



CUP CRAZINESS
Blackhawks president John McDonough holding the Stanley Cup after the Hawks clinched the NHL title in 2010.

Hawky Town

Thanks to an innovative owner and a president with decades of experience, the Blackhawks have become the most successful franchise in the NHL. | *By Michael Nagrant* |

He spent 24 years building up one of the most recognizable teams in pro sports. It was his dream job. He was at the top of his game. And then he walked away.

It wasn't supposed to be like that. It was supposed to be much worse. He graduated 311 out of 356 at Notre Dame High School in Niles. The best thing one of his college professors could say of him was that he had a "very narrow skill set." And he wasn't a ladies' man either. "Through high school I wasn't exactly a prolific dater," says the 57-year-old father of three. "So I spent a lot of time at Comiskey Park."

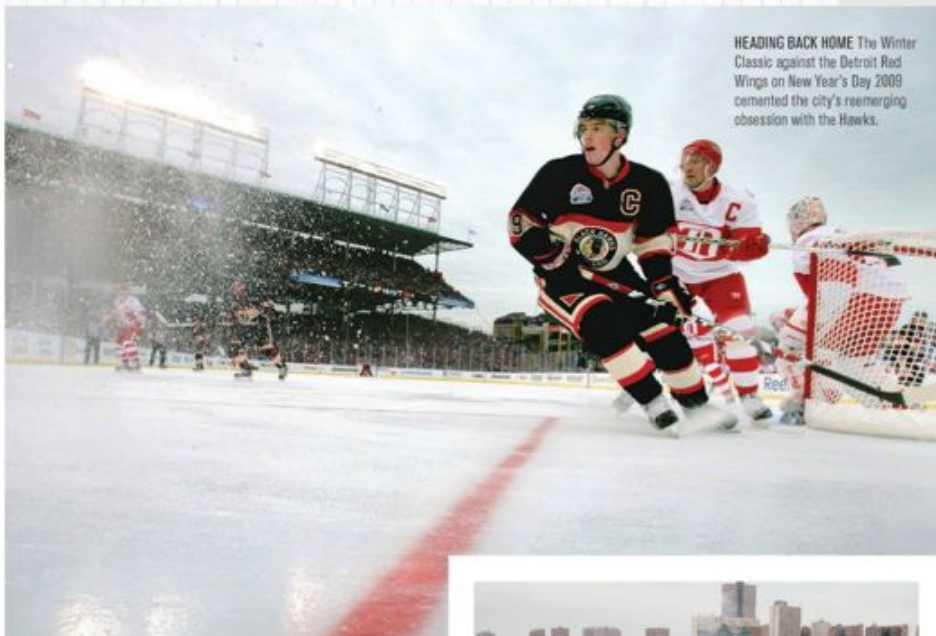
That's right, John McDonough, architect of the Chicago Cubs' rise as one of the most beloved pro baseball teams in the country, used to be a White Sox fan. Maybe that's why after 24 years on the North Side, the inventor of the fan convention, the man responsible for celebrity renditions of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" during the seventh inning stretch at Wrigley and a subconscious Sox fan, could walk away from one of the world's most cherished sports teams and toward one of the worst teams in pro hockey.

After all, it certainly wasn't that the Chicago Blackhawks, named the "worst franchise in sports" in 2004 by ESPN, were very attractive.

Really, it all starts with a guy named Rocky. When a guy with a name like that summons you, broken kneecaps are usually involved. But this Rocky, faced with resurrecting a franchise so broke that they flew commercial airlines on road trips in the early part of the decade, was almost on his knees. "We went to lunch and [Hawks owner] Rocky [Wirtz] said, 'I'm going to lose all my leverage, but I want you to run the Blackhawks and I have no plan B,'" explains McDonough.

He was intrigued. He floated the idea. "My wife had a tough time," he says. "There were tears and gnashing of teeth and twisting and sleepless nights." He adds: "I've got five or six people that I really value their opinion, so [when I] told them I was thinking about leaving the Cubs [for the Hawks], well, with every single one of them there were three or four seconds of deafening silence."

Hawks Executive Vice President Jay Blunk, who was the Cubs Vice President of Marketing at CONTINUED...



HEADING BACK HOME The Winter Classic against the Detroit Red Wings on New Year's Day 2009 cemented the city's reemerging obsession with the Hawks.



...CONTINUED the time McDonough was considering leaving, was a doubter. "I was one of those guys," he says. "He'd worked his whole life in a prominent place... we had a good team and our dream was to win the World Series. I saw it as my duty to talk him out of that."

Though McDonough was once a mediocre student, he was always willing to outread, out hustle and outcreate. He thrived on adversity. He was 54 when Wirtz made the offer, but he had the fire of a 25-year-old baseball closer in his belly. "This was an opportunity I wanted," he says "To do something people say could never be done."

So much for armchair prognosticators. After McDonough joined the Hawks, premier free agents like Brian Campbell signed with the team. Hawks legends Bobby Hull and Tony Esposito came back as ambassadors. The 3,400 season ticket holders became 14,000 (with a waiting list of 5,000). The team made the conference finals in 2008-09 and won the Stanley Cup in 2009-10. It seemed easy, like it all went according to plan.

Not exactly. The man who has a framed placard in his office that says "Change" doesn't believe in plans. "There are times when the other team will have three of their four best players injured, you have 22,000 fans at home and on

paper everything looks like it's gonna go your way—and you get blown out," he says. "Whatever you think is going to happen probably isn't. You've got to be agile and have the ability and courage to alter your plans."

What McDonough did have when he arrived at the United Center in 2007 was his "Tenets of Good Leadership," a list of good leadership traits/practices that are the bedrock of how he operates, amongst them that "hiring is the most underrated executive skill." One of his first moves was to bring in Blunk, whose savvy and Cubs connections helped the Hawks negotiate a critical deal with WGN Radio and WGN-TV.

"There were times I'd leave at 11 at night and I didn't know if I would come back," says Blunk. "Ratings and trends were so bad that [TV executives] would say if we take current programming off the air to run your games, we're going to lose all of our viewers." CONTINUED...

The Trip to the Top

SEPT. 26, 2007 Bill Wirtz dies at age 77.

OCT. 5, 2007 W. Rockwell "Rocky" Wirtz assumes the role of Chairman of the Blackhawks.

OCT. 6, 2007 The Blackhawks host their first regular-season home game of 2007-08 with a season ticket holder base of approximately 3,400.

NOV. 20, 2007 John McDonough is named President of the Blackhawks, departing the Chicago Cubs after 24 years.

APRIL 1, 2008 For the first time in team history, the Blackhawks announce that they will televise the entire 82-game regular-season schedule and playoffs.

APRIL 4, 2008 The Blackhawks conclude the home portion of their 2007-08 season with 12 sellout crowds.

JULY 18-20, 2008 The first annual Chicago Blackhawks Convention takes place, the first of its kind in NHL history. The event sold out in less than two weeks and entertained more than 10,000 fans.

SEPT. 19, 2008 The Blackhawks set a preseason franchise record by hosting a capacity crowd of 19,734 fans for their game against the Washington Capitals.

NOV. 12, 2008 The Blackhawks make the largest one-year gain of any team, a 26 percent increase over the past year, when *Forbes* magazine releases its list of the most profitable NHL teams during the 2008-09 season.

JUNE 9, 2010 The Chicago Blackhawks clinch their fourth Stanley Cup and first in 49 years with a 4-3 overtime win over the Philadelphia Flyers in Game 6. NBC5 Chicago registers a 32.8 HH Rating for Game 6, making it the most watched contest in the modern era of Blackhawks history.

JUNE 11, 2010 Less than 48 hours after winning the Stanley Cup, an estimated 2 million people line the streets of Chicago to honor the Blackhawks.



...CONTINUED To fans' ire, McDonough replaced coach Denis Savard with the feisty Joel Quenneville and reassigned Dale Tallon, who was the general manager at the time that franchise cornerstones Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane were drafted. He installed Stan Bowman, now the youngest GM to ever win the Stanley Cup, in Tallon's place.

McDonough was quietly pursuing another tenet: that "there will only be one Chicago Blackhawks." Historically, marketing/business guys are regarded as slick-talking suits who know little about sports and spend their time crunching numbers. On the other hand, hockey guys, coaches and GMs usually made their bones on the ice as fierce competitors clawing their way to the top. In most organizations, the sides rarely talk. Not at the Hawks. Under McDonough, everyone is involved in every critical decision. McDonough and Blunk sit in on meetings about trade decisions, while Bowman sits in on marketing meetings.

"Until John and Jay came along there was never this vision," says Bowman. "But I've learned that just because it hasn't been done before doesn't mean it can't be done. With the salary cap, we have to be attractive to players. By working with the marketing guys we had an opportunity to drive revenue as high as we could to get what we needed done instead of focusing on cutting costs."

That meant that Bowman sometimes had to change the way the hockey side did business. "Jay came over in 2010 and asked if we could throw out the first pitch at Sox opening day and would we mind delaying our charter before a game," says Bowman. "A few years back they wouldn't have asked that question. We would have said, 'Are you crazy? We're heading out of town for a game and you want us to change our routine?' But it wasn't really a big ask. It was a reward for our fans and the guys who played well in the Olympics."

After the Hawks won the Cup last June, McDonough, Blunk and their teams started revising



ON TOP OF THE WORLD
The Blackhawks players and management team celebrate in front of more than 2 million fans downtown after winning the Stanley Cup.

the official "One Goal" marketing campaign, figuring they'd achieved what they set out to do. After months of work, they presented new slogans to the hockey guys. "Stan said, 'I gotta tell you, we really hit on something,'" says McDonough. "We shouldn't change this. It [One Goal] doesn't really have an expiration date."

Fast forward to early March 2011 and the defending champs, who were in danger of not making the playoffs, are on an eight-game winning streak. "No one has Stanley Cup-itis," says McDonough. "It makes me hungrier. Anytime one fan enters the arena, we have to earn that. We're not entitled to another win, another fan coming back, to anything."

When I ask him if it feels weird to work 24 years for the Cubs and not win a championship, he says, "Part of my heart and soul is always with the Cubs. I would love to see those fans rewarded. One hundred and three years is a long time." Yes, but he won a Stanley Cup instead. ■

RIGHT SIDE PHOTOS BY GREG GILLIS