Where to begin with this year's version of the Florida Panthers?

Only seven wins and 20 points speaks volumes about this season's lack of success. The next worst team has 10 wins. I could mention their Goals For/Goals Against ratio of minus-39, or as I like to call it, Winnipeg in January. By a wide margin, Florida sports the leagues worst goals-against average of 3.72, the next worst are the Islanders sitting at 3.25. This was a team that won their division last season.

In their defence, the team has been beset by lengthy injuries to too many players such as Stephen Weiss
,
Kris Versteeg

, Dmitry Kulikov,
Jose Theodore
,
Mike Weaver
,
Scottie Upshall
and Team Captain
Ed Jovanovski
.

An optimist would argue that finishing at the bottom of the standings this season is the best thing that could happen to the team. I would tend to agree with that sentiment as it would allow Florida to grab one of Seth Jones, Jonathan Drouin or Nathan MacKinnon, regardless of the lottery outcome. Adding one of those players would be huge when you consider the quality of the young Panthers core already on the team or in the system:

Literally leading the way is their top scorer Jonathan Huberdeau . The 19-year-old has 12 goals and 18 points in 29 games. In 2010-11, he was the QMJHL Playoff MVP with 16 goals and 30 points in 19 games. That year, he was also named Memorial Cup MVP. In his final junior season, he scored 30 goals and 72 points and led the league in plus/minus with an insane plus-53 in only 37 games. Huberdeau should be in the conversation for rookie of the year.

Drew Shore has been a pleasant surprise for the Panthers this year. Many expected fellow big body Nick Bjugstad to make a splash before Shore. Shore has 11 points in 27 NHL games and had 30 points in 41 AHL games this season. He has earned increased ice time and hasn't looked out of place in the NHL at all. The 22-year-old was taken in the 2009 entry draft with the 44th overall selection.

Peter Mueller has lined up beside Huberdeau and Shore for the vast majority of his season to date. He also gets the fifth most power play ice time on the team. Only 24-years-old, many people forget that he recorded a 22 goal, 54 point rookie season back in 2007-08 with Phoenix. A huge red flag has to be that he missed the entire 2010-11 campaign to a concussion. Mueller is RFA after this season. The talent is there, but so is the risk as well.

Much more was projected this season from Dmitry Kulikov, but his seven points in 20 games should be attributed to the general malaise that has been the Panthers season thus far. He was

receiving top power play minutes along with Brian Campbell . In his only season in the QMJHL, Kulikov recorded 62 points in 57 games, taking home the leagues Best Defenseman honours. He then jumped directly to the NHL, where he scored 16 points as an 18-year-old. The following season he had 26 points and then 28 points last year in only 58 games, a 40 point pace. He's still so raw and defensemen typically take longer to master their positions in the NHL. The best is yet to come.

One player I have been impressed with when watching Florida games of late has been 25-year-old Shawn Matthias . After starting the season with four points in his first 20 games, he has a point in six of his last nine games. Stephen Weiss has been out for the last seven games and Matthias has really stepped it up. Maybe the most impressive stat is his plus-1 rating on the season, the only positive on the entire team (remember that minus-39 team GF/GA ratio?). In his last year in junior, he did have 32 goals and 79 points in 53 games and he did record four points in seven World Junior Championship contests. It's not unheard of for big players to take a little longer to physically mature and make their mark in the NHL.

The newest Panther is defenseman T.J. Brennan. In his first two seasons as a professional, he had 23 points in 65 games and 39 points in 72 games in the AHL. The interesting part is that his coach was Kevin Dineen, the current bench boss in Florida. Brennan took it up a notch this season in the AHL, recording a massive 14 goals and 35 points in only 36 games prior to his recall with the Sabres and subsequent trade to Florida. He can fulfill the role that Jason Garrison
played on the power play opposite
Brian Campbell
.

Just because Erik Gudbranson was taken third overall in the 2010 entry draft, it doesn't mean you should expect him to produce at the NHL level right away. In 2010-11, he had five points in seven World Junior Championship games and finished his junior season with 34 points in 44 games. He has all the tools to produce at the NHL level, but don't expect it to happen overnight. He's not being placed in an offensive role and won't be for the foreseeable future. Think
Adam Larsson
or
Victor Hedman
with less offensive upside.

The Panthers first round pick from 2010, Quinton Howden may be the next young gun to get

an audition with the big club this season. He has 30 points in 57 AHL games this year. In his last two seasons of junior, he had a combined 70 goals and 144 points in 112 games. A cause for concern however, is that he has sustained a couple of concussions over the past two seasons.

One of the most sought after Panther prospects has been Nick Bjugstad. Last season, he led the WCHA Minnesota Gophers in goal scoring with 25 in 40 games. He also had 42 points. This year, he once again leads the team in goal scoring with 21 goals in 38 games to go along with 36 points. Rumour has it that Vancouver wanted Bjugstad in any potential Luongo deal, but Florida wouldn't part with the big, strong forward.

Alex Petrovic was the WHL's Top Defenseman in 2011-12. He had 48 points in 68 games and the season before that, he was even better offensively with 57 points in 69 games. This is his first full season as a professional and he has 15 points in 43 AHL games. He has been called the "most complete" defenseman in the team's organization (by Asst GM Mike Santos, taken from The Hockey News Future Watch 2012) and is not far away from full-time NHL duty. Temper your enthusiasm though as he likely won't provide fantasy worthy numbers outside of hits and penalty minutes for several years.

With Jose Theodore out for an extended period, the Panthers are throwing top goaltending prospect Jacob Markstrom to the wolves. Florida is a hurting team and it is showing on the scoreboard. The big 23-year-old keeper hasn't shone as brightly as many had expected, but let's take a closer look at the numbers of all the Florida goaltenders this season:

	GP	**W**	**L**	**OTL**	**GAA**	**SV%**
Theodore	15	4	6	3	3.29	0.893
Markstrom	7	1	5	1	3.29	0.891

Clemmensen	13	2	5	2	3.41	0.857

Jose Theodore is a former Hart and Vezina trophy winner, who admittedly is on his last legs in the NHL. Last season, Theodore recorded a 2.46 goals-against average and 0.917 save percentage on this very Panther team. Clemmensen had slightly less flattering numbers when compared to Theodore, 2.57 goals-against average and 0.913 save percentage. Chalk up Markstrom's poor numbers this season partly to a depleted team and partly to bad luck. Don't let your faith waiver on this guy, he will be money in a couple of years when this team is on the upswing.

In addition to the above young talent, Florida has mostly reasonable contracts to a good number of their experienced players. Tomas Fleischmann , Tomas Kopecky , Sean Bergenheim , Scottie Upshall
and
Ed Jovanovski
(okay, he's more than a little long in the tooth and that cap hit doesn't look so good right now). They have valuable vets
Kris Versteeg
and
Brian Campbell
locked up for the next three years.

Pending UFA, Stephen Weiss will likely not be back, but most if not all of these RFA's should return: Shawn Matthias , Peter Mueller , Jack Skille , T.J. Brennan and
Colby Robak
.

The final word about this team has to include the General Manager, Dale Tallon, who had a hand in shaping the Stanley Cup winning Chicago Blackhawks roster. He has done it before and should be able to surround his young stars with the right mix of veterans and leaders that can show them the right way to conduct themselves as professionals.

If you have a chance to grab one of Florida's young guns for a dynasty league team or if you are able to stash them on the farm, now would be the time to do so before they start fulfilling their promise and become endangered species in your leagues.

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