

Block Party

Raanta Baby

"When they said I was going down (to Rockford) - you just have so many questions inside your head. You try to figure it out, like 'what did I do wrong?'"

Antti Raanta couldn't have done much better for the Blackhawks this season.

In 12 starts and 14 appearances overall for the Hawks, Raanta went 7-4-1 with a 1.89 goals against average and .936 save percentage. He posted two shutouts, which is the same amount of shutouts as Corey Crawford has through 51 starts this season.

But after parts of two seasons under Joel Quenneville's watch, the six-foot one inch Raanta fell down the depth chart in some folk's minds with the emergence this year of the 6'6" Scott Darling. Quenneville was one of those minds. While not entirely, the decision largely came down to size. Raanta relies more on athleticism, while Darling's style is more geared towards mechanics and taking advantage of his large frame to guard the nets and stop pucks. Sometimes the bigger the better, and in Darling's case the Hawks see more upside potential in him than they do Raanta.

Raanta was universally liked in the Blackhawks dressing room and his upbeat nature hasn't been affected by this recent demotion.

"He has such a great attitude and his demeanor," IceHogs head coach Ted Dent said of Raanta. "His positive outlook on everything - Win, lose or draw he's always smiling. I think that really helps out his situation."

Since Raanta's been sent back to Rockford he's been splitting starts with veteran Michael Leighton. Leighton actually was having a slightly better season overall than Darling at the time of Darling's recall, but Leighton is 33 and not considered a prospective NHL goalie at this point by the Blackhawks.

In five starts since being reassigned on February 23rd, Raanta is 4-0-1-0 for Rockford. He's allowed 11 goals in those five starts for a 2.19 GAA and .922 save percentage. He shutout the Adirondack Flames this past Saturday and over these five starts the IceHogs are averaging 3.78 goals in support of Raanta.

Raanta is 12-5-1-0 in his AHL career, all with Rockford, with a 2.60 GAA and .917 save percentage.

Odds are Raanta will be moved to another organization this off season. Mac Carruth has positioned himself at this point to be the backup in Rockford next year with a strong second half playing for the Indy Fuel. The Hawks would then likely bring in another veteran along the lines of Leighton, or pursue a top college free agent netminder. There's also Anders Nilsson, who the Hawks picked up the rights to in the Nick Leddy trade from the Islanders. Nilsson's having an incredible season in the KHL and his contract is expiring there. However, Nilsson does not want to return to North America unless it's to play in the NHL, so it is almost certain Nilsson will sign to play in Sweden next year.

The Blackhawks did not qualify Scott Darling for the AHL playoffs, so he's not going back to Rockford this season. Raanta could return to the NHL, but it'll only be if Crawford or Darling is injured.

The following is an interview with Raanta conducted last week by myself and Brian Hedger of NHL.com (who was pulling work for the Daily Herald that day).

Did the demotion you by surprise, or did you see that coming at all?

Well, of course, it came a little bit surprisingly. But now I have played 3 games in 3 weeks. So, it has been good for me. Corey [Crawford] has been playing up there. Of course everybody wants to be there, but I'd rather play a game once a week than sit three weeks in a row on the bench. We've had an easy schedule [in Rockford] now. So, it's not like I've come here and played lots of games. We've had only like six games in three weeks, so now it's going to start. We're going to play three games in a week, maybe some time four games. So, it's going to be interesting, to get a little bit more game action, maybe back-to-backs sometimes. I'm hoping. I'm waiting for that. It's always a challenge when you haven't been playing so much.

Did you think something (as in a trade) might happen at the trade deadline?

Well, the last three hours I didn't go to Twitter, I didn't look. [Laughs] Of course

there was lots of rumors going on. But I didn't hear anything from my agent, or anybody. So, I almost knew that nothing was going to happen. You know, we're going to the playoffs, and the Hawks are going to the playoffs. So, we need good goalies here. So, it's understandable why they wouldn't want to give away good goalies when now we have really good goalies in the organization. Of course, it was a little bit nervous - the trade deadline. But, I'm pretty happy that it's over and now I can just focus on playing and practicing.

Have the Hawks given you any indication of what's in store for you (beyond this season) with Scott Darling getting a new contract?

Of course there's lots of things going on, but I try not to think about it. Of course, you think about it, but you know, you always have to say that you try not to think about it. But you just do what you can do. If you start focusing too much on that kind of stuff it's going to affect your games, and your practicing. You're going to be tired, mentally. I just try to do my job. You never know what's going to happen. Sometimes there will be injuries, or something else. So, you just have to do your thing here and be ready whenever the call up is coming, or if it's not coming. But we want to go all

the way here (in Rockford). We have a good group of guys. It's exciting to be here. It is a little bit different than (with) the Hawks. It's a little bit like being back in the juniors, for me (back in Finland). Traveling and everything else is a little bit different. I am having a great time here, but, of course, everybody wants to go to the NHL. That's my focus still. But now I just started focus on my things and try to stop all the pucks that are coming.

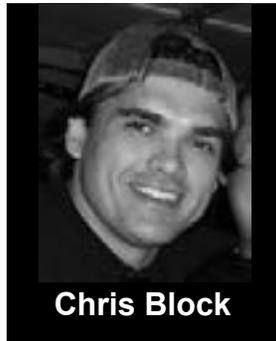
Imagine the news of the demotion had to be difficult...

Yeah, the first night, after the Boston game (Feb 22) when they said I was going down (to Rockford) - you just have so many questions inside your head. You try to figure it out, like 'what did I do wrong?' But the next day when I came to Rockford, I was just full of energy. I just wanted to get the new start again [with the IceHogs]. Got some good practices, got a game and got the road win (Feb 28 at Texas) straight away there. So it was a huge weekend

for me, the first week. Now you start knowing the boys and you start feeling like your own self again.

When the rumors starting swirling about you on trade deadline day, at that point did you think a trade might happen, or did you speak with your agent at all that day?

I only talked with my agent when I was driving to Rockford. So, that was the only time I was talking with my agent. It was a week before the trade deadline was going on. My agent just said that we'll see if there's something going on, he would call me and tell me. But I never got that call. Of course, my friends (back in Finland) are excited about the NHL, so they were watching the trade deadline show in Finland. I was talking with them. That wasn't the best idea. [Laughs] I was focusing too much on [the trade deadline]. It's (Rockford) still a great place to be. I wasn't expecting a trade. We need a couple forwards since Kaner went down. You never know what's going on. You see Ben Smith got away. He's an awesome guy, great teammate and like that. So, you never know what's happening. So, it was a little bit stressful, but, you know, it's still a waste of time to put all your energy there. We had practice that day. I went to practice and practiced good. Then went to home and saw that nobody did trade me. It was good news. I'm really happy to be still with the Hawks. Hopefully we got a couple Cups in Rockford and Chicago. That would be a great ending for this season.



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