

by Sal Barry



Current Blackhawks at the convention included (from left) Nick Schmaltz (8), Alex DeBrincat (12), Chris Kuritz (14), Artem Anisimov (15), Duncan Keith (2) and Dylan Sikura (95).

SAL BARRY PHOTOS

2018 BLACKHAWKS CONVENTION

New faces and a few surprises revitalize annual team event



The Blackhawks Convention has been a must-do for 'Hawks fans ever since the show started in 2008. This year, it took place on July 27-29 at the Hilton Hotel in downtown Chicago.

It was the 11th year for the popular show, where fans have the opportunity to meet and get autographs from players, shop for hockey merchandise and attend panel discussions. There is also an interactive room with activities like floor hockey, as well as a display from the Hockey Hall of Fame. It's a tried-and-true format that hasn't changed much in the past 10 years. So, what could the Blackhawks do this year to mix things up and make the show feel fresh again?

For starters, the Blackhawks brought

back two of its most iconic players: Jeremy Roenick and Chris Chelios. The pair were the most popular Blackhawks players during the 1990s, but neither had been a part of the Blackhawks Convention until now.

"It always seemed that the Convention was at the same time as something that I had already planned," said Roenick, who played with the Blackhawks from 1988 to 1996. "I have a charity golf tournament each summer, and the timing always seemed to be an issue. I was really happy that I was able to get back in front of the Chicago fans and do something for them."

Chelios, a Chicago native who played with the team from 1990 to 1999 and served as captain for four seasons, moved

back in July to spend more time with his mother. The Blackhawks quickly brought Chelios back into the fold as a Blackhawks Ambassador, with the 2018 Blackhawks Convention being his first appearance in his new role.

In addition to bringing in the two retired legends, a few changes to the show's autograph policy, as well as some pleasant surprises, breathed new life into the Convention.

Cheers and tears

Although the dealer room opened on Friday, July 27 at 3 p.m., things really got started with the "Opening Ceremony" at

5 p.m. – a glorified pep rally to introduce past and present players.

It was a combination of mostly highs, with a few lows, as Blackhawks play-by-play announcer Pat Foley emceed the start of the ceremony. A moment of silence was given to honor former 'Hawks goaltender Ray Emery, a member of the 2013 Stanley Cup Championship team who passed away earlier in the summer.

Fans were also emotional when color commentator Ed Olczyk, who underwent cancer treatment over the past year, took to the stage. Foley gave Olczyk a hug as the audience cheered. Olczyk fought back tears, thanking everyone for their support, before introducing the other guests, including Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews, Alex DeBrincat, Bobby Hull, Tony Esposito and Denis Savard. More than 50 current and former players, as well as coaches and broadcasting staff, were introduced to the thousands of fans in attendance.

The biggest surprise was the appearance by Scott Foster, a local accountant and amateur goaltender. He made national headlines back in March when he stepped between the pipes for the Blackhawks and played 14 minutes after both 'Hawks goalies were injured. Foster, who stopped all seven shots he faced that night, had politely declined all interview requests since then, so his participation at the Blackhawks Convention was unexpected and welcome.

Sign here, please

Another big surprise at this year's Convention was that a change was made to the autograph wristband policy. Since the third Convention in 2010, fans wanting an autograph would have to get a colored wristband, which were given to the first 315 fans 90 minutes before the player was scheduled to sign. This guaranteed an autograph from that player when he signed later, but fans were limited to one wristband at a time – meaning that they could not get “banded” for another player until the first wristband was removed.

But this year, fans were allowed two different wristbands at a time.

“It's terrific,” said Fred Fragassi of Glenview, Illinois. “A lot of the players you want to get are signing autographs at



(From right) Blackhawks legends Steve Larmer, Eric Daze and Denis Savard.



Stu Grimson, a.k.a. “The Grim Reaper,” played 12 years in the NHL, including three with the Blackhawks.

the same time. But now, you can get both wristbands and then go from one line to another. That works out great.”

A second change made for the better was how autographs from the most popular players were handled. Each fan would go to a prize kiosk, scan their convention pass, and then get an on-screen “scratch-and-win” game card. Prizes were either the opportunity to get an autograph from a “VIP player,” a photo opportunity with a VIP or a \$25 gift certificate to the

Blackhawks Team Store.

The big problem in the past was that fans never knew what VIP they were going to get a signature from until 15 minutes before the player's scheduled appearance. This frustrated fans, who did not know what to bring to get signed, and would many times scramble around the dealer room last-minute to try and find a particular item (like a trading card or photo) once they knew who the scheduled signing was for. This year, the Convention



Fans could get their picture taken with former and current players, such as Artem Anisimov.

program listed what time each VIP was signing, which was widely praised.

"Its been a lot better this way," said Jim Holstine of Batavia, Illinois. "More people had the opportunity to win, and you get to see who it is. People have been able to trade with each other and get autographs from players they haven't gotten yet."

However, the only way to get an autograph of a top-flight current player, like Kane or Toews, or a retired legend like Hull or Esposito, was to win the opportunity.

"I don't think it's good equity for the top players," said Fragassi, who has attended all but one 'Hawks Convention. "I haven't had an autograph from one of them since 2009. I got [Marian] Hossa and Kane that year, but haven't had a VIP since. It could be my bad luck."

Another complaint was that the VIP opportunities were not as random as some people would have liked.

"I won four autographs from Corey Crawford," said Mike O'Neill of Chicago. "They should have all been different."

Apparently, passes registered at the same time, then scanned at the prize kiosks at the same time, were awarded the same VIP autograph or photo op.

"I got two identical scratch-offs," said Fragassi. "Both were for Adam Burish and Brian Campbell (who were signing together at the same table). If I got Roenick or Chelios, I would have been ecstatic!"

Although fans might not have been able to get an autograph from their favorite player – especially if he was a VIP – they could still get quite a few autographs from most of the players if they had a little patience. Many times, two or three players were signing at the same table, meaning that fans had to get only one wristband and then later wait in one line to get several autographs at once.

A little breathing room

Unlike most prior years, this year's Chicago Blackhawks Convention was not sold out, with tickets still available the night before the show. The passes, which cost \$95 this year, usually sell out a month after they go on sale in January. But not this year; perhaps due to the team's lackluster season and missing the 2018 playoffs.

For Don Metter of Park Ridge, Illinois, the lower attendance at the Convention was helpful for his autograph project: a five-foot tall painting of the Blackhawks



Lower attendance at this year's Convention encouraged fan Don Metter to bring along his 5-foot Blackhawks logo painting to get autographed.



Longtime Blackhawks defenseman and Hockey Hall of Fame member Chris Chelios was a guest for the first time ever at the 2018 Blackhawks Convention.

logos, signed by as many current and former stars as possible.

"I thought it would be a good year to bring it," Metter said. "I thought that maybe it's not going to be as crowded this year, and I can bring it without risking it getting damaged."

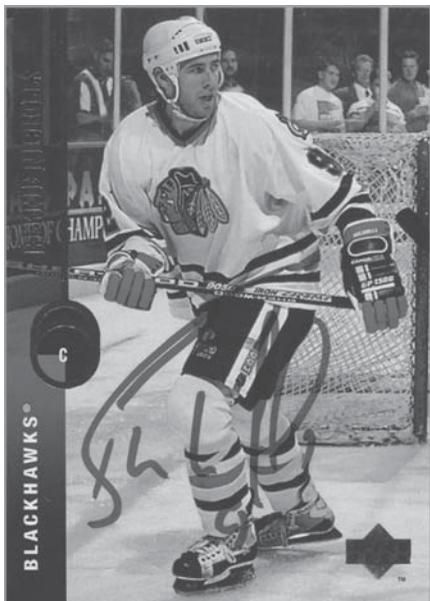
"It seems less crowded this year," said Logan Breen of Naperville, Illinois. "You can get around easier, and get in and out of [autograph] lines quicker, so that's a bonus."

But just because the show didn't sell out didn't mean that it was empty; far from it. Wait times for some autograph guests exceeded an hour, depending on if the line was full and how fast or slow the players signed. Newer players tend to quickly scribble out an autograph, but the

retired players take their time.

For example, Esposito would ask each fan his or her name and have a short conversation before signing his autograph. Chelios was happy to shake hands with anyone who wanted to do so.

Roenick, never one to shy away from a conversation, was also eager to engage fans.



With plenty of opportunities to obtain autographs from former and current Blackhawks players, autographed cards were popular.

“Every single person who went through my line mentioned that they were so happy that I was there,” he said. “And obviously, I reciprocated the same sentiments.”

Talkin’ hockey

Almost as popular a draw as the autographs are the panel discussions. This year, there were 14 different panels. In “Goal Scorers,” Kane and Roenick talked about the difficulty of scoring in their respective eras. Roenick, who missed Friday night’s opening ceremony, received a standing ovation when he walked out on stage for the Saturday morning panel.

“Inside Hockey Operations” featured the team’s top brass, who discussed running the Blackhawks. “That panel wasn’t as full as the other ones,” said Breen, a veteran of five Conventions. “But I like hearing about that stuff.”

In “From Beer League to Big League,” Foster looked back at his 14-minute stint as the Blackhawks emergency goaltender, including what led up to his unlikely turn in the spotlight. This was the first time he spoke about that night since the postgame media scrum. Foster was not slated to sign during any of the autograph sessions that weekend,

so fans walked up to the stage afterward to try and get the accountant’s autograph. Surprisingly, he obliged, signing anything that was put in front of him.

Another popular panel was “Life After Hockey,” where former Blackhawks Colin Fraser, Adam Burish and Bryan Bickell talked about – you guessed it – what they have been up to since hanging ‘em up.



Photos and pucks were strong sellers for vendors in the dealer room.

Bickell, who had to retire from hockey after the 2016-17 season because of a multiple sclerosis diagnosis, got choked up when discussing what he went through towards the end of his career.

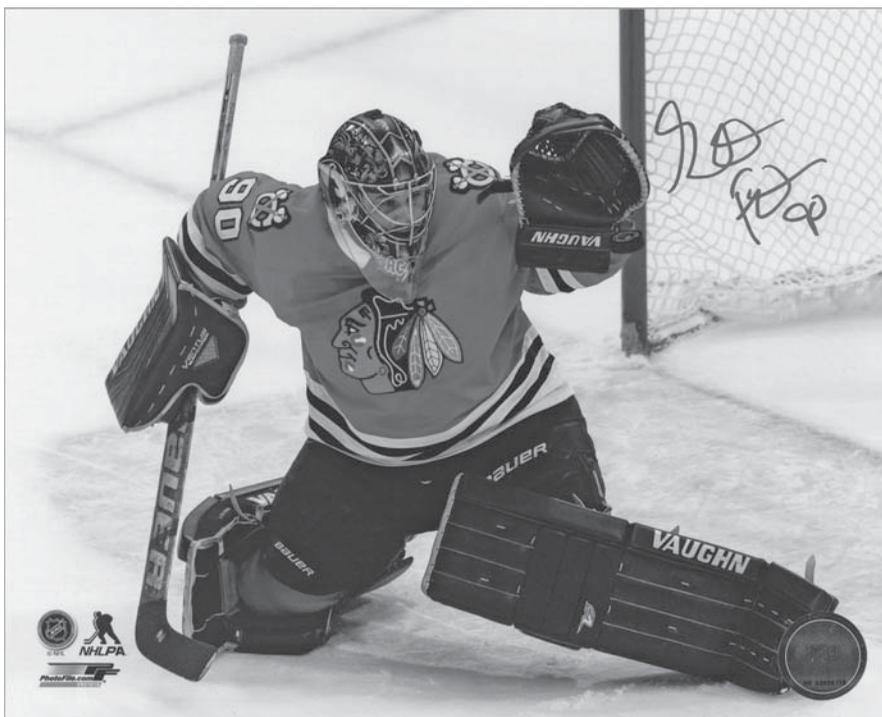
“I was surprised that Bryan Bickell got as emotional as he did,” said panel moderator Steve Konroyd, a former Blackhawks defenseman and the team’s studio analyst since 2006. “Everything’s pretty recent as far as what’s gone on in his life over the past three years. I thought he did very well.”

Deal me out

While attendance by fans may have been a little lower, there were undeniably far fewer dealers at the Blackhawks Convention this year. Not only that, but vendors were concentrated in the center of the dealer room, which was left empty along the walls, making the room feel even more vacant.

“It’s a little disappointing that there were less vendors,” said Holstine, who attended the prior two conventions. “There was one specific guy who sold replica championship rings. I was hoping to get a few more.”

During the 2016 Convention, the Blackhawks Team Store had a presence in the dealer room, selling merchandise



Scott Foster, the emergency backup goaltender who made headlines in March, was a surprise guest at the Convention. He signed autographs after a panel on Saturday afternoon.



Retired Blackhawks players, and current team broadcasters, Troy Murray (left) and Steve Konroyd (center) pose with a fan.

at blowout prices; much of the same merchandise dealers were selling at full price in order to make back the \$1,200 cost of their booth space. Even worse, many dealer tables were blocked by the long lines of customers buying merchandise from the Blackhawks Team Store. That angered a lot of vendors, who did not return in 2017. Even less were present for the 2018 show.

“A guy I always buy shirts from wasn’t there,” Fragassi said. “Maybe they need to reduce the price of tables, because I think that room should be full. After people get autographs, they go and buy more stuff.”

However, less competition made the overall sales better for the vendors present this year. Dealers who had the smaller, impulse-priced goods in the \$5 to

\$10 range did well, particularly those that stocked items that could be autographed. One dealer reported to *Sports Collectors Digest* that they sold more than 500 pucks and 100 photographs during the weekend.

Fun for all

Fans who didn’t want to shop could head over to the interactive room, which had enough sights and activities to keep them busy until the next panel or autograph session. Children could try their hand at some hockey skills testing or play floor hockey in an inflatable rink. Hilary Knight, Kendal Coyne and Alex Rigsby –

members of the U.S. Women’s Team that won the gold medal at the 2018 Winter Olympics – dropped by on Saturday to play a little shinny with the kids.

Fans of all ages could take their picture with a Blackhawks Zamboni or in a replica of the team’s locker room. The Hockey Hall of Fame had a display featuring many NHL trophies, as well as some vintage hockey sweaters and sticks.

Overall, the 11th annual Chicago Blackhawks Convention was well-received by the fans who attended.

“I thought that after missing the playoffs that maybe interest wouldn’t be quite as high as it had been in the past,” Konroyd said. “From my perspective, it didn’t really seem to dull anyone’s enthusiasm for the convention. It certainly looked like it was on par with the last four, five years.”

Even the players had fun.

“If the Blackhawks invite me again, absolutely I will be back,” Roenick said. “I had a great time, and I wish it didn’t take me so long to get to one of them. The Blackhawks did a great job of getting their players out to meet the fans, and getting the fans excited about the upcoming season.” ♦

Sal Barry is a freelance contributor for Sports Collectors Digest. He can be reached at sjb@puckjunk.com or on Twitter @puckjunk.



Pucks were a popular item to get autographed at the Blackhawks Convention.

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