

## Zach Parise's Future in New Jersey

Written by Tim Lucarelli

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Last season, the New Jersey Devils shocked the hockey world when they opened the season with a 10-28-3 record. This was an organization that had won two Stanley Cups in the last 10 years and qualified for postseason contention each of the last 13 seasons. With the almighty Martin Brodeur in goal, the team seemed like a lock for at least one more playoff berth. But Brodeur struggled early on and the lack of team depth was gloriously magnified. While the team had just locked up superstar Ilya Kovalchuk to a contract Rick DiPietro can smile at, the Devils were really missing another key forward – Zach Parise.

Parise has established himself as one of the elite players in the NHL, like many of his 2003 draft counterparts. Aside from his injury-shortened season last year, Parise had averaged 41.5 goals over the previous two seasons and 88 points in the same stretch. He is one of Team USA's top stars and wears the alternate (not assistant) "A" on not only his Devils' but also on his Team USA sweater. His list of awards and achievements go on and on. Yeah, he's good.

The million-dollar question right now in New Jersey though is will they sign Zach Parise? The restricted free agent made \$3.125 million last year and is certainly due for a raise. With a massive contract for Ilya Kovalchuk in the books, the Devils might not be able to afford Parise's

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price tag. Brian Rolston and Patrik Elias eat up \$11 million between the two of them and both carry no-trade-clauses. Rolston's contract meets the 35+ criteria, making his salary set in stone unless they can convince him to waive the NTC and find a trade partner.

Assuming the Devils do figure out a way to clear space and give Parise what he deserves, is Parise even a good fit in New Jersey? Let's look at their depth.

In goal, the Devils are still relying on the 39 year-old Martin Brodeur, who has one year remaining on his contract. He'll likely have a decent season, but this year should be his last. He and backup Hedberg both carry NTC's, so these are the goalies in NJ all year. Depth behind Brodeur is not nearly as good as it could be.

On defense, there are a few up-and-comers like Taormina and Urbomb, but this team is committing over \$16.5 million to Volchenkov (NTC), Tallinder, White (NTC), Greene, and Salvador. The Devils could use a few upgrades here as well, but will be looking much better once Adam Larsson joins the squad.

On offense, Elias has two years remaining on his deal. He led the team last year with 62 points and he should be able to find some more spring in his step before his deal is up at age 37, at which point retirement will definitely be considered. Travis Zajac is locked up for another two years and could potentially take over as the team's top center once Elias leaves or gets injured. He's played much better with Parise than Kovalchuk, but with Kovalchuk locked up for eternity,

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it's clear who will be around longer. Although they have some decent prospects in Josefson, Tedenby, Palmieri, Zharkov, Gionta, and Vasyunov, the Devils don't have a legitimate, established RW that can play now. The forward crew is rounded out by Clarkson, Rolston, Zubrus, Pelley, and Steckel, which is just not good enough.

So in goal, the team is set for now, but has a serious lack of depth for the future. On defense, they have a bunch of average talent, with a handful of promising prospects and one future star (Larsson). At forward, they have a decent amount of talented prospects, mixed with a fair amount of third liners in the active lineup.

After watching the Bruins trade pending RFA Phil Kessel and how the team was able to move on with the pieces obtained in that deal, Devils GM Lou Lamoriello should definitely be looking at moving Parise. Neither Parise nor Kovalchuk want to play on the right wing and it makes little sense to keep two elite left wings when you don't have the right line mates to support. With the Atlantic Division also boasting Brad Richards, Crosby, Malkin, Briere, Giroux, and Tavares, the Devils could really use another legitimate center. With Paul Stastny's name rumored to be available, a Parise-Stastny swap could make both teams very happy, though it's highly unlikely we'll see that deal ever happen.

If the Devils somehow manage to keep Parise, fantasy owners should expect a good season, but not as good as the 88 point average he posted before Kovalchuk arrived. Kovalchuk will likely get all the top minutes at LW and Parise's production should dip slightly. The team also has the aforementioned weakness on the right side, so any legitimate right winger will again play with Kovalchuk. Parise doesn't need a superstar, as he produced extremely well with Langenbrunner previously, but he does need an established player who is responsible at both ends of the ice.

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If Parise does get traded, the odds of him having another Kovalchuk in front of him are extremely low. Whoever lands Parise is going to immediately make him their number one left wing, which should be music to the ears of fantasy owners. While Parise should excel in whichever city he skates, he will likely provide the most dividends in a state other than NJ where he is receiving the ice time a true number one left winger deserves.

With Parise's contract still up in the air, now might be the best time to pry him from one of your GMs. It won't be easy, but it should be easier now than it will be in three months. Even if he ends up a number two LW behind Kovalchuk, he's still better than many of the other options out there.