

Rookie picks up slack

But Smith also blames himself for own goal

By **Brian Hamilton**
TRIBUNE REPORTER

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — The way things are going for the Blackhawks, it figures their leading scorer Friday night had a hat trick, but only two counted for their side.

Though it's unlikely anyone will beat up Ben Smith for an own goal of sorts, at least not as bad as Smith is flogging himself.

"The stick shouldn't be in the lane, the body should, and that was a tough one," Smith said after scoring two goals but deflecting in another for the Canucks in a 4-3 loss in Game 2. "Playoff time you have to sacrifice the body. Didn't get in front of that one, and it's pretty disappointing."

Precious little else about the rookie winger's night was. In a series in which the Canucks have suffocated the Hawks' top producers masterfully and thoroughly, somehow it was Smith stepping into the void, showing the way and offering some life despite a 2-0 series deficit.

"Eventually in the playoffs you're going to have to get some support offensively because you can't just have your top guys scoring all the goals," Hawks goalie Corey Crawford said. "It's nice for them to come in and get those goals. They were key goals



Blackhawks rookie Ben Smith (57), who later would score two goals of his own, reacts to the Canucks taking a 1-0 lead Friday night in Game 2 in Vancouver.

obviously, and it maybe takes a little pressure off our top guys."

Smith's first career playoff goals were precisely the sort of scores the Hawks have crowed about getting in the past week. His second-period score was a product of camping out at the net and waiting to slam home a cross-ice feed from Bryan Bickell. His third-period goal was ripped in off a rebound in the slot.

"That's kind of the thing down in Rockford I was working on toward the end," Smith said. "If you get to the net and the puck gets

to the net, usually good things will happen."

Said winger Marian Hossa: "Benny played really well. He was in the right place at the right time. We just have to keep going to the net, because those types of goals, they're waiting for us."

Anyone with a vested interest in the Hawks is waiting on the likes of Hossa, Jonathan Toews, Patrick Kane and Patrick Sharp to do anything close to what Smith did. Clearly, the Canucks are paying much more attention to making things claustrophobic for

the top Hawks scorers.

And, clearly, if the Hawks are to survive past mid-week, the likes of Smith and Viktor Stalberg — who scored the other Hawks goal of the evening — must do something if the mainstays are scuffling.

"You're always saying that, you're always saying we have to work hard, we have to create our own chances," Smith said.

"We could have done more, you can always do more."

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SUNDAY SPECIAL
LEO TRACK AND FIELD



Bruce Gray, from left, Rueben Blackwell and Denzel Howard have excelled despite difficulties outside Leo.

These kids run tough

Despite adversity, Howard, Blackwell and Gray persevere for Lions

By **Mike Helfgot**
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

as he has."

'A better future'

In a city full of broken homes, Denzel Howard's burned to the ground.

Sitting in honors chemistry class at Leo 14 months ago last week, Howard received a text message from a cousin urging him to get home immediately.

The track-and-field standout saw smoke and flames throughout his three-block sprint home from the small Catholic school on the South Side. His biggest fear was not realized, but the damage was irreparable.

"I immediately broke into tears," Howard said. "I thought my mom was inside."

As it turned out, Mirtha Howard was working, which has served as a useful reminder that as bad as things got, they could have been worse.

Howard, a senior sprinter and member of the 400-meter relay team that finished second in the state in Class 1A last year, isn't the only Leo runner to overcome adversity and get his life back on track.

None has dealt with more.

"Everything was gone," Howard said. "We lost everything. We've been moving around. I lived with my auntie in Harvey, then with my sister in Dixmoor and now I'm on 83rd and Dorchester."

"My mom has two jobs, but it's been real hard trying to pick up the pieces. It is getting better. The Leo community has helped us a great deal with clothes and food."

Determined to stay off the streets and focus on his lifelong goal of attending college, Howard used track as an escape and learned to play the piano through the After School Matters program.

He leaned on his mother and Leo track coach and athletic director Edward Adams for support, refused to fall behind in school and gained acceptance to Computer Systems Institute, which he will attend after becoming the first member of his family to graduate high school.

"Sometimes I broke down and cried; sometimes I stay strong," Howard said. "Everybody has those times where they let it all out."

"When it happened, we were in school," teammate and close friend Rueben Blackwell said. "We looked out the window and saw the smoke, and he literally ran out of school. A couple days after, we walked past his house and he broke down crying. I don't think I'd be able to handle this as well

In a city full of broken homes, Rueben Blackwell's is being mended.

When his mother died four years ago, Blackwell moved in with one of the five sisters he has from that side of his family.

He has two additional sisters through his father, though that side of his family was not a part of his life.

"At first when my mom passed away, he came around. Then we lost communication," Blackwell said. "I hadn't talked to him since freshman or sophomore year. Then last year he started coming around a lot. Now he's back in my life."

Blackwell recently moved from the South Side to Rogers Park to live with his father.

An honors student and state-championship contender in the hurdles, Blackwell is being recruited by several colleges and has narrowed his choices to Alcorn State and Mississippi Valley State.

"You have to find other ways to motivate yourself," Blackwell said. "Some kids have their father to push them. When I met Mr. Adams, to me, he was my motivation. He and my sister kept me on the right path. "There is always going to be that weird feeling of why, but I don't fault him for it or anything. I put it in the past. Mistakes are going to be made. I let the past go and hope that it leads to a better future between me and him."

A reconstructed home

In a city full of broken homes, Bruce Gray counts his blessings.

Gray and his three sisters grew up in a stable, loving environment.

Gray said his mother and father battled alcohol and substance abuse problems, and he and his sisters have lived with their grandmother since the senior was in first grade.

He said his parents' absence — they live separately in Wisconsin — still bothers him. Adams was the only person he ever spoke to about his parents until being interviewed for this story.

"My mother is better now," said Gray, a state-championship contender in the sprints who is being recruited by North Central, Benedictine and Miami of Ohio.

"She calls or texts every now and then and comes and stays with us every now and then. It was tough, but I got used to it. It could always be worse. I feel blessed."

"You have to find other ways to motivate yourself. ... When I met Mr. Adams, to me, he was my motivation."

— Leo's Rueben Blackwell on his coach Edward Adams

BLACKHAWKS BITS BY CHRIS KUC AND BRIAN HAMILTON

Pisani remembers '06 magic

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — The Blackhawks don't expect **Fernando Pisani** to recapture the magic he conjured the last time he played in the playoffs, but they sure wouldn't mind it.

Pisani made his Hawks postseason debut Friday night when he took the ice for Game 2 of the Western Conference quarterfinals at Rogers Arena. It was his first playoff game since 2006, when he scored a league-high 14 goals in 24 postseason contests during the Oilers' run to the Stanley Cup finals.

"It has been a while," the veteran winger said. "You always remember the times you had. You try to use that experience to make you a better player and a better person."

Pisani was a healthy scratch for Game 1 but was inserted into the lineup Friday for **Tomas Kopec**, who was sidelined with an upper-body injury.

"It's a special time of year and everybody tries to raise their game — you have to," Pisani said. "You want to add to that and contribute in situations like this."

Coach **Joel Quenneville** said Pisani is the type of role player who can have an impact on a series.

"A lot of times in the playoffs it's the guys who are least expected to provide scoring or change the momentum in a game or series," Quenneville said. "A guy like (Pisani) could jump up and be a big factor."

Oh, Captain: The reigning Conn Smythe Trophy winner had but one goal in his last eight games heading into Game 2. And **Jonathan Toews** likely must be at the heart of the Hawks matching the Canucks' firepower. He knows it and isn't sweating it.

"You look at the regular season, at the end of the year, yeah, not much has been going in for me per-

sonally lately," Toews said before Game 2. "But I'm not worried. In some of these games, you're getting close and sometimes just a bounce or two makes a big difference."

No surprise: A handful of Hawks made their playoff debuts in Game 1, which might account for some of the tentative play early on. But there was little the veteran teammates with a Stanley Cup to their names could do to prevent that, so they must bank on lessons learned and applied moving forward.

"There were some conversations and talk before the game, but there's only so much you can say," forward **Patrick Sharp** said. "Everyone in our locker room ... has watched playoff hockey. They know everything kicks up a notch and is that much more intense. It's something you have to experience yourself."

Hawks limp home down 2-0

Continued from Page 1

from Viktor Stalberg but kept fumbling it back to the Canucks.

"We have to win the third one, otherwise it's not going to be good," winger Marian Hossa admitted. "We showed we can play against this team, but we have to do it for a full 60 minutes."

Corey Crawford suffered the loss in goal for the Hawks after yielding the four scores on 27 shots.

The Canucks took the lead early in the opening period when Sedin found an open Hansen with a pass from behind the goal line and the winger fired a one-timer past Crawford.

It didn't take the Canucks long in the second to snatch a 2-0 lead. Just 30 seconds in, Sedin was camped in front of Crawford and was in position to redirect Christian Ehrhoff's shot.

The Hawks went 94 minutes, 50 seconds into the series before solving Luongo late in the second when Smith flipped in a rebound of a Bryan Bickell shot that the goalie got a glove on but let trickle to the rookie winger.

Edler's goal with 14 seconds remaining in the second halted the Hawks' momentum. The defenseman fired a long shot from just inside the blue line that deflected off Smith's stick and sailed over Crawford's left shoulder.

Early in the third, Stalberg cut the deficit to 3-2 when his shot from the right circle eluded Luongo. Sedin made it 4-2 with a laser from the slot to beat Crawford but Smith answered with his second of the night when he fired in a rebound of a Michael Frolik shot.

"We have to keep playing our game and not let anything creep into our heads," Crawford said. "Play hard and just leave it on the ice."

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