

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Hawks' journey shows tripwires for titles that apply to baseball

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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I've seen into the Chicago baseball future by covering the Chicago Blackhawks the last five seasons.

The vision is positive, but the caution light is blinking. The message of the latter is don't dash through the yellow with full championship expectations enveloping your entire emotional portfolio.

I bring up the Hawks because hockey compared to baseball is not apples and oranges starting with ice and skates relating to manicured grass and spikes. There are a lot of similarities, beginning with the stark realization that championships are so very hard to win even if you're loaded, even if your roster is considered the best in the game.

Using the moral of the story with the Hawks is important for Cubs fans wondering about the pot at the end of the rainbow in the Theo Epstein total-teardown-and-rebuild plan. Also connected here is the more accelerated lineup-restocking program that already has borne some fruit by Sox GM Rick Hahn.

The Hawks example is you can have a the best organization in the game with the most popular owner in Rocky Wirtz, a true hero to Hawks fans for lifting the home TV blackout and putting winning before team profits. Everything still has to go right, and seemingly then some, to win a Stanley Cup, as happened in 2010 and 2013. And if you're just off by 10 percent, as the Hawks appeared to be in the second half of the regular season and during the Western Conference semifinals, you're on the golf course before the onset of summer.

A championship journey requires a surfeit of talent and more than your share of good fortune. I use the word "fortune" instead of "luck," because some of the good breaks are man-made as opposed to the lucky stars descending upon a team.

The proper positive mental attitude is to not get wrapped up in the actual winning of a title as life's satisfying event. Enjoy the ride and have confidence in a quality winning



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organization. But let the championship come to you instead of you chasing it, and coming up keenly disappointed when the sheer odds stacked against any team winning actually kick in.

The Hawks had good fortune to win in just Jonathan Toews' and Patrick Kane's third seasons. The arrival of the teen-age prodigies in 2007 changed the tenor of the bedraggled organization immediately for the better. But their development time was short. Neither had to learn on the job as so many hyped-and-rushed Chicago baseball prospects. Toews in particular was wise well beyond his years, quickly earning the team captaincy.

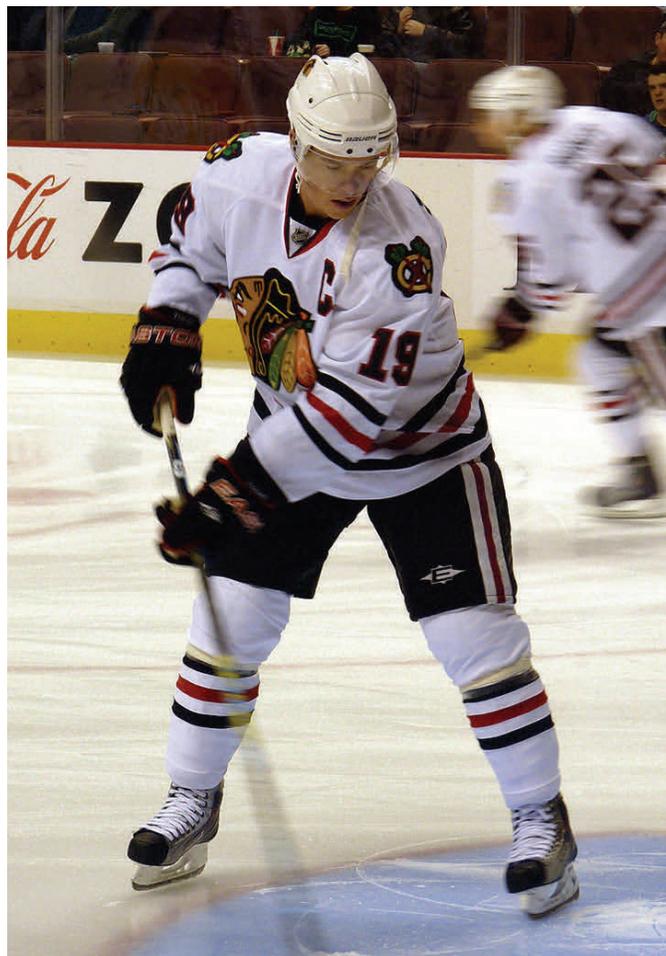
Winning games against all odds part of equation

Good fortune had to be present. Remember the quarterfinals against Nashville in 2010? The Hawks were short-handed as time ticked down in the third period at the United Center, thanks to a Marian Hossa five-minute major. But somehow Kane performed his point-guard-style juking and movin' magic to tally the tying goal a man down. The Hawks killed the rest of the penalty as overtime began. Then Hossa leaped out of the box to score the winning goal in short order. The consequences of losing that game would have been falling behind in the series and trying to rally on the road in Nashville.

More good fortune or talent? Kane scored the Stanley Cup winning goal on an extremely bad angle in overtime in Philadelphia. Only he seemed to realize the result immediately as it took a few seconds for all observers to realize the Hawks had won it all.

The winning momentum can be fleeting. Stripped of their depth due to a salary-cap purge in 2010, the Hawks struggled to reach the playoffs the next two seasons. They even suffered a nine-game losing streak. They were ousted in the quarterfinals each year. But there was no return to the bad ol' days.

And by the time the fringes of the roster were restocked, the Hawks took full advantage of the lockout-shortened season in 2013. They zoomed to a record unbeaten streak in regulation, became dominant, re-



Was it good fortune or talent with the Hawks winning it all in only young captain Jonathan Toews' third season? Photo credit [Matt Boulton](#).

spected and even feared a bit, and yet still had to rally from a 2-1 deficit in the Stanley Cup Finals. Finally, there were the two come-from-behind goals in 17 seconds in the Game 6 clincher against the Bruins. Good fortune again? Man-made: goalie Corey Crawford had kept each game within a potent offense's reach.

Contrasts came in the season just concluded. The Hawks started fast, but New Year's wasn't all that kind. Even before the Olympic break, they seemed "off." They couldn't buy a win in overtime or a shootout for months; ditto amassing as much as a three-game winning streak. The Blues and Avalanche passed them in the division. They lost home-ice advantage in the first round.

The Hawks were good enough, but not 2013 dominant, in dispatching the Blues and Wild in the first two rounds. Then that 10 percent drop kicked in against the Kings, via the horrific third period in Game 2, a 3-1 series deficit and the fact they simply could not lock down two-goal leads against the opportunistic Kings. They were one break or good twist away from returning to a Stanley Cup Finals they likely would have dominated against the Rangers.

Hockey's advocates claim the Stanley Cup is the hardest pro-sports championship to win. They have their point. The titlist must win a quartet of seven-game series, the rosters accumulating injuries, or making lingering ones even worse, as the spring goes along after the six-month-long regular season. Lesser teams who enjoy a hot goalie or, ahem, a streak of good fortune can upset the dominant regular-season franchises.

Seven games enable favorites to recover

On the other side, though, the seven-game series enable the better teams to recover if they stumble early. The Kings were backed up to the wall 2004 Red Sox-style, falling behind 3-0 in the quarterfinals against the Sharks. Since San Jose had to win a full four before advancing, LA had life after near-death. They rallied and the rest was history.

The Hawks nearly pulled off the startling comeback from being down 3-1 two seasons in a row, thanks to the seven-game format. They came back against the hated Red Wings in the semis in 2013. Again, one more piece of good fortune – where have we heard that before? – or just one third-period lead maintained against the Kings, and the 3-1 comeback would have been completed.

The lack of three seven-game post-season series in baseball makes the summer game's championship quest as hard as hockey now – and the reason for tempering the panting for a championship on both North and South Sides. The five-game Division Series, which should be expanded to seven but never is, provides the ultimate tripwire for superior teams against hot opponents. Fall behind 2-0, and there's little maneuvering room for recovery as the Hawks experienced in the seven-game tilt against the Blues.

The 97-win Cubs were victimized against the Dodgers in 2008, playing jittery and nervous in Wrigley Field in the first two games. Cubs manager Lou Piniella had not emotionally positioned his team correctly after a pedestrian September. Facing an elimina-

tion game in Los Angeles, they had no time to right themselves. Some great regular-season Oakland teams in the early 2000s were tripped up by the five-game ALDS format.

Conversely, if a favored team goes up 2-0, then the underdog comes back with three straight wins, the season is over in five games. But with two more to play in a seven-game tilt, there's new life. Advantage, hockey.

One game ruins all the good of a season

Making the championship road even worse is the new one-game play-in for the two wild-card teams. A baseball playoff hopeful can successfully maneuver through all the minefields in the stretch run, only to have all that good work down the drain going up against a hot pitcher or a bad break in one game.

If a team doesn't win their division, they must capture in white-knuckle style the play-in game, then the five-game series, just to get to the League Championship Series. The seven-game entrée to the World Series has often been more intense and dramatic in recent decades than the Fall Classic itself. Too many exit points await even the best-positioned team.

So to win it all, whether via the somewhat quicker rebuild at The Cell or the more tortuous process at Wrigley Field, requires defying long odds, even if the organization seems stacked and poised to win. Revving one's self up for a title is the wrong way to go.

If I recall right, the 2005 Sox simply developed without much advance notice. Kenny Williams sacrifice of power in Carlos Lee for leadoff-man speed in Scott Podsednik turned out to be genius, but was only part of the story. For a Sox fan going into that season expecting glory, or even getting poised at the midway point when the Sox had a commanding AL Central lead, was ill-advised.

Sometimes you just have to let the big one sneak up on you. Otherwise, you'll have the bad fortune – yep, again – of being keenly disappointed.



Lou Piniella knows full well how the most dominating regular-season performances can be washed away in a five-game series. Photo credit [Jauerback](#).