

BLOCK PARTY

Interesting Choices

After watching the Blackhawks get skated out of their pants in games 1, 2, and 3 of the Vancouver series back in April, overturning the roster to become older, slower and dumber wasn't the first thing that came to mind.

But that's largely what Chicago did this summer when they shipped off Brian Campbell's burdening contract along with key members of the supporting cast in Chris Campoli, Troy Brouwer and Tomas Kopecky. Other players of less consequence such as Fernando Pisani, Ryan Johnson, Jake Dowell and Marty Turco moved on as well.

To fill those wholes, Stan Bowman went out and signed three players who have long since passed their primes.

Andrew Brunette is fun to watch because of how much he's still able to accomplish on the ice being so poor at hockey's most essential skill. Yet, now at age 38, Brunette finds himself in an offensive structure predicated on speed, high tempo and stretching defenses aggressively. So, he won't be of much help outside of the power play or other times his line is able to sustain possession and set up shop in the opposition's zone. Brunette's good on the wall and has a knack for getting to pucks around the crease, but he's not your typical crease disturber. It'll be interesting to see how Joel Quenneville plays him. Brunette has to play on one of the top two lines to be effective, but when you throw the power play on top of it, that's far more shifts than Brunette should be taking at this stage of his career. He's two years removed from 25 goals. Even if age catches up to him, Brunette should still be good for 20 skating with the guys he will be in Chicago.

Jamal Mayers, like Brunette, has played for Coach Quenneville before. Mayers, who turns 37 later this month, was very solid and full of energy in his fourth liner role during the preseason. Mayers has the strong, respected kind of veteran presence Chicago was apparently lacking in the dressing room last year. He's a secondary leader who has no problem sticking up for his teammates. However, Mayers may be asked to bite off more than he can spit or chew on the ice if the team's center woes force the Toronto native to shift to center instead of his traditional right wing position. The 14-year veteran has played in six NHL postseasons. Last year with San Jose was Mayers' first since 2004 when he was still a member of the Blues.

Hulking defenseman Sean O'Donnell has been as tough and dependable as they come over his now-17 year career. O'Donnell, who turns 40 next Thursday when Winnipeg comes to town, however has seen better days and appeared to slow and drag last year in Philadelphia and looked every bit his age during this preseason. Luckily though, if the blue line stays healthy, O'Donnell will only be asked to be a part-timer as he'll be platooned with Sami Lepisto, who was picked up when Chris Campoli refused to take a low-ball offer from the Hawks to be a 6th or 7th defenseman.

The guy who will be charged with pairing with Lepisto or O'Donnell (and lest we forget the late-blooming John Scott) and possibly the most important off season acquisition, is journeyman blue liner Steve Montador. The tough and versatile, third pairing kind of defenseman Stan Bowman said he couldn't pry free from Buffalo at last season's trade deadline, Montador was acquired and signed just prior to free agency. Bowman didn't do Montador any favors in terms of expectations when he gave Montador a four-year \$11.0M deal, which is a year longer and a few hundred thousand more expensive than the contract that made Brent Sopel expendable after winning the Cup in 2010. Montador will be paid \$4.6m of that deal this season and some preseason struggles have already elicited loud groans from many a watchful Blackhawk fan.

Montador is best-described as a jack-of-all trades, master of none type. He's earned his journeyman title. Chicago marks his sixth NHL stop in the past seven seasons. Four years ago in Florida, Montador was skating as much on defense as he was as a wing on the Panthers' fourth line. So, he's only recently come into his own. He's a battler, but a 6-0, 210, he won't win many of those against the big forwards in the West. He's a nice depth guy on a contender who can pitch in on both the PP and PK and give you big minutes from time to time. Still, every season he's had his struggles that have warranted visits to the press box as a healthy scratch. Don't expect any different in the brighter lights and loftier expectations in life as a Blackhawk now brings.

By far the biggest head-scratcher of the summer came during late-afternoon July 1st when the Hawks signed Daniel Carcillo to a one-year deal. Carillo was out-right let go by the Flyers in June when the winger was in line to become a RFA. Philly chose not

to retain Carcillo's rights after watching him last season be ineffective and most nights appear lost on the ice. Carcillo was one of the worst regulars in all the NHL in 2010-11. He comes to the Hawks suspended for the first two games this weekend due to verbal abuse of officials' actions in last spring's playoffs. Carcillo's a noted whack-job on the ice whose act ran stale in Philly. While his mouth, ability to attract the retaliatory penalty and diving technique will give his team a power play or three, Carcillo's PIM-taken per 60 minutes last season was worse than Tomas Kopecky's, to give you some perspective.

For all the examination of last year's Blackhawks in the valiant and near comeback on the Canucks, the one fact largely missing from most every report, and one no Hawks' fan wants to admit, is how the Hawks' best players were outperformed by Vancouver's best. Had that storyline gone differently, Chicago would have knocked Vancouver down for a third-straight year. So, while most people talk about the roster changes, the new faces won't be helpful, or be remembered for anything, in most cases, if the Blackhawks' star players don't bring up their levels for 2011-12.

A quick glance at this month's schedule has given many Blackhawks' faithful a sense of security in knowing that outside of the visiting Bruins (Oct 15) and ever-tough Predators (Oct 31), and perhaps the Hurricanes in Carolina on the 28th, October is filled with very winnable games.

But in looking at their top rival's fall schedule, the pressure to win and salvage overtime points is already ahold. Detroit has an ultra-easy October schedule with lots of days off, followed by practice days. Then the Red Wings start November with six-straight at home. If the Hawks are to win the Central and secure one of the top 3 spots in the Western Conference playoffs, a quick start is almost essential to keep pace with the finely-tuned Red Wings just up to the start of the annual 'Circus Trip' in mid-November.

With apologies to Toews, Kane, Hossa, Keith and Crawford – the Blackhawks most significant player this year will be its GM. As it stands today, this is not a team without holes. Expecting injuries and the education of watching this questionable supporting cast over two-thirds of a season, Stan Bowman and his scouting staff must continue to shine up to the trade deadline. The Hawks wants or needs could include anything by February. Whether it's a 2nd line center, another defenseman or a big scoring winger, Bowman will have the assets and the cap space to make a significant or the appropriate acquisition cap constraints would not allow last year.

Going into the year, Bowman has anywhere from 3 to 4 million in cap space to play with. He's right at \$3M now with 24 players on the roster (with Stalberg on IR). If Brandon Saad plays in nine or less games and goes back to junior at some point, you can make that \$4M. What Bowman does with that flexibility very well could be the difference between his 2nd Stanley Cup and another first or second-round playoff exit.

In hindsight, Bowman's summer changes appear designed to toughen his team physically and spiritually, while bridging his team successfully to a later point when he can pinpoint and strike on the final championship pieces. Looking at his roster now, Bowman's next plays will dictate this year's success or failure.

When the 2011-12 season is put to bed, look for Blackhawks to be accepting a lot of post-season hardware.

Jonathan Toews probably deserved the award for last year, but expect a groundswell to form throughout this season and Toews will finally get his just-due as the NHL's best defensive forward.

We took a lot of shots at Duncan Keith last year and he deserved damn-near every one of those. It's not as if Keith was among the NHL's bottom-rung blue liners in 2010-11. He was far from it. But Keith is expected and paid to be a dominant leader of the defense. He wasn't. With Campbell gone, Keith's job gets tougher. He took a good first-step when he humbly acknowledged his underwhelming season last spring. Look for Keith to return near to his Norris form and take that award easily in the voting come June.

Provided Stan Bowman does his part and gets the reasonable amount of health any team would need, expect the Blackhawks to playing hockey again in June, this time conquering over the New York Rangers.

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