

BLOCK PARTY

HEADLINE

You'll never want to get too high or too low in a seven-game playoff series. One non-eliminator game isn't going to make a series more often times than so and margin of victory counts for about as much as Jack Skille's rookie card or Kris Versteeg's shooting percentage.

So it's not for me or anyone to point to Saturday night's Game 1 loss as a proverbial season-toss. If the Hawks respond tonight with a win, they'll be poised to regain their home ice advantage and all will be right in Blackhawks' nation. Well, at least for another 48 hours.

In the end, the Game 1 was as lop-sided as the 5-1 score suggested. Although, if not for a few unfortunate brain cramps and Roberto Luongo teeth-grinding saves, the Hawks could've been leading after twenty minutes and that quick Henrik Sedin goal to push the score to 3-0 thirty seconds into the 2nd wouldn't have been the game-killer it turned out to be. But those points didn't lean in Chicago's favor and for the first time in over two years, the United Center was half empty with six minutes left in a game.

Simply put, the Hawks were badly beat at their own game. Saturday's loss wasn't as appalling as Game 3 in Nashville. Neither was it as demoralizing, nor have the turn-away factor as the Hawks in '92 against the Blues, or '87 against Detroit. But there were plenty of red flags sprouting from the ice Saturday.

The Hawks who took to the ice in Game 3 at Nashville were unprepared, and shell-shocked under an unexpected pace Nashville set on their home ice. It was an embarrassing effort. One completely out of character for this group of Hawks and thus easy to write off. On the other hand, Saturday they were noticeably shaken after Vancouver absorbed the Hawks' best punch and had the game then taken to them. They were beaten to seemingly every loose puck and an unwillingness to take the game to the tough areas again reared its ugly head.

On the bright side, the power play saw tons of chances. It did take a 5-on-3 to get one past Roberto Luongo, but should that trend continue, the power play should have some success in this series. Chicago's penalty kill is still the best in the playoffs at 92%. While the Canucks went 1 for 4 on the night, they were limited to 4 shots in five and a half minutes a man up. While Kane was indecisive and tried to do too much himself, he and Patrick Sharp were the two best Hawks and should be reunited.

The Hawks had the better of the action in period one but got caught running and stubbing their toes around the defensive zone. Christian Ehrhoff's 50 foot snapper didn't need a Patrick Sharp or Alex Burrows' screen; Antti Niemi spotted Ehrhoff enough twine up top to net a Canadian walleye. For a guy of Niemi's size, he can't be on his knees relinquishing his size when struggling behind obstructed sight-lines. It should be noted again; Niemi's tendency to over-commit and lose his angles moving side-to-side will eventually be exploited, and Vancouver is getting there. He's always made nights harder than they should be with those lively leg pads and juicy rebounds. His athletic ability is enough to stop most of the second and sometimes third-chance opportunities he creates, but he's always in need of a little assistance from his defenseman. Only problem Saturday was the Hawks' d-men were circling their zone like they used Mapquest to direct them to Niemi.

Whatever answers or response Joel Quenneville has conjured up for tonight will likely be misguided if the idea is to counter the Canucks' Game 1 battle plan. Alain Vigneault is likely to change the theme tonight and will try to slow dance the way to a commanding 2-0 series lead heading towards two dates in British Columbia. He'll attempt to suffocate the Hawks with a disturbingly plodding pace. He'll have his Nucks lined up in a neutral-zone clogging, defense-first formation and hope the home team tenses up and once again dishes the puck around like a hot plate. And if so, Vigneault will take his chances that his shooters crawled have inside Antti Niemi's head.

I don't know what's wrong with Brent Seabrook, but he was slower than Brent Sopel on Saturday. Getting outmuscled by Kyle Wellwood on Vancouver's fourth, and only power play goal officially made Seabrook's night an utter embarrassment. Duncan Keith was so jittery he may have been snorting a white powdery substance between shifts for all any of us know. The myth that is 'the great' Duncan Keith is taking another fable-weakening blow for the second consecutive playoff. If he is a leader and a Norris Trophy finalist, he should start acting like one.

If Marian Hossa's lone 2010 playoff highlight turns out to be his OT goal against the Predators, I wouldn't be surprised. It's playoff time and Hossa is a fraction of the guy who made many a Blackhawks fan go all Pontius Pilate on JC Havlat. Hossa came and left the UC Saturday without getting a single shot on Luongo. At what point do we tag Hossa with the Thornton label? All that talent, the flashes of brilliance, periods of dominance and what does he bring to the postseason? A stupid, careless, wreckless major penalty that against most other power plays without Martin Erat would've cost the Hawks a Game 5 and by the act of cowardness of an officiating

crew, he's allowed to stay in a game he should have been ejected from only to score the game-ending goal seconds after leaving the box. Blackhawks were lucky to be sitting on the fortunate side of a travesty of justice that day. And ironically, it's the only span in seven playoff games we've noticed Hossa.

But the biggest disappointment on Saturday and the aftermath of the series-opening loss was that of head coach Joel Quenneville. A guy not known for rah-rah speeches or challenging his players directly, instead choosing to send subtle messages or roster tweaking to get his points across, Quenneville chose not to practice his team in the wake of Saturday's humiliating defeat. I guess because they played so well, he couldn't think of a single thing they needed work on? They should have been practicing between periods Saturday night.

Even more eye-raising, was Patrick Kane's admission after Game 1 that the team he may have taken Vancouver (Northwest Division champs and 3rd seed in the conference) lightly. This, two weeks after the Hawks were muttering the similar tones in round one. A lack of preparation, commitment and work ethic ultimately falls on the heads of the players, but also reflects upon their head coach.

Before round one, Quenneville was quoted when talking about the extra day or two off before the start of the Nashville series as saying "hopefully we can take advantage of the rest and get enthused." Enthused? Playoffs?

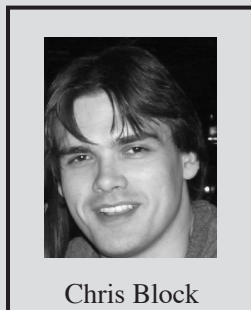
The reality is, Q was over-matched in round one and he was out-coached Saturday before the first puck was dropped. More Dave Bolland is a bad thing for Chicago hockey. When Quenneville gave number 36 the assignment of checking the Sedin-Samuelsson line, that meant a whole lot more Bolland (recently demoted from the second line and just 1 garbage goal in 7 playoff games). Which in turn meant more Versteeg (0 goals in 7 playoff games) and more Andrew Ladd (quietly having a miserable playoff in every aspect). While it wasn't facing the Sedin line, it was Bolland and Versteeg who left one entire side of the ice wide open for Mason Raymond to one-time that huge Niemi rebound at the end of the first period. So Quenneville actually

thought aligning an underachieving Ladd and two guys who couldn't be trusted to cover Dustin Byfuglien at an open bar was the best way to contain the league's top scorer, his twin brother and a renowned Hawk-killer? And he gets paid to make these decisions.

So what changes need to be made before the Hawks make a 1-1 series reality? First off, reduce Bolland and Versteeg's ice time. Versteeg's ice dancing routines should be saved for rat hockey and Bolland's minutes should be limited until he earns a few more. Far too many times late in the season, and now the playoffs, Quenneville's line juggling has rewarded those who are underperforming and penalizing guys who're among the most consistent team players. Troy Brouwer has been slow to find his game since returning from a week with his ill father, but skating on the fourth line he won't find his former self. Bryan Bickell can't play in this series. He can't keep up. Brouwer should return to a top line. He's reliable in all zones, he'll finish his checks and is a big body who can get to the net and score on a chance here and there. Bickell is penciled in as a fourth liner next year. How can Quenneville expect him to produce on Toews' line in the Stanley Cup playoffs this year? I have a composition book I write all sorts of crazy ideas in, but I don't share them with people.

The Hawks also need to finish every single check within legal striking distance. As mentioned above, Vancouver has their road win and tonight will be looking to "steal" another. They don't care for style points. They will emulate the paint-drying approach which gave the Hawks fits in game's 3 and 4 of last year's series in this very building and similar to what the Hawks just saw in certain games in the Nashville series. While the scoresheet shows the Hawks outthit Vancouver 37-27 in Game 1, you'd be hard-pressed to remember but a few of them. The Hawks need to put more intent behind those checks. Dump and chase hockey isn't the most popular, but when timed right, it makes for a long night for opposing defenseman. The game will be tight and closely checked. The more lumps the Hawks dish out, the quicker the Canucks will check out and take their one win back to the charter home. The Hawks still want to focus on puck possession, but can create more chances by getting physical.

There is zero pressure on Vancouver to win this one. It's not exactly a must-win for the Hawks, but they sure need a stronger output than Game 1. If you've paid close attention to this team for the past two years, you can expect just that. Only question is, if the villains get a two-goal or late lead, will the Hawks and their coach wilt under the pressure as they did Saturday? Let's hope not.



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