

Block Party

Oh So Close

All that separated the Blackhawks from victory and a 1-0 series lead Friday night were a bad bounce Antti Niemi didn't read and a bonehead Troy Brouwer miscue midway through the third. Well, and then there was Pekka Rinne.

Nashville did exactly what everyone expected them to do in Game 1. No surprises. No upset. They cluttered the neutral zone with white jerseys, forcing Blackhawk puck carriers to the outside and for the most part, kept the scoring attempts Rinne did see to favorable distances. The Hawks didn't respond. They didn't force enough pucks or bodies to front the Finnish netminder. They didn't get their proverbial noses dirty. They didn't play 'playoff hockey' and now they've lost their home ice advantage. But all is not lost. The Hawks can win four of the next six games. They should anyhow, provided they show up tonight like a team interested in doing anything for victory.

The Blackhawks probably will win a game in this series 1-0, but they can't expect to and their performance in the third period Friday night was proof.

A few things came out of Friday's effort worth concern for Blackhawk fans. One; not only did the Hawks surrender a third period lead, but they allowed Nashville dictate the play to them during the final frame, getting out shot 13-4. Dave Bolland continues to be largely invisible skating on a line with one of the game's brilliant offensive players, Patrick Kane. There's Patrick Sharp, who's connected with opposing twine just once in the past eight games. He's getting lots of chances, so you figure he'll bounce one or two in here soon, but the Hawks can't wait another week for him to do so.

While Bolland was near perfect on face offs in the opener, 7 for 9, it's an aspect of the game he's been hot and cold in during his young NHL career and as the second center on a team aiming for a Stanley Cup Finals bid, he needs to provide so much more. In his last 19 games, Bolland has just 2 goals and 4 assists. He's been playing with Patrick Kane for a couple of weeks and should have more to show for it than a goal, one assist and seven shots in those eight games. Purely unacceptable. His interference penalty two minutes after J.P. Dumont's shot from along the half wall deflected off Duncan Keith's stick and two-hopped past Antti Niemi to tie the game was the epitome of stupid. As it turned out, Nashville were held without a shot on goal during the ensuing power play, but Bolland's timing, per usual, was ill-fated.

You can expect some changes tonight. One glance behind the Blackhawks bench late Friday could've told you so. As Nashville twice pounced on the home team's vacated net and Joel Quenneville's face became increasingly tautened, it was apparent his wheels were spinning and line combos would soon too. You know, because in Quenneville's world, a loss of course means a goalie change, line shuffling, or we are all punished by a period or two of Kris Versteeg playing center.

The biggest and definitely most interesting change made for tonight is the reuniting of Brent Seabrook and Duncan Keith. The pair have been together for nearly their entire five year careers but were split up out of necessity last month after injuries to Brian Campbell and Kim Johnsson depleted an already struggling defense core.

On the surface it appears to be a panic move as it will weaken the other two pairings and core six unnecessarily. Dustin Byfuglien is now skating with Jordan Hendry and Niklas Hjalmarsson with Brent Sopel. Keith and Seabrook will be asked to skate 30 minutes tonight for sure. Barry Trotz knows this and will instruct his forwards to be as physical as possible and make those a hard 30 minutes. Keith was darting around Friday like he was streamlining amphetamines. He may need to.

In case you haven't noticed, Hjalmarsson has been jittery of late. Now his turnovers will leave Brent Sopel alone to clean up, and as much as I commend his play this season, that's a big dropoff from Seabrook.

Hendry is a nice fill-in until Campbell gets back. He's not prone to many mistakes and is a good enough skater to join a rush when the occasion presents but he's not someone you'd classify as a shut down d-man. He's

just kind of out there. A guy with no identity. Hendry and Byfuglien were regular partners while teammates in the Hawks farm system, but before today there was a Norris Trophy finalist hanging around to correct Byfuglien's blunders. I sense trouble here.

Even more puzzling is the new first power play unit. With the Hawks power play at this point scoring less often than its penalty kill, who could blame Quenneville being open to try almost anything? Since Brian Campbell was pushed into the UC end boards from behind by Alexander Ovechkin, the Hawks power play has scored just four times (4 for 50) or converted on 8% of those chances. It's shockingly bad on a team with this much firepower. If the Hawks don't tune the PP up in a hurry, Nashville won't have much trouble taking this series.

You wouldn't think however, the answer would be to put two non-defenseman, currently providing nothing offensively themselves, on the points with the first power play unit. But that's exactly what Quenneville did at practice yesterday. The aforementioned line-killer, Dave Bolland and Dustin Byfuglien skated on the first unit with Toews, Kane and Sharp.

Quenneville has used Bolland there many times in the past, and it never really clicked before so why he's revisiting this now is your guess, not mine. Considering getting traffic in front of six-foot five Pekka Rinne is an immediate concern, Byfuglien's tall, wide-body would be better suited to park in the deep slot as opposed to sixty feet out. Quenneville will defend the move citing Byfuglien's big shot, but Seabrook has a decent one too and he's a lot better at getting pucks through traffic than Byfuglien. Not to mention, for reasons I couldn't begin to rationalize, everybody's favorite Norris Trophy candidate can't crack the first power play unit. More trouble? Are you getting a little urpy?

Additional changes see Sharp reunited with Kane on the Bolland line. This drops Brouwer to the Madden-Versteeg line. Toews and Hossa will now have Andrew Ladd on their left side.

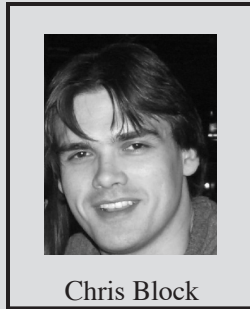
Kane and Sharp have great chemistry so perhaps Sharp breaks the slump tonight? Of all the moves, this one makes the most sense, or any sense at all. If Bolland can just stay out of the way now.

The formula is simple. Get pucks to the net. Drive hard and crash the crease for rebounds. With the groove Rinne is in currently, he's going to make the first save and then the battle is between the Hawk forwards and Predators' defenseman. If the home team forgets to bring the heat again in Game 2, we're looking at a long night and a lot of unhappy folks heading for the exits.

That's not to suggest Brouwer or Ben Eager take another run at Rinne. In 1991, Dirk Graham ran Jon Casey in the opening game of a series with heavy underdog Minnesota North Stars. The act didn't jar Casey but it did the Hawks as they never regained their composure. Storming the crease and guys like Sharp and Hossa driving wide and cutting around defenseman to the net will eventually create all kinds of problems for Rinne and the Nashville defense. Before the league eliminated the clutching and grabbing, the dreaded "trap" was very real. Today, it's only a trap if you stand around and let it be. The Hawks must be more assertive going forward.

The Blackhawks are still the better team. They own a decidedly more potent offense and a defense that is at least as good, even now, as Nashville's. This is still the Hawks series to lose. I wouldn't go as far to classify tonight as "must win" as much as it's important the Hawks get their game going and instill some doubt in a Predators group beaming with confidence right now. If they don't, this won't take very long.

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