Welcome once again to “An Expert’s Audit”. This audit will also be posted here as well as on my fantasy hockey blog at www.fantasyhockey.hockeyanalysis.com . During the season I also do weekly reviews of teams for people who email in to me for a look-see. These audits will continue to appear here monthly and if you’re interested in having your keeper team “worked over” then you can begin by emailing Dobber about it.

I’ve been emailing back and forth with Paul Miller about his hockey team for going on three seasons now. When I first looked at his league it scared the crap out of me because it seemed so convoluted when you add the salaries and the expiring contracts and stuff like that but once you get your feet wet then it all ain’t so bad. Let me encourage the rest of you to dive right into some in-depth league and have a blast with it. If you’re going into a league like this one then

you should review my last two month's submission to "An Expert's Audit" for a few extra pointers on how to stay afloat in a salary league.

Let's get right to it. Paul plays in a 10-team salary league with 25 man rosters and a reserve roster of minor leaguers and bench options with salary attached. Each team starts 15 forwards (no positional requirement), 7 defensemen, and 3 goalies. You keep 12 guys plus your farm team since they don't count toward your cap until they're actually in the NHL. The league's roto style has for its categories: G, A, +/-, PIM, and Goalie Wins + (2 x shutouts). That lone goalie category makes this league a bit quirky since every starter in the NHL will be starting in this league but there are no ratios to worry about. Goalies who get shutties are GOLD, particularly if you can get up near 40 wins on the season too. The auction salary cap is $250 and the in-season cap is $300.

Paul won this league this past season … by a single roto point. He rode all the way to a championship on the elite goaltending of Roberto Luongo, the stellar goal scoring of Ilya Kovalchuk and the PIMy influence of Chris Pronger. Unfortunately all of those guys' contracts expired and they all go back into the auction. You'll want to go after them again. And yes, you should pay dearly for them. Your team weakness last year was assists and you'll want to address that somehow this season.

Keeping the right guys

You should be asking yourself these questions every offseason; who's affordable? Who do I base my team on? What will my team need most next season?

Your 12 keeps are:

Evgeni Malkin $16 (signed through 2010) – nice. No wait, FREAKING nice. Nuff said.

Brendan Morrow $18 (can be extended) – I actually think this is a bit pricey for him and would've been more militant about my opinion here if his season this year had been like the season before. I'm not in favour of signing him long term on your team.

Johan Franzen $8 (can be extended) – he's learned from Tomas Holmstrom and now you'll see that he becomes a better version of him. Lock him up for your squad.

Jochen Hecht $1 (can be extended) – one of my fave hockey names out there since I love to pronounce with the German "ch" sound like I'm a cat with a huge hairball. Dude's hugely underrated, great two way option on a Sabres team that is going to come back to prominence if they can get any sort of offense generated from the back end. A 20 goal season seems about right for him though so I wouldn't worry much about going with a long term contract for him, you can probably keep getting him back cheap in an auction any year down the road.

Kristian Huselius $2 (2 more years max from him) – I'm not a huge fan actually but there's no way anyone can resist the price tag here. If he's in Calgary I like him more than just about any other place I can think of. I hope he re-ups in Cowtown.

Ryan Malone $6 (can be extended) – he's an NHL RFA but I don't see him going anywhere else. He was born in Pittsburgh and they kinda have something going on with that team, he'll re-up there I expect and everyone will be happy. He's a 30 goal 100 PIM guy next year if he's in Pitt.

Chris Kunitz $12 (can be extended) – the price tag seems a bit steep to me and you might want to consider him in part of a package to get some help elsewhere but if that doesn't happen then he's still got 30 goal upside.

Dion "PIMy D" Phaneuf $16 (locked up long term) – people just don't get how valuable this guy is in fantasy hockey, they see that the best D's in the game get 50 pts so they'd rather lock up a 60 pt forward instead. That's a mistake my friends, you can still lock up your forwards after you've locked in your elite options on D. Few D contribute EVERYWHERE like PIMy D does. The first thing I said to Paul was to lock up Dion for as long as he can. My work is done here.

Brent Burns $9 (can be extended) – when I look at young NHL'ers I try to give a picture of what he's capable of, and Burnie is hard to peg. Think Ray Bourque with a bit of a mean streak. I think he can be Ray Bourque one day, wouldn't that be phenomenal? Lock him up longterm

Paul.

Brett Clark $4 (can be extended) – steady. Underrated. 40 pt assist option that's a solid choice for a D3 or 4 on your team. If you decided not to keep him I'm pretty sure you can get him back at the end of an auction for cheaper or the same price. You also have Dennis Wideman at $10 and Michal Rozsival $14 that you could consider keeping ahead of him if you think you can spare the extra couple bucks out of your auction.

Ryan Miller $16 (signed through 2010) – how soon people forget that the Sabres were the Prez trophy winners in 2007 and they were definitely decimated by some injury, disappointing stat production and some key FA departures. You know what though, the Sabres are going to be back and Ryan Miller is going to be a high 30 game winner again. What? I said it. What?

Manny Legace $1 (can be extended) – it's probably wisest to just let Manny ride out his 3 year contract with you. Marek Schwarz isn't the answer but who knows what the Blues are going to do either. Manny is certainly a fine G3 starter for your team.

All farm team options are unsalaried and must keeps; yours include (brackets are Dobber's Prospect ranking): Derick Brassard (2), Jakob Voracek (6), Patrick Berglund (9), Igor Makarov (50), and Drew Miller (101).

You have $109 tied to 12 players and you have $141 left for 13 more players. I'm of the opinion that you should keep Michal Rozsival for $14 instead of Brett Clark $4 but … to each his own. You'll need to pursue an elite goaltender option at some time, a stud forward (preferably a goalscorer), and another elite option at D. You should plan to spend $90-100 on those 3 players and that'd leave about $50 to fill out the remaining 10 roster slots.

What to do, what to do

You have three areas that need to be addressed before or during your auction; you're going to need to go after an elite goaltender, at least one elite goalscorer and a hardnosed D. You'll have to budget, plan your inflation rate prior to your auction (since you'll probably need to consult it as many as 3 times during the auction), and as prep it'd be nice to solve one of those 3 areas by trade before auction time comes. It may've been easiest to solve your elite goaltender option right now but it looks like guys have beaten you to the punch. Over the last month Evgeni Nabokov, JS Giguere, and Niklas Backstrom have all changed hands while you sat on yours. It's a pity actually, Giggy would've looked wonderful on your team and the price may've been low enough that say Kristian Huselius would've been enough. Oh well, there may be an option with the guy that traded for Giggy since he has Rick DiPietro who may be expendable on his team now. You tell me that your inclination is to make a move closer to the draft but let me just tell you, you're missing the boat NOW. Jump on board.

Come auction time there are going to few elite guys to pursue. As an elite goalie option then it looks like Roberto Luongo and Henrik Lundqvist will spark bidding wars, but you aren't going to have the most money at the table so you could be outbidded for either of them. Don't be. Break out your inflation rate calculation and if you go into the draft still needing another elite goalie then you MUST come out of the auction with one of these two options. The silver lining in this scenario is that there look to be a couple goalies out there that you can try to trade for now and

then you don't have to worry about this problem at auction.

Elite D options won't be plentiful at auction either. The main target is Chris Pronger, I just like him because he provides nearly as much offense and +/- as Nik Lidstrom but he gives a bucketful more PIMs. The next couple options that should be available for auction are the aforementioned Lidstrom, followed by Brian Rafalski and Ryan Whitney. Anyone after that is going to be a guy you won't want to come close to spending elite money on.

Finally the elite F options at auction should be Joe Thornton, Ilya Kovalchuk, and Daniel Alfredsson in the uppermost tier, followed by Daniel Briere, Rick Nash, Brian Rolston, Daniel Sedin, and Ales Hemsky in the next tier. You'll want to go hard after one of the guys on the top tier and at least one more from the 2nd tier, maybe two if you can afford it from the 2nd tier.

What you did

Ok, between now and auction day you'll want to solve one of your 3 needs if you can. In most scenarios that'll mean dealing for a goaltender. It doesn't look like there'll be many elite guys available for trade at either F or D so you should be targeting certain goalies. Actually some goalies have been up for grabs already and you haven't gotten any of them, it looks like there are some options around yet though.

Let's look at some possibilities.

Yogis made a move in the last month to get JS Giguere and then he sat with Giggy, Rick DiPietro, Marty Turco, and Pascal Leclaire. Both DiP and Turc are on expiring contracts this season so I first suggested you try to trade for Turco. Yogi loves to trade and had too much salary locked up into too many keeper options so in the end you traded Ryan Malone $6 (can be extended) for Marty Turco $24 (expiring next year), Rick DiPietro $13 (expiring this season), and Dan Boyle $14 (expiring this season). Yogi wanted stability on his roster beyond this season for a price he can afford and you wanted elite goaltending. My reaction was HOLY FREAKING HAIRY COWS MAN! (or perhaps some other kind of colourful word play). Now you have Ryan Miller that you can move for offense and Manny Legace becomes your G3 for next to nothing. You even addressed your D problem with this deal.

Next you shopped Ryan Miller around for some elite offensive options available. Rumour was that Paul Stastny was available. Negotiations continued and at last check the offer stood at Ryan Miller/Kristian Huselius/unknown player for Paul Stastny/Brian Campbell. If you can get that then you should, even though it'll mean that you will have to rebalance your squad after you win another championship. Another guy had Vinny Lecavalier on the block and you offered Miller up for him. That isn't enough, but you know that. A recent counter was Morrow/Franzen for Vinny $26 (signed thru this season only) and I think that price is too steep when you can use the extra cash in your auction to get options as viable as Vinny and still have Franzen/Morrow as excellently priced secondary offense. Another package offer you made was Miller/Huselius/Morrow for Bieksa/J.Staal/Backstrom (the C) and that's all part of negotiations thus far.

Some of those moves look good to me.

Conclusions

Well, here we are. You had 3 areas to address and I was hoping we could address one of them this offseason, it's looking like you have a decent shot at addressing all 3 areas though. You certainly have addressed 2 of them by acquiring Turco, DiPietro and Boyle (again, wow). It even looks like you can move your spare goalie for offensive help too but even if you can't then you can still spend the rest of your offseason dangling a goaltender out there for an offensive option that includes somebody the calibre of Paul Stastny if you can't land him in the next week or so.

You've used up a whack of salary making these deals but you're doing so in an attempt to stay at the top. I believe you're going to stay at the top. Your goaltending is once again elite, your D is anchored by Phaneuf and now Boyle and you still have salary left to go after Pronger who will be in the auction. Most of your auctioning will be to go get affordable offensive options and one elite offensive option. The elite offensive forward should be Ilya Kovalchuk in my opinion since it looks like your team will need more goal scoring next year. Failing that the next best elite option in your auction is Joe Thornton. If you come out of your auction with one of Kovy/Thornton as well as Pronger in your pocket then I don't care if you have to roster Mark Recchi and Keith Tkachuk to back them up, you're well on your way anyway.
We emailed back and forth about what your strategy was for this season and I had to make sure you understood what you were doing by making these moves. You sold some of your future in an attempt to stay on top. I'm confident that you'll be doing that.

Congrats on your championship this year and congrats on the one that you're on your way to for next year. Attaboy Paul.