



INTRODUCTION

Congrats, Blackhawks fans You deserved it

Chicago captain Jonathan Toews was a toddler the last time the Blackhawks reached the Stanley Cup Finals. When he joined the team in 2007, they were stuck in a stretch of missing the playoffs nine out of 10 years. In 2004, ESPN called the Blackhawks the worst franchise in sports.

The young Blackhawks showed signs of life two seasons ago, barely missing the playoffs. Toews and Patrick Kane took two of the three nominations for the Calder Trophy, the NHL's prize for the league's top rookie. Kane, the top pick in the 2007 draft, lifted the trophy.

Off the ice, the Blackhawks grew stronger. Rocky Wirtz, who inherited the team's ownership from his father in 2007, got the team's games on local TV and hired former Cubs executive John McDonough as team president. Four games into the 2008-09 season, McDonough installed Joel Quenneville, veteran coach of the rival St. Louis Blues, behind the bench.

Last year playoff hockey returned to the Windy City. The Blackhawks won 46 games to finish second in the Central, then knocked out Calgary and Vancouver before falling to Detroit in the conference final.

They topped themselves this year, winning a franchise-record 52 games to win the division. The Blackhawks had a solid start, then won eight straight in November, punctuated by a 7-2 win at San Jose in veteran Marian Hossa's first game with the team. By the time Toews (Canada) and Kane (USA) dispersed to their national teams for the Olympics, Chicago was secure atop the Central Division.

With a playoff spot nearly secured, the Blackhawks had a post-Olympic swoon, losing seven of nine in March. They rebounded to win their next six before dropping the season finale in overtime. Now experienced in the postseason, the Blackhawks disposed of Nashville and Vancouver in six games each, then emphatically swept No. 1 seed San Jose to reach the final.

Their final opponent: the Philadelphia

Flyers, who emerged from an upset-riddled East bracket. Montreal came back from a 3-1 deficit to knock out the Presidents' Trophy-winning Washington Capitals, then rallied again to beat the defending champion Pittsburgh Penguins. Meanwhile, the seventh-seeded Flyers beat second-seeded New Jersey and shocked sixth-seeded Boston after being down 0-3 to set up the unlikely matchup of the conference's seventh and eighth seeds. The Flyers made quick work of the Canadiens, winning the series in five games to earn the right to play in the finals—after barely making the playoffs.

But the Flyers could not turn back the Blackhawks. Young stars Kane and Toews were the team's leading scorers in the playoffs. Duncan Keith, a fifth-year Blackhawk who is still just 26, anchored the defense with veteran Brian Campbell. Then there was the unlikelyst of playoff stars—goaltender Antti Niemi, not to be confused with the fellow Finn with the same name who was a long-serving goalkeeper in English soccer. Niemi came to Chicago as an undrafted free agent in 2008 and won the starting role in the midst of a championship season.

This magazine is a celebration of the Blackhawks' championship and the NHL's 2009-10 season. It contains a game-by-game recap of the stirring Stanley Cup Finals, when a young Blackhawks team rose to the occasion and brought the cup to Chicago with a flurry of scoring; coverage of every playoff series in the long, winding NHL playoffs; a brief overview of Chicago's 2009-10 season, in which we pick 10 key games that captured the ups and downs of the season; and a review of the year in professional hockey, including a survey of the Olympic tournament that drew so many fans to the game.

Between the Olympics, the now-annual outdoor Winter Classic, and the emerging generation of NHL stars, the 2009-10 season showcased hockey's modern era. And in Chicago, one of the Original Six NHL cities with a proud history in the sport, hockey has been reborn.

—Beau Dure for USA TODAY

