

Block Party

What Lies Beneath

In the wake of the Blackhawks recent decisions to recall Dennis Rasmussen, Ryan Hartman and Kyle Cumiskey in particular, many people have raised questions as to why other prospects such as Mark McNeill and Klas Dahlbeck have been passed on in recent weeks.

Well, I don't have any great answers. Hartman wasn't a recall I would consider completely unjustified by any means. He has a great future as an intangible guy at the NHL level. The Hawks had an opportunity to lend and the timing was right to give Hartman a spot to inject some life into the Hawks bottom six.

Cumiskey, on the other hand, is rather difficult to explain. He's been a big disappointment in Rockford this season in terms of being a veteran guy who came in with some NHL experience and skill, yet he's consistently been outperformed by younger, less experienced Hawks' prospects, and T.J. Brennan, who was a contract the Hawks had to take off the Islanders' hands in the Nick Leddy trade, and whom the Hawks have no plans for.

One would think, in an organization so proud of their own developmental system, that a player like Klas Dahlbeck would be getting an opportunity to help improve the Hawks' obvious bottom defense pair problem. The easiest, and cheapest way to solve a glowing deficiency on the defense as the trade deadline approaches would be through their own system.

Dahlbeck is now the organization's current longest-tenured IceHog. He skated in his 189th game with Rockford last night. The two previous longest-active Hogs were Adam Clendenning (185gms) and Jeremy Morin (208) and both were traded earlier this season.

What the Cumiskey recall probably tells us is that the powers that be don't see Dahlbeck as a piece to the puzzle. Hartman is definitely a piece, but he's still just 57 games into his pro career and his time may not fully come before next year.

When looking up and down the IceHogs' roster, there are clear candidates for spots on next year's Hawks' team. Stephen Johns, Phillip Danault, Teuvo Teravainen and presumably Mark McNeill head that list. Hartman's not far behind if he's not ahead of McNeill already in their minds. That's what some have taken out of Hartman getting the call this week and not McNeill.

With that, let's take a look at some of the other Rockford players, and where they stand 50 games into the AHL season.

DENNIS RASMUSSEN

The extra body the Hawks lifted for their west coast trip, Rasmussen is a massive center who played three years of pro hockey in Sweden prior to signing a 1-year deal with the Hawks last June. He's a lean 6'4" but he handles himself well against the bigger centers in the AHL. He doesn't provide much offense, checking is more his game. But, he can score from within 15 feet if he finds a rebound.

GARRET ROSS

If Stan Bowman is to make a deal for a defenseman or a bottom six center before the deadline, its either going to come at the expense of a second round pick or an IceHog - possibly both. I note this under here because the Hawks have too many guys who project out as third and fourth liners and not enough spots for them on the NHL roster. Ross and Hartman are similar players expect one is a left handed shot and the other a right. They play opposite wings, though Ross can skate on the right side as well. Hartman hasn't played center at all in Rockford, though he was drafted with that experience. If the Hawks have to trade a prospect, since Ross and Hartman fill the same role, it could be one of those two, more likely Ross, but you never know because of the nature of how deals get done this time of year.

PETER REGIN

Awful. The Blackhawks haven't had much luck with veteran acquisitions for Rockford since Jeff Taffe was a leading scorer there. Plerre-Marc Bouchard was a total waste of time, and the player who came along with him hasn't done much to help the Hogs. When Regin was cut from the Blackhawks it was thought Regin was a nice 'get' for Rockford. Well, its been 27 games since Regin's scored a goal and he has just 6 assists and is a minus-9 over that span heading into last night's game.

VILLE POKKA

Had a slow start after coming over in the Leddy trade because he arrived with an injury from Isles' camp. You can't completely appreciate Pokka without watching him every night. There's nothing spectacular about his skill set. He's just all around solid.

T.J. BRENNAN

A lot of people ask about the IceHogs' leading scorer. T.J. Brennan is a solid guy who can be really exciting to watch. He had a sit down with head coach Ted Dent after he arrived in Rockford in which the two discussed Brennan's style. The high-risk/reward element to Brennan's mode from the blue line has been carved down a bit from last year when he was in Toronto's system. As mentioned above, the Hawks were kind of forced to take him in the

Leddy trade because the Isles didn't want to pay the guy \$600k to play in the minors. Rocky Wirtz is used to writing those checks now. Because he's waiver eligible, its hard to see the Hawks risking losing Brennan by giving him any sort of a look considering he'd probably drive Quenneville nuts anyhow.

JOAKIM NORDSTROM

When he's been in the minors, he's just about been the IceHogs' best player. It just hasn't translated to the NHL consistently. He had a stretch earlier this year when he was playing ahead of Jeremy Morin that I thought he was on his way to solidifying a spot there on the fourth line. For what this is worth, my understanding of the original plan from earlier this week was Nordstrom was going back to Rockford this weekend to get some games in, and then he was coming back and Teuvo was getting demoted. That St. Louis game last Sunday was crucial for Teuvo in Quenneville and management's eyes, and he was very average against the Blues. I believe at that point it was decided that Teuvo was going back to Rockford. It still could wind up that way, though Ryan Hartman could throw a monkeywrench into that plan with another good game or two. Still, I think the Hawks want Hartman and Teuvo playing games more right now than they're concerned with Nordstrom.

PHILLIP DANAUULT

Marcus Kruger's agent is likely to be looking for his client to be moved this summer should a spot higher in the lineup not be in the cards. If Kruger can't be slotted in as a third line center in the traditional sense, than it would be in Kruger's best interest to play elsewhere. Especially if the Hawks win another Cup, and their second with Kruger in a key spot. That's where Phil Danault comes in. Danault is a tenacious forechecker who plays a simple, low-risk game. Perfect for the Hawks' 'fourth' line. Danault has been an absolute beast in all three zones this past month. If anyone was slighted by the Hartman call up, it was Danault, but the Hawks were looking for a winger to rattle Ben Smith's cage, and Danault is being groomed at center for Kruger's spot.

MARK MCNEILL

Consistency had been the issue coming out of Mark McNeill's rookie season. He's corrected that this year. The majority of his team-leading 14 goals (a mark here shares with Garret Ross) came over a two and a half week stretch in November. If you recall, McNeill got injured in mid November during that run. A few days later the Hawks had a need for a forwards and with McNeill hurt, Nordstrom got the call. He may have anyway, but when you look at McNeill's season that was the point when he was playing the best. I've cooled on my expectations for McNeill. If the Hawks need to save a little bit of money against the cap next year, they could trade Ben Smith (\$1.5M) and I believe McNeill would slot into that spot on Danault, or Kruger's right wing.

Side Note: It's amazing when you look at how the Blackhawks have handled the slotting of some of their key forward prospects.

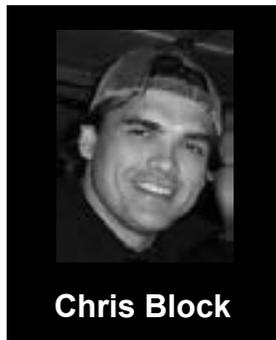
For the entirety of the McDonough regime, there has been a center depth issue. They've tried year after year to jam square pegs into round holes and while Patrick Kane doesn't need a traditional playmaking center to get him the puck, the Hawks will again be faced with finding Kane a center this summer when Brad Richards' contract expires.

Mark McNeill was a center when he was drafted but the Hawks went to his Prince Albert coach after that 2011 draft and requested McNeill be played exclusively at right wing. McNeill takes some faceoffs on his strong side still, but he's never been a center since his draft.

This is an organization that was so desperate that it tried to make Jimmy Hayes a center during the lockout. Yet, Teuvo Teravainen, a prototype playmaking pivot, has gone back to Rockford and has been moved over to the right wing. Joakim Nordstrom, a winger most of this season, is now back at his natural center ice position this weekend in Rockford. And Rasmussen, a center all season long, is skating left wing on the line with Nordstrom and Teravainen.

The Hawks went on a run of drafting center a couple years ago, but most of those kids; John Hayden, Tyler Motte, Anthony Louis, Hartman - have since been moved to the wing.

It'll be interesting to see what they do for Kane next year, because it doesn't appear the Hawks believe the answer is within their grasp now.



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