

## HOCKEY STANLEY CUP PLAYOFFS

## Blackhawks Star Sidelined by Concussion Hopes to Return for Playoffs

By BEN STRAUSS

CHICAGO — During a full-ice drill at the Chicago Blackhawks' practice Tuesday morning, Patrick Kane skated across the blue line, dished the puck, got it right back and scored. The man in the middle of the give-and-go: Jonathan Toews.

The sight of Toews skating is a welcome one for the Blackhawks, who begin their first-round playoff series against the Phoenix Coyotes on Thursday night. Toews, Chicago's 23-year-old captain, has not played since Feb. 19 because of a concussion, missing the final 22 games of the regular season.

"I've been sitting here a lot longer than I thought I would be," Toews said. "It's been tough to battle through."

Like hockey's most visible concussion patient, Sidney Crosby, Toews is a skilled young star, and his struggle with postconcussion symptoms has been fraught with confusion, setbacks and questions about life after hockey.

Toews is not the only scoring star recovering from a head injury as the playoffs begin. Vancouver's leading goal scorer, Daniel Sedin, has been sidelined by a concussion since March 21 and missed Wednesday night's series

opener against the Los Angeles Kings. The Bruins announced Wednesday that right wing Nathan Horton, who had three game-winning goals during Boston's title run last year, would miss the playoffs because of a concussion sustained Jan. 22.

Crosby missed last year's post-

## Jonathan Toews was a top contender for the Hart Trophy.

season with his head injury, a situation Toews hopes to avoid. Toews said he expected to be on the ice for Game 1 in Arizona.

"He's made real consistent progress recently," Blackhawks Coach Joel Quenneville said. "Each and every day he feels even better."

The plight of Crosby, perhaps the N.H.L.'s most recognizable player, is well documented. He missed more than a calendar year's worth of hockey after sustaining a concussion in January 2011, returning for eight games this season only to miss another three months with recurring

symptoms. If Toews plays Thursday, he will have been out of action fewer than two months.

But for the man who led the Blackhawks to the Stanley Cup in 2010 and was a top contender for the Hart Trophy before he was sidelined (having scored 57 points in 59 games), the past seven weeks have been trying.

The circumstances surrounding Toews's concussion are murky. He initially sat out a Feb. 21 game against the Detroit Red Wings with what was called an upper-body injury. He had not been on the receiving end of any big hits in the Blackhawks' previous game. As it turned out, Toews said he began feeling dizziness four or five games before he sat out against Detroit.

"Considering where the team was, I wasn't going to throw in the towel," he said. "Everyone knows when you have something serious and you need to deal with it, and I eventually did. I wouldn't do it any differently."

On Feb. 23, Toews hit a steel support beam for Chicago's elevated train with his car, but he said the crash did not exacerbate his concussion symptoms. The next weeks were a series of starts and stops: skating followed by dizziness with little progress,



JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES

Jonathan Toews, Chicago's captain, missed the final 22 games of the season while struggling with postconcussion symptoms.

even with a strict diet and an early bed time.

Two seasons ago, Toews missed two weeks with a concussion after a hit from Willie Mitchell of the Canucks. As the playoffs approach, Toews is cognizant of his history of head trauma and the long-term risks it carries but is also lured by a quest for another Stanley Cup.

"As a young hockey player, you have a certain level of invincibility where you don't think that far down the road, but you have to be careful," Toews said. "The biggest thing I'm worried about is my game ready to go and is my conditioning there. If all those things fall into place, then I won't be risking the fact that this might happen again."

## Rangers Look to a Veteran to Show the Way

By JEFF Z. KLEIN

GREENBURGH, N.Y. — Brad Richards has occasionally found himself walking the streets of Lower Manhattan, wondering how it would feel to be part of a Stanley Cup parade in the Canyon of Heroes.

"It's happened a few times," he said. "Can't get too far ahead, though."

The Rangers, the No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference, open their playoff season against the Ottawa Senators on Thursday night at Madison Square Garden, starting the quest for their first Stanley Cup since 1994, and only their second since 1940.

Front and center in that quest will be Richards, signed by the Rangers to a nine-year, \$60 million contract last July, mainly because he led the way to the Cup before. Richards, then 24, was the playoffs' top scorer and most valuable player when the Tampa Bay Lightning won the Stanley Cup in 2004 with a Game 7 victory over Calgary. He scored the winning goal in 7 of the Lightning's 16 playoff victories.

In the seven seasons since, Richards has returned to the playoffs only three times with Tampa Bay and the Dallas Stars, the last time in 2008.

"Getting to come here and play in New York is great, but this is exactly the reason why you want to go somewhere and get a chance," he said. "It's just great to have that feeling again, to be back in it."

Richards was by far the most prominent free agent on the market last summer. Several N.H.L. teams sent delegations to woo him at the office of his agent, Pat Morris, in Mississauga, Ontario.

They wanted Richards for his playmaking skills. They wanted him for his taciturn leadership. They wanted him to make them contenders.

He turned down bigger offers from Calgary and Toronto and chose the Rangers. He wanted to play for an Original Six team. He wanted to play for a team in the Eastern time zone, so it would be easier for his family in Prince Edward Island to watch and sometimes attend his games. He wanted to play for John Tortorella, his coach when they won the Cup in Tampa Bay.

"I know how hard he is, but it doesn't matter," Richards said of Tortorella when he arrived in New York. "At the end of the day it's about the players and about winning."

The Rangers got what they hoped for from Richards during



BARTON SILVERMAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The playoff-tested Brad Richards (19) joined the Rangers this season and led the team in assists.

the regular season. He led the team in assists and finished second to Marian Gaborik, often his linemate, in total scoring. He was a quiet leader in the dressing room and throughout the season was praised by Tortorella for his professionalism.

Richards led the team in power-play scoring, as expected, but he did not make the Rangers' power play effective; it finished 23rd in the league.

Still, the bottom line is the Rangers finished first in the East and No. 2 in the league after years of playoff-bubble mediocrity. For that the signing of Richards is an unqualified success.

But now comes the real deal, as Tortorella has lately been calling the playoffs. Now is when Richards starts earning his money for a team that has not won a post-season series since 2008.

He will be called on to anchor the power play, set up Gaborik and deny time and space to Ottawa's high-scoring defenseman, Erik Karlsson. And he will be called on for something more.

"He's a winner, the M.V.P. of four rounds," Tortorella said. "He's going to be a big part of it on the ice, and maybe sometimes more important, off the ice. I think the leadership is going to pay off once we're in the middle of the series, when some things happen to your team, the ebbs

and flows of the series. That's when people can rely on some of the guys who've gone through it."

Richards has 62 points in 63 career postseason games, 26th among active players, but most of them have played far more games than he has. When it is narrowed down to those who have played fewer than 80 post-season games, Richards is fourth,

## A leader with 62 points in 63 career postseason games.

behind only Sidney Crosby (82 points), Evgeni Malkin (73) and Richards's old Tampa Bay teammate Martin St. Louis (68).

Richards said he learned from the bad times during the Cup run, pointing out that the Lightning did not win two games in a row over the last two rounds until they won Games 6 and 7 of the finals.

"If you let yourself think that we're done or it's not going our way, it can grab you and snowball quickly," he said. "Your mind can play tricks on you and get you down."

Rangers defenseman Michael Del Zotto, a TriBeCa neighbor of

Richards, said Richards had helped him all year mentally and acted as something of a mentor.

"He's been around so long, he's won a Cup, he knows the playoff experience so well," Del Zotto, 21, said. "This time of year it's going to be key to have him around."

Richards, his former Lightning teammate Ruslan Fedotenko and Mike Rupp are the only Rangers players to win a Stanley Cup. (Fedotenko and Rupp each scored Cup-winning goals, in fact.)

Richards said there was not much he could say to impart wisdom on the Rangers' many young players.

"No matter what I say, you've still got to get through it — you've got to experience it, you've got to get into the games, see the level of intensity," he said. "It gets to you. We can talk about it all we want, but for the most part, experience is just getting your feet wet."

Richards, 31, has spoken about not wanting the 2004 Cup to be his only one, about being aware that his window is closing for another.

"You can see him today, his excitement, how happy he is to be back in the playoffs," Del Zotto said after practice this week. "We were all joking today — we were saying he seems 10 years younger."

## N.H.L. ROUNDUP

## Flyers Rally to Beat Penguins in Overtime

By The Associated Press

Jakub Voracek beat Marc-Andre Fleury from in close 2 minutes 23 seconds into overtime to give the visiting Philadelphia Flyers a 4-3 comeback victory over the Pittsburgh Penguins on Wednesday night in Game 1 of their Eastern Conference quarterfinal series.

Fleury stopped Matt Read's shot from the corner, but Voracek pounced on the rebound to cap a furious rally from a 3-0 deficit.

"It was a lucky bounce for me, but I'll take it," Voracek said after his first career playoff goal.

Game 2 is Friday night in Pittsburgh.

Daniel Briere scored twice, and Brayden Schenn added a goal in his playoff debut for the Flyers. Ilya Bryzgalov settled down after a shaky start to finish with 25 saves.

Sidney Crosby, Tyler Kennedy and Pascal Dupuis scored for the Penguins, and Fleury stopped 22 shots, but Pittsburgh struggled after dominating the first period.

The rivals delivered on their promise to play "whistle to whistle" and leave out the rough stuff that highlighted their six regular-season meetings. The game featured only a handful of penalties and little of the typical animosity.

Crosby missed the playoffs last season because of concussion symptoms, and the memory of watching from the rafters as the Penguins lost to Tampa Bay in seven games remains fresh.

He wasted little time making his presence felt. He gave Pittsburgh the lead on his second shift, shaking off a hit Philadelphia defenseman Braydon Coburn in the corner, then bouncing to his feet and flipping a rebound over Bryzgalov's glove 3:43 into the first period.

Kennedy made it 2-0 just over four minutes later, his wrist shot from the left circle beating Bryzgalov over his stick. Dupuis gave Pittsburgh a 3-0 lead with 37 seconds left in the first period.

Briere gave the Flyers life with a breakaway goal 6:22 seconds into the second period, although replays showed he was well off-side. He brought Philadelphia within a goal with 10:37 left in regulation. Schenn tied it just over three minutes later by redirecting a shot by Scott Hartnell.

**PREDATORS 3, RED WINGS 2** Gabriel Bourque scored two goals in his postseason debut, and the Nashville Predators held onto home-ice advantage by beating Detroit to open their Western Conference playoff series.

Toews shares an agent with Crosby and texted him during his recuperation for advice.

"He had little words of encouragement just to hang in and stay with it," Toews said.

Toews has passed the N.H.L.'s concussion protocol tests and was cleared for full contact practice at the beginning of April. Now on the cusp of returning to game action, he has been practicing on the Blackhawks' top line alongside his fellow All-Stars Kane and Marian Hossa. That is an indication that the Blackhawks expect Toews to play even if Quenneville chose optimism over certainty when asked if Toews would be on the ice.

"We're hopeful and we're looking forward to that," Quenneville said.

Kane added: "He hadn't been practicing on the line with us before so it's a good sign. He's a force and to have him back would be a huge boost."

After Tuesday's practice, Toews was measured when discussing his health, but cracked a smile when asked to compare how he felt now compared with a few weeks ago.

"Like night and day," he said. "There's light at the end of the tunnel."

## N.C.A.A. Champion Joins Rangers for the Playoffs

By CHRISTOPHER BOTTA

GREENBURGH, N.Y. — Chris Kreider might have considered prolonging the celebration of Boston College's N.C.A.A. championship or completing what was left of the school year. But the Rangers, whose scouts have salivated over Kreider's speed and puck skills since the team drafted him in the first round in 2009, did not want to wait any longer for him to come aboard.

"They were pretty adamant about getting started and getting me here as soon as possible," Kreider said Wednesday after practice, his first as a professional. "So I wanted to do that. I wanted to help however I could."

Kreider was one of the first players on the ice as the Rangers went through their final practice

before their first-round series against the Ottawa Senators opens Thursday at Madison Square Garden. Kreider, a 6-foot-3, 230-pound forward, was not part of a set line. He wore the same green practice jersey as the regulars Brian Boyle, Ruslan Fedotenko and Brandon Dubinsky, but was clearly the fourth man.

Coach John Tortorella refused to discuss how he planned to use Kreider against the Senators or any prospective playoff opponents. Entering the media room after practice, Tortorella offered only a statement on Kreider and said he would not address any questions about his new player.

"We're happy he's here," Tortorella said. "He's a Ranger. From there, we go day by day. I'm not going to tell you our line-

ups. This is a young man that we feel has a great future and it started with us today. He signed, he's up and we move on with our business."

Kreider, who turns 21 on April 30, said that he had yet to speak at length with Tortorella and that he understood a spot in the lineup was not guaranteed.

"They definitely sent the message that if you want to play, you're going to have to prove that you're ready to play," he said. "You're going to have to earn your ice time, which is how I think it should be."

Kreider, who had 23 goals and 22 assists this season, celebrated with his family and Boston College teammates Saturday night after the Eagles defeated Ferris State, 4-1, to win the N.C.A.A. ti-

tle. But he flew home to Massachusetts the next day to begin preparation for the start of his professional career.

He acknowledged that he was nervous before practice and called the sudden transition from college to the N.H.L. playoffs surreal.

Kreider's new teammates gave him a warm welcome, offering advice and kidding him about his first day. After practice, no one seemed bothered by the presence of the highly skilled newcomer.

"It's not like he's a veteran looking for playing time," center Brad Richards said. "He's respectful and this is a great opportunity for him to learn. Besides, this is the playoffs. You need bodies, and he's a big, very talented kid."



GENE J. PUSKAR/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Penguins' Pascal Dupuis wristed a first-period goal past Flyers goalie Ilya Bryzgalov. Pittsburgh lost a 3-0 lead.