

Block Party

There Goes Your Man

It has been four years and about five weeks since Jeremy Morin made his NHL debut in the Chicago Blackhawks' uniform.

Morin was 19-years-old then and six weeks ahead of the Hawks loaning him to Team USA for the World Junior Championships, culminating in Buffalo at the turn of January, 2011. Morin played injured in that tournament, missing two games and managing just one assist in four games played.

Back then, Morin's future in the Blackhawks organization was very bright. Seen by many as the principal jewel acquired from the Atlanta Thrashers in the deal that sent Dustin Byfuglien, Ben Eager and Brent Sopel down south, Morin was pegged as a future 30-goal scorer and potentially a fixture in the Hawks' top six for years to come. That slot would eventually be taken by Brandon Saad, who was drafted by the Hawks after cascading down the draft board into the second round in 2011.

On Saturday night, November 6, 2010, at Philips Arena in Atlanta, Morin took to the ice wearing sweater #27. In those days the number was still seen as Jeremy Roenick's 'number.' A month prior, Morin was among the final cuts out of his first Blackhawks' training camp. In fact, had Brian Campbell not suffered a knee injury in the final days of preseason, prompting Stan Bowman to peg 19-year-old Nick Leddy for the Opening Night roster instead, Morin likely would have been on the ice the night the Blackhawks rose their first Stanley Cup banner in 49 years.

In Morin's NHL debut, he skated on a line with Troy Brouwer and center Patrick Sharp. That's how long ago this was - Sharp was still playing his natural position. Jack Skille was still a Hawk then. He was present on a fourth line that included Fernando Pisani and defenseman, just turned forward, John Scott. Marian Hossa and Dave Bolland were out of the lineup with injuries. Brian Campbell had returned to the lineup and Leddy was sent down to Rockford to make way for young Morin.

Morin exhibited a blend of speed, feistiness and a wrist shot that all suggested he wasn't far off from being an NHL regular.

So when and how did the train veer off the tracks for the highly-touted young sniper to be?

Morin didn't take any time off after the World Juniors, though he had played through the tournament with a shoulder injury. He was sent back to Rockford since the Hawks were healthy and tight against the cap. Unfortunately, Morin would play just three more games that season.

On January 15, 2011, Morin skated into the Chicago Wolves' end of the Allstate Arena ice in Rosemont. He was greeted by an Andrey Zubarev hipcheck that sent Morin's legs airborne and he came crashing down helmet-first, on the top of his head and crunching his neck.

Morin would suffer through post-concussion symptoms for several months.

When he reported to conditioning and training camp the following September, Morin was still claiming to be feeling the effects of his concussion, and leery of taking part in contact drills. This was the point when Morin's stock within the organization took a hit. There was a sentiment by some in and around the team that Morin wasn't tough enough. He would not appear in a game until mid-October with Rockford.

Morin played three games with the Hawks in his second pro season. The callup came at an odd time. He had just finished serving a three-game AHL suspension for a hit he threw along the boards in Milwaukee that included an errant elbow. Morin hadn't played a game in over a week, but he was called to duty with the Blackhawks anyway because there was really no one else worthy of a recall at the time.

His first game was a Sunday night game against Calgary at the UC. He played left wing on the top line with Toews and Kane. He didn't see a regular shift with those two all night, but when he did play, it was with 19 and 88. That stayed the same in Pittsburgh two nights later. But then Morin was demoted to right wing with Michael Frolik and center, Jamal Mayers the next night, December 21, 2011. Morin would be sent down after that and not be recalled again until a few games at the end of the 2013 regular season.

By this time the shine had worn off.

Morin only has himself to blame.

His game never evolved. His play over the puck wasn't the major concern, though shot selection has come into question. It was his commitment and awareness away from the puck that was scrutinized by many.

How much you can blame Ted Dent, Barry Smith or the Blackhawks' developmental

coaching staff, I'm not sure.

He didn't take strength training as serious as other players. His skating skill has improved only marginally over four-plus seasons.

Morin's an emotional kid at times, too. He was a part of a group of players who believed, rightly or wrongly, they were NHL ready after a year or two in Rockford. And if they were just given a chance, they'd prove that to be true. When the opportunities didn't come as quickly as Morin wished they would, he wore his frustrations.

There was a spot for Morin to win at the start of the 2013-14 campaign, but he failed to do so. Returning yet again to Rockford, Morin didn't channel his frustrations in a positive way.

It wasn't until late January that Morin got his game going. For two months Morin dominated the AHL.

But by then it was too late. Stan Bowman had moved on, reacquiring Kris Versteeg from Florida to fill the spot Morin couldn't. It was the symbolic end to Morin's Blackhawks' career and Morin knew it at that time.

Over the time I covered Ben Smith in Rockford and saw him hit with untimely injuries or be passed over by management, I never saw Smith sulk or beaten down emotionally.

I couldn't say the same for Morin, or Brandon Pirri.

It's tough for prospects to read their GM say he wants to overstay them in the minors.

They're competitors who want to prove they can perform at the next level and when they're not given extended opportunities to prove that, it's understandably frustrating.

But in this case Morin has no one to blame but himself.

Had he gone back to Rockford a year ago and played the kind of dominating hockey he would later in the year, it's possible Versteeg isn't reacquired and Morin would have played 50 games with the Hawks last year, not 24.

Instead he sulked in group of other prospects who shared his views on the situation and that of their own. Those players were soon traded.

There's a larger issue at hand here than Jeremy Morin.

For the Hawks to sustain their success as Marian Hossa gets older and the salary cap forces stars such as Patrick Sharp and Brent Seabrook potentially out of town, the Hawks must become more homegrown. That, after all, is how the current dynasty was built by

Dale Tallon.

Three players on Sunday night's roster were Stan Bowman draft picks. Add in Ben Smith (a '08 Tallon pick) and only four players Sunday's squad were drafted by the Hawks since Patrick Kane in 2007.

While the narrative throughout the hockey world is that Stan Bowman and his staff have done a terrific job drafting and crafting a team, one can't continue to assert that if the Hawks aren't turning their drafted assets into players on their NHL roster.

If next year's cap limit comes in at \$72.5M, which is a fair estimate, the Hawks will have \$7.5M left to spend on nine roster spots. Three of those spots are on defense, and that's assuming none of the big three are dealt to clear cap room. They'll also need to sign Brandon Saad, who won't be easy to sign since he'll want as least as much as the \$4M teammate Bryan Bickell makes.

Which means now it's more important than ever for Stan to churn his own prospects into Hawks.

Instead, in trading Morin, Stan puts Tim Erixon, like with David Rundblad before, marginal players at best, ahead of his own drafted prospects with higher ceilings.

Klas Dahlbeck and Adam Clendening with both be RFAs after this season. Both will become solid NHL regulars for someone. By not determining if these players can perform as Blackhawks before they get to their second contract, Bowman is stacking the deck against his own guys.

I can't foresee a world in which Joel Quenneville dresses a team with six true rookies. And since Joel has more stroke in the organization than Stan supposedly does, players like Dahlbeck and Clendening could be headed for similar fates as Morin or Ryan Stanton before him.

Not every prospect is going to be like Brandon Saad and blow the doors down.

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