

AROUND TOWN

Shooting the Hawks

The Hawks announced a TV deal, but commercials? Coudal Partners had 10 days...

- BY MATT WOOD -

Less than two months ago, the thought of seeing a Blackhawks home game on television would have been unimaginable, let alone watching slick, new commercials advertising upcoming games on Comcast SportsNet; but it's happened.

As soon as the Blackhawks decided to broadcast a slate of home games this year, they contacted Coudal Partners to help them reach the public.

"We had a meeting one day and we just kicked it around a little bit," said Jim DeMaria, Blackhawks executive director of communications. "One day after practice, I'd asked a bunch of guys to come in ... and the guys were excited about doing it."

And there they are; four new spots produced by Coudal Partners, a Chicago-based idea factory cum ad agency and design studio. The spots feature Martin Havlat, Patrick Kane, Robert Lang, and Jonathan Toews joking around in the locker room. Which doesn't seem remarkable ... and yet, they were commissioned, shot and produced in 10 days.

Coudal Partners had long worked with the team, designing billboards, tickets, and the current Red Rising campaign. But they needed the new



spots quickly, before the first game against Detroit aired on Nov. 11. Team executives called Jim Coudal, the agency's president in late October, and told him he had 10 days to have the spots ready.

"I came back to the office and told everybody, 'We have some work to do.'"

The shots ostensibly had to be the public's first glimpse of what is a new team and a new culture minted in the wake of obstinate owner Bill Wirtz's death in September. At that point, control was quickly ceded to his son Rocky, and the late Wirtz's dunderheaded approach to local TV vanished.

The day the younger Wirtz released a memo announcing that the Hawks

were working with Comcast SportsNet to air a package of home games, Jay Mariotti wrote, "What's next around here? Clean and honest politicians?"

The elder Wirtz had refused to allow broadcasts of home games, save for the ill-fated Hawkvision pay-per-view scheme during the 1992-3 season, claiming it would hurt ticket sales. That stubbornness, combined with his miserly ways and boneheaded personnel decisions, nearly killed the team's once-rabid fan base. Meanwhile, the NHL was doing its own hatchet job on the sport of hockey as a whole with the lockout that cancelled the entire 2004-5 season.

It was a peculiar mix of optimism and mourning, but suffice to say, plenty of Blackhawk fans weren't

necessarily restraining their joy at the news of the elder Wirtz's passing. It feels like a second chance for the franchise dubbed the worst in sports by ESPN the Magazine in 2004. With its roster of exciting young players like Kane and Toews, and prolific scorer Havlat due to return from the injured reserve soon, the team has a chance to regain some of its erstwhile fans.

Coudal is no stranger to sports marketing. In addition to the Blackhawks, his company has done work for the White Sox, the Houston Astros, the Western Open, and the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

"We've shot a lot of spots in our life with athletes in them, and there's a couple ways to approach a spot like that," he said. "Generally, athletes are not actors, so either you keep the amount of conversation, or the amount of dialogue that an actor/athlete needs to say to a minimum," or, he says, "You try to make the shooting experience as relaxed and as little like a big television shoot as possible."

In the interest of time, Coudal and the team chose the latter.

"We know from experience that in general hockey players are very nice guys, and so we came up with this idea of putting them in an environment in which they were comfortable, meaning

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

"Generally, athletes are not actors, so either you keep the amount of conversation or the amount of dialogue that an actor/athlete needs to say to a minimum, or you try to make the shooting experience as relaxed and as little like a big television shoot as possible." - Coudal President Jim Coudal.



Whether these new spots and TV coverage can help rebuild fan interest in the Hawks or not is yet to be seen, but DeMaria says putting that excitement on TV is vital.

the room in the locker room where they sit and talk all the time, and to not make it into a huge Hollywood thing.”

A large part of a day was spent setting up lighting and video equipment, the commercials shot in a couple hours. Coudal had many of the jokes written ahead of time, but also left room for the players to improvise and speak in their own voices. For instance, in the spot where the players pass the buck on getting Patrick Sharp a soda, when Havlat tells Patrick Kane, “Don’t even think about it, Kaner,” the line was improvised.

“The end was not what was in our script,” said Coudal, “But it seemed like the right thing to do at the shoot.”

After shooting as much video as they could, Coudal’s team edited the video for the next three days. The Blackhawks then aired clips at a press conference, just days after the initial decision to shoot was made. The Hawks seem ecstatic with the work.

“I think that they did a fantastic job,” said DeMaria. “The guys really had some fun with it, like I said, and they enjoyed doing it and they were happy to come down. It was something new for them, and they got a big kick out of it. So did we. It worked very well.”

The first Hawks home game to be televised in this new era of fan friendliness, a 3-2 win over Detroit on November 11, went better than the team could have hoped. Kane and Toews both scored goals in an atmosphere that hasn’t been seen for the United Center since MJ was holding court. Whether these new spots and TV coverage can help rebuild fan interest in the Hawks or not is yet to be seen, but DeMaria says putting that excitement on TV is vital.

“What you’re doing is you’re not only selling your team, but you’re selling the experience of coming to the United Center to watch a game, which you can only sell if you televise your home games.”

Such a concept.

Matt Wood is a regular contributor to Chicago Sports Weekly

DISCOVER BANKING THAT’S BEYOND, WELL, BANKING.



Bank at CenTrust, and you’ll get so much more than standard banking services. With the sound advice and valuable experience of CenTrust bankers at your side, you’ll be able to more intelligently manage and invest today’s money, as well as plan for an even brighter financial future. From personal banking and business banking to loans and investments, CenTrust Bank prides itself on creating personalized solutions that fit your specific needs. Best of all, we do it like only a truly dedicated community bank can - with a genuine smile and helping hand.

CEN TRUST BANK
Experience. Service.



www.centrustbank.com • 400 Lake Cook Road, Suite 202 • Deerfield, IL 60015 • 847.267.1331

WIN a \$150 BORDERS’ GIFTCARD!

JUST GO TO [WWW.CSWEEKLY.COM](http://www.csweekly.com),

TAKE OUR **READER SURVEY,**

and you’ll be entered into a drawing for a

gift from the magazine.

**CHICAGO
SPORTS
WEEKLY**

**SHARE YOUR
*FEELINGS
WITH US!**

* Your demographics. Seriously, we want to know who you are.