

Block Party

Not Going To Plan

The journey to Illinois hasn't gone the way Teuvo Teravainen had anticipated.

In the 11 games he's played into this AHL season, Teravainen has just one goal and six assists. His minus-3 rating is the worst on a Rockford IceHogs squad that posted its 8th consecutive win on Saturday night and is now 10-2-0-1, behind only the Utica Comets (Vancouver Canucks' affiliate) for best overall record in the league.

Teravainen isn't producing to the level most everyone expected of him and his talents, figured to be so good that he'd be a cut above at the American Hockey League level, haven't connected with his IceHogs teammates to this point.

After Saturday's 3-1 victory over the Grand Rapids Griffins, in which Teuvo was held off the scoresheet for the fifth time in 11 appearances, the 20-year old Finnish phenom struggled to crack a smile.

Teravainen stood with his arms folded, speaking to his agent Markus Lehto, down the hallway from the IceHogs' locker room for twenty minutes following Saturday night's game.

After that conversation, we spoke with Teravainen.

"I'm not playing good right now and I don't know why," Teravainen told me. "I'm not myself on the ice. I just got to focus on the little things and get going."

Ted Dent was protective of Teravainen after Saturday night's victory. The Rockford IceHogs' head coach has been careful not to publicly criticize Teuvo over his struggles this early season. However, Dent did shorten his bench Saturday, up a goal during the final ten minutes of the third period and Teravainen didn't get much ice time during that time.

"Well, he was sick here this past week," Dent, speaking of the sinus infection that held Teravainen out of games on Tuesday and Thursday. "He had one practice (on Friday) before today's game."

Teravainen fell ill on Tuesday afternoon in Rockford after the team's morning skate prior to an eventual 4-3, come from behind win over Lake Erie. He was left home as the team traveled to Des Moines on Wednesday to prepare for a rare school day 10:30am contest with the Iowa Wild the next day. But Teravainen was well enough to practice with his teammates on Friday and for the morning skate on Saturday.

"I don't think he was 100 percent (on Saturday night). He was fine tonight," Dent said. "It's a tight game the last 5-7 minutes. We have to have certain centers on the ice for face-offs and things like that, so I had to shorten the bench a little at the end there."

Teravainen has admitted he's frustrated with the rhythm of the AHL game. Because it's a developmental league with a wide variety in the level of talent on the ice, there's a lot of chipping and chasing, missed passes and rat race type hockey.

"Of course I see the game is a lot different here, than in Europe," Teravainen said, again on Saturday. "I think it's even different than in the NHL [than it is in the AHL]. It's a lot of chipping, just, like, battling and guys are just going everywhere."

From an observer's point of view, one of the issues impacting Teravainen's game to this point is one he cannot control. Teravainen thinks the game faster than just about everyone else on his team. Thus, his passes aren't connecting and his shifts break down into – as Teuvo said – guys scrambling everywhere to reclaim pucks.

Dent agrees.

"I think our teammates are getting used to him as well," Dent explained. "[Teuvo] surprise passes a lot, and no-look passes a lot."

But that said, Teravainen hasn't shown a willingness in recent weeks to take control offensively. He makes a lot of his passes standing still, or he stops moving after releasing a pass. He's not as active as he needs to be in puck retrieval. So, he's as much a part of the problem on his line as he is the solution. He's averaging two shots per game, one more on average than he did in his brief look at the end of last season. But he's not getting great looks either.

To no fault of his own, Teravainen has been overhyped, and presented by the organization, and some in the media, as the Hawks next great young superstar. In some circles it seems Hawks fans believe they have another Patrick Kane on their hands. Teuvo isn't that.

We've made the Saku Koivu comparison before, and as one scout told me recently, that's more accurate. Although he also said he's not convinced

Teravainen can even be that, citing Koivu's compete-level versus what Teravainen's exhibited so far.

This is all being said now during a time when Teravainen is struggling to find his place in a league that is slightly below his talents. No one is denying the ability is there. But now Teuvo is faced with some adversity he was not prepared for.

Teravainen is shy around the media. He's not the most quotable player to begin with, but the signs of wear in dealing with the expectations and attention are beginning to show.

When asked if he felt he could have made the Blackhawks had he not got hurt and missed a week of training camp, Teuvo shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. I know the team is pretty hard to make. There's so many good players, so, I don't know."

When players are sent down to Rockford, most get the same generic speech. They're told the organization likes what they're seeing. Just to go to Rockford, work hard, stay positive and their opportunity will eventually come.

According to Teuvo, he got a similar speech.

"They like me. They said they liked me in training camp. But, I don't know."

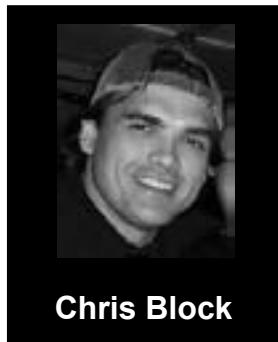
"I had a good summer, got a little stronger. I think I had a good training camp. I was a little injured there, and got sent back down here. I don't know. I feel okay. I know I can play a lot better."

In his answers in our conversation Saturday night, Teravainen mentioned over and over how he has to focus on staying positive and trying to have fun.

"I just try to get better every day here, and try to stay positive. The team is winning here, so its fun."

And again, on trying to stay positive and have fun in Rockford.

"Yeah. Stay positive. Try to have fun here and play good."



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