

Offseason Game Plan - Ottawa

Written by Tim Lucarelli

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Over the next couple of months, I will be taking a closer look at each of the Eastern Conference teams to show what their current status is and where their offseason focus lies. Knowing a team's strategy should provide extra assistance in any offseason trading or keeper decisions. This week I'll take a look at the Ottawa Senators.

As a reference, I'll add each of the teams I've covered here at the top in case you'd like to look at some of the other game plans.

[Boston Bruins](#)

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New York Rangers

UFA: Jesse Winchester, Matt Gilroy, Mark Parrish

RFA: None

Rostered players signed for next season: 20

Available cap space: \$20M

The cap space above (taken from capgeek.com) consists of 12 forwards, six defensemen, and two goaltenders. Of the 12 forwards, only Jason Spezza carries a no-trade clause, and all are signed to one-way contracts. On defense, Erik Karlsson, Sergei Gonchar, and Chris Phillips all have no-trade clauses, while Jared Cowen is still on an entry-level, two-way contract.

At forward, Colin Greening beat out the competition to land a top-line spot with Spezza and Milan Michalek, and that line will be completely intact for the coming year. Bobby Butler was in the mix, but ultimately fell short, and was just recently [bought out](#) of his contract. Kyle Turris will undoubtedly center the second line, and the most likely wingers will be Daniel Alfredsson and Guillaume Latendresse. A year ago, it was Turris, Alfredsson, and Nick Foligno rounding out the second line, but with Foligno shipped off to Columbus, the spot will be penciled in for Latendresse. The problem there is that Latendresse is injury prone, and he will have fierce competition from youngsters such as Mika Zibanejad and Jakob Silfverberg, either of which may be able to beat out Latendresse even if he is healthy. Before taking into account the two youngsters, Ottawa's bottom-six should include some combination of Chris Neil, Peter Regin, Zack Smith, Jim O'Brien, Erik Condra, and Kaspars Daugavins.

Looking at players who are ready to make the jump to the NHL, Zibanejad and Silfverberg are two names that jump out right away. Some others include Stephane Da Costa and Andre Petersson. Zibanejad made the team last year after being selected sixth overall just a couple short months earlier, but after the nine-game mark, Ottawa decided to let him return to Djurgården of the Elitserien to continue his development. Zibanejad performed quite well for his age, scoring 13 points in 26 games, a pace that would have put him third on his team, and expectations are that he will make a strong push for a roster spot this training camp. Silfverberg also skated in the Elitserien last year, but he accomplished slightly more. Silfverberg scored the game winning goal in the Elitserien championship and was named MVP of the league after scoring 54 points in 49 games. Some Ottawa fans will say that if anyone from the Elitserien makes the Senators this year, it will be Silfverberg – and there's a good chance they're right. Silfverberg made the jump to North America last year and joined Ottawa for two playoff games, immediately being used on each of the top two lines. Look for an immediate impact.

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Da Costa split his time between the AHL and NHL last campaign, and with the added competition, it might actually be tougher to earn an NHL roster spot this season than last. Still, Da Costa is one of Binghamton's top performers, as he scored 36 points in 46 games. To put that in perspective, Binghamton's top scorer managed only 49 points in 76 games. With Corey Locke and Butler both out of the picture, Da Costa will at least have more development room in the AHL. Petersson made the jump last year from the Elitserien to North America, and he notched 44 points in 60 games for Binghamton, good enough for second on the team. He is a one-dimensional offensive player, but if he can develop chemistry with one of Silfverberg or Zibanejad, his value could spike pretty quickly. While he is a longshot for an NHL roster spot, he should be good for a cup of coffee or two.

On defense, Ottawa's top four should include Erik Karlsson, Sergei Gonchar, Jared Cowen, and Marc Methot, leaving Mike Lundin and Chris Phillips to round out the bottom pairing. The biggest change from last season is the departure of Filip Kuba and the addition of Methot. Matt Gilroy is still an RFA, and if he is signed, he will have an opportunity to fight for a top-four spot. Kuba's absence should open the door for Cowen to step up as the third-best defenseman from an offensive standpoint, or even overtake Gonchar as the number two behind Karlsson, although he is probably a year or two away from hitting that level of production.

In terms of players that might be ready to make the jump to the NHL, the Senators don't have quite as many options available to them on defense. The two biggest names on the verge include Patrick Wiercioch and Andre Benoit. Wiercioch just wrapped up his second season of professional hockey after spending two years at the University of Denver, where he scored 62 points in 75 games. He has had a hard time replicating that type of offensive success at the professional level though, and may still need some time to truly blossom. Benoit is a 28-year-old defenseman who has gone back and forth between North America and Europe for the past decade or so, but has made some decent accomplishments along the way. He won a Memorial Cup title in Kitchener while skating with guys like Derek Roy and Mike Richards, and he has won two Calder Cups – one in Hamilton and one in Binghamton. He also tallied the most assists among AHL defensemen in postseason play on three different occasions. Last year was another spent in Europe as he skated with Spartak Moskva in the KHL, but this year he is back in North America on a two-way contract with Ottawa. Benoit is a veteran defenseman with experience in just about every league other than the NHL, but with Ottawa's thin blue line he may just finally get an opportunity to stick in the NHL.

In goal, Craig Anderson is the top netminder, but he has had inconsistency issues. When he is on his game, he is undoubtedly a phenomenal fantasy option, especially due to his high number of saves. Ben Bishop is the likely backup though and is going to be pushing Anderson hard for

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his shot. The journey has been long for Bishop, but he is finally beginning to perform at his true potential. Just last season, Bishop was working on a 0.928 save percentage and 2.26 GAA in Peoria when he was traded to Ottawa. He maintained the strong play in Binghamton for three games before making his way up to Ottawa, where he strung together a 2.48 GAA and 0.909 save percentage in 10 games. If Bishop is truly the backup in Ottawa, he could see a big value increase if he can perform well during a time where Anderson falters.

In terms of players ready to step up, the Senators have the highly touted Robin Lehner. Some were rather surprised that Ottawa would acquire Bishop after already having someone of Lehner's stature in the pipeline, but while Lehner performed remarkably in his limited NHL action a year ago, his AHL performance was not quite as pretty and could have been the reason for the Bishop acquisition. As Bishop has more NHL experience and has had more time to develop, he should have the inside track on the backup position in Ottawa, but make no mistake – Lehner has more than enough talent to win that job. The difference between Bishop and Lehner is that if Bishop were to overtake Anderson, it could be short-lived whereas if Lehner were to overtake Anderson, he might never look back.

Biggest holes to fill: None. And they have \$20M cap space at their disposal too.

Priorities: The top priority for Ottawa is to add defensive depth. If Karlsson or Gonchar succumb to injury, the depth is far too thin. Benoit may turn out to be a strong asset if given the chance, but there should be some other options in place as a safeguard. The next priority is simply to trim the fat in their offense. For the past few years, they've had a ton of mediocre talent (Greening, Butler, Regin, Condra, etc.) and rolled the dice that one or two of them would elevate their game. Now they are at the point where they have some players with true potential, and they need the room to develop. Ottawa has already started to weed out some by buying out Butler's contract and watching Corey Locke leave for Europe, but they need to make room for their emerging stars – Turris, Silfverberg, Zibanejad – to truly excel.

Overall the Senators are one of the organizations that have truly put themselves in a better position for the upcoming season. Their offense is stronger and filled with young, emerging talent. That infusion of young talent should translate to more goals and a more balanced offense, ultimately leading to more fantasy assets. Their defense is still a bit thin, but the addition of Methot should help from a defensive standpoint. While Karlsson will have a tough time replicating last season's performance, he is still an amazing player to own and could bump the value of guys like Gonchar and Cowen. Although inconsistency might be an issue at times, their goaltending is strong, as they have three goaltenders who on any given day can shut down the most elite talent in the NHL.

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Got anything to add? Feel free to add your opinion below.