(They say a picture is worth a thousand words... but to Blackhawks owner Rocky Wirtz, the above one is worth about 1.3 million)

Congratulations on winning the 2010 Stanley Cup, Chicago. Now, welcome to cap hell! The Blackhawks have almost $58 million committed to 14 players for 2010-11. The current salary cap ($56.8 million) is expected to rise by $2 million this summer, but that still leaves GM Stan Bowman approximately $1 million to sign eight players.

On the surface, it appears like Chicago might be completely screwed for 2010-11 and beyond. Their core (Duncan Keith, Brent Seabrook, Jonathan Toews, Patrick Kane, and Marian Hossa) is locked up to long-term deals aside from Seabrook, and all five will be wearing Blackhawk sweaters for a long time. However, their impressive depth is in jeopardy this summer. Can Chicago find a way to keep this team together? Probably not, but their situation may not be as bad as it has been made out to be...

Keep in mind that I am making a number of assumptions with my off-season plan for Chicago.

If Stan Bowman follows this simple five-step process, he should expect another deep playoff run in the spring of 2011. It was reported today that Jonathan Toews received a $1.3 million bonus for winning the Conn Smythe, and that bonus will count against the 2010-11 cap for Chicago. That complicates things a bit more.

1. Bury/trade Cristobal Huet.

This is the most obvious and logical move for Chicago to make. A $5.6 million goalie riding the bus in the AHL may keep Rocky Wirtz awake at night, but he will have the comfort and protection of at least one Stanley Cup ring beside him. Huet has two years left on his current deal, and is virtually untradeable. Chicago could package him up with some great players/picks/prospects in a salary dump move if they are unwilling to bite the bullet and demote him.

Fantasy impact: Corey Crawford should get the promotion to back up Antti Niemi in 2010-11. Crawford had the inside track at the back up position last fall behind Huet, but he lost out to Niemi in training camp. Chicago may also dip into the free agent market for a more experienced depth goalie, but a Crawford/Niemi tandem will be cheap and should be effective. Niemi probably won't start more than 55 or 60 games, so Crawford will have some fantasy value.

2. Trade Kris Versteeg.

Versteeg is a fantastic second line scoring winger. He is crafty, fast, and confident with the puck. However, his $3 million cap hit will be too rich for Chicago's blood in 2010-11. The Hawks would prefer to keep Dustin Byfuglien ($3 million) and the versatile Patrick Sharp ($3.9 million) over Versteeg. He could fetch a nice prospect and/or draft pick in a trade.

Fantasy impact: Versteeg's position in the top nine would probably be replaced internally. The best bet to step up is bruising winger Kyle Beach. Beach led the WHL in scoring in 2009-10, and he plays with more edge than a Gillete Fusion razor. Neither Bryan Bickell nor Jack Skille has Beach's offensive upside. Beach could emerge as a Calder candidate if he earns a spot on the top line (20-25 goals, 50-55 points, and a lot of penalty minutes). More realistically, expect 12-15 goals and 200+ PIM if he makes the team in more of a depth role.

3. Don’t re-sign John Madden

Madden was a great veteran presence for the young Hawks, but he has seen better days and the Hawks can spend his $2.75 million cap hit more wisely.

Fantasy impact: Little to none. Expect someone like Jake Dowell or Bryan Bickell (league minimum salary) to replace Madden on the fourth line.

4. Trade Brent Sopel

Sopel had a fantastic playoff run for the Blackhawks. He was an afterthought for most of the season, but emerged as a very reliable top-four/five blue liner from the outset of the playoffs during the Nashville series. He battles hard and is solid in the defensive zone. There will be a market for a steady, reliable defenseman making $2.2 million. Chicago would love to keep him but they need to pinch more than a few pennies this summer.

Fantasy impact: Depends who Chicago brings in. They could call up young defenseman Brian Connelly from Rockford (AHL). Connelly had 35 points in 78 games for the IceHogs last season. He is undersized at 5'11" and 175 lbs, but he is a good skater and plays a very smart game. They may opt for more of a veteran presence and sign a free agent (perhaps Nick Boynton returns).

5. Trade Andrew Ladd's rights

Ladd had a strong playoff run and emerged as a solid third line banging winger. He skates well, hits hard, and has a very good shot. He is a restricted free agent this summer and will be looking for at least $2.5 million/season. Like Versteeg, the Hawks could fetch a solid prospect and/or draft pick for Ladd.

Fantasy impact: Ladd's most logical replacement is Jack Skille. Skille hasn't developed offensively like Chicago had hoped when they selected him 7th overall in 2005, but he has good size and is strong at both ends of the ice. He has upside to be a 20 goal scorer if put in the right situation, but expect him to be skating in more of a depth role next season. A trade out of Chicago will benefit Ladd, as he will probably fit in on the second line somewhere else. He didn't see much power play time with Chicago, but he could score 25 goals in a more offensive situation.

Using those five steps, the following roster could be assembled:

Forwards			
Dustin Byfuglien	$3 million	Jonathan Toews	$6.3 million
Tomas Kopecky	$1.2 million	Patrick Sharp	$3.9 million
Kyle Beach	$1.2 million	Dave Bolland	$3.375 million
Troy Brouwer	$1.025 million	Adam Burish	$.900 million
Defensemen			
Duncan Keith	$5.54 million	Brent Seabrook	$3.5 million
Niklas Hjalmarsson	$3 million	Brian Campbell	$7.1 million

Jordan Hendry	$0.65 million	Nick Boynton	$1.0 million

Goalies

Antti Niemi	$2.5 million

Corey Crawford	$0.800 million

Without the $1.3 million bonus owed to Jonathan Toews, that roster would place Chicago about $35,000 below the $58.8 million proposed salary cap for 2010-11. However, factoring in the bonus, it is obvious more cost cutting must be done.

Adam Burish could be jettisoned for an even cheaper fourth line center. That saves about

$400,000. A cheaper sixth defenseman could be signed or called up from Rockford. That saves another $500,000. Tomas Kopecky could be dealt for a pick. Kopecky was a very effective player for Chicago down the stretch and throughout the playoffs. However, he isn't going to be the difference between winning and losing. That would save another $500,000, which should open up enough space. That leaves Chicago with the following roster:

Forwards			
Dustin Byfuglien	$3 million	Jonathan Toews	$6.3 million
Kyle Beach	$1.2 million	Patrick Sharp	$3.9 million
Troy Brouwer	$1.025 million	Dave Bolland	$3.375 million
LW	$0.500 million	C	$0.500 million
Defensemen			
Duncan Keith	$5.54 million	Brent Seabrook	$3.5 million

Niklas Hjalmarsson	$3 million	Brian Campbell	$7.1 million
Jordan Hendry	$0.65 million	D	$0.500 million
Goalies			
Antti Niemi	$2.5 million		
Corey Crawford	$0.800 million		

Conspiracy theorists – does Bettman want to see the Blackhawks fail? I am being facetious of course, but the choice of Toews over Keith for the Conn Smythe was baffling (and now very costly for Chicago). Toews had 14 even strength points in the playoffs, only two more than Keith. Toews scored only twice at even strength, and was goalless and minus-6 during the Cup Final. Keith averaged over 28 minutes of ice time per game during the playoffs.

How will Stan Bowman navigate through difficult waters this summer? Weigh in with your thoughts!