

Where Will Jay-Bo Go?

Written by Jeff Angus

Friday, 05 June 2009 05:41 - Last Updated Saturday, 06 June 2009 06:24



The most sought after free agent this summer is far and away Jay Bouwmeester. He is the new-age UFA. Only 25 years old (he doesn't turn 26 until September), Bouwmeester is just starting to scratch his potential, and he already is one of the most dominant two-way defensemen in the league. Where will he end up next season?

The Florida Panthers took a big risk when they decided not to move Bouwmeester at the 2009 trade deadline. He was highly sought after by a number of teams, and the Panthers could have fetched a pick, a blue-chip prospect, and a roster defenseman in return. Hindsight is always 20/20, and at the time the Panthers were in playoff contention and management needed to make a statement to both their fans and players that they were serious about winning. Bouwmeester (and the Panthers) fizzled down the stretch run, and once again they finished on the outside of the Eastern Conference playoffs.

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Bouwmeester is a game-changing player. He is big, fast, physical, and can shoot and pass equally well. He is not without his faults, however. He has never recorded a point at the pro level in the post-season (he played 18 games for Chicago of the AHL during the lockout and went pointless, and has yet to see the playoffs in the NHL). He has averaged just under 42 points in his last four seasons, but he has the offensive game to be closer to 50 or 60. He was hyped as the next Paul Coffey out of junior because of his fluid skating ability, but he has developed into more of a two-way defenseman with a physical edge. Even with his lack of success at the NHL level, Bouwmeester is going to command top dollar. Even with the economic uncertainty and how it will effect the salary cap, Bouwmeester will probably see close to \$6 or \$7 million on a long-term contract. But with what team?

The Contenders:

Philadelphia Flyers. The latest news that the Flyers are targetting Ray Emery confirms their interest in adding a top level defenseman. They don't have the cap to get a high-level goalie and a defenseman, and Emery will come in at a very low price (if he does end up signing). The Flyers also have some bad - but movable - contracts (Randy Jones, Joffrey Lupul) that they can deal to free up additional space. Bouwmeester's rights may be dealt at the draft, and the Flyers have already gone this route in the past when they added Kimmo Timonen and Scott Hartnell two years ago, prior to July 1st.

Toronto Maple Leafs. The Leafs would love to add a player like Bouwmeester to build around, but he may be more attracted by a contender, and the Leafs are at least a year or two away from being that. They also already have some big money committed to their back end, so unless some contracts are moved out, it may be tough to justify bringing in a Bouwmeester-type of defenseman.

Edmonton, Vancouver, and Calgary. Bouwmeester is rumored to want to play in Western Canada, which immediately brings all three teams into contention for his services. However, all three have different issues that may make bringing in Bouwmeester difficult. Edmonton is very cap-heavy at defense (Visnovsky and Souray are both making close to \$6 million, Tom Gilbert checks in around \$4 million, Steve Staios makes \$2.7 million, and they need to re-sign Denis Grebeshkov as well). The Flames are extremely tight against the cap, and they have already essentially replaced Mike Cammalleri with Olli Jokinen up front. They could definitely use the help on the back end, and don't underate the craftiness of GM Darryl Sutter. The Canucks need some mobility on the back end, and they have the most cap space of the three teams. However, they still need to re-sign the Sedin twins, and they would also like to lock up both Roberto Luongo and Ryan Kesler to long-term extensions this summer.

There are many other teams with lots of cap space and a glaring need for a top-flight defenseman (Columbus and Atlanta, to name two), but other issues (ownership-related) cloud those situations a bit. There are also a few darkhorse teams (Minnesota, Colorado, Dallas) that may want to make a splash at free agency to shake things up. And finally, there are those teams with little cap space that will clear some money to bring in Bouwmeester (San Jose and Washington, to name a few). I personally see Bouwmeester ending up in Philadelphia, but the Flyers will have to move lots of money out in order to accomidate the move.