

Block Party

Who To Watch For

The addition of established veterans through off season trades along with young stars like Marko Dano and Russian import Artemi Panarin (and his 27-year old co-pilot Viktor Tikhonov) won't leave much room for competition amongst the Blackhawks recent draft picks, college UFA signings and Rockford residents.

But every camp there is a surprise or two. Sometimes those surprises are strategically hyped, others are well-earned. Regardless, injuries, suspensions and other factors test just about every organization's depth over the course of a season. So let's take a look at some of the players most likely to see action in Chicago at some point over the course of this season.

RW – KYLE BAUN (23)

While a mid-season injury replacement call-up isn't out of the question, this undrafted college free agent signing has virtually no shot of making the NHL squad out of camp. Baun impressed some with his physical play in his brief stay with the Hawks after wrapping his collegiate career at Colgate. His hands, however, are suspect and there are far too many bodies ahead of him on the depth chart. Baun figures to be a nice depth contributor at the AHL level who could see some fourth line NHL action down the road.

C – PHIL DANAULT (22)

Hip surgery a month ago will keep Danault off the ice until mid-December. His return to the lineup may not come until January. It's a tough setback, but Danault wasn't a serious contender for an NHL spot this training camp anyhow. Danault will be better served enhancing his game for another full season in the AHL where he can be a leader on and off the ice for Ted Dent's IceHogs.

RW – RYAN HARTMAN (21)

With Stephen Johns now in Dallas, and Teuvo Teravainen graduated full-time to the NHL, Ryan Hartman now sits atop the Blackhawks' prospect lot. The 2nd year Chicago area product could begin the season in the NHL in a lot of organizations, but barring a standout camp, Hartman is more likely to begin the year in Rockford. His NHL arrival may follow a similar path to Teravainen's. Hartman is not in the same stratosphere of top-end skill that the Finnish phenom possesses. But what Hartman lacks in pure hockey skill, he more than makes up for in the intangibles. You can always count on Hartman making an impact on the game. Perceived nights off are a rarity. His emotions and persistent desire to play under the opponent's skin do get him in trouble from time to time, not unlike Andrew Shaw for example. That's a risk you live with, though, if you're a coach because you also know Hartman is a gamer you can count on. Hartman won't be a top-end goal scorer, but he'll get his goals because he hunts for them. His passing skills are very underrated, however, and thus he can play on any line. Joel Quenneville is already aware and intrigued by Hartman's versatility. It's only a matter of time and opportunity.

C – TANNER KERO (23)

Another undrafted college UFA signing from this past spring. Tanner Kero is intriguing in the sense that he was more of a playmaking center in college but he posted 20 goals in 41 games last year at Michigan Tech and then five tallies in six regular season games in Rockford. Kero says he's spent a lot of time working on his release the past year. So, there is potential upside in this 23 year old prospect. Kero figures to get a lot of top six minutes in the AHL this season. He's a guy you could see getting a reward call-up at some point this year, if the opportunity arises. The Blackhawks front office loves that tally of IceHogs players who've "graduated" or have been called up to the NHL. It means something to them and they'll want to see that number continue to rise, so look for them to pass around the recall slips around the IceHogs locker room again this season.

LW – BRANDON MASHINTER (26)

Mashinter was in line for an NHL roster spot a year ago, but a training camp injury basically cost him that opportunity. The Blackhawks went out and signed Dan Carcillo instead and Mashinter spent the year in the AHL. Mashinter was the return in the Kyle Beach trade from a couple seasons ago. He's a solid minor leaguer with limited NHL roster ability other than he can skate a respectable shift on your fourth line and be the guy to drop the gloves when need be. He's big and a good fighter, so you can't completely rule out Mashinter figuring into things.

RW – MARK MCNEILL (22)

This former Hawks 1st rounder (#18) from the 2011 Entry Draft is entering his third

full pro season and the final of his entry-level contract. McNeill had a tough luck 2014-15. He was playing his best hockey as a pro in early November when he was sidelined by a leg injury. A spot on the NHL roster opened up just after McNeill was sidelined. That went to Joakim Nordstrom. McNeill struggled to regain the scoring touch he enjoyed during the three-week stretch he torched the AHL in late October and early November, which was during the formation of the Ross-Danault-McNeill line that Stan Bowman takes credit for. That line was reformed when McNeill returned but never had the success again that it did in November but it was kept together until the final night of the season. McNeill is about as solid an all-around player as you can ask for. He's a willing and dependable penalty killer. He's had an NHL body since he turned pro. The issue for McNeill has been that his game always leaves you (and the Blackhawks' brass) wanting a little more. It is that, and more consistency the Hawks have been asking for. McNeill, maybe more than anyone before him, could be the one prospect who could benefit and thrive in a third AHL season. But as history has showed us, the Blackhawks sour on prospects who take this long to develop. Only Ben Smith has persevered through this kind of wait. McNeill is a long shot to make the NHL roster. Regardless, its crucial he has a great start to the season if he wants to have a career in Chicago.

LW – JEREMY MORIN (24)

I don't know what Morin did to the hockey gods that he finds himself back in Chicago under Joel Quenneville's watch once again. Morin never got going in Columbus and appeared to be struggling with confidence issues before his health scare forced him out of the lineup. His best chance at this point is to just play like he has nothing to lose and hope that he gets lucky and scores some goals when he draws in the lineup. His best hockey as a pro came in 2014 when he felt like the organization had no plans for him and he just stopped worrying about that and played hockey. At that point, he began scorching the AHL at a rate the Blackhawks couldn't ignore. Morin needs a thicker skin.

LW – GARRET ROSS (23)

At times last year, Garret Ross was Rockford's best player. He's not spectacular in any area but he's solid and smart all-around. He's an agitator with skill to go with it in the Brad Marchand mold. The problem with Ross is he's six-foot-nothing. He'll have another good year in

Rockford and get a look at some point, either in Chicago or elsewhere.

LD – ERIK GUSTAFSSON (23)

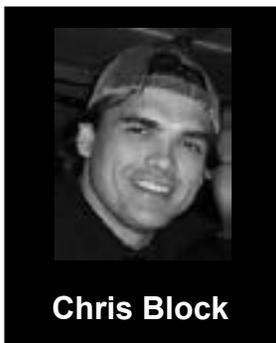
Until the Blackhawks seeked out veterans Jan Hejda, Lubomir Visnovsky and brought Michal Rozsival back for training camp try-outs, it appeared Erik Gustafsson had the best chance of any of the Hawks defense prospects this month. Now he appears headed for Rockford regardless. Gustafsson is average sized (6'0" 176). He's skates with a strong base and was an effective battler in Sweden and in July's prospect camp against lesser competition.

RD – VILLE POKKA (21)

The last remaining piece from the Nick Leddy trade, the Blackhawks can and will take their time with Pokka. Pokka has a solid skill set and poise to go with it. He's steady and consistent shift-to-shift and night-after-night. Pokka's best hockey last year was alongside T.J. Brennan, who was the puck lugger and an offensively proficient blue line partner Pokka played well off of. Pokka wasn't nearly as effective without Brennan, though some of that may also have been the effects of the long season as Pokka wore down into April and May. He was the next-best Blackhawks defense prospect behind Stephen Johns, who flourished late last season after the Hawks opened up ice time with moving out the likes of Clendening, Brennan and Dahlbeck. With Johns gone, its Pokka's time to step up now.

LD – VIKTOR SVEDBERG (24)

Svedberg will have a rough time getting to and/or staying at the NHL level because hockey ops has questioned the 6'9" Swedish defenseman's level of toughness and durability. He's a good skater for someone of his height, but Svedberg doesn't have a lot of mass to him. His height got him another contract but I wouldn't expect Svedberg to make much of an impact at the NHL level if he ever gets there.



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