For the second straight season, Chicago's backup goaltender exceeded all expectations, took advantage of ample opportunities and played their way right into a starter's role for the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Back in October, Corey Crawford was considered as nothing more than a serviceable backup. He thrived as a minor-leaguer after traveling the long-winding journey from Moncton (QMJHL) to Norfolk and then Rockford of the AHL. He had also played more than enough AHL games in order to develop the mental toughness, poise and skills needed to succeed at the NHL level…he just needed the chance.

More importantly, Crawford also faced plenty of adversity through situations like disappointing AHL playoff losses, a gut-wrenching and hopeless waiver ordeal, and then of course the

2009-10 training camp battle loss to Antti Niemi.

Yet through it all, he persevered with a patient and gratifying smile.

These invaluable learning experiences, along with a quality mentor in Marty Turco and outstanding goalie coach in Stephane Waite, made Crawford's transformation a successful and meaningful one.

And as the Blackhawks prepare to battle the Vancouver Canucks in Game 5 of their first-round playoff series, one thing is for certain: In Crawford, Chicago trusts. The players, coaching staff, upper management and the fans have plenty of faith in Crawford's ability to out-shine Roberto Luongo and extend the series.

So regardless of how the series ends, the current state of Blackhawks goaltending reveals tremendous developmental success and plenty of bright spots for next season and beyond.

To give you a brief overview of Chicago's goaltending depth chart, let's quickly roll through the eight goalies in the system. Be sure to check out our *NHL Depth Charts* feature, which provides updates on every NHL team's goalie depth on a monthly basis!

In Chicago, Turco will be an un-restricted free agent on July 1, while Crawford will be restricted. I do not expect the Blackhawks to re-sign Turco, but do feel that they won't make the same mistake twice and will get a deal done with Crawford before going to arbitration.

Cristobal Huet is signed for next season, but it is unclear whether or not he will be loaned to a club in Europe again. His performances in Switzerland have been well below expectations for an NHL goaltender and unimpressive for someone that has such quality butterfly skills. That being said, I expect he'll continue to play in Europe somewhere.

Hannu Toivonen, who was extremely strong down the stretch for Rockford this season, is also set to become an un-restricted free-agent on July 1. Alex Salak, who was acquired a few months back from Florida, just completed a spectacular Gold Medal-winning season with Farjestad in the Swedish Elite League.

Although his rights now belong to Chicago, he is an RFA, so they still need to sign him to a new contract for next season. Alec Richards is also an RFA this summer, leaving Huet as the only signed goaltender for next season.

From there, Chicago has two quality prospects developing in the Western Hockey League (WHL) in Kent Simpson and Mac Carruth. Both goalies had strong seasons for their respective teams and are members of my *Top-100 Prospects Rankings* . This means I consider them as having legitimate NHL upside and potential.

Enjoy the insight on the reader-submitted questions below and a special thanks to Blackhawks Down Low for winning the Charity Blogging project!

How have you seen Crawford progress this year and what do you think his ceiling is?

Crawford's progress this season has been terrific. I don't think he developed much in the way of raw skills, but more his mental toughness and durability. He always had a very quality and underrated skill set, so I think the biggest thing I noticed this season was his ability to handle a very heavy workload and maintain an even-keeled attitude. By that I mean he didn't get too high when the wins were plentiful, but he didn't get too low when he struggled. That's the sign of a mentally tough goaltender with a "starter" mentality.

At 26 years of age, Crawford is one of the more mature rookies out there. He's also starting to

hit his prime. You have to be careful about the sophomore slump, but I think his age and his quality skills will help him stay grounded and confident if he goes through a rough stretch. He has the attitude, work ethic and body language a team wants in a starter and I fully expect the organization to embrace him as their go-to goalie for next year and beyond.

I also want to point out that the playoff series against Vancouver is huge for his development in so many ways. It is important for fans to look beyond his game-by-game performance and realize it's a tremendous learning experience. Win or lose, he gains a lot of confidence knowing he can perform well enough in the playoffs to give his teammates a chance to win in every game. In regards to his ceiling, I would say it's high enough to win 35 games in the regular season and high enough to take the Blackhawks back to the Stanley Cup Finals.

Where does Salak fit into the Blackhawks goaltending depth? How long until we see him in Chicago?

If Chicago can sign Salak over the summer, do not be surprised if he wins the backup role in training camp. I occasionally touch base with Salak's goalie coach in Sweden, Erik Granqvist, and I've heard many good things about Salak's development this year.

From what I can see, Salak is much more technically sound and not nearly as over-amplified as before. He's relying more on positioning and has instilled some better practice habits into his daily on and off-ice routine. He was already a sensational raw-skilled talent to begin with, so I

am excited to see how Salak performs heading into next season.

As long as he gets an opportunity to win the backup role in Chicago, or the starting role in Rockford, I fully expect him to surprise Blackhawks fans and be very successful next year.

Where do you think Marty Turco will go next season?

The marketplace for backups just looking to extend their career is not nearly as dry as starters looking for big-money contracts. There will be opportunities for Turco to sign a one-year deal as a backup on another team. He is a great mentor, a great teammate and still one of the best puck-moving goalies in the world. I have no idea what team is interested in his services, but his agent will get some calls.

Things did not go his way this season, but I don't think it was due to a lack in skills. He's a rhythm goalie and thrives on playing consistent minutes. He had a very short leash this season due to Crawford's emergence, so I think it was simply a "transition" year or Turco. He is in a different stage of his career. He will have to embrace the backup role and work hard this summer to keep his skills honed and remain a viable option for an NHL team.

I also have to point out that I was a big advocate of the #TurcoJesus campaign on Twitter and I am a huge Turco fan. He's a dynamic personality with a very calming influence in the locker room and knows how to have a good time. Fans may lack trust in his skills, but I bet every Blackhawks player loves having him around.

The only goalie under contract for Chicago next season is Cristobal Huet. Since we know he's not coming back, who fills the starter and backup roles next year? Can Hannu Toivonen be a serviceable backup?

I will venture to say that Chicago's tandem next year will be Crawford and Salak. If Toivonen walks and Richards is re-signed, there is a spot open in Rockford. It could be given to Joe Palmer, but in my opinion, he has no NHL upside and is not fit for anything more than an AHL backup role. I do think Toivonen can be a serviceable backup, but I am not sure if Chicago is willing to give him that chance, or if he might look elsewhere for a better opportunity.

Because none of Chicago's goalies are signed for next season besides Huet, the Blackhawks have a lot of decisions to make and could go in a variety of directions. There are free agents available and there are many different ways to manage and maintain their depth. Ultimately, the biggest step will be re-signing Crawford to a fair contract.

From there, I hope Chicago gives Salak an opportunity to win the backup job in training camp. I don't think they would acquire him unless they knew he was a legitimate option for a serious role within the organization next season. If he's given that chance, don't be surprised if history repeats itself again and Salak pushes Crawford for starts next season.

Hawks fans are interested in Kent Simpson and Mac Carruth. Can you tell us a little about their potential?

Hawks fans should be excited about both of these prospects. Simpson is a very hard-working, durable goaltender for the Silvertips (WHL) and had a very good season. He was seventh in goals-against average (2.78) and had a .916 save percentage in 53 games for Everett. He posted better stats last year, but only played in 34 games, so he did a good job of increasing his role as the team's full-blown starter this season.

Simpson is a technically sound goaltender with a good balance of positional and reactionary skills. His frame is solid, as he is listed at 6-foot-2 and 190 pounds. He makes himself appear bigger in the net while also having the reflexes needed to make reflex or desperate saves.

Carruth exploded this year for the Portland WinterHawks. Right now, he's rolling along in the playoffs with an 8-1-1 record, a 2.57 goals-against average and a .924 save percentage. During the regular season, he went 31-13-1 with a 3.08 goals-against average and a .914 save percentage. Stats rarely tell the story of a goalie's season, but I know he was reliable and a real sparkplug for his team. He's also optimally sized for today's NHL, as he is listed at 6-foot-3 and 174 pounds. He's a lanky guy with a lot of potential and a good frame, so the upside is clearly there.

I really like both of these guys' upside because they played so many games this year. That goes a long way in molding the skills it takes to be a successful pro goaltender. They are much more likely to be durable workhorses that can play 55-60 games in the AHL and NHL if they play more than 40 games in the WHL. Be excited for these guys and cheer them on as they continue to develop in the juniors!