

# Block Party

## A Disconnect

As great as the past seven or so years have gone for the Blackhawks, there are causes for concern as to whether or not the organization can sustain this reign of success going beyond yet another cap crunch that awaits Stan Bowman and company this summer.

Patrick Sharp's days with the organization appear to be nearing an end due to the mammoth Toews and Kane contracts kicking in next season. And Marian Hossa may have only another year or two left in him before he retires. On the blue line, Brent Seabrook has one more year before he's an unrestricted free agent. When that day comes, Seabrook will be a 31-year-old, 11-year NHL veteran.

Brandon Saad and Teuvo Teravainen are top-six talents who will help smooth that transition. Future Hall of Famers Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane are so good the Hawks will always be a threat no matter what.

But what has separated the Blackhawks in their championship runs, as well as the near miss in 2014, was the team's depth. A third and fourth line that matches or exceeds that of any of their conference and playoff rivals; as well as a top four defense that is as good as it gets in hockey. Whether the fourth guy was Brian Campbell or Johnny Oduya, it didn't matter. The Hawks are filthy rich in elite defenseman with Keith, Seabrook and Hjalmarsson leading the way.

Most of this depth and embarrassment of riches came from the prior regime, led by Dale Tallon. As flawed as Tallon's reign was as Blackhawks general manager was at times, his handprints are still all over today's Blackhawks.

The Stan Bowman and Al MacLlssac led Hawks had mostly rode a hot hand. They've had their hits (Nick Leddy, Johnny Oduya) and too many misses to list. That said, there's been no real reason to criticize management too much over the past few years. The results are what they are. Chicago is an elite organization. But their mettle is about to be tested.

The sense of finality is very real in this season's quest for a 3rd Stanley Cup in six seasons. While the Hawks aren't about to fall off the map anytime soon, the roster will look a lot different next fall, and especially in the fall of 2016 than it does now. New second, third and fourth liners must emerge and at least one of the defense prospects will have to follow the Hjalmarsson or Seabrook career path if the Hawks are to still be legitimate Cup contenders in 2017.

Which is why player development has never been more crucial.

But what has grown more in recent years is an apparent disconnect between the amateur and pro scouting staffs, led by Vice President and general manager, Stan Bowman.

The Blackhawks employ one of the biggest scouting and development staffs in hockey. Other teams, such as Toronto, have since followed suit.

Team president John McDonough has assembled an impressive staff of some of the more respected minds in hockey – Scotty Bowman, Barry Smith, Mark Kelley, Norm MacIver and Pierre Gauthier to name a few. Others, like Marc Bergevin and Kevin Cheveldayoff have gone on to become GMs in other cities. Stan Bowman sits at the head of the table of command that is overseen by McDonough and his right hand man, Al MacLlssac.

There are many influential people on the inside of Hockey Operations and all have some degree in say to what goes on. I've been told by a few people independent of one another that it takes a lot of "yeses" to anything done when it comes to hockey operations.

After my 2015 prospect rankings were first published back in January, I got some solicited and unsolicited feedback from a few sources. None of this feedback went into much detail. Generally, the responses were that the rankings mirrored the general consensus, for the most part. Everyone has their own opinions and ideas of which prospects will make the most impact at the NHL level in the end (which is what the rankings are aimed at projecting). There was some, "He'll never make it here" commentary and "Well, this guy's a little high," and "It's a little early to put him there," and so on. There was alternate commentary on certain prospects offered as well. I take it all into account. I'm one person watching a ton of hockey and doing my best to give my take. I don't have a small army of veteran hockey minds at my every day disposal. I take the rankings seriously as a project. Player development is also a fluid thing that can change week to week, so it's not something I dwell on after it's published.

Because he's recently become a topic of conversation, I will say one player in particular whose position in our January rankings was scoffed at to a degree was 2013 2nd round pick, Carl Dahlstrom.

The draft pick used to select Dahlstrom came from Toronto via the June 30, 2013

trade that sent Dave Bolland to the Leafs. Effectively, in the end, the Bolland trade netted four draft picks the Hawks used to obtain three defensemen - Dahlstrom, Robin Norell, Luc Snuggerud and winger Fredrik Olofsson – all players who ranked in our top 25 prospect rankings in January.

Dahlstrom is a 6'4" Swedish defenseman who was the Hawks second pick in the 2013 draft. He was brought over in late March after his season with Linkoping concluded to finish out the year in Rockford.

At the same time, the Blackhawks also summoned Robin Norell and Robin Press, also both unsigned recent draft picks, to come and get a taste of North American hockey.

The real reason the three players were brought over was so the Blackhawks front office, scouts and player development staff could see them play. I guess because flights to Sweden aren't in the budget or they don't have access to the same international video feeds I used to watch Dahlstrom play this year.

What they hoped to determine was which of the three Swedish defensemen were ready to play in the American Hockey League in 2015-16.

Dahlstrom got into two games for Rockford. In the first was at Charlotte on April 12. Dahlstrom picked up an assist on his first shift as an IceHog, a shot he sent on net that was tipped by Tanner Kero. Dahlstrom acquitted himself fine in that game.

His second, and only other appearance came in the IceHogs regular season finale at home against Toronto. Rockford, with a win and a Grand Rapids loss that same night, would have won their Midwest Division.

But with many of the Blackhawks scouts and player development staff in town, the decision was made to scratch several IceHogs regulars so hockey operations could evaluate Dahlstrom, Robin Press, Vince Hinostroza and others.

Rockford lost the game, 3-1 to Toronto. Grand Rapids lost theirs as well.

Dahlstrom did not play well against Toronto. His gap was too laxed on Willie Nylander's goal early in the first period and Dahlstrom had a few instances in the game when he mishandled the puck.

As result of that, after one viewing, hockey ops decided Dahlstrom would not be brought over to North America next season. Dahlstrom has a year left on his contract with Linkoping, but he had the ability to get out had the Hawks signed him and worked with Linkoping on a re-lease. After that game, Dahlstrom told us in an interview that he wasn't sure if he would play in Sweden or Rockford next season.

In fact, Dahlstrom was sent home early from the IceHogs before their season ended. Norell and Press stayed, which prompted a stream of questions and speculation from fans as to why Dahlstrom had been sent home early.

When I did a little more digging on this I discovered that internally the Blackhawks have had a negative impression on Dahlstrom since they first saw him at prospect camp.

"No puck skills" is the internal performance review. The Hawks would also like to see Dahlstrom be more assertive in his play. Not just more physical, but showing more willingness to step up and make more puck plays.

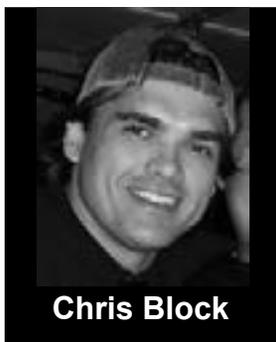
Knowing now that the Hawks scouts and top brass have had a negative opinion of Dahlstrom since almost the week after they drafted him, that begs the question – Why did they draft him?

Did they not scout him extensively? If so, why utilize a 2nd round pick on the player?

Is the amateur scouting staff recommending the type of players Stan Bowman and company desire? How much communication is there between the pro and amateur staffs? Where does the accountability fall here if the most influential guys in the front office have so quickly passed judgment on a 2nd round pick?

All questions we won't get answers to, most likely. But even so, they are questions John McDonough and Stan Bowman should be asking themselves nonetheless.

When you look examine player development over the past seven years, the Hawks haven't developed much in the way of contributors to their own roster. Kids once thought of as top prospects have come and gone. They've wasted picks before, and apparently consider this another case of that. Questions about player development from the outside led Kevin Hayes to reject the Hawks and sign with the Rangers. Another wasted top draft pick. That can't continue to happen from this point forward.



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