

The New York Rangers – A Team in Transition

Written by Jeff Angus

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The Rangers handed out a massive five-year contract to injury-prone star Marian Gaborik this off-season. The fact that they paid a pretty penny for a top free agent is nothing new to Ranger fans. In 2006 they made a huge splash signing Chris Drury and Scott Gomez, and in 2007 they threw a ton of money at Wade Redden. Going back a few more seasons, they spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the likes of Eric Lindros, Bobby Holik, Pavel Bure, Jaromir Jagr, and Theo Fleury. To date, the Rangers have zilch to show for their free-spending ways.

Gaborik is a huge risk to take, as he has battled groin injuries for the past half-decade. He is definitely worth the \$7.5-million per season if he can remain healthy, and many think that he will, after undergoing two successful hip procedures last season to correct a muscle imbalance. After Alex Ovechkin, there isn't another player as electrifying in the entire league as Gaborik. In addition to adding the game breaking Gaborik, the Rangers also revamped most of their secondary scoring. They were a team that struggled for offense all of last season - will the moves that they made this summer change that?

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The biggest and most important change the Rangers made is the man behind the bench. John Tortorella believes in implementing a high-octane, aggressive, offensive system (and it did help him win a Stanley Cup). Tom Renney believed in a meticulous, patient defensive game. The Rangers consistently ranked near the top of the league in goals-against under Renney, but they could never find enough goals to win in the playoffs. You can add about five points to every player right off the bat because of the change in team playing style. In addition to the change in style, Tortorella gets his favorites and plays them a ton. In Tampa, this was the big four (Vincent Lecavalier, Brad Richards, Marty St. Louis, and Dan Boyle). After Gaborik (and goalie Henrik Lundqvist), the Rangers lack high-end talent. However, they do have ample depth at forward, as well as four proven NHL defensemen.

On the back end, expect Redden to have a rebound season in 2009-10 (although it won't be hard – even if he scores four or five goals it will be an improvement on the disaster that was 2008-09). Redden's play improved markedly Tortorella took over, so expect him to get every opportunity to become "the man" on the back end for the Rangers. Up front, the Rangers ditched Nikolai Zherdev, traded Gomez, and signed Vaclav Prospal and Ales Kotalik. Prospal is the key to watch – he is a great playmaker and should click with Gaborik on the top line. Kotalik will get his 18-22 goals playing lots on the power play. The Rangers also brought in Chris Higgins, who will add a lot to the penalty kill.

There really are only two roster holes right now in New York. The first is at center. Drury is not a top line center. Brandon Dubinsky isn't either, and after those two there isn't much else. Artem Anisimov is a rookie, and Brian Boyle has proven nothing at the NHL level. Once Dubinsky re-signs, expect him to earn the top spot with Prospal and Gaborik. He has proven he can step his game up with elite talent, as he clicked with Jaromir Jagr back in 2007-08. The other hole is on defense. After the top four (Redden, Michal Rozsival, Marc Staal, and Dan Girardi), there is no proven talent. Matt Gilroy and Bobby Sanguenetti are both very skilled offensive defensemen, but neither has any NHL experience. There are some other decent youngsters beyond those two, but nothing of fantasy significance (prospect Michael Del Zotto is a few years away most likely). Because of the lack of depth on the Ranger blue line (especially from an offensive/power play standpoint), both Gilroy and Sanguenetti make for good sleeper picks in keeper leagues or deeper one-year leagues.

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Some final words of advice for you poolies...

I expect Dubinsky to take a big step forward offensively this season. 60 points is a realistic target to shoot for. A lot of his points will come from assisting on Gaborik's tallies, so health is the key issue here.

Look for Prospal to return to the 70-point mark. He is famous in fantasy circles for his good year/bad year/good year/bad year offensive production pattern. He distributes the puck very well, really likes playing for Tortorella, and plays the left wing better than any other Ranger – three big keys working in his favor.

The Rangers have some great speed. Avery, Higgins, Drury and Callahan (some combination of those four) may form one of the best two-way lines in the league. I'd expect all four of them to score between 18 and 25 goals.

Look for Redden to get back to the 40-point plateau. It is going to be tough to forget about last

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season (especially if you owned him), but give him a fresh slate to work from. The Rangers are pretty thin on the back end and he will log a ton of offensive minutes for them.

Until he proves he is more than just blinding speed, don't get your hopes up with Enver Lisin. Being traded from Phoenix should be a warning itself.

You are probably wondering about Henrik Lundqvist. I don't really talk a lot about goalies, for a few reasons. First off, I don't consider myself a goalie expert at all; it is usually the position I am struggling to salvage during the season. Secondly, Justin Goldman puts out some awesome, awesome stuff every Monday and I leave it up to him. When I have goalie questions I go to him, and you should too! Briefly though, expect Lundqvist's totals to dip because of the aforementioned change in team playing style. Nothing drastic though.