

Lancione takes a look at the fantasy hockey outlook for the Calgary Flames.

The Calgary Flames have missed Lord Stanley's Playoffs for four seasons running; a trend with no end in sight. In fact, the 2013-14 Flames outfit will be hard-pressed to avoid finishing in the deepest shadows of the NHL's basement. The fire sale that media, pundits and fans alike had been clamoring for several years for, finally began this past spring when franchise player Jarome Iginla, big money rearguard Jay Bouwmeester and depth winger Blake Comeau were dealt. Alex Tanguay returned to Colorado in the offseason and the all but official farewell of the Saddledome's crease junkie of the past decade, Miikka Kiprusoff, certainly marks the end of an era.

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To be quite frank, save for one glorious run in the spring of 2004, where Calgary came within one Martin Gelinas call away from a second franchise championship, this era was indisputably an unmitigated disaster. Immediately preceding that magical run which took us through the red mile a decade ago, the Flames hopeful had witnessed a horrid run of seven straight seasons failing to qualify for the playoffs. Following that run and the subsequent 2004-05 work stoppage, the club endured four straight first round exits, followed by the current four year playoff drought and counting... (For those of you running the numbers at home, that's --count it-- five playoff appearances and only one venture past the first round over the past 16 years!)

It really is a shame this large scale overhaul was put off for so long by an upper brass in denial, led by GM Jay Feaster. It goes without saying that had the fire sale been activated three years back, the ransom that could have been fetched for Iginla (two low level prospects in 13'), Kiprusoff(nothing), would have been dramatically more significant. It could have sped up the turnover period drastically, but instead we have watched those once high profile assets wither away in value, due to advanced age, diminished abilities and impending retirement.

The core of the team as currently constructed consists of Mike Cammalleri and Jiri Hudler, a goaltending tandem of Joey MacDonald and Karri Ramo, as well as defenseman, Mark Giordano. Ouch! That being said, the prospects have been silently travelling up the Alberta pipeline to Calgary despite regional rival Edmonton gaining all of the attention for the higher profile blue chippers heading that way. Despite Calgary surprisingly only having had a single top-20 selection over the past decade before this summer's No.6 overall selection of Sean Monahan

some promising picks have gradually been amassed. I.e. The fully groomed Mikael Backlund, Sven Bärtschi

(now primed for his first full season), 2013 U.S. World Junior standout: John Gaudreau

### Markus Granlund

and the newly selected Monahan-- not too shabby a collection of young talent.

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# **Lancione's Top Five Flames Prospects**

- 5) Markus Granlund (Liiga= 50 GP, 30 points)
- 4) Mikael Backlund (NHL= 32 GP, 16 points; SEL= 23 GP, 30 points)
- 3) Sven Bärtschi (NHL= 20 GP, 10 points; AHL= 32 GP, 26 points)
- 2) Sean Monahan (CHL= 58 GP, 78 points)
- 1) John Gaudreau (NCAA= 35 GP, 51 points)

However, the majority of these kids are far from being every day, NHL-ready contributors. With Mike Cammalleri entering the final year of his deal and likely headed out the door by midseason, the departure of Roman Cervenka back to Europe, an unproven goaltending duo, an increasingly thin blue line and serious lack of offensive depth, things will assuredly be getting worse before they get better in Calgary.

With a striking similarity to the Toronto Maple Leafs' past decade of ineptitude (before they

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finally righted the ship in 2013), the Flames have perpetually been too poor to squeak into the postseason, but not quite horrible enough to garner top picks to boost the talent pool in the entry draft. The reluctance of management to throw in the towel and ascertain the much needed injection of youth and the odd promising blue-chipper that would have been hauled in, by converting said aging assets, when still possible, has impeded the growth of the franchise immeasurably.

Not unlike the Toronto path, this Flames group did finally divulge itself of those aging flotation devices (Iginla, Kipper, Bouwmeester), so to speak, which prevented them from sinking low enough in the standings to be in a high percentage position to draft an elite talent. This year, all signs point to such a finish that may enable the Flames to have a top two pick next summer. However, unlike the Toronto route, they have not surrendered top picks by acquiring a Phil Kessel type talent at the completely wrong time in the rebuild.

There is virtually no shot that Calgary spends anywhere near to the cap ceiling this season, despite certainly having the wherewithal to do so. The theory of them 'tanking' will probably fester among media outlets and the blogosphere at times this year. Though this is the model (Pittsburgh, Chicago, Edmonton, etc) which tends to yield the highest and quickest level of talent-pool regeneration, while positioning for long term success in the cap-world NHL. There are only a couple players who should continue to thrive in this diminished lineup this season. Mark Giordano, for one, is positioned to replace Jay Bouwmeester as the Defensive Corps leader. He leads by example, falling amongst the NHL leaders in blocked shots on an annual basis. In 2010-2011, he placed third in the NHL with a whopping 193 blocked attempts on the campaign. Look for him to push 200 this season with the weakest corps he's been a part of yet, throughout his decade as a Flame.

This season, the Abbottsford Flames should have a number of future NHLers given ample room to develop their game this year. Markus Granlund comes to mind if he will finally leave the

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Finnish Elite league set-up to begin adapting to the North American game. His prospect camp performance this summer in Calgary was well received by scouts and local media, having being deemed a much improved player over a year ago. American collegiate standout, John Gaudreau

, has surprised many in his committing to remain in the NCAA circuit for another season, rather than report to the farm club (AHL). Though he will again be a top candidate in that circuit for the 2014 Hobey Baker Award.

In the Canadian Major Junior ranks, <u>Sean Monahan</u> is primed for a very important final season with the OHL's Ottawa 67's (assuming he doesn't make the Flames), as well as almost assuredly, a role on Canada's WJC squad. Both outlets should allow for a fantastic opportunity for him to really elevate his performance level.

Meanwhile, the already graduated AHL prospects, such as: Max Reinhart, Sven Bärtschi and Mark Cundari

will be positioned to gain valuable experience, with full-time gigs in the big show in store for them this upcoming campaign.

### **Top 5 Projected Flames Producers for 2013-14**

- 5) Curtis Glencross 47 points
- 4) Lee Stempniak 49 points
- 3) Mikael Backlund 52 points

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2) Jiri Hudler – 54 points
1) Mike Cammalleri – 56 points
Looking forward a year from now, the Flames may decide to make a big free agent splash in the summer of 2014, when they will have a ton of cap space to allocate freely. Though this team is still likely a few years away from ending the current four year playoff drought in any event. In fact, matching the seven year streak transpiring prior to the 2003-04 Cup Final run is probably a reality for Flames Nation.
What can be said for the first time in years though, is that Calgary is no longer compounding the length of time required to right the ship. They are finally in a position to take a step or two backward in order to take a few steps forward.
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