

Halak Arrives in St. Louis

By Chris Pinkert | St. Louis Blues Online

Jaroslav Halak's performance last season, particularly in the playoffs, had legendary hockey broadcasters like Sam Rosen and Mike Emrick repeating themselves more often than a damaged music CD.

“Save, Halak!”

“Glove save! Oh, what a save by Halak!”

“Another save by Halak!”

The saves kept coming, and so did the compliments.

The 25-year-old Slovakian goaltender captivated the city of Montreal, every hockey fan in North America and practically everyone associated with the game when he led the eighth-seeded Canadiens all the way to the Eastern Conference Finals earlier this year. Along the way, his heroics also mowed down the top-seeded Washington Capitals and the fourth-seeded Pittsburgh Penguins.

Both teams were heavy favorites for the Stanley Cup.

Halak's performance in each series was the stuff of legend. On April 26, facing elimination in Game 6 against Washington, he stopped a jaw-dropping 51 shots before giving up a goal with 4:50 remaining. He followed that up with a 41-save performance in Game 7. Including Game 5, Halak stopped 131 of 134 shots to frustrate a Capitals' offense that was arguably the league's most dynamic.

Later against the Penguins, he stopped 38 of 39 shots in both Game 2 and Game 7 to help eliminate the defending champions.

Despite being the most-talked-about goaltender of the playoffs, Halak remains humble.

“I'm just a regular guy. I'm like any other goalie,” he told Canadiens.com earlier this summer. “I'm not a superhero or a God or whatever else; I just am who I am.”

His numbers last season suggest though that he's more than a regular guy. Halak led all playoff goaltenders with a .923 save percentage. He ranked second in playoff wins (9) and was third among playoff goaltenders with a .255 goals-against average.

He was even being compared to Patrick Roy and Ken Dryden, and history proves that those two weren't just 'regular guys' between the pipes.

Halak started last season as the backup to Carey Price, but gradually stole his job, posting a 26-13-5 record. His stellar goaltending also helped Slovakia finish fourth overall at the

Winter Olympics, capping off a tremendous year for the 25-year-old netminder.

But all of his newfound fame and notoriety didn't come easy.

Halak wasn't drafted until the ninth round (271st overall) of the 2003 NHL Entry Draft. After being selected by the Canadiens, he toiled in the Quebec Major Junior League, the ECHL and the AHL before finally getting a start in the big leagues in 2007. There he served as the backup to Price until last season, where tremendous play gave him a firm grasp on the No. 1 job in Montreal.

But with both goalies unsigned earlier this summer, the Canadiens opted to hold onto Price, trading Halak to the Blues for prospects Lars Eller and Ian Schultz.

"When you think of where he was drafted and the road trip he's had to become who he is today, he's excelled in all areas," said Blues President John Davidson after acquiring Halak from Montreal on June 17. "He helped Montreal get in the playoffs, he played well in the playoffs, he played well in the Olympics. We're just simply excited to have him here in St. Louis.

"Our research tells us about his demeanor, which is very solid. He's one of those players who loves to play, loves to battle. He works extremely hard in practice, understands the position. At his age, we feel the best is ahead of him."

If the best is yet to come, then a new four-year contract ensures Halak's best will happen in St. Louis.

"I've been looking forward to playing in St. Louis ever since the trade was announced," he said. "I believe in my abilities and hope to do some good things for the Blues."