

It's easy to jump on John Scott, Quenneville's wacky line combinations or Stan Bowman's love of seventh defenseman, but the culpability lies with this team's leaders.

Did you know that Marian Hossa's drawn just three penalties all season? Yeah. One per month, so it should be coming again any time now. Heck, Viktor Stalberg's created four times as many power plays on his own.

Troy Brouwer is an impending RFA who the Hawks may or may not have dough for next season. His intangibles make him difficult to part with. Brouwer is the Hawks leader in hits and is the best secondary option they have on the power play. But that also makes him the most desirable asset Stan Bowman may be willing to part with and the Hawks have needs.

For various reasons, mostly self-inflicted and salary cap induced, the Blackhawks have been in a constant back-peddle mode since they touched down at O'Hare the morning after raising the Cup after Game 6 in Philadelphia.

Giving Stan Bowman the benefit of the doubt now, which I don't believe he's earned, but I'll award him in this case only, the signing of several shit players on minimum contracts over the summer has given him the flexibility now to improve his roster for a playoff push. If he planned it this way I'd be willing to bet he didn't think his precious "core" would have let him down to the point they stand today. Bowman could be a "seller" in a few weeks if the team hits the skids.

Now, granted, had he re-signed just Jordan Hendry and not John Scott

and Nick Boynton, Bowman could have brought a professional defenseman to town instead and perhaps the need to cannibalize floundering NHL rosters wouldn't exit today. But again, we'll play along.

While Bowman simply didn't have the cap space to replace all of the components of the Stanley Cup team, he has enough now to get the job done. But, like his team, the need to get aggressive starts now.

The guys Bowman would be most-willing to deal would include Jack Skille, Brouwer, Kyle Beach, Tomas Kopecky, and possibly Viktor Stalberg. I say possibly because its hard for me to believe Bowman would be willing to admit a mistake this early in his tenure, but if he got the right return, he could spin it any way he wanted.

Guys like Pisani, Boynton, and Ryan Johnson can easily be released or buried in Rockford. John Scott has another year left on his deal. You figure that one out.

First and foremost, and like tomorrow, the Hawks need another defenseman. The target should be a two-way guy, mobile who skates top four minutes anywhere else in the league, but slides in here as the # 5 guy. The perfect acquisition would be Buffalo's Steve Montador. He should be the first and primary target on Bowman's radar and it's a deal he can get done very soon with the right parts.

After that's done, Bowman should address a group of forwards that's softer than my midsection these days.

Here's a list of suggestions for Stan, starting with Montador. I'm sure Stan will appreciate it.

Steve Montador: D – Sabres, 6-0, 207, \$1.55M, UFA (31) Tough as nails two-way defender who can play either special teams unit and is one of the league's better shot-blockers. A late bloomer, Montador is one of better bargains around. That also makes him a valuable commodity for Buffalo and thus the rate of return they seek won't be cheap. If they like Beach I'd make him a part of the deal. Montador is a B.C. boy too, so he'd fit right in. Montador leads a bad Sabres

team in plus/minus (+10) and skates more than 20 minutes a night in all situations. There's no reason to doubt he wouldn't thrive here playing 14-18 minutes a night alongside Hendry or Hjalmarsson. Montador's moved around a lot in his career and Chicago would no doubt be a nice place for him to settle in at a reasonable number next year skating with Nick Leddy or Dylan Olsen.

Curtis Glencross: LW – Flames, 6-1, 200, \$1.2M, UFA (28) Again, because of Glencross's cap hit, this is a deal that could get done tomorrow with no trouble. While Jeremy Morin excites fans, Glencross is a complete forward who can bring the physical every night and doesn't mind getting involved in the high traffic areas. Not a fighter, but would add an element of team toughness the Hawks sorely lack right now. **Ben Eager: LW – Thrashers, 6-3, 225, \$965k, UFA (26)** Given recent developments and the fact Eager has been on the outs with coach Craig Ramsey for some time would lead you to believe Eager is available to whomever presents Rick Dudley with the least insulting offer. Eager, in addition to Glencross, assuming Skille and another winger (Stalberg/Brouwer) moving in a deal for a defenseman would immediately address the issue of the Hawks being too soft up front. Eager, Dowell and Kopecky sounds like the perfect fourth line.

Other options:

Craig Rivet: D – Sabres, 6-2, 207, \$3.5M, UFA (36) Consummate team player whose spent the latter half of his 16-year career sticking up for teammates on small-ish teams. He's a bigger, older, less mobile version of Montador and has very little value to the Sabres beyond this season. So, Bowman would want to be stingy on the exchange. His cap hit would also likely prevent the Hawks from doing this deal until closer to the deadline.

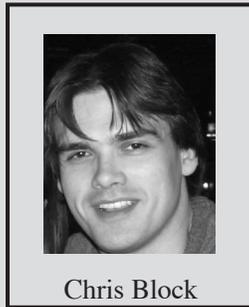
Chris Phillips: D – Senators – 6-3, 220, \$3.5M, UFA (32) This 13-year NHL vet turns 33 in March. Phillips is the former 1996 1st overall draft pick who never sniffed the Brian Leetch type prospectus, but the Senators are hoping to get a good young player and middle round draft pick in return.

Marty Reasoner: C – Panthers, 6-1, 205, \$1.15M, UFA (27) Acquired this summer originally in the Byfuglien deal, Bowman sent him to Florida for Jeff Taffe when he suspected he'd need the room for Antti Niemi or another goalie's contract. Reasoner's having a good season centering Florida's third line and would be a nice throw-in if you could do the following....

Stephen Weiss: C – Panthers, 5-11, 195, \$3.1M, (exp 12-13) This is a shot in the dark but I'll throw it out there. Check with Dale. How much does he love Dave Bolland, really? Weiss would push Sharp back to the left wing where he wants to be and then you wouldn't have an overpaid, brittle third line center who your coach insists on pushing on the power play. Weiss isn't as useless in his own zone as he once was and he'd fill the void at center on the second power play unit as well.

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