

The Blackhawks Have Their Swagger Back

Written by Michael Amato

Monday, 25 February 2013 15:51 - Last Updated Monday, 25 February 2013 22:35



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It's not like the Chicago Blackhawks have played poorly since they captured the Stanley Cup during the 2009-10 season, but when you have the type of talent Chi-Town has, expectations are high. Chicago followed their championship with a couple of first round exits from the playoffs, after finishing in eighth and sixth respectively in the West over the last two years. Early round losses aside, the Blackhawks were still a good team, but just not a great one.

In 2013 things have changed. Chicago has yet to lose in regulation and are off to a 15-0-3 start. Not only that, but the Blackhawks own the NHL's best goal differential at plus-22. All that firepower is finally clicking, and in the process, making poolies very happy.

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4.19% EV 13 CARCILLO,DANIEL - 81 HOSSA,MARIAN - 88 KANE,PATRICK

3.6% EV 13 CARCILLO,DANIEL - 88 KANE,PATRICK - 10 SHARP,PATRICK

2.53% EV 88 KANE,PATRICK - 16 KRUGER,MARCUS - 10 SHARP,PATRICK

2.3% EV 13 CARCILLO,DANIEL - 88 KANE,PATRICK - 19 TOEWS,JONATHAN

You can see just how many line-mates and combinations Kane had to deal with last year. It would have been difficult for him to get into a rhythm and develop some continuity with his team-mates, and his career low 66 points were evidence of that. He never played with the same group for more than 12% of the time, but in 2013 things have definitely changed.

Frequency□□□□□□□□ **Strength**□□□□□□□□□□□□ **Line Combination**

51.68% EV 36 BOLLAND,DAVE - 88 KANE,PATRICK - 10 SHARP,PATRICK

Kane is playing with [Dave Bolland](#) and [Patrick Sharp](#) almost 52% of the time and already has

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put up 23 points, which is good enough for a share of third spot in league scoring.

Chicago's other top line of Toews, [Brandon Saad](#) , and [Marian Hossa](#) are almost playing together just as much.

Frequency Strength Line Combination

49.16% EV 81 HOSSA,MARIAN - 20 SAAD,BRANDON - 19 TOEWS,JONATHAN

Any time you can throw those two groups out there on a regular basis you are going to be in good shape.

The Blackhawks power play has also improved by leaps and bounds this season. That may sound funny considering they are only ranked 14th currently with the man advantage, but the fact that they were 26th last year was inexcusable. They have too much talent to not make that part of their game a dangerous weapon. If they get themselves into the top 10 as the year progresses it will make life for their opponents even more difficult.

You could make an argument that the reason Chicago's power play struggled in 2011-12 was that their two anchors on the point, [Duncan Keith](#) and [Brent Seabrook](#) , were simply burnt out. They were averaging 26:53 and 24:43 a night respectively because the Blackhawks were not very deep on defense. However, Chicago brought in

[Johnny Oduya](#)

late last year and added

[Michal Rozsival](#)

in the off-season. The two are a combined plus-17, and this season Keith is only averaging 24:17, while Seabrook has dropped down to 23:19.

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Oduya's presence specifically has meshed well with [Niklas Hjalmarsson](#) as the two are playing together 73% of the time, and have really developed into a solid shutdown pair. Chicago's new found depth has also made a difference in

[Nick Leddy](#)

's game. The young Blackhawk blueliner can now drop back to the 5-6 pairing which may hurt his ice-time, but help his production. Leddy is still getting over three minutes of power play time per game, but defensively he doesn't have to go against the opponent's top forward groups as often as he did last year. In 2011-12 he finished as a minus-12 for that reason, but this year he currently sits at plus-5.

The Blackhawks firepower is well documented, but it has been their play between the pipes that has left some question marks. [Corey Crawford](#) had a pretty pedestrian season last year posting a .903 save percentage and 2.72 goals against. The additions on defense and some improved play from Crawford have turned a weakness into one of Chicago's greatest strengths in 2013. His numbers in the aforementioned categories are now in the top five in the league at .941 and 1.50 respectively. Much of the credit has to go to Crawford, but blocked shots have also played a factor. The Blackhawks finished 2011-12 26th in blocks, however, this year they are all the way up to 12th. Add in the fact that the team has a reliable veteran in

[Ray Emery](#)

backing him up, and Chicago has appeared to have solved any goaltending issues for the time being.

Chicago is the perfect environment for young and inexperienced players like [Andrew Shaw](#) , [Brandon Saad](#)

, and

[Marcus Kruger](#)

to learn and hone their craft. Thanks to a couple of shrewd moves and difficult decisions by General Manager Stan Bowman, the Blackhawks are set up well both long and short-term. With a little minor tinkering they should be prepared for when the cap drops next season as well.

Despite what Ottawa Senators owner Eugene Melnyk said about his team's depth last month, I'm pretty sure that the other 29 NHL squads are actually jealous of the Blackhawks.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter at [@amato_mike](#)

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