

Block Party

Happy Trails

"Every single player on that team is with Dale. I still talk to the guys all the time, hockey players know a phony when they see one." Martin Havlat 7-15-2009

After 33 years with the Chicago Blackhawks; 5 as a player during the seventies, 17 as a broadcaster and 11 in the front office, Michael Dale Tallon officially exited the organization on Tuesday, ten months after taking the fall for a supposed inner-office mailing error.

On July 14, 2009, team president John McDonough stunned most observers when he announced he was relieving Tallon of his general manager duties and "re-assigning" Tallon to a Senior Advisor to hockey operations position, the same role Scotty Bowman has fulfilled since coming aboard July 31, 2008. Tallon had not been visible at the United Center or with the team ever since.

You all know the story. Young Stan, a man 22 ½ years Tallon's junior, with a more hockey-renowned surname and christened after the Stanley Cup would go on to replace the highly popular, quick-witted Noranda, Quebec native.

The culprit, if you believe McDonough, was hockey operations' mishandling of qualifying offer sheets due to several of last summer's restricted free agents. Included in that mishap were Cam Barker, Troy Brouwer and Kris Versteeg. In the midst of a grievance filed on behalf of the players involved by the NHLPA, which potentially could have seen those three become un-restricted free agents due to the Blackhawks not complying with the guidelines set by the collective bargaining agreement, the Hawks handed out hefty raises in exchange for dropping their grievances. Barker and Versteeg in particular got new three-year contracts worth more than three million a year each, both well above what the Hawks wanted to pay them.

The squeaky-clean image of the new-era Hawks took its first blow as the front office was the laughing-stock of the league for a few days. The Tallon-McDonough relationship was tenuous at best to begin with. A little over a week later, action was taken.

What followed was a press conference in which McDonough talked in circles for better than a half hour about accountability, pointing to the RFA debacle as proverbial straw that broke Tallon's back. All as he sat next to Dale's successor, the same Stan Bowman whose office, as assistant general manager, was responsible for handling player contract paperwork.

In fact, Stan's exact responsibilities as outlined in the 2008-09 Blackhawks media guide read:

"Bowman works closely with general manager Dale Tallon, attending to the day-to-day administration of the Blackhawks' hockey operations department. His primary responsibilities include all CBA-related matters such as contract negotiations, free agency, salary arbitration, player movement and player assignment."

So, as outlined in their own company directory, it was either Stan's failure to accurately comply with a CBA which was his job to master, or botched system of checks and balances relating directly to him that led to Tallon losing his job and Stan being promoted to it. Huh. Any wonder John and Stan were as sweaty and uncomfortable as they appeared at the aforementioned press conference? That's a tough sell even for the greatest of con-men.

The real story will come out someday. Pieces of it are everywhere. Dale wasn't McDonough's guy. Stan's last name made John more comfortable. Stan's father was in the ear of McDonough to the point Tallon's words had less and less value by the passing hour. Dale had a hard time adhering to McDonough's persistent prying into hockey operations. In his first two years on the job, McDonough referred to himself as someone who was hockey naïve and "learning." Others considered it meddling.

With a year left on his existing contract, McDonough though showered the scorned Tallon with rose pedals publicly by giving him a two-year extension on his existing contract which originally would have run out this summer. While the president insisted Tallon would continue to be a valued member to hockey ops, the gesture smelled of shut-up money. Tallon was rarely seen or heard from again.

Tallon effectively left the organization back in January when he moved full-time to his second residence in Vero Beach, about two hours north of where the Panthers play in Sunrise, Florida. He did a lot of golfing, a passion that rivals his one for hockey, and attended many Panthers' games. Within the last two weeks, McDonough and Wirtz, with the team deeply entrenched in a run at the Cup, chose to allow Tallon to seek certain available GM opportunities.

New ownership in Florida quickly swooped in on the architect of a Blackhawks team now six wins in the rear of a championship and made Tallon a GM again.

The Panthers are in a similar situation as the one Tallon found himself in four years ago when he used the 3rd pick overall to draft Jonathan Toews. Florida owns the 3rd pick in this summer's NHL Entry Draft which takes place at the Staples Center in LA June 25-26. With Taylor Hall and Tyler Seguin going 1-2 to Edmonton and Boston, Tallon will likely look to build his new team as he did the Hawks, through speed and puck-carrying prowess from the blue line and select Cam Fowler, defense-

man of the Windsor Spitfires. Fowler is touted for his offense, but he also shut down his Windsor teammate Taylor Hall in the World Junior Championships when Fowler patrolled the ice for the U.S. Fowler will draw comparisons to Drew Doughty, and he'll be in the league in two years if not next.

Since the turnover rate for GM's in Florida is ridiculously high, Tallon may need to come away more than that. He'll arrive at the draft with nine picks, three of which are in the second round (33, 36, 50). As of now he doesn't have a selection in the third round, but he does have two in the fourth, one being Toronto's (acquired in the Mike Van Ryn for Bryan McCabe deal). After Toews in '06, Tallon came away with nothing. Unless you consider names like Makarov, Danis-Pepin, Lagerstrom, Shutron, Palmer, Jutilainen, Auger or LeBlanc something.

Also awaiting Tallon's attention are two veterans entering the final year of each's respective contracts. Tomas Vokoun and Bryan McCabe will take up \$11.45M on Florida's cap next season and neither is likely to be re-signed. They have Jacob Markstrom, a big young Swedish netminder thought to be a star-in-waiting, but he's another year or two from being NHL ready. If Dale learned anything from studying the market, and specifically the Panthers' inability to move star player's expiring contracts at the trade deadline, forming a plan for Vokoun and his immediate goaltending plans should be of utmost priority.

New ownership in Sunrise will provide Tallon with the resources to expand a sparse hockey and scouting staff as it exists today. In the coming weeks and post-draft, Dale will hire an assistant GM, a director of hockey operations and create several additional scouting positions.

One hire Tallon can't make is perhaps the most interesting piece to the Chicago puzzle. Rick Dudley left the Blackhawks last off season prior to the Tallon firing. It raised eyebrows at the time and became no coincidence later on when Tallon got the boot for Stan Bowman's error. Dudley has made several cryptic remarks about Hawks' front office inner-workings since and he and Tallon were closely aligned while on the same team in Chicago. Dudley joined the Thrashers shortly after leaving the Hawks and became the team's general manager last month when Don Waddell removed himself from the position. Dudley was also the GM who largely assembled the 2004 Stanley Cup champion Tampa Bay Lightning. Dudley was the key in the Nikolai Khabibulin negotiations in 2005 and a tireless scout who was the ace behind many of Tallon's moves.

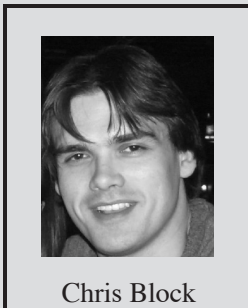
Dale Tallon has taken some deserved shots over time for his first two years as the official GM here in town. He and Bob Pulford stripped the roster bare under orders from Bill Wirtz in preparation for the 2004-05 lockout with the indication they'd have the dollars and ability to operate intelligently under the league's first salary cap system. Wirtz kept his promise. The team signed the defending Stanley Cup winning goalie away from Tampa Bay, added Adrian Aucoin, Jaroslav Spacek and Martin Lapointe to a young in-experienced group. Had Tallon considered how the rule changes and crack-down on obstruction would change the game, those might not have been so bad.

But in the end, it turned out okay. Khabibulin struggled through injuries and inconsistency for two seasons. Aucoin and the entire Hawks' defense, including Keith and Seabrook at the time, were brutal. And the deficiencies on offense turned up Toews in '06 and Patrick Kane after the Hawks' won the draft lottery in '07.

In case you believe otherwise, Tallon deserves much praise for those moves. Consider this: He could easily have chosen Phil Kessel over Toews and James VanRiemsdyk or Kyle Turris over Kane. How the course of history would have changed if he'd made those moves? Well, John McDonough may have never taken this job. Maybe the Hawks would have Toronto's second pick in the upcoming draft? Brian Campbell and Marian Hossa would have never considered coming here. Versteeg and Barker would let that grievance play itself out and a Duncan Keith trade for prospects at the deadline in lieu of the richest contract in team history certainly would have gone down.

It all seems so wrong. The brain behind a team as it appears destined to win its first Cup in 49 years left the organization this week without a trace. No mention or acknowledgment from the brass other than one misguided dig. Stan Bowman representing the organization in San Jose on Monday insisting he taught Tallon a thing or two while underneath him. Like what? Forgetting to submit paperwork or help, as the supposed team cap-ologist, to steer the team into a salary cap abyss? Tallon will really miss that in Florida.

If the Hawks do win reign supreme this spring and Tallon's name isn't engraved on that Cup, it will be an injustice of Mc-mammoth proportions. Although, maybe the greatest acknowledgement of all came from the players Tallon assembled upon hearing of their former leader's new gig. Admiration, friendship and unwavering respect. You can't find their words on the Hawks' web site, but they do. Just like Marty said. They know.



Chris Block