



Hawks champion blueprint one Cubs, Sox should follow

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Tuesday, June 25, 2013*

I don't know how we'd handle a championship clincher at home.

We'll have to wait at least a year to see if the Blackhawks can throw the United Center up for grabs. And no doubt a lot, lot longer for each of our baseball teams.

It's probably a godsend the Hawks won the Stanley Cup in Boston, three years after they clinched in Philadelphia, putting the Cup on ice amid hot, humid weather outside on both occasions. The out-of-town championship probably kept Chicago's championship-starved fans from a real ruckus, considering the still-spread-out frequency of titles in the Windy City.

Since the Bears won Super Bowl XX in 1986, only three of the Bulls' six titles have been won at home – 1992 against Portland, 1996 against Seattle and 1997 over Utah. By '97, Michael Jordan smoking his victory cigar was old hat, an entitlement to Chicago in a special era.

But the Bears and their fans tore up New Orleans in '86. The Sox won it all in Houston, where baseball enthusiasm is muted and whose nightlife did not encourage continued celebration. This present veteran core of Hawks' first Stanley Cup was clinched in a square mile of stadiums and parking lots in south Philadelphia, where the celebration would quickly disperse once the traveling party and fans left the arena.

No matter where the Hawks won, the triumph should have made the management of our baseball teams take notice. It's a case of the last shall be first. In this case, probably second, which is good enough in town.

The Hawks were buried in last place among all major Chicago sports franchises in the mid-2000s. Progressive management and aggressive marketing has vaulted them to possibly second, behind the permanently-entrenched No. 1 Bears. You've got to admit, at least for now, the Hawks are more popular, and much more admired, than the Cubs and White Sox.

First of all, Hawks owner Rocky Wirtz has put his money where his mouth is. Wirtz has admitted all along that the hockey team continues to operate at a deficit, with the parent Wirtz Co. staunching the red ink. It's a process. The longer the winning which began in 2008-09 continues, the less the Hawks bleed financially.

Hawks spending money to make money

In essence Wirtz is spending money to make money. He's going for the home run (we'll always use baseball metaphors) each year. No rebuilding. The more popular the Hawks become in the Chicago pecking order of sports, the more revenue is pulled in. Wirtz put home games on TV, after his father Bill Wirtz passed away. Bill and grandfather Arthur Wirtz were the last adherents of a discredited 1930s-vintage owners' philosophy that viewed free broadcasts of games as hurting the home gate. Home telecasts only bring in more ad and broadcast rights revenue while stimulating the appetite for tickets.



Andy MacPhail spent less than Tribune Co. expected him to do as Cubs president. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

Wirtz in essence is George Steinbrenner without the bombast, arrogance and shady legal past. The only bottom line at work is winning.

When have you last heard a Chicago baseball owner or top exec proclaim the diamond equivalent of damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead?

Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf always had the philosophy that he didn't mind breaking even, just don't lose money. If anything, the Cubs underspent ownership expectations under team president Andy MacPhail. In 1999, MacPhail tied player development spending to claimed team revenues – that is, middle of the pack. You saw the end results in a languid farm system. Later, MacPhail surprised his Tribune Co. overseers with budgets under what they expected him to submit. He repeated the same mantra for Cubs' improvement to the honchos he had done for the media years before: "slow, steady, unspectacular."

Bowman finds his stride

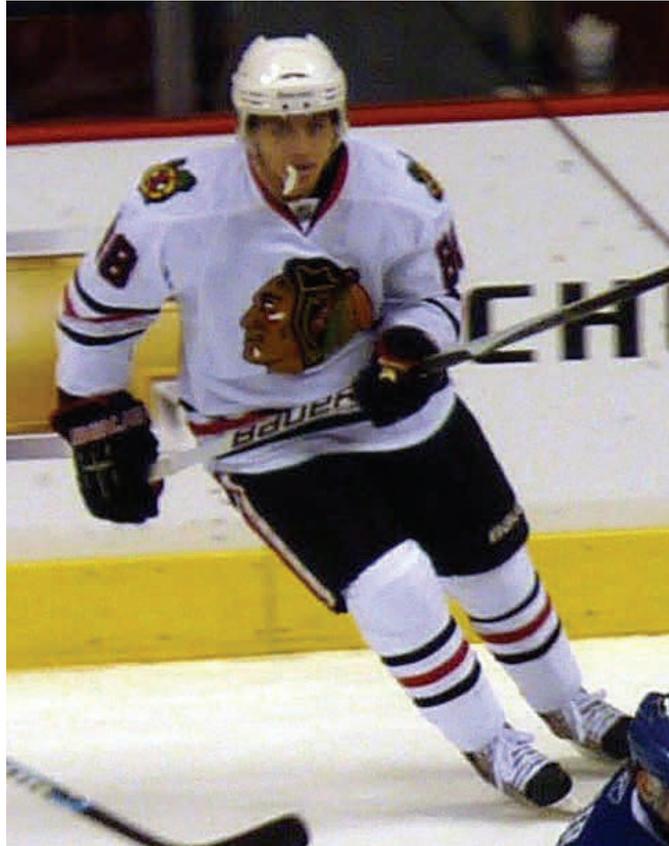
Hawks GM Stan Bowman inherited the championship nucleus from 2010, as MacPhail did with the Kirby Puckett-Kent Hrbek-Tom Brunansky home-grown Twins crop of players that eventually won two World Series in 1987 and 1991. Some of Bowman's early moves were duds in replacing 2010 Stanley Cup team supporting-cast members jettisoned due to salary-cap restraints. But Bowman hit his stride in 2011, with the drafting of Brandon Saad and Andrew Shaw, and successful deals for complementary players. Best of all, he had confidence in Corey Crawford, tuning out the nay-sayers, and patiently watching Crawford become an elite goalie in the 2013 postseason.

Bowman has constructed a Hawks roster made up of battle-tested veterans, most of them still in their prime, but also with room to filter in a handful of youthful contributors each season. Fresh blood is welcomed by both the GM and coach Joel Quenneville. They're going neither too old or too young.

The Cubs and Sox, unfortunately, lurch to one extreme or another. All along, they have underrated – and, most costly – underspent on player development. Only in 2011 did the Cubs give above-slot bonuses to snare desired young prospects in the June draft. The Sox had long spent \$1 where \$1.25 had been needed on draftees. They vowed to model their development systems like the Atlanta Braves, who kept spewing forth big-league-ready prospects even after they drafted last through all their first-place finishes. Talk, unfortunately, remained cheap.

Bowman will have several NHL-ready players for Quenneville to plug in when he inevitably lets some role-player veterans go during the summer. And don't hype them as franchise savior. There's nothing to save. The Hawks are the best in the NHL, and primed to maintain that standing for years to come.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. It's time the baseball teams take their hint from the local champion, rather than wait for success to rub off via osmosis.



Where is the Chicago baseball equivalent of Patrick Kane? Photo credit [Matt Boulton](#).