

Block Party

One Worth Waiting For

Nick Leddy's acceleration into the top-4 has calmed nearly all fear Brian Campbell's exit would cripple the Hawks' depth. With young prospects like Dylan Olsen (2009, 1st rd #28), Shawn Lalonde (2008, 3rd rd #68), Joe Lavin (2008, 5th rd #126) and non-drafted signings Brian Connelly and Ryan Stanton patrolling the point in Rockford, Stan Bowman probably rest assured he had plenty of talent in the pipeline if Leddy stumbled.

To this point, however, Rockford allows the most goals against in the AHL. It's true though, too much blame has been placed on the IceHogs blue line for the team's defensive woes. The goaltending has ranged from average to turn your head away bad. Many times, the IceHogs are their own worst enemy. Trouble usually begins with the zone-exit pass and taking chances instead of just playing it safe and getting the puck deep, leading to turnovers. From there, the defense is in a scramble and the forwards don't provide much help at times. The defense isn't as bad as it looks on paper, but it's not like it'll produce three or more full-time NHLers either.

However, there is one cant-miss on the IceHogs blue line. He's still a half season away, but Dylan Olsen is looking like that guy.

Blackhawks fans have longed for a big, mean, shut-down defenseman to eat minutes, kill penalties and take some of the burden off stalwarts Brent Seabrook and Duncan Keith.

With only a half season of pro hockey under his belt, 20-year old Dylan Olsen was the final defenseman cut from training camp in October. There, Olsen impressed Joel Quenneville with the strides he made in conditioning and his quickness all over the ice.

Now in Rockford, Olsen is sharpening his rough edges. When he was sent down, Olsen was told to concentrate on his positioning, and learning to make smart, quicker reads. Olsen physically plays a lot like Seabrook when he first turned pro but its way too early to tell offensively.

"Right now, I think I'm doing really well at shutting down the top guys on the other team," Olsen told The Committed Indian.

"I'm focusing on moving the puck; making smart plays and passes. Getting up ice and trying to do what I can to help out offensively but knowing the proper times of when to pinch in the offensive zone."

Olsen does boast a heavy shot. His offense isn't what will earn him a job at the NHL level (he has one point in 27 games this season and just five overall in 69 career AHL contests) but he does move well carrying the puck. He makes smart plays and his offensive skill set should translate better at the NHL level, but he'll always be defense-first.

"His strength is being a solid stay-at-home defenseman," says IceHogs head coach Ted Dent. "We expect Dylan to take care of his end and be a plus-player at the end of the night."

"And if he can chip in on some offense here and there that's great, but that's not what we're looking for him to do. Just make a good first pass on breakouts and be responsible in his end and defensive zone coverage."

With Olsen, being defensively responsible is not a goal, it's what he thrives on. Despite his lack of production in the offense and being on a team that gives up the most goals against in the AHL and matching up with the opposition's top lines most every night, Dylan Olsen has never been worse than a minus-1 in any IceHogs game this season. He's been a minus in 9 of the 27 games he's played. The team is 2-5-1-1 in those nine.

Olsen, who turns 21 next Tuesday, knows there is always room for improvement in his game, but he prefers to focus on his defense.

"Learning how to play my two-on-ones a bit better," Olsen said when asked specifically where he's looking to improve. "Just stick placement and all of that. Other than that though, I think I've been playing pretty well."

Dylan is the son of former pro, and one-time Calgary Flames defenseman, Darryl Olsen. Dylan has a younger brother Dalton, 18, who also plays defense and has been up and down for the Vancouver Giants of the major junior WHL this season.

Packing up and moving seemingly each year in the life of a journeyman minor league hockey pro, Dylan lived in Salt Lake City, Providence, Italy, Austria, the United Kingdom and three different cities in Texas, all before his 9th birthday.

At that point his father retired and settled in the family's roots back in Calgary. Darryl Olsen also played one season in San Diego under head coach Rick Dudley, who was a part of the Blackhawks scouting staff who identified Dylan Olsen prior to the 2009 Draft. Dudley resigned a week before the draft, which was a sign of things to come as Dale Tallon was fired (or reassigned to a mythical advisory position) less than a month later.

Although a Calgary native, Dylan's father matriculated four years at Northern Michigan University from 1985-89. Dylan says it was a mutual desire for son to follow in father's footsteps.

"Growing up I always wanted to go to school. My dad went to school and that was always his dream as well, for me to go to school."

Olsen chose the Minnesota-Duluth Bulldogs over Medicine Hat (WHL), who drafted and owned his junior rights, but wound up staying in Duluth barely a year and half before turning pro. Reportedly, Olsen was in jeopardy of facing academic ineligibility for the second semester

when he signed is entry-level deal with the Blackhawks.

When Olsen left school this time last year, UMD was the top-ranked team in D-1 college hockey. Even without Olsen, they went on to win the NCAA Frozen Four national championship.

For Olsen, the decision to leave school, he says, was not a tough one.

"You know what, I can't say it was hard," Olsen admitted. "I was happy with my decision and I still don't regret it."

"They got what they wanted and I got what I wanted," he told us. "I'm happy for the boys. They deserved it. They worked hard. We're still friends. No hard feelings with me for leaving. I went back there after the season and hung out with them. And we had a good time celebrating their championship."

Olsen was away from his Minnesota-Duluth teammates playing for Canada in the World Junior Championships in Buffalo last December when everything went down and word of Olsen leaving school to sign with the Blackhawks spread on New Years Eve. He played that tournament banged up and was on the ice for Canada's colossal third period collapse to Russia in the gold medal game.

He was give some time to go back to Minnesota and clear out of school before reporting directly to the Rockford IceHogs. Once there, Olsen was eased into the pro game making his debut on January 14th against the Texas Stars. Rockford dressed seven defensemen in the game and Olsen saw only a handful of shifts.

Jumping in mid-season was admittedly harder than Olsen imagined.

"Last year, you know what, it wasn't as great as I expected," he said in referencing his 4 points and -18 rating in limited action over 42 games.

After three months off, Olsen already showed great advancements in strength and conditioning at July's prospect camp in Chicago. Olsen credited a serious summer workout regime which included boxing training.

Of course some of you probably heard, if you haven't seen the footage of Olsen (6-3) dropping the gloves with 5-11 forward Andrew Shaw for a summer camp ending tussle at Johnny's West. Shaw decidedly won the bout, bloodying the bigger Olsen, who had not fought since the third game of his second season in Camrose.

"That one against Shaw was my first fight in three years," Olsen joked.

Olsen said the two didn't talk about the fight afterwards. "No, not really. I saw him at the airport after that. I had nothing to say to him and he didn't really want to say anything to me."

"We came here to Rockford and we really got to know each other,"

Olsen continued. "He's a great guy. We joke about the fight every now and then. It was just one of those things that happen. He was playing aggressive in that game. He did something in front of our net that I didn't like and we just decided to go at it."

From last year to now, Olsen has really stepped up his physical presence. He makes forwards pay a price along the boards and behind the net. There isn't much flash to Olsen's technique.

"There's a time and a place when a big hits going to be there," he says. "You don't want to go out of your way to make a hit. Its really just reading and reacting. If the physical part of the game is there, take advantage of it. But if not, just continue to keep playing."

Another 'first' Olsen waited a long time for was his first professional goal. He didn't get one last season and he went another 22 this season before tallying one during a 5-4 shootout loss at Milwaukee on December 11.

"The celebration could have been a bit better," Olsen chuckled. "But it was awesome. I'm very happy to get that over with."

It doesn't take long watching Olsen to notice the similarities in his skating and mannerisms to Toronto Maple Leafs blue liner Dion Phaneuf.

"Yeah, Phaneuf was one of my favorite players when he was in Calgary," Olsen explained. "He was the type of guy that I wanted to play a similar style. Growing up I tried to be a little bit like him. And just before the draft teams were telling me that I play a lot like him. I don't mind (the comparison). He's a great player and if I can keep playing like him and for as long as he has that would be awesome."

The comparison isn't completely accurate. Olsen isn't nearly as liberal with the puck as Phaneuf has been at times during his career. But Olsen's game still has room to mature so time will tell.

So far, though, the Blackhawks like what they're seeing.

"They said I had a really good camp," Olsen said. "I did what they wanted. Now, I'm happy to be [in Rockford] and getting better as we move along."



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