

Free Agent Futures

Written by Russ Miller

Thursday, 29 January 2009 06:58 - Last Updated Thursday, 29 January 2009 11:00



With the trading deadline set to happen in little over one month, many teams may be looking to deal with their various free agents now. Who's in line for a big payday this summer? Who will get traded? Who will get inked to a new deal? Why do they call them "free" agents, when there is nothing free about them?

I'll rate each of the Eastern Conference team's likelihood of becoming buyers, sellers or standing pat at the deadline.

Thrashers – Sellers

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UFA – Mathieu Schneider, Niclas Havelid, Eric Perrin, Marty Reasoner

RFA – Colby Armstrong, Erik Christensen, Boris Valabik, Kari Lehtonen

If Atlanta doesn't retain pending restricted free agents Colby Armstrong or Erik Christensen, then all they have left to show for trading Marian Hossa would be Angelo Esposito and Daultan Leveille, whom they drafted with Pittsburgh's first round pick. I could see both Armstrong and Christensen back in Atlanta next season.

Boris Valabik will be re-signed, but Kari Lehtonen's future is very much in doubt in Atlanta. I say he is gone by the trading deadline, with the Thrashers acquiring a veteran netminder to mentor young Ondrej Pavelec next season. Mathieu Schneider and Niclas Havelid are both unrestricted and are prime candidates to be traded.

Bruins – Buyers

UFA – P.J. Axelsson, Tim Thomas, Manny Fernandez

RFA – Phil Kessel, David Krejci, Matt Hunwick, Matt Lashoff

Phil Kessel and David Krejci chose a great time to have breakout seasons; both will be re-signed by the Bruins. Matt Hunwick has made a case for a nice raise. The Bruins will want to re-sign P.J. Axelsson, who could have a career season at 34-years-old. One of either Tim Thomas or Manny Fernandez will likely be back and split starts with 21-year-old Tuukka Rask next year.

Sabres – Hold

UFA – Maxim Afinogenov, Tim Connolly, Ales Kotalik, Jaroslav Spacek, Teppo Numminen

RFA – Drew Stafford, Clarke MacArthur, Andrej Sekera

Max Afinogenov is most likely gone by deadline day. I could see everyone else happy to come back with the Sabres next season.

Hurricanes – Buyers

UFA – Dennis Seidenberg

RFA – Tuomo Ruutu, Anton Babchuk

Carolina will be fighting for a playoff spot and will likely look for immediate help. The team will have no problem re-signing Tuomo Ruutu as he seems to have fit in quite well and is currently on pace for career highs in goals and points.

Panthers – Hold

UFA – Jay Bouwmeester, Richard Zednik, Radek Dvorak, Ville Peltonen, Craig Anderson, Nick Boynton

RFA – David Booth

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The question on everyone's mind is what is going to happen with Jay Bouwmeester? Rumour has Florida hanging on to JBo if they are in contention for a playoff spot at the deadline. They'll deal with his pending unrestricted free agency following the season. David Booth is another pending free agent having a great season. Craig Anderson is liable to go in search of a better opportunity to be a starter. The return of fellow free agents Zednik, Dvorak, Peltonen and Boynton is up in the air.

Canadiens – Buyers

UFA – Alex Tanguay, Saku Koivu, Alexei Kovalev, Robert Lang, Tom Kostopoulos, Mike Komisarek, Patrice Brisebois, Francis Bouillon

RFA – Chris Higgins, Tomas Plekanec, Guillaume Latendresse, Matt D'Agostini, Kyle Chipchura

The Habs are going for it in their centennial year, but will be the hardest hit team next July. It may have been easier to list the players that are under contract for next season. Deciding which players to sign and which to let go will be a daunting task for Canadiens management. Team chemistry can be hard to gauge.

Devils – Hold

UFA – Brian Gionta, John Madden, Bobby Holik, Brendan Shanahan, Johnny Oduya, Kevin Weekes, Scott Clemmensen

RFA – Travis Zajac, Andy Greene, Anssi Salmela

Travis Zajac is having his best year yet as he heads into restricted free agency. Sensing a theme here? If he can maintain his current pace, he'll record 25 goals and 64 points. Scott Clemmensen has played very well in Brodeur's absence. Will the 31-year-old be content to play back-up or would he prefer to explore other opportunities? I can't imagine John Madden playing anywhere else.

Islanders – Sellers

UFA – Bill Guerin, Doug Weight, Mike Comrie, Mike Sillinger, Thomas Pock, Joey MacDonald

RFA – Jack Hillen, Blake Comeau

Let the yard sale begin. All reasonable offers accepted. Jack Hillen and Blake Comeau will both re-sign without much fanfare. This team is the heavy favourite to finish first in the Tavares sweepstakes.

Rangers – Buyers

UFA – Paul Mara, Dmitri Kalinin, Stephen Valiquette

RFA – Nikolai Zherdev, Brandon Dubinsky, Lauri Korpikoski, Peter Prucha, Nigel Dawes

Perennial deadline day buyers, the Rangers will be burning up the phone lines once again this

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season. I envision all their RFA's except for Prucha sticking around. The Blueshirts need some help defending Lundqvist and there is potential for something big to happen here.

Senators – Sellers

UFA – Filip Kuba, Chris Neil, Martin Gerber, Dean McAmmond

RFA – Brian Elliott

Ottawa could be a big seller if the rumours of trading Jason Spezza come to fruition. The team needs help on the back end and secondary scoring. Brian Elliott seems to be adjusting to NHL life quite well, but he isn't going to lead the Sens to the playoffs this year. The 32-year-old Kuba is on pace for a career high 50 points and will be re-signed if his demands are reasonable.

Flyers – Hold

UFA – Martin Biron, Antero Niittymaki, Mike Knuble

RFA – Scottie Upshall

Philly should be exploring number one goaltending options for next season, but they likely won't. Both Martin Biron and Antero Niittymaki are scheduled to become unrestricted free agents and I don't know if either of them are the answer. The Flyers sit smack dab in the middle in goals against average, which is amongst the worst of all playoff contenders. Mike Knuble will have to sign for cheap if he wants to stay and Scottie Upshall will likely be back as he has found a home on the Flyers.

Penguins – Buyers

UFA – Miroslav Satan, Petr Sykora, Ruslan Fedotenko, Philippe Boucher, Hal Gill, Mathieu Garon

RFA – Alex Goligoski

Pittsburgh pre-empted Jordan Staal's foray into free agency by signing him to a four year deal in early January. Coach Therrien is fighting to keep his job and the Pens playoff hopes alive and can't afford to trust rookie defender Goligoski, but will all the healthy scratches taint contract negotiations this summer?

Lightning – Sellers

UFA – Mark Recchi, Gary Roberts, Chris Gratton, Cory Murphy, Olaf Kolzig

RFA – Jussi Jokinen, Steve Eminger, Lukas Krajicek, Karri Ramo

Tampa Bay should be sellers, but who the hell knows what that group will do? The Lightning are 7-3-0 in their last ten games and if they continue their winning ways, it is possible that they become bargain hunters. Cory Murphy is well on his way to getting another NHL contract offer. Jussi Jokinen would be better served if he was dealt to a team that will give him more ice time.

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Maple Leafs – Sellers

UFA – Nik Antropov, Dominic Moore, Mark Bell, Brad May

RFA – Mikhail Grabovski, Justin Pogge

A big time fire sale seems likely to take place soon in Toronto. Tomas Kaberle and Pavel Kubina have both been rumoured to be on the move. While I'm certain it would change the team dynamics, I'm not convinced that it would necessarily be for the better. The team will have to decide whether Nik Antropov is a part of the future or trade bait. Mikhail Grabovski and Justin Pogge will almost certainly be inked to new deals.

Capitals – Hold

UFA - Sergei Fedorov, Viktor Kozlov, Donald Brashear, Shaone Morrisonn, Brent Johnson

RFA – Milan Jurcina, Sami Lepisto, Eric Fehr

Barring injury, the Caps will likely stand pat at the deadline. They have depth at both forward and defence positions. Jose Theodore is getting hot at the right time. He is having his best month so far this season, but with only one more year remaining on the contract after this year, do the Caps actively look for something better? Probably not. The future is Simeon Varlamov and the future begins next year.