

Free Agents to Watch - Part I

Written by Jeff Angus

Wednesday, 16 June 2010 20:51 - Last Updated Thursday, 17 June 2010 16:39



There are big fish in the NHL free agent pond every summer. In 2008, the Chicago Blackhawks made Brian Campbell a \$7 million man. That same year, the Rangers shelled out \$39 million for Wade Redden. The Bruins gave the one-dimensional Michael Ryder \$4 million per for three years. In 2009, Chicago gave Marian Hossa a career contract worth over \$5 million per season. The Rangers took a major risk when they gave Marian Gaborik \$7.5 million per season.

What is the point I am trying to make? With the top end free agents, it is almost impossible to get a bargain of a contract. Hossa's friendly cap hit exists only because of some fancy manoeuvring. Gaborik performed about as well as anyone could've expected in 2009-10, and I'd wager 99% of Ranger fans would give him the deal all over again if given the choice. However, \$7.5 million is at best fair value for the Slovakian sniper. Additionally, the first three players I mentioned have all become incredible salary cap burdens. Campbell's cap hit is one of the reasons Chicago is going to lose a few great players this summer. Wade Redden is barely an NHL defenseman at this point, and Michael Ryder will continue to burn a hole in the wallet of Jeremy Jacobs for another year.

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The real value with free agents comes from the unsung players. Mikael Samuelsson was nothing more than a depth forward on Detroit, but the Canucks believed he had more to give when they gave him \$2.5 million per season last summer. He proved them correct by scoring 30 goals. Colorado decided to take a chance on the unproven Craig Anderson, and he was one of the best (and at under \$2 million per season most efficient) goalies in the entire league this past season. Read on to find out about three lesser known free agents, and what may be in store for them in 2010-11.

Dan Hamhuis – Defence

Why?

Hamhuis is a great skater, he moves the puck effectively, and he has a solid shot from the point. So why have his offensive totals declined since peaking in 2005-06? Looking at the numbers below, the culprit is obvious – power play time. In Nashville, he has been stuck behind Shea Weber and Ryan Suter for the past few seasons. This past season, the emergence of Cody Franson on the power play cut his man advantage ice time to less than 30 seconds per game. Hamhuis is a terrific two-way defenseman, but he is particularly strong in the defensive zone. Because of this relative strength, he has been placed in almost a purely defensive/shutdown role by Nashville coach Barry Trotz.

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Season	GP	G	A	P	TOI	PP TOI	SH T
2009-10	78			5		19	
2008-09	82			3		23	
2005-06	82			7		31	

He bears watching if he goes to a team willing to give him two or three minutes per game on the power play. I listed five of the most likely places he could wind up, and of them Los Angeles would give him the best chance to benefit. The Kings are looking for a capable defenseman to partner up with Drew Doughty on the top unit. Jack Johnson is too raw, and Rob Scuderi's style of play isn't conducive to playing 22-25 minutes per night (he doesn't generate enough offensively and hampers the breakout). With respectable power play time and a defenseman like Doughty as his partner, Hamhuis could set career numbers across the board in 2010-11.

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Potential Destinations:

Vancouver, Los Angeles, San Jose, Dallas, and New Jersey.

Kyle Wellwood – Center

Why?

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Wellwood's evolution as a player over the past two seasons has been nothing short of remarkable. Cast aside by the Leafs for being too lazy, soft, and offensively one-dimensional, he has reinvented himself as a responsible, hard-working defensive center capable of chipping in with 15 goals per season. He probably won't be back in Vancouver next year, as the writing is on the wall with Henrik Sedin and Ryan Kesler ahead of him on the depth chart and Cody Hodgson looking like the top candidate to center the third line. Wellwood is still undervalued by fans because he isn't the prototypical "checking" centre. He is small, not fast (although he is a very deceptive skater), not gritty, and not physical. However, he is one of the smartest players – with and without the puck – I have ever seen. He rarely panics, he puts the puck in great spots, and he always helps out his defensemen bring the puck out of the zone.

His production has dropped over the past two seasons with Vancouver because of ice time, a change in role, and quality of linemates. Last season, his three most frequent wingers were Tanner Glass (four goals), Steve Bernier (11 goals), and Jannik Hansen (nine goals).

Season	GP	G	A	P	TOI	PP TOI	SH T
2009-10	75	14			11		
2008-09	74	18			9		

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2006-07*

82

21

51

*Wellwood's 2006-07 numbers are prorated over a full 82 game schedule.

I hope there is at least one team out there that has done their research and is willing to give Wellwood consistent second line minutes. Washington seems like a perfect fit for him – they have big wingers like Brooks Laich on the second unit, they play a puck possession game, and Bruce Boudreau encourages creativity with the puck.

Potential Destinations: Washington, Minnesota, Anaheim, Phoenix, New York.

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Joe Corvo – Defence

Why?

After being acquired at the 2008 trade deadline by Carolina, Corvo finished the season with seven goals and 21 points in his final 23 games (a 25-goal, 75-point pace). He had a solid 2008-09 season with the Hurricanes, scoring 14 goals and adding 24 assists. Many were expecting Corvo to take the next step and develop into one of the league's best offensive defensemen, but he didn't improve as much as many had hoped. Last season was a disaster for him, as he battled injuries and finished with a very disappointing six goals and 18 points in 52 games, split between Carolina and Washington. Because of his forgettable 2009-10, Corvo is flying well under the radar right now in fantasy hockey circles. Provided he gets signed by a team with realistic expectations (subpar defensive play with a strong power play presence), Corvo could return to the 45-50 point mark in 2010-11.

Season	GP	G	A	P	+/-	TOI
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PP

2009-10

52

6

12

25:13 C

19:40 W

4:38 C

1:30 W

99

2008-09

81

14

24

2007-08

74

13

35

20:46 C

17:41 O

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5:56 C

3:39 O

167

*C = Carolina, W = Washington, O = Ottawa

Potential Destinations: Pittsburgh, New Jersey, Buffalo, Florida, and Phoenix.