

2010 Trade Deadline Preview - Leafs Leaving Town?

Written by Jeff Angus

Tuesday, 26 January 2010 17:14 - Last Updated Tuesday, 26 January 2010 22:48



Brian Burke told reporters over the past weekend that making the playoffs this season is still his priority.

The Leafs have the 28th most wins in the NHL with 17. Their average offence (2.60 goals per game has them sitting in 18th) is completely overshadowed by an abysmal 3.40 goals against. Heading in to the season, the defence that Burke constructed was supposed to be among the stingiest in the league. However, due in large part to a combination of abysmal goaltending and an unfathomably bad penalty kill, the Leafs simply can't keep the puck out of their own net.

Sure, we believe you Brian.

Burke's most valuable trading asset (aside from the 2012 1st round pick) is **Tomas Kaberle**. However, Burke claims he won't pressure Kaberle to waive his no trade clause, and Kaberle has emphatically stated that he does not want to leave Toronto. However, if the Leafs miss the playoffs this year, Kaberle's no trade clause becomes void and they are free to move him in the summer.

After Kaberle, the Leafs have a number of decent players who will undoubtedly be made available at the deadline. Alexei Ponikarovsky, Matt Stajan, and Lee Stempniak are all impending unrestricted free agents. Jamal Mayers, Wayne Primeau, and Rickard Wallin are as well, but the Leafs would be lucky to get a mid round pick for any of them. The only free agents on defence are Mike Van Ryn, and Garnet Exelby. Van Ryn, who is currently on the mend from

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a serious knee operation, may never be a solid NHL defenseman again, and Exelby has never even been one. Vesa Toskala is a free agent, and his value is around nothing at best. The Leafs may get creative and move him out to make room for an overpaid, underperforming goalie (JS Giguere, for example), but a salary dump is probably the only reason any other NHL club would take Vesa on at this point.

Alexei Ponikarovsky is a solid top six forward who will be coveted by a number teams on deadline day. He plays a simple game and is willing to go to the dirty areas to get his goals. He is on pace for 28 goals and 210 shots on goal. Contending teams that need a top six forward include Pittsburgh and Colorado. The Leafs are hoping that Ponikarovsky is able to fetch them a 1st round pick, but considering that Nik Antropov only went for a 2nd last year, that line of thinking is probably on the overly optimistic side. Look for the Leafs to deal Ponikarovsky for a 2nd round pick and a solid prospect. Pittsburgh would be a great fit, and Ponikarovsky's fantasy value would obviously shoot up drastically playing with either Sidney Crosby or Evgeni Malkin.

Like Ponikarovsky, **Matt Stajan** is a solid top six forward. He is dependable defensively, and is starting to blossom offensively as well. He is on pace for 23 goals and 59 points, although those numbers a bit inflated as he is playing a bigger role on Toronto than he would on most other teams. Still, he has taken advantage of extra ice time and that deserves some praise. Teams looking for a steady 2nd or 3rd line center will have interest in Stajan, but his value won't be much higher than a 2nd round pick.

The St. Louis Blues sold high on **Lee Stempniak** when they dealt him to the Leafs early last season, after recognizing that his 27 goal season in 2006-07 was probably a bit of an anomaly. Since posting career totals that season, Stempniak has only 40 goals in 208 games split between St. Louis and Toronto (approximately a 16 goal pace over 82 games). Stempniak doesn't contribute much else when he isn't producing. He has been playing the point on the Leafs power play at times, but that is more of a reflection of Toronto's lack of skill. If he gets moved, expect the Leafs to get a 3rd or 4th round pick in return.

The Leafs and Burke are in a tough situation. A rebuild makes obvious sense, but any selling

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done at the deadline will only worsen the sting of not owning their 2010 1st round pick. Additionally, the Leafs have lots of salary committed to players that have little-to-no trade value. Leafs fans shouldn't get their hopes up for an impressive haul on deadline day. A few new draft picks, some decent new prospects, and a lot of Brian Burke interviews would be a reasonable and logical outcome to expect.

Toronto would be able to fetch a decent return for **Ian White**, but speculation around Toronto is that the team would like to lock White up long term. He has been the most consistent Leaf all season at both ends of the ice. White's rapid development from press box fodder (Ron Wilson healthy scratched him numerous times early on last season) to arguably the team MVP this season has been nothing short of amazing.

As I wrote in a [recent article](#) , keep an eye on Viktor Stalberg, Christian Hanson, and Tyler Bozak after deadline day. The Leafs will have some open roster spots up front and will want to evaluate their young talent as they head towards another summer of rebuilding.