

Block Party

The Hockey Oscars

Sunday's third in a series of five Chicago Blackhawk "Heritage Nights" at the United Center, spotlighting once-NHL enforcer Bob Probert, was a perfect example of how a professional sports organization can attempt to present its own version of history, while alienating the truth for the sake of a good party.

By ignoring the facts and presenting Probert to Blackhawks fans of 2009 as something he most certainly wasn't – a hallmark of Hawks' teams of the late 90's and early 2000's, the team -- and more importantly Probert himself -- missed out on an opportunity to tell what in part is the inspiring truth.

In an interview with the Blackhawks in-arena game program, Probert chronicled his version of the path traveled in becoming a Blackhawk:

"I talked to a few different teams, but I always loved going to Chicago and playing in the old Stadium when I was with the Detroit.... so when the opportunity arose to play in Chicago, I jumped at it."

But that's not how it happened exactly. Blackhawks Magazine as well ignored the specifics of Probert's tale and side-stepped any acknowledgement that this supposed famed Blackhawk hero came to the organization as a scumbag drug user and while he did supposedly stay clean as a Hawk, throughout his tenure was a financial and professional burden. I guess we can add altering history to John McDonough's marketing 101.

Upon completion of the 1993-94 campaign, the Red Wings dragged their feet about re-signing Probert. Stalled labor negotiations between owners and the NHLPA which eventually led to the '94-95 season being cut in half didn't give the Wings any reason to jump on the case anyhow.

In those days, the free agency period hadn't quite reached the level of insanity it resembles today, where any player worth a damn is snatched up within the first 48 hours. There certainly was interest in the embattled bad-boy from a few different sources, but as of mid-July, Probert was a man without a team.

Then on July 15, 1994 Probert got all liquored-up, snorted some cocaine and smashed his motorcycle into a car in suburban Detroit. For the Red Wings, this symbolized the end of the two sides' affiliation. For other teams sniffing around the Probert camp, it was a stench no longer worth exploring. As it turned out, the Blackhawks were the only team left standing, offering a generous four-year, 1.6 million per year contract to a guy who almost certainly was about to be banished from the NHL for an undetermined period of time. For comparison, \$1.6M in the NHL those days was like \$4M is now.

At that moment the facts were coldly harsh; the concerns for Probert's immediate mortality were very real. Before signing with the Hawks, Detroit executives very publicly stated they were washing their hands of Probert, who had been in and out of rehab almost since the day his career began in 1985. The reality was, Detroit felt they couldn't control someone who obviously wasn't capable of helping himself. This was a guy who already had received a 'lifetime' ban; multiple DUI's and was in and out of jail for smuggling cocaine over the Canadian/US border.

But on the 23rd of July, a mere eight days after Probert's accident in West Bloomfield Township, the Blackhawks signed him to the four-year contract worth \$1.6 million dollars annually. That was a 400 percent raise from what he had been earning with the Wings and to boot, Blackhawks' owner Bill Wirtz would personally fund Probert's six-month, \$150,000 stay at a rehabilitation clinic in Van Nuys, California. No other team was interested in agreeing to terms anywhere close to those. It would be a full year before Probert was cleared by doctors and the NHL to officially join the Blackhawks and resume his career.

Bill Wirtz's intentions though weren't entirely gratuitous. The internal expectation was if Probert could get clean, his on-ice performance would regain its earlier form. His stats plummeted in his final year with Detroit and the theory was his troubles off the ice were directly related. The idea he could 'steal' Probert from the rival Red Wings, rehabilitate him and possess the undisputed brute of the National Hockey League played into Wirtz's game as well.

A reasonable hope, but Probert never resembled the player he was on the junk in Motown, post-rehab. In his return to hockey, the 1995-96 season, Probert's

comeback was, however, immensely successful with the big guy dressing for all but four games, scoring 19 goals, 21 assists while accumulating 237 penalty minutes, the most of any Hawk since Bryan Marchment amassed 313 in '92-93.

Aside from his comeback '95-96 season, there really isn't much to recall about Probert's Blackhawk career. If it had ended there, it would've been one of professional sports most inspiring stories. Instead the Hawks hung onto him as his fire dissipated and ability slid dramatically from year to year.

Astonishingly, Wirtz and general manager Bob Pulford gave Probert a raise when his contract came up for renewal prior to the 1997-98 season. A year later, new general manager Bob Murray inherited the distinction of being the one to approach Probert and request he renegotiate his deal, taking a near fifty percent pay cut. Probert responded by mocking Murray and challenging the GM to send him to the minors. Murray didn't because Bill Wirtz wasn't about to shell out nearly two million dollars for a minor leaguer. But in effect he was anyway, as the Hawks were stuck with a player nobody else wanted, and a bad contract on the books for years after Probert had outskated his usefulness.

Probert's final days as a Hawks came in the 2001-02 season that saw him score just one goal and four points in 61 games. He would retire the following November after it was clear neither the Hawks or any other NHL team had a swig of interest in him. Bill Wirtz convinced Probert to stay with the organization as an intermission radio analyst (remember how horrible he was?) but that lasted only a few months as Probert quickly fell off the sobriety wagon post-retirement and re-enlisted in a substance-abuse program.

Since then Probert's name has popped up in the police blotter from time to time, signifying a man whose struggles with dependency are interminable.

Only three and a half years ago Probert was arrested for disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace after Windsor, Ontario police were called to his home at 9am in July of 2005. He was arrested after allegedly fighting with a police officer but the charges were mysteriously dropped because the surrounding home's surveillance cameras didn't pick up the incident.

Almost a year prior to that altercation, Probert was arrested and tazered multiple times after resisting arrest and fighting multiple police officers in Del Ray Beach, Florida, where Probert worked briefly. Probert was so out of it that night, the arresting officers never bothered to book his mug shot because they were afraid he would become too combative once again if they allowed him out of his cell. A year later he was acquitted of all charges.

It sure would've been nice had Probert stepped off the self-serving platform John McDonough placed him on for a brief moment at some point last weekend and gave thanks to the Blackhawks and the late Bill Wirtz for giving him another opportunity at life, not just something as frivolous as professional hockey.

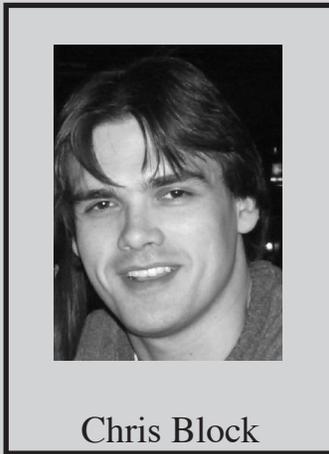
What would've become of Bob Probert, the infamous heavyweight champion of hockey, had Bill Wirtz not stepped up in 1994, offering another chance at life and a boyhood dream? The odds are more than likely – Probert would be dead, just like his contemporary and fellow bad-boy John Kordic who also couldn't manage the extra-curriculars involved in his chosen lifestyle. Probert's wife Dani, who's stood by him throughout these countless ordeals would be without a husband and his children without a father.

He claimed his most memorable Blackhawks' moment being the goal he scored at Maple Leaf Gardens in February of 1999, the last goal scored in Toronto's historic arena. How about that contract he signed in July of 1994, the company-sponsored rehab or the gift he received four years later?

Probert should be heaving faint praise in this franchise's direction. Not the other way around. To hear him humble himself in acknowledging that fact would've given Sunday night, and his celebrated distinction, in my mind anyway, vindication.

They say those who cannot accept the past are doomed to repeat it. Good luck, Probie.

Chris Block is the founder of Third Man In (thethirdmanin.com), the definitive Hawks blog, and Puck Chatter, an outstanding NHL blog (www.puckchatter.blogspot.com)



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