Toews aims to be a real youthsayer

Wants to recapture skillful style of his early 20s

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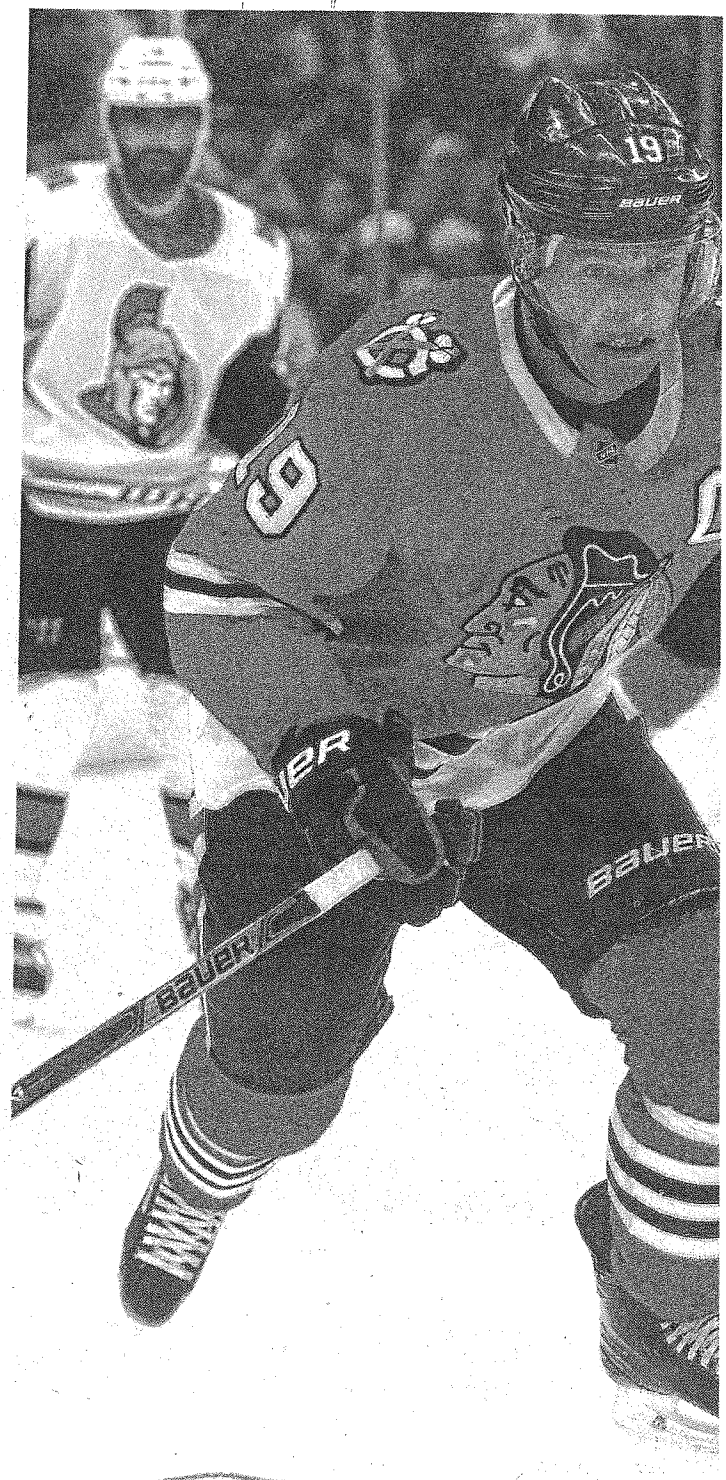

A lot of hockey players don't actually watch a lot of hockey. When you live at the rink and sit through daily film sessions and toil through a 10-month season, watching other players play is usually the last thing NHL players want to do.

But during the Stanley Cup playoffs this past spring, Jonathan Toews was watching.

"Quite a bit," he said before chuckling. "More than usual."

The Blackhawks missed the playoffs for the first time in a decade, plummeting to last place thanks to Corey Crawford's head injury, a shaky blue line and a drop in production from the likes of Toews and Brandon Saad. But seeing the expansion Vegas Golden Knights run roughshod over the Western Conference and seeing the perennially disappointing Washington Capitals finally hoist the Stanley Cup served as stirring reminders for Toews that anything can happen.

All you've got to do is get in.

"It's not only motivating, just to see how fast that play was, and to have missed out on playoff hockey this year and to have the drive to get back there," Toews said. "But knowing that if you do sneak into the playoffs, it doesn't really matter — you can go a long way. Us thinking, 'Oh, we're going to go back and win a Stanley Cup this year,' it sounds like a long shot. But as always, our No. 1 goal is just getting back to the playoffs and being ready to hit our stride the right way when we get there."

A lot of things have to go right for the Hawks to get back to the playoffs in an increasingly difficult Central Division, but Toews knows it starts at the top with him. His 52 points last season was a career low for a full season, and he scored just 21 and 20 goals in each of the last two seasons after scoring 28 in each of the previous three.

Toews, who always has played a heavy, grinding style of hockey, said he wants to get back to playing the way he did in his early 20s, when he was more of a skill guy. That's one of the reasons he was at MB Ice Arena on Wednesday night, playing in the Chicago Pro Hockey League — a mishmash of current pros (such as Toews, Alex DeBrincat and Vinnie Hinostroza), prospects and college kids playing two 25-minute halves of four-on-four. Toews has seen DeBrincat, Hinostroza, Nick Schmaltz and other young players messing around and working on their skill games after practices, and he has seen the results.

"Getting that skill and that creativity back in my game is a big thing I want to focus on," he said. "You watch a lot of these young guys that are coming up and getting the opportunity to play right away, they all have the skill, they all have the skating. And it's days like this, where they're out there working on stuff and playing around and just being loose and creative. It's going to be fun to get that back into my game."

Wednesday was the 10th anniversary of Toews being named captain at age 20. And nearly three months into his 30s, Toews said it's OK to stop and reflect once in a while on all the Hawks have accomplished in that decade. But he sisted that there's no "satisfacti that there's still plenty to prove plenty to do.

The long road back sta Wednesday night with a cl ity summer-league game. He ho that this time around, it contin beyond the first week of April. cause after that, you never knov