

Block Party

Simple Equation

You can put your pencils and notepads down. The only thing left to learn about these 2010-11 Chicago Blackhawks is how bad the “core” wants to win at this point. Two, how far they can drag the dead weight Stan Bowman has anchored to what remains of the 2010 Stanley Cup champs.

One look at Cpt. Scowl-face and the ever-present expression tells the story. This team can’t accomplish much if 50, 19, 10, 88, 2 and 7 aren’t hovering near perfection. Throw Marian Hossa into the mix and you might have something, but those who remember last spring and have paid close attention this season should know better than to count on him.

Brian Campbell has sacrificed some offense to be a little more dependable in his own end. He’s needed to. His partner for most of the season, Niklas Hjalmarsson, has been a mess for the most part. Good luck out East next year, Nik. Campbell’s plus-28 rating is second best in the NHL right now. It’s a little misleading since his pairing draws the opposition’s secondary scoring line, but that’s no different than last year and Campbell’s offensive production has remained steady and his defense has improved, while Duncan Keith has gone backwards in both cases.

It’s about time we call a spade for what it is. Outside of the aforementioned, adding Dave Bolland and maybe Troy Brouwer, there’s a bunch of guys in this locker room who should consider themselves lucky to be Blackhawks for the time being.

Fans, observers and beat reporters alike so far have afforded this team the benefit of the doubt. And for the most part, so have I. Put up or shut up has been knocking for some time. Tonight would be a good night to skate like champions again.

Brouwer hasn’t scored a goal in 12 games and has just two in his last 19, all while averaging fifteen minutes a night. You can cut him a little slack considering his current center isn’t of NHL-caliber. Maybe on Long Island or Florida there’s a place for Jake Dowell, but there shouldn’t be one for him in Chicago next season. Though, Brouwer is getting just as much power play time as he was last season and his production hasn’t improved. Through 69 games in ’09-10, Brouwer had 19 goals. This year he has 17. His overall ice time has dropped slightly and that is solely due to not being used on the PK as much. Brouwer’s hitting more but that’s primarily because the Hawks have the puck less. He’s shooting more, but getting his shot to the net less and his defense has taken a stride back.

The Hawks need a big finish from Brouwer and he’ll need one too if he wants to stick around and seek a nice pay increase to boot.

Michael Frolik is about the worst Blackhawks center I’ve seen since, well, Jake Dowell or Tomas Kopecky. SuperCuts Stalberg & Pisani will be appearing for a limited time only. I’ve been very critical of Hossa for the past year, with good reason but I really felt bad for the guy on Sunday. Stuck on a line with two dunce caps like Frolik and Bryan Bickell is no way to spend an afternoon. The Hawks may have to get by with those two as bottom-sixers next season, for cap purposes, but Bowman will need to find a great passer with a ton of patience to pivot between them. Bickell thinks he’s Mike Bossy when the reality is he’s not even Adam Creighton. Frolik has never seen a weak angle he didn’t release a soft wrister from. Outside of Sharp, no one on the team attempts more shots per shift than Frolik. In that sense he’s no change from Jack Skille. The trade off was Skille’s physicality for Frolik’s defense and versatility. Actually, scratch the latter.

Chris Campoli was a pathetic swing and miss deadline acquisition from a GM who explicitly stated his needs in the weeks leading up to Feb 28th. Bowman said he needed help on the penalty kill; a forward (at different points he expressed a plain PK forward, then specifically a center) and a defensive-defenseman to help seal those holes. Campoli didn’t address any of that. Some have been fooled into taking Campoli as an upgrade for the injured Jordan Hendry, of course ignoring the fact Hendry was the 7th defenseman Quenneville wasn’t going to play anyway. Campoli was brought in to do everything Nick Leddy can’t at this point. That’s the reality. Campoli is the upgrade from Leddy while the gaping hole still exists.

Look for a lot of the top-six up front and top-four defenseman the rest of the way, because that’s the only way.

Leddy’s poise is great. Yet, he’s mesmerized by the puck and doesn’t touch the ice during with either of the special teams and you see less and less of him in important situations and tight games. Since last summer, we’ve been force-fed the hype, but it remains to be seen how good Leddy can be. There have been far worse charity roster spots given away in this town, but Bowman insistence on rushing Leddy has been a part of the problem, not the solution. When the defensive pairings were juggled, Leddy and Keith were paired to protect the youngster and ground Keith. Don’t kid yourself. Brian Campbell skated 7:05 in yesterday’s game at Washington, nearly half of which was regulated to the power play. Is Nick Leddy really that useless or untrustworthy in the coaches’ eyes that Campbell on one leg is still better than Leddy, even with a man advantage? Obviously so.

Chicago enters tonight in a playoff spot (7th) by just two points. They’re fortunate in a sense with the three teams directly underneath them, they have just one game remaining; being with Anaheim at the UC on March 26th. They’re done with Nashville and Calgary and still have single road games coming up this week with the two teams directly above them, Dallas and Phoenix.

At this point, the Hawks can still say they control their own destiny. Scoreboard watching is for losers. Don’t be that guy.

However, the terrain gets tougher from here. In nine of their final thirteen games, they’ll face playoff contenders and favorites. They have three left with Detroit and face Boston, Tampa, and visit the always tough Molson Centre in Montreal. Even divisional matchups with the Blues and Jackets won’t be easy and the lone “gimme” opponent, Florida, just killed the Hawks 8-game victory road.

With a heavy reliance on the top dogs this year, there’s a legitimate concern as to how much those guys have left. The recent surge was led by Toews, Crawford and a refocused Keith. Sprinkle some timely scoring in there against middle of the road opponents and you came out with 8-straight wins. On outside of that now, the Hawks have dropped three straight. Yeah they got two points, but they lost two of the three outright. Who are these Hawks and what are they capable of? No one knows for sure.

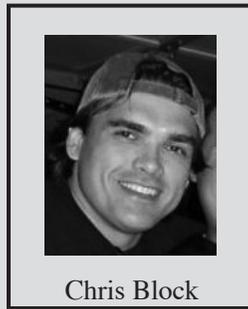
Think back to last year, it was at this very point last season when the team hit the skids.

Actually, after a Sunday afternoon 4-3, overtime loss to the Caps also put the Hawks down for the third consecutive outing. From there, the Hawks, without Brian Campbell, went on to lose 4 of their next 6 and overall, 8 of 11.

A repeat of that and they’re won’t be a postseason... All-you young hockey players out there.

The Hawks will excel as far as the “core” takes them. They’ll need a healthy Bolland, Campbell, and Hjalmarsson too.

The reality is if this team can regain that confidence they captured in late February, anything’s possible. But missing the postseason is just as possible, too. This is nothing like last year. And, in a way, it’s more fun that way.



Chris Block

Hart of the Matter

With Sidney Crosby down for the count apparently and Toews looking unstoppable recently, it’s become popular to hype Toews for the Hart Trophy. Never one to run with the in-crowd, we’ll take a step back first to give this a thorough-over. Right now, you could make just as strong of a case for Corey Crawford for team MVP, but no one with a clue is stating a case for him over Thomas, Price, or Luongo for the Vezina, let alone the Hart. There’s no debating Toews is the force driving the Blackhawks. Being said, that responsibility doesn’t come and go conveniently.

Toews has posted 12 goals and 31 points in his last 20 games, numbers that date back to the Minnesota game right before the All-Star break. Toews has 69 points in 67 games overall. So, 45 percent of his points have come in the last twenty games. When he scores, the Hawks are 16-5-1-1.

The Hawks started the season 9-9-1-1. Toews also started slow, collecting just five goals and nine assists in the team’s first twenty games. This span included the two home losses to Edmonton and, at the time, a pitiful Devils’ team, all inside regulation. Speaking of which, if the Hawks had those six points they’d be two points behind the Red Wings for the top spot in the Central division. But, what’s done is done. The team wasn’t ready to play on those three consecutive home games in a ten day span and it’s a principle reason they are where they are today (not giving a damn for a Dec 3rd home date with rival Vancouver looked awful then and now too). The captain had two points and was a minus-4 in those games. He should share in the culpability of today’s uncertainty, no?

In the games Toews has played the most, the Hawks are 4-10-2-4. In the same scenario (top 20 ice times) at this point last season, that record was 11-6-0-3. The average of those top-20, this season as compared to last year sees only a slight jump, surprisingly, 23:11 from 22:41. We know it’s unpopular to question the Chosen One, but that stat is a difficult one to ignore.

Let’s be clear, if Crosby were healthy Toews wouldn’t sniff the Hart conversation. Crosby hasn’t played in two months and he’s still 11th in league scoring. Toews has played in twenty-six more games than Sid and still has three goals to go before he matches Crosby’s 32. And both Sedin twins, Stamkos, Brad Richards, and Jarome Iginla will figure into this equation too.

If Toews can continue the pace he’s set in the past two months, there may be no denying him that award. More importantly, it’s a prerequisite to right the wrongs of the first quarter just to get his cavalry into the postseason.

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