

Block Party

Rockford Report

After shedding veteran ace Jeff Taffe and other vets like Jassen Cullimore, Garnet Exelby, Hugh Jessiman, Ryan Potulny and Evan Brophrey, the IceHogs were looking for their young talent to take a step up.

So far that hasn't happened.

Ben Smith, Brandon Pirri and new number one center, veteran Brett McLean, have good numbers. That's the good news.

Jeremy Morin is still getting his legs under him since returning last month from the concussion which sidelined him nearly ten months. At the moment, Rob Klinkhammer has one skate in the press box. Kyle Beach could be done for the season already and second year players like Pete Leblanc and Chris DiDomenico haven't contributed much and were both scratched this weekend in favor of a seventh blue liner.

Rockford is struggling on home ice, having dropped their 5th in a row last night to Peoria. On Friday night in Peoria, the IceHogs had a 6-4 lead with less than a minute and a half to go in regulation but allowed Peoria to tie the game. The Rivermen then won the game in overtime. All this after Rockford scored five unanswered, including four to start the third period, to take that 6-4 lead.

The IceHogs are 1-5-0-0 at home, 5-7-1-0 overall and currently sit firmly in 5th and last place in the Midwest division trailing the 4th place Chicago Wolves by 3 points.

First year head coach Ted Dent isn't panicking but does have areas of concern.

"Overall at home we've had games where we don't have enough guys going on the same night," Dent told the CI after Saturday's loss. "You need 20 guys going at the same time, on the same night, to give yourself a chance to win in this league. So if you only have fifteen or fourteen out of the twenty, it's going to be tough. And most home games this year, we've had that."

"We're just trying to take it day by day and not worry where we are. We're just trying to improve every day and get better."

Almost a fifth of the way into the AHL season, let's take a look at some of the top prospects and how they're doing so far this season.

Kyle Beach was enjoying a good start (3 g, 3a, 8gp) before dislocating his shoulder in a fight at Peoria with Stefan Della-Rover on October 28th. Beach will soon be reevaluated and hopes to avoid season-ending surgery. The injury is a huge blow to Beach's young career as it appeared he was beginning to turn a corner in his development. Some of the same issues remain. He's still over-consumed at times with nonsense behind the play. Beach's skating can still use some work and he really should be stronger and have more muscle on his frame at this stage. But his hands and competitiveness are there, so missing any significant length of time, be it six weeks or 4 to 6 months, will be an unfortunate blow to his future with the organization. It also means Stan Bowman has one less asset to trade when he looks to add for another run at the Cup before the trade deadline.

Brian Connelly is without question, Rockford's best offensive player and most consistent performer overall. Recently Ted Dent referred to Connelly as the IceHogs' Duncan Keith. While that's a bit of a stretch, even relatively, because Connelly still has his issues on the defensive side, he's their best passer and is heavily relied upon to set up Rockford's offense. In his third year as a pro, Connelly is playing the best hockey of his pro career. He's tied with Brett McLean for the team lead in points (1g, 12a, 13gp) and for the moment leads both of Rockford's power play units. He skated nearly 30 minutes of a recent home game and is evolving into a team leader off the ice as well. He's growing too evidently, as he's now listed at 5-11.

Jimmy Hayes has the hands but not enough foot speed or skating ability to exercise his talents regularly at the AHL level. He needs time and there is no rush to get him into a Hawks uniform. There's a good chance his brother Kevin Hayes will leave Boston College after this year and we'll see them together as IceHogs next year. And that will be about the time you can make a true evaluation on Hayes career potential. He's been a fixture on the third line to this point.

Rob Klinkhammer has been a big disappointment. After starting the season with 2 goals and 5 points in 2 games opening weekend, Klinkhammer has gone pointless in his last 10 games. Ted Dent dropped the Klink down to the fourth line this weekend. To make matters worse, Dent dressed seven defenseman in both games this weekend so Klinkhammer didn't get much ice time and each time he did it was with a different centerman. Klinkhammer's game is speed, aggressive forechecking and hustle on the defensive side. His futility last year on breakaways and penalty shots was well documented, but now he's just plain snake bitten and it's evident his confidence is shot.

Shawn Lalonde has a huge, high-rising shot he likes to rip every chance he gets. It's

the type of shot his teammates don't want to be in the way of. Of all the IceHogs returnees, Lalonde has made the most improvements. He's a lot better in his own zone, is carrying the puck with much more confidence and he's engaged and battling more and more physically on most nights. Still, defense isn't his forte; he's sloppy at times and is prone to mental errors in all areas.

Brett McLean was brought in to provide veteran leadership as well as anchor the first line. You can't complain with the results. He leads the team in scoring (5g, 8a) skating mostly with Brandon Segal. Early on Rob Klinkhammer skated on his left wing but Klinkhammer has since played his way down to the fourth line. McLean has the legs to take over a game a few shifts at a time, but he and Segal haven't found a consistent chemistry thus far.

Jeremy Morin returned to action nearly ten months to the date of the collision which led to the concussion that had kept him out of action. Morin didn't waste any time, scoring on his first shot on goal, in his first game back, on October 14th at Abbotsford. He scored again in his second game. Morin's cooled off since, posting two goals in his last nine starts. He's not quite back to 100% physically but he's showed no fear or apprehensiveness for getting his nose dirty or challenging in the tough areas. Morin even dropped the gloves in just his fourth game back on Oct 22 versus Chicago.

Dylan Olsen is hit and miss. He's developing in the mold of Brent Seabrook; a big physical backliner who sees the ice well and whose passes are hard and sharp. However, there are also moments when Olsen tries to do too much, ala Dion Phaneuf, one of his idols. Olsen has the tools though. And it's only a matter of time before they all come together.

Brandon Pirri is fourth on the IceHogs in scoring with 4 goals and 10 points in 13 games. That's about where you'd expect your second-line center to be. Pirri also operates the second power play unit from the right half wall, working a conventional overload. It can still be too easy for defenders to challenge and strip the puck from Pirri, but he has improved in that regard from a year ago. He's been showing signs of that creative flashiness that caught the eye of Blackhawks scouts when he was a freshman at R.P.I. and could be a Blackhawk next year if he continues to get stronger and compete nightly at the level he does most nights in Rockford.

Andrew Shaw is entertaining to watch. The no-nonsense forward brings energy every night and that has earned him a bump up to the second line with Pirri. Though a center, Shaw has skated almost entirely at wing for Rockford. On an AHL-contract after being drafted as a 19-year old by the

Hawks in June, Shaw is out to prove to the Blackhawks brass he can be a useful player at the NHL level. Shaw is just 5-11 and 180 pounds, but he'll hit or fight anybody. You may recall Shaw dropped the gloves with Dylan Olsen at July's prospect camp and got the better of the 6-3 defenseman. Shaw has a decent shot when he gets it off, but his hands aren't the greatest so he'll probably never be much of a point contributor. But he gets his nose dirty and is one of the few IceHogs who gets to the front of the net frequently.

Ben Smith remains the Hawks most well-rounded young forward prospect. He returned from the September 28th concussion sustained from the Brendan Smith hit to play on October 21st against the Wolves. In nine games, Ben Smith has posted 6 goals and 10 points. Smith is keeping a positive attitude about the reassignment to the AHL.

"It's kind of the way it works in the business I'm in," Smith said. "Obviously I'm here for a reason. I have to improve in all aspects of my game and do my best to prove to them that I can do that day in and day out, be consistent and hopefully get a chance back up there again."

"I feel pretty good," he asserted. "Getting back into it, playing a lot of minutes, definitely has been helpful. For me, it was about two or three weeks and I was fortunate to be able to come back pretty quickly."

If the Hawks needed a forward tomorrow, Smith would likely get the call.

Ryan Stanton is slowly bringing his game back to the level it was when he finished last season. Coming into the season, Stanton was considered the closest to providing quality minutes in a pinch at the NHL level. He's not close to that right now as Connelly has earned that call should a spot come available and Stanton isn't playing well enough for the Hawks to take those minutes away from a prospect like Dylan Olsen, who is a fixture in the team's future plans.

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