

Block Party

Teuvo Truth

Speaking to him after Rockford's finished its 2013-14 season last month, I came away with the impression that Teuvo Teravainen didn't exactly enjoy his sojourn to North America.

I can't say I blame him, because the Blackhawks really jerked the kid around (and for no good reason). But it did seem Teravainen was counting the minutes until he could fly back home to Finland. He was gone the morning after Rockford's last game.

Teravainen did concede that he needs to get bigger and stronger in adapting to the North American game.

"Hopefully my body is more ready for next season. I think it will be," Teravainen said before exiting Rockford three weeks ago.

Teravainen, who will turn 20 right before the start of training camp this coming fall, came to Chicago in March with a tremendous amount of hype.

His stock rose exceedingly with a tremendous showing at the World Junior Championships this past winter, and was followed up by two great months with Jokerit, his Finnish Elite League club. At one point Teravainen was appointed the honor of team captain of his hometown Helsinki squad, after Jokerit's original captain fell to injury.

After his month-long stay here in Chicago and Rockford, the Blackhawks allowed Teravainen to go back to Finland to try out for his National team that is in action now at the World Championships in Belarus.

The Blackhawks' mindset behind promptly sending Teravainen back to Finland was two-fold. He'd get the opportunity to keep playing hockey at a highly competitive level. But, it was also an out-of-sight, out-of-mind thing. If Teravainen stuck around as a so-called black ace, there'd always be questions from fans, and perhaps media, as to why Teravainen wasn't getting a shot to help the Blackhawks drive for back-to-back Stanley Cups. Stan Bowman claimed he wouldn't have an issue with burning year one of Teravainen's entry-level contract, but his actions have portrayed the opposite.

Is it possible that Teravainen, given the full slate of regular season games down the stretch to acclimate himself to the NHL, could have been the answer at second-line center now? It's possible. Could Teuvo's presence in the wake of an Andrew Shaw injury or perhaps to another forward down the road this playoff made a difference between a premature playoff exit and another Finals appearance? Perhaps. It's a reasonable discussion point at the very least.

Now that Teuvo's out of sight, no one's asking those questions.

Teravainen didn't make Finland's roster. He was one of the last cuts. While there are a lot of politics that go into forming those World Championship teams, the man in charge of putting Finland together is Jari Kurri. Also the general manager of Jokerit, Jari Kurri was one of Teravainen's biggest supporters.

Jokerit is moving to the KHL next year. And Teravainen has one more year remaining on his contract with the Helsinki team.

While this is just my speculation, I believe the Blackhawks sole motivation to bring Teravainen over from Finland in March was to get Teravainen's released from his Jokerit obligations before the KHL got its hands on that team. Again, just my speculation, but one would think getting the KHL to allow Teuvo out of the final year of his deal would be more of a struggle than it was with the Finnish league.

As I wrote before Teravainen made his NHL debut in March, the Blackhawks were not open to the idea of burning the first year of Teuvo's entry-level deal no matter what was being said publicly.

Before Patrick Kane suffered the knee injury that opened the cap space for Teravainen, the plans for Teuvo were different.

Originally, Teravainen was going to report straight to Rockford. Since there wasn't sufficient enough cap space before Kane got put on long-term IR for the remainder of the regular season Stan Bowman had no other option.

The first-laid plans were for the 19-year old to play with the Icehogs for a few

weeks before being called up for the Blackhawks final three games, when the team estimated there'd be just enough space to squeeze Teuvo onto the roster.

In the Hawks' minds, he'd play a 2 or 3 meaningless games at the end of the regular season and that would be it.

Kane's injury changed that. Now, why Bowman didn't stick to that plan if he had zero intention of allowing Teravainen to stick on the Hawks anyway is a mystery maybe only Stan or one or two other people above him could answer for you.

Of course, Joel Quenneville was front and center in how the Teravainen saga played out. Some will see Quenneville as the bad guy in this. After all, he scratched Teravainen and commented with his new buzz sayings like "needing more" from Teuvo. But Stan and Q were obviously on the same page on this and the coached backed up his general manager.

As it played out, Teravainen was passable in his first two appearances as a Blackhawks – against Dallas at home and then when he was somewhat surprisingly inserted into the March 27th game at Boston. Teuvo was sat out the next night at Ottawa and then back in two days later at Pittsburgh.

It was an odd selection of games. He put on his best performance of the three in a 17-minute showing in the wake of a Jonathan Toews injury at Pittsburgh.

Despite that performance, Teravainen was chained to the press box for the next two weeks in spite of the absence of both Kane and Toews. Yet another odd turn of events.

Teravainen sat and watched games in Chicago while Rockford was blowing its AHL playoff chances. Stan Bowman knew the Icehogs could have used Teravainen, but he waited until Rockford had five games left to send him there.

When Teuvo showed up in Rockford he seemed to just be happy to playing in games again. He scored in his Icehogs' debut, one of the two goals he'd score in his five games with Rockford.

From getting to see Teravainen up close both in Chicago and Rockford, his puck skills are evident. He's going to be a real good pro. But, I hesitate to project anything beyond that.

I see in him a young Saku Koivu. That's still a very good thing for those who watched Saku Koivu on the Canadiens in the mid to late 90's. Koivu struggled with injuries early in his career, but was always around the twenty goal mark and 50-60 points if you projected his numbers out of 82 games. That's about where Teravainen will be if he's centering the Blackhawks second line for the next handful of years. I don't watch Teravainen and see a dominant NHL star, but you never know for sure.

One of Stan Bowman's main task as general manager is to make sure that the salary cap shredding in the wake of the Blackhawks 2010 Stanley Cup championship never happens again.

It's why Michal Handzus was brought back for one more year and Brandon Pirri and Jeremy Morin weren't handed 60-82 games of NHL action in the final year of their entry-level contracts. Managing the damage on a player's second contract while maximizing value in a young player's beginning seasons while always be of concern to any GM of a team that expects to squeeze under the upper limit from year-to-year. Stan Bowman is no different. He'll feel forced to make unpopular decisions. And in the case of Teravainen, controversial ones.

And it's also why Bowman wasn't going to waste the first year of Teuvo Teravainen's contract by playing him in 10 or more games during the regular season and playoffs.

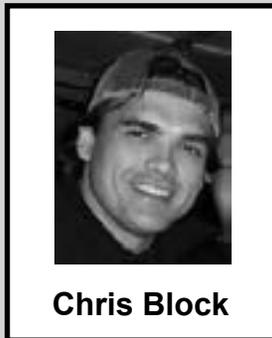
While it's not a 100-percent guarantee that Teravainen will make the Blackhawks right out of training camp this fall, it's close to it and pretty certain he'll be the team's second line center of the now and future before long.

At least that's the hope. And then everyone involved can laugh and put this ridiculously dubious beginning to Teuvo's NHL career behind them.

ChrisBlock@TheThirdManIn.com

PuckChatter@gmail.com

Twitter.com/ChrisBlock



Chris Block