

Offseason Musings - Part I

Written by Jeff Angus

Sunday, 04 July 2010 15:45 - Last Updated Monday, 05 July 2010 11:26



July 1st has come and gone, and for the most part there were no major surprises. The high-end defensemen were all signed very quickly, and all for reasonable cap hits considering that overpayment is usually a necessary aspect of dipping into the free agent market.

There are several players who will likely end up on different teams for the 2010-11 season still out there – Ilya Kovalchuk, Tomas Kaberle, Kevin Bieksa, Simon Gagne, Marc Savard, and potentially even Bobby Ryan. There are also a few interesting young players that I want to talk a bit about in more detail.

I'll go into a bit of depth on a fantasy issue or two pertaining to each of the 30 NHL clubs.

Anaheim

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It is too bad for Leaf fans that Toronto decided to pursue **Phil Kessel** so hard last summer, as they would probably be able to acquire

Bobby Ryan

for the exact same price (two 1

st

round picks and a 2

nd

round pick) right now. In my humble opinion, Ryan is a superior player in all facets of the game, outside of skating speed and shooting accuracy. The Ducks better make sure they receive a king's ransom in return for Ryan, who has the potential to be even more offensively dynamic than

Corey Perry

and

Ryan Getzlaf

.

It is unclear whether or not the differences between the Ducks and Ryan are reconcilable or not, but it isn't looking good.

Atlanta

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Look for **Niclas Bergfors** to have a breakout campaign with the Thrashers. He is their best offensive winger at the moment, and will have a spot on the top line alongside

Nik Antropov

and

Bryan Little.

The Thrashers have acquired skill and size up front with the acquisitions of

Dustin Byfuglien

, Andrew Ladd, and

Patrice Cormier

. Add those three in with the towering Antropov and the emerging star

Evander Kane

, and things are looking bright up front for the Thrashers. Don't be surprised to see Bergfors approach the 35 goal mark for the Thrashers in 2010-11 – just a hunch.

Boston

The Bruins are far from done in terms of player transactions. They have to clear some cap space to ice a full roster, and winger **Blake Wheeler** still needs a new contract. **Marc Savard** has quietly requested a trade, and the impact of a potential deal on

David Krejci, Patrice Bergeron,

and Tyler Seguin is substantial. With no Savard, Krejci becomes the top line center in Boston (at least from an offensive standpoint). He probably jumps back up to the 70-point mark. Seguin is an interesting case as well. There are some who feel he isn't NHL ready, but the Bruins are already pencilling him in as their third line center. If the team can't move Savard, there obviously won't be room for Seguin in the top nine, unless he is moved to the wing.

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Buffalo

Nik Zherdev wants to return to the NHL, and there was a rumor last week that he was being pursued by a Northeast Division team. Buffalo makes a lot of sense – they have the cap space to sign Zherdev, as well as a spot in their top six up front for him to earn. Puck Daddy's Dmitri Chesnokov [speculates](#) that the team interested in Zherdev is Boston, but they have some cap constraints that would make signing him very difficult. Zherdev plays the right side and would be a logical fit with **Thomas Vanek** and **De**
rek Roy
on the top line. This would allow
Tyler Ennis,
Tim Connolly
, and
Jason Pominville
to skate together on the second line. The Sabres may even toy with the idea of Ennis centering the third line with
Tim Kennedy.

Calgary

The **Olli Jokinen** signing makes a bit more sense with news that **Daymond Langkow's** recovery from a late-season neck injury is way behind schedule. Darryl Sutter wants to stick Jokinen on a line with
Jarome Iginla
, obviously because it worked out so well last season. It is tough to get an idea of how Calgary's scoring lines will shake out, but one player who should have a great season is defenseman

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Mark Giordano

. The smooth-skating offensive blue liner had a breakout campaign in 2009-10 with 11 goals and 30 points. With a better power play in Calgary, he should see his point total rise above 40 and approach 45.

Carolina

The youth movement is officially underway in Carolina. **Jamie McBain** and **Bobby Sanguinetti**, who are both 22 (and born four days apart), will both factor in to the top six on the back end. McBain is going to get most of the attention, but Sanguinetti has been very successful at the AHL level with very little fanfare. Up front,

Zach Boychuk

is being pencilled in on the top unit with Jussi Jokinen and Eric Staal. He should content for the Calder Trophy if he is able to stick in that spot for most of the season.

Brandon Sutter

had a strong rookie season and reminds me of

Travis Zajac

– lanky, solid skater, smart defensively, and underrated offensively. He has 75-point upside in a couple of seasons.

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Chicago

As most expected heading in to the 2010 offseason, the Blackhawks have lost numerous key players due to the salary cap. **Kris Versteeg**, **Andrew Ladd**, and **Dustin Byfuglien** made up 1/3 of Chicago's top nine forwards in 2009-10, and all three will have to be replaced internally moving forward. There are two tremendous opportunities available on the top two lines – one on the left side with

Patrick

Kane

and

Jonathan Toews

, and the other on the left side with

Patrick Sharp

and

Marian Hossa.

At the moment, the favourites for the two open spots are

Troy Brouwer

and the newly-acquired Viktor

Stalberg

, respectively. Brouwer is a big body who shoots the puck well – he could score 30 with Kane and Toews dishing him the puck. Stalberg is big and incredibly fast, but he doesn't have great hands. However, he size and speed will open up a lot of space for his linemates. The wildcard is

Kyle Beach

, Chicago's star prospect who is one part Steve Downie and one part Brendan Shanahan. He has 40-goal upside.

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Colorado

Everyone is well aware of the young talent in Colorado. Led by **Matt Duchene, Paul Stastny, Chris Stewart,**

and

Peter Mueller,

the Avs boast one of the most impressive collections of young forwards in the entire league.

However, since you read DobberHockey, this is far from new information. I am sure many of you are well aware of big winger

David Jones

, as well. For those who aren't, here is a brief rundown. Jones played three years for Dartmouth College, scoring 17, 18, and 14 goals respectively during his career there. Since turning pro, his offensive development has been stalled by a slew of injuries. Last season he got off to a terrific start with 10 goals through 23 games, but a torn ACL sidelined him for the rest of the season.

There were some rumors that Colorado would try and add a winger or two during free agency, but those didn't come to fruition (at least not yet). Great news for Jones, as he now has a very good shot at earning a spot on a line with either Duchene or Stastny as his center. If Jones can stay healthy, don't be surprised with a 20-25-goal breakout campaign. He doesn't do anything extremely well, but is very good at many things (a lot like Stastny).

Columbus

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Who will be the power play quarterback in Columbus for the next few years – **Anton Stralman**, **Kris Russell**, or player-to-be-acquired?

John Moore

will probably fill the role down the road, but he isn't ready for top power play duties yet. The Jackets are rumoured to be interested in Vancouver blue liner

Kevin Bieksa

, as they like the fact that he shoots right and is a solid power play defenseman. Keep an eye on who Columbus slots in on the top unit – they have a ton of young talent ready to break out up front, and playing on the top unit with the likes of

Rick Nash

,

Derick Brassard

, and

Kristian Huselius

probably means another 10 or 15 points. Stralman is better offensively than Russell, and he had 34 points in 73 games last season for Columbus. If Columbus decides he is their quarterback, look for him to break the 40-point mark in 2010-11.

Dallas

Like Columbus, the Stars are in dire need of a power play quarterback. They gambled that **Matt Niskanen**

was ready for the responsibly this past season, and he failed miserably in the role. Niskanen is a good skater and sees the ice very well, but he is weak physically and still too much of a liability without the puck to play in a top-four role. The Stars are said to be shopping

Mike Ribeiro,

who has three years left at \$5 million per on his current contract. For some reason many hockey writers and members of the media think Ribeiro is overpaid. Have these people bothered to watch him after the trade from Montreal? Ribeiro plays hard and is incredibly skilled with the

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puck. He'd be the first line center on at least 10 teams in the league, and makes for an ideal second center on a contending team. Dallas is hoping to dangle him for a puck mover or it is back to the Niskanen experiment again.

Detroit

Jiri Hudler is returning, and Detroit fans couldn't be happier. The Red Wings struggled to find scoring last season beyond the top players. Hudler had a phenomenal season in the KHL with 54 points in 54 games for Moscow Dynamo. Look for him to bump **Dan Cleary** and Todd

Bertuzzi

out of the top six. Hudler had 57 points with the Red Wings in 2008-09, and he should be primed to fly past that number in 2010-11. Detroit especially missed his creativity, puck poise, and vision on the power play. After

Pavel Datsyuk

, Hudler is probably the most creative and skilled Red Wing with the puck.

Edmonton

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The Oilers will have a very different group up front in 2010-11 compared to this past season. Gone are **Ethan Moreau, Fernando Pisani, Robert Nilsson**, and **Marc Pouliot**. The returning **Ales**

Hemsky will be joined by a trio of blue chip prospects –

Taylor Hall, Jordan Eberle

, and

Magnus Paajarvi-Svensson.

The Oilers will probably try to spread out the offense (and inexperience) on three lines, with **Sam Gagner, Shawn Horcoff**

, and

Andrew Cogliano

centering. Gagner is the odds-on favourite to center the top line (with Dustin Penner and Hemsky in all likelihood), but he has been pushed to the wayside by Edmonton's other young talents. Gagner, only one year older than Eberle, has already played three full seasons at the NHL level. He recorded 49 points in his rookie year, but has only managed 41 in each of the past two seasons. The fact that he has played on some miserable teams needs to be factored in. He is an incredibly smart player and sees the ice very well. With so much talent coming up through the ranks on the wing, he is probably being undervalued in fantasy hockey circles right now. It won't last long, so try and acquire him before the 2010-11 season kicks off.

Florida

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Are **Dmitri Kulikov-Sergei Gonchar** comparisons realistic? Let's take a look. Gonchar was picked 14th overall in 2009. Gonchar played two seasons in Russia and half of the 1994-95 season in the AHL. He recorded two goals and give assists in 31 games with the Capitals during 1994-95 as a 22 year old. Kulikov, who doesn't even turn 20 until October, had three goals and 13 assists in 68 games for the Panthers last year. In addition to both being Russian (I hate comparisons that are only based on place of birth), Kulikov has reminded many of a young Gonchar because of the way he skates, shoots, and moves the puck.

Gonchar had 15 goals and 41 points in 1995-96, his first full season in the NHL. Kulikov isn't a 40-point defenseman right now, but he is also a few years behind Gonchar in terms of development. I wouldn't be surprised to see the young Russian approach 10 goals and 30 points in 2010-11. His long-term upside is sky high – 15-20 goals, 55-65 points. Kulikov is a game breaker that flew far under the radar in Florida last season.

Los Angeles

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Do the Los Angeles Kings really need **Ilya Kovalchuk**? They have yet to find a perfect fit for **Anze Kopitar**. **Ryan Smyth**

has looked very good at times, but he struggles to keep up with the big Slovenian in open ice.

Dustin Brown

and Kopitar have absolutely no chemistry, and Justin Williams is about three steps behind the play after two knee surgeries. Los Angeles may need Kovalchuk for off-ice reasons (draw excitement, sell tickets), but from an on-ice perspective, they don't. They are on the right track in terms of progressing as an organization, and would probably be best served by aiming lower for someone like

Simon Gagne.

Back to Kopitar, who is on the verge of 90+ points. He is a good playmaker, but is even better as a goal scorer. He loves to have the puck on his stick and make plays bringing it in to the zone. Kovalchuk does as well. I am not going to argue that Kopitar is better off without Kovalchuk, but I could see diminishing returns creeping in if the two were paired together.

Minnesota

The signing of **Matt Cullen** will push one of **Brent Burns** or **Marek Zidlicky** to the second power play unit. Minnesota is extremely thin up front, and subsequently there is a significant

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talent drop-off from the first to second power play unit. Cullen likes to play the point and distribute the puck. Zidlicky is probably the favourite to play the top unit – he has a huge shot and hits the net with it. Burns is a more dynamic skater but he sometimes tries to do too much with the puck. Zidlicky as consistent as it gets – his past three point totals are 43, 42, and 43. Look for him to hit the 45 point mark in 2010-11.