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Anaheim Ducks

Season preview: Ducks’ Getzlaf gets A as ‘C’

By ERIC STEPHENS

The letter might be have been passed from one to the other over the course of a few months a summer ago but the seeds were planted some time before that.

It was four years ago when a 21-year-old Ryan Getzlaf sat on a stage at Honda Center with Scott Niedermayer, Ducks coach Randy Carlyle and then-general manager Brian Burke as he discussed the state of the franchise.

Niedermayer was the club’s unquestioned captain since coming to Anaheim while Getzlaf had all of 108 NHL games under his belt. Surely, it seemed like a setting where the big center would be full of jitters.

Or not.

"I wasn’t nervous," Getzlaf said, recalling the moment. "I was little surprised when Burke asked me to do it. First of all, I had no idea what it was — just the overall state of the union or whatever. I was kind of like, ‘OK, I don’t really know what I’m going to say.’"

"But it was fun. It was nice to be part of something like that and knowing they wanted me to be a big part of this organization.”

Years later, the sublime playmaker has followed the defenseman into the role once destined for him as he’ll start his second season as their captain on Friday when the Ducks open the 2011-12 NHL season overseas against the Buffalo Sabres in Helsinki, Finland.

Before last season, Getzlaf was made the eighth captain in the team’s 17-year history after Niedermayer announced his retirement early in the summer of 2010. It is something that still resonates with him as he enters his second season as the Ducks’ leader.

"To have that support staff that I’m able to have as a young captain, it’s been great for me,” he said. “It means a lot that my peers thought that highly of me.”

While there was no question that Niedermayer would assume the captaincy upon his signing with the Ducks, Carlyle took the different approach of leaving a vote to the players.

Having served as a captain with Pittsburgh and Winnipeg during his playing days, Carlyle speaks from experience and said that wearing the ‘C’ was a burden earlier in his career. It is why he wanted to make sure Getzlaf was surrounded by a support system.

"It’s a learning process and if you don’t experience it, then you don’t know,” Carlyle said. "You have to walk a mile in the man’s shoes before you understand. Because there is more responsibility that takes place between the coaching staff and maybe even management. It stretches that far to ownership at times.

"The (public relations) department is always calling. The media wants more. There’s more that’s asked of you. So you’ve got to make sure that you’re prepared to give what you feel you can give. If there’s things you’re not comfortable with, then you’ve got to have other people step to the forefront and help you.”

After the Ducks were eliminated from the playoffs, Getzlaf admitted that he should have sought out Niedermayer more for advice than he did. But he did seek out Koivu, who saw him grow as a leader.

"Obviously early in the season, the way we played doesn’t make it easier for a new captain,” said Koivu, who was captain in Montreal for nearly 10 seasons. "That’s when everybody kind of measures you. When the team is winning, he’s doing a great job. When the team is losing, then all is wrong. And that’s not the case.

"But I felt that he didn’t have any bumps in the road. He was confident. He was secure about himself as a captain.”

The Ducks have had big visions for Getzlaf ever since they took him with the 19th pick in the celebrated 2003 draft and then grabbed his bookend in Corey Perry nine picks later.

In turn, Getzlaf has put up points throughout his six-year career with a high water mark of 91 in 2008-09. He’s also coming off consecutive seasons in which he’s missed 15 and 16 games respectively, which have held his numbers down.

And now the Saskatchewan native has a running mate in Perry who won the Hart Trophy as the NHL’s most valuable player, something many figured Getzlaf would possibly do first before his partner.

Genuinely happy for his teammate, Getzlaf played a key part in Perry’s breakout season and was there in Las Vegas last June to celebrate the moment. The Ducks quietly wonder if that will serve as motivation for the center to take his turn and stretch his vast game to that level.

In response to whether he feels a Hart Trophy is in him, Getzlaf said he’s "going to do everything I can every year to try and achieve something like that."

"There’s always that competitiveness and me and Pears have always kind of had that amongst ourselves," he said. "It’s helped drive us to where we are now. We’ve been able to kind of have that healthy thing but at the same time being happy for each other and helping each other achieve these things."

"I think it’s definitely something that makes it more real. Like it’s within reach.”

In the meantime, Getzlaf is working on being a better leader. He has tried to tone down the once-rampant chatter with officials. He is also striking a balance between being “a guy who looked out for my teammates and everything that had to do with them” with conveying what his coach is demanding.

The big center knows he has large shoes to fill.

“Scotty stepped into this organization with respect from everybody,” Getzlaf said. "You have to earn the respect of your players around you and your coaching staff, knowing that they can count on you for different things throughout the year.”

"I think I’ve been trying to develop that the last couple of years.”

Orange County Register: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Local Ducks fans enjoy Scandinavian commute

By JEFF MILLER

HELSINKI – So there he was Wednesday, some 5,600 miles away from home, but just inches away from his heart.

All around Eric Hankins were Ducks.

Getzlaf, Ryan, Perry. Selanne, Hiller, Fowler. Every one of them. All the signatures on his prized jersey back home. All the faces hanging on his walls. All the figurines poised on his shelves. Suddenly come to life.

“It's borderline obsessive,” Hankins said of his devotion to all things Duck. Then he smiled and added, “I don't brag about it too much.”

So, Eric, was it worth the trip?

The look on his face answered for him.

But then, to Hankins, the Ducks are always worth the trip. They must be, right? Why else would a man have season tickets to a team that plays nearly 200 miles from his home?

“I was living in Texas when they won the Cup, so I wasn't able to make it to any of those games,” Hankins, 26, explained, even his loyally having its limits. “I guess now I'm just making up for lost time.”

He lives in Santa Maria, north up the California coast. Mapquest calls it 186.8 miles to Honda Center.

He attended 20 Ducks games last year and plans on hitting as many as 25 more this year. To understand how dedicated this guy is, please note that he already has been to Honda Center for three preseason games.

Let's be honest. Most people wouldn't travel across the street to watch preseason hockey. Hankins traveled nearly four hours roundtrip to do it. Three times! In the span of barely a week, no less.

“I really don't mind the drive,” he said. “Our town's really boring. I'd rather be in a car for four hours than be there.”

So flying 14 hours to Finland wasn't that daunting. For one thing, someone else was driving. For another, there's very little traffic at 37,000 feet.

Oh, yeah, Hankins knows about traffic, knows about traffic the way the Keebler Elves know about cookies.

For starters, he and his usual traveling partner, girlfriend Jaclyn Cabreana, typically attend weekday games because both work weekends, when California's freeways are considered only crowded, not quadruple-bypass candidates.

He also usually leaves from school rather than home. And where is Hankins studying accounting? Cal Poly, which is in San Luis Obispo, 45 minutes north of Santa Maria, or 45 minutes farther away from Anaheim.

After stopping to pick up Jaclyn – “I always have lunch ready,” she said – the two continue south toward Honda Center, not reaching their heaven until first passing through our hell – Los Angeles at rush hour.

“Most people think I'm crazy,” Hankins confirmed, “because of the gas alone.”

His 1990 Honda Civic burns through 20 bucks each way. The car, though, has been loyal through all this, too, only quitting on Hankins once, and that was his fault. He left the lights on.

It's usually at least 1 a.m. by the time Hankins and Jaclyn are back in Santa Maria. Five hours later, his alarm will sound, telling him it's time for school. Yep, 45 more minutes together, a man and his Civic.

Apparently, sometimes you just have to follow your heart, even if it's stuck averaging 10 mph in the carpool lane.

So what, exactly, does Hankins' family think of his fanatical commuting in pursuit of a puck?

“My dad's really disappointed,” he said, smiling again but sounding quite serious. "He wants me to focus way more on school than Ducks games.”

Imagine Gary Hankins' reaction when his son told him he was going to Finland and Sweden for Ducks games. And he was going to pay for the trip with the money he had saved to study abroad in Spain.

Those plans, however, were canceled when Hankins shattered his wrist playing roller hockey.

Questioning Hankins' sanity was the obvious first step in reporting this story. Just as obvious was the next step: questioning his motivation.

"The wins are really fun,” he explained, "I don't know, you just go with the highs and lows of the team, I guess. You feel like you're a part of things after awhile.”

They were all part of this organization Wednesday, Hankins and the nearly 150 other Ducks crazies who traveled here on packages offered by the team. The players hosted the group at a post-practice reception inside Hartwall Arena.

They were allowed to mingle, joke and pose with any Duck they wanted, from Teemu Selanne to Maxime Macenauer.

“I just like the players,” Hankins said. "They're very accessible. They do a lot of charity stuff. They're fun to watch.”

He looked around the room, at his Ducks and his fellow faithful followers and added, "I guess this shows there's still some money in Orange County, too.”

It certainly looked like it Wednesday, even from all these miles away. Especially from all these miles away.

This team does have some devoted admirers, no doubt. Few of them, though, are more – OK, we'll say it – driven than Eric Hankins, for whom even a home game is a road trip.

Orange County Register: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Jets trying not to repeat Atlanta's mistakes

The Associated Press

From the moment the NHL announced its return to Winnipeg, the city's focus turned immediately to the future: What would the team be called? What would the sweaters look like? Who would the first opponent be?

But new general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff was just as interested in looking back at what happened before the Atlanta Thrashers migrated north.

"I think you have to look at the past a little bit in the sense that (last year) was a tale of two seasons," said Cheveldayoff, who was hired in June to replace Rick Dudley. "The first half they came out and played exceptionally well, and the second half of the season something went wrong. You look at all the little indicators, you look at some of the things that maybe you can improve upon."

That was particularly important because the roster remains nearly unchanged. Six defensemen and both goalies have returned from the NHL's 29th-ranked team in goals against — not to mention roughly two-thirds of the forwards.

Atlanta found itself in playoff position midway through last season before going 14-21-6 down the stretch and tumbling to 12th in the Eastern Conference.

A number of key players slumped, including big defenseman Dustin Byfuglien who had just 13 of his 53 points in the second half and top goaltender Ondrej Pavelec, who had a .893 save percentage in 31 appearances after Dec. 31.

"I think the pace of our game dropped off," captain Andrew Ladd said. "The big thing for us was getting up the ice and putting pressure on other teams and forcing them to make mistakes. Once you have one or two guys not getting there in time, it gives teams an opportunity to get (the puck) out of their own end and get on the attack.

"Obviously, we gave up too many goals," he added. "You can point to a few things, but we had a young team and we can learn from that and not make that mistake twice."

It will be up to new coach Claude Noel and his staff to make sure it doesn't happen again.

The 55-year-old was given his first full-time NHL head coaching job after Cheveldayoff decided not to retain Ramsay. He was interim coach in Columbus for 24 games following Ken Hitchcock's departure in February 2010 and spent last season in Winnipeg coaching the AHL's Manitoba Moose.

The biggest unknown about the Jets season is what impact, if any, playing in a new city will have on the team's performance. Dating back to the Atlanta Flames move to Calgary in 1980, the last six NHL franchises to relocate averaged an 11-point improvement in their first year in a new setting.

For players who had grown accustomed to the relative anonymity they enjoyed with the Thrashers, there will be an adjustment period now that they're the biggest game in town.

"Definitely it's a big change," third-year forward Evander Kane said. "Coming to a Canadian market and a Canadian city where hockey is No. 1. We've got some passionate fans, and a passionate province, so I think it's a fresh start for everybody."

Kane is the most intriguing player in the lineup. At just 20 years old, he's expected to improve on a 19-goal season from a year ago and could develop into the team's most dynamic offensive contributor.

The Jets also will lean heavily on the line of Ladd, Bryan Little and Blake Wheeler and look for some added contributions from returnees Nik Antropov and Alex Burmistrov.

On the blue-line, Byfuglien is expected to log big minutes again. The 26-year-old also will have to deal with some off-ice issues after being charged with boating while intoxicated over the summer.

Zach Bogosian, Tobias Enstrom, Mark Stuart, Johnny Oduya, Ron Hainsey and Randy Jones round out the defense corps, while Chris Mason will back up Pavelec in goal.

One of the biggest challenges for the Jets will be enduring the wait for the regular season opener against Montreal on Oct. 9. It comes more than a week after the team wraps up the preseason.

"It's kind of like everything for us this year," Cheveldayoff said. "There's been a lot of preparation and a lot of time that's gone in, but at the end of the day you just want to get things started."

Atlanta Journal Constitution LOADED: 10.06.2011
Atlanta trades Thrashers for minor league hockey

By Paul Newberry

DULUTH, Ga. — The signs are still up outside the IceForum, a rink in suburban Atlanta.

"Atlanta Thrashers Practice Facility," they proclaim, right below that familiar logo of a hockey stick-swinging bird.

Not anymore, of course.

The Thrashers are now in Winnipeg, re-christened the Jets and set to play before sellout crowds every night in hockey-crazed Canada. Atlanta will have to make do with a minor league team, the ECHL’s Gwinnett Gladiators, after becoming the first city in the NHL’s modern era to blow it with not one, but two franchises.

"It’s an enormous emotional loss," said Michael Gearon Jr., who was one of the Thrashers’ co-owners. "The hardest part for me, by a long shot, is what it meant to my family. We were all huge fans."

Unfortunately, they didn’t have a lot of company.

The Thrashers were traditionally one of the worst-drawing teams in the league. They struggled on the ice, too, making the playoffs only once during their 12-year existence. A last-ditch rally to save the team drew only a few hundred die-hards. When the Thrashers shuffled off to Winnipeg in early June, the reaction around Atlanta was a collective, "Hey, when does football season start?"

But for a resilient group of hockey lovers, losing the Thrashers cuts deep — especially for those who remember the last time it happened.

Lisa Reisman was just 12 years old when the Flames moved to Calgary in 1980, the league’s first foray into the Deep South lasting a mere eight seasons. She remained a fan, however, cheering from afar as her old team won the Stanley Cup within a decade of its northward migration. Her loyalty paid off when Atlanta was awarded another expansion franchise that began play in 1999, this one taking its name from Georgia’s state bird instead of the city’s fiery destruction during the Civil War.

This season, Reisman was looking forward to being a full-season-ticket holder for the first time after being able to afford only partial packages in the past. She was already making payments when the Thrashers left for Winnipeg. Instead of getting 41 games at Philips Arena, she had to settle for a refund.

"This is the second time it’s happened to me," Reisman said. "It (stinks). It really does. I’m not going to watch it, even on television."

She’s bitter at Gearon and the other former owners, a group known as Atlanta Spirit that sold the Thrashers for a reported $170 million. She’s even angrier at NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman, claiming he quickly brokered a deal with Winnipeg interests without giving hockey a fair chance to succeed in her city.

"I’m not going to give the NHL anything until Bettman is gone. I hear he’s got three years left on his contract. I can wait," Reisman said. "I’ll probably still keep up with the scores. I'll still be a Flames fan. But I seriously doubt I’ll be a Winnipeg fan, even though it’s the same guys. I’m too mad about the way it happened."

Hockey isn’t totally dead in Atlanta.

The Gladiators are getting ready for their ninth season in the ECHL. In a striking twist from the long-term attendance woes that plagued the Thrashers, Gwinnett (a suburb of Atlanta) has traditionally been one of the better-drawing franchises in a league that’s two steps down from the NHL, roughly the equivalent of Double-A baseball.

Last season, the Gladiators ranked fifth in the 19-team ECHL with an average or more than 5,100 a game at their modern arena along Interstate 85. They’ve never ranked outside the Top 10 in attendance.

Gwinnett expects a bump from Thrashers fans making their way to the suburbs. Already, team president Steve Chapman said new season-ticket sales are up about 20 percent over last season. By opening night, the team hopes to sell about 2,000 season packages.

"If fans come out and really give it a chance — meet the people around ‘em, enjoy the facilities and everything we’re about — I guarantee we can fill the void," Chapman said.

Reisman is among those who traded NHL tickets for a much more affordable season package with the Gladiators. She says everyone who sat around her at Philips Arena has purchased tickets in the same spot — along the goal line — for the Arena at Gwinnett Center. She’s at least willing to give this lower level of hockey a chance to fill the void, with a caveat.

"It depends how much they fight," she said, her voice rising with excitement. "That’s the best thing about the game, when they’re kicking the living crap out of each other. I know these guys are trying to get to NHL. But it should be fun. If they play that type of hockey, hell yeah, it’ll be great.

Gearon has no plans to attend a Gladiators game. He’s not sure he could bear to watch another hockey team in Atlanta while the franchise he once owned is playing somewhere else. In fact, he spent all but a couple of days this past summer away from the city, saying he needed time to deal with the disappointment of not being able to find a way to save the Thrashers.

"I wasn’t running away from anything," Gearon insisted in a telephone interview with The Associated Press. "I was just drained. When you have a loss, sometimes you just need to get away."

Atlanta Spirit remains a convenient target for disgruntled Thrashers fans. There’s no disputing the team generally had one of the league’s lowest payrolls, losing many of its top players through trades or free agency. Also, the ownership group was embroiled for years in a legal dispute with one of its former partners, which undoubtedly hampered efforts to line up new funding.

Still, Gearon feels the partnership did everything it could to keep an NHL team in Atlanta. He points out that none of Atlanta’s most prominent — and richest — citizens stepped up to help the team. Atlanta Spirit had been seeking additional investors since 2008, and Gearon made it clear in February that the current ownership couldn’t continue to absorb some $20 million a year in losses.

"I feel bad as an Atlantan," Gearon said. "I don’t feel bad about the way we did things. I was the one guy in the city who stepped up and did what I could, when there were other people in this city who didn’t step up and could have. I’m secure enough in myself — other than feeling bad for my kids — that I can handle it. I don’t agree with people who say it’s my fault. Over eight years, we put more than $100 million into that team, basically subsidizing entertainment for the city of Atlanta."

Gearon’s youngest son still sleeps in a bedroom decorated with Thrashers gear, everything from the pillowcases to the pictures on the wall. There’s still plenty of kids playing the game, too, at several rinks scattered around the sprawling suburbs.

But some youth hockey officials fret about the long-term impact of losing the NHL.

"It’s going to affect us in the future," said Curtis Morrison, who runs a program for some 250 kids and young adults at the Marietta Ice Center. "It’s going to affect us more at the learn-to-play, learn-to-skate levels. When kids had an opportunity to go to a Thrashers games with their parents, it obviously piqued their interest right away."

The Gladiators are trying to fill that void, taking over some of the outreach programs that had been handled by the Thrashers.

The ECHL team also has taken advantage of the locker room and weight-training facilities left behind at the IceForum, using them during training camp.

"Before, we’d be driving over here with our gear on," said Paul Flache, a Gwinnett defenseman who was originally drafted by the Thrashers. "We’d put our skates and helmets on when we got here. This is definitely nicer. I hope the guys appreciate it."

Gladiators coach John Wroblewski is confident the minor league team will take away some of the sting from losing the Thrashers. Recently, he went out for a few beers at a bar near his home and was surprised to overhear several people discussing the NHL season that begins Thursday.

"They told me they used to go to Thrashers games," he said. "Now they’re planning to come see us."
Boston Bruins

Night of chills

By Fluto Shinzawa

During practice yesterday at TD Garden, Bruins general manager Peter Chiarelli sat in his usual spot at one end of the rink, overlooking the roster he had assembled. Aside from two new faces in Joe Corvo and Benoit Pouliot, the rest - minus their beards - were the ones that celebrated on the Rogers Arena ice in Vancouver less than four months ago.

That was exactly the general manager’s intention.

“We took careful planning on not to meddle with it too much, recognizing that we'd lose some key performers,” Chiarelli said. “We added a couple players. We've also taken into account that the rest of the guys will be better and more experienced.

“We took a bit of a hands-off approach that way. Chemistry was a very important part of our planning.”

The Bruins were nothing close to broken. So, there was nothing to fix. Chiarelli’s philosophy was simple: stay the heck out of the way.

The summer of 2011 was one of celebration. The only heavy lifting required of Chiarelli was hoisting the 35-pound Stanley Cup over his head. The Bruins signed Pouliot to a one-year, $1.1 million contract July 1. Four days later, after Tomas Kaberle signed a three-year, $12.75 million deal with Carolina, the Bruins acquired Corvo from the Hurricanes for a 2012 fourth-round pick.

The lazy summer was the opposite of the tomdao Chiarelli went through the year before.

The 2010 offseason was one of the Bruins’ busiest. They acquired Nathan Horton and Gregory Campbell from Florida in the Dennis Wideman trade. They re-signed Dennis Seidenberg, Johnny Boychuk, Shawn Thornton, Mark Recchi, Daniel Paille, and Blake Wheeler. They extended Zdeno Chara and Patrice Bergeron in the final days of the preseason.

During the season, Chiarelli made the final tweaks. The Bruins traded Wheeler and Mark Stuart to Atlanta for Rich Peverley. They landed Chris Kelley from Ottawa for a second-round pick. They swapped Joe Colborne, their 2011 first-round pick, and their 2012 second-rounder to Toronto for Kaberle.

Because of all those moves, the Bruins had few left to make this summer. Chiarelli knew that Recchi would retire if they won the Cup. Kaberle, an ill fit following his trade, got the megabucks and extended term with Carolina he never would have in Boston. Michael Ryder scored a two-year, $7 million payday with Dallas. The Bruins had few complaints about seeing them walk.

The plan, starting tonight with the season opener against the Philadelphia Flyers at TD Garden, is for the returning players to jack up their production. It would be unfair to expect Vezina-winning goaltender Tim Thomas to submit a repeat performance. But that’s why the Bruins have Tuukka Rask.

The 24-year-old Rask will see more playing time this season. Nobody within the organization would be surprised if Rask grabbed the No. 1 job for stretches of the year.

Up front, it’s possible that Milan Lucic, David Krejci, and Horton could slip as opponents send out top shutdown pairs and checking threesomes against Boston’s power line. That’s where the Bruins expect the No. 2 line of Bergeron between Brad Marchand and Peverley to assume more offensive responsibility.

But there is no player who could make more of a jump than Tyler Seguin. Last year, the rookie had 11 goals and 11 assists in 74 regular-season games. In 13 postseason games, he added three goals and four assists.

This year, with more muscle on his frame and more confidence in his mind, Seguin could double his numbers across the board. He will start tonight as the right wing on the third line, but could shift to center if coach Claude Julien wants more pop in the middle. During camp, Seguin looked more comfortable at center, his natural position, than on the wing.

“He’s been very confident, more comfortable in his skin,” Chiarelli said. “Last year, everything was new to him. This year, he knows what to expect.”

Tonight, the Bruins face off against the team that initiated their 2010 changes because of its comeback in the second round of the playoffs after the Bruins led the series, three games to none. This time around, it was Philadelphia - swept by Boston in the second round last spring - that underwent franchise-shaking alterations.

GM Paul Holmgren shipped out Mike Richards and Jeff Carter. As part of the return, Holmgren imported Wayne Simmonds and Jakub Voracek. He signed Ilya Bryzgalov, Jaromir Jagr, and Max Talbot. The Flyers now belong to new captain Chris Pronger and young guns Claude Giroux and James van Riemsdyk.

“They feel they’ve made some right decisions,” said Julien. “They’re the only ones who know whether it’s good or bad, whether it’s going to make them better or whether they’ll stay the same. That’s a decision they decided to make.

“I know we’re going to see a different team. Goaltending was the biggest thing they feel they’ve addressed.”

With each passing season, Chiarelli will have more influence on his roster. Of the 20 players expected to be in uniform tonight, 13 were acquired with Chiarelli in full control of the team. That number will continue to grow.

Next summer might be busier for Chiarelli. Peverley, Kelly, Paille, Campbell, Thornton, Corvo, and Boychuk will be unrestricted free agents. Not all of them will return. Of the seven, Peverley stands the best chance of being re-signed.

As a result, next year’s Bruins will undergo significant turnover. The 2011-12 Bruins, however, look much like last year’s team. They’ll be very pleased if the final outcomes bear a resemblance.

Boston Globe LOADED: 10.06.2011
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Boston Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
A good time to forget for Bruins

By Stephen Harris

It wasn't that long ago that a common theme about the Bruins was their relative irrelevancy on the Boston sports scene. Remember? How the other three pro teams in town had won recent championships, and the Bruins were dismissed as a second-rate team in a second-rate sport?

"Well, that story's dead, that's for sure," said Bruins forward Shawn Thornton.

It died for good last spring, as the Bruins provided one of the most improbable, entertaining and emotional playoff runs ever witnessed hereabouts, en route to winning the Stanley Cup.

Seemingly all of Boston turned out to celebrate, with a victory parade through the city streets that was witnessed live by about 1.5 million fans.

Maybe we weren't quite back to the Bobby Orr days — when the Bruins unquestionably owned the town — but it was mighty close. And the current turmoil of the Red Sox and absence of the locked-out Celtics merely enhances the B's opportunity to turn even more fans into hockey converts.

"That means a lot to the guys who've been here a long time," said Thornton. "It's my fifth year here. To be able to change that perception is pretty special."

Many Bruins players acknowledged yesterday that even after hoisting the Cup in Vancouver nearly four months ago, it seemed almost unreal that their team had actually captured the NHL's grand prize. For many, the reality of it all may not completely sink in until tonight, when the Stanley Cup banner is raised at the Garden before the B's and Philadelphia Flyers face off to start the new season.

"I'd be driving in my car and hear it on the radio, 'The Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins,'" said defenseman Johnny Boychuk. "And you're like, 'Hey, that's right, we are.'"

"For me," said center Patrice Bergeron, "it kicked in after my day in the summer with the Cup. It really was hard to believe before that."

But now the Bruins have their ridiculously gaudy and expensive, diamond-encrusted rings and tonight they'll watch the Cup banner go up to the rafters. It will no doubt bring back all the stunning emotion of last spring and make it all seem real.

And then . . . ?, the Bruins have to forget all about it. Enjoy this one last ceremony saluting their incredible accomplishment, and then pretend it never happened.

"As soon as the banner goes up we have to turn the page and focus on getting another one," said Thornton. "It's been a great summer. It's been a great offseason. It was an unbelievable spring. But that means nothing after (tonight). It's time to focus on the new year."

The Bruins are no longer No. 1. They're one of 30, all trying to reach the same goal.

"Exactly," said Thornton. "It's all square. Everybody's got no losses and no wins and here we go. What we did last spring doesn't mean anything for this season. It's great that it happened, but that's all over now."

It's imperative the Bruins tonight flip the switch instantly, from savoring every second of the flag-raising, to being ready to face the Flyers, the first of 82 opponents who will like nothing better than knocking off the defending champs.

"Seeing that banner go up is going to be really special for us, for anybody who's in the building or anyone who's watching it on TV," said Boychuk.

"But as soon as that banner goes up, that's when the new season starts. They drop the puck and you're not champions anymore, you're defending champions. So we've got to make sure we're prepared for the challenge."

"You're the king of the hill and every other team wants to knock you off. You've got to prove yourself once again."
Mark Recchi’s leadership a tough act to

Stephen Harris

It is the evening of May 10, 2009, shortly before the Bruins are to face the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 5 of the Eastern Conference semifinals at the Garden.

In the B’s medical room, Mark Recchi is lying on the trainer’s table, screaming in unimaginable agony. The 41-year-old is experiencing what frequently is described as pain akin to what women suffer during childbirth as he attempts unsuccessfully to pass a kidney stone.

Recchi also has one, or possibly two, broken ribs.

Yet he goes out and plays, scoring the first goal in a crucial, 4-0 victory that cuts the Bruins’ deficit in the best-of-seven series to 3-2. The excruciating pain continues right up to Game 6 in Raleigh, N.C., two nights later, but again, Recchi plays and scores the first goal in a 4-2 victory.

The next night, Recchi undergoes surgery in Boston to partially remove the kidney stone. He has additional surgery the next morning. And he is in the Bruins lineup that evening for Game 7.

The Bruins, as fans remember too well, saw their season end with a crushing, 3-2 overtime loss. It was a massive disappointment in a series they know they would have won had they matched the Hurricanes’ commitment level.

But in a true sense, the leadership Recchi displayed that postseason, with his incredible courage and sacrifice, became a vital building block for a young team that won the Stanley Cup two years later. Those youngsters were handed a vivid picture of what it takes to win in the playoffs and the highest level of commitment that is required.

“I still talk about that all the time, what (Recchi) did,” Shawn Thornton said recently. “I fancy myself fairly tough, but that’s as tough as I’ve ever seen. And our core of young guys — (Milan Lucic, David Krejci, Patrice Bergeron) were all there to witness that. I’m sure no one has forgotten.”

Now, Recchi is gone, retired after 22 seasons and headed for the Hall of Fame. The Bruins face a rugged challenge in their effort to repeat as Cup champions, and the lessons in leadership Recchi imparted could be critical in whether they can go back-to-back.

“We have to fill that void,” Thornton said. “You don’t want to say that void is easy to fill, because it’s not. But you have to fill it. I think we still have a great bunch of guys and a good leadership group.

“But he’s Mark Recchi, and he’s one of a kind. Obviously he brought something to the table that no one else in the world had. We’ll miss it, but we still have a great group of leaders.”

That group is led by captain Zdeno Chara, who, as general manager Peter Chiarelli sees it, has come a long way as a leader in his five seasons with the B’s.

“He’s grown into his role,” Chiarelli said. “He’s had little ebbs and flows during his time in Boston on what he should and shouldn’t do. I see him being more comfortable now in not having to wave the flag all the time. He’s adapted and changed.”

Chiarelli doesn’t necessarily want to see a lot of emotional speech-making, but rather leading by example — letting a player’s actions speak for themselves.

“The rah-rah side of it can be overstated a bit,” Chiarelli said. “The main way you show leadership is to lead by example. You do things on and off the ice that the other guys see, and they follow.

“I mean, after seeing (Recchi) on that table screaming in agony and then going out and playing, how can you question anything he says? How can you not try to do the same kinds of things he does? How can you not give 100 percent and never take a night off?”

But with Recchi not around to take a teammate aside and quietly admonish him or offer advice, it is now up to players such as Bergeron, Lucic, Krejci, Andrew Ference, Gregory Campbell and Chris Kelly to make sure every teammate understands and accepts what is expected of him.

“It is the oft-used word of accountability,” Chiarelli said. “Accountability is when you don’t win that puck battle and you should have, and your teammate comes up to you and says, ‘Hey, you’ve got to win that (expletive) puck battle.’ That’s hard to do. It’s hard for someone to say that to someone (else), but that’s leadership.”

Chiarelli feels such leadership can be exerted only by players who have earned the right to speak up.

“Everyone talks about how good of a leader he was off the ice, how vocal he was at all the right times,” Thornton said of Recchi. “All that is true. But he also was the hardest-working guy on the team every day at practice. It was infectious, seeing a 41-year-old guy doing that.”

Now the B’s have to apply the lessons they learned.

“(Recchi) was a guy you can’t replace,” Campbell said. “What he accomplished in his career, the leadership he brought just by being in the room or on the ice, was irreplaceable.

“But having said that, there’s enough guys in this room who have now been through a championship run. The void will be filled.”

Boston Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
By Steve Buckley

Not that there’s ever a bad time to win a championship, but the Bruins are unveiling their freshly stitched Stanley Cup banner just when a different type of banner — a shroud, actually — is being placed over the 2011 Red Sox.

Talk about riding to the rescue. The Sox embarrassed themselves down the stretch, staging the worst September collapse in baseball history, and now blame is being assessed and fingers are being pointed. Ownership stepped right up to the plate after the collapse: They blamed it all on manager Terry Francona.

Enter the Bruins, who took out the Vancouver Canucks in a thrilling Stanley Cup final in June to secure their first championship in 39 years. In addition to easing their own institutional pain and righting a lot of the wrongs that had beset the organization for most of the past four decades, the Bruins also cleaned up Dodge: They have everyone smiling.

The Red Sox hand-wringing no doubt will continue right on through the winter, but an Alka-Seltzer of sorts is at arm’s reach. To borrow from the old Denis Leary promo, it’s called Bruins.

And it’s not the first time in history the Bruins have brought the Stanley Cup to Boston just when another of our local pro sports juggernauts has ceased to be a championship contendah.

On May 10, 1970, when Bobby Orr sailed through the air after his game-winning goal in Game 4 of the Stanley Cup final clinched the Bruins’ first championship in 29 years, it happened to be the first spring in 20 years that the Celtics failed to make the playoffs.

Boston’s NBA franchise had won 11 championships in 13 seasons. And then Bill Russell retired, as did K.C. Jones, and the 1969-70 Celtics didn’t even make the playoffs. The Bruins? They already were a big hit by the spring of ’69, with Orr, Derek Sanderson, Pie McKenzie and others emerging as certified Hub celebrities, but the Stanley Cup triumph put the team over the top.

And here we are again. The Bruins, like their ancestors of 1970, are celebrities. The stars — Tim Thomas, Milan Lucic, Zdeno Chara, David Krejci — can mingle with the upper classes of Boston’s pro sports stars. Heck, they all can. Shawn Thornton is not a “star” in the statistical sense, but he has a way about him that connects with Boston sports fans. It doesn’t help that he has put down roots in Charlestown and procured his green card, indicating he plans on hanging around for a while.

And what about Brad Marchand? It might be too early in his career to call him a star, but he starred in the Stanley Cup playoffs. His face-washing of Daniel Sedin in Game 6 of the Vancouver series, though reviled by some hockey purists outside Bruinsland, is the Facebook profile picture of the entire postseason, one few B’s fans ever will forget.

That makes Marchand, too, a Boston celebrity of high order.

Maybe he can buy the row house next to the Thornton’s.

That’s what happened in 1970. A lot of those guys from the days of the Big, Bad Bruins — Orr, McKenzie, Sanderson, Johnny Bucyk and Ken Hodge, to name a few — wound up setting down here. Where once they were followed by Boston sports fans, now they had become Boston sports fans themselves, settling in for the long ride. We see them all over town, all the time.

Will other members of the defending Stanley Cup champions follow in Thornton’s path and become true Bostonians? Are we headed for a day when there’s a Patrice Bergeron Toyota on Route 1? “Marchand and Merloni” on the radio? The Committee to Elect Tim Thomas?

That’s what these Bruins have become: They have become .?.?. you. They seem to fit, to belong.

In the spring of 1970, as the Celtics aged before their eyes, Boston sports fans turned to the Bruins to lift their spirits. Now, in the fall of 2011, as the
Bruins’ Stanley Cup runneth across the globe

By Matt Kalman

There is no trophy on Earth that has covered more ground travelling the world than the Stanley Cup.

And this summer, it got quite a workout. As is tradition, the Bruins had 100 days with the Cup to divide up among their players and personnel. Starting from June 15, when they defeated Vancouver and brought the Cup home to Boston, it rarely was out of the sight of someone with ties to the Bruins organization through early September.

Some players opted for a whirlwind tour and some decided to limit their touring to one or two places and instead focus on quiet time at home with friends and family. Almost every player devoted at least part of his day to a more intimate celebration with those closest to him.

After the parade June 18 and a visit to a Red Sox game at Fenway Park [map] the next day, the Cup made its way to the NHL awards show in Las Vegas and then the draft in St. Paul, Minn. before the world tour really got going in the summer.

Here’s a look at some of the best Cup days from the B’s offseason:

June 25
1 The Cup makes its way from the draft to Martha’s Vineyard with Cam Neely, Peter Chiarelli, Don Sweeney, Claude Julien and the Jacobs family.

June 26-28
2 Location: Buffalo
July 1-3
3 Highlights: Fresno, Calif., Yosemite National Park, Pebble Beach Golf Links.
JULY 5
4 Assistant coach Doug Houda
Location: Whitefish, Mont.
Highlights: Whitefish Lake Golf Course, Stumptown Ice Den, Iron Horse Golf Club, Bulldog Saloon and The Great Northern.
JULY 14
5 Assistant coach Geoff Ward
Location: Westford, Lexington & Burlington
Highlights: Butter Brook Golf Club, Brestyan’s American Gymnastics Club.
JULY 15
6 Assistant general manager Don Sweeney
Location: Lynnfield
JULY 16
7 General manager Peter Chiarelli 1
Location: Lexington
July 17
8 Nathan Horton
Location: Dunnville, Ontario
Highlight: Parade through Dunnville.
Quote: “I think it was just special to bring it home and share it with your family and people that you grew up with. It’s not every day you get to bring the Stanley Cup back and everyone knows what it is and it means so much to everyone. It’s just so nice to have there.”
July 20
9 Tomas Kaberle
Location: Kladno, Czech Republic
Highlights: Visited the Velky Tanecni Sal hall, where Kaberle was serenaded by The Hello Piggy Band and was presented with a shield and a sword; David Krejci joined Kaberle at a joint reception.
July 21
10 David Krejci
Location: Stebenk, Czech Republic
Highlights: Party at home with friends and family; party at the town square; Tomas Kaberle joined in the celebration.
Quote: “Obviously, the whole day was pretty much perfect. But then when I had it at home, it was just my closest friends, my family and I remember my mom was kind of giving a toast. It was pretty cool, you know, she was choking up and was very emotional. So it was a pretty cool moment.”
July 22 & 23
11 Zdeno Chara
Locations: Bratislava & Trencin, Slovakia
Highlights: Reception inside Trencin Castle, Trencin Zimny Arena and a rally in Trencin Square.
Quote: “Everything was very special. I was very happy to bring it back to the people and the fans and my family. I just really enjoyed the whole experience.”
July 24
12 Tuukka Rask
Location: Savonlinna, Finland
Highlights: Visited Talvisalon Jaahalli (the local hockey arena), a castle and a cottage at Lake Saimaa.
Quote: “I got a chance to take it to my hometown. Where I’m originally from, there’s about 30,000 people. So it was a really big thing for those kids who play there. They only see that stuff on TV, so I think it was a special thing.”
July 27
13 Shawn Thornton 1
Location: Oshawa & Toronto, Ontario
Highlight: Visit to the top of the CN Tower.
July 28
14 Daniel Paille
Location: Niagra Falls & Welland, Ontario
Highlights: Maid of the Mist boat ride; Welland City Hall and Welland Arena; Foyer Richelieu nursing home.
Quote: “One thing that stands out obviously was taking it on the Maid of the Mist, which is basically just a tour of the falls. You get a little wet. So I think that was pretty memorable for me. I was on it when I was young and I always wanted to go again. The city of Niagara Falls allowed me to go on early. First we got to share it with a bunch of tourists that didn’t know that we were going to be there, so it was sort of exciting.”
July 29
15 Rich Peverley
Location: Guelph, Ontario
Highlight: Sleeman Center Arena
Quote: “Just to be able to share it with family and friends, especially in the evening, and just to see how everybody’s so excited ... to be able to bring it back enjoy it. It’s a busy day but it’s a really enjoyable day.”
July 30
16 Gregory Campbell
Location: Tillsonburg, Waterloo & Kitchener, Ontario
Highlight: Grand River Hospital in Kitchener
Quote: “I spent it with my family, and that’s what’s most important to me. I probably had 100 of my closest friends and family there. When my dad won it in ’94, he brought it back to the farm there where we spent our summers and where I grew up for the most part. So I wanted to bring it back to the farm as well and have kind of an old-fashioned barn party, so to speak. I think it meant a lot to my town. It’s only ever seen the Cup once before I brought it back, and I hope it sees it again, but towns like that, they don’t get something like that too often.”

July 31
17 Tyler Seguin
Location: Toronto & Brampton, Ontario

Highlights: Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto; Chinguacousy Park; Westwood Arena.
Quote: “It did five different things. It was obviously one of the best days of my life. We started out with a hospital visit and then went to a local rink and then to a community spot back home and then family and friend time. It was my rink where I played in a place called Westwood in the Greater Ontario Hockey League where probably a ton of guys in this league have played once upon a time. So I wanted to take it back there to show the kids.”

AUGUST 1
18 Marc Savard
Location: Bridgenorth, Ontario
Highlight: Kawartha Golf & Country Club

AUGUST 2
19 Chris Kelly
Location: Ottawa, Ontario
Highlights: Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario; former Bruins forward Shean Donovan attended Kelly’s private party.
Quote: “It was a busy day. We started off at the hospital in Ottawa there and let some kids see it, and had a barbecue at the golf course that I live on with just friends and family. It was a great afternoon, it was lots of fun for the kids and I’m happy I had a little get-together with my family and close friends at the house just to kind of relax for myself because it is such a busy time. ... Just getting them to experience seeing it was a pretty big deal, especially being from Canada. So just getting to touch it and hold it and just get a good look at it. ... a lot of people don’t get that opportunity.”

August 3
20 Assistant coach Doug Jarvis
Location: Brockville, Ontario

August 5
21 General manager Peter Chiarelli 2
Location: Ottawa, Ontario
Highlights: University of Ottawa Law School; Nepean Corona School of Gymnastics; Marshes Golf and Country Club.

August 6
22 Head coach Claude Julien
Location: Ottawa & Navan, Ontario
Highlights: Rideau Canal, Tudor Hall

August 7 & 8
23 Patrice Bergeron
Location: Quebec City, Quebec
Highlights: Seminaire Saint-Francois (school); Children’s Hospital University of Quebec; Espace 400e Bell in the Port du Quebec; current Bruins rookie Jordan Caron and former B’s center Steve Begin attended Bergeron’s party.

August 9
24 Dennis Seidenberg
Location: Atlantic City, N.J.
Highlights: Boat ride, beach photos and christening of son Noah, cocktail party at Caesars Palladium Ballroom.
Quote: “It was great to share the Cup with my friends and family. It was a lot of fun but really exhausting — a lot of socializing and entertaining, which I’m not good at. Nonetheless, it was a lot of fun.”

August 10 & 11
25 President Cam Neely 1
Location: Martha’s Vineyard; flights from Martha’s Vineyard to Montreal to Vancouver.

August 12
26 President Cam Neely 2
Location: Maple Ridge & Port Moody, British Columbia
Highlights: Cam Neely Arena; Belcarra Regional Park

August 13
27 Mark Recchi
Location: Kamloops, British Columbia
Highlights: Kamloops Heritage Railway, Pediatric Ward at Royal Inland Hospital; fundraiser at The Brownstone on Victoria Street; Andrew Ference attended Recchi’s private party.

August 14
28 Milan Lucic
Location: Vancouver, British Columbia
Highlights: Serbian Orthodox Church; harbour cruise boat “The Princess.”

August 16
29 Assistant GM Jim Benning
Location: Sherwood, Oregon

August 18
30 Shane Hnyd
Location: Winnipeg & Neepawa, Manitoba
Highlight: Yellowhead Centre

August 19
31 Johnny Boychuk
Location: Edmonton, Alberta
Highlights: Stollery Children’s Hospital, Rexall Place, Fort Edmonton Park, Cook County Saloon.
Quote: “I went to the children’s hospital and visited all the kids. Just to see them smile made the whole day. It doesn’t matter anything else that I did for anybody. I just saw them smiling and it just made the whole day. Throughout the whole day we raised some money for the hospital. When we had the Cup and family and friends were there, we had a donation job. I think we raised $7,000 in three hours.”

August 23
32 Goaltending coach Bob Essensa

August 24
33 TIM THOMAS 1
Location: Davison, Mich.
Highlights: Thomas’ return home included a visit to Davison High School, his alma mater. The Vezina and Conn Smythe received a key to the city and had a bridge named after him.
August 25
34 Steven Kampfer
Location: Ann Arbor, Mich.
Highlights: Yost Arena, University of Michigan.
Quote: “Going to Michigan, going to Yost was awesome, to go to the place that helped me become a player I am. So to give back to the program and to Mott Children’s Hospital was awesome. It was pretty special to me. They had a huge thing on the Jumbotron there. I got to go into the locker room and take pictures there and we did donations for Mott Children’s Hospital. It was great going back there and giving back to the program and to Mott’s.”

August 28
35 Adam McQuaid
Location: Prince Edward Island
Highlights: Parade through Cornwall, tour of Cornwall schools.
Quote: “Well the whole day was pretty neat. It was really, really busy day, the town Cornwall where I’m from did a parade. So that was pretty neat to get to see all the people that came out and all the people that supported me and the team throughout the playoffs. And I also took it to where my father grew up, which is where four or five generations of McQuaids have grown up there — Riverdale. It’s out in the country and we got a lot of pictures out there. It’s beautiful, the scenery. And you can feel the family history when you’re there. So it was pretty neat. Every time I go there I just kind of reflect on how many generations have been there and I kind of think … it was pretty neat to think 100 years ago, how many of them would’ve thought while they were out plowing the fields that there’d be the Stanley Cup there some time.”

August 29
36 Brad Marchand
Location: Halifax & Hammonds Plains, Nova Scotia
Highlights: IWK Health Centre Hospital, Parade through Halifax.

August 30
37 Michael Ryder
Location: Newfoundland
Highlights: Boys and Girls Club of St. John’s, 3D helicopter ride from St. John’s to Bonavista, parade through Bonavista

September 3
38 Tim Thomas 2
Location: Burlington, Vt.
Highlights: Parade down Church Street and a visit to the UVM campus. Thomas was presented with the United States and Green Mountain battle flags by the Vermont National Guard.
Quote: “They were both great, and having it home with family and stuff was special. But the parade in Vermont … the two favorite things that I did with the Cup were the two parades. The one here in Boston and then the one in Burlington. It’s hard to compare, but the parade was special in Vermont. But in Michigan, (the trip) was great also.”

September 5
39 Andrew Ference
Location: Boston
Highlights: Parade and flash mob in North End; Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital.
Quote: “It was a lot of fun to do like the parade through the North End just because of the history with the saints and the way we carried it through. So that was really kind of crazy and fun at the same time. But the coolest part, and it was probably the shortest — and this sounds kind of cliche — but the Spaulding was really cool. … It was neat when we were doing it, but the neat part was to look back at the pictures that we took at Spaulding and see all the family members in the background and to see just the faces with the patients. Having been there before, and seeing they had some tough days with the rehab and stuff, they were just lit up. That was actually really cool.”

September 6
40 Shawn Thornton 2
Location: Boston
Highlights: Charlestown, Fenway Park, Children’s Hospital, private concert with Dropkick Murphys.
Quote: “Taking it to Children’s and having the ability to get the Dropkick Murphys to play a private show for me and my friends, it was a perfect storm with the Fenway shows being right after. It was a warmup gig for them and it was awesome there were 300, 400 people that we know personally and they were watching that. I know people would die to have that experience. So for that to happen to me was ridiculously special.”

Boston Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
Veteran Chris Clark sent packing

By Steve Conroy

The Bruins may have cleared up one mystery headed into tonight’s season opener vs. the Flyers, but they have not made all decisions public.

After he went through the entire training camp and suffered a broken nose during a fight in his final exhibition game, veteran Chris Clark was not offered a contract and was given his release yesterday, leaving the B’s with 13 healthy forwards and 22 players in all.

Coach Claude Julien still has to decide whether to go with Jordan Caron or Benoit Pouliot on the third line with Chris Kelly and Tyler Seguin. As of yesterday, he wasn’t saying, but noted the competition won’t end tonight.

"Some decisions are going to be made as far as who’s going to be in and who’s not going to be in, and that doesn’t mean it’s going to stay like that," Julien said. "The perfect example is last year we started off with Tuukka Rask in the first game. Timmy got in there and really didn’t give up his spot, so the same thing is going to be basically happening up front.

"Somebody may not start, but if somebody plays and he gets a chance, then he may not let that spot go again, so I’m leaving that open to debate."

Three of the four lines appear to be set, with David Krejci centering Nathan Horton and Milan Lucic; Patrice Bergeron between Brad Marchand and Rich Peverley on the second line, and Gregory Campbell between Shawn Thornton and Daniel Paille on the fourth line.

Take the point

One interesting preseason element was Seguin seeing time at the point on one of the two 5-on-3 power-play units. He played on the left side with Joe Corvo on the right, while Bergeron was at the top of the crease with Peverley and Marchand on the wings.

"We’ve talked about (Seguin) taking a bigger role and he’s got a good shot," Julien said. "He sees the ice well. We ran two units of 5-on-3 and he was on one of them. It doesn’t mean they were units per se, but we just made sure that everybody from the power play was comfortable in playing different positions.

"He’s a guy that we’re hoping is going to give us some important minutes on the power play. This is us giving him that opportunity, and it’s him taking that opportunity and grabbing on to it."

Seguin played the point a bit in junior hockey.

Alternate decision

Julien said that he has not yet decided on the second alternate captain behind Bergeron, though there isn’t exactly a shortage of candidates. Either Andrew Ference or Chris Kelly would make a good choice.

"You guys all know it’s not going to be an easy decision and that process is made between coaches and obviously you always get a little input from players," Julien said. "But there’s a lot of guys that could wear it and I know that it could be shared, it could be a monthly thing, it could be just a few guys. And there are also guys that don’t really need a letter to be leaders."

Defensive Adam McQuaid missed his second straight day of practice yesterday and Julien termed him "possible" for tonight. If McQuaid can’t go, Matt Bartkowski will take his place. .?.

Defensive Steve Kampfer (knee) was placed on injured reserve, expected to miss 2-4 weeks after suffering a left MCL sprain.

Boston Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
B’s entitled to a party

By Steve Conroy

There will be a hockey celebration to end all hockey celebrations tonight at the Garden when the Bruins raise their Stanley Cup championship banner.

Then the party stops and the B’s life as the hunted begins.

First up on the menu for the 2011-12 season is one of the more intriguing teams in the Eastern Conference. The Philadelphia Flyers, thanks in large part to being swept by the B’s in their Eastern Conference semifinal series last spring, may not have completely blown up their roster, but grenades were rolled into the locker room. The Flyers will have a decidedly new look when they arrive at the Garden.

Gone are former captain Mike Richards, three-time 30-goal scorer Jeff Carter, tough guy Daniel Carcillo and — perhaps most importantly — the forever turning goaltender carousel.

The Philadelphia newcomers include Jaromir Jagr, Wayne Simmonds, Maxime Talbot and Jakub Voracek up front, with Ilya Bryzgalov aboard in hopes that he can be the man to end the net nightmare. Forward Sean Couturier, who as the eighth overall pick in the June draft was taken one spot before the B’s selected defenseman Dougie Hamilton, could also be in the lineup.

The new names represent a big change for a team that was in the Stanley Cup finals in 2010. But though they made a lot of noise in the offseason, no one really knows what to expect from the revamped Flyers.

“You know what? I have no idea what’s going to happen with their team,” Bruins coach Claude Julien said after yesterday’s practice. “It’s not really that important to me. It’s more about what’s going to happen with us, as you know. But as an outsider, I don’t know. I know that they feel they’ve made some right decisions and they’re the only ones who know whether it’s good or bad and whether it’s going to make them better or whether they’ll stay the same. But that’s a decision that they decided to make and I know we’re going to see a different team.

“Goaltending was the biggest thing they seemed to feel they’ve addressed. They had a lot of depth up front and there’s still some pretty good players there, even though they lost some real good ones as well. But they replaced them and have maybe a different look. We’ll have to wait and see.”

Bryzgalov comes to the Flyers from Phoenix, where he posted a .920 save percentage or better three of the last four years with the Coyotes.

“I played with Bryz in Anaheim and, if they felt like they need to get a goalie, he’s a good guy to get,” winger Shawn Thornton said.

There will still be some familiar faces in white and orange, however. Chris Pronger, the new captain, will be back on defense following offseason back surgery. The injury curtailed his participation in the playoff series against the B’s. The Flyers also have plenty of talent left up front in Danny Briere, James van Riemsdyk and Claude Giroux.

“The first two games are against teams that we knocked out of the playoffs (the Tampa Bay Lightning will be at the Garden on Saturday) and might have a little bit of sour tastes in their mouths,” winger Brad Marchand said. “You’ve got to expect a big game and that they’re going to come out hard. Every team is going to make us tough, being the Cup champs. We just have to make sure we’re prepared.”

Tonight, the B’s won’t be battling just the Flyers.

“I think for the most part in camp we put in a good effort on the ice and skated hard trying to get back into game shape, but the main test is going to be (tonight),” defenseman Dennis Seidenberg said. “It’s going to be crazy with all the stuff going on, a lot of emotions. And then after a couple of minutes, you have to play a game and try to win it.”
Costly savings

Staff Writer

The Bruins could make the case for having one of the best goalie tandems in the NHL. After all, Tim Thomas has won the Vezina Trophy two out of the past three seasons. And while the Bruins certainly pay for what they get from the position, there are other teams that shell out more. Here’s a look at the most expensive goalie tandems in the league:

1. NEW YORK RANGERS
Henrik Lundqvist $6,875,000
Martin Biron $875,000
2011-12 total cap hit $7,750,000

2. PHILADELPHIA FLYERS
Ilya Bryzgalov $5,666,667
Sergei Bobrovsky $1,750,000
2011-12 total cap hit $7,416,667

3. CAROLINA HURRICANES
Cam Ward $6,300,000
Brian Boucher $950,000
2011-12 total cap hit $7,250,000

4. BUFFALO SABRES
Ryan Miller $6,250,000
Jhonas Enroth $675,000
2011-12 total cap hit $6,925,000

5. MINNESOTA WILD
Nicklas Backstrom $6,000,000
Josh Harding $750,000
2011-12 total cap hit $6,750,000

8. BRUINS
Tim Thomas $5,000,000
Tuukka Rask $1,250,000
2011-12 total cap hit $6,250,000

Boston Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
Is Cup half-full or half-empty?

By Stephen Harris

History shows that winning back-to-back Stanley Cup titles is a daunting task. Here are three things working in the Bruins’ favor as they attempt to defend their championship beginning tonight, as well as three obstacles standing in their way:

REPEAT DEFENDERS

1. Youth of team: The B’s probably won the Stanley Cup a year or two “early,” because their young stars — David Krejci, Milan Lucic, Patrice Bergeron, Nathan Horton, Brad Marchand, Tyler Seguin, etc. — still are learning and growing as players. As they build on last season’s experiences, they should become even better players, which should significantly improve the team overall.

2. A fine goalie tandem: If Tim Thomas has a hard time equaling his MVP-caliber play of last season, the B’s have a proven No. 1 goalie in Tuukka Rask ready to share the load. That’s a luxury not many Stanley Cup winners have enjoyed.

3. The Claude Julien system: If the Bruins do suffer from the Stanley Cup hangover, they always have Julien’s proven system to fall back on. As long as they stick to the plan, they remain competitive.

ONE AND DONE

1. Laws of probability: Like every champion, the Bruins had plenty of luck in winning their title. They mostly avoided the injuries that can ruin a playoff series (see: Krejci, dislocated wrist vs. Flyers, in 2010) and got the fortunate bounces in many wins. As anyone who’s been to Las Vegas knows, you might be lucky one day, but that doesn’t mean your good fortune will persist the next.

2. The Stanley Cup Hangover: Having gone through all the trials and tribulations required to climb hockey’s Mount Everest, and then celebrated heartily afterward, it can be tough to muster the energy and enthusiasm to make that ascent again.

3. A much-improved Eastern Conference: The Penguins will be a force again with Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin back. The Capitals and Flyers might have fixed long-running problems in goal. Teams like the Sabres, Rangers and Islanders, as well as the Lightning and Panthers, are better and very hungry. Winning three playoff series in the East won’t be easy.

REPEAT STANLEY CUP WINNERS

1930-31: Montreal
1936-37: Detroit
1947-49: Toronto
1954-55: Detroit
1956-60: Montreal
1962-64: Toronto
1965-66: Montreal
1968-69: Montreal
1974-75: Philadelphia
1976-79: Montreal
1980-83: New York Islanders
1984-85: Edmonton
1987-88: Edmonton
1991-92: Pittsburgh
1997-98: Detroit

Boston Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
Herald staff picks

By Herald Staff

STEPHEN HARRIS
Eastern Conference champ: Pittsburgh Penguins
Western Conference champ: San Jose Sharks
Stanley Cup champ: Penguins
Skinny: With Crosby and Malkin back, the Pens hand the Sharks more heartbreak.

STEVE CONROY
Eastern Conference champ: Pittsburgh Penguins
Western Conference champ: San Jose Sharks
Stanley Cup champ: Penguins
Skinny: The Sharks finally win the West, but the Pens' health holds up in the end.

JIM LAZAR
Eastern Conference champ: Boston Bruins
Western Conference champ: Vancouver Canucks
Stanley Cup champ: Bruins
Skinny: It'll be fun to watch the Bruins slap the Sedin sisters around again.

STEVE BUCKLEY
Eastern Conference champ: Bruins
Western Conference champ: San Jose Sharks
Stanley Cup champ: Bruins
Skinny: Rask is solid during the season, keeping Thomas fresh for more Cup heroics.

MATT KALMAN
Eastern Conference champ: New York Rangers
Western Conference champ: Chicago Blackhawks
Stanley Cup champ: Blackhawks
Skinny: Super deep team with rising-star goalie takes down the elite netminder.

Boston Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
Claude Julien has pulse of Bruins

By Steve Conroy

Claude Julien will take part in a ceremony tonight that will signify the pinnacle of the hockey lifer’s career when the banner commemorating his team’s Stanley Cup victory will be hoisted to the Garden rafters. 

And, the Bruins coach admitted, he’s dreading it.

Julien knows from his experience of winning Canada’s junior championship — the Memorial Cup — with the Hull Olympiques in 1997 that, no matter how much you want to get on with the next season, memories come rushing back.

“That’s when it hits you emotionally, when you realize what you’ve accomplished,” Julien said. “I’m kind of getting myself mentally ready for that because it was a pretty emotional night (in ’97). As much as I was pretty cool about winning the Cup, when you saw the flashbacks and the stuff that had been accomplished, you kind of get emotional.”

But with the exception of tonight’s festivities, Julien’s mind already has turned the page to this season, and it’s been like that since June 19 when he conducted the exit interviews with his players before they headed to Fenway Park [map] for their duck boat entrance.

By the time the draft rolled around later that week, Julien was into the process of picking other coaches’ brains to discover why it’s so difficult for a champion to repeat in this league. His targets included Scotty Bowman, who coached the last team to repeat (the 1997-98 Red Wings), as well as his own assistant Doug Jarvis, who played for Bowman’s Montreal team that won four straight from 1976-79 and was an assistant for a Dallas Stars club that won the Cup in the 1998-99 season and made it to the finals the next spring.

Julien knows that if the B’s start taking things for granted — including making the playoffs — they are doomed.

“At the end of all the talks (with other Cup-winning coaches), what you come out with is there have been different types of challenges,” Julien said. “For me, it’s about knowing what kind of challenges happen and (being) ready for those.

“The one thing you don’t want to do is panic. Panic as a coach is the worst thing you can do. All players can sense that. You have to somehow have control of the situations, of your emotions, and make sure you make the right decisions. There’s going to be a lot of emphasis on me staying on top of all those things with our coaching staff, making sure the decisions are made appropriately.”

Julien reached the ultimate goal after more than 30 years in hockey, but if anything’s different about him, it surprised, it’s simply in how he might now be perceived. He’s still as much about the journey as he is the destination. He loves showing up at the rink early in the morning, and if he doesn’t leave until after midnight, that’s fine.

Julien never will be a celebrity coach. As commanding a presence as he is at the rink, he prefers, as he says, “to fly under the radar” away from it.

Quick to point out the solid work of assistants Jarvis, Geoff Ward and Doug Houda, Julien doesn’t try to cultivate a genius persona, either. And when his Bruins won the Cup, he was more than happy to cede the stage to his jubilant players.

“In my mind, you push the players so hard all year and demand so much that when they win, they deserve to celebrate, and you as a coach need to step back and give them that time,” Julien said.

One of the first things Julien stressed to general manager Peter Chiarelli after the exit meetings was that he didn’t want any at the rink before Labor Day. They not only earned their rest, they needed it. But now that they’re ready to start a new season, Julien is eager to go about the task of repeating — one step at a time, mind you.

“I think if we look at ourselves as being in the mix for the Stanley Cup again, we’re only kidding ourselves because other teams in the past have had their troubles just making the playoffs the following year. We have to understand that’s reality,” Julien said. “That’s the cautious side of me, to make sure we’re in the right frame of mind.

“You hear me often say that it’s a humbling game and that it takes a long time to make it to the top, but it doesn’t take long to slide down. I don’t want our team to do that. I want to do everything I can in order to keep our team grounded, focused and hungry.”

Julien’s regular-season winning percentage is .616 in four years with the Bruins, pretty good when you consider he took over a team that had not made the playoffs in the two seasons before his arrival. In his first year, he helped improve the team defense by 67 goals, took an injury-riddled squad into the postseason and nearly knocked off a heavily favored Montreal team. The following season, his B’s took a quantum leap, posting an Eastern Conference-best 116 points and improving in scoring by 62 goals.

Under his stewardship, all those Bruins caps and T-shirts that had been in mothballs since the early 1990s came out again, even before the Cup run.

But in this town, a coach is measured by his championships, and after putting up such a fight in that seven-game loss to the Habs, Julien experienced two major playoff disappointments against Carolina and Philadelphia.

Off with Julien’s head went the familiar refrain on the airwaves after blowing a 3-0 lead against the Flyers in 2010, the mountain of progress be damned. And it didn’t really stop until Zdeno Chara raised the Cup on that magical night in Vancouver.

And who knows? The first two-game losing streak this season might start the criticism all over again.

“It’s always nice to be appreciated, but I’m certainly not going to lose sleep over the negative stuff,” Julien said. “Coaches are going to be under the microscope.”

“There’s always second-guessing...?..%. (Last season) I knew it was going on because people would tell me that it was, but my response was, ’I don’t want to know, I don’t care. I just want to do my job.’”

The banner being raised tonight proves he knows how to do get that job done.

Boston Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
By Steve Conroy

When the Chicago Blackhawks won the Stanley Cup in 2009-10, it was well-known that management would have to significantly pare down the championship roster because of the salary cap.

By the end of that summer, good, young players Dustin Byfuglien, Kris Versteeg, Andrew Ladd, Ben Eager and Antti Niemi blew out of the Windy City.

The Bruins, who are attempting to become the first team to repeat as Cup champions since Detroit in 1997 and '98, are in much better shape than Chicago.

The B's lost only three players — veteran forwards Mark Recchi and Michael Ryder and defenseman Tomas Kaberle — from last season and boast a core of eight returning players from last year's team who are 26 or younger. Patrice Bergeron and Nathan Horton are 26, David Krejci and Adam McQuaid are 25, Milan Lucic, Brad Marchand and Tuukka Rask are 23 and Tyler Seguin, perhaps the most talented of the bunch, is 19.

Few are predicting a dynastic run for these Bruins like the Oilers of the 1980s or the Canadiens of the 1970s, not with the parity in the league and the lengthy postseason schedule teams must endure. They might not have that explosive wow factor, but the B's should be in the hunt for years to come.

“The potential's there, that's for sure,” said Krejci, who is one of only two players in the core group (Rask) without a contract for 2012-13. “You look around here and almost everybody is young. Even the older guys are in great shape. You look at (Zdeno Chara) and he's got a contract for like seven more years.

“I believe that the young guys here, including me, are not in our prime yet. I feel like every year, I get better at one thing, I feel like I'm getting better, stronger, I'm improving on my skating ability, so I believe my prime time is still ahead of me. The same for (Lucic) .??. and (Horton) and (Bergeron).”

All players have room for improvement at any stage of their careers, but many in the B's young core still could improve their games greatly, most notably Seguin, who has seen time as both a center and a winger in his second training camp. Seguin came through with a well-timed offensive explosion in the playoffs and demonstrated he can hang tough in tight-checking Games 7s.

Marchand, meanwhile, scored 21 goals while spending the first half of the regular season on the fourth line. Expecting a bump up from that number is reasonable.

“I think management has done an unreal job of bringing in great young guys,” Marchand said. "They're building a great core of guys here, guys like (Bergeron), (Krejci) and (Lucic). There's a lot of talent and the guys are still so young and the guys they're bringing are in their prime. It seems like everyone is brought in at the right time to fit their role and everyone's playing that to a T right now. We're going to be a great team for years to come.”

The young Bruins need only look to Pittsburgh to know the climb to the top can be slick. With two first overall picks (Sidney Crosby and Marc-Andre Fleury) and two second overall picks (Evgini Malkin and Jordan Staal), the Pens seemed as poised as anyone to put together a long run of high-end success. And they seemed well on their way when they went to two straight Cup finals, winning the second.

But in the past two seasons, they failed to reach the conference finals. Last season, devastating injuries to Crosby and Malkin added to struggles. In 2009-10, they simply were upset by goalie Jaroslav Halak and the Canadiens. That's the NHL in the 21st century.

“We've had our share of that before, with me getting hurt and then (Krejci) getting hurt in the playoffs,” Bergeron said. “So yeah, we've had our share and you need everyone to be healthy. You saw that last year in the playoffs. We were pretty lucky in that matter and we went a long way.”
Tim Thomas, Tuukka Rask have it covered

By Steve Conroy

One guy is trying to regain the form that was good enough to make him a starting goalie two years ago. Another guy has a chance to build on what could be a Hall of Fame resume. Together, they make the best 1-2 goalie combination that the National Hockey League has to offer.

They are, of course, Tim Thomas and Tuukka Rask, both of whom Bruins coach Claude Julien considers to be No. 1 goalies.

The question now is how to dole out playing time for both of them.

"One thing that's pretty obvious, with the amount of games Tim played last year and where he is in his career, you've got to think about making sure he gets the proper rest," Julien said. "Will Tuukka play a big role? We hope so. And that won't take anything away from the strength of our team. If anything, it will make it a little better."

The 37-year-old Thomas is coming off a dream season. After going 35-11 with nine overtime losses and a 2.00 goals-against average in the regular season, he played all 25 postseason games, winning 16 of them and posting a 1.98 GAA. It was the kind of season only one other man has enjoyed. Only former Philadelphia Flyers great Bernie Parent did what Thomas did last year, which was win the Vezina Trophy, the Conn Smythe Trophy and the Stanley Cup in one season. Parent actually did it in back-to-back campaigns and so, if you know anything about Thomas and his competitive fire, you know where at least some of his motivation will come from this season.

Rask, on the other hand, certainly wants to improve on what for him was a difficult season. Early on, he was mostly the victim of a lack of offensive support, and then things seemed to snowball on him. He finished 11-14 with two overtime losses and a 2.67 GAA in 27 starts. He never quite looked like he did the year before, when the young Finn let people know why he was one of the top goaltending prospects in the world by posting a 22-12-5 record with a 1.97 GAA in 39 starts.

The 23-year-old looked sound again in net during the preseason and appears ready to resume the upward arc of his career. He also proved last year that he knows how to be a team player, basking in the glory of the Stanley Cup as much as anyone despite Thomas taking every postseason start.

"At the end of the day, it's not about you. When your team wins, you win," Rask said. "When you win the Stanley Cup, everybody's happy."

But don't mistake that happiness with satisfaction. Rask has not fallen into the mindset of being a backup goalie.

"I know for a fact Tuukka won't let that happen. He's hungry," general manager Peter Chiarelli said. "At some point, I know it will be Tuukka's time. He's a guy whose got things in perspective and I wouldn't fear him falling into that mindset. He's always going to be disappointed if he doesn't get the bulk of the games, but he's mature enough to know that, on merit, he will get it. When is that? I don't know. He also recognizes where he's at in his career and where Tim's at in his career. It's a fairly compatible relationship right now."

Thomas agrees.

"It's a good working relationship," said Thomas, whose ideal number of games is around 55 — the exact number he started last regular season. "I've been fortunate to play with a lot of goalies who are really good people, too, and Tuukka falls into that category. It's such a relationship that I don't even think about it. He's my teammate and we just show up...??. The competition is always against yourself. It's never against the other guy."

One thing to keep an eye on will be how Thomas handles success this time around. After the first of his two Vezina wins in 2008-09, he followed with a subpar, then injury-addled, season. But Chiarelli feels Thomas is mature enough to learn from what did and didn't work two years ago. The GM also believes the goalie is blessed with a strong self-awareness that serves him well.

Chiarelli hasn't spent much time looking at what it would take for Thomas to get the Hall of Fame call some day — three Vezinas have usually done the trick, though length of career could be an issue — but he acknowledged it's in play.

"If he bangs out another Vezina, he'd obviously have to be considered. And he's motivated," Chiarelli said. "What really impresses me about Tim is that you see these workhorse goalies and they want to get their 70, 75 games a year, but Tim recognizes that he can't do that and have the longevity and success in the playoffs. He's a wise man."

As for how the playing time will be parcelled out, Chiarelli doesn't think it will be any more difficult than in past years.

"Every year you have to balance what guys are doing on merit, you have to balance the hot hand, you have to balance the body of work, you have to balance where the guys are physically," Chiarelli said. "A lot goes on behind the scenes with how the whole goalie plan is carried out. Every year is tricky."

And if figuring whether to play Thomas or Rask is a problem, well, there are a lot of teams in the NHL that would like to have that one.

Boston Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
Brain study finds damage in ex-Sabre Rick Martin

By Jimmy Golen

BOSTON - Researchers studying the brain of former Buffalo Sabres great Rick Martin found damage consistent with the trauma they found in other former NHL players. The difference is Martin wasn't a fighter.

Martin is the first non-enforcer who has been diagnosed with Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy by researchers at a Boston University brain bank.

Martin died of a heart attack at the age of 59 in March. All three former NHL players who have donated their brains for research so far have been diagnosed with CTE, a neurodegenerative disease linked to repeated brain trauma.

Martin, a seven-time All-Star, played 13 NHL seasons for the Sabres and Los Angeles Kings. He scored 382 goals as part of the legendary "French Connection" line with Gilbert Perreault and Rene Robert.

"Rick Martin's case shows us that even hockey players who don't engage in fighting are at risk for CTE, likely because of the repetitive brain trauma players receive throughout their career," said Chris Nowinski, a founder of the Sports Legacy Institute at BU. "We hope the decision makers at all levels of hockey consider this finding as they continue to make adjustments to hockey to make the game safer for participants."

Further details of Martin's brain tissue analysis will be released in a medical journal. But the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy said his family wanted the initial findings publicized "to raise awareness of the dangers of brain trauma in sports and encourage greater efforts to make sports safer for the brain."

Dr. Ann McKee, who studied Martin's brain, had previously found CTE in the brains of former NHL tough guys Bob Probert and Reggie Fleming. CTE can only be diagnosed after death.

Martin's case was considered Stage 2 - with Stage 4 being the most severe - a stage unlikely to significantly affect his cognitive abilities or behavior. But researchers said it was significant because he did not fight and his only known concussion occurred in 1977 when his head hit the ice while not wearing a helmet, causing immediate convulsions.

Martin began wearing a helmet after that injury and wore it for his next four years before retiring.

"I think that day was a real awakening for everybody. But it was also all for the good of the game, too," Robert told The Associated Press in March after a memorial service for Martin in Buffalo. "I think when you get into that situation you realize that before anything starts to happen I need to start wearing one."

Dr. Robert Cantu said most 59-year-olds who have been studied had more advanced CTE. It was not clear why Martin's case was less severe, he said.

"We believe that repetitive brain trauma is a necessary factor for developing the disease, but not a sufficient factor," said Robert Stern, a co-director of the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy. "We now must learn why some people get the disease and others don't and why CTE progresses more quickly and severely in some individuals than in others."

The CSTE brain bank was founded in 2008 as a collaboration between BU, the Sports Legacy Institute and the Department of Veterans Affairs. It contains 96 specimens, including the brain of former NHL enforcer Derek Boogaard, who died this year at 28; results of that study are pending.

McKee has analyzed more than 70 former athletes, and more than 50 have shown signs of CTE, including 14 of 15 former NFL players along with college and high school football players, hockey players, professional wrestlers and boxers. More than 500 living athletes have committed to donate their brain.
HELSINKI, Finland -- Teppo Numminen looked up at the rafters of Hartwall Arena, saw the Team Finland banners and immediately thought back to all the games he'd played in the place through the years.

"I had a lot of good games here," Numminen said, "and bad games, too!"

Numminen was quick with a joke Wednesday because he felt at home. The Tampere native grew up two hours from Helsinki and played often in the Finnish capital.

"It's really exciting to be home, be somewhere where you're from and somewhere you're really proud of," Numminen said. "Playing with the Team Finland here in front of the home crowd, it's a lot of great memories."

Numminen will add another Friday when the Buffalo Sabres start the regular season against Anaheim in Helsinki. This time, the experience will be as a coach instead of as a player.

Numminen is beginning his third week as an assistant on Lindy Ruff's staff. It's been a whirlwind stint of learning a new profession while traveling through Europe.

"It's been a lot going on," Numminen said. "I'm just grateful to have such a great coaching team working with me. I've learned a lot. It's been a great learning couple weeks, and it's been exciting."

Though the Sabres have been a model of consistency with Ruff behind the bench since 1997, this offseason saw tremendous turnover with his staff. Longtime associate coach Brian McCutcheon was let go. Ruff added Numminen and promoted development coach Kevyn Adams to an assistant's role on the bench.

"It's brought some new energy," Ruff said. "It's brought enthusiasm. Teppo brings a little bit of a European influence to our staff. People have commented that he always has a smile on his face. He's an extremely positive person.

"Kevy did a lot of great work with our young players last year. He's got a tremendous rapport with them, and I think the players were happy that he was named an assistant coach. There's some new energy, and I think that part was important to our staff."

The Sabres have typically had two assistant coaches, but with holdover James Patrick also around, they are up to three. It's given them more time to teach.

"We're going to have to as a staff grow and help each other, really figure out what the best tools are for each guy," Ruff said. "It's a sorting-out process, but I think through the preseason I like what the staff has done. We've done a lot of individual work with players, and due to the size of the staff you can spend time now. You can have Teppo spend time with one or two of our defensemen. You can have James Patrick and Kevyn Adams doing the same. In that way, it's been easier."

Numminen sits in the press box on game nights and communicates via headset with Adams. With seven preseason games on their resume, they feel they have a good understanding of each other. Numminen will observe an opponent's forechecking scheme or breakout strategy, and he'll relay the information to Adams.

"You've got to make adjustments, so it's a really important part of the game with the constant communication we can have," Adams said after Wednesday's light practice. "He sees something and lets me know to let Lindy know and James. We both kind of had to work at it in preseason, but you start to understand how to help each other, and we're doing it."

Adams spent last season working with players during and after practices, showing them tips he learned during a Stanley Cup-winning career. He did that again Wednesday, but the games will give him an added teaching technique.

"I'm working with the forwards as they come off, so it's a little more hands-on in terms of immediately having feedback," he said.

The Sabres will practice in Hartwall Arena again this morning before getting focused for Friday's NHL Premiere Series debut. Numminen hopes the game against the Ducks will be a positive memory the next time he returns to his homeland.

"It's been exciting to watch the game upstairs and watch it on video afterward, see the game in a little different way," Numminen said. "That's why you kind of start coaching. You miss the game and you think and believe that you can help the young players with the knowledge and mistakes that you've gone through during your career. That's why I'm here, try to give a tip here or there and help them out."

Buffalo News LOADED: 10.06.2011
Lee Stempniak is beginning to fit right in with the Flames.

Niklas Hagman readily admits the newspaper business pages mean nothing to him.

When it comes to reading, Stieg Larsson’s Girl With the Dragon Tattoo trilogy is more his style.

“I know Lee understands that business stuff,” Hagman says, motioning to his neighbour in the Calgary Flames locker-room. “He’s a smart, smart guy.”

Indeed. Lee Stempniak, 28, studied finance at Dartmouth College and worked as an intern on Wall Street for Goldman Sachs.

A lawyer by trade, Flames GM Jay Feaster clearly loves to surround himself with intelligent people. Assistant GM John Weisbrod obtained an English degree from Harvard. Troy Ward, head coach of the farm team in Abbotsford, holds an undergraduate degree in education and a Master’s in administration. Chris Snow, the new director of video and statistical analysis, graduated from Syracuse and worked at the Boston Globe as the Red Sox beat writer before moving over to hockey.

Enter Stempniak, a goal-scoring winger obtained this summer from Phoenix for centre Daymond Langkow. Brains are not lacking in this boy. Not by a long shot.

“I was an intern on a bond sales desk,” Stempniak said. “I was just sort of there learning the ropes and helping out. I had never been to New York City before. I moved there, took the subway on my first day, and I was on Wall Street.

“So it was an unbelievable experience.”

At the NHL level, hockey players receive healthy (minor understatement) compensation for their troubles. The spotlight is intense, with thousands upon thousands of fans dissecting — and often criticizing — every move. But that stint on Wall Street gave Stempniak an up-close look at one of the most high-stress jobs imaginable.

“It’s a go, go, go environment,” he said. “Certainly high-paced.

“It taught me a completely different side of finance that I had no idea about. But I think at that point in my life, I was already in hockey mode —— trying to play hockey for a living.”

A fifth-round selection of the St. Louis Blues in 2003, Stempniak went on to score 15 goals in his rookie season (2005/06.) A natural around the net, the six-foot-one, 195-pounder popped 27 goals as a sophomore.

Two years later, the Blues dealt him to Toronto for Alex Steen and Carlo Colaiacovo. After two years in the centre of the hockey universe, the Leafs traded the struggling winger to Phoenix for a prospect and a couple late-round draft picks.

The move provided Stempniak with a fresh start. He responded with 14 goals in 18 games.

“He’s a goal-scorer,” Feaster said upon consummating the trade with Phoenix. “A streaky goal scorer. He’s a guy who, when his confidence is high, he can fill the back of the net.

“When he loses confidence — or feels that the group has lost confidence in him — then his offensive game struggles.”

Stempniak grew up just outside of Buffalo in West Seneca, N.Y. As a part-time job, he worked at the pro shop in the local arena and received special permission to use the ice after closing.

“My brother and I would skate for 40 minutes or whatever when they were cleaning up,” he said. “It was awesome. We got a lot of time on the ice with pucks and things like that. I would like to think it made a difference.”

To this day, Stempniak is a goal-scorer, not a setup man. He will never be mistaken for Alex Tanguay.

“He is going to get his assists by putting the shot on net,” Feaster said. “He’s going to pick up his assists by putting the shot on the net.

“The goalie is going to make the save, and the rebound is going to be converted.”

For the Flames, Stempniak is expected to start the year on a line with Olle Jokinen and Curtis Glencross. His $2.3 million contract expires at the end of the season.

After less than a month in Calgary, the newcomer has already fallen in love with the mountain vistas outside of his home just west of the city.

Just like in every other walk of life, NHL veterans get caught up in the daily grind, at times. Human nature dictates the extraordinary becoming ordinary — regardless of the occupation — after a time. But Stempniak realizes he has it awfully good, especially in these days of turmoil on the financial markets and intermittent crisis on his old stomping grounds.

“I love playing hockey,” he said. “I really enjoy the things that go into it — whether it’s training in the off-season or working hard after practice. It’s a dream come true to be playing in the NHL. You just want to maximize every opportunity you have.”

Calgary Herald: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Feaster fosters open lines of communication

By SCOTT CRUICKSHANK

Flames GM Jay Feaster, back, likes to keep his communications lines open with his team, including Craig Conroy, his special assistant.

Photograph by: Stuart Gradon, Calgary Herald

No one would dare to knock the qualifications of these gentlemen.

And on this day, Michel Goulet and Craig Conroy — 1,000-game forwards in the National Hockey League — happen to be talking shop. Specifically, Sven Baertschi and the prospect’s penchant for shooting glove side.

That ploy clearly works in junior, the two solemnly agreed. But in the NHL? Against NHL goalies? Not likely.

Calgary Flames general manager Jay Feaster got wind of this training-camp conversation between his deep-thinking employees.

He was troubled by it.

"After hearing about it," says Feaster, "I went to Connie and said, 'Don't tell each other . . . it doesn't do us any good to have you two talking to each other. Go tell the kid.'"

Feaster volunteers this anecdote to make a point — the lines of communication are now open at Flames headquarters.

It's not a furrow-browed dictatorship.

Meaning if you can help, then help. By all means. Please.

"That's where we want to get as an organization," says Feaster. "That you can have that observation, and you have the confidence and the support to know that you can go have that conversation with the player. And it's going to go down a whole lot better — and it's going to go down 10 times better — coming from Connie or Michel, the Hall of Famer, than it is from Brent (Sutter) as the coach. It's human nature. In Tampa, it meant much more to Vinny Lecavalier when (director of player personnel) Bill Barber suggested something to him about his play than when (coach) John Tortorella did.

"The big thing is, we have to get to that point. It's about organizational success. And that's the culture we want to build."

That's not to say that members of the Flames' front office — a significant chunk of which was overhauled this past summer — don't know their places.

Because they do — and so does everyone else in the city.

On Sept. 1, the Flames took the rare measure of issuing a press release to announce the structure of the 2011-12 staff, including slots for everyone, from Feaster to the Abbotsford Heat's assistant equipment manager (Scott Starrak). Indicated, too, were the supervisory checks at each level.

"The relational aspects of the way everyone interacts with each other, that tends to be more organic . . . but the obvious chain of command is black and white," says newcomer John Weisbrod, the assistant general manager (player personnel). "In every aspect of life you talk about the importance of communication. When there's lack of clarity in the chain of command, then that's communication gone wrong at the highest level, at the most elemental level."

And front-office friction — "Infighting or power struggles or politics," says Weisbrod — is trouble. Counter-productive squawking rarely stays contained within top-floor boardrooms.

"Players always know if they're working for an organization that's buttoned up and on the same page," says Weisbrod, "or if there's friction going on over their heads."

Conroy, special assistant to the general manager, agrees.

"For sure," says Conroy, whose point of view is still the players'. "We know if the coaches don't get along. If management is having a problem, we know. I mean, you think we don't know anything . . . but, it's true, we do know what's going on. You feel it, tension and different things."

Now, though, with a clean slate — with handful of new hires, with a new man in charge — the Flames are eager to move forward.

"I'm confident that it'll be good," says Weisbrod, who, as a member of the Boston Bruins' staff, captured the Stanley Cup only a few months ago. "Usually the deciding factor on effectiveness, ultimately, is the culture within the whole group . . . if relationships are sound and solid."

But sound and solid does not mean boot-licking and brown-nosing, according to Feaster.

"I've said to my group, 'This is a participatory democracy, but at the end of the day the decision responsibility stops at my desk,'” he says. "But I don't want to be doing that in a vacuum. I want everyone's opinion — and I want their unvarnished opinion. I don't want them to pre-suppose what the answer might be."

Rather, he wants debate.

Vigorous if necessary. Heated on occasion.

"Conflict is healthy. Disagreement is healthy," says Feaster. "As long as we can do that in a way that isn't personal, isn't attacking, isn't backstabbing, isn't trying to get someone else's job . . . we'll have success as an organization. I always thought it was the most important thing in Tampa . . . there was never a day that I thought, 'I wonder what Bill Barber is doing today to undermine me.' There was never a day when John Tortorella came in and said, 'I wonder what that S.O.B. Craig Ramsay is doing to get my job.' Everyone wanted to do their job.

"That's what we want here."

Feaster, the pride of Harrisburg, Penn., began filling his front office last season.

First came Conroy, a Potsdam, N.Y., native, followed by Weisbrod from Long Island, Chris Snow from Boston.

The flavour is unmistakably American, eh?

"Candidly, I didn't set out (to do that)," says Feaster. "If Craig Conroy had been Lithuanian, we'd have a Lithuanian special assistant to the general manager. Same thing on Weis. It wasn't a thoughtful, 'Oh, I've got to go get a U.S. guy.' All of a sudden, it just happened that way."

"Connie and I have talked about this. Our goal is to be the first team to bring the Stanley Cup back to Canada (since 1993). That way, maybe we can get the Order of Canada from the Prime Minister."

Calgary Herald: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Calgary’s constant forces: Iginla and Kiprusoff

By SCOTT CRUICKSHANK

Miikka Kiprusoff has the most saves in Flames franchise history. Photograph by: Michael Martin, NHLI via Getty Images

Let’s say you’re a faithful observer.

You never fail to slalom to the big rink to watch your heroes, often after scraping windows and boosting batteries, frequently with spinning tires and gasping heaters, sometimes through blizzards and slush-piles. Which is to say you’re loyal. You don’t miss a date. Year after year.

Your reward is a window on the hockey world.


In short, you’ve seen everything.

Everything except this:

A night in the past eight winters when neither Jarome Iginla nor Miikka Kiprusoff appears on Saddledome ice.

Since the netminder’s acquisition — Nov. 16, 2003 — the Calgary Flames’ twin pillars have been remarkably resilient, remarkably reliable.

Remarkably present.

In the Flames’ 61 regular- and post-season games following Kiprusoff’s arrival from the San Jose Sharks, the dynamic duo has bowed out on the same day only twice.

And never in Calgary.

These are the only two-headed no-shows:

n April 8, 2007, at the Colorado Avalanche. A 6-3 loss in Game 82 as the Flames rest their two (healthy) stars and gear up for a first-round shellacking by the Detroit Red Wings.

n Jan. 19, 2004, at the Anaheim Ducks. Kiprusoff’s left knee has issues, while Iginla is sidelined with a sprained ankle. (“I don’t follow (Iginla) into the dressing room like he’s God,” Flames boss Darryl Sutter had groused, “and ask him if he’s all right.”) No matter — Roman Turek stops 36 shots, while Craig Conroy picks up four helpers, in a 5-1 triumph. Curiously, this stands as the lone win in a stretch of 23 (!) visits to Anaheim.

Aside from those two evenings, the stars of this show have been Miikka Sakari Kiprusoff and Jarome Arthur-Leigh Adekunle Tig Junior Elvis Iginla for nearly a decade.

Yet many in the community suggested that the club had been ripe for a summertime teardown (guilty). Flames general manager Jay Feaster, though, faithfully kept the pieces in place.

Sure, Robyn Regehr, the third member of the core, was flipped eastward, but Iginla and Kiprusoff did not budge.

Young fans in this city have never cheered for a Flames squad without those two fixtures — the captain, the goalie.

“I can’t imagine watching the Calgary Flames without Jarome,” says Conroy, former front-line presence, current front-office staffer. “From what Jarome does for this city to what he does on the ice . . . .”

Because of a cranky back, No. 12 didn’t get a lick of pre-season toil in recent weeks.

But Flames coach Brent Sutter is confident that Iginla, 34, will miss minimal time. In fact, maybe none.

“You can just see in the exhibition games — without Jarome here, it’s a different look team,” continues Conroy. “It’s a different vibe. He is the face of the franchise and he is our leader. I always see Jarome starting his career here and ending it here.”

Given the star winger’s reputation for durability, Iginla may play Saturday’s season opener against the Pittsburgh Penguins and grind his way toward a fifth consecutive 82-game campaign. Eight times in his career, he’s skated the full slate. In the past nine seasons, he’s passed up only 20 contests.

And Kiprusoff?

His annual workload is well-established. Since the lockout, the skinny netminder has munched up the starts, ringing up appearance totals of 74, 74, 76, 74, 73, 71.

It comes as no surprise that Kiprusoff needs only a single dubya to become the franchise’s all-time winningest goalie. Today he’s deadlocked, at 262, with Mike Vernon.

Kiprusoff, who turns 35 this month, is already the Flames’ most- peppered person — 13,328 shots against — and, obviously, he’s responded with the most saves in franchise history. His career 2.43 goal-against average is the team’s finest. Ditto that .914 save percentage of his.

Shutouts, No. 34 has collected 37. Next on the Flames’ charts? Dan Bouchard with 20.

And, barring injury, Kiprusoff will surpass Vernon for most appearances in the Calgary net. He’s a mere 44 nords behind.

All told, the Finn has bagged 276 wins, good for 32nd among all goalies in National Hockey League history. Dead ahead is Tiny Thompson.

Iginla, meanwhile, has taken a Sharpie to the Flames’ scrapbook.

His games (1,106), points (1,006), goals (484), power-play goals (151), game-winning goals (76), shots (3,641) have put him at the top of each franchise pile.

Iginla does happen to be 87 assists behind Al MacInnis and his 609.

Not that he’s losing sleep over that.

Especially considering his steady progression on the NHL’s all-time charts.

The dawn of the 2011-12 campaign finds Iginla tied for 75th — with Lanny McDonald — for career points, putting him within reach of names such as Henri Richard and Rod Gilbert and Joey Mullen.

With his 484 tallies, there’s the inevitable milestone. And it won’t take long. This player, after all, has scored 28 or more goals in a dozen consecutive winters.

Iginla is currently tied for 46th — with Darryl Sittler — in career goals. Jean Beliveau is not far away.

In other words, you are watching history. Iginla and Kiprusoff carve out their places in franchise lore, in league history, at the same time, often on the same nights. And that, alone, is good reason to plug in the car this winter.

Calgary Herald: LOADED: 10.06.2011
BANFF — Cory Sarich and Alex Tanguay are the proud owners of Stanley Cup rings. They are, in fact, the only two players in the Calgary Flames lineup who have earned championship jewelry in the National Hockey League.

Similarities end there, though. The ceremonies where they got their hockey bling were at opposite ends of the glitz spectrum.

One was modest, conducted under a cloak of near-secrecy. The other featured a posh setting and some show-stopping wizardry.

“We had a very nice party at the Cherry Hills Country Club in Denver — Arnold Palmer won the (1960) U.S. Open there,” recalls Tanguay, who, as a member of the Colorado Avalanche, cinched the 2001 National Hockey League crown. “We had a nice dinner. The whole team was there — but Ray Bourque wasn’t there for some reason. But the magician doing the entertainment at the end of the night, he made Ray appear with the Stanley Cup rings. He wasn’t there, then, all of a sudden, boom, like Houdini he came in.

“It was great. Very interesting.”

Sarich, as every hockey fan in Calgary knows, bagged his title in 2004 at the expense of the Flames.

But instead of having an opportunity to revel in an evening of extravagance, the Tampa Bay Lightning got labour strife.

“So ours was pretty hush-hush,” says Sarich. “Because of the lockout, we were operating around league rules and things like that. I’m not sure we were even all there for it. We got a quick little lunch, said hi to the guys, that was it. Guys went their separate ways.

“It was so manufactured. A little bit weird. I don’t remember it in great detail because it was such a flash. We never really did get a great chance to go out and celebrate.”

John Weisbrod, in a matter of hours, will have a tale of his own.

Thursday night — before puck-drop between the Boston Bruins and the visiting Philadelphia Flyers — the Flames assistant general manager will receive his Stanley Cup ring.

“I wasn’t really planning on going to any of it,” says Weisbrod, a member of the Bruins’ scouting staff for five years. “When (Bruins boss Peter Chiarelli) was kind enough to call and ask me, I declined. I was thinking they could mail it to me.”

That’s when Weisbrod’s current supervisor cleared his throat.

Flames general manager Jay Feaster — who, like coach Brent Sutter, has a ring of his own — convinced Weisbrod to make the trip east. It would be worth it.

“I’m not big on that stuff, generally speaking. Like, the page has turned and it’s time to move on,” says Weisbrod. “But in the big picture and in the long term, it’ll end up having been the right thing to do. The enjoyment of the day for me will be seeing my friends back there, colleagues and people on the staff. Peter and Jim Benning and Don Sweeney. As always seems to be the case, any time you win something it’s because that group is really tight, really together, really in sync, really cares about each other. So I’ve got a lot of love for those guys back there.

“Getting the ring while I’m there is almost secondary.”

Weisbrod, by the way, doesn’t plan to wear the thing.

Slowed away, it won’t be lonely — not with baubles from Calder Cup, Turner Cup and NCAA championships already in Weisbrod’s safe.

“So I’ll just put it in there and away we go,” he says.

Tanguay slipped his on the night he got it — “It’s certainly beautiful, it’s certainly big” — but not once since.

Sarich, however, is often encouraged to trot out his ring.

“I haven’t worn it in a long time,” he says. “But we go on little trips — like the States this past summer — and my wife (Reagan) is, like, ‘Bring it along. Wear it.’ I’m very proud of it. I know exactly where it is. But I don’t know. It does bring attention . . . so, for the most part, I keep it to myself.”

Calgary Herald: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Flames avoid drama on NHL’s final cut-down day

Staff Writer

Calgary Flames veteran forward Brendan Morrison will start the NHL regular season on the injury reserve list.

Cut-down day, as it turned out, packed much less dramatic punch than anticipated.

The Calgary Flames got down to 22 men — 23 being the maximum — by the National Hockey League’s deadline Wednesday afternoon in rather straightforward fashion.

No harried trades.
No big names to the minors.

Simply:
C Brendan Morrison (knee), LW Raitis Ivanans (concussion) remain on the injury-reserve list, which is where they’d finished the 2010-11 season. Being at 22 players, the Flames, if they wanted, could activate Morrison without any roster juggling.

C Mikael Backlund (finger) is placed on IR. He underwent surgery on Tuesday, and now he’s sidelined for six weeks.

D Brett Carson (back), because his injury occurred during the summer, holds non-roster status.

D Jordan Henry, having cleared waivers, is assigned to the Abbotsford Heat of the American Hockey League.

All of which leaves your 2011-12 Flames:

Forwards (13)
Alex Tanguay/David Moss/Jarome Iginla
Curtis Glencross/Olli Jokinen/Lee Stempniak
Niklas Hagman/Roman Horak/Rene Bourque
Tom Kostopoulos/Matt Stajan/Tim Jackman
Pierre-Luc Letourneau-Leblond (suspended)

Defence (7)
Chris Butler-Jay Bouwmeester
Mark Giordano-Scott Hannan
Anton Babchuk-Cory Sarich
Derek Smith

Goalies (2)
Miikka Kiprusoff
Henrik Karlsson

The Flames open their season Saturday against the visiting Pittsburgh Penguins.

Calgary Herald: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Hannan set to take on shutdown role

By John Down

Veteran Scott Hannan adds grit to the Calgary blueline.

If Scott Hannan is being fingered as the man to assume Robyn Regehr’s shutdown role with the Calgary Flames, so be it.

"Any way I can help," grins the 32-year-old veteran defenceman, who was signed as a free agent after Regehr had been shipped to the Buffalo Sabres. "That’s been my role on a lot of different teams.

"It’s nothing new to me. It’s a style of play I’ve grown accustomed to and I take that as a chance. I think sometimes I play my best hockey when I’m faced with those challenges and you have to step up and play above your level."

Hannan, who is marking his 12th year in the National Hockey League with his fourth team, has been partnered with Mark Giordano since Day 1 of training camp to form what most observers feel is the No. 1 blueline pairing.

The chemistry between the two has been evident since the start.

"We kept those two guys together since Day 1 and I think it’s a real good fit for Gio," says Flames coach Brent Sutter. "Hanny makes a really good first pass, is a real good communicator on the ice, which I think is important.

"Gio’s never going to be second on the puck, I’ll tell you that, and when you’re under pressure a lot it’s nice to have someone who can communicate with you."

"It just makes the game a little easier for you."

You’ll get no argument from Giordano on Sutter’s assessment of Hannan.

"He’s a great guy to play with because he’s rock solid defensively and really vocal out there," he said. "He’s easy to play with and I feel like we move the puck pretty well."

Hannan, a first-round choice of the San Jose Sharks back in 1997, has patrolled the blue lines with not only San Jose but also with the Colorado Avalanche and the Washington Capitals.

Needless to say, through his 830 games, he’s had all sorts of partners and likes what he sees in Giordano.

"He’s a great defenceman," says the former Western Hockey League star with the Kelowna Rockets. "He sees the ice so well, he skates so well and has a great shot. He’s a special player. It’s been fun."

Hannan wasn’t sure where his career would take him following last season. He certainly had the credentials, but there were few offers on his plate.

One of those was from the Flames and it caught his attention immediately.

A million-dollar, one-year deal.

"I was looking at some situations out there and I thought this was a great fit for me and my family," he said. "We spend our summers in Kelowna, so it’s nice to be playing in Canada.

"It’s a nice short trip for family back to Vancouver. There’s going to be a little bit of rivalry with a couple of my friends and family back home, but it’s going to be fun."

Skating into a new environment takes a little time getting used to the new faces, a different coaching staff, some new plays, but Hannan found this transition as easy if not easier than any in the past.

"The camp’s been good, a lot of skates, it’s been hard," said Hannan. "There’s the little transitions of getting to know what the coaches want from you, of getting to know the players and that’s about it."

Does the six-foot-two, 220-pounder regard himself as a stay-at-home defenceman?

"I think the game changes all the time," he said. "I think sometimes I join the rush even more now than I did when I was younger."

"Before with the style of game that was played, there was a lot more trapping, but now you find the best defence is to stay in the other team’s zone as much as possible."

Hannan, at first glance, looks like he’s been through a war, trench warfare in fact. The miles, the seasons show on his gritty face. But does he feel his age?

"Thirty’s the new 40 now, right? I feel like I’ve come a long ways, grown as a player and am really looking forward to a fresh start here, to do something special here," he said.

His play here may or may not determine his future either with another team or a contract extension with the Flames.

"I can’t control that," he said. "I can control the way I play and that’s to go out and play well, play strong and hopefully some time down the road when it comes to that, I’ll have a chance to play here longer."
Clackson. On a one-way ($550,000) contract, Letourneau-Leblond is expected to stick with the Flames after his suspension is served.

As an enforcer, he realizes his role could eventually be phased right out of the game all together.

"I’m happy," he said. "I’ve got a good family. I’ve got good friends . . . As long as I like what I’m doing, I’m going to keep doing it. I have another things on the side, too.

"I have B-plans for the future. I think it’s important that guys realize once the hockey career is over, there’s got to be something else."

Calgary Herald: LOADED: 10.06.2011

Enforcer Pierre-Luc Letourneau-Leblond is suspended for Saturday’s season opener, but he figures to factor in Calgary’s plans after that.

As a matter of habit, Pierre-Luc Letourneau-Leblond calls home to Quebec after every game — even if his team is playing on the west coast.

As a National Hockey League enforcer, the man known as PL3 (a shortened form of the longest name on the circuit) classifies timely updates on his personal well-being as mandatory.

Such is the life of an on-ice police officer in the pros.

"My mom doesn’t even watch," says Letourneau-Leblond, the newest toughie for the Calgary Flames. "She hates it. So does my dad. I think they understand, the job, but they never watch. I can’t blame them."

After the deaths of three NHL enforcers this summer (Derek Boogaard, Rick Rypien and Wade Belak), Letourneau-Leblond dealt with a steady stream of questions from concerned friends and family.

Boogaard died of a prescription drug overdose. Rypien’s body was found in his home in the Crowsnest Pass. The former Vancouver Canucks enforcer was known to suffer from depression.

Then Belak, a former Flame, killed himself in a downtown Toronto condominium. He also experienced depression.

"I don’t think (fighting) has anything to do with happened," Letourneau-Leblond said softly. "Until they prove it, I’m going to keep doing what they ask me to do."

Letourneau-Leblond is a pugilist by trade. At 15, the Levis, Que. native strapped on his headgear and took up Olympic boxing. His record shows four fights and three victories — including two over the Canadian junior heavyweight champion at the time.

In the crowd for one of those bouts just happened to be a scout from the Baie-Comeau Drakkar, of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League. Sensing something special, the scout attended one of the boxer’s hockey games.

"I always played for fun with my friends," Letourneau-Leblond said. "I was playing midget double-B. That’s pretty low. You have triple-A, double-A and double-B. ‘I guess that guy was really good at what he did.’"

Through that "guy," Letourneau-Leblond earned his first invitation to a major junior camp at age 18. As expected, he suffered through an awkward apprenticeship on the job.

Exchanging punches on skates is something entirely different from fighting in the ring. "My first fight I fell, and I cut my thumb," he said. "I needed eight stitches.

"My first games were tough. Really tough. I got in some hard fights. My first eight fights, I didn’t look good at all. But my coach, he kept sending me out there. He trusted me.

"I guess I got better at it."

He got so much better at it the New Jersey Devils selected him in the seventh round (216th overall) of the 2004 NHL Entry Draft.

From there, his journey took him from the United Hockey League, to the East Coast Hockey League, to the American Hockey League, the National Hockey League and back again.

The Flames acquired the bodyguard this summer for a fifth-round draft pick.

“He’s responsible,” said Flames head coach Brent Sutter, who also worked with Letourneau-Leblond in New Jersey. “He’s obviously got toughness in his game. I just like the way he forechecks . . . he’s very team-oriented.”

Letourneau-Leblond hit the headlines in the pre-season as one of the first offenders punished under the new NHL justice regime. Disciplinarian Brendan Shanahan suspended him for all but one exhibition game and the regular-season opener. His crime? A hit from behind on Vancouver’s Matt
No contract, no problem for Sutter

By ERIC FRANCIS

Iginla’s quest for 500 goals

If Brent Sutter is at all concerned about entering the final year of his contract with no extension in sight, he sure isn't showing it. "I haven't even thought about it," said the Calgary Flames head coach, reiterating his stance last spring. "We missed the playoffs the last two years, and I feel as much responsibility as anybody on that. Yet you know how the team played the last half of last season, and that's encouraging. That's what you build off."

There isn't a head coach alive who doesn't enter a season without unbridled enthusiasm.

But given the way the Flames played from Christmas on, Sutter does indeed have reason to feel better about life under team GM Jay Feaster. After all, the two communicate and work well together, which is a huge departure from the tense relationship Brent had with brother and Flames former GM Darryl before the latter's ousting late last December.

Yet none of that has led to any summertime discussions with Feaster of a new deal after this season.

If the season goes well and Sutter is happy in Calgary, his confident contract talk will come up in due time. If things falter again, he's realistic enough to know coaches who miss three-straight playoff parties aren't long for their jobs.

Don't forget, this is a man who walked away from a lucrative contract with the New Jersey Devils in 2009 so he could be closer to his family in Red Deer and run the WHL's Rebels, which he still owns.

"I trust my instincts, and I have good staff," said Sutter, who brought in several new coaches and truly feels he has all the resources necessary to coach the way he wants in Calgary.

"The biggest thing was building a team -- togetherness, caring about one another, having an environment in which you feel good about and enjoy coming to each day ... We have fun in practices. And we can understand and differentiate between winning and losing. And we're being professional in how we approach everything."

Having won almost everywhere he's coached and played, the two-time Stanley Cup winner is firm on how he wants things to be done. Feaster has also won a Cup, giving the club a one-two punch Sutter relishes.

Add the recent Cup won by former Bruins executive John Weisbrod, who is now Feaster's assistant GM, and the club's braintrust is rife with good leadership.

"When you come from winning programs and have won, you understand the atmosphere and intangible things it takes that people who haven't won don't understand."

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
BANFF, ALTA. - There should be no more delays in Jarome Iginla's final stretch to 500 goals.

After more than two weeks spent either resting or doing some light skating by himself or with the other injured brigade members due to his bad back, the Calgary Flames captain was at full blast in Tuesday's practice in Banff.

Barring an unforeseen issue, Iginla is set to play in Saturday's season-opener against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

"I've been feeling really good," Iginla said. "We definitely took more time to make sure (it's 100%) and everything's been really positive. Hopefully, it's just a one-off and not an issue down the road. Talking to the medical staff and trainers, they don't think it should be (a problem)."

Most importantly, the Flames need their star right winger to boost hopes of being a playoff team after two unsuccessful years.

Iginla is also chasing a huge personal goal. He needs 16 goals to become the 42nd player in NHL history to net 500 regular-season tallies in a career.

Reaching milestones is hardly anything new to the franchise's all-time leader in goals and points, but Iginla admitted this would be different.

"It's hard during your career to pause and appreciate things at the time, but that would be one to do it," Iginla said. "When I started out, I can't say I was sitting there thinking I'd get to 500. Hopefully, I do get it. It's still a ways to go, and God willing I'll be healthy and get it.

"It would be special, not only to score 500, but it means I've been able to play that long and have a lot of fun. I hope to get to it and keep going. Hopefully, I'll score a lot more."

At age 34, and having netted 30 or more goals in each of the last 10 seasons, Iginla may have enough left in the tank to hit the 500-goal mark.

But first things first.

By hitting 500 he'd become just the fifth player in franchise history to reach that milestone (Brett Hull, Joe Nieuwendyk, Joe Mullen and Lanny McDonald are the others), and only the second to do it in Flames silks (McDonald).

Iginla would be alone in scoring all 500 goals with the franchise.

"I'm extremely blessed for a lot of reasons," said Iginla, who is currently tied with Darryl Sittler on the all-time list and will surpass Brian Bellows, Norm Ullman, Jean Ratelle and Glenn Anderson before hitting the milestone.

"I've been healthy enough to play this long. I've had the opportunity to be in a scoring position, played with some great passers and players, and great goal scorers."

Iginla is always quick to defer praise, and credits some of his set-up men -- Craig Conroy, Kristian Huselius, Daymond Langkow and Alex Tanguay quickly come to mind -- but also credits Theoren Fleury for mentoring him.

"I got to see early in my career his drive and tenacity, how he competed. I was lucky to see that," Iginla said.

As amazing as it seems, Iginla can quickly rattle off all kinds of memories about the key and milestone goals in his career.

Naturally, the first is a big memory, but that doesn't count in this chase since it was a playoff game in the spring of 1996.

However, his memory of the first regular-season tally from the fall of 1996 is in there, too.

So are several others, such as both times he hit 50 in a season, and the tally which put him tops on the Flames' all-time list and the century marks.

Then again, he has them all on video, an idea given to him at the start of his career.
Shot at Cup shrinking for Flames veterans

By STEVE MACFARLANE

CALGARY - With the puck dropping on a new NHL season, the Calgary Flames consider themselves a playoff contender.

They're hoping to start the season the way they played much of the second half of last year, and that the minor tweaks made in the off-season make them better.

That's the hope, anyway.

The reality is this team's window to win it all has been closing for years, and stars Jarome Iginla and Miikka Kiprusoff may barely fit through the gap anymore.

That pair -- star sniper and stud goaltender -- are the keys to Flames success.

TD Weekend Planner

Both, however, are moving toward the point where their ages are rounded up to 40 rather than 30.

Iginla's back troubles in training camp could be a sign of things to come, which only makes it more important the Flames get off to a quick start this season in an effort to end the two-year playoff drought.

But inside the locker-room, players see a lot more than just their aforementioned stars.

"When people from the outside, the so-called analysts or experts, look at our team, they see Mikka, they see Jarome," said winger Alex Tanguay, who signed a five-year extension in the spring to become a part of the team's core group.

"But if you look up and down our lineup, with Rene Bourque, (Olli) Jokinen, (Niklas) Hagman, Lee Stempniak, David Moss ... we've got size, we've got speed, we've got guys that are able to put points on the board and to do well offensively."

This is where the balancing act begins.

Head coach Brent Sutter wants his team to score, but not at the cost of giving up odd-man rushes and goals against. In the past, there's been a tendency to get a little loose defensively when the focus shifts to offence.

"The best way to play defence is with the puck," said Tanguay. "With the size that we have, the speed that we have, we have to be able to hold onto pucks in the corner, be able to make the decision not to throw the puck away, and play that type of intelligent game where it's going to be hard for the other team to get the puck."

When the season is over, whatever the final results may be, the Flames want that to be their identity -- a puck-possession team capable of winning both the lopsided and tight games.

"First and foremost, we've got to be a hard-working team," said defenceman Mark Giordano, who offers the same puck-hog philosophy as Tanguay but suggests the best offence is a good defence instead of the other way around.

"Honestly, you get good results offensively when you play well defensively. You get more chances," said the blueliner. "If we're good in our own zone, and sharp, it makes it easier to get into the play and jump in and go as a five-man unit.

"I think we have a good group this year on the back end being able to carry the puck, hold the puck and make plays.

"It's exciting."

Despite all the frustration surrounding the Flames over the past couple of seasons, there is reason to be optimistic. With Iginla, Tanguay, Bourque, Stempniak, Moss and Curtis Glencross centred by the likes of Mikael Backlund, Jokinen, Brendan Morrison, Matt Stajan and rookie Roman Horak, there is scoring depth.

An apparently re-focused Niklas Hagman is also in the mix, and Tim Jackman is capable of providing mismatches against another teams' fourth line and third defensive pairing.

"Looking at the board on a game day, for the other third pairing, it's going to be a really good line up there," Giordano said. "That's what we need, scoring from every line. We can't just rely on Iggy and Tangs and Backs to be the scoring line.

"We need everyone to chip in."

Without Robyn Regehr on the blueline, the defence has a different look and attitude.

Whether that turns out to be beneficial remains to be seen. But they're a relatively mobile group comprised of Giordano, Jay Bouwmeester, Chris Butler, Anton Babchuk and your more physical Cory Sarich and Scott Hannan.

As a group, the team knows it has to be better in its own zone.

"Defensively, we've got some fixing up to do," said Tanguay.

"Especially on our penalty kill. Our defensive zone needs to be better."

But Tanguay is confident. He says the entire team is.

"The way we played last year after Christmas, the way we found that consistency was by desperation. We knew we had to win," he said. "We need to be desperate.

"We need to be hungry for pucks, we need to be the more desperate team out there like we were last year after Christmas."

"We're going to have to fight extremely hard to get to the playoffs."

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Flames GM believes his team worthy of playoffs

By RANDY SPORTAK

Shot at Cup shrinking for Flames veterans

For some reason, Jay Feaster’s proclamation caused quite a ruckus. In the pre-season, the Calgary Flames GM said on TV during an interview intermission his team would make the playoffs.

It was emphatic, too, with the words: “Write it down.”

Considering we’re talking about a Flames team that has missed the Stanley Cup tournament in each of the last two seasons and there were minimal changes in the off-season, the twitiverse went a little crazy, with detractors firing off the shots.

Feaster would never relent.

“I don’t understand the question, because I don’t know what anybody would expect a manager in the National Hockey League to say. Do people expect me to say, ‘Oh God. Playoffs?!? Playoffs?!? You’re talking about playoffs?!?’” he said while providing a great impersonation of the infamous response from former NFL coach Jim Mora.

“It doesn’t make any sense to me. Of course, I feel that way, and I do believe we’re a good enough team to be a playoff team and not just sneak in.”

“And of course, when I get those questions, I’m going to be emphatic about it.”

Still, you can see why there would be doubters.

The Flames finished 10th in the Western Conference in each of the past two campaigns, traded away their best shutdown defenceman in Robyn Regehr, and starting goaltender Miikka Kiprusoff is about to turn 35 years old.

It’s easy to ask Feaster why he genuinely feels that way.

“I watched what we accomplished the second half of last year, and I honestly believe we started to come together as a team, that we started to understand what Brent (Sutter), as the coach, was looking for, and we started to buy into the team concept,” said Feaster, whose team ended the season with a 27-11-9 run. “We started to understand if we play the way the coaches ask us to play, play as a team, we are a very good collection of players.

“|This group, in the exit meetings, to a man, acknowledged there was a transformation, a coming together as a team and will be ready to take the next step.” |

That annals of hockey history are filled with teams which had strong conclusions to seasons but didn’t carry over that success to the coming season, so only time will tell whether Feaster’s theory is correct.

However, you can say he has faith by keeping the vast majority of the 2010-11 team intact.

Feaster did make a couple of big changes by dealing away Regehr and the under-achieving Ales Kotalik for defenceman Chris Butler and minor-league forward Paul Byron.

Butler has big shoes to fill in a top-four role.

The other big deal has to be a positive simply from the perspective of man-games played. Centre Daymond Langkow made an incredible comeback from a horrific neck injury suffered late in the 2009-10 season, but he missed all but four games last season. Feaster sent the veteran and his US$4.5-million salary cap hit to the Phoenix Coyotes for winger Lee Stempniak, who scored 28 goals two seasons ago.

In turn, Feaster believes Calgary has a deeper team that will be better able to survive injuries and has the salary cap space to bring in players or make moves at any time.

Remember, at the trade deadline last season, the Flames were handcuffed, but they will go into this season with a cushion of around $3.6 million on the $64-million cap.

Still, the GM must keep an eye on the long-term future, and Feaster has his hands full in that regard.

A decade of bad drafts have left the Flames with a dearth of legitimate high-end prospects. In fact, many will argue the Flames even have a dozen future NHLers.

The Flames had a complete changing of the guard among their prospects, cutting free several players who hadn’t made the jump, including a pair of first-round draft picks in Kris Chucko (2004) and Matt Pelech (2005), opting for a plan to rely on fewer youngsters in the minors and putting more veteran minor leaguers around them to keep the pressure off them and provide leadership.

“The conversation we had with everybody going to Abbotsford was ‘Don’t wait to make an impression in Abbotsford because we’re deeper down there than we’ve been before.’ That’s a reality the guys have acknowledged,” Feaster said. “Talking to the guys who were in Abby last year, they know we’re going to have a deeper team, and we’re pleased with that.

“We’re pleased with the juniors who we had at camp, too.”

Moving forward, Feaster has some big decisions on his plate.

As of now, there are 11 players due to become unrestricted free agents.

The opportunity to make sweeping changes is there.

“I like the idea of having a lot of guys in the last year of their deals. I think guys on the last year of their deals are playing for something and are hungry, and want to get that next contract,” Feaster said. “As an organization, this will allow us to make decisions about who fits into the plans going forward and gives the opportunity to change the look of things.”

Having had the job of running the Flames since Darryl Sutter was told to resign just before Christmas, Feaster has made two major changes to the atmosphere around the team.

The first was something he said would happen right off the hop: Making it a fun place to be around.

“My job is to take the tension out of the job and make sure that’s how it is. Everybody’s working hard, but it’s more loose. We laugh, rib each other, smile,” he said.

The other isn’t something as well seen but just as critical.

While the Sutter brothers had a strained relationship, Feaster and Brent Sutter can always be spotted talking to each other.

During game-day skates and optional practices, they can usually be seen in the owners’ suite watching the team and discussing things.

Feaster, who openly admits his lack of experience playing professional hockey makes him defer to the knowledge of others, intently watches to see who the coaching staff has one-on-one talks with to ensure he knows why and make sure he can deliver the same message if needed.

“It doesn’t work unless the coach and GM are on the same page and communicating all the time,” he said. “I talk to the coach during the season more than my wife during the season. I think it’s that important.

“At the same time, the guys see it, recognize it. The players are smart enough to know when there’s a rift or a divide.”

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
CALGARY - In the middle of the Flames locker-room, where laundry baskets and the media have generally taken up space, now sits a large flaming ‘C’.

Stitched into the carpet this summer, the four-foot wide trademark is symbolic of the fact no matter what transpires in the room or in the standings -- and no matter how many slouched scribes inadvertently traipse all over it -- the franchise will endure.

"When the lights are off here at night, there's no other light on in that room except the one over that logo," explained head coach Brent Sutter of the new addition, complete with spotlight overhead. "I'm a big believer in that. That logo and the front of that jersey means the world to you."

For the first time in nine years, the Flames will open the season without Darryl Sutter overseeing everything inside the room and out.

Instead of being an organization shaped by Darryl's autonomous rule, the focus is now on working together as a team. Not just on the ice but off it, as well.

In that vein, Brent Sutter collaborated with GM Jay Feaster, president Ken King and the owners to come up with several dressing room renovations aimed entirely at changing the culture of a team that forgot how to have fun at the rink until Darryl was ousted last Christmas.

"It's about advancement," said the third-year coach.

"We want this to be a great place to be. I think it was before, but we've added more in terms of serving the needs of the players more."

An expanded players lounge now includes several computers, allowing players to casually surf the web or even tap into the team's innovative Pucks System that enables them to see every shift they've played the last three years.

Down the hall sits a massive new video room, allowing the team's new video team to make even more use of its ever-expanding systems for players, scouts and management.

The head coach's office has also been modified significantly, allowing Sutter to sit down with players, owners or other coaches in a private setting for the first time.

"We'd be sitting in the head coach's room and someone would walk right through because it was the only way to get to the assistant coaches' room," said chuckling Sutter of the old setup. "Privacy is really important, especially in the head coach's room. That door is always open to the players, and I want them to feel good about coming in."

Mark Giordano said the atmosphere that improved the last half of the season is even more conducive to success.

"The changes are definitely not insignificant," said the defenceman about the renos. "They're all geared towards keeping us together, and that's the way it should be -- we should all be good buddies in here hanging out. Little things like these help out, and overall, I think guys do care about one another and are buds."

Like every other player, Giordano welcomed the arrival of the floor logo:
Even if the media schleps hardly noticed.

"We don't ever step on the logo, but we're worried about you guys doing it," said Giordano with a laugh just as several cameramen trampled on it.

"It's more of a respect thing -- every team I've ever played on had that."

After years of having Darryl Sutter cast a pall over the organization by running it single-mindedly, management is now doing exactly what they want the team to do: Work together.

"I want this to be about everybody," rybody," said Brent, whose sports psychology department has also been bolstered.

"This was a discussion amongst owners, Ken, Jay and myself about what we wanted to do to change things. If we're going to have a different culture, we need to change the dynamics around that. (Senior VP and assistant GM Mike Holditch had input and (special assistant to the GM Craig) Connie (Conroy), too. We asked what other dressing rooms have and tried to put it all together so it brought change."

And so, no matter how dark some days may feel down at the Saddledome after a loss or two, that solitary light will continue to shine down on the dressing room floor, where the flaming 'C' will remain the one constant around which everything else revolves.

"It's about feeling good about yourself and your teammates and trusting every-body," added Brent of the new attitude.

"Win or lose, we're all in it together, supporting guys through it all."

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
BANFF, ALTA. - So there was Matt Stajan of the Calgary Flames, the centre on the fourth line as final preparations for the season began.

Despite Stajans pair of 50-point seasons and a contract with a US$3.5-million salary-cap hit, there are a pair of young centres above him on the teams ladder at centre ice, as well as veteran Olli Jokinen. And thats with another vet, Brendan Morrison, out due to off-season knee surgery.

One of those youngsters, Mikael Backlund, is heading into just his second full NHL season, and the other is Roman Horak, a 20-year-old first-year pro about to make his NHL debut.

And with Backlund now out of action due to injury, Stajan is still on the fourth line.

If hes about to explode over his lot in life, it wont happen in front of many people.

Ill share (my deepest feelings) with my wife, and thats about it, Stajan said after Wednesdays practice in Banff. I love my teammates here and want to be a part of it.

Yes, Stajan, the 27-year-old centre who was a key part of the trade which sent Dion Phaneuf to the Toronto Maple Leafs, is vowing to be the good soldier.

You know what, I come to the rink every day, work hard, talk to my linemates the guys Im playing with (Tom Kostopoulos and Tim Jackman) are both hard workers and make sure Im doing my job, Stajan said. Thats all I do come here and be a good teammate. Work hard and whatever opportunity they give me, I go with it.

It wasnt supposed to be this way when Stajan was acquired Jan. 31, 2010.

The Mississauga product arrived in Calgary having collected 16 goals and 25 points in 55 games for the Leafs that season. After netting a pair of goals and four points in his first seven games with the Flames, he inked a four-year, $14-million pact.

Since mid-March 2010, though, things have seemingly come unglued.

Stajan was looking for big things in 2010-11, but life first fell off-track due to a pre-season shoulder injury. Just as he was hitting his stride, with assists in six straight games, he was rocked by New York Rangers defenceman Marc Staal.

The rest of last season was a write-off, with just five goals and 17 points in 58 contests, and a reduced role with the team.

Yeah, I played on the top line at times in Toronto, but I wasnt on the top line all the time, said Stajan, who refuted a rumour he refused to waive his no-trade clause with the Flames this summer. At that point of my career, thats where I was at. At this point, this is where Im at. Im not going to sit here and complain. Thats not what this is about. Its a fresh season a fresh start so well work hard and go from there.

Thats a role Flames head coach Brent Sutter believes is best at this point for Stajan.

Im sure Staje would like to be a 20-minute guy, but hes not going to be not where hes at right now, Sutter said. Were going to expect him to play a certain role on this team.

I have no issues with Staje at all. My job is to coach the hockey team and put the guys in the right holes. Do dollars impact that? It shouldnt. For me, it doesnt. If youre making decisions with your lineup on what players are making, you can make some mistakes.

Bravo to the Flames for having the courage to put a highly-paid player in a limited role. All too often, decisions are made based on contracts.

To his credit, Stajan is saying the right things and just going out to play.
Kiprusoff copes with Banff misadventures

By RANDY SPORTAK

BANFF, ALTA. - Miikka Kiprusoff experienced the great outdoors during the Calgary Flames sojourn to Banff.

As harrowing as it was at times, he wants to go back.

On Monday, the Flames goaltender had his ear clipped by Brendan Morrisons hook while they were out fly fishing.

On Tuesday, a Raitis Ivanans shot hit him flush in the mask, sending his face guard crashing to the ice.

Interesting last couple of days, for sure, Kiprusoff said.

Good thing the team returned Wednesday to Calgary. Who knows what would have happened next?

At least the Finnish goalie was able to laugh things off first the fishing incident, during which Morrison also hooked Jarome Ignatia.

It was pretty funny, The guy has been talking how great a fisherman he is, and then we see him in action, and the only things he could catch were his own teammates, Kiprusoff said.

As for the puck to the mask, he wasn't happy in the immediate moments after which Ivanans immediately tried to apologize for his shot getting so high but was more laid-back about it.

Those happen once in a while, so you get used to it, Kiprusoff said.

Of course, there was a highlight for him and everyone else on the team.

Gen. Rick Hillier, the former defence staff chief for the Canadian forces who headed the NATO mission in Afghanistan in 2004, spoke to them during dinner.

Really interesting, Kiprusoff said. It was really good too see.

The message was about leadership and its value when pushing for team goals.

To hear some of his stories of things around the world is really incredible, said Flames head coach Brent Sutter. Its incredible the people over there fighting for your country, fighting for world peace and freedom how they sacrificed themselves.

You believe in certain things as a coach. I was always a captain or assistant captain of teams, and as a coach, you have to be a leader and you always want to make sure your leadership is where it needs to be. It was good to listen to someone else talk about that at his level.

Everyone is looked at as a leader, and rightly so, and its no different than a hockey team. You look at a hockey team, and everyone in the dressing room has to lead in their own way and do whats necessary for the betterment of the group.

READYING FOR PUCK DROP

The NHL's regular season will kick off Thursday night on three fronts.

The Flames will still have two days to wait before starting up against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Considering the their last pre-season game is now a full week in the rear-view mirror, you bet their champing at the bit.

It's a really long time, especially when you jump right in and start playing pre-season games right away and then have to take a step back, said Flames forward Lee Stempniak. Weve had some really good practices, and it really gave us time to focus on systems and get things in order to be our best.

I think well be ready to go for Saturday.

Youll be seeing the highlights on TV and see the scores, and that gets you excited. It's one of the most exciting times of the year everybody gets back into the swing of it, and the Saddledome will be rocking. I cant wait.

It cant come soon enough.

As much as the players appreciated their two-day bonding getaway in Banff and practices to instil their system play, the games in other cities will get them thinking its time to play.

Im excited to watch some hockey, said Flames defenceman Mark Giordano. Its a little bit longer of a wait than you want, but its going to be a good atmosphere Saturday at home.

Still, the Flames have unveiled their 22-man opening-night roster.

Thats thanks to finalizing it Wednesday. Defenceman Jordan Henry was sent to the AHL Abbotsford Heat, while C Brendan Morrison (knee), LW Raitis Ivanans (post-concussion) and C Mikael Backlund (finger) are all on the injured list and D Brett Carson has non-roster status because his back injury was suffered in the off-season.

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
By ERIC FRANCIS

CALGARY - Jay Feaster has read the reviews and isn’t the least bit irritated by what he’s seen.

No one in the hockey world is picking the Calgary Flames to make the playoffs. No one.

“When I canceled my Sports Illustrated subscription in Tampa and burned it in effigy, that’s when I really stopped caring,” the Flames GM said with a chuckle of preseason predictions.

“I truly don’t care. Everybody is entitled to their opinion, and some of them are pretty uninformed.”

It was 2002 when Feaster’s Tampa Bay Lightning were pegged by SI to finish 30th, prompting Feaster to set match to his last copy of the glossy mag. His club responded by winning the southeast division and beating Washington in the first round.

We’re about to find out if the Flames can react similarly.

But first, Feaster may have to get his lighter out and burn this page as it’s evident 10th is the best this squad can hope for in the Western Conference.

Contrary to what national media types have suggested, it has indeed been a progressive summer for the club as Feaster made two tough decisions to get the club out of salary cap jail while injecting much-needed youth into the organization. Trading Robyn Regehr and Daymond Langkow opened some wiggle room between the salary cap and the club’s current payroll, allowing the team some flexibility moving forward.

But that doesn’t mean the team improved.

In fact, it would be tough to argue the west’s 10th-place finisher from a year ago is any better a team than the one that struggled to keep pucks out of its net. After all, gone is the club’s top shut-down defenceman.

Offensively, the team may actually be better with the addition of Lee Stempniak bolstering a surprisingly deep forward ranks that scored the seventh-most goals in the NHL last year (and most goals from Christmas on!).

However, the top line is already in a massive state of flux due to Jarome Iginia’s pre-season back ailments, Brendan Morrison’s ongoing recovery from knee surgery and Tuesday’s announcement first-line filler Mikael Backlund is out for six weeks with a broken finger.

The atmosphere is certainly much better these days as Feaster and coach Brent Sutter have made great strides in improving an atmosphere damaged by Darryl Sutter’s prolonged stay. In Sutter, the team truly has one of the league’s most accomplished and talented coaches, giving the club every chance to continue its progression from Christmas onwards.

It goes without saying that for the Flames to have any chance at making a charge at the top eight, it will have to get the type of world-class goaltending Miikka Kiprusoff provided two years ago. Perhaps that’s possible with the newfound confidence in Henrik Karlsson, giving Kiprusoff more time to rest.

But perhaps the best way to illustrate how tough it will be for the Flames to make the grade for the first time in three years is to work backwards and figure out who they can’t finish ahead of.

Can we all at least agree Vancouver, San Jose, Los Angeles and Detroit are in an echelon the Flames can only dream of? Right. It’s hard to fathom Chicago, Anaheim or Nashville taking steps backwards this year, leaving Phoenix as the only playoff from last year team unlikely to be near the top eight next spring.

By the way, for those who thought the Flames were close to being playoff material last year, keep in mind they had a 39% winning percentage against the above eight. They won 76% of the time against bottom dwellers.

The young Blues of St. Louis are healthier and a little more developed, Columbus broke the bank to add two superstars, and even Colorado’s young studs may be ready to challenge. (We won’t insult the Flames by suggesting Edmonton or Dallas are comparable).

It’s likely Calgary will be one of five clubs battling for the lone playoff spot not essentially sewn up.

Sure, the Flames will win more games than they’ll lose.

But it won’t be enough.

Cue the lighter.

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
"As long as he's here he has a chance to play in games and be a member of this team this year. And as every day goes by he's learning something new, which is the important thing."

RALEIGH The Carolina Hurricanes have set their 23-man NHL roster for the start of the regular season.

Justin Faulk's on it. So is another rookie defenseman, Ryan Murphy. In fact, it's overloaded with nine defensemen.

Center Riley Nash was assigned Wednesday to the Charlotte Checkers, the Canes' American Hockey League affiliate. Nash was the final roster cut after veteran forward Chad LaRose, who had been out with a lower-body injury, returned to practice Wednesday and was cleared to play.

Canes coach Paul Maurice did not disclose who will be on the blue line Friday in the season-opener against the Tampa Bay Lightning, saying he would be comfortable with any of the nine defensemen. But Faulk, 19, has earned a spot in the lineup.

General manager Jim Rutherford was asked Wednesday if Faulk was in his top six defensemen.

"No," Rutherford said, "in the top four."

A year ago, Faulk was beginning his freshman year at Minnesota-Duluth. A second-round draft pick by the Canes in 2010, the South St. Paul, Minn., native would play a major role in the Bulldogs winning their first NCAA championship.

Faulk then joined the Checkers, playing 13 games in the AHL's Calder Cup playoffs. Checkers coach Jeff Daniels liked Faulk's consistent, poised play.

Rutherford said he has been impressed by "pretty much everything" Faulk has done in training camp and exhibition games.

"To think that he's 19 years old, and to have the composure he has, and the way he handles different situations, how he moves the puck, how he skates. He knows the game," Rutherford said. "I haven't seen many flaws in his game to this point."

"This is great for us. We knew we had a good player in Justin, but as a defenseman we always say it's going to take longer. But for him to do what he did in the preseason as a 19-year-old is pretty impressive."

Faulk said he appreciated the praise and confidence but that it would not change his approach.

"I'm happy right now and it's just a start," he said. "I'll just keep playing my game and do my best to stay up here. I am starting to feel more comfortable with the guys and getting to know them better."

Faulk laughed, noting Minnesota-Duluth's hockey season also starts Friday.

"This is quite a step up from that," he said.

"He's had a great camp and we have a lot of faith in him," Maurice said of Faulk. "He's got a lot of instincts to play defense and a nice little upside offensively. We know he's got a big shot. So we are comfortable putting him in the lineup."

Murphy, 18, was the team's first-round draft pick this year. Rutherford said Wednesday no decision had been made on Murphy, who has quickness and offensive flair. Murphy could stay with the Canes this season or be sent back to the Kitchener Rangers of the Ontario Hockey League for another year of junior hockey.

Forward Jeff Skinner made it an easy decision for the Canes last year - Skinner was staying as an 18-year-old rookie. But deciding on Murphy will take a little longer and Rutherford said the Canes might keep the full 23-man roster early in the season.

"Jeff came in as a forward - not that it's easy to come in as an 18-year-old and play in this league and play that position - but it is easier to adjust as a forward than a defenseman," Rutherford said. "Ryan has done a really good job and has had a really good camp and we're excited about him and excited about his future."
Seabrook a rock for Hawks

David Haugh's In the Wake of the News

Staying in Vancouver seemed impractical for Brent Seabrook.

Sure, Seabrook grew up in British Columbia's largest city but there had to be a more peaceful place for a Blackhawks star to spend his off season than somewhere so crazy over Canucks. Riot's last June after the Bruins' Stanley Cup title over the hometown team in Game 7 reminded North America just how crazy.

"It was wild and I heard everything," Seabrook recalled Wednesday.

Coincidentally, it was around the same time Seabrook decided to move 250 miles northeast to Kelowna, one of those picturesque vacation towns you see on brochures promoting Canada's natural beauty. After finishing daily workouts by noon, Seabrook split time swimming at the beach, walking dogs Stanley and Knox and riding his boat around scenic Lake Okanagan.

There was the occasional dinner with Blackhawks buddy Duncan Keith, who also summered nearby.

"It was the ideal spot to rest my body, rest my mind and get refocused," Seabrook said.

If Seabrook wanted to be left alone, he always could have stayed in Chicago.

That's a bit facetious. But there's no denying that on a popular Blackhawks team the city has gotten to know so well recently, the most unknown core player remains the one who, along with Keith, has been here the longest.

Beginning his seventh season in an Indianhead sweater, Seabrook, 26, often gets overlooked playing alongside a former Norris Trophy winner, Keith, on a team full of compelling personalities. We notice what Jonathan Toews wears and where Patrick Kane hangs out. We know the name of Patrick Sharp's dog (Shooter) and the sex of Marian Hossa's newborn child (girl). We typically shrug over details of Seabrook's life, which suits the man as unassuming off the ice as he is underrated on it.

The guy entering the prime of his NHL career simply wants to play hockey, taking the same approach whether 21,000 are cheering inside the United Center or nobody's watching on a frozen Canadian pond.

"The only recognition I want is to win a Stanley Cup again," Seabrook said. "I love playing for the fans and my teammates but don't do it for media coverage or fame. I'm just a guy that goes out to work hard and play physical, whatever I can to help this team."

The Hawks never have valued Seabrook's variety of contributions more.

They rewarded his steadiness last winter with a five-year, $23 million contract extension that squelched trade rumors and showed Seabrook the type of respect that matters most. He returns from his most productive offensive season (9 goals, 39 assists) aware of but unfazed by the pressure to earn every penny.

With due respect to the improved depth on the blue line with the addition of veterans Steve Montador and Sean O'Donnell, trading Brian Campbell reduced the number of All-Star caliber Hawks defenseman from three to two. But Seabrook accepts that changes were necessary to add sandpaper to a roster with too much varnish. He welcomes the challenge of supplying an even more physical presence than in 2010-11 when only two NHL defensemen had more hits than his 227.

"I'm a firm believer in being a tough team and not having just one guy do it," Seabrook said. "We had some guys who played that role a little bit last year but not enough. (Management) addressed what we needed."

Whatever the Hawks need from Seabrook, he stands at the ready. If it's on the power-play, Seabrook proved capable last season by leading Hawks D-men with five goals on the man advantage. If it's pairing with Niklas Hjalmarsson instead of Keith as Seabrook has often this preseason, he understands the rationale.

"I like how competitive he is," Joel Quenneville said. "He gives us some toughness in the back end. He has some offense to his game, a big shot, and he's not easy to play against. We give him tough assignments, playing against top guys and he has that reliability."

That reliability may not get Seabrook on the covers of magazines or in the crosshairs of TMZ. It might be as old-fashioned in today's game as a wooden hockey stick. But slowly the quality turned Seabrook into one of the league's sturdiest at his position.

"The thing I take most pride in and the fans love most is consistency," Seabrook said. "Early in my career it was tough to find. That was one thing I really wanted to get better at. A lot of coaches worked with me and said, 'You look at the best defensemen in the league and they're consistent on a nightly basis.'"

To find one now, Seabrook can just look in the mirror.

Chicago Tribune LOADED: 10.06.2011
Hawks put up united front

By Chris Kuc, Chicago Tribune reporter

The changes on the ice are evident.

During training camp drills and exhibition games, the nine newcomers on the Blackhawks' roster who will start the regular season Friday night against the Stars in Dallas have intermingled well with returning players to form a cohesive unit that is among the favorites to hoist the Stanley Cup next summer.

Not so easy to detect for those watching from the stands, press box or on TV is the closeness of the team in the dressing room.

It's a chemistry lesson that begins anew every season and from all indications the Hawks are passing it with a group that has come together quickly and shares the excitement of a new start.

"We've had that chemistry right from Day One — no question about it," veteran forward Patrick Sharp said Wednesday. "When you bring in veteran players who have had success all across the league on different teams it seems like there's one excitement in the room."

No one in the Hawks' dressing room was disparaging those who sat beside them last year, but there's a noticeable buzz and raised volume this season with the additions of veterans Daniel Carcillo, Andrew Brunette, Jamal Mayers, Sami Lepisto, Steve Montador and Sean O'Donnell.

"It just seems like we have a really good group," center Patrick Kane said. "Sometimes the chemistry is there and sometimes it's not. This year it really seems like it is; especially with the new guys coming in."

When the Hawks captured the Cup in 2010, there were characters aplenty. Dustin Byfuglien, Kris Versteeg, Andrew Ladd, Colin Fraser, Cristobal Huet, Brent Sopel, Troy Brouwer, Adam Burish, Antti Niemi, John Madden and Ben Eager gelled with the other members of the team to form a unit that behaved more like a family than professionals plying their trade. After the championship, many were dispersed around the league via trades and free agency in a salary purge.

O'Donnell, who won the Cup with the Ducks in 2007, knows what that kind of turnover can do to a unit and saw from a distance what it did to the Hawks.

"You had a group of guys who win it and you feel like a family," O'Donnell said. "And then in a matter of a week or two about eight or nine members of your family are gone. (New players) come into a situation where the team is trying to repeat and you don't want to step on any toes. I could see how this would be a very quiet and tough room to kind of get going. A lot of those guys they lost were energy guys who kept things loose and fun. You lose that and it's tough."

"Some of us who came in (this season) are older and a little more comfortable. That keeps things loose and we aren't afraid to say something to Kane or Marian (Hossa) or (Jonathan) Toews that will keep them relaxed too."

A close-knit dressing room isn't a necessity for a championship team, but it can go a long way toward helping to push teammates through adversity that hits every season.

"You need to care about the guy sitting beside you," O'Donnell said. "You need to know, I don't want to let this guy down because I respect him and I know he doesn't want to let me down. That pushes you. When you do that it brings out the best in a player and a team. When you have (23) guys, not everyone has to be best friends, but if you have a respect and a like toward somebody it's a lot easier to go all out for them."

Brunette, a veteran of 1,032 NHL games, said it's important for a team to develop chemistry and that it carries over into games.

"It translates huge on the ice in every facet," Brunette said. "As a season progresses there are going to be all kinds of potholes and ups and downs and when your team is tight and enjoy being around each other, you usually get out of those little holes quicker."

One-timers: Dave Bolland (upper body) and Ben Smith (concussion) are questionable for the opener. ... Sharp, who missed the entire exhibition slate, said, "I'm ready to go and barring anything major in the next day or two I'll be playing Friday." ... The third season of Blackhawks TV, an all-access, 30-minute show highlighting Hawks players personalities off the ice, debuts with an episode that can be seen at 7 p.m. Thursday on CSN, at noon Saturday on WGN-Ch. 9 and at 2 p.m. Saturday on WMAQ-Ch. 5.
Shanahan set for crackdown on NHL rule breakers

Shanahan was suspended five times during his 21-year, Hall of Fame-bound career.

Shanahan was even suspended for a cross-check he delivered in his Detroit debut: Hi and bye all at once.

For the most part, Shanahan knows he merited his punishments.

"I certainly did some things that deserved suspensions and certainly did some things I wanted to take back," Shanahan said. "Sometimes with the passion and the speed of the game, things happen. That experience has taught me that I do believe players have respect for one another. Sometimes it's just the environment of the game, and how things can get away from people a little bit."

This season, that reasoning sounds like a perfect defense for an accused player to plead his case to Shanahan.

Shanahan is judge and jury of his former peers in his first year as the NHL's head disciplinarian, reviewing cases of the scores of rule-breaking players who aim for the head or commit various other infractions. His grace period in his new job lasted as long as a power-play shift.

He's become the stern-faced spokesman for the NHL rule book, suspending this preseason a whopping nine players for a total of 31 regular-season games. On the eve of the NHL season, Shanahan has swiftly made his mark as a discipline czar whose wants to protect the best interests of the sport he loves and respects -- even if he loses a popularity contest to make his mark.

Shanahan is not out to make a kinder, gentler NHL.

Just a safer one.

"The focus has gone on the players that we've punished, and I understand that," Shanahan said. "But from my perspective, it's about the ones we intend to protect. That's important to me."

Shanahan, who took over for Colin Campbell, has already revolutionized the job and created a more transparent process with videotaped explanations that should allow the rest of the league, fans and media to form a logical understanding of his decisions.

Take his video (found on video.nhl.com or linked through Twitter.com/NHLShanahan) on Toronto Maple Leafs forward Clarke MacArthur's preseason plus two regular-season game suspension for hitting Detroit's Justin Abdelkader in the head.

Shanahan describes the play over video of the act. The video cuts to a written explanation of the rule 48.1 (illegal check to the head). "A hit resulting in contact with an opponent's head, where the head is targeted and the principal point of contact, is not permitted."

He then refers for additional clarification to the rules and regulation video, "that all NHL players were required to watch." Shanahan explained MacArthur's hit was not intentional and -- combined with the facts that MacArthur didn't have a previous history, and Abdelkader wasn't injured -- meant the penalty would not be as harsh as it would be for a repeat offender.

All summed up in 90 seconds for everyone to see.

"I think that's the best part," Bruins forward Milan Lucic said. "He's clarifying things. It's more black and white. Videos don't lie. How are you going to complain if the evidence and the video is there."

In a mostly thankless role, however, there are bound to be complaints.

Shanahan's punishments are mostly a reaction to the sensitive nature of crushing blows to the head.

A year ago, the NHL banned blindside shots to the head. The rule was expanded this season to include penalties for any hit that involves primary contact to the head and shots that target an opponent's head and make it the principal point of contact. The original wording to Rule 48 applied only to hits that came from the lateral or blindside. Those words have been eliminated. The ban applies to hits anywhere on the ice and from any direction.

It means Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman James Wisniewski gets nailed for eight regular-season games for his shot to the head of Minnesota's Cal Clutterbuck.

It means Detroit Red Wings defenseman Brendan Smith gets suspended for the first five regular-season games for an illegal hit to the head of Chicago forward Ben Smith.

NBC's Mike Milbury complained that enforcement of some of these rules means the league could turn into "touch football."

"I think if this goes the way it's going right now, it'll do more than if they were fighting out of the game," Milbury said. "People don't want to lose tens of thousands of dollars, going out for 10 and 20 games for what have been, sometimes, really vicious hits and sometimes questionable calls, in my opinion."

Shanahan insists there is a way to mix safety and physical play.

He is still learning about a new job he needed two months to decide to accept after Campbell stepped down after 13 years in the high-profile position.

But it's just the kind of job that suits his style.

Shanahan conducted a summit during the NHL's 2004-05 lockout, and that gathering of people from all aspects of hockey produced several suggestions that led to rules changes after a new collective bargaining agreement was reached.

Shanahan said he has never considered his various roles as a sense of service in hockey, only a commitment to making the NHL a better product.

"I'm protective of the people who play it," he said.

He played it as well as anyone around.

Shanahan joined the NHL front office as vice president of hockey and business development less than a month after he retired as a three-time Stanley Cup champion. The eight-time All-Star played on the Red Wings' Stanley Cup championship teams in 1997, 1998 and 2002. He also won a gold medal with Canada at the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics.

His resume earns him credibility.

His decisions could only strengthen the NHL.

"It was just too important of an endeavor to say no to," he said.

Chicago Tribune LOADED: 10.06.2011
Bolland, Smith questionable for opener; Sharp ready

By Chris Kuc

Things went silent during Chicago Blackhawks practice Wednesday when forward Jamal Mayers collided with teammate Patrick Sharp and appeared to injure his right wrist.

After skating off the ice in obvious pain, Mayers returned to practice and later said he was good to go for the Hawks' season opener Friday night against the Stars in Dallas.

Still unknown, however, is whether the Hawks will have the services of forwards Dave Bolland and Ben Smith.

Bolland skated after practice as he continues to recover from an upper-body injury and Smith has not yet been cleared for contact after suffering a concussion Sept. 28 following an illegal hit to the head by the Wings' Brendan Smith.

"(Bolland) skated after (practice) and tried it," Quenneville said. "He's questionable for the weekend. Hopefully we get him in."

After practice, coach Joel Quenneville said both players are questionable. If one or both can't go, the Hawks could call up a player from Rockford of the American Hockey League. Centers Marcus Kruger and Brandon Pirri would be the leading candidates.

Forward Patrick Sharp said he's ready to go on Friday.

"I feel strong on the ice (and) I feel better in the drills," Sharp said Wednesday. "My conditioning is where it needs to be. It's just a matter of game-speed and taking hits, protecting the puck and doing all that kind of stuff. I'm ready to go and barring anything major in the next day or two I'll be playing Friday."

Chicago Tribune LOADED: 10.06.2011
Blackhawks' Niklas Hjalmarsson ready to improve on offense

By ADAM L. JAHNS

Believe it or not, defenseman Niklas Hjalmarsson made his Blackhawks debut five seasons ago.

It was more than halfway through the 2007-08 season — Feb. 8, 2008, to be exact — and teenagers Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews were revitalizing hockey in Chicago.

Since then, Hjalmarsson has been praised by Dale Tallon and Stan and Scotty Bowman. He has been lauded often for his defensive prowess by Joel Quenneville, and he has blocked more shots in parts of four seasons than some players will get in front of their entire careers.

But it’s time to see more from Hjalmarsson.

His proverbial table seemingly has been ready for a while. With Brian Campbell gone, he’ll be counted on more than ever.

“I’m 24. I’m not young and promising anymore,” Hjalmarsson said. “I’ve got to live up to my potential, and hopefully this year I can do that.”

Hjalmarsson is in the second year of a four-year, $14 million contract, which he got after the Hawks matched the San Jose Sharks’ offer sheet for him during the summer of their salary-cap purge. He then got off to a bad start last season, which included a minus-9 rating in 12 games and a two-game suspension for an illegal hit.

The fact that Hjalmarsson recovered to finish with a plus-13 rating last season is a testament to his defensive abilities and perseverance, especially after the short offseason. But his 10 points left much to be desired, especially for a player with a considerable contract.

Expectations are even higher for him this season because he’s the No. 3 defenseman behind Duncan Keith and Brent Seabrook.

“The offensive side of things with [Hjalmarsson] is something we’re always looking for improvement,” Quenneville said. “Whether it’s more direct plays or him being comfortable jumping up in the play, I know we talk about that. He makes some indirect plays sometimes when there’s a direct play.

“The thing he gives us is so much confidence in his positioning defensively and reliability and dependability in our end. [But] there’s room for growth with direct plays and some offense, be it off the point or off the rush.”

In others words, instead of sending the puck around the boards, the Hawks would like to see him take shots or make a pass to maintain their puck possession.

The Hawks won’t try to make Hjalmarsson something he’s not. They’ll still need him in defensive situations as Nick Leddy adjusts in his second year and Steve Montador, Sean O’Donnell and Sami Lepisto settle in to their new team.

But the offensive potential is definitely there. Hjalmarsson has a solid shot, which has steadily improved since his arrival.

“That’s one thing, I didn’t have that many shots [64] last year,” said Hjalmarsson, who will start the season with Seabrook as the Hawks’ shutdown pair. “I’ll try to make more plays, but not try to do too much. There’s a fine line there.”

On paper, the Hawks blue line looks deeper than last season. But a more complete Hjalmarsson could make them elite.

“I’ve got more to show people here in Chicago,” he said. “I’m just looking forward to the season.”

Chicago Sun Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Blackhawks’ Patrick Sharp shows he’s ready with practice hit

By ADAM L. JAHNS

He wasn’t able to play in any exhibition games, so Blackhawks forward Patrick Sharp is doing everything he can to be ready for opening night Friday against the Stars in Dallas.

On Wednesday, that meant giving his team a scare.

Sharp made a play on Jamal Mayers against the boards at practice, sending his new teammate down to the ice screaming in pain. Mayers got up slowly and made his way off the ice under his own power, but he was favoring his right arm.

But that was the worst of it for the banged-up Hawks. It didn’t take long for Mayers to return.

“It wasn’t that bad, was it? I told him I was coming,” Sharp joked. “I guess all that weight training has paid off. Hopefully, he’s OK. We had a good laugh about it. Hopefully, he doesn’t try to get me back one of these days. I’ll be sitting up with you [the media] at practice.”

As for Sharp, he says he’s ready after missing most of training camp because of an emergency appendectomy. He’ll start on the right side of Jonathan Toews as rookie Brandon Saad handles left wing. Coach Joel Quenneville also said he won’t ease Sharp into his first game since last season.

“My conditioning is where it needs to be,” Sharp said. “It’s just a matter of game speed, taking hits, protecting the puck and doing all that stuff. But I’m ready to go. Barring anything major in the next day or two, I’ll be playing.”

Injury report

Dave Bolland (upper-body injury) is questionable for the weekend’s home-and-home matchup against the Stars, and Ben Smith (concussion) is questionable for the season opener.

Chicago Sun Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Colorado Avalanche waits to name its captain

By Mike Chambers

On the day the Avalanche finalized its opening-night roster, the captain of the team remained undecided.

As he previously stated, Avs coach Joe Sacco on Wednesday said forwards Milan Hejduk and Paul Stastny will wear an "A" patch on their sweaters as alternate captains, but he's in no hurry to give anyone the "C."

A third player, however, will be given an "A," and that letter might rotate to the chests of various players.

Thus, the retired Joe Sakic and Adam Foote remain the only captains in Avalanche history as the club begins its 16th season Saturday against the Detroit Red Wings at the Pepsi Center.

"Does it change at some point during the season? It may. It may not," Sacco said. "As I've said before,

(The Denver Post)

we'll kind of let that process play itself out over the next little while. Can't put a timetable on when it will be."

Meanwhile, the Avs reduced their roster to the regular-season maximum of 23 players by reassigning rookie defenseman Stefan Elliott and putting defenseman Kyle Cumiskey (groin) and forwards Mark Olver (head) and Brandon Yip (forearm) on injured reserved.

Elliott, a prized 20-year-old, puck-moving prospect, will begin his pro career with Colorado's American Hockey League affiliate, the Lake Erie Monsters. He had a good chance to begin his career in the NHL if the Avs kept eight defensemen.

As it is, they will begin with 14 forwards, seven defensemen and two goalies.

"I thought that Stefan did everything in his power to stay here," Sacco said. "He certainly impressed the coaching staff, the management staff, with his play."

Sacco added, "We have to get down to numbers but are real proud of what he showed during training camp."

Based on practice lines and pairings, the two extra forwards are Joakim Lindstrom and Kevin Porter, and the extra defenseman is Matt Hunwick.

Gabriel Landeskog, the No. 2 pick in the June draft, is the only rookie to make the Avs' opening-night roster.

"Not a lot has changed. I still have the same focus and same goal - to go out there and prove myself every time I'm on the ice," Landeskog said. "Nothing changes that way, except I have a stall here and my number."

Landeskog will play left wing on the Ryan O'Reilly-centered line, with Daniel Winnik, against the Red Wings on a night when former Swedish and NHL superstar Peter Forsberg's jersey will be retired by the Avalanche.

"If someone asked me to write a script for the first game, it couldn't be any better than this," said Landeskog, a Sweden native. "Obviously, my big boyhood idol, Peter Forsberg, is having his jersey retired. It's going to be a fun night, a great experience."

Denver Post: LOADED: 10.06.2011
The Avalanche today reduced its roster to the regular-season maximum of 23 players by reassigning defenseman Stefan Elliott and putting defensemen Kyle Cumiskey (groin) and forwards Mark Olver (head) and Brandon Yip (forearm) on injured reserve.

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As it is, they will open the season Saturday against the visiting Detroit Red Wings with 14 forwards, seven defensemen and the standard two goalies.

"I thought that Stefan did everything in his power to stay here," Avalanche coach Joe Sacco said after today's practice. "He certainly impressed the coaching staff, the management staff, with his play."

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The Dallas Stars lost their best player, center Brad Richards, and veteran Jamie Langenbrunner to free agency. They also have one of five rookie coaches in the league, Glen Gulutzan.

When the puck drops tonight with three games — the Blue Jackets play host to the Predators on Friday — everybody is 0-0-0, and nobody knows where this is going.

“It’s all on paper,” Blue Jackets defenseman Marc Methot said. “We’re better. Lots of teams think they’re better. But nobody knows until you play 82 games.”

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 10.06.2011

NHL: Western Conference is predictably stacked

By Aaron Portzline

Mike Richards is now with the Kings.

Looking at the board in the Blue Jackets dressing room where the Western Conference standings are displayed throughout the season, R.J. Umberger looked up and down the 15 clubs and shook his head.

“You could flip a coin on any of those teams,” Umberger said of trying to guess which ones are playoff-worthy. “There are some teams you have to believe are going to get in. But if any of those other teams gets a break or two, they can get in. We say this every year, it seems, but the conference is loaded.”

The Blue Jackets made substantial and expensive changes this season, acquiring All-Star center Jeff Carter, point-producing defenseman James Wisniewski and veteran winger Vinny Prospal to stoke a club that has never quite scored enough goals to facilitate winning.

But the Blue Jackets weren’t the only team to bulk up their roster over the summer. Three others — the San Jose Sharks, Los Angeles Kings and Minnesota Wild — made big changes.

The Sharks, who it seems have been on the edge of greatness for years, added defenseman Brent Burns to give them better flexibility. They also replaced fading winger Devin Setoguchi and malcontent winger Dany Heatley with consistent points producer Martin Havlat.

The Kings added center Mike Richards and winger Simon Gagne, giving them a lethal group of top-six forwards that could help them get over the hump. And they re-signed Norris Trophy candidate Drew Doughty at the end of training camp, avoiding a messy situation.

“I would be really disappointed if they didn’t take the next step,” NBC and Chicago Blackhawks broadcaster Eddie Olczyk said. “Not a lot of people are talking about the L.A. Kings, but they’re one of those teams that has a legit chance to get out of the Western Conference finals.”

The Wild, which traded Burns rather than lose him to free agency, took Setoguchi and Heatley off the Sharks’ hands and is teaming them with center Mikko Koivu. The hope is that the duo will be rejuvenated enough to give Minnesota its best No. 1 line in the franchise’s 11 years.

Others teams — the Anaheim Ducks, Chicago Blackhawks, Detroit Red Wings and Vancouver Canucks — didn’t have to make big moves.

At some point, the Red Wings’ age has to catch up to them — doesn’t it? They signed free agent lan White to make up for the retirement of Brian Rafalski, but ageless Nicklas Lidstrom’s return for yet another season was a pleasant surprise.

“I think they’re terrific,” said NBC broadcaster Mike Milbury, former general manager of the New York Islanders. “But they need a surprise on wing and maybe on defense to really contend for a championship.

“No doubt the pieces are there, and every game they’re never anything but a high-end team, but they need some fresh, dynamic, off-the-wall guy to lug the puck on the blue line. And unless they get that, do I think they’ll win a championship? No.”

The St. Louis Blues, Calgary Flames and Colorado Avalanche made only modest moves, while the Edmonton Oilers continued their ramp up to respectability by adding another No. 1 overall draft pick, center Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, to the roster. The Oilers might not win a lot of games, but they will be interesting.

Some clubs would appear to have taken significant steps backward.

The Phoenix Coyotes have played over their heads for two seasons, but the loss of goaltender Ilya Bryzgalov via free agency — and the signing of Mike Smith to replace him — has sent expectations downward.

The Nashville Predators, who finished fifth in the West last season, did not address their No. 1 concern: scoring. They let Joel Ward and Steve Sullivan go, replacing them with unproven winger Niclas Bergfors.
NHL prognosticators see tough season for Stars in 2011-12

In its NHL preview, ESPN's power rankings put the Stars 27th out of 30 teams, ahead of only the Coyotes, Oilers and Senators: "We're still not sold on Kari Lehtonen as a franchise netminder, and the loss of Brad Richards will be hard to get over."

CBSports.com predicts the Stars will finish fifth in the Pacific Division and out of the playoffs. "Losing Brad Richards to free agency is a big blow, even with Mike Ribiero -- who trailed Richards by just six points last season -- still on the roster."

Sports.yahoom's Stars preview projects another season in which the Stars will miss the playoffs: "The Stars are deep at the wing and mediocre at center, defense, and goaltending in a league where a lack of depth at the wing can be overcome. But problems down the middle, on defense and in goal cannot. Expect them to finish outside the playoff picture."

Thehockeynews.com predicts the Stars as the 13th-place team in the West. The reasoning? Once a Western Conference powerhouse, the Stars have financial and ownership concerns, which has negatively impacted the team. The team lost Brad Richards to free agency and didn't replace him. If Kari Lehtonen can stay healthy for another season it will only help the Stars, but that's hardly a scenario to count on.

Thehockeywriters.com is more optimistic, projecting a return to the playoffs for Dallas: Stars take the 7th seed in the West and make the playoffs for the first time since the 2007-2008 season.

Bleacherreport.com forecasts a 12th-place finish in the West for the Stars with a record 36-34-12 for 84 Points. "The Stars were not a pretty site with Brad Richards out of the lineup last year," writes Matthew Fairburn.

None of the hockey guys on thehockeyguys.net - Anthony Mingioni, Todd Cordell and Dustin Leed - have the Stars being in the top eight come playoff time.

bflo360.blogspot.com has the Stars as the 14th best team in the West. A synopsis: The ownership questions and the lack of money have resulted in the downfall of this onetime powerhouse. Star Brad Richards has not been adequately replaced. The defense is mediocre and they desperately need netminder Kari Lehtonen to stay healthy for once.

Thefastertimes.com ranks both conferences as one and has Dallas as the 27th team out of 30: Brad Richards is gone and the Stars made no effort to replace him. This is going to be a painful season for the Stars.

Bostinnovation.com has the Stars making the playoffs as the No. 8 seed but losing to top-seeded Vancouver.

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 10.06.2011
Aware of projections, Gulutzan says Stars will embrace underdog role

Kate Hairooulos / Reporter

After being read predictions from various media outlets projecting an average to bad season for his club, Gulutzan said being an underdog was fine with him.

"Those are perfect," he said. "We'll embrace that role. You don't want to make any promises, but the promises you do make are we're going to play hard, exciting hockey."

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 10.06.2011
Heika: Flyers an example of need to win now in NHL, but it might work

MIKE HEIKA

Never mind the dynasties of the Canadiens, Islanders or Oilers, teams like the Red Wings, Avalanche and Stars had decade-long runs or more in recent years.

But not today. No, the NHL reflects society’s short-term focus, and no team better reflects that than the Philadelphia Flyers. Needing to shake things up, the Flyers traded their top two centers and signed a 31-year-old goalie to a nine-year contract. What’s more, they shuffled six regular forwards and brought in 39-year-old Jaromir Jagr, who played the last three seasons in Russia.

And you know what, it just might work. Mike Richards (to LA for Brayden Schenn, Wayne Simmonds and a second-round draft pick) and Jeff Carter (to Columbus for Jakub Voracek and two draft picks) didn’t appear to be fitting in with the Flyers, and new Philly goalie Ilya Bryzgalov could finally be the answer in net. And who knows what Jagr has left, but he sure seems motivated.

To be fair to the rest of the league, the Flyers aren’t the only team going crazy. The Sabres are spending to the cap under new owner Terry Pegula, the Rangers have tied their fortunes to a nine-year contract for Brad Richards, and the Blue Jackets are hoping to jump 10 places in one season with their expensive moves. So the demand to win now is contagious.

But let’s give the Flyers the nod to complete their task ... that is if they can find a way to stay focused for one whole season.

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 10.06.2011
Forward Adam Burish (groin injury) didn't skate Wednesday and is doubtful for Friday's home opener, but he's expected to skate Thursday and could be ready as soon as Saturday.

Burish would love to get back in time to face Chicago, the team he played for from 2006 to 2010.

"Any time you play your old team, you want to get the last laugh. Those are some of my best buddies," Burish said. "I don't want to sit and watch. I'd rather go and try to run a few of them through the end wall, score a few goals on them and afterward be able to make fun of them."

Burish said he's feeling good and will know more after he skates Thursday.
With defensemen Pardy out and Grossman uncertain, call-ups may be needed

Kate Hairopoulos / Reporter

FRISCO -- The Stars could be without two defensemen as they open the season with a home-and-home against the Chicago Blackhawks on Friday and Saturday.

Adam Pardy was placed on injured reserve Wednesday after suffering a rib injury in last week's preseason win over St. Louis. Nicklas Grossman (groin) tried to skate Wednesday but left the ice early. Coach Glen Gulutzan sounded hopeful that Grossman would be able to go, but general manager Joe Nieuwendyk said he would be out for the weekend.

If he can't go, the Stars will be left with only six healthy defensemen and will probably need to pull up a player from the minor leagues in Austin.

Also, the most recent defensive pairings would have to change, probably mixing in Mark Fistric and Philip Larsen.
Stars' Gulutzan on visit by Mavs coach Carlisle: 'I learned something in the first 10 minutes'

Kate Hairopoulos / Reporter

Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle and some of his staff visited Stars practice Wednesday. Carlisle likes to pick up on how other teams and sports operate; he also visited Cowboys training camp. He has time for such endeavors, with the NBA lockout ongoing.

"I learned something in the first 10 minutes of talking with him," said first-year coach Gulutzan, declining to elaborate. "I thought it was a pretty neat move."

Carlisle addressed the players and mentioned that the Mavs viewed hockey footage from the Stanley Cup Finals between Vancouver and Boston during their run to the NBA championship.

"Boston was real physical with Vancouver and kind of took the series over," Gulutzan said. "He talked to his guys about persistence. Everybody knows the results. ... He said they [Mavs players] went crazy when they watched it."

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 10.06.2011
The Dallas-Fort Worth area, with the Mavericks winning the NBA title, Cowboys Stadium hosting the Super Bowl, TCU winning the Rose Bowl and the Rangers winning the American League pennant last season, has been named The Sporting News' Best Sports City for 2011, the first time the North Texas area has won the award.

The area beat out Boston, which won the Stanley Cup in 2011 for the top spot. Philadelphia is third, Chicago is fourth and New York is fifth. Rounding out the top 10 is Pittsburgh (6), Atlanta (7), Los Angeles (8), Miami (9) and Tampa-St. Petersburg (10).

"The whole of the athletic area exceeds the sum of its sports parts, and in these parts it's all about winning," writes Bob Hille in his opening piece on the subject for the magazine. "The Cowboys' collapse and Stars' ownership struggles were merely the quarter-teaspoon of lemon that heightened the sweetness of championships won.

"Don't sleep on MLS Cup runner-up FC Dallas and MVP David Ferreira, Texas Motor Speedway and postseason bowl games, high school football and palatial Cowboys Stadium, which has also played host to an NBA All-Star game. SMU football is back (legally) and though college hoops takes a back seat, you could fill out a dang good five with talent from the area. And did we mention Texas-OU football?"

The Sporting News explains that the list is based on the summer of 2010 to the summer of 2011 and ranks 271 cities and towns in the U.S. and Canada. Evaluations are based on a number of factors, including regular-season won-lost records of the area's various teams, postseason appearances, bowl and tournament appearances, championships, applicable power ratings, attendance, fan fervor and more.

Past winners:
2010-Chicago
2009-Pittsburgh
2008-Boston
2007-Detroit
2006-Chicago
2005-Boston
2004-Boston
2003-Anaheim/Los Angeles
2002-Boston
2001-New York
2000-St. Louis
1999-New York
1998-Detroit
1997-Denver
1995-Denver
1994-Cleveland
1993-Chicago

Note: There was no Best Sports City in 1996 as the ratings were expanded and refined.
2011-12 NHL season preview

By Art Garcia

WESTERN CONFERENCE

PACIFIC

San Jose Sharks

48-25-9-105 (Lost 4-1 to Canucks in Western Conf. Finals)

Newcomers: D Brent Burns, C Michal Handzus, RW Martin Havlat, D Matt Pelech, D Jim Vandermeer, RW Andrew Murray, C James Sheppard

Outlook: It's scary to think the West-contending Sharks might be even better this year. Down the middle they are one of the best in the NHL with C Joe Thornton, C Joe Pavelski and C Logan Couture. On the back end, they have skill in Burns and D Dan Boyle, and toughness in Murray.

Anaheim Ducks

47-30-5-99 (Lost 4-2 to Predators in first round)

Newcomers: C Mark Bell, D Mathieu Carle, C Andrew Cogliano, G Jeff Deslauriers, RW Andrew Gordon, LW Jean-Francois Jacques, D Bryan Rodney, D Matt Smaby

Outlook: Still have the big top line (RW Bobby Ryan, C Ryan Getzlaf and LW Corey Perry) and RW Teemu Selanne is back, so scoring shouldn't be an issue. Blue-chip prospects D Cam Fowler and D Luca Sbisa, as well as vets D Francois Beauchemin and D Lubomir Visnovsky, anchor the back end. G Jonas Hiller is looking to rebound from last season's bout of vertigo.

Phoenix Coyotes

43-26-13-99 (Lost 4-0 to Red Wings in first round)


Outlook: Former Stars coach Dave Tippett might have his biggest coaching challenge of his career after the Coyotes lost All-Star G Ilya Bryzgalov in free agency. Tippett will rely heavily upon D Keith Yandle and RW Shane Doan.

Los Angeles Kings

46-30-6-98 (Lost 4-2 to Sharks in first round)

Newcomers: C Mike Richards, LW Simon Gagné, C Colin Fraser

Outlook: The Kings look primed to make a run at the Stanley Cup this season. The trade for Richards and the long-term deal locking up franchise player D Drew Doughty means LA is putting in all its chips.

Dallas Stars

42-29-11-95

Newcomers: C Jake Dowell, RW Radek Dvorak, LW Vernon Fiddler, RW Eric Godard, D Adam Pardy, RW Michael Ryder, D Sheldon Souray

Outlook: The off-season additions could put the Stars in position to surprise, despite losing C Brad Richards, C Mike Ribeiro, LW Jamie Benn, D Alex Goligoski and G Kari Lehtonen need to step up. Overachieving teams are a trademark of first-year coach Glen Gulutzan. This squad should be deeper, more mobile, tougher and smarter than the past few years.

NORTHWEST

Vancouver Canucks

54-19-9-117 (Lost 4-3 to Bruins in Stanley Cup Finals)

Newcomers: LW Marco Sturm, RW Mark Manconi, RW Byron Bitz, LW Mike Duco, C Andrew Ebbett, D Ryan Parent

Outlook: Along with San Jose and Los Angeles, the Canucks will contend for the West crown. They are talented, deep, have a strong power play, a good penalty kill and superstar players such as the Sedin twins (C Henrik and LW Daniel), C Ryan Kesler and G Roberto Luongo.

Calgary Flames

41-29-12-94

Newcomers: RW Lee Stempniak, D Scott Hannan, C Paul Byron, D Chris Butler, LW/RW Pierre-Luc Letourneau-LeBlond

Outlook: The guy who needs to have a big year this season is G Mikka Kiprusoff. He's 34 and must make a major impact if the Flames are to get back into the playoffs for the first time since 2009. They have the talent, but do they have the chemistry?

Minnesota Wild

39-35-8-96

Newcomers: RW Dany Heatley, D Mike Lundin, C Darroll Powe, RW Devin Setoguchi

Outlook: The Wild shook up its roster this summer and made a coaching switch. Although they lost offensive-minded D Brent Burns to San Jose, they added scorers in Setoguchi and Heatley. Does the Wild have enough depth on the back end to push for one of the eight playoff spots?

Colorado Avalanche

30-44-8-68

Newcomers: F Evan Brophey, G Cedrick Desjardins, G Jean-Sebastien Giguere, D Jan Hejda, RW Chuck Kobasew, C Joakim Lindstrom, G Drew McIntyre, D Shane O'Brien, G Semyon Varlamov

Outlook: Probably still a year or two away from competing for the playoffs, but they do have some good, young talent and expect big things from C Paul Stastny up front and D Erik Johnson on the back end. With former Capitals netminder Varlamov in the pipes, they could surprise.

Edmonton Oilers

25-45-12-62

Newcomers: LW Ryan Smyth, LW Ben Eager, C Eric Belanger, RW Darcy Hordichuk, D Cam Barker, D Andy Sutton

Outlook: Because of their young core, the Oilers don't appear ready for the postseason, but they will have flashes of brilliance with youngsters LW Taylor Hall and RW Jordan Eberle. Defense and goaltending are questions that must be answered.

CENTRAL

Detroit Red Wings

47-25-10-104 (Lost 4-3 to Sharks in second round)

Newcomers: G Ty Conklin, RW, Chris Conner, D Mike Commodore, D Garnet Exelby, D Ian White

Outlook: With superstars like LW Henrik Zetterberg, C Pavel Datsyuk and D Nicklas Lidstrom, the Red Wings are destined for another playoff appearance, even though their core is getting older. With arguably the league's best forward (Datsyuk) and defenseman (Lidstrom), injuries are the chief concern.

Nashville Predators

44-27-11-99 (Lost 4-2 to Canucks in second round)


Outlook: Just when you want to count the Predators out, they make the playoffs...again. Pekka Rinne is one the NHL's best goaltenders. Shea Weber is arguably the best defenseman and there's a committed forward group that plays coach Barry Trotz's system flawlessly.

Chicago Blackhawks
Newcomers: D Steve Montador, RW Jamal Mayers, D Sean O'Donnell, LW Andrew Brunette, LW Dan Carcillo, D Sami Lepisto

Outlook: The Blackhawsks still have some of the best offensive producers in the game in C Jonathan Toews, RW Patrick Kane, LW Patrick Sharp, RW Marian Hossa, D Duncan Keith and D Brent Seabrook. They added some veterans with lots of experience in Brunette, O'Donnell and Mayers. Despite the skill and talent they possess, is G Corey Crawford the answer in net?

St. Louis Blues
38-33-11-87

Newcomers: C Jason Arnott, C Evgeny Grachev, C Scott Nichol, LW Brett Stirling, RW Jonathan Cheechoo, RW Jamie Langenbrunner, D Kent Huskins, D Danny Syvret, G Brian Elliott

Outlook: The Blues are hoping for chemistry among their younger players and new veterans. RW David Backes will lead, but will need help from C T.J. Oshie, RW Chris Stewart, D Alex Pietrangelo and C Patrik Berglund. With former Stars Langenbrunner and Arnott rounding out the roster, the Blues should make a push for the playoffs.

Columbus Blue Jackets
34-35-13-81

Newcomers: C Cody Bass, C Jeff Carter, LW Alexandre Giroux, D Aaron Johnson, D Radek Martinek, LW Vaclav Prospal, C Ryan Russell, G Curtis Sanford, D James Wisniewski

Outlook: The Blue Jackets spent big money on Wisniewski, and made a huge trade for Carter. All of that won't matter if G Steve Mason doesn't return to his rookie form of 2008-09.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Atlantic

Philadelphia Flyers
47-23-12-106 (Lost 4-0 to Bruins in second round)

Newcomers: G Jason Bacashihua, G Ilya Bryzgalov, RW Jaromir Jagr, D Andreas Lilja, RW Wayne Simmonds, C Brayden Schenn, C Maxime Talbot, RW Jakub Voracek

Outlook: Traded away superstars C Mike Richards and C Jeff Carter. The Flyers are younger, and some might say better, after adding the likes of Voracek, Simmonds and Schenn. Jagr also returns and had a great preseason. Their strength will be on their defense, with D Chris Pronger still one of the league's best.

Pittsburgh Penguins
49-25-8-106 (Lost 4-3 to Lightning in first round)

Newcomers: LW Steve MacIntyre, D Alexandre Picard, LW Steve Sullivan, RW Jason Williams

Outlook: Everybody in the hockey world is wondering when C Sidney Crosby will come back, but even without Sid the Kid, the Penguins will be a force in the East. Look for C Evgeni Malkin and C Jordan Staal to star, along with G Marc-Andre Fleury.

NY Rangers
44-33-5-93 (Lost 4-1 to Capitals in first round)

Newcomers: RW Andre Deveaux, D Tim Erixon, C Brad Richards, C Michael Rupp, RW Andreas Thurosson

Outlook: Former Star Richards leads a talented roster with high hopes. Along with Richards, the Rangers are counting on C Brandon Dubinsky, C Derek Stepan, RW Marian Gaborik, C Artem Anisimov and RW Ryan Callahan. Henrik Lundqvist is one of the game's best between the pipes, but can he make up for an iffy defense?

New Jersey Devils
38-39-5-81

Newcomers: LW Eric Boulton, RW Cam Janssen, D Maxim Noreau

Outlook: The hottest team in the NHL to close the regular season last year is looking to get off to a faster start in 2011-12. The Devils have scoring power in LW Ilya Kovalchuk and RW Nick Parise, but first-line C Travis Zajac is out 4-6 months with a torn Achilles' tendon. Can G Martin Brodeur bounce back from a poor season or is he finally slowing down at 39?

NY Islanders
30-39-13-73

Newcomers: D Matt Donovan, C Marty Reasoner, LW Brian Rolston

Outlook: The Islanders need big things out of their young core. C John Tavares, RW Kyle Okposo and C Joshua Bailey should produce. RW Michael Grabner is coming off a 34-goal season. With thin defensive corps and questions surrounding their goaltending, the Islanders could be in for a long season.

Northeast

Boston Bruins
46-25-11-103 (Stanley Cup champion, defeated Vancouver Canucks 4-3)

Newcomers: D Joe Corvo, LW Benoit Pouliot

Outlook: Defending champs come back with a similar team that won it all last year. They are big, deep, can score, have a solid defense and great goaltending. If they don't avoid a case of Stanley Cup hangover, they should roll into the playoffs.

Montreal Canadiens
44-30-8-96 (Lost 4-3 to Bruins in first round)

Newcomers: F Erik Cole, G Peter Budaj, D Raphael Diaz, F Michael Blunden, D Jeff Woywitka, D Chris Campoli

Outlook: A strong nucleus of players in G Carey Price, D P.K. Subban, C Tomas Plekanec, RW Brian Gionta and LW Michael Cammalleri gives the Habs a good shot at a long playoff run. Look for several players to have big years for this serious East contender.

Buffalo Sabres
43-29-10-96 (Lost 4-3 to Flyers in first round)

Newcomers: D Christian Ehrhoff, LW Ales Kotalik, RW Ville Leino, G Drew Mcintyre, D Robyn Regehr

Outlook: With a new owner in place, the Sabres spent money on Ehrhoff, Leino and their own D Tyler Myers. Their backbone again is G Ryan Miller, who is arguably the best netminder in the league. They're primed to make a playoff run.

Toronto Maple Leafs
37-34-11-8

Newcomers: C Tim Connolly, C Philippe Dupuis, D Cody Franson, D John-Michael Liles, C Matthew Lombardi

Outlook: Big expectations that come with playing in Toronto boil down to just one thing for fans: playoffs. Do they have enough horses to do it? Connolly has to shake off the injury issues that have plagued him. The Leafs appear to have found a solid goaltender in James Reimer.

Ottawa Senators
32-40-10-74

Newcomers: G Alex Auld, D Tim Conboy, LW Nikita Filatov, C Zenon Konopka, G Mike McKenna, RW Mark Parrish

Outlook: The Senators will be looking to bounce back from a poor 2010-11 campaign. Though they didn't make major roster changes, they brought in coach Paul MacLean. If he can get C Jason Spezza to buy into his system, the Sens could challenge for a playoff berth.

Southeast

Washington Capitals
48-23-11-107 (Lost 4-0 to Lightning in second round)
Newcomers: LW Chris Bourque, RW Troy Brouwer, C Jeff Halpern, D Roman Hamrlik, C Christian Hanson, RW Danick Paquette, D Ryan Potulny, D Danny Richmond, RW Taylor Stefishen, G Tomas Vokoun, RW Joel Ward

Outlook: The Capitals added key parts to an already explosive roster. Weighty wingers like Brouwer and Ward should make Washington a harder team to play against. They are one of the most skilled teams in the league with LW Alex Ovechkin, C Nicklas Backstrom, LW Alexander Semin and D Mike Green, but their competitiveness will determine how far they go.

Tampa Bay Lightning

46-25-11-103 (Lost 4-3 to Bruins in Eastern Conference Finals)

Newcomers: G Mathieu Garon, D Bruno Gervais, D Matt Gilroy, LW Alexandre Picard, C Tom Pyatt, RW Ryan Shannon, C Trevor Smith

Outlook: Following an Eastern Conference Finals appearance, the Lightning has set its sights on more. Tampa Bay is counting on C Steven Stamkos, RW Martin St. Louis and C Vincent Lecavalier. Coach Guy Boucher should have his team primed for another deep playoff run.

Carolina Hurricanes

40-31-11-91

Newcomers: C Tim Brent, G Brian Boucher, D Tomas Kaberle, LW Alexei Ponikarovsky, LW Anthony Stewart, LW Chris Durno

Outlook: The Canes will have production from their top two lines with C Eric Staal, C Jeff Skinner, LW Jussi Jokinen, C Tuomo Ruutu and C Brandon Sutter leading the way. Along with their depth up front, is their back end is good enough? Should be in the playoff chase because of G Cam Ward.

Winnipeg Jets

34-36-12-80

Newcomers: RW Eric Fehr, LW Tanner Glass, D Randy Jones, D Derek Meech, LW Kenndal McArdle

Outlook: The NHL returns to Manitoba after relocating from Atlanta, and excitement in the air. Another team with a lot of young talent in D Zach Bogosian, LW Evander Kane, C Alexander Burmistrov and C Bryan Little. Look for good things from G Ondrej Pavelec.

Florida Panthers

30-40-12-72


Outlook: With money to burn, they corralled free agents Kopecky, Jovanovski, Campbell and Upshall. With G Tomas Vokoun departed for Washington, can Scott Clemmensen and Theodore carry the load in net?

Star-Telegram LOADED: 10.06.2011
Getting to the playoffs is the Stars' focus

By Art Garcia

DALLAS -- Overcoming a Tom Hicks-forced bankruptcy and competing for a championship have been done in these parts. The Stars aren't guaranteeing the Stanley Cup Finals this season, but they also won't use finances as an excuse when it comes to constructing their club.

So while the ownership situation swirls, it remains business as usual on the ice. Players missing paychecks or the NHL stepping in to run daily operations isn't a concern.

"We don't see it," Steve Ott said.

"What do we have to complain about? We're treated first class. The Dallas Stars organization has always treated us first class and it's never wavered, even without an owner right now.

"For us it's not even thought about. We just continue to play. That's the only thing we know how to do. If we knew how to crunch numbers, we definitely wouldn't be playing hockey."

"The new owner is going to come in with fresh ideas and new input as to marketing and advertising," general manager Joe Nieuwendyk said. "I believe that you have to get out there in the community, but the bottom line is you have to win. That's the thing that we have to do. I think everybody feels confident that we're on the right path."

For the players, that path means getting back into the playoffs after a three-year absence. The season begins Friday against Chicago at American Airlines Center.

"The only thing we can do is win games," center Mike Ribeiro said.

The new owners will get a franchise building with homegrown talent and in a healthy salary cap situation.

"We've been very smart that way the last couple of years with our contracts," Nieuwendyk said. "We don't have any bad contracts, really, and that's important in today's game. We've tried to be selective and smart about who we bring into our team, and we feel very comfortable from that standpoint."

So the Stars begin a new season much like the Texas Rangers began the 2010 season. And they wouldn't mind some of that Rangers' success rubbing off on them.

"Paychecks are still coming; life is good," left wing Steve Ott said.

Star-Telegram LOADED: 10.06.2011
Red Wings' Ian White the right fit for a lefty team

HELENE ST. JAMES

Red Wings coach Mike Babcock likes to sum up his newest defenseman by listing all the things Ian White isn't: Not big, not the most gifted skater, not the best with the puck. What makes White potentially such a good addition for the Wings is that he is a hockey player, which in Babcock's lingo is as good a compliment as there is.

"He's just smart and he competes," Babcock said. "I really like that about him."

The Wings signed White on July 2 for two years and $5.75 million. Brian Rafalski had retired in May, and the top four needed shoring up, even with having re-signed Jonathan Ericsson.

White's assets included his age (27), his size -- he is about 5-foot-10 and a solidly built 200 pounds -- and his experience -- he'd just helped the San Jose Sharks get to the third round of the 2011 playoffs, which included expelling the Wings in the second round. He also shoots right, a rarity on a team loaded with lefties.

Babcock has had White opposite Nicklas Lidstrom from the start of training camp, a move that certainly eased White's transition, as teammates have noticed.

"It looks like he and Swede have been playing together for five years already," Henrik Zetterberg said. "They really read off each other good. I think them playing together is going to be good for Nick and good for Whitey. And if they put those two together on power plays, they're going to be a tough matchup to beat."

White has six seasons and 401 games of NHL experience, most of it with Toronto.

Last season he bounced from Calgary to Carolina to San Jose, so to get a shot at stability and get it with a competitive team made for an easy decision in the summer. He also stands to improve the offensive side of his game in Detroit, since he'll be out with a top line.

"You look at the personnel we have up front, and just playing with Nick, there's definitely an opportunity just with making a good first pass and getting the puck up to our forwards as quick as possible," White said. "This is a fairly easy system to learn when you play with such talented players."

Pairing White with Lidstrom has enabled the Wings to reunite Brad Stuart with Niklas Kronwall, who play exceptionally well with one another. Lidstrom, meanwhile, gains a young, fresh set of legs, and a guy who plays with a bit of edge.

"He plays aggressive in his own zone, he's quick, and he's on you constantly," Lidstrom said. "He won't give you a whole lot of breathing room. I like the physical presence that he brings. I think it's just a matter of him and I playing together and getting a feel for what he's good at, see how he's reading plays, and just knowing how he reacts, but I think he's been a great fit."

When White isn't being a good hockey player, he's being a good dad to his 2-year-old son, Paxton, and 5-month-old daughter, Gracelyn. The family has settled in Birmingham, giving White a little haven away from hockey.

"The season is such a grind," he said, "that sitting on the couch with them for a couple of hours is a nice way to relax."

Detroit Free Press LOADED: 10.06.2011
FSD wants to bring fans high-tech hockey experience

By MIKE BRUDE

Mickey Redmond laughs when he thinks of Fox Sports Detroit's "between-the-benches" reporting from NHL Hall of Famer Larry Murphy during Red Wings home games.

"I think the benches in my day would have told Larry to 'get out of the road' when they passed him," said Redmond, who played for the Wings in 1970-76 and is a longtime FSD Wings color analyst. "But as we go along, fans today want to know more about players -- their stats, their habits, their passions, their thoughts before, during and after games. Hockey, for example, is being played at breakneck speed and we have to be capable of delivery the news and pictures as such."

This season marks the 15th year of Wings coverage by FSD.

Perhaps nothing at FSD has changed as much as the network's technical enhancements when it comes to bringing viewers what is happening on the ice.

Redmond's enthusiastic use of the telestrator is one of a number of advancements FSD has introduced since its Wings hockey coverage began in 1997.

"It's easy for me to say, but I think the telestrator is the greatest tool we have," said Redmond, who has been involved in TV broadcasting for 33 years. "I like to teach the game and it's perfect for that."

The addition of high-definition telecasts of Wings games has been a huge development for FSD and hockey fans as well as the advent of the super slo-mo camera -- what is called "Fox-mo" by the network -- goal cams and the consistent time and score updates in the Fox Box on the screen. FSD executive producer John Tuohey has helped advance game technology at the network and particularly enjoys the cleaner, crisper look of high-definition Wings telecasts.

"Nothing is more important than to get it right for our viewers in covering sports," Tuohey said. "Our job is to translate the game -- we can't change the outcome -- but we do have the ability to bring the game experience to the fans. Sure, we want people to go to games but watching the Red Wings on TV -- we want to make it the next best thing."

Tuohey is looking at the possibility of moving robo cameras down toward the goal line, bringing the action closer to viewers, and covering hockey from all different angles including creative use of sky cams.

"Camera placement definitely helps people follow hockey better," Tuohey said. "The sport is so fast we must continue to catch up with it from a technical standpoint."

Ken Daniels, the veteran Red Wings play-by-play announcer on FSD, is a student of hockey and an avid statistician.

"The looks and angles -- it's remarkable how far we've come in televising the game," said Daniels, who watched "Hockey Night in Canada" growing up in Toronto.

Daniels believes technology such as super slo-mo has also helped stamp out the "hooking and grabbing" in hockey and can aid in cleaning up the game in highlighting cheap shots.

He also thinks his partner Redmond can handle more than just the telestrator.

"Mick's a creature of habit, really," Daniels said. "But he's up on technology, which is a good thing."

Detroit Free Press LOADED: 10.06.2011
Red Wings know they need better defense, better play at home for shot at Cup

Helene St. James:

All summer long, Henrik Zetterberg said, he and his Red Wings teammates have talked about what they need to do this season.

The bar for the Wings, as Zetterberg put it, "is high; it's every year about the Stanley Cup for us."

The past two springs, however, have ended with second-round exits. The playoffs are such a long way off -- the NHL regular season lasts from October to mid-April -- but what happens then begins with what happens when the Wings start the 2011-12 season Friday against Ottawa.

"We've been talking about defense all summer and all camp," Zetterberg said. "We know we have to go out and play better defense. We have to keep our goals-against lower than we did last year. That starts with winning face-offs and being better in our own zone."

Coach Mike Babcock's frustration lies in figuring out why he seemed to have two teams last year.

"We played north-south on the road, and we played east-west through the neutral zone at home and got ourselves in trouble," he said. "So is that because we're trying to be too fine at home, entertain at home? I don't know the answer, but I just know that we've got to be a better hockey team at home."

That effort should be aided by a handful of younger players who will play more prominent roles this season, adding speed to a roster that still boasts names such as Zetterberg, Pavel Datsyuk and Nicklas Lidstrom.

The Wings enter this season once again towering among the NHL's elite, and, after a summer's worth of planning, they are ready to show they'll be there come next spring, too.

There's work to be done

The NHL season is a nearly seven-month marathon just to cross a finish line for the sake of playing as much as two more months. That last stretch is what the Red Wings are all about, or what they want to be all about, anyway. They've made the playoffs 20 seasons running, but they haven't been even halfway to the Stanley Cup final since 2009.

Work on getting there in 2012 begins Friday, when the Red Wings open the season at home against Ottawa. The Wings want to use the game as the start of a restoration project, a chance to send the first of many messages that they should be feared.

Players know the Wings don't top preseason predictions like the team has in the past -- and recognize why.

"The aura is slipping away," forward Danny Cleary said. "The last few years we haven't gotten past the second round, so I don't know if we deserve to be thought of as a top, top, top team, but we believe we are, so we have to prove that to ourselves, and prove everybody else wrong."

"We need to get back to playing the way we were in '07-08-09 -- good team defense, good at home, good in all areas."

These are even times in hockey.

Nicklas Lidstrom, the Wings captain whose tenure with the team overlaps that impressive playoff streak, said "I don't think the NHL has ever been this close. There's just so much parity now. You look at the league, and anyone can win now."


"I would just end it with that," he said. "My opinion is that if you put those three on a board and picked three top guys from every other team, those three might get picked first. It's a pretty good start."

General manager Ken Holland has heard ad nauseam that the Wings are too old and too slow, but over the past few years they've steadily integrated younger players like Darren Helm, Justin Abdelkader, Patrick Eaves and Drew Miller, and this summer the defense got younger with the addition of Ian White.

Half the team hovers around 30, a group that includes workhorses like Zetterberg, Datsyuk, Cleary, Johan Franzen, Valtteri Filppula, Niklas Kronwall and Brad Stuart. The summer retirements of Brian Rafalski, Chris Osgood and Kris Draper left just three players who are 36 and older in Lidstrom, Tomas Holmstrom and Todd Bertuzzi.

"We're trying to transition the team," Holland said, "and also compete with other elite teams, and position ourselves within the collective bargaining agreement. We've brought in some people internally. You look at our team today, a lot of the players are in their 20s. We don't draft high, so we don't get any superstars, but a lot of our younger players are above-average players."

The Wings added a big forward earlier this week when they signed Fabian Brunnstrom, who'll further increase the competition for playing time among the forwards. There's also good competition on defense, where Jonathan Ericsson is going to push to get into the top four, and Jakub Kindl and Mike Commodore will be battling to be in the rotation. If needed, the Wings have over $5 million in salary cap space, giving them great flexibility to make a trade.

The gist of the matter is, it's not so much personnel that's been missing the past couple of years. Sure, the Wings could use another goal scorer, but every team has an area of weakness, that's the parity imposed by the salary cap.

What's ailed the Wings -- what's lessened that aura Cleary spoke of -- is how lax they've been defensively. Last season they finished 23rd out of 30 teams with a 2.89 goals-against average; the two teams that made it to the Stanley Cup final, Vancouver and Boston, were first and second.

"We have to play better team defense to be good in the long run," Lidstrom said. "We scored a lot of goals last year, but we also let in a lot of goals. That's our emphasis -- try to play stronger and better team defense. That's coming back hard and helping out back checking. Doing that takes more out of you, so you have to have discipline, too, that your shifts are shorter so you can stay fresh out there."

"I think we are a hard-working team, and we all believe in ourselves, but we need to be more aggressive, hunt the puck more, get on the puck quicker. By doing that, you're going to wear down the other team's D. We have the guys who can do that, too, who have that speed and that checking ability to get on top of the opponents' defensemen."

When they had the puck last season, the Wings were one of the best in the league, with a 3.13 goals-per-game average that trailed only the Canucks' 3.15. The Wings lost one of the game's best outlet passers in Rafalski, but still have a very active back end with Lidstrom, Kronwall and Ericsson.

The bigger onus is on some of the forwards -- especially Franzen, who scored only twice the last two months of last season; Hudler, who contributed just 10 goals and Filppula, who is overdue to break 40 points.

By carrying 14 forwards, there are plenty of options for coach Mike Babcock as he assembles lines.

"I'm excited about our group," Babcock said. "We've got more competition on our third and fourth lines than we've had in a while. I think we've got good energy, I think we've got a good team. I think we've got good depth."

The NHL regular season used not to mean much, as elite teams quickly separated from the common. That's not the case any more; now the playoff picture isn't settled until the last weekend. Over the past two seasons the Wings have learned how important it is to secure home-ice advantage, how important it is to play well and play hard.

"Certainly we've got a lot to prove; to ourselves, first," Cleary said.

A long and competitive stretch lies ahead, but what it's really all about for the Wings is making sure it lasts even longer next spring.

Detroit Free Press LOADED: 10.06.2011
Jakub Kindl 'excited' about expanded role with Red Wings

ANTHONY FENECH

Jakub Kindl has been waiting for this moment his entire career.

"I'm really excited, I'm not going to lie," he said after practice on Wednesday. "I've got the opportunity, now I just have to show everybody that I can play."

After getting his feet wet last season, the 24-year-old defenseman is ready to take advantage of the regular playing time that he'll be getting this season with the Red Wings.

Last season, Kindl played in 48 games, tallied four points and a plus/minus of minus-6. This season, coach Mike Babcock is counting on him for more, pairing him up defensively with Jonathan Ericsson.

"It's a huge opportunity for him," Babcock said.

An opportunity that Kindl started working on during the summer, while working out with Justin Abdelkader.

"You gotta give the kid credit," Babcock said. "He trained like crazy all summer, he's gotten way stronger and I think his confidence has grown. It's never been about skill level, it's been about having the confidence to compete at the highest level."

Kindl hopes that strength and confidence will take his play to the next level.

"I definitely think I feel more stronger out there," he said. "I just have to use my body more and play more aggressive."

He said that he and Ericsson are starting to jell as a pairing. The two played together in Grand Rapids, in training camp and throughout the exhibition season.

"I thought we did a pretty decent job," Kindl said. "But still, it's early in the season and now we're going to find out if it's going to work out or not."

Babcock is banking that it does. "It's gotta be a real good pairing," he said.

INJURY UPDATE: Tomas Holmstrom (knee) and Patrick Eaves (knee) both participated in Wednesday's practice and every player except defenseman Mike Commodore skated. "I'll be ready to go," Eaves said about Friday's home opener against Ottawa.

Detroit Free Press LOADED: 10.06.2011
Sports Illustrated: Red Wings just fifth-best in Western Conference

STEVE SCHRADER

This is the most unusual start to a Red Wings season in quite a while. They're still there, still good, but just not generating the buzz of the Lions and Tigers.

Usually, this is the Thank God for the Wings time of the year.

Even Sports Illustrated, given the choice of regional covers for its annual NHL preview, put the Lions on the issue that Hockeytown gets. Boston gets the Bruins.

Inside, SI has the Wings penciled the same as most of the national previews: second to Chicago in the Central Division, fifth in the Western Conference.

On the bright side, SI's Sarah Kwak writes of the Wings: "With awe-inspiring center Pavel Datsyuk back to full health ... the Wings' offense, which was second best in the league, should be even better."

Quick hit

• Wings wives will join those at all U.S.-based NHL arenas in selling $10 wristbands at Friday night's opener to benefit the 44 families that lost loved ones in last month's crash of the Russian jetliner carrying the Lokomotiv Yaroslavl hockey team. That included three former Wings: Brad McCrimmon, Ruslan Salei and goalie prospect Stefan Liv.

The wristbands and $50 jeweled prayer bracelets (kids' sizes $25) are available at LoveforLokomotiv.com.

Detroit Free Press LOADED: 10.06.2011
Will the Red Wings win the Stanley Cup? s make the call

MITCH ALBOM

No.
But they'll come close. There's a time when you have to give up a few slots for new faces, and the Wings have remade the team and the locker room significantly since last year. You have to trust the front office with nudging new talent into place. If the Wings follow normal suit, this will be a buildup year to a new height next season.

MICHAEL ROSENBERG

No.
Hey, only one team wins it. My money is on Pittsburgh if Sidney Crosby is past his concussion issues. The Red Wings should be in the mix in the Western Conference again, and I wouldn't be shocked if they contend for the top spot in the West.

HELENE ST. JAMES

Yes.
Sure, a lot of teams have a shot. The Wings certainly have the personnel to do it, if they stay healthy, which is always the key. But San Jose made some tremendous changes over the summer, and Chicago could have an interesting season.

DREW SHARP

No.
They're probably only the fourth-best team in the Western Conference, behind San Jose, Chicago and Vancouver. It's time for guys like Valtteri Filppula and Jiri Hudler to step forward and assume bigger offensive responsibilities on this team.

Detroit Free Press LOADED: 10.06.2011
Lidstrom United
resurrected
smiling, "Faster!
"Nice!
"Let's
talking
White,
circle,
Amid
medicine
and
As

581321   Detroit Red Wings

Wings' Swedish pair still going strong

Gregg Krupa/ The Detroit News

Detroit - It was 15 minutes after a recent practice, during which coach Mike Babcock had the Red Wings skating hard.

Nicklas Lidstrom and Tomas Holmstrom sat on the stools at their dressing stalls, pulling off their damp skates, pants and pads and saturated practice jerseys.

Like the rest of the Red Wings, they were both just a tad winded.

"Tommy," Lidstrom said, staring at the floor in front of him, "You ready?"

He looked up and across the room to Holmstrom.

"Are you ready, old man?" Holmstrom responded.

"Anytime you are," Lidstrom said, a half-smile greeting the taunt.

Much about this season for the Red Wings is the hope second-tier players seize bigger responsibilities and drive the team deeper into the playoffs. Only two of their oldest guard remain.

But Lidstrom and Holmstrom are intent on not going quietly - if, after helping revive the franchise and restoring its glory, this is to be their last season.

As they both stood and walked across the dressing room, behind curtains and into the workout room, Babcock began a daily session with reporters.

As Babcock spoke, Lidstrom and Holmstrom worked with weight machines and resistance equipment. They stood on the ground and repeatedly jumped up on to elevated platforms. After 20 minutes, they walked back into the dressing room with Ian White, Lidstrom's new defense partner, carrying medicine balls.

Amid banter from Holmstrom that amused Lidstrom and White, the trio sat on the floor. They spread their legs broadly and arrayed themselves in a circle, their feet each touching the next man's, and they began firing the medicine balls at each other's chests, each man in order, around the circle.

It is a drill that exerts groins, abdominal muscles and triceps.

One of White's passes is slightly inaccurate.

"What are you doing?" Holmstrom asks the newcomer, with humorous intent.

Then, making an accurate toss and turning up the comedy, Holmstrom told White, "This is how we roll, here!"

Smiling, White's pardon me consisted of firing the next toss all the harder at his teammate.

After a brisk 10-minute session, all three players are breathing heavily, and talking between huffs and puffs.

"Let's go one more!" Holmstrom said, tossing the ball at Lidstrom before any response.

The ball went around.

"Nice! Nice! Nice!" he said, urging them on.

"Faster! Faster! Faster!" Holmstrom hollered, with Lidstrom and White smiling, stifling laughter. "Go! Go! Go!"

Then there were 2

The Red Wings and their fans are down to just two. Only two players remain from the team in the mid-1990s that buried "The Dead Things" and resurrected not only the Red Wings, but the Red Wings of Stanley Cup championships - the most in the history of the NHL by any team in the United States.

Despite intense efforts at conditioning, this may be the last campaign for Lidstrom and Holmstrom.

They like this: the practices, skating, and drills, all the extra work after practices, the camaraderie - all topped off by the fact some of the most knowledgeable fans in the NHL have cherished the results.

They know they will miss it, and they know they may miss it soon.

But they also discern there is at least one more once, that they are in great shape, pain-free and that if this season is to end with them hoisting the Stanley Cup for a fifth time, they remain vital to the success of this team.

Had Lidstrom, 41, retired, general manager Ken Holland says the franchise would be in a full-blown rebuilding process, with Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg as the foundation.

Had Holmstrom, 38, retired, every goaltender and many defensemen in the NHL would have breathed sighs of relief, and Babcock would have to look elsewhere for many of his frequently demanded goals from around the net.

And, especially with Draper now in management, if not for "Holmer," who would keep the room loose?

Thanks in part to Lidstrom and Holmstrom, the Red Wings have been amazingly consistent for 20 years, and they seemed destined for another 100-point regular season in 2011-12.

Discovering Detroit

Living in opposite ends of Sweden, Lidstrom and Holmstrom did not meet until they played for their country at the 1990 World Cup.

"He was the new guy on the national team," Lidstrom said. "I read about him being the 'Demolition Man,' back in Sweden. But I didn't know anything about him, except that is what he was called.

"He was kind of a gritty player back then, too. I remember he was running around hitting players. He was hitting (Igor) Larionov and hitting some of the older guys in training camp. He wasn't shy at all.

"And I think he found his niche pretty early, too: Being a good player on the power play, being fearless going to the front of the net and that is what he was good at."

Holmstrom knew about Lidstrom, before they met.

"I knew he played in Detroit for a long time, and that he was one of the best defensemen we had in Swedish hockey, already, then," he said.

"He really took care of me; really, you know, helped me out from the beginning. Like, coming over here, he showed me around, places to live, where to get the cars, and stuff like that. And he took care of my wife, too."

When he arrived five years earlier, Lidstrom said, much about Detroit was unfamiliar.

"I didn't know a whole lot about the team or the city," he said. "I knew it was one of the original six teams and one of the historic teams."

But, besides that, I knew about Steve Yzerman. I saw him play for Team Canada a few times."

At first, he said, he did not know about the four-decade Stanley Cup drought, which began after the Red Wings had won four in five years in the 1950s.

"But once I got here, you know, I realized it's been 40-some years," Lidstrom said. "And I just learned the history of the team and the players that have been here in the past, and got a chance to meet Gordie Howe, Ted Lindsay and some of the former players."

Now, 20 years later, the team has not missed the playoffs with Lidstrom, and the number of Cups in franchise history increased from seven to 11.

"You know, it was a good team," Holmstrom said of the group playing when he arrived in 1996. "But there's lots of good teams, and you have to go all of the way.

"You got to have the right formula, you need the good goaltending, deep defense and the good forward lines, and that is what we had."

After the first two, back-to-back in 1997 and '98, it might have been easy to think the championships were done. It is often like that, especially with free agency, in the NHL; a team peaks and then must rebuild. But the Red Wings persisted.
"We were keeping the same core group of players together, pretty much since the early '90s," Lidstrom said. "A few players left and a few new players came. But the nucleus was the same."

Said Holmstrom: "I think that's why so many guys want to come over here. It's so professional from the ownership to the management on down. And I'm fortunate; this is the only team I've played on and you think, this is how it is, you know? But you hear of guys coming from different clubs and they say, 'Wow, this is great!'"

Built to last

Ask his teammates about Lidstrom's enormous success, and the portrait of perfect man emerges. No such thing is possible, of course. But Lidstrom is close.

Ask him, and another attribute emerges: humility.

"It's hard to say why, talking about yourself," Lidstrom said. "I think conditioning has been a big part of it, taking care of myself in the offseason and being ready to play a long season. And I've been fortunate enough not to have any major injuries throughout my career and I think that's been a big part of it, too.

"And I think my positioning on the ice. I play a lot of minutes, and that is something our assistant coach, Dave Lewis, back when I first came here, told me. 'Look, just play your position right.' Especially as a young defenseman coming in, you have to play your position right to stay in this league. I think I was a good listener back then."

If Lidstrom is a high-performance Porsche, Holmstrom is a four-wheel drive pickup with a beat-up liner bed. But it is a workingman's truck that should be adorned with garlands.

No one in the game plays in front of the net quite as well as Holmstrom, screening and deflecting. And in one of the best compliments in the NHL, when young players are urged to do it, they are told, "play like Holmstrom."

"For this season, it is take one day at a time and have fun," Holmstrom said. "That's all. And see what happens."

Detroit News LOADED: 10.06.2011
From Abdelkader to Zetterberg: Meet the Red Wings

Ted Kulfan / The Detroit News

Pavel Datsyuk, center
Last season: 56 games, 23 goals, 36 assists
Analysis: Playing on Datsyuk’s line remains the perfect tonic for any slumping forward on the team. One of the best two-way players in the world, he’ll be back in the hunt for the Selke Trophy this season as the top defensive forward.

Henrik Zetterberg, left wing
Last season: 80 games, 24 goals, 56 assists
Analysis: Returned to form last season thanks to good health. Seems ready for a big season in the prime of his career, and appears to be taking a greater leadership role for his younger teammates.

Tomas Holmstrom, right wing
Last season: 73 games, 18 goals, 19 assists
Analysis: Is this the end of the road for maybe the best net-front player in NHL history? It all depends on Holmstrom’s health. He was able to stay on the ice last season and was productive.

Valterri Filppula, center
Last season: 71 games, 16 goals, 23 assists
Analysis: There’s pressure on Filppula, who hasn’t met expectations offensively. Is there untapped potential or not? The Red Wings need more from him and have told him as much. He may finally understand that he needs to shoot more often.

Johan Franzen, left wing
Last season: 76 games, 28 goals, 27 assists
Analysis: Appeared to be headed toward a 40-goal season and then everything stopped. Two goals in his last 27 games isn’t good enough. Franzen is another player that Mike Babcock has singled out for better production.

Todd Bertuzzi, right wing
Last season: 81 games, 16 goals, 29 assists
Analysis: On a line with youngsters Darren Helm and Justin Abdelkader, Bertuzzi has played with jump and vigor during the exhibition season. There were concerns about effects of a concussion suffered in the playoffs, but Bertuzzi isn’t holding back.

Fabian Brunnstrom, right wing
Last season: (Texas, Toronto AHL), 72 games, 15 goals, 20 assists
Analysis: The Red Wings always have been intrigued by his size and skill and it paid off during training camp. In camp on a tryout, Brunnstrom impressed with his ability to hang on to the puck and to finish plays.

Jiri Hudler, left wing
Last season: 73 games, 10 goals, 27 assists
Analysis: Hudler gets another chance to wipe away last season’s misery and disappointment. After a summer of conditioning work, Hudler looks capable of much more than he produced a season ago. He needs to be the crafty scorer he was before heading for Russia.

Danny Cleary, right wing
Last season: 68 games, 26 goals, 20 assists
Analysis: An ankle injury deprived Cleary of much bigger numbers last season. He’s one of the most valuable Red Wings forwards because coach Mike Babcock can play him in any role and not worry about any fall-off. A workmanlike player who has found a home.

Darren Helm, center
Last season: 82 games, 12 goals, 20 assists
Analysis: One of the fastest players in the league, Helm did a better job of capitalizing on that speed with those 12 goals. He’s developed into a better finisher, and don’t be surprised if that area of his game progresses further.

Justin Abdelkader, center
Last season: 74 games, 7 goals, 12 assists
Analysis: One of the players whose development is vital to the success of the Red Wings this season, Abdelkader was turning into a tough, two-way player toward the end of last season. He’s a big-body player who isn’t afraid to get into opponents’ faces, but he has to get to the net consistently.

Patrick Eaves, right wing
Last season: 63 games, 13 goals, 7 assists
Analysis: Coach Mike Babcock feels there’s untapped offensive potential here, and it’s up to Eaves to show if that’s true. Eaves has spent time on a line with Pavel Datsyuk during the exhibition season and it wouldn’t be surprising if he’s back there again. Eaves has one of the hardest shots on the team.

Drew Miller, left wing
Last season: 67 games, 10 goals, 8 assists
Analysis: Watch Miller on a daily basis, game to game, and you see why the Red Wings felt it was necessary to re-sign him last summer. You can plug Miller into a variety of roles and he has a knack for putting the puck in the net. He never complains and fulfills whatever task is he is asked to complete.

Cory Emmerton, center
Last season: Grand Rapids (AHL) 65 games, 12 goals, 26 assists
Analysis: Chances are Emmerton won’t play much, but he’ll learn more with the Red Wings at this point in his career than in Grand Rapids for another season. Smart and skilled, Emmerton has improved defensively in his time with the Griffins.

Nicklas Lidstrom, defense
Last season: 82 games, 16 goals, 46 assists
Analysis: Lidstrom’s fans may want to savor this season because at this stage of his illustrious career, Lidstrom takes it one year at a time. It wouldn’t be surprising if next summer he finally packs it in - though he’s certainly capable of winning an eighth Norris Trophy.

Jakub Kindl, defense
Last season: 48 games, 2 goals, 2 assists
Analysis: Kindl seemed to be putting things together the latter part of last season and has been steady this exhibition season. Kindl has a big body with ample potential, the Red Wings believe he could develop into a fine NHL player.

Niklas Kronwall, defense
Last season: 77 games, 11 goals, 26 assists
Analysis: It’ll be interesting to see how Kronwall follows what was in many ways his best NHL season. Kronwall is likely to get the most minutes of any Red Wings defenseman, playing in every situation, and he thrived when given that responsibility the second half of last season.

Jonathan Ericsson, defense
Last season: 74 games, 3 goals, 12 assists
Analysis: The Red Wings showed faith by signing Ericsson to a three-year contract, and the big, mobile defenseman will get an opportunity to repay the investment. Ericsson has a ton of natural athletic ability but has struggled with inconsistency and confidence.

Ian White, defense
Last season: (Calgary, Carolina, San Jose) 78 games, 4 goals, 22 assists
Analysis: White hit the lottery early during training camp when he found out he was paired with Lidstrom. If White continues to play with Lidstrom, there's a good chance White will enjoy a career year - just as many other Lidstrom partners have.

Mike Commodore, defense
Last season: (Columbus) 20 games, 2 goals, 4 assists
Analysis: Has proven in exhibitions he'll be willing to drop the gloves in order to stand up for teammates, and that attitude was well-received by coach Mike Babcock. A veteran defenseman who does the dirty work, he was a safe, low-risk investment.

Brad Stuart, defense
Last season: 67 games, 3 goals, 17 assists
Last season: Developing into one of the leaders in the Wings' locker room, Stuart has been a capable performer since arriving in Detroit. The biggest question surrounding Stuart is pending free agency; the Red Wings can't afford to lose him.

Jimmy Howard, goaltender
Last season: 37-17-7, 2.79 GAA
Analysis: Many questions were answered last season about Howard's ability and mental toughness with a fine regular season and even better playoffs. Backed with a two-year contract, Howard should have no worries and a clean frame of mind entering this season.

Ty Conklin, goaltender
Last season: (St. Louis) 8-8-4, 3.22
Analysis: When Chris Osgood retired, there was little suspense about his replacement. Conklin was here before, played well here and was anxious to return after two forgettable seasons with the Blues. Conklin is comfortable with his role as Howard's backup.

Mike Babcock, coach
Analysis: He brought in two new assistants, Jeff Blashill and Bill Peters, to incorporate fresh ideas and energy into a staff that may have started to get stale. Babcock has made it known he needs several players to rebound from sub-par seasons and playing time will be given to those that earn it.

Ken Holland, general manager
Analysis: The process of getting younger began over the summer as established, popular veterans (Brian Rafalski, Kris Draper, Chris Osgood, Mike Modano) retired. Holland didn't use all of his available salary-cap space, preferring to see what'll be available at the trade deadline. It doesn't sound as if Holland's work is done.

Detroit News LOADED: 10.06.2011
Detroit Red Wings looking to start strong, just like last season

Vincent Goodwill/ The Detroit News

Detroit- A veteran team like the Red Wings is past the old "take-one-game-at-a-time" mantra heading into Friday's opener against the Senators. They've taken a look at the October schedule and see an opportunity to take advantage of a light workload - nine games.

"That's something we're definitely focusing on," Niklas Kronwall said. "It's better to get points early. It'll be a lot easier down the stretch if we do that."

Of the nine games, three are against playoff teams from last season (Canucks, Capitals and Sharks).

Even though they aren't overlooking any opponent, the Red Wings aren't downplaying the importance of getting off to a good start.

"It's very important, we don't have a ton of games," captain Nicklas Lidstrom said. "We did it last season, getting off to a real strong start."

The Red Wings had a similar schedule last season, starting 6-2-1 in October.

While Lidstrom, 41, appreciates the schedule as it is, he wouldn't mind it if it were somewhat reversed.

"Sometimes you're looking forward to having a few days off in March and late in the year," he said. "But you have to take advantage in October by being ready to play and being healthy."

Fan of 'Mac'

Red Wings coach Mike Babcock will feel a little awkward when he looks at the Senators bench Friday and sees former assistant Paul MacLean.

"I'm a big fan of Mac and the years he put in with myself in Anaheim and Detroit," Babcock said. "We won tons of playoff games and we were great on special teams. During the game, we want to beat his butt but he'll want to win, too."

Senators at Red Wings

Faceoff: 7 p.m. Friday, Joe Louis Arena, Detroit

TV/radio: FSD/WXYT

Outlook: Four of the Red Wings' first nine games are at home.

Detroit News LOADED: 10.06.2011
What hockey writers are saying about the Red Wings

The Detroit News

George Johnson, Calgary Herald: Another 45-plus win season in the cards for the staggeringly consistent Wings. A tough, competitive division will push them on, and top-end talent remains enviable. Pavel Datsyuk remains arguably the best reason in hockey to splash for a ticket. Brian Rafalski will be missed by one of the favorites out West. Again.

Jim Gintino, Arizona Republic: These guys could all be 10 years older, and they'd still be a threat to finish in the top four in the West. Seriously, age may creep up on them a little bit this season, but I don't see any way they do not make the postseason, maybe at No. 5 or No. 6. I know I speak for 14 teams when they can say, "See you later, Detroit," if the Red Wings move to the Eastern Conference. Heresy for a sportswriter to say this, I know, but I'd pay my way to see Pavel Datsyuk play.

Lance Hornby, Toronto Sun: We're with most of the NHL on this one, not believing the Wings are too old until we see them with canes and walkers. Some teams will finally catch up, but Wings should make the playoffs to end their Western Conference days on a high.

Bucky Gleason, Buffalo News: The Red Wings and their ageless leaders know Father Time has been nipping at their skates, but they continuously find ways to remain a step ahead of other teams in their division. Only a fool would count them out of the playoffs. Once they reach the postseason, they're as dangerous as any team in the NHL for one reason above all others: They know what it takes to win.

Ed Willes, Vancouver Province: This is the year age starts to catch up. They make the playoffs but they don't win the division. Sixth in the West sounds right, behind San Jose, Vancouver, Chicago, Los Angeles and Anaheim.

Aaron Portzline, Columbus Dispatch: The addition of free agent Ian White helps soften the blow of Brian Rafalski's retirement, and the Wings dodged a huge bullet when ageless Nicklas Lidstrom delayed retirement another year. If veteran Valtteri Filppula can finally become a reliable scorer - not just a second-tier player - the Wings will be difficult to defend. But the Central Division will not allow for many easy nights this season.

Pat Hickey, Montreal Gazette: Like fine wine, players like Nick Lidstrom appear to get better with age. The Red Wings have the core of their Central Division championship team together and should be Cup contenders with improved goaltending from Jimmy Howard.

Josh Cooper, The Tennessean: The Red Wings are the Gold Standard of the Central Division, but they did not make any major upgrades during the offseason. Plus, there is always the question of when age will catch up to them. Still, expect them to challenge for the division crown and the Stanley Cup ... again.

Ed Olczyk, NBC analyst: "(They'll be) right where they always are. Always competing for the conference, always competing for a division championship. You know, it's amazing the consistency aspect of it. It's amazing of looking at their roster and seeing some players that maybe are on the back nine or maybe have had a tough time."

Detroit News LOADED: 10.06.2011
Detroit Red Wings

Red Wings' Jakub Kindl hopes to take advantage of early playing time

Ansar Khan By Ansar Khan MLive.com

DETROIT -- Jakub Kindl was playing on borrowed time a year ago when he stepped into the Detroit Red Wings lineup the second game of the season, after Jonathan Ericsson was injured.

Then Brian Rafalski got hurt, enabling Kindl to play a little longer,

But Kindl, then a rookie, knew he would be scratched once everyone on defense was healthy.

That's not necessarily the case this season. Kindl will line up alongside Ericsson during the team's first two games, Friday at home against Ottawa and Saturday in Colorado. And this time, Kindl knows he has a better chance to secure a regular spot.

He is excited about the possibility.

"I'm not going to lie. This is the moment that I've been waiting for for a year," Kindl said. "I've been working on it and now I've got the opportunity and I just have to show everyone that I can play."

Kindl, 24, was competing for the sixth spot on defense with Mike Commodore, who had the edge because of his experience and penalty-killing ability. But Commodore is out for at least the first two games with a Grade 1 MCL sprain.

It's a chance for Kindl to show he is much stronger after a new offseason training regimen, more poised with a year of NHL experience and more abrasive.

"I just have to use my body more and play aggressive," Kindl said.

"Everyone has their own role, as do I, and now I'm in the lineup and I just have to show that I can play. I have to be solid defensively."

Coach Mike Babcock called it a huge opportunity for Kindl.

"The kid trained like crazy all summer. He's gotten way stronger," Babcock said. "It's never been about skill level with him, it's been about competition level. He needs to have the confidence to compete at the highest level. When he does, he can move the puck and he knows how to play. We expect big things out of him."

Commodore also was injured near the start of last season with Columbus, after breaking his thumb in a fight.

"This is a little different," Commodore said. "I've never had a knee problem in 12 years. The good thing is it's only a Grade 1. Once I get this (knee) brace (on Thursday) and skate for a few days I'll be ready to go."

Commodore is not concerned about falling behind or losing his place on the depth chart.

"If (Kindl) plays well, that's great. If the team is doing well, that's what I'm here for," Commodore said. "I want to be part of a good team, that's why I came here. I'm not worried about playing time at all, falling behind or losing ice time."

"My main concern right now is getting my knee healthy and getting myself back in it. And when I'm healthy they'll know I'm available."

Kindl was paired with Ericsson throughout training camp and the preseason.

"I thought we did a pretty decent job," Kindl said. "But that was early in the season, and now we're going to find out if it's going to work. We've just got to be solid defensively."

"E is obviously a bigger guy, a little stronger, but I believe he's the guy who can stay back more and be better defensively and look after me. But I've felt pretty good so far."

Ericsson said they will learn on the fly.

"We've been playing better and better ever since training camp started," Ericsson said. "It always takes time. No matter how long you are in the league, there are always things you're learning about each other, like communication."

-- Forwards Tomas Holmstrom (knee) and Patrick Eaves (foot) returned to practice Wednesday. Babcock said both should be available for Friday's game.

Michigan Live LOADED: 10.06.2011
By Jim Matheson

JASPER - Edmonton Oilers fans may have a tad more interest in whether Sidney Crosby plays Sunday at Rexall Place, rather than whether Devan Dubnyk or Nikolai Khabibulin gets the start in goal against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

"Yeah, Sid playing? I think he might have the upper hand on me," said a deadpan Dubnyk.

Crosby, who hasn’t played in nine months because of post-concussion issues, will be on the Penguins’ Western Conference swing, but has already ruled himself out for the first game at Vancouver on Thursday.

The Penguins’ games at Calgary on Saturday and at Edmonton on Sunday are pretty iffy.

So who gets the nod as the Oilers’ opening-night starter in goal is a story, although it doesn’t mean coach Tom Renney is sold on one netminder over the other. It’s not like the Montreal Canadiens, where Carey Price plays every day ending in y, or Ryan Miller with the Buffalo Sabres or Henrik Lundqvist with the New York Rangers.

If Renney has decided on his goaltender for the first game against the Penguins, in concert with goalie coach Fred Chabot, he’s not saying. Neither Dubnyk nor Khabibulin say they’ve been told, although neither had their right hand on a Bible.

Here’s how the exhibition season stats looked:

Dubnyk: 1.60 goals-against average, .947 save percentage
Khabibulin: 2.57 GGA, .880 save percentage.

But the pre-season isn’t always a barometer. In Chicago, the Blackhawks signed training camp tryout Ray Emery to back up Corey Crawford, even though he had a 4.54 GGA, and sent rookie Alexander Salak to their American Hockey League farm team with his 1.94 goals-against average.

"Obviously, there’s hype as to who starts in the home opener," Dubnyk said. "When you’re growing up, you want to be the guy to start the season, but I don’t think you can read a lot into who starts the first game."

"If it’s me, great. But there’s a lot of games, lots of ups and downs in a season."

"I want to start (the opener), but whatever happens, happens," said Khabibulin. "I do feel better moving, seeing the puck in traffic. It got better after the first game (three goals on seven shots against the Minnesota Wild). I feel better physically."

"Playing that last (exhibition) game against Vancouver was really good for me, going against that power play. You don’t get to practise against one of the best power plays in the league. I was happy we took some penalties. Of course, you want that in pre-season, not regular season."

Khabibulin said he wouldn’t base goalie starts on pre-season stats if he was a coach.

"It’s hard to judge on a couple of games ... there’s different players, you don’t have full lineups," he said.

Dubnyk pointed out that goalies don’t get a lot of minutes or game action during the pre-season.

"Sometimes, you get half-a-game’s work and there’s some bad bounces and a couple go in, and there’s really no time to recover stats-wise. I wouldn’t read anything into (who had the better numbers)."

There is symbolism to being the opening-game starter. Khabibulin, who was coming off back surgery in Year 1 of his Oilers contract, had his best game of the season last October when he blanked the Calgary Flames 4-0 while Jordan Eberle scored his first NHL goal with a fantastic toe-drag move on goalie Mikka Kiprusoff.

Khabibulin made seven straight starts before Dubnyk got his first opportunity to play in Columbus against the Blue Jackets on Oct. 28. That won’t be the case this year.

"I don’t know what the formula (for starts) is going to be, but I certainly don’t see one guy running with this for a long period of time. For one, Devan has made himself legitimate. He should start more," said Renney. "And Khabby is a starter in this league without a shadow of a doubt ... but he’s not a young guy. When he has the opportunity to step away, regroup, stay fresh and get treatment, it will be good for him."

Khabibulin turns 39 in three months.

Which goalie starts the first game isn’t a big deal to Renney, who may let the goalies know on Saturday.

"That’s more a question for them," he said of the goalies. "For me, it’s putting the players on the ice who can get us a win. The goalies are going to be pivotal for us if we want to contend for a playoff spot, whether that’s Game 1 or Game 81."

Khabibulin has vowed to be much more of a factor this season than in 2010-11 when the losses kept stacking up. He went a couple of months between victories, winning only 10 of 46 starts. He had a 3.40 goals-against average and .890 save percentage, pedestrian numbers, although Renney refuses to stick him on an island.

"Let’s cut the guy some slack, we were a work-in-progress from Day 1 and can you imagine playing goal behind that?" said Renney. "I thought he started out really well, but the season can take its toll on an older body. He had to suffer the growing pains of the team in front of him.

"Nick’s a competitor. He’s got terrific work habits. It’s a long season and playing goal is a tough position. It’s like being a catcher in baseball. After a while, things start to give way, so you have to sort of relinquish the job to somebody else here and there.

"But he’s a confident man. We need that from Nick. He’s part of our leadership group," Renney said.

Dubnyk is still feeling his way into what might be a No. 1 job some day.

"I’m trying to build my game so that if I get the call to start more, I’ll be ready. I’m still young. I have to prove myself," said Dubnyk. "I would certainly like to play more than I did at the start of last season, but back then I was concerned more with making the team, of being the No. 2 guy."

Edmonton Journal: LOADED: 10.06.2011
By JIM MATHESON

JASPER - The Edmonton Oilers predictably put defencemen Ryan Whitney and Taylor Fedun plus forwards Ben Eager and Sam Gagner on the injured reserve list at the deadline for submitting their 23-man roster to the NHL’s home office on Wednesday, and listed blue-liner Ladislav Smid as available to play, even though he has a sprained shoulder.

The Oilers also have defenceman Taylor Chorney, who tweaked his knee last Friday against the Wild in St. Paul, Minn., on their 23-man list.

Smid isn’t likely to play the Oilers’ season-opener against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Sunday because he was in a no-contact jersey at practice on Wednesday, but Chorney says he’s fine. If Whitney doesn’t come off IR for the Penguins’ game, it would be between Corey Potter and Chorney as the sixth defenceman.

Whitney was buzzing around the ice in practice, looking like he might play Sunday against his former team. He had only one misstep.

“Horc (Shawn Horcoff) was coming down on me one-on-one and, when I pivoted, he got a step on me and I couldn’t skate backwards any more. That wasn’t good. It’s not like it was (Evgeni) Malkin,” Whitney said jokingly. “Malkin ... who they say is going to rip it up this year.”

Playing his first game in nine months against Malkin and Co. isn’t that inviting a test, but Whitney badly wants some game action.

Oilers head coach Tom Renney said Whitney has to be able to battle for position, work the corners and finish his checks.

“We’ve tried to do that for him in our practices,” said Renney. “I’m going to be safe with him, quite honestly.”

• Oilers president Kevin Lowe dismissed a radio report out of Toronto that said he was getting itchy feet and wanted back in as an NHL general manager.

Lowe gave way to Steve Tambellini in 2008 after seven years as the Oilers general manager.

Truth is, while Lowe is removed from the day-to-day GM chores, he still has lots of input in player moves.

• Gilbert Brule’s agent, Gerry Johannson, says his client took the demolition to the Oilers’ American Hockey League team at Oklahoma City “totally professionally.”

“Did he expect it? I don’t think any player does, but he understands that this was the next card in the hand,” said Johannson. “He’ll get lots of quality time there. He’s going to get some power-play time.

“He’s trying to find some traction. He’s still only 24. People are thinking he’s 40.”

If the Oilers recall Brule, he would go on re-entry waivers and would be available to any team in the league for half of whatever salary is left on his contract. He makes $1.85 million.

The Vancouver Canucks were sniffing around Brule at the trade deadline last season, but his contract numbers were prohibitive then.

• While Ryan Nugent-Hopkins playing with Taylor Hall and Ales Hemsky looks like a No. 1 line, Renney begs to differ.

“It’s a fair question, but I don’t have a one, two, three. I might have a 2B. I may have four on most nights,” Renney said. “I look down and I see four lines that can create offence. Great depth to not miss a beat. The big thing is getting the puck up to them and let them do their work. I look down and I can see weapons.”

Right now, Horcoff will play with Magnus Paajarvi and Linus Omark, giving the Swedes some defensive presence, while Eric Belanger will be between Ryan Smyth and Jordan Eberle. The fourth line will have Anton Lander and Ryan Jones, for sure, with a rotating set of wingers based on injury and circumstance (Darcy Hordichuk, Eager, Lennart Petrell).

Jones had 18 goals last season, but if he’s on the fourth line most of this year, he might not do that. Renney figures he’ll move Jones around, though.

“He’s still going to get his junkyard goals. He’s proud of that,” Renney said. “He can play up and down the lineup, giving us a little spark. Any line he’s on takes on Ryan’s look. You can’t be a pushover.”

• Johannson, who also represents former Oilers centre Colin Fraser, doesn’t know where the medical dispute stands between the Oilers and Los Angeles Kings.

“There is a provision whereby a player has to pass a physical before a trade is completed, like when Dustin Penner got traded to Los Angeles. The Kings had Colin in later to see their doctors,” Johannson said.

Fraser, who needed surgery to repair an ankle injury, has been skating but hasn’t played a game and is on the Kings’ non-roster list to start the season.

• The Oilers don’t have a set power play, yet. The first two units will likely have Nugent-Hopkins, Smyth, Hall, Hemsky, Eberle and either Horcoff or Belanger up front, and maybe Paajarvi on the point at times. They want Cam Barker’s big shot back there.

“We have an unbelievable power play, but just haven’t used it yet. I think our power play will be better. It should be. If not, it’s (assistant coaches) Bucky (Kelly Buchberger) and Smitty’s (Steve Smith) fault,” said a joking Renney.

This ‘n’ that

Petrell could be odd-man out against the Penguins, with Darcy Hordichuk likely dressing on the fourth line, especially if Pittsburgh dresses former Oilers super-heavy Steve MacIntyre.

It appears that former Oilers winger Zack Stortini has made the Nashville Predators as either the 13th or 14th forward, with Mike Fisher (shoulder) not ready to open the season.

The Oilers decided not to practise Thursday, but will have an off-ice workout before heading back to Edmonton.

Edmonton Journal: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Who’s on first? Oilers won’t say

By Jim Matheson

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Edmonton Journal: LOADED: 10.06.2011
The season hasn’t even started yet and the world is already piling on Edmonton.

First The Hockey News picked the rebuilding and optimistic Oilers to finish dead last in the Western Conference. Again. Now Sports Illustrated, in its annual NHL Predictions issue, is forecasting another long winter of discontent in Edmonton. They’re picking the Oilers to finish 14th, just ahead of the lowly Dallas Stars.

Even gambling website Bodog.com, putting its money where its mouth is, gives Edmonton the longest odds of winning the Western Conference — 35-to-1, along with Colorado, Columbus and Minnesota.

“I couldn’t care less,” said Oilers captain Shawn Horcoff. “I don’t look at that stuff. I wouldn’t know about it if the media didn’t bring it up. Those projections mean nothing to us.

“You can’t really tell until you start playing real games and for us it’s coming pretty soon.”

Sports Illustrated isn’t exactly a hockey bible. In the “Key Losses” part of Edmonton’s preview they included Colin Fraser’s departure, so their grasp of the situation is distant at best.

But the Hockey News knows what it’s talking about, and they had the Oilers pegged right last year (picking them 15th) and were pretty close two years ago (slotting them 11th before an injury pandemic sewered their season).

So you can’t entirely dismiss it. Or can you?

“You can’t listen to the critics and believe that’s how you’re going to do, that’s in our hands,” said defenceman Tom Gilbert. “And we definitely have more upside than we’ve had in the past few years.

“Last year, with a bunch of key injuries and being young, we just weren’t prepared. We were losing games in the first period. With a few more veterans in the lineup and a little more experience for the young guys, I think we’ll give ourselves a chance.”

Ryan Jones isn’t surprised everyone thinks Edmonton will be a doormat again.

“T guess I can kind of understand. You follow the trends and we’ve been there the last few years,” said Jones. “So I’m sure they can justify putting us there. I personally couldn’t justify putting us in that spot, but that’s just me.

“Until you get to see the core of this team and see how it grows and how hard we work … nobody will ever understand how much competition there was at camp. When you have that sort of competition it just drives the team to get better. We have a group of guys here, and in Oklahoma, who are going to push each other.”

Having added Ryan Smyth, Ryan-Nugent Hopkins, Eric Belanger, Andy Sutton, Ben Eager, Darcy Hordichuk and Anton Lander, he asks how they can’t be better?

“And all these kids who were big for us last year have another year of maturity and that sort of thing is invaluable,” said Jones. “I’m excited to see what they can do. And a guy like Nuge coming into the league is going to have an impact right away.

“It’s just a matter of sticking together, staying healthy and winning some hockey games.”

How many? Is it realistic to expect this team to make the playoffs?

“I don’t think it’s unrealistic,” said Gilbert. “We just need the confidence to know that we can go out and win games.

“I think at times last year we got pushed around. We were in 30th place and we were always the underdog. The more you think that, the more you
Florida Panthers must turn exciting new pieces into production

By GEORGE RICHARDS

Kevin Dineen has felt the excitement growing for his team over the past few weeks as he goes about town. The first-year coach of the Panthers and many of his new players seem to enjoy becoming part of the South Florida community.

Dineen admits to watching the Miami Dolphins and, despite their play, has done his best in rooting for the new home team. Defenseman Brian Campbell went to the University of Miami-Ohio State football game and laughed when admitting to throwing up "The U" as others in his section did.

David Booth isn’t new around these parts, but the Michigan State graduate is known to walk around wearing something with Miami written on it. General manager Dale Tallon took in one of the final Marlins games of the season.

Dineen and the Panthers hope South Florida returns the favor and feel it’s time for the Panthers to become center of attention. They know they need to earn the spotlight. But with the Dolphins reeling, the Hurricanes struggling, the Marlins vacationing and the Heat locked out, the Panthers might be one of the few things worth watching around these parts.

"This is an avid sports town, and we saw that in the spring when the Heat made that incredible run," Dineen said a few days before Florida opens its 2011-12 season against the host New York Islanders on Saturday night.

"You see the enthusiasm for the new baseball stadium. You see the loyalty toward the Dolphins. We want to make sure we do our part. There’s a window there. We have to take advantage."

Dineen and the Panthers attended a charity gala in Fort Lauderdale on Tuesday night, meeting with fans and excited members of the community.

Florida finished last season with its worst finish in franchise history - and that’s really saying something. Despite not making the playoffs for an NHL-record 10 straight seasons, fans in South Florida seem juiced about the Panthers.

Tallon’s vision - and championship past - is a big reason.

The Panthers GM tore Florida’s roster apart in the middle of last season, trading contracts some - including himself - thought were unmovable. By the time the final game was played and the Panthers finished last in the Eastern Conference for the first time, Tallon all but had a clean deck to work with. He fired coach Pete DeBoer hours after that final win against the Capitals and remaking the Panthers began in earnest.

With little money committed to the payroll, Tallon and assistant general manager Mike Santors put together a list of players they wanted.

With one pocket filled with contacts and another stuffed with cash, Tallon and Santors went on a spending spree, something needed to reach the league-mandated salary cap floor if nothing else. Tallon started things by trading for Campbell - and the remaining five years and $36 million on the contract he signed with Tallon in Chicago - and Tomas Kopecky.

After failing to talk goalie Tomas Vokoun into staying before the free agency period opened, the Panthers went after Jose Theodore soon after the bidding period started. On the opening day of free agency alone, the Panthers remade their roster by signing eight players. Included in the haul were players such as Ed Jovanovski (who played for the team from 1995 to 1999), Kris Versteeg, Scottie Upshall and Tomas Fleischmann.

The Panthers are, for the most part, a new team.

"All the talking doesn’t mean anything. We have to go out there and win the games," said center Stephen Weiss, one of only nine current players who has - not counting Jovanovski - spent more than one full season with the Panthers. "We want to get on a roll here early and fill the building."

Kris Versteeg: "We know what this franchise has been through the past 10 years. Management went out and changed things. Now it’s up to us. We have to win games. When you compete and win, the fans will come. I saw it in Washington a couple of years back. No one showed up, then it was the hottest ticket in town. In one year, there was 'Rock the Red' all over town. Winning cures everything."

A week after the free agent frenzy, Tallon introduced many of his new players to South Florida at a news conference held at BankAtlantic Center. There were so many new faces, the table at the conference reached from one end of the banquet room to the other. Photographers contorted themselves trying to get everyone at the table in one shot.

"The million-dollar question is how does this thing all come together. I’m anxious to see it," Tallon said Wednesday. "I saw flashes of brilliance in some of the preseason games. I want to see that for 80 minutes. We’re deeper all over, we have more options all over the ice. We’re going to play an entertaining brand of hockey, play hard every night. We’ll see where that takes us and what pieces we need to add."

When the puck drops Saturday night at the Nassau Coliseum, games count. Although there is guarded optimism locally, the Panthers haven’t made much of an impression nationally as many hockey journalists predict the team will continue its postseason drought.

"I believe in the guys here, that we can have success," Dineen said. "We play in a very good league. Things sort themselves out."

The Panthers readily admit there is plenty of work to do, with Tallon saying the building has not been completed.

At least you can see something rising from the scorched earth.

"There is a lot of optimism out there, and I would hope it’s not false," Dineen said. "Moves have been made to try to improve this team and make it an entertaining bunch to watch and support. While there has been much talk since July 1 when all the players were signed, it'll be nice to get away from that. It's time to see it in action."

Miami Herald LOADTED: 10.06.2011
Florida Panthers' roster

FORWARDS

LW SEAN BERGENHEIM, 20
Ht., Wt.: 5-11, 200.
Age: 27.
Hometown: Helsinki, Finland.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 7/1.
Remaining contract*: 4 years @ $2.75 million.
Notable: Bergenheim busted out during his first taste of the playoffs last season, scoring nine goals as the Lightning came within a goal of the Stanley Cup Finals.

RW DAVID BOOTH, 10
Ht., Wt.: 6-0, 212
Age: 26.
Hometown: Detroit.
Remaining contract: 4 years @ $4.25 million.
Notable: Booth bounced back from his nightmarish 2009-10 season by playing in all 82 games last year. Booth scored 23 goals but was a minus-31; Florida is looking for big things this season.

LW MATT BRADLEY, 22
Ht., Wt.: 6-3, 210.
Age: 33.
Hometown: Stittsville, Ontario.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 11/1.
Remaining contract: 2 years @ $950,000.
Notable: Bradley didn't score many goals for the Capitals last season but was a fan favorite in the District for his intense style of play. He will toughen Florida's Florida fourth line, for sure.

C RYAN CARTER, 24
Ht., Wt.: 6-1, 200.
Age: 28.
Hometown: White Bear Lake, Minn.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 5/2.
Remaining contract: 1 year @ $750,000.
Notable: Carter played for three teams last season as he was traded from Anaheim to Carolina before landing in Sunrise. The Panthers liked what they saw as Carter is one of the few "tryout" players from last year to return.

LW EVGENY DADONOV, 63
Ht., Wt.: 5-10, 180.
Age: 22.
Hometown: Chelyabinsk, Russia.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 2/2.
Remaining contract: 1 year @ $875,000.
Notable: Dadonov started last season with AHL Rochester (N.Y.), but after scoring eight goals in 24 games was brought to Florida where he showed playmaking ability.

LW TOMAS FLEISCHMANN, 14
Ht., Wt.: 6-1, 192.
Age: 27.
Hometown: Koprivnice, Czech Republic
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 7/1
Remaining contract: 4 years @ $4.5 million
Notable: Fleischmann started last season with the Capitals but was traded and refound his game with the Avs. Fleischmann had 21 points in 22 games before being shut down with blood clots. He has been cleared by doctors, but it's a condition the Panthers will monitor.

C MARCEL GOC, 57
Ht., Wt.: 6-1, 205.
Age: 28.
Hometown: Calw, Germany.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 7/1.
Remaining contract: 3 years @ $1.7 million.
Notable: A strong puck-moving center, Goc won't be asked to score a lot - although he does have good hands and a knack for scoring timely goals. Goc had nine in 51 games with the Predators last season.

RW TOMAS KOPECKY, 82
Ht., Wt.: 6-3, 200.
Age: 29.
Hometown: Ilava, Slovakia.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 6/1.
Remaining contract: 4 years @ $3 million.
Notable: A two-time Cup champ with Detroit and Chicago, Kopecky was traded to the Panthers prior to the free agent spending spree began. Tough in front of the net, Kopecky should add to last year's 15 goals.

C SHAWN MATTHIAS, 18
Ht., Wt.: 6-2, 213.
Age: 23.
Hometown: Mississauga, Ontario.
Remaining contract: 2 years @ $850,000.
Notable: After sustaining an ankle injury that cut short his season, Matthias had a strong camp after the team only offered him a two-way contract during the summer. Matthias has a total of 13 goals in the past two years.

C MIKE SANTORELLI, 13
Ht., Wt.: 6-0, 189.
Age: 25.
Hometown: Vancouver, British Columbia.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 4/2.
Remaining contract: 2 years @ $1.6 million.
Notable: The Panthers got Santorelli on the cheap last summer and he proved to be a steal, scoring 20 goals and playing in all 82 games. Santorelli will start this season on the DL, however, after hurting his shoulder.

LW JACK SKILLE, 12
Ht., Wt.: 6-1, 205.
Age: 24.
Hometown: Madison, Wisc.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 4/2.
Remaining contract: 2 years @ $825,000.
Notable: Drafted in the first round by Chicago, Skille was reunited with Dale Tallon in a midseason trade last year. Skille brings size and speed to the lineup - and an ability to score a bit.

RW SCOTTIE UPHALL, 19
Ht., Wt.: 6-0, 200
Age: 27.
Hometown: Fort McMurray, Alberta.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 7/1.
Remaining contract: 4 years @ $3.5 million.
Notable: Upshall is a player the Panthers are really counting on to provide some scoring punch. In 82 games between Phoenix and Columbus last season, Upshall put in 22 goals.

LW KRIS VERSTEEG, 32
Ht., Wt.: 5-10, 180.
Age: 25.
Hometown: Lethbridge, Alberta.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 5/1.
Remaining contract: 1 year @ $3.1 million.
Notable: One of Tallon's favorite players from the Chicago days, Versteeg (with three 20-goal seasons on the résumé) was traded to Toronto after the Blackhawks' championship and ended last season with the Flyers.

C STEPHEN WEISS, 9
Ht., Wt.: 5-11, 180.
Age: 28.
Hometown: Toronto.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 10/10.
Remaining contract: 2 years @ $3.1 million.
Notable: The Panthers' top-line center, Weiss led the Panthers in scoring, although it wasn't his greatest season. Weiss got beat up last year and is looking to come back strong.

DEFENSE
BRIAN CAMPBELL, 51
Ht., Wt.: 5-11, 185.
Age: 32.
Hometown: Strathroy, Ontario.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 10/1.
Remaining contract: 5 years @ $7.14 million.
Notable: The Panthers acquired this top defenseman at the draft for Rostislav Olesz. Campbell should bring strong defense while helping out on the offensive end - especially on power plays.

KEATON ELLERBY, 4
Ht., Wt.: 6-4, 200.
Age: 22.
Hometown: Strathmore, Alberta.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 3/3.
Remaining contract: 1 year @ $787,000.
Notable: Ellerby, the 10th overall pick in the 2007 Draft, really picked up his game after a disappointing rookie season. Ellerby is much stronger, assertive and plays with a bit of a mean streak.

JASON GARRISON, 52
Ht., Wt.: 6-2, 220
Age: 26.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 3/3.
Remaining contract: 1 year @ $675,000.
Notable: An undrafted free agent signing by Jacques Martin, Garrison has been a great find and has quietly become a top defenseman for the Panthers. In a contract year, expect more big things.

ERIK GUDBRANSON, 44
Ht., Wt.: 6-4, 195.
Age: 19.
Hometown: Ottawa.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 1/1.
Remaining contract: 3 years @ $900,000.
Notable: Gudbranson is expected to make his NHL debut in Florida's season opener Saturday against the host New York Islanders. The third overall pick in 2010, Gudbranson is quick and big and can play.

DMITRY KULIKOV, 7
Ht., Wt.: 6-1, 183.
Age: 20.
Hometown: Lipetsk, Russia.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 3/3.
Remaining contract: 1 year @ $375,000.
Notable: A victim of the dreaded sophomore slump, Kulikov's game seemingly got stronger as the season went along. Expect the Panthers to give him more responsibility.

ED JOVANOVSKI, 55
Ht., Wt.: 6-3, 218.
Age: 35.
Hometown: Windsor, Ontario.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 16/5.
Remaining contract: 4 years @ $4.15 million.
Notable: The first overall selection in the 1994 Draft by the Panthers, Jovanovski comes back after being traded in 1999. 'JovoCop' only played in 50 games last year but had a strong camp.

MIKE WEAVER, 43
Ht., Wt.: 5-9, 186.
Age: 33.
Hometown: Bramalea, Ontario.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 10/2.
Remaining contract: 1 year @ $900,000.
Notable: Weaver has proven himself to be a top-end defender as he uses his long reach to pick off pucks, and he always seems to be in the way. Last year's 11 assists were a career high.

GOALIES
SCOTT CLEMMENSEN, 30
Ht., Wt.: 6-3, 205.
Age: 34.
Hometown: Des Moines, Iowa.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 9/3.
Remaining contract: 1 year @ $1.2 million.
Notable: Clemmensen was having a strong camp and was in competition to start Saturday's season opener against the Islanders before having minor knee surgery. Clemmensen should be back later this month.

JACOB MARKSTROM, 25
Ht., Wt.: 6-3, 178.
Age: 21.
Hometown: Gavle, Sweden.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 1/1.
Remaining contract: 2 years @ $875,000.

With Clemmensen on the shelf, Markstrom - Florida's 'Goalie of the Future' - gets an early taste of NHL life. Markstrom is big and doesn't scare easy. Good characteristics for a goalie.

JOSE THEODORE, 60
Ht., Wt.: 5-11, 181.
Age: 35.
Hometown: Laval, Quebec.
NHL seasons/With Panthers: 14/1.
Remaining contract: 2 years @ $1.5 million.

A past Vezina and Hart winner while with Montreal, Theodore is eager to prove his best isn't in the past. Theodore had a strong season with the Wild last season before signing on with Florida in July.

(*) Salary numbers are based on cap hits (average over length of contract) and not actual money paid out by the Panthers with exception of rookie (Gudbranson, Kulikov, Markstrom) contracts which have higher cap hits.

GEORGE RICHARDS
Miami Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
Confident Panthers center Dadonov clinging to roster spot
Center could go down when Santorelli returns

By Anthony Chiang, Sun Sentinel

CORAL SPRINGS

Even though Evgeny Dadonov is on the Panthers' 22-man roster for opening night, he is still fighting for time on the ice.

Dadonov, 22, got a taste of the NHL the last two seasons, but he's still battling a few teammates for a more-permanent spot on the third line.

"I'm just working hard," said Dadonov, a third-round draft pick in 2007. "I need to find my game and find where I can play. I know I can [compete on this level]. I just need to show them."

He made a case last season, scoring eight goals and collecting nine assists in 36 games. However, a broken finger and inconsistent play slowed him.

"He can play in different areas of a lineup, whether it's on the scoring line or a line that's going to go out there and create energy," coach Kevin Dineen said. "But he's still a young kid, and he has to learn to bring that on a nightly basis."

"I'm still positive on him, but with the nature of our lineup that could change in the next couple of days."

The Panthers are carrying 13 forwards (one extra), so with Dadonov on a two-way contract, he could be the odd man out when center Mike Santorelli returns from a shoulder injury in about a month. His competition could be center Ryan Carter, who for now is on the fourth line with Shawn Matthias and Matt Bradley.

Although that's not a lot of time, it gives Dadonov an opportunity to show the coaching staff that he belongs.

"I need to be in good physical condition and prepare every game, and play hard every game," he said. "That's all I need."

Dineen may wait to name captains

The Panthers will open the season Saturday, but that doesn't mean Dineen will name the team's captain and two assistants before then.

"It's a difficult decision because I have a number of different options," Dineen said. "At the end of the day, I'm not going to make any decision until I'm comfortable with it. If that's not ready by Saturday, then I won't do it."

The front-runners are believed to be Ed Jovanovski, Brian Campbell and Stephen Weiss. The announcement may come during Thursday night's team dinner.

Versteeg sings for charity

With the regular season inching closer, the Panthers are making the most of their free time.

On Tuesday, players, coaches and executives spent time with sponsors and fans at the Face-Off Gala to raise money for the Florida Panthers Foundation, which is dedicated to the fight against pediatric cancer.

"We had a really nice evening [Tuesday] night," Dineen said. "We were able to go and spend the night with our fan base and get a chance to talk to a lot of people."

Forward Kris Versteeg really got into the spirit, singing Enrique Iglesias' "Hero" at the event. The performance drew a $3,000 bid that's earmarked for charity.

Sun Sentinel LOADED: 10.06.2011
Floral Panthers

Commentary: Look at me! Florida Panthers want to people to see red, then catch a hockey game

By Ethan J. Skolnick

CORAL SPRINGS - Kevin Dineen wants to make a change.

His son William is a Patriots fan.

But the Dineens live in South Florida now, and Kevin is entering his first season as coach of the NHL's Panthers. So he's embraced the Dolphins, and tried to get his son to do the same. Unfortunately, his new favored football team can't win a game.

"It hasn't been fun for us at the beginning," Dineen says. "That doesn't make me cheer any less, but it's been a little harder to convince (William) to change over to be a Dolphin fan. So that success, it makes it easier for everybody."

The Dolphins' failures, however, could make it easier for his Panthers, when it comes to stealing some of the South Florida sports fan's attention. So could the Heat's absence, at least until the NBA lockout is settled, which may not be for months. The Marlins are done until April, the University of Miami Hurricanes a long way from shaking a scandal.

"There's a window," Dineen says.

There is. It's not exactly panoramic. It's more the size of what you'd find in a prison cell. But at least and at last, when the 2011-12 season starts Saturday in Long Island, the Panthers can peek out a crack and see a little sun.

"We've talked about that, that it's a perfect opportunity to grab the spotlight here," says Stephen Weiss, the team's longest-tenured player.

"There is a lot of optimism out there, and I don't think it's false," Dineen says.

It's not. It's been more than 11 years since the Panthers played in a playoff game. They've made plenty of promises, but been good only for pratfalls. Supposed saviors? Come and gone. Yet this offseason felt different. The front office seemed, um, competent. There was thoughtful execution of an actual plan, one conceived upon general manager Dale Tallon's arrival from Chicago.

Horde draft choices.

Add high-character veterans with winning track records to lead until the kids are ready.

Build some buzz.

There was even a coherent marketing strategy.

Since the rat-inspired 1996 run captured the region, the Panthers have been a colorless organization.

Tallon approached owner Cliff Viner and president Michael Yormark and requested that the Panthers return to their roots, and red home sweaters. That spawned the "We See Red" campaign which, starting in June, has been on billboards and buses all over Broward County, along with some of the players. Fans, excited about Tallon's acquisitions during the draft and free agent period, used the "We See Red" Twitter hashtag to celebrate every one.

"It's been tremendous for us," Yormark says. "It's the color in which we had the most success. People are looking at us differently than they have. It helped us distance ourselves from the past several years which, as you know, have not gone well. It's a symbol of hope, a symbol of winning, a symbol of success, a symbol of a new attitude, new future."

Of course, it's merely a symbol.

Nothing sticks if the Panthers stink. And so, yes, they know.

"In order for us to create the buzz we want in the marketplace, we need to come out of the gate quickly," Yormark says.
NHL preview: Western Conference questions

By Helene Elliott

1. Can the Vancouver Canucks repeat as conference champions?

Losing to Boston in the seventh game of the Stanley Cup finals last season was emotionally and physically draining. Center Ryan Kesler, the team's soul, will sit out the start of the season while recovering from hip surgery. They will miss departed free-agent defenseman Christian Ehrhoff, who averaged nearly 24 minutes a game and was a key element on their NHL-best power play. Defense could be a vulnerable spot.

2. Is this finally the San Jose Sharks' year?

This question comes up every season and the answer inevitably is no. But maybe Brent Burns, acquired from Minnesota, has the talent and stability they have sought on defense. And maybe trading Dany Heatley and Devin Setoguchi to Minnesota for Martin Havlat will shake things up enough to ... nah.

3. Can the Blackhawks rebound from their post-Cup hangover?

Salary-cap considerations forced them to break up their 2009-10 championship team before the confetti from the parade was swept up, and they never developed much cohesion. But with more rest this summer for core players Jonathan Toews, Patrick Kane, Duncan Keith and Brent Seabrook, they could make a long playoff run.

4. Is it time to crown the Kings?

By signing free-agent winger Simon Gagne, taking on Mike Richards' contract in a trade with the Flyers and securing defenseman Drew Doughty for $56 million over eight years, they spent more than $114 million, or about $1 million more than the franchise sold for in 1995. Richards and Anze Kopitar should be a formidable 1-2 center punch, and Gagne brings much-needed speed. They're a little slow on defense but have a balance of offense and stay-at-home types. They're built for a playoff push. An early exit would be a huge failure.

5. Are the Detroit Red Wings too old?

Another perennial inquiry, but they continue to defy the calendar. As long as magnificent defenseman Nicklas Lidstrom doesn't care that he's past 40, it doesn't matter. They have tons of skill and grit, though they will miss retired defenseman Brian Rafalski. The Red Wings should be a force again.

LA Times: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Murray liked what he saw from Doughty

Posted by Rich Hammond on 5 October 2011, 11:23 am

As noted yesterday, Drew Doughty made his preseason debut in Hamburg and played a regular rotation with partner Willie Mitchell. No official time-on-ice statistics were kept, but given that the Kings rotated four defensive pairs, instead of their standard three, it allowed Terry Murray to ease Doughty back into the lineup. Here's what Murray said about getting Doughty back, and whether he saw what he needed to see, in terms of Doughty's preparation for the start of the season.

MURRAY: "Just in terms of being involved in the game, just to feel the pressure of what it's going to be like when we get started. There was a lot of forecheck, a lot of speed coming at the defensemen. The Freezers, they have some players that are very quick, very fast and putting pressure on the defensemen. We turned some pucks over and they almost capitalized on a couple of others that they had, through smart forecheck pressure. I did like what I saw out of Doughty, in the fact that he got his first taste of the game this year."

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Dany Heatley sat in the next stall, eavesdropping on Devin Setoguchi's story.

"That's when he figured it was waaaaaay easier to score goals," Heatley said.

He chuckled, but he wasn't kidding.

Setoguchi easily could have become a potato farmer in Taber, Alberta, like his father. But when Devin was 10, he sliced off the top of his left index finger on a conveyer.

"That kind of turned him off a bit," said Dale Setoguchi, more than a decade after his son's freak accident. "He kind of got gun-shy being around the farm after that. He was always thinking in his mind he didn't want to be a farmer.

"It worked out pretty good for him because I don't think I wanted to see him back here either," Dale said and laughed. "He probably wasn't cut out for it.

All turned out well for Devin Setoguchi.

He is 24 and making millions as one of the NHL's rising young goal-scorers. After beginning his career in San Jose, where he gained immediate success by scoring 31 goals during his first full season, Setoguchi has arrived in Minnesota, where a larger role and greater ice time seem certain.

None of this shocks proud father Dale, who was the Alberta Junior Hockey League's MVP in 1979.

"Devin was always a hockey player," Dale said by phone, taking a break from the thick of the potato harvest. "Hockey's his love. Even after he smashed his finger -- and it was quite an incident -- a week later he put a cap over it, taped it up and away he went.

"He didn't want to miss any games. He's lucky to be doing what he's doing, and he realizes it."

That's why anybody who talks about Devin Setoguchi says he's a guy who never has a bad day at the hockey rink.

"Always in a good mood," Heatley said.

A family's journey

Setoguchi knows things always could be worse. It's a lesson learned from his grandparents, Ken and Nancy, who still live in Taber, a town of 7,000 filled with farms and oil patches an hour north of the Montana border.

Setoguchi is a fourth generation Japanese-Canadian. His grandparents, born in British Columbia, were removed from their homes during World War II and placed in an internment camp.

"The theory behind it was anybody who was Japanese, even if they were American or Canadian, would be loyal to Japan and be spies," Setoguchi said.

His grandparents, who weren't together yet, spent four years imprisoned behind barbed wire. When the war was over, they returned to their homes in British Columbia only to find other families had moved in "with all their stuff in it."

"My grandma still gets fired up. She lost a lot of valuable stuff," Setoguchi said.

Ken and Nancy, along with about 15 other families, relocated to Taber to work the sugar beet fields. Ken began Setoguchi Farms in an area where today, Setoguchi says, there are roughly 10 farms run by Japanese families.

Setoguchi is proud that "I'm the only half-Japanese player in the NHL."

His favorite player growing up was Paul Kariya, whose father was a Japanese-Canadian born in an internment camp.

"My grandma, she has possibly every piece of memorabilia of the San Jose Sharks and now will get every piece of Minnesota Wild memorabilia," Setoguchi said. "She's got a 12-foot-sized poster shrine of me inside of their garage. She has a wall with probably 150 pictures of me."

Says Dale Setoguchi: "My parents were Devin's biggest fans from the day I put a pair of skates on him. They never missed a game, and still don't."

Change in plans

Setoguchi was blindsided the night of the NHL draft this June.

With the event in St. Paul and not knowing how the hometown fans would respond, Wild General Manager Chuck Fletcher executed a gutsy blockbuster by trading fan favorite Brent Burns and a draft pick to the Sharks for Setoguchi, top prospect Charlie Coyle and a first-round pick that became Zack Phillips.

"When he got traded, he was very disappointed," Heatley said of Setoguchi. "He was a good friend and a good teammate, so I called him that night and told him, 'It's going to be good there. You're going to like it. They traded for you because they want you.'"

Heatley added with a loud snicker, "Ten days later, he called me: 'It's going to be good there. You're going to like it. They traded for you because they want you.'"

Setoguchi admits it took time to get over the trade, which came one day after he signed a three-year, $9 million contract so he could continue to grow with the Sharks' core.

"It just kind of stunk the way it happened," Setoguchi said. "I respect [the Sharks] so much, and I grew as a player there a lot. I was traded for a guy who could be one of the best defensemen of the league.

"But I was just upset because you go so far in the playoffs, you go to the conference final two years in a row, and there's this anger when you lose. So there was this motivation to get a new deal done and, 'OK, Let's win a Cup now.' You want to be a part of that, and then a day later, you're not."

But Setoguchi is long past the disappointment.

After living in a peaceful suburb of San Jose near the mountains, Setoguchi's living in the heart of downtown Minneapolis, fighting the traffic and discovering favorite sushi restaurants.

"I've got to stick to my roots," he joked.

Called "Techno Gooch" in San Jose because of his love for techno, Setoguchi might even start playing the guitar again after frustration drove him to smash his two others into pieces.

His jam partner in San Jose was Rick Bronwell, but Setoguchi quit playing when Bronwell became a Wild assistant equipment manager. Now they're reunited.

"Our biggest attempt was Stone Temple Pilots' "Interstate Love Song," said Bronwell, who has conversations with Setoguchi in fake Japanese. "He'd play one part. I'd play the other part. Didn't sound that good. Then he started throwing his guitars. I'm like, 'Dude, come on, just give them to me.'"

With the Wild

Most of all, Setoguchi is looking forward to a bigger role in Minnesota. After years of battling for ice time behind wingers such as Heatley, Patrick Marleau and Joe Pavelski, he will move from right wing to left on the most legitimate first line in Wild history.

Skating in the preseason with center Mikko Koivu and Heatley, Setoguchi scored a goal and had four assists as the trio combined for five goals and 11 assists in three games. He has shown to be a super-fast, super-aggressive, offensively gifted player with a knack for the net. His legs are always moving, which leads to induced penalties and power plays.

And his shoot-first mindset is why Fletcher acquired Setoguchi and Heatley, a two-time 50-goal scorer.

"You have to have guys like that," said former Wild coach Todd Richards, now an assistant with Columbus who coached Setoguchi for one year in San Jose. ["Setoguchi and Heatley] are finishers and proven goal-scorers. When they lost [Marian] Gabonik, we had lots of guys who wanted to pass
but nobody who was willing to shoot and, once they got the opportunity, could actually finish."

Setoguchi knows he still has to earn his first-line duty to stay there, and one way would be to become more consistent. He's a streaky scorer, which was proven last season when he followed a miserable first half with an exceptional second half and postseason (seven goals, including two overtime winners).

"Sometimes a fresh start is good," Setoguchi said. "We're definitely motivated, not only Dany and myself but the whole group of guys and coaching staff. We've got a little swagger going where we can start fresh and erase whatever memory people had of this team in the past and try to build and move forward.

"I'm just excited. I'm young. I'm not married. I just kind of fend for myself and have fun and love the things I'm doing right now. I know a lot of other people would kill to be in the position that everyone in this dressing room is in."

Star Tribune LOADED: 10.06.2011
With Lundin on shelf, Scandella gets a chance

Article by: MICHAEL RUSSO, Star Tribune

Mike Yeo said he believes Marco Scandella will be a top defenseman in the NHL for a long time. The Wild coach said since the start of training camp that Scandella is good enough to be a top-four defenseman.

That's why the Wild coach indicated a month ago that unless Scandella could get top-four minutes immediately, it might be beneficial for the 21-year-old to get more ice time with Houston of the AHL.

A back injury to Mike Lundin will give Scandella those minutes in Minnesota.

"It's funny how guys get their opportunity," Yeo said. "Some guys, they wait and they wait and they wait, but the opportunity never really comes. But here's an opportunity for him right off the bat."

Scandella is part of the team's 23-man opening night roster, along with three other contenders -- forwards Brett Bulmer and Nick Johnson, and defenseman Justin Falk.

Scandella receives the biggest role immediately, after playing 20 games with the Wild last season and helping the Aeros to the Calder Cup Finals.

"Every day is a mental battle," he said. "I've got to perform. As a young guy, you have to be on your toes every day."

Scandella showed some signs during an injury hindered season of being a skilled, smart defenseman. He demonstrated it in his third game, Nov. 17 when he skated end-to-end to set up Antti Miettinen's overtime winner.

"I remember talking to an NHL executive that night that said, 'Wow, is that a good hockey player?,'" GM Chuck Fletcher said. "Last year he showed signs of playing very well and then he would get injured, and you'd almost have to build his game back up again. But he gained a lot of great experience."

Walz on board with FSN

Wes Walz, one of the Wild's original players, will do pre- and post-game shows on Fox Sports North.

"I'm really excited to be involved with the Wild family again," said Walz, 41. "My kids all grew up here, so we have deep, strong roots in this area having played here eight years. I'm looking forward to being around the rink all the time again and pulling for the guys."

Walz was a go-to quote for Minnesota media, "but I'm under no illusion, broadcasting is different and the good ones make it look really easy."

Injury report

Goalie Josh Harding skated in a track suit Wednesday to test his twisted left ankle. Two hours later, goalie Matt Hackett was reassigned to Houston and Harding was added to the Wild's opening night roster.

Three players will start on injured reserve.

Center Cody Almond is not improving from a back injury that's kept him off the ice all of training camp. "It's not a short-term thing," Fletcher said. "It's frustrating for him because he came to camp in great shape and this was the year he thought he could challenge for a roster spot."

Left winger Matt Kassian (broken finger) is practicing, but the Wild will be cautious to give him the green light -- either here on in Houston -- because he's a fighter. Lundin is starting to feel better, Fletcher said.

Star Tribune LOADED: 10.06.2011
Bulmer, Scandella, Falk, Johnson should stick on the Wild's 23-man roster

Posted by: Michael Russo under Wild player moves, Wild training camp
Updated: October 5, 2011 - 9:32 AM

As I mentioned on one of the blogs yesterday, the Wild had a couple very exhausting, very long practices in Duluth. Tons of skating, meaning their legs probably feel like porridge this morning.

For that reason, the Wild will have an off-ice workout this morning only before two very important days of practice Thursday and Friday in preparation for Saturday's home opener vs. Columbus and a very busy first week of duty.

The Wild plays five games in the first eight nights, including back-to-back games on Long Island (a.k.a. 'best place on Earth') and Ottawa.

At 2 p.m. today, the Wild must submit its roster to the NHL hierarchy for Opening Night.

Barring waiver pickups (no Sean Avery) or trades, the roster that is in place now should be the roster that is in place at 2 p.m. The one exception: They have to decide what to do with Josh Harding.

Since he's going to back up anyway Saturday and injured reserve is allowed to be retroactive and you can be taken off IR in one week, I'd assume Harding opens on IR. Then, if he's better by the weekend, he can be taken off IR on Sunday anyway (one week from twisting his ankle). But like I said, they have to make a decision on Matt Hackett staying or going today, so I'd think he stays unless they figure Harding can strap on a boot and back up anyway Saturday.

Capisce?

Brett Bulmer, 19, will make the opening night roster, as well as Marco Scandella, Justin Falk and Nick Johnson.

The only real question is who dresses Saturday. Justin Falk will clearly be the defenseman scratched, but how about up front? It'll come from somebody on that fourth line: Colton Gillies, Eric Nystrom, Bulmer or Johnson. I have my suspicion, but I'd prefer not to guess ... yet.

Couple things on each of the guys that are staying:

-- Gotten a few emails asking if they keep Bulmer, aren't they risking another James Sheppard? First, two different people, two different personalities, two different players. Second, just because he's staying doesn't mean he's staying for good. Third, Sheppard never played a day in his life in the minors. Just because Bulmer's staying doesn't mean next year he doesn't get time in Houston. Plus, one reason Bulmer came to camp so confident this year and Mike Yeo and Darryl Sydor were so comfortable with him is because Bulmer got a taste of the A last year during Houston's run to the Calder Cup Finals.

But I get the concern, and I asked GM Chuck Fletcher about this yesterday because let's be honest, two years ago when the Wild placed Gillies in the minors, it was alluded that new management felt some players were rushed to the NHL by old management.

"We're going to do what we can to protect Brett's development," Fletcher said. "If we're not developing him properly, we'll just send him back to junior. It's that simple. But the lessons he is learning right now I think will be invaluable for his career longterm."

Everybody keeps asking me about the 10-game rule. Please read today's article because I explain it in there. The Wild could care less if it burns the first year of his contract. In other words, if the Wild sent him back to junior after 15 games, it would make no difference to them. There's going to be a lot of kids entering the lineup in the next few years, and the Wild doesn't want to get to a very precarious point where all these first contracts are expiring at the same time in a league now where players get incredibly inflated second contracts.

You remember what happened in Chicago when Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane had first contracts expiring at the same time. Mayhem.
Minnesota Wild have high hopes for a healthy goalie Niklas Backstrom

By Bruce Brothers

Wild goalie Niklas Backstrom says that despite statistics that were down last season, "for the most part of the season, I played the best hockey I ever played." (Pioneer Press: Chris Polydoroff)

Niklas Backstrom is a stand-up guy.

When the Wild play poorly - or when he does - he says so.

With goaltending considered one of the key factors in whether the Wild are a playoff contender this season, Backstrom is weary of hearing that he produced a less-than-stellar season last year.

"I look back at last year," he said, "and for the most part of the season, I played the best hockey I ever played."

Backstrom had two stretches that wrecked his statistics, one at season's end when the Wild went in the tank and Backstrom was struggling with a shoulder injury. He nevertheless posted a 2.66 goals-against average and a .916 save percentage.

Other than backup goalie Josh Harding, goalie coach Bob Mason is Backstrom's biggest booster.

The .916 save percentage was adequate, Mason points out, and it would have been much better if the Wild hadn't gone 2-9 in Backstrom's final 11 starts.

"So he dropped a couple games under .500," Mason said. "But it's a two-way street. The team didn't have a great finish, either."

Mason is a numbers guy. He pointed out that Backstrom was near the top of the league with a .940 save percentage before "he had that little dip" in November and gave up 18 goals in three games. Backstrom's numbers inched back to .920, Mason said, before the team finished on a 4-11-1 skid.

"He's delivered the goods," Mason said.

Darren Pang, a national TV commentator and former goaltender, said he doesn't believe either last season or the year before, when Backstrom produced a 2.72 goals-against and a .903 save percentage, could be classified as "down years" even though Backstrom's save percentage was .920 or above in his first three seasons.

Pang said he saw inconsistency from Backstrom a few times but also "brilliant performances." Pang blames a hip injury two seasons ago that hindered Backstrom's lateral movement and the shoulder injury last season.

Backstrom admits he was "dinged up" on occasion but doesn't use that as an excuse.

He's healthy now, and Pang saw that during a 1-0 exhibition win over the Blues in St. Louis.

"His movement was fantastic," Pang said. "Early on, the Blues had some great scoring chances and Backstrom looked like he was in full control of his game."

Pang says there's another factor in Backstrom's statistics: The Wild ranked second from the bottom in goals in the Western Conference last season, so when pucks elude Backstrom "it becomes more noticeable because of the lack of scoring."

Where Backstrom's numbers go this year also will depend on the Wild's youthful blue line. The top seven defensemen going into the season opener against Columbus on Saturday night at the Xcel Energy Center are veterans Nick Schultz, Marek Zidlicky and Greg Zanon along with youngsters Justin Falk, Clayton Stoner, Jared Spurgeon and Marco Scandella.

NBC-TV commentator Eddie Olczyk referred to Minnesota's "very good goaltending" with Backstrom and Harding. But he also wanted to know, "Are they going to be a team that is going to be average at best on the back end?"

Fellow commentator Pierre McGuire called the blue line Minnesota's "biggest issue."

Wild coach Mike Yeo says goaltending and defensive play are intertwined.

"I believe that as we get better in front of Back, then he's going to get better, too," he said, but added that during exhibition play, Backstrom has been in top form.

"Each and every game, he's given us a chance to win."

Harding, who's coming off a knee injury that sidelined him for all of last season, admires Backstrom's work.

"He's underrated; he's solid," Harding said. "He's solid, but he still has that athleticism to make the big save, the diving save. It's fun to watch him."

Pang points out that the Wild are on their second head coach since Jacques Lemaire departed in 2009 and the defense has occasionally paid a price by having to refigure things.

But, Pang said, "If they can tighten up defensively, then I see goaltending as a strength of the hockey club."

So does Backstrom.

"It doesn't matter what people say about you," he said. "It's how you feel about yourself or your game. That's the most important thing. You always try to get better and move on. The past is the past."

"Like I say, we didn't make the playoffs, so you can't be happy. But we're going to be better."

Pioneer Press LOADED: 10.06.2011
Minnesota Wild picked to finish out of the playoffs

By Bruce Brothers

Going into their 11th NHL season, the Minnesota Wild are off the radar.

Most experts and national publications are predicting Minnesota won't finish among the top eight in the Western Conference again.

That's what happens when a team misses the playoffs three consecutive years.

When NBC commentator Mike Milbury was asked about the Wild, he said, "I don't see them making the playoffs."

Wild general manager Chuck Fletcher smiled at that.

"That's great," he said.

Fletcher has said repeatedly he's fine with his team flying under the radar.

So is first-year coach Mike Yeo.

"Doesn't bother me a bit," he said. "People have to form opinions and make predictions right now. But that's something you write on a piece of paper; that's not the real story. The real story is what happens at the end of the year, and as far as I'm concerned, we're the ones who get to decide how this is all going to play out.

"At the end of the year, yes, other people are going to write that story, but we're the ones who are going to determine what they write."

Sports Illustrated picked Minnesota to finish 10th in the West, and Bodog's preseason odds have the Wild as 75-1 long shots to win the Stanley Cup.

TSN.ca has the Wild 27th of 30 teams in its preseason power ratings. The Hockey News ranks the Wild 11th in the West.

"We'll see," Fletcher said. "Any time you have a new coaching staff and players, there's a lot more work involved in terms of getting the team on the same page and getting the system implemented.

"I think people think we're just throwing words out there, but right now for us it's so important for us to focus on the process.

"We're playing catch-up compared to a lot of teams."

Fletcher is willing to cut the Wild some slack early, saying he believes the team will be better the second half of the season because it will be more familiar with its system.

"How quickly we become a team is the key to our success," he said.

It's a process, Yeo insisted. Play the right way and keep growing as a team, "and if we continue to do that, I like our chances."

Winger Eric Nystrom points out that changes - a new coach and new players such as Dany Heatley, Devin Setoguchi, Darroll Powe, Colton Gillies and others - look good so far compared to the team that finished 12th in the Western Conference last season.

"Everyone's entitled to their own opinion," he said. "We're not the same team as last year. It's all about becoming a team."

Briefly: Wes Walz, an original member of the Wild, will join the television broadcast team and appear on Fox Sports North's Wild Live pregame and postgame shows beginning with the home opener Saturday, the Wild and the network announced today.

The Wild open their season against the Columbus Blue Jackets at 7 p.m. Saturday at the Xcel Energy Center.

- The St. Paul Chamber of Commerce Welcome Luncheon for the Wild is scheduled Thursday at the Crowne Plaza.

- Backup goaltender Josh Harding tested his sore ankle today and said he will be able to play in Saturday's season opener.

- The Wild sent goalie Matt Hackett back to the Houston Aeros of the American Hockey League.
Montreal Canadiens

Habs sprinkle size among sprites to boost net presence

By DAVID SHOALTS

Cole, Pacioretty, Kostitsyn expected to bring some much needed bulk to forward corps with new focus on generating traffic in crease

The catchphrase for the Montreal Canadiens this year is net presence. The matter first came up when Canadiens head coach Jacques Martin was asked about the roles of three larger forwards sprinkled among the sprites on his top three lines.

"We expect those individuals to have more of a net presence," he said. "We as a team have to be better that way in order to improve our scoring."

Then it came up again when the coach was asked if he was hopeful of improvement with the Canadiens' power play, which will once again be missing star defenceman Andrei Markov thanks to knee surgery.

"Obviously, if you don't have that net presence, goalies are so good now it's hard to score on direct shots," Martin said. "So if you look at teams that excel on the power play they have net presence that is very effective."

In this case, net presence means having a large forward station himself in front of the opposing goal to whack away at rebounds, defencemen and goaltenders in no particular order. For several years, this was a rare commodity among the Canadiens forwards, a group of Smurfs who too often found themselves pushed to the perimeter by defenders.

The Canadiens were 21st among the NHL's 30 teams last season in goal-scoring with a modest 2.60 average per game. Their power play finished the season ranked seventh but that was a little deceptive as it struggled for most of the season and then put on a late spurt.

While Habs general manager Pierre Gauthier has not recruited a gang of imposing forwards, Martin now has enough to ice at least one on each of his forward lines when the Canadiens open the NHL season Thursday night in Toronto against the Maple Leafs.

When the Canadiens left for Toronto on Wednesday after a two-day team-building session in this resort town, the lineup included Max Pacioretty, Andrei Kostitsyn and Erik Cole as the designated power forwards on the top three lines. Cole, signed as a free agent this summer, is the only newcomer in the group but this should be Pacioretty's first full season as a first-line player since he was lost for more than half of the 2010-11 season to a concussion and broken vertebra in his neck when Boston Bruins defenceman Zdeno Chara rode him into the glass at the players' bench.

Pacioretty says his role on a line with centre Scott Gomez and right winger Brian Gionta will be a little different than those of Kostitsyn and Cole on the second and third lines.

"They are a lot more skilled than I am," he said. "I know my job is to go straight to the net and create havoc. That's where my size is the most effective."

Pacioretty said he is completely recovered from last season's injuries. He also received an apology from Chara over the summer and wants to put the whole thing behind him. But he did note he was pleased with the design changes to the glass around the benches at Montreal's Bell Centre and in other arenas that make collisions safer for the players.

"It was a great feeling to be back," Pacioretty said. "I had a couple of bumps on my neck [early in training camp] but everything is fine. I've been feeling more comfortable with every game that I play."

There may be some shuffling among the three power forwards as the season proceeds. Kostitsyn is not known as a player who drives to the net, although he can work effectively along the boards, so Cole could move up from the third line. There may also be occasions when Martin uses both Cole and Pacioretty on a line with Gomez.

"Let's see what happens," said Mike Cammalleri, who indicated he was tired of the discussion about the size of the Canadiens' forwards and their scoring. "If we score 20 goals in first three games, it's not an issue. If we..."
Montreal Canadiens winger calls game against the Leafs a ‘dream come true’

Mike Cammalleri is entering his third season with the Montreal Canadiens but this is the first time he will have the chance to step on the ice in his hometown for a season-opener against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

One year ago, the native of Richmond Hill, Ont., a few traffic lights north of Toronto, missed his chance because he was serving a one-game suspension for whacking another player with his stick in the Canadiens' final pre-season game. Playing at the Air Canada Centre in the NHL’s oldest rivalry on Thursday night in front of his friends and family is so important, Cammalleri made sure he was not part of NHL vice-president Brendan Shanahan's crackdown on head shots.

"I got some congratulations today from the boys for making it through the preseason without a suspension," Cammalleri, 29, said Wednesday as the Canadiens wrapped up a team-building session on Georgian Bay. "It's special for me to play in Toronto: Opening night, Habs-Leafs, all the implications, it's a dream come true, that's for sure.”

When he was growing up, Cammalleri got to see a few Leaf games at Maple Leaf Gardens when his father Leo would score some tickets. The younger Cammalleri said his father would sometimes exchange the pricy red tickets for greys up in the rafters "because he said that was where the real fans sit."

But one memorable night in the early nineties, Leo Cammalleri managed to get tickets right behind the Buffalo Sabres’ bench and hung on to them.

"I was really young, I must have been 10 or 11," the younger Cammalleri said. "I got Benoit Hogue’s stick. He broke it a little bit in the warmup and the trainer gave me it plus a roll of tape, I still have both.

"The [television] camera guy said, 'Okay, I'm going to put you on.' I think it was Hockey Night In Canada, coast-to-coast. I was right there and my friends saw me, so that was a big thrill for me."

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 10.06.2011
Habs trim roster, add Betts

By DAVID SHOALTS

Forwards Aaron Palushaj and Michael Blunden headed to the minors

The Montreal Canadiens finished their team-bonding exercise in this resort town Wednesday by juggling their roster in preparation for the NHL season-opener against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Forward Blair Betts, 31, was picked up on waivers from the Philadelphia Flyers while forwards Andreas Engqvist, 23, Aaron Palushaj, 22, Michael Blunden, 24 and defenceman Jeff Woywitka, 28, were sent to the Canadiens' American Hockey League team. Blunden cleared waivers at noon Thursday while Woywitka was placed on waivers at the same time. That leaves the Canadiens' roster at 23, if injured players Andrei Markov, Lars Eller and Ryan White are not counted.

Markov and White are on the injured-reserve list and a decision on Eller has to be made before Thursday's opener in Toronto. Eller is still recovering from shoulder surgery and may not be ready to play for the first couple of games. He could be put on injured reserve retroactive to the last game of last season, which means he could be taken off the list at any time. Eller hopes to receive clearance to play from the doctors in the next two days.

Betts will start on the Canadiens' fourth line Thursday at the Air Canada Centre with wingers Travis Moen and Yannick Weber, a defenceman who could not find any room on that unit.

Wednesday's moves ensured the surprise of training camp, Swiss defenceman Raphael Diaz, nailed down the sixth defenceman's spot. He beat out Russian blueliner Alexei Yemelin, who will watch from the press box.

The Canadiens' lineup:

Forwards
Max Pacioretty - Scott Gomez - Brian Gionta
Andrei Kostitsyn - Tomas Plekanec - Mike Cammalleri
Mathieu Darche - David Desharnais - Erik Cole
Travis Moen - Blair Betts - Yannick Weber

Defence
Hal Gill - P.K. Subban
Chris Campoli - Josh Gorges
Jaroslav Spacek - Raphael Diaz

Goal
Carey Price

Peter Budaj
Montreal Canadiens set for opener

By Dave Stubbs

TORONTO – It’s such fun when the Canadiens open their season here, Stanley Cup sugar plums forever dancing in the heads of Maple Leafs supporters who are the most faithful if, bless ’em, the most deluded fans in hockey.

So where were we a year ago Friday, the Habs in Hogtown to begin their 2010-11 season with a 3-2 loss to the Leafs?

- Canadiens forward Michael Cammalleri was in the press box, sitting out a one-game suspension for a slash of New York Islanders prospect Nino Niederreiter during Montreal’s final preseason game.

- Goalie Carey Price, sickened by a flu bug, was roughly the colour of chalk when his team broke camp. He wasn’t a whole lot more lifelike when the first puck was dropped for real.

- Defencemen Andrei Markov and Roman Hamrlik both were out of the lineup, Markov recovering from his first of two rebuilt right ACLs, Hamrlik healing a knee he’d strained during a summer workout.

- Radiant rookie rearguard P.K. Subban, then a veteran of two regular-season and 14 playoff games, was playing his first hometown match. He had begged, borrowed and skillfully mooched 13 tickets scattered around the Air Canada Centre for family and friends whom he said wouldn’t care “if they’re sitting on the roof, looking through a hole.”

Let’s flash back one more season, the Canadiens 4-3 overtime winners in Toronto with Price making 43 saves in their 2009-10 curtain-raiser.

- Montreal was stocked with seven high-to mid-profile free-agent signings and was minus 10 roster players from the previous season, new head coach Jacques Martin celebrating his 57th birthday with a victory in his first game behind the Habs bench.

- For the first time in its century, the Canadiens began (and would finish) the season without a captain.

- A day before the game, Sergei Kostitsyn refused a demotion to the sidelines.

- New Canadien Travis Moen had a goal and a fight, one assist shy of the Gordie Howe hat trick.

- Former Habs defenceman Mike Komisarek, a rich, perhaps even truculent agent signing by Leafs GM Brian Burke that summer, spent 15 minutes in the penalty box from where he witnessed two Montreal power-play goals, including the first overtime winner in the career of Josh Gorges.

Which brings us to Thursday and what surely, by comparison, will be an uneventful season opener for a team that faces off against Toronto – either the Arenas, St. Pats or Maple Leafs – for the 709th time in the history of the forever rivals.

The franchises have opened their seasons against each other only a dozen times, their first meeting a 7-5 Toronto win coming seven days into the NHL’s inaugural season.

“Canadiens are the Flying Frenchmen no longer,” boasted the Toronto Mail and Empire on Dec. 27, 1917. “With their speed gone, Canadiens are trying to win games by their grey matter.”

(At least the newspaper made a big deal of it. The Montreal Star devoted less space to the game than to the local Outremont-Heather curling-club matches.)

Through the decades, the Canadians have won five, lost five, tied once and lost one overtime game in season-openers versus Toronto, which has played host eight times.

The Habs will bring a 335-278-88-7 lifetime against the Leafs before a crowd that will be a blend of opera-goers, BlackBerry-thumbing lawyers and Montreal expatriates who will make the contest at times seem like a home game for the visitors.

The Leafs hold a wide edge on their own ice, the Habs only 126-180-45-3 in Toronto. And in a sport with far too many statistics, here’s one more, guaranteed to be the most ridiculous:

On Thursday, the Leafs will wear their new third jersey, a replica of the model they wore to begin the 1967 Canadian centennial-year playoffs – the 13th and most recent time Toronto won the Stanley Cup – and through the end of the 1969-70 season. In the 32 games the Leafs played against the Canadiens in this “historic” jersey, Toronto is 11-15-6.

The Canadians are familiar with opening their season on the road. This is the Habs’ 11th consecutive road opener, their most recent home start a 4-1 loss to the Leafs on Oct. 2, 1999; they’re 5-3-2 since that defeat.

A dismal preseason record of 2-6-0 – it’s no matter to fans that the Canadiens use many exhibitions just to scope their prospects – will be forgotten should the Habs put up a W on Thursday. But even a strong effort with a losing result is never a consolation against Toronto, given bragging rights and strutting by Leafs supporters that would shame a rooster.

If not as dramatically retooled as the 2009-10 edition, the Canadians of this year brought a new face down from three days of team-building in Collingswood, Ont. Seven players – about one-third of the bench – and a backup goalie from last season’s opening-night roster have moved on.

Fan angst over player moves began months ago, proving that Canada’s national sport is not, in fact, hockey, but rather second-guessing the general manager of your favourite team.

None of this will matter come June, of course, when the Maple Leafs finish eighth in the Eastern Conference, making the playoffs for the first time in seven years, and the Canadiens miss the postseason by finishing ninth.

So says no greater authority than EA Sports’ NHL 12 video game, whose simulation has Pittsburgh knocking off Chicago in a six-game Stanley Cup final.

So enjoy Thursday’s game, Habs fans, and the 81 that will follow. It seems one computer figures that spring will come depressingly early in Montreal, a season that at least will not/cannot feature a championship parade in Toronto.

Montreal Gazette LOADED: 10.06.2011
Montreal Canadiens' power play struggling without powerful point shot

By Pat Hickey

TORONTO - Canadiens head coach Jacques Martin believes that special teams and goaltending are the keys to victory, but his team goes into the season with a major concern about the power play – and it won't be resolved when Andrei Markov returns to the lineup.

While the Canadiens miss Markov in the quarterback role, the team played most of last season without him and had the seventh-best power play in the National Hockey League.

Most of their success came in the second half of the season, after they acquired James Wisniewski and his booming shot. But the Canadiens couldn't afford to re-sign The Wiz when he became a free agent at the end of last season.

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Montreal Gazette LOADED: 10.06.2011
Montreal Canadiens acquire centre Blair Betts off waivers

By PAT HICKEY

TORONTO – The Canadiens are hoping that centre Blair Betts is a quick study.

The Canadiens acquired Betts off waivers from the Philadelphia Flyers Wednesday, a few hours before the team was required to meet the opening-day roster of 23 players. He is expected to be in the lineup Thursday when the Canadiens and the Toronto Maple Leafs meet in a resumption of the National Hockey League’s oldest and most storied rivalry (7 p.m., CBC, RDS, TSN Radio 990).

The 31-year-old Betts is 6-foot-3 and 210 pounds, and will provide the Canadiens with some much-desired size up the middle.

“I talked with Ian Laperrière yesterday and he mentioned Betts was on waivers, and he said he would be a good pickup for the Canadiens,” Mathieu Darche said.

Betts will replace Andreas Engqvist on the fourth line with Yannick Weber and Travis Moen, and is also expected to see action as a penalty-killer. When Betts was with the New York Rangers in 2008-09, they had the best penalty-killing record in the NHL with Betts and Fredrik Sjostrom as the key players. Canadiens assistant coach Perry Pearn was with the Rangers at the time.

There was a flurry of activity in the Canadiens’ camp as forwards Aaron Palushaj and Michael Blunden were sent to the Hamilton Bulldogs of the American Hockey League. Defenceman Jeff Woywitka is expected to join them if he clears waivers at noon Thursday.

Andrei Markov and Ryan White start the season on the injured-reserve list, while Lars Eller will be on the roster, but might not be available for Thursday’s game or Sunday’s game in Winnipeg (5 p.m., CBC, RDS, TSN 990 Radio).

The acquisition of Betts gives the Canadiens some flexibility, and there’s a good chance that when Eller is fully recovered from shoulder surgery he’ll play centre on the No. 3 line and David Desharnais will move to the wing.

The Canadiens will open the season with some changes from last season.

While general manager Pierre Gauthier elected to stick with the core of last season’s team, the defence has radically changed since the playoffs with the departures of James Wisniewski, Brent Sopel, Roman Hamrlik and Paul Mara.

With the exception of Hal Gill, this year’s defence is smaller and quicker, but the Canadiens will miss Wisniewski’s shot on the power play and the club is still auditioning players for the role of quarterback on the power play. That spot is up for grabs until Markov completes his rehabilitation from knee surgery.

The addition of Erik Cole gives the Canadiens more depth and size, but two returning players hold the key to a more potent offence. Scott Gomez appears to have recommitted himself after the least productive season of his career, and linemate Max Pacioretty is ready to pick up where he left off before he was driven into a stanchion by Boston’s Zdeno Chara.

“I’m trying to be less predictable,” Gomez said, which means shooting the puck more and taking some of the heat off linemates Brian Gionta and Pacioretty.

“My job is simple, I have to go to the net and create some room for my linemates,” said Pacioretty, whose arrival from the minors midway through last season gave a spark to the line.

Pacioretty’s season ended on March 8, when he was driven into a stanchion at the Bell Centre by Chara. Pacioretty suffered a concussion and a broken vertebra in his neck.

“I took some bumps in the exhibition games that rattled my neck a bit,” Pacioretty said, “but I’ve had good treatment and I’m doing exercises to strengthen the neck muscles.”
Montreal Canadiens power forward Erik Cole’s hockey roots start in Oswego

By PAT HICKEY

MONTREAL - When the Canadiens went looking for a power forward, Erik Cole was at the top of their shopping list.

It was partly because he has enjoyed great success over the years playing against the Canadiens, but mostly because of a competitive edge he developed as a youngster in Oswego, N.Y., a once-bustling port city on the southern shores of Lake Ontario.

“My older brother played hockey,” Cole, 32, recalled when asked about his introduction to the game.

“He’s six years older than me, and I just tagged along with him as much as I could. In the summer, it was street hockey, pretty much with all of his friends. They allowed me to play with them. It was pretty good. It was the kind of situation that, if your younger brother is going to play with us, we’re not going to take it easy on him.

“I took my licks, but it was good for me. They taught me how to grow up a little bit, and how to compete because I had to with those guys.”

Cole went through the minor hockey program in Oswego and also played Junior B in Ontario, but it wasn’t until he spent his senior year of high school playing for Des Moines in the United States Hockey League that he concentrated on hockey.

“I played baseball and soccer, and one year of football in high school,” Cole said. “I really liked baseball and I kind of wished I grew up in a warmer climate and could have given that a go. I loved being at the ballpark. With the exception of one week of hockey school, my summer was baseball all day, every day.”

Cole’s Junior B hockey coach encouraged him to think about playing major junior, but he committed to Clarkson University while playing in the USHL.

“I never felt I was a sure thing for the pros and it also appeased my parents to take the college route,” Cole said. “Even after my freshman year, I had some interest from a team in the WHL. But I felt I was in a good situation at Clarkson.”

The Carolina Hurricanes selected Cole in the third round (71st overall) of the 1998 NHL entry draft after his freshman year at Clarkson, and he turned pro two years later. He spent one year in the minors before earning a regular spot in Carolina, where was part of the BBC line with Rod Brind’Amour and Bates Battaglia.

Cole was having his best season with 30 goals (including eight winners) and 29 assists in 60 games, when he was driven into the boards by Pittsburgh defenceman Brooks Orpik on March 3, 2006. He suffered a compound fracture of the C5 vertebra, and watched from the sidelines as the Hurricanes put together a Stanley Cup run.

“The struggle I had was I was laying on a hospital gurney in Pittsburgh and a doctor says you have a broken neck and that you’re lucky,” Cole recalled. “I had a tough time coming to grips with that because I didn’t feel lucky at the time.”

It wasn’t until a week later that I realized that it wasn’t worse,” Cole said. “When I learned to deal with that, it was a lot easier to cope with it on a daily basis and focus on getting better.

“It was a long process and a tough one watching the playoff run,” added Cole, who returned for Game 6 of the Cup final against Edmonton.

“During the Eastern final, I had a CT scan and I wasn’t ready,” Cole recalled. “I remember flying to Edmonton and I didn’t know I’d be playing, but Doug Weight was injured in Game 5 and that opened an opportunity for me. Stepping into a Game 6 situation in the finals isn’t the ideal way to pick things up off a layoff. My timing was a bit off, but I wasn’t a liability.”

Gary Roberts, who had a similar injury, offered Cole advice through his rehabilitation, and Cole has played the same role in helping Max Pacioretty, who suffered a cracked vertebra late last season.

Cole is expected to line up with Michael Cammalleri and Tomas Plekanec when the season opens Thursday in Toronto, but he played with Mathieu Darche and David Desharnais in the final exhibition game against Tampa Bay.

“You play with a lot of different guys during the course of a season, and it’s good to get an idea of how they play,” Cole said.

While Cole has fit into the Canadiens’ system on the ice, he said his family has made a smooth transition after years in Carolina.

“When you move a young family, the biggest concern is for them,” said Cole, who has a 10-year-old daughter and a 7-year-old son. “The school they’re in is great, the teachers are great. We have a tutor coming to the house a couple of times a week to work on the French with the kids, and this is going to make them more rounded individuals.”

Cole said his son recently went through an evaluation for his minor hockey team.

“Mom’s a pretty good critic, and she said he played well, skated well,” Cole said.

Emily Cole has a hockey background of her own. She was a standout blue-liner at St. Lawrence University, which is Clarkson’s main rival. She was working as a New York State Trooper when a mutual friend introduced her to Cole.

“I took her on one date and I told my buddies I was done (looking),” Cole said.

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Habs need scorer on power play

By PAT HICKEY

Canadiens head coach Jacques Martin believes special teams and goaltending are the keys to victory, but his team goes into the season with a major concern about the power play - and it won't be resolved when Andrei Markov returns to the lineup.

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Literate loyalist follows Habs from afar

By MIKE BOONE

Andrew Cohen was a hockey fan in Denver before the NHL came to town. But his loyalty was to a team 2,600 kilometres away.

No, not the Nordiques. That would have made Cohen a happy man when the Quebec City franchise was moved and rechristened the Colorado Avalanche in 1995.

Cohen, who grew up in the Town of Mount Royal before his family moved to Denver in 1979, loved the Canadiens.

And he still does. Having spent the first 13 years of his life developing a hockey Habit, Cohen wasn't about to switch teams - least of all to the Canadiens' transplanted rivals.

Cohen is 45. A graduate of the Boston University law school, he is the CBS News legal correspondent and a national correspondent for The Atlantic magazine.

I became an email pen-pal of Cohen last spring when he sent me a link to a piece he'd written for The Atlantic. Headlined "Woe, Canada: The NHL's slide into big trouble", Cohen's article was written in reaction to Zdeno Chara's homicidal hit on Max Pacioretty.

"I have been watching hockey faithfully for nearly 40 years," Cohen wrote, "and I cannot remember a more devastating hit."

Cohen blasted the hapless Colin Campbell's response to the Max-Pacioretty injury. His column warned:

"It's going to end with a casket. At center ice. One of these days, a player is going to be killed live and in HD during a game we all are watching from our seats or our homes. The whole world is going to see it. And then the NHL's lawmakers, the suits who justify and defend this level of violence in the name of competition and tradition, will come before us, tears in their eyes and blood on their hands, to honor the fallen and to beg forgiveness."

Nice writing, eh? And since then, Cohen has kept me abreast of his hockey columns, which occasionally show up in The Atlantic amid learned and lively analyses of U.S. Supreme Court decisions.

I phoned Cohen last week to talk about his long-distance love affair with the Canadiens. He was watching Zoolander and turned down the volume before waxing nostalgic about the great teams of the 1970s.

"My first memory of hockey is the 1973 Stanley Cup finals against Chicago," he said. "There was a game on a Sunday afternoon, which was a treat for me because I was able to watch the whole game."

It was May 6. The Canadiens shut out the Hawks 4-0 at Chicago Stadium in Game 4 of a series that went to seven games before Cohen's team won its 18th Stanley Cup.

True to the cliché, Cohen says absence from Montreal has made his heart grow fonder for the faves of his youth.

"As much of a fan as I was in the '70s, I think I became more of a fan after I left," he said. "The team, for me, was a way to keep connected with the city I'd grown up in and which I loved."

"I became even more passionate about the team when I was gone."

Nurturing that passion has been a challenge for Cohen. He subscribes to the NHL Centre Ice package - which includes TSN and, occasionally, RDS feeds of Canadiens games - but there were decades during which Cohen had to scramble to keep up with news of the Canadiens.

"We moved a month after they won their fourth straight Cup (in 1979) and everything changed for the team," Cohen recalls. "In 1980, I listened to playoff games on shortwave radio, a Minnesota broadcast when the North Stars beat the Canadiens."

During the 1980s, cable TV exploded and Cohen was able to watch hockey on the USA Network and ESPN. He remembers being a senior in high school and watching the notorious Good Friday playoff bloodbath in which the Canadiens came back from a 2-0 deficit to beat the hated Nordiques 5-3 at the Forum.

"It was one of the top three or four games certainly of my lifetime," Cohen said. "The fighting, the sense of justice and injustice, the punch that struck Jean Hamel, the French and the English."

"It was civil war - the fighting that never really happened on the streets."

After graduating from high school, Cohen spent seven years at university in Boston, where he was an island of bleu-blanc-rouge loyalty in a sea of black and gold.

"I hated and still hate the Bruins and everything they stand for," Cohen says. The Avalanche, however, have been "more tricky" because they are the hometown team and, Quebec City antecedents notwithstanding, do not carry the stigma of the bitter Montreal-Boston rivalry.

"I had season tickets for a while," Cohen says. "I enjoyed the games and tried to embrace the team, but I just couldn't."

"And the atmosphere in the States, especially in cities that aren't Original Six, is completely different. The fans are there not because they're passionate about hockey but because it's an event or a social thing or whatever."

Cohen's other problem with the hometown team was the Patrick Roy trade.

"I loved him," Cohen says of the great goaltender. "But when he did what he did, I couldn't abide him. So I couldn't root for Patrick Roy, which meant I couldn't support the Avalanche."

One lingering effect of Cohen's time in Boston is his baseball loyalty to the Red Sox. It used to be said that while the Yankees had better teams, the Red Sox had higher-class fans among the literati, notably Stephen King and John Updike.

As a writer for The Atlantic, Cohen probably qualifies as the Canadiens' most literate loyalist. I asked if the Canadiens awaken something unique in the literary imagination?

"Absolutely," Cohen replied. "They're a generational team. The passion transcends the game and brings you back to a history of your family and a history of the country."

His late father, Eddy Cohen, was the son of immigrants, played hockey in his native Quebec and was a contemporary of Mordecai Richler, who was also a diehard Canadiens fan.

"He loved hockey and he shared that love with me," Cohen says of his father. "To me, when you like a team that goes back a hundred years, you're not just liking what you see on the ice. You're liking what it makes you a part of."

When he lived in Montreal, Cohen felt like a part of the hometown team. And since he left, the Habs have been a part of him.

"You have grainy, black-and-white memories of the Richard Riot, the funeral of Morenz ... all that drama, and it connects you in a very emotional way."

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Savard's driving force was fear of failure

By IAN MACDONALD

Denis Savard spent most of his Hall of Fame career with the Chicago Blackhawks, but he was also part of the Canadiens' last Stanley Cup team in 1993.

And he also speaks fondly of the roles the Junior Canadiens and Verdun minor hockey played in his development as a player.

In three seasons with the Junior Canadiens, Savard scored 146 goals and added 309 assists for 455 points in 214 games. After posting 63-118-181 totals in his final junior season, many hockey people thought the Canadiens would take the 5-foot-10, 170-pound centre with the No. 1 overall pick at the 1980 National Hockey League entry draft.

But the Canadiens opted instead for Regina native Doug Wickenheiser, and Savard went to the Chicago Blackhawks with the No. 3 pick, after the Winnipeg Jets took defenceman Dave Babych.

Savard posted 28-47-75 totals in 76 games during his rookie season, while Wickenheiser played only 41 games with the Canadiens, posting 7-8-15 totals.

"Everything happens for a reason, and I had a chance to play right away in Chicago, and I might not have had that here," Savard said after his Hall of Fame career ended. "I was fortunate to have a great career and win the Stanley Cup. They say timing is everything, and I wouldn't have done anything differently."

Savard attracted national attention during his junior career with his dazzling rushes while playing on the Trois Denis line with Denis Cyr and Denis Tremblay. Remarkably, all three were born on the same day: Feb. 4, 1961.

During a recent telephone interview, Savard was asked if the Trois Denis still keep in touch.

"When you called, I was on the line with Denis Cyr," Savard said from his Chicago-area home. "I talk with Tremblay regularly. He's a postman now, and quite happy."

Savard said his experience with the Junior Canadiens was "very constructive ... very positive."

He added: "I was blessed throughout my career."

Of his minor hockey days while growing up in Verdun, he recalled: "Most of our games were indoors, but a lot of our practices were outdoors."

Savard recalled practices at Richard Park near the Verdun Auditorium and at Willibrord Park.

"They had two hockey rinks and a skating rink, and the main thing is we did a lot of skating, the 50-year-old said. "They did the right thing, I think, in teaching a lot of skill stuff, but the most important thing is the ice time - skate and skate and skate."

There was a time during Savard's junior career when he talked about fear playing a role.

"I feel I was driven especially hard by fear through most of my career," he said. "I don't mean fear of getting injured, I mean fear of not making the play properly - of disappointing people. That fear was a driving force for me."

Savard often used a "spinarama" move, similar to the one mastered by Canadiens Hall of Fame defenceman Serge Savard (no relation).

"I wasn't copying anyone's style with that move," Savard said. "I simply started using it as a puck protection idea. If you have the puck directly in front of you, the opponent has a clear chance to dislodge the puck or take it away. By turning your back to him, then the defender has to get around you before he can touch the puck."

"I kept trying it out in practice, and eventually I was confident enough to use it in games. I found it to be quite effective."
Gionta wears 'C' with reverence

He dips, too, into his experience as a junior in Rochester, N.Y., and up through Boston College, U.S. Olympic and world championship teams and the minor pros.

"You learn from every coach, every leader, and you take things from everybody you've been around," he said. "You take a little bit from each of them and put it into how you are, how you conduct yourself."

Gionta arrived in Montreal in the rebuilding summer of 2009, signing a five-year, $25-million contract. Head coach Jacques Martin put an alternate captain's "A" on his jersey that fall as team management let the "C" lay fallow for a year.

"Everyone needed to come together," Gionta recalled. "The personalities needed to mesh."

He says that he couldn't have better timed his arrival, with the Canadiens celebrating their centennial.

"Look at that big photo we had taken with all the alumni. You see yourself in that picture and it's very humbling," he said. "It sends shivers up your spine."

Talk to any established player on the Canadiens and Gionta's many qualities are catalogued. Some are in plain view on the ice when this 5-foot-7 forward crashes the net or goes hard into the corners, inevitably crushed for it. Others are more abstract - work ethic, practice habits, the silky way he moves through his life, whether the cameras are on or off.

"You know how important the captaincy is in the community," Gionta said. "For the fans, and for everybody involved.

"I'm still involved in different events the team has, and the charities I felt strongly about. You're a figurehead for the players, appearing on behalf of them."

The history of the Canadiens "C" had set the bar at a challenging height and Gionta knew the skates he was being asked to fill, succeeding the legendary Larry Robinson at the helm of a franchise looking to restart the winning ways. The Canadiens had been working for a century to get back to the top and Gionta knew the responsibilities that came with the "C" that was now stitched to his upper left shoulder.

"It's just a matter of me going about my business," Gionta said. "That's what I've been doing since my first game as the 28th captain in franchise history."

"You're available (to teammates), and if somebody's going through some things, you're there for him. Anyone can bring anything to me and I try to analyze it and go from there."

"There are times when things aren't going right that you need to be that (vocal) guy... If something needs to be said, you definitely have to say it. That's part of the role.

"Sometimes, it's just a look. Everybody needs to be on board, 'Let's get this going,' and I think all the guys do that to each other. We police ourselves."

The Canadiens are stocked with leadership on and off the rink. By name, Gionta mentioned five teammates - defencemen Andrei Markov and Hal Gill, his regular alternate captains, and Josh Gorges, as well as forwards Michael Cammalleri and Scott Gomez.

"The majority of leadership comes from a good group of guys, and that's great to have," Gionta said. "As far as looking for sparks, for composure when things are down, I think that's where you look to the guy who's captain. When things aren't going well, when they start spiralling the wrong way, it's for the captain to right things, to calm things down.

"But you need different voices at different times. We have a lot of veteran guys who have experience, and by no means do I have all the answers. It's a collaborative effort most times and on most things it's a group of us making decisions or trying to figure things out.

"(Leadership by committee) is what you want. You want guys to be active and that brings the camaraderie. Everyone thinks they're playing a part in the team, and that's important."

Gionta's style of leadership is culled from every influential hockey figure whose path he's crossed through nine NHL seasons, including a Stanley Cup championship with New Jersey in 2003, his sophomore year.

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Montreal Canadiens

Keon lit the fire in leafs-habs rivalry

By RED FISHER

Most hockey people will tell you there has never been a greater National Hockey League rivalry than Montreal-Toronto, which resumes on Thursday when both teams start the new season at the Air Canada Centre (7 p.m., CBC, RDS).

No argument there, up to a point. There was a strong case to make for it during the six-team league. Since then, not much, but their 1967 Stanley Cup final - the last one in which the Maple Leafs appeared - still resonates.

As you know, the Canadiens have won the Stanley Cup 24 times, the Leafs 13, putting them one-two in NHL history. They have met in the playoffs 15 times, but you might be surprised to learn that the Leafs have won four of their six meetings in the Cup final, including 1967.

The teams split the first two games at the Forum that year, as well as the next two in Toronto, with Bob Pulford scoring the double-overtime winner in Game 3. After falling 6-2 to the Canadiens in Game 4, the Leafs stunned the Canadiens 4-1 in Montreal and put them away with Jim Pappin getting the winner in the 3-1 series finale at Toronto.

The Leafs' goaltenders were Johnny Bower and Terry Sawchuk. Tim Horton and Bob Baun were the best of a veteran defence corps. Frank Mahovlich, George Armstrong, Red Kelly, Pulford, Pappin and Mike Walton were among the forwards. However, in all of the 15 seasons Dave Keon wore the Leafs jersey, he was the one Toronto player the Canadiens' great teams hated to see on the ice.

He was one of the NHL's many small players (5-foot-9, 165 pounds) during that era, the best two-way player of his time, but nobody on any of the six teams was blessed with a larger heart. One moment, you'd find him scuffling for a loose puck in the corners; the next, he'd be in heavy traffic in front of the nets. You'd find him everywhere, using his speed to pull away from the opposition, often with shorthanded goals.

In his 15 seasons with the Leafs, Keon was their captain for six.

The intense rivalry in the Original Six was an amalgam of many things. The Leafs and Canadiens stirred the souls with their 14 regular-season meetings and raised the bar in the postseason, but Toe Blake and Punch Imlach made the pot boil.

Keon was voted the most valuable player of the postseason in 1967 (Conn Smythe Trophy) for all of the right reasons, but Imlach should have been given a piece of the pie for the way he motivated the team to a Stanley Cup hardly anybody imagined the Leafs would win.

They weren't even expected to get beyond the first round against a Chicago team that had finished No. 1 with 94 points, followed by the Canadiens with 77 and the Leafs with 75. Toronto, with its long-in-the-tooth lineup averaging 31, beat Chicago in six games, largely because of the excellence of goaltenders Bower and Sawchuk. The Canadiens swept the New York Rangers with goalies Gump Worsley and Rogatien Vachon - the latter a first-year pro with the Houston Apollos after spending most of his development seasons at the Junior B level.

Imlach was on the phone the night before the start of the Cup final.

"How do you think your team will do against the Canadiens?" he was asked.

"You tell me," Imlach said. "How do you think we'll do?"

"You haven't got a chance," he was told. "They have too much speed for your old guys."

Short pause. Finally: "They'll never beat me with a Junior B goaltender," Imlach snapped.

"Is that on the record or off?" he was asked.

"You called me for a damn story, didn't you?" Imlach said, and promptly slammed down the phone.

Imlach's assessment of Vachon, along with Blake's delightful reaction to it that "predictions are for Gypsies" made headlines across Canada the next day. That night, with Vachon in the nets, the Canadiens won the series start 2-1. Alas, a couple of games later, Vachon was out - and Worsley in.

How good was Keon in the finale? He was held to only a goal and an assist in the Cup final, yet won the Conn Smythe Trophy.

Three years later, he replaced Armstrong as captain. Keon was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1986.

Montreal Gazette LOADED: 10.06.2011
1970-71 road warriors dethroned Bruins

By RED FISHER

MONTREAL - The 1970-71 postseason held little promise for the Canadiens, even though they had locked up a playoff spot after failing to qualify the previous year for the first time in 22 years.

The Canadiens had finished a solid No. 3 in the East Division standings in the 14-team league. Trouble was, they trailed the reigning Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins by 24 points. Worse: they were to face the Bruins in the first round with a late-season addition, goaltender Ken Dryden, whose NHL experience was limited to six games.

Help!

Nobody gave the Canadiens a chance to win this series. Boston had Bobby Orr and Phil Esposito at their best. They had Gerry Cheevers, one of hockey's best money goalies. Ken Hodge, Wayne Cashman, Johnny Bucyk, Derek Sanderson and John McKenzie. They were the Big, Bad Bruins in every sense of the word, but mostly they were an immensely talented team.

The Bruins won the first game 3-1, largely because Cheevers had played an exceptional game. The next day, Boston head coach Tom Johnson said he would be switching to backup Eddie Johnston for Game 2.

"Are you nuts?" Johnson was asked. "Cheevers was the only reason your team won last night. He was the best player on the ice."

"Before the series started, I promised Eddie I'd use him in the second game," Johnson argued. "If I don't, I'll lose him for the rest of the playoffs."

"So what," he was told. "You go with your best."

The next night, with Johnston in the nets, the Bruins toyed with the Canadiens in the first half of the game. Yvan Cournoyer had opened the scoring in the first period, but Orr and Ted Green followed with goals.

McKenzie, Cashman and Sanderson beat Dryden in the second. The Bruins were leading 5-1, and even though Henri Richard scored late in the period, Boston still held what appeared to be an insurmountable three-goal lead after the first 40 minutes.

Game over, right?

Wrong!

Jean Béliveau lifted the Canadiens to within two in the third period, then added another. Jacques Lemaire's goal tied the game. John Ferguson scored the winner and Frank Mahovlich added one more. Canadiens 7, Boston 5.

If the Canadiens hadn't rallied in the third period, they would have gone home trailing the best-of-seven series 2-0. That would have been far too much of a deficit to overcome against the NHL's best team.

As it developed, the Bruins lost Game 3 at the Forum 3-1, but regained home-ice advantage when they won Game 4 by a 5-2 score. Then, a one-sided 7-3 win at home provided Boston with a 3-2 lead in the series.

By then, the strud had returned to the Bruins' stride, but the Canadiens buried them 8-3 in Game 6 at the Forum, and even though the Bruins scored the first goal in Game 7 at Boston, the Canadiens once again rallied to win 4-2.

Nobody was surprised when the Canadiens eliminated Minnesota in six games - but the best was yet to come when they won their 16th Stanley Cup in a seven-game series with Chicago - this time after losing the first two games on the road.

The Cup final was all about Dryden, who led the Canadiens to two wins at home - Chicago won Game 5, the Canadiens Game 6 - and saved the best for last by rallying from a 2-0 deficit in Chicago to win 3-2.
Pacioretty back playing to the Max

By MIKE ZEISBERGER

COLLINGWOOD, ONT. - As they carried Max Pacioretty’s limp body off the ice on a stretcher that fateful evening of March 8, the shocked capacity crowd at the Bell Centre wondered if the young Montreal Canadiens forward would ever live a normal life again, let alone play hockey.

In the end, so did he.

Having been slammed against the unforgiving divider partition at the end of the Boston bench by Bruins bad boy Zdeno Chara, Pacioretty was rushed to hospital with broken vertebra and a serious concussion after being involved in one of the most horrifying on-ice incidents in recent years.

Seven months later, here stood Pacioretty, looking remarkably healthy again, enjoying the beautiful sun-splashed Collingwood weather on Wednesday afternoon, enjoying the friendly banter with his teammates, enjoying the mere fact that he was back in the Canadiens’ fold again.

On Thursday night at the Air Canada Centre, Pacioretty will make an appearance in a National Hockey League regular season game for the first time since having his head splattered by Chara.

And after going through such a traumatic experience, he’s not about to take all of this for granted. Not in the least.

“I do appreciate that I’m back, I really do,” Pacioretty said. “I was pretty close to having all of this taken away from me. You don’t forget something like that.”

Pacioretty, 22, admits there will be butterflies churning in his gut when he steps onto the Air Canada Centre ice to face the Maple Leafs. Then again, with this being the curtain raiser on the 2011-12 regular season, he won’t be the only one wearing bleu, blanc and rouge who will be feeling that way.

All things considered, Pacioretty should consider himself fortunate that his recovery went so relatively quickly. Two days after being admitted into the emergency ward, he was released. By the time the Habs were facing off against the Boston Bruins in the first round of the playoffs, he was back skating again. In the ensuing months, he built himself back into shape, claiming “it was the best (workout) off-season of my life” because of all the time he had to rehab.

In four exhibition appearances he scored two goals, all the while getting acclimatized again with the role of being an NHL player.

“It’s been crazy,” he chuckled. “But it’s a great feeling. I was a little nervous at first, my timing was off and there were a couple of bumps to my neck but, all and all, I felt more comfortable with every appearance,

“I’m ready.”

Upon his return, one of the first things that caught Pacioretty’s attention were the modifications the league made to the divider partition glass, an obvious attempt to keep another Pacioretty-type collision from ever happening again.

“I noticed it the most at the Bell Centre,” he said. “The curved glass is a great idea. I don’t know why they didn’t do it sooner.”

If they had, his injuries likely would have been prevented. Of course, as the old adage goes, hindsight is 20-20. The alterations to the glass at arenas around the league were not the only steps taken by the NHL to address safety concerns. There’s a new sheriff in town laying down the law around the league in the form of Brendan Shanahan and he’s been busy, suspending nine different players throughout the preseason, most for headshots.

“It’s good to see, but, at the same time, every hit seems to be in a grey area,” Pacioretty said. “Guys are going to have to learn what they can and cannot do.”

Chara was not suspended nor fined for the hit after the league’s disciplinarians decided that Pacioretty was the victim of bad luck. The
Price was right, critics wrong

By MIKE ZEISBERGER

COLLINGWOOD, ONT. - Some 365 days ago, on the eve of the Montreal Canadiens 2010-11 season opener against the Maple Leafs, Habs management types were being ripped by fans and media alike for trading away the popular Jaroslav Halak in favour of the younger Carey Price.

Obviously hockey’s most storied franchise had shipped out the wrong goalie, critics such as yours truly claimed at the time.

Now, upon further review, Price needs to be told one thing.

We were all wrong.

Indeed, instead of melting down under the pressure of the Bell Centre boos and the blistering barbs from the press, Price turned in an outstanding season, posting 38 victories, eight shutouts and a fine 2.35 goals-against average. His Habs then stretched the eventual Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins to Game 7 on their first-round playoff series before a Nathan Horton overtime goal spoiled the party.

A year later, Price admits he feels much more comfortable this time around as the Canadiens once again get set to kick off their season versus Toronto at the Air Canada Centre.

“This year there are a lot less doubts,” Price admitted on Wednesday. “It’s certainly made things easier by not having to worry about that other stuff.”

By “other stuff,” Price was referring to the goalie controversy with Halak.

Of course, it wasn’t the first time Price has dealt with “other stuff” in his time in Montreal. There were wild off-ice rumours. There were suggestions that his glove hand had suddenly slowed down. And there was his infamous mockery of the home fans during the 2009 playoffs when he reacted to Bronx cheers at the Bell Centre by doing his best Patrick Roy imitation, waving his arms in the air.

Carey Price says he has grown up since then. And so does his coach.
Jacques Martin.

“I’ve been here for four years. That’s a long time for a 24 year old,” Price said. “Being in Montreal, it’s definitely felt longer.

“But it’s definitely helped me at the same time. You learn a lot more about life on and off the ice when you play in a hockey market. It’s helped my development.”

When Martin looks at Price, he sees a much more grown-up young man than he did a couple of years ago.

“Carey has really matured the past two years,” Martin said. “He was outstanding last year. And we expect him to continue to get better.”

Price, a native of B.C., admits watching the Bruins skating around Vancouver’s Rogers Arena hoisting the Stanley Cup back in June. Didn’t it bug him knowing how close his Habs had come to eliminating those same Bruins in the first round?

“Not really,” he said. “We didn’t win.”

A very mature outlook from a more mature Carey Price.

Montreal Sun LOADED: 10.06.2011
More beef in that Habs sandwich

By MIKE ZEISBERGER

COLLINGWOOD, ONT. - Known as The Smurfs in recent times, Montreal’s core of petite forwards have often caused Canadiens fans to ask: “Where’s the Beef?”

But coach Jacques Martin feels the Canadiens now have some muscle with their hustle up front, thanks to the summer free agent signing of Erik Cole, the return of Max Pacioretty and the addition of 6-foot-3 Blair Betts, who was claimed off waivers on Wednesday.

“We definitely think we are better in that area.” Martin said.

Playing on a line with Mike Cammalleri and Andrei Kostitsyn, Pacioretty knows what his role will be.

“I don’t have the skills of the other two guys, so I have to go to the net and use my size,” the 6-foot-2 winger said. “That’s the plan anyway.”

Montreal Sun LOADED: 10.06.2011
Subban aims to rub it in to Leafs fans

By MIKE ZEISBERGER

COLLINGWOOD, ONT. - Bring on the jeers, Toronto fans.

So says Montreal Canadiens defenceman P.K. Subban, the Etobicoke native who welcomes any negative reaction he receives during Thursday's season opener against the Leafs at the Air Canada Centre.

"Let them boo," Subban said. "Boo away. If they're booing me, that means I must be doing something good out there."

Being candid is nothing new for Subban. After being picked in the second round of the 2007 draft by the Habs, Subban vowed that, after he helped Montreal win the title one day, he would parade the Stanley Cup in front of all the Leaf fans in his Toronto neighbourhood.

Never a dull moment with this guy.

Montreal Sun LOADED: 10.06.2011
The Montreal Canadiens claimed Blair Betts, a solid faceoff man, off waivers Wednesday from the Philadelphia Flyers. Betts, 31, had five goals and seven assists in 75 games last season, his second with the Flyers.

The 6-foot-3, 210-pound Edmonton native has 41 goals and 37 assists in 477 career games with the Calgary Flames, New York Rangers and Flyers.
NHL preview: Montreal

By CHRIS STEVENSON

Tomas Plekanec remains one of the most underrated players in the NHL. (CHARLES WILLIAM PELLETIER/QMI Agency)

FANTASY POOL HERO: Tomas Plekanec
UNSUNG HERO: Josh Gorges
TOUGH GUY: Ryan White
SLEEPER: David Desharnais
ROOKIE TO WATCH: Alexei Yemelin
ON THE DECLINE: Jaroslav Spacek

You know the story with these Montreal Canadiens.

Small and fast up front, often too hurt on the blue line, great power play. Trouble scoring goals at even strength.

A team capable of surprising in the playoffs, having gone to the conference final two years ago and taking the Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins to overtime of the seventh game in the opening round last spring.

Maybe things change a bit for the better this season.

As far as being small up front, general manager Pierre Gauthier went out and signed power forward Erik Cole from the Carolina Hurricanes. He had 26 goals last season for the ‘Canes and was 10th among NHL forwards in hits. Along with Max Pacioretty, who was really coming into his own until that hit by Boston’s Zdeno Chara (11 goals in the 20 games previous to being injured March 8), the Canadiens might actually now have some legitimate size on their first two lines. Cole could line up with Tomas Plekanec and Mike Cammalleri, while Pacioretty worked well last season with captain Brian Gionta and Scott Gomez.

The Canadiens gave the Bruins all they could handle without Pacioretty and top defencemen Andrei Markov and Josh Gorges, the latter two since recovered from knee injuries. Goaltender Carey Price took a big step toward becoming an elite goaltender; now consistency is his challenge.

With the Cole signing and a clean bill of health for the key injured, this Canadiens team looks to be a little better than last year. But so are some other teams in the East, which means making the playoffs still isn’t a given.

FORWARDS

Scott Gomez. Seven goals. Really? Despite having a decent group of top six forwards, the performance of Gomez, with his $7.3-million cap hit a season, was and remains one of the big sore points for fans in Montreal and rightly so. Gomez said all the right things after last season, but it remains to be seen if he can raise his play or become an issue again this season. With the addition of some size in Cole and the apparent healthy return of Pacioretty from that hit by Chara last season, the Habs finally have a little bit of size up front to go with the skill of Gionta, Cammalleri and Plekanec (who remains one of the most underrated players in the NHL). There isn’t a superstar in this group, but they should score enough goals to make this a playoff team. The frustrating Andrei Kostitsyn, blessed with a legitimate power-forward skill set but loath to use it on a consistent basis, is in a contract year so he might just be motivated enough to bring it more often this season. He could challenge for a top-six forward spot or give the Habs a great threat on their third line.

DEFENCE

Answer: Andrei Markov. Question: Name the No. 1 defenceman the Montreal Canadiens need to stay healthy this season? After playing just seven games and missing the rest of the season with his second major knee injury, Markov’s status will go a long way toward determining the effectiveness of this group. The return of gritty Josh Gorges, who missed half the year with a knee problem, will be a boost, too, because he’s a positive presence in the dressing room. P.K. Subban emerged as a bona fide star last season and veteran Hal Gill, who keeps Subban in line, will be back for another season.

Yannick Weber, Jaroslav Spacek and rookie Alexei Yemelin round out a strong blue line - if it can stay healthy.

GOAL

Carey Price, after playoff hero Jaroslav Halak had been traded during the summer of 2010, started with a poor performance in his first pre-season game a year ago and told everybody to chill. He then got hot. Price posted a league-leading 38 wins last season while facing the second-most shots in the NHL (2,147). He was seventh in save percentage (.923), 10th in goals-against average (2.35) and third in shutouts with eight. He emerged as a solid No. 1 goaltender. The Canadiens will need nothing less than the same performance - or even better - from the 24-year-old if they are going to be a playoff team again this season. Peter Budaj was signed during the summer as Price’s backup, replacing Alex Auld. Budaj, 29, is coming off a less-than-medium year with the Colorado Avalanche, but should be a capable backup for the Habs. He won’t be called upon too often. Everyone knows now this is Price’s team.

COACHING, MANAGEMENT

Canadiens coach Jacques Martin is all about the process, as he repeatedly says in his daily meetings with the media. Martin has helped the Canadiens become a middle-of-the-pack team in the Eastern Conference as he enters his third year behind the bench. He has won four rounds in the playoffs in his two years as coach, which is a pretty decent showing for a guy who had a reputation for regular-season success but post-season underachieving (see Senators, Ottawa). Perry Pearn is back as his No. 1 assistant, but popular Kirk Muller has moved on to get some head coaching experience in the AHL.

He’s replaced by Randy Cunneyworth, who was immensely respected by his teammates when he was a player and graduates from the AHL where he was the coach of the Habs farm club in Hamilton. Martin’s message seems to be still finding an audience.

INTANGIBLES

Price and Subban took huge steps forward last season toward becoming legitimate stars. In Montreal, where the spotlight is white hot and the city has a tendency to devour its hockey young, it will be interesting to see if they can continue to improve. In Price’s case, he seemed to find a new maturity and sang froide that helped him. Subban seems to feed off the energy in Montreal and doesn’t seem to be bothered by the criticism directed at him by opponents, whom he drives crazy with his self-assured attitude and sometimes over-the-top goal celebrations.

It has been a while since the Habs had some bona fide young stars who can handle playing in hockey’s Mecca. The Habs can’t afford to have either of their young stars backslide.

Montreal Sun LOADED: 10.06.2011
Winning division title won't be an easy feat

In early September, several Predators trickled onto the ice at Centennial Sportsplex for informal practices.

Some were veterans, some were rookies, but most had some ties to the organization from the previous season except one: forward Niclas Bergfors.

"I only knew a couple of the guys, so you want to get into it," Bergfors said. "It's never something that's bad, to return early."

Bergfors, 24, is the only unrestricted free agent the Predators signed to a one-year contract during the offseason. A former first-round pick, he is considered a low-risk but high-reward player who can provide some offensive punch.

Two seasons ago he scored 21 goals with the Devils and Thrashers, but then dropped off to 12 with the Thrashers and Panthers last season.

"Last year I had some ups and downs and I learned a lot from it. It feels like I can do that better," the affable Bergfors said. "I've been working out during the summer. I just want to show I can be a more consistent two-way player."

Last offseason, the Predators took a similar "gamble" with Sergei Kostitsyn, acquiring the forward in an offseason trade for free-agent-to-be goaltender Dan Ellis.

The Predators weren't going to re-sign Ellis anyway, and they figured Kostitsyn could help the offense at minimal cost. He led the team in goals and finished tied for the lead in points.

Bergfors will make $575,000 this season.

"Our style requires a lot more skating," Coach Barry Trotz said. "I think that has been an adjustment for him, just as it was for Sergei. But he has a good release, he knows how to play the game."

Ekholm's option: Defenseman Mattias Ekholm still has the option to return to play in his native Sweden, but he said he wouldn't think about it as long as he remains on Nashville's roster.

"We have discussed it a little bit, but we haven't come to any decision yet — but it's the same," Ekholm said. "I can go back if I want to and I can go to Milwaukee if I want to. I don't want to think about it when I'm up here."

Ekholm made the team out of training camp, but the Predators have said they may adjust their roster after this weekend's games at Columbus and St. Louis.

The Predators selected Ekholm in the fourth round of the 2009 draft.

Injuries: Defenseman Francis Bouillon (concussion) could return to the Predators in a couple of weeks.

Trotz said Bouillon will make the first road trip but won't play.

"The plan right now, if everything is tracking upward, is that Frankie will continue to practice with us next week and then by the end of the week hopefully be close to be in condition to play some minutes and get into a game or two," Trotz said.

Forward Mike Fisher (shoulder) will also make the trip, but won't play.

Nice text: There was no fanfare when forward Blake Geoffrion found out he'd made the opening-night roster. A friend informed him by text.

The Brentwood resident started last season, his first as a pro, with the Milwaukee Admirals of the American Hockey League.

"It's pretty cool to be on an opening night roster. But I'm not content with that," Geoffrion said. "That's one baby step here and I have to keep working hard and coming to the rink every day."

Tennessean LOADED: 10.06.2011
Offense will determine success for Predators

Here we are on the cusp of the 2011-12 season with the same question that has dogged the Nashville Predators almost their entire franchise history: Can they score enough goals?

The answer is probably once again yes and no.

Yes, in the sense that the Predators can score enough to win games. No, in that it probably won’t be enough to keep pace with the elite goal-scoring teams in the NHL.

Last season, the Predators were the third-best defensive team in the league behind Vancouver and Boston — the 2011 Stanley Cup finalists. Vancouver was also the NHL’s top offensive team, Boston the fifth-best.

Of course, there’s also an unknown quantity here. Nashville’s forwards are young and mostly unproven. According to General Manager David Poile, however, they are high on potential.

Defense and goaltending have fewer queries, but that’s pretty much the norm for the Predators.

Here’s a breakdown by position:

Forward: Skilled, fast, but unproven. That’s the way to look at the group of forwards.

During the offseason, many questioned the wisdom in not re-signing unrestricted free agents Joel Ward, Steve Sullivan and Marcel Goc. But it was clear throughout the preseason that the Predators are going with a speed movement along with a youth movement.

Though the three players the Predators let go were all effective, they weren’t as fast as their projected replacements — younger players including Colin Wilson, Craig Smith, Nick Spaling, Blake Geoffrion and Matt Halischuk.

Stalwarts Martin Erat, Sergei Kostitsyn and Patric Hornqvist are back, but the highest returning scorers from a year ago are Erat and Kostitsyn. Both netted 50 points, the lowest total for a leading scorer for any playoff team.

Defense: This should be the team’s strength. Expect Ryan Suter and Shea Weber to log more minutes this season. As usual they will be the shutdown pair.

The Predators also expect 2007 first-round pick Jonathon Blum to take a major step forward as a No. 3 or No. 4 defenseman.

But after those three and Kevin Klein, Nashville’s defense gets a little dicey.

The Predators decided to go with seven defensemen to start the season and kept Jack Hillen, Teemu Laakso and Mattias Ekholm on the roster. Hillen is the most proven of the three, with 175 NHL games. Laakso has played eight total NHL contests and Ekholm none.

Ryan Ellis, a 2009 first-round pick, and Roman Josi will provide depth in Milwaukee as the first two defensemen called up.

Goaltending: The Predators have last season’s Vezina Trophy runner-up in Pekka Rinne, who finished with a 2.12 goals against average and .930 save percentage. He was arguably team’s most valuable player in 2010-11.

Rinne was so prolific in the postseason, that fans in Vancouver made a Twitter hashtag called #thingsinrinnesglove.

When Rinne missed time with knee injuries last season, rookie Anders Lindback stepped in and finished with an 11-5-2 record, 2.60 goals against average and .915 save percentage.

Tennessean LOADED: 10.06.2011
Winning division title won’t be an easy feat

Offense will determine success for Predators

Predators expect Bergfors to provide offense a spark

The old adage is that every team improves in the offseason. True or not, at least this season that description has meaning for almost every team in the Central Division.

Whether you were the Columbus Blue Jackets (sensing urgency to complement your All-Star wing with a real center for the first time in his career) or the Chicago Blackhawks (hoping to reacquire that veteran-type presence which led you to a Stanley Cup in 2010) teams for the most part got better.

The Nashville Predators have never won the Central Division. They came close in 2006-07, finishing three points behind Detroit, and gave the Red Wings a run last season.

This season, the Predators face a tougher-than-usual road to a division crown.

Here’s a quick look at each team, listed with last season’s points:

Detroit Red Wings (104). The Gold Standard and rock of the division, the Red Wings were their typically dominant selves last season, finishing with 104 points and winning the Central.

But you always wonder when age will catch up with the Wings. This could be the year it happens. Center Pavel Datsyuk is 33, winger Henrik Zetterberg will turn 31 on Oct. 9, and Nicklas Lidstrom is 41.

Detroit did not make any major offseason acquisitions — unless you count Ian White or Mike Commodore.

The Red Wings are like the New York Yankees of hockey. People wonder when age will catch up, but they just keep winning.

Reports of their demise are always greatly exaggerated.

Nashville Predators (99): The Predators were the only team in the Central Division besides the Red Wings not to make any major roster upgrades. But General Manager David Poile believes the “Predator Way” of promoting younger players will lead to a successful season.

History indicates Poile is right. Nashville made the playoffs six of the last seven seasons.

Back is the superstar Big 3 of defensemen Shea Weber and Ryan Suter and goaltender Pekka Rinne. The two leading scorers from last season — Sergei Kostitsyn and Martin Erat — also return.

Gone, however, are a bevy of forwards who played on the top two lines, such as Steve Sullivan, Joel Ward and Marcel Goc.

Nashville will look to young forwards Blake Geoffrion, Craig Smith, Colin Wilson and Nick Spaling to help fill those voids.

Chicago Blackhawks (97): Whenever your team has Patrick Kane, Patrick Sharp, Jonathan Toews, Duncan Keith, Brent Seabrook and Marian Hossa, you’re going to be competitive.

Last season, the Blackhawks had a bit of a Stanley Cup hangover and snuck into the playoffs on the final day of the regular season.

In order to infuse a little more hunger, the Blackhawks added grit. Andrew Brunette is a tested veteran looking for one last shot at glory. Dan Carcillo and Jamal Mayers are hard-nosed players who should help the toughness quotient.

Goaltender Corey Crawford is also a year older and a year wiser from his rookie campaign.

The Blackhawks are deep and should go back to their 2009-10 ways again.

St. Louis Blues (87): Every year we wonder when the Blues’ young players will break out. It will really be this year.

Last season, St. Louis was one of the top teams in the NHL before it lost several top players to injury. While David Perron (concussion) sounds like he won’t be ready for the start of the regular season, the Blues have a deep stable of forwards that got stronger this summer when they signed Jason Arnott and Jamie Langenbrunner.

Also, David Backes’ presence as team captain should help the atmosphere in the locker room.

For real this time, St. Louis will be a sleeper team.

Columbus Blue Jackets (81): Rick Nash finally has his center. During the offseason, the Blue Jackets acquired former 46-goal scorer Jeff Carter to be Nash’s pivot. Columbus also picked up former Islanders defenseman James Wisniewski.

Still, the Blue Jackets have many questions — namely in goal, where starter Steve Mason is coming off a season where he had a 3.03 goals against average and .901 save percentage. Former Predator Mark Dekanich, who has played 50 minutes of NHL hockey, is Mason’s backup.

There is also a culture of losing that needs to be broken. The Blue Jackets have made the playoffs once in their existence.

Tennessean LOADED: 10.06.2011
Preds' Big Three eye stellar 2011-12 campaign before possibly going separate ways

In the fantasy hockey world, the Nashville Predators are the real thing.

None other than NHL.com, the National Hockey League’s website, rates Nashville defenseman Shea Weber and goalie Pekka Rinne the No. 1 fantasy players at their respective positions for the 2011-12 season, which opens this week. Nashville begins play with a pair of road games Friday and Saturday and plays at home for the first time on Oct. 13.

The fantasy rankings are not so much an assessment of overall ability. Instead, they are a mix of talent and value to a team, and those two players — along with Weber’s defense partner, Ryan Suter — arguably are as valuable as anyone else anywhere in the game at this time.

The question will be raised after the season, though: What are they worth?

That is the reality that awaits Nashville and its fan base.

None of those three are signed beyond the current season. Rinne and Suter are headed for unrestricted free agency. Weber is set for a second straight summer as a restricted free agent, but this time he is free to accept an offer sheet from another team.

It is no secret that management wants to sign all of them to new, long-term contracts, yet given the team’s uneven financial history and its limited ability (relative to many others) to generate additional revenue, the opportunity to get them all back beyond this season might be … well, a fantasy.

“I think it’s something we’re going to deal with every day of the year … and we just have to deal with it the best we can,” general manager David Poile said. “I’ve talked to all the players. I’ve talked to all their agents. We’re going to do the best we can to get the contracts done at some point.

“It’s equally important right now to not have it be a distraction.”

One of the most widely held theories in the sport is that a team is best built from the back to the front — defense first, offense second.

Beginning with the 2003 draft, the Predators remained focused in that regard for an extended period of time. That year, they selected Suter in the first round (seventh overall) and got Weber in the second. The following year they picked up Rinne with an eighth-round selection.

None of the three is older than 28. If age were the only factor, therefore, there would be no end in sight for their partnership.

There are, of course, other issues. Most professional athletes look at unrestricted free agency as a career milestone, not to mention a chance to sign a once-in-a-lifetime contract. To forgo that by re-signing with their current team — in the minds of many — would be a failure to take full advantage of the system as it exists.

Weber already is one of the best defensemen in the league, as evidenced by his runner-up finish (he lost to Detroit’s Nicklas Lidstrom by nine votes) for the 2011 Norris Trophy and his status as a first-team NHL All-Star.

However, he played his best hockey last season when Suter was his partner. In the 12 games Suter missed (a career-high), Weber’s production dipped noticeably.

Rinne, like Weber, was an awards finalist last season. He lost out to Boston’s Tim Thomas for the Vezina Trophy.

“I think it just builds your confidence and your own expectations. They rise a little bit to a higher level,” Rinne said. “You have your goals and dreams. Just to see those guys who are on the top and try to get there and try to see what they do and why they are the best players in the league, that was great.”

That sort of production and recognition also increases a player’s value.

There are seven goalies scheduled to make $6 million or more this season, topped by Ilya Bryzgalov, who will earn $10 million in the first year of a new deal with Philadelphia. Rinne will earn $4 million, the highest salary of his career to date.

An independent arbitrator awarded Weber a one-year, $7.5 million package this offseason. Three others will make more, led by Christian Ehrhoff, who will make $10 million in the first year of a 10-year pact with Buffalo.

“I know it’s a cliché, but you still have to perform on the ice,” Rinne said. “It doesn’t matter how last year went. Now it’s a new season. My only goal is to play well on the ice. After that, the contract is going to take care of itself. That’s for sure.”

From the beginning, the Predators have been viewed as a team short on talent but long on heart that more often than not exceeds the expectations of most.

In 2011-12, they have bona fide top-end talent, players any real-life general manager probably would like to have on his team.

“It doesn’t really matter what the opposition thinks of you, it’s how good you think you’re going to be,” Poile said. “… We’re happy with where we are. We think everybody on our team this year can improve and get better. They’ve not reached their peak, if you will.”

At the same time, Suter, Weber and Rinne also have not maximized their earning potential. Once they do, it’s possible the only way they’ll be on the same team is if it’s in fantasy hockey.

Nashville City Paper LOADED: 10.06.2011
Alex Ovechkin, Capitals go all in for Stanley Cup

Ted Kulfan/ The Detroit News

Is it finally time for Alex Ovechkin and the Washington Capitals?

After four consecutive seasons of bitter and unexpected playoff disappointments, the Capitals don't have any excuses.

Management eliminated whatever holes were seemingly left in the lineup by adding veteran, character players such as defenseman Roman Hamrlik, forwards Joel Ward and Troy Brouwer, and an elite goaltender in Tomas Vokoun.

The Capitals are all in. Stanley Cup title or bust.

"I sure liked what they did over the summer," NBC announcer Mike Emrick said of the Capitals' offseason plan.

Few coaches in the NHL have the pressure Capitals coach Bruce Boudreau has this season. Another early playoff exit doesn't bode well for Boudreau's job security.

"Well constructed," said Pierre McGuire, Versus/NBC analyst, of the Capitals personnel additions. "They've done everything they can to take away any excuses."

"It is time for Washington to take that next step," said Ed Olczyk, NBC/Versus analyst.

The usual suspects, such as the Red Wings, defending Stanley Cup champion Boston, Chicago, San Jose and Pittsburgh are among the Cup favorites again. Young and rising teams such as Los Angeles and Buffalo are trendy picks to make long playoff runs.

Teams on the rise

Los Angeles: Few teams are better or deeper up the middle after the acquisition of Mike Richards. The young core of this team is second to none.

Buffalo: Expectations are high after new ownership spent a considerable amount of money, bringing in big-name free agents.

Winnipeg: Don't be surprised if the Jets (formerly the Atlanta Thrashers) get an emotional boost moving to a city where hockey actually matters. Plus, this is a good, young team.

Teams on the decline

New Jersey: The Devils aren't as bad as they were in the first half last season, or as good as the second half. They're closer to the bad.

Calgary: Age is beginning to creep onto this roster, and the defensive depth the Flames had has disappeared.

Dallas: Once one of the best organizations in the league, the Stars are going through ownership problems and the disarray is extending onto the ice.

Ted Kulfan's winners

Hart Trophy (MVP): Alex Ovechkin, Washington - If the Capitals are to win the Stanley Cup, Ovechkin has to be the one who leads them. The thought here is that Ovechkin will embrace the role, with the most talented teammates he's had. Other candidates: Steven Stamkos, Tampa Bay; Jonathan Toews, Chicago.

Norris Trophy (defenseman): Shea Weber, Nashville - What better way to head into unrestricted free agency then being proclaimed the best defenseman in the league? Other candidates: Nicklas Lidstrom, Detroit; Mike Green, Washington.

Selke Trophy (defensive forward): Mike Richards, Los Angeles - Being traded by Philadelphia will prove to be a little extra motivation for one of the elite two-way players in the game. Other candidates: Pavel Datsyuk, Detroit; Ryan Kesler, Vancouver.
Team-by-team breakdown

Staff

SOUTHEAST DIVISION
WASHINGTON CAPITALS
- LAST YEAR: 48-23-11, 107 points (top east seed, swept by Lightning in semis).
- WHO'S IN: G Tomas Vokoun, LW Chris Bourque, D Roman Hamrlik, RW Joel Ward.
- WHO'S OUT: RW Matt Bradley (Florida), C Jason Arnott, RW Eric Fehr, LW Marco Sturm, G Semyon Varlamov.
- THE PREDICTION: With Vokoun in net, the Capitals won't have to use up all that energy playing defense and can go back to their high-flying ways. Washington wins the division and works its way to the Stanley Cup Finals.
- WHERE THEY LAND: First in Eastern, conference champions.

Tampa Bay Lightning
LAST YEAR: 46-25-11, 103 (lost to Bruins in east finals).
- WHO'S IN: G Mathieu Garon, LW Alexandre Picard, C Tom Pyatt, C Trevor Smith.
- WHO'S OUT: LW Sean Bergenheim (Florida), LW Simon Gagne, G Mike Smith, D Matt Smaby, D Randy Jones.
- THE PREDICTION: The Lightning broke out during its first year under GM Steve Yzerman and coach Guy Boucher, challenging Washington for the division while coming just a goal from the Finals. Tampa Bay is going to be good for some time.
- WHERE THEY LAND: Second in division, fifth in east.

CAROLINA HURRICANES
LAST YEAR: 40-31-11, 91 (missed playoffs by two points).
- WHO'S IN: D Tomas Kaberle, C Tim Brent, LW Anthony Stewart, LW Alexei Ponikarovsky.
- THE PREDICTION: Carolina needed just a win over Tampa Bay in the final game of the season to make the playoffs and was embarrassed. The Hurricanes will find themselves in a similar predicament this year. It's going to be tough.
- WHERE THEY LAND: Third in division, ninth in east.

FLORIDA PANTHERS
LAST YEAR: 30-40-12, 72 (finished last in east for first time in history).
- WHO'S IN: D Brian Campbell, G Jose Theodore, LW Tomas Fleischmann, D Ed Jovanovski, RW Kris Versteeg
- THE PREDICTION: The Panthers have gone an NHL-record 10 seasons without making the playoffs. But most of these guys had nothing to do with it. Still, the Panthers have questions in net and just aren't there yet. Close? Yes. Better? You bet. Worse? Impossible.
- WHERE THEY LAND: Fourth in division, 11th in east.

WINNIPEG JETS
LAST YEAR: 34-36-12 (fourth place last season as Atlanta Thrashers).
- WHO'S IN: RW Eric Fehr, C Mark Scheifele, D Randy Jones, LW Kenndal McArthur (Florida).
- WHO'S OUT: City of Atlanta, RW Radek Dvorak, RW Anthony Stewart, LW Enc Boulton
- THE PREDICTION: The NHL’s return to Winnipeg will be met with sold-out crowds for each of the 41 home dates. Travel will be a concern, however, as the former Thrashers struggle in their final year in the Southeast Division. This is a good young team, however, and they will be in every game.
- WHERE THEY LAND: Fifth in division, 13th in east.

NORTHEAST DIVISION

BOSTON BRUINS
LAST YEAR: 46-25-11, 103 (division champ, Stanley Cup champ).
- WHO'S IN: LW Benoit Pouliot, D Joe Corvo.
- WHO'S OUT: RW Mark Recchi, C Michael Ryder, D Tomas Kaberle.
- THE PREDICTION: The Bruins proved themselves playoff worthy after the 2010 collapse in Philadelphia. Boston played one tough playoff series after another, and once the parties were over, didn't lose much from what is a strong team.
- WHERE THEY LAND: Division champs, second in east

BUFFALO SABRES
LAST YEAR: 43-29-10, 96 (lost to Flyers in opening round).
- WHO'S IN: D Christian Ehrhoff, RW Ville Leino, D Robyn Regehr.
- WHO'S OUT: D Tim Conboy, C Tim Connolly, D Steve Montador, RW Mark Parrish.
- THE PREDICTION: The Sabres have a new (billionaire) owner in Terry Pegula, a Buffalo fan who is passionate about the team and willing to spend for it as evidenced by opening up the checkbook for Ehrhoff and Regehr. If Boston is hung over, Buffalo could win the division.
- WHERE THEY LAND: Second in division, sixth in east

MONTREAL CANADIENS
LAST YEAR: 44-30-8, 96 (lost to Bruins in opening round).
- WHO'S IN: G Peter Budaj, D Chris Campoli, RW Erik Cole.
- THE PREDICTION: Coach Jacques Martin's team didn't change very much from last season, although the addition of Cole gives the Habs a quality forward. Montreal will be in contention for one of the final playoff spots - and find a way to slip in as usual.
- WHERE THEY LAND: Third in division, seventh in east

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS
LAST YEAR: 37-34-11, 85 (out of the playoffs).
- WHO'S OUT: D Tim Brent, G Jean-Sebastien Giguere, C Christian Hanson, D Brett Lebda.
- THE PREDICTION: The Leafs are one of two teams to not make the playoffs since the 2004-05 lockout - you know the other, Panthers fans. The Leafs are better, but like the Panthers, won't make it this year.
- WHERE THEY LAND: Fourth in division, 10th in east.

OTTAWA SENATORS
LAST YEAR: 32-40-10, 74 (out of the playoffs).
- WHO'S IN: G Craig Anderson, G Alex Auld, D Tim Conboy, LW Nikita Filatov, RW Mark Parrish
- THE PREDICTION: General manager Bryan Murray shook things up last year in a bid to save his job. The fast finish after Murray got Anderson for
basically nothing helped the former Panthers GM get a contract extension. This is still a team in rebuilding mode.

- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Fifth in division, 14th in east.

### ATLANTIC DIVISION

#### PHILADELPHIA FLYERS

- **LAST YEAR:** 47-23-12, 106 (division champs, lost to Bruins in east semis).
- **WHO’S IN:** RW Jaromir Jagr, RW Wayne Simmonds, C Brayden Schenn, RW Maxime Talbot, G Ilya Bryzgalov, D Andreas Lilja.
- **WHO’S OUT:** C Jeff Carter, LW Dan Carcillo, C Mike Richards, LW Ville Leino, RW Kris Versteeg (Florida), D Danny Syvret.
- **THE PREDICTION:** Despite all the changes - Richards and Carter were blockbuster deals for GM Paul Holgren - the Flyers are still one of the elite teams in the east. Adding a solid goalie in Bryzgalov answers a nagging question on Broad Street.
- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Division champs, third in east.

#### PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

- **LAST YEAR:** 49-25-8, 106 (fourth in east, bumped by Tampa in opening round).
- **WHO’S IN:** LW Steve MacIntyre, LW Steve Sullivan.
- **WHO’S OUT:** RW Eric Godard, RW Alex Kovalev, RW Maxime Talbot.
- **THE PREDICTION:** With the health of star Sidney Crosby in doubt as the season begins, the Penguins fly under the radar among the elite. The Pens will be back - and challenge Philly for the division title.
- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Second in division, fourth in east.

#### NEW YORK RANGERS

- **LAST YEAR:** 44-33-5, 93 (slipped into playoffs, beat by Caps in opening round).
- **WHO’S IN:** C Brad Richards, LW Michael Rupp, D Tim Erixon.
- **WHO’S OUT:** C Chris Drury, LW Sean Avery, D Matt Gilroy, LW Vaclav Prospal.
- **THE PREDICTION:** The Rangers pulled off the July 1 coup by signing Richards to a big-money deal, but there are still plenty of holes above Penn Station. Richards will help, and as long as goalie Henrik Lundqvist stays healthy, the Blue Shirts will be in contention for a playoff spot.
- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Third in division, eighth in east.

#### NEW JERSEY DEVILS

- **LAST YEAR:** 38-39-5, 81 (out of the playoffs).
- **WHO’S IN:** LW Eric Boulton, RW Cam Janssen, D Adam Larsson.
- **WHO’S OUT:** C David McIntyre, RW Brian Rolston, D Colin White.
- **THE PREDICTION:** The Devils don’t like change unless it’s behind the bench. Former Panthers coach Pete DeBoer becomes the ninth coach (counting two turns each by GM Lou Lamoriello and Jacques Lemaire) since 2003.
- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Fourth in division, 12th in east.

#### NEW YORK ISLANDERS

- **LAST YEAR:** 30-39-13, 73 (out of the playoffs).
- **WHO’S IN:** C Marty Reasoner (Florida), LW Brian Rolston.
- **WHO’S OUT:** C Doug Weight, D Bruno Gervais, C Zenon Konopka, D Radek Martinek, RW Trent Hunter.
- **THE PREDICTION:** Michael Grabner had a big season last year after being waived by the Panthers, scoring 34 goals and helping the Islanders to a decent finish. This is a talented young group that is still growing.
- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Fifth in division, 15th in east.

#### CENTRAL DIVISION

**DETROIT RED WINGS**

- **LAST YEAR:** 47-25-10, 104 (division champs, lost to San Jose in semifinals).
- **WHO’S IN:** G Ty Conklin, D Ian White, D Mike Commodore.
- **WHO’S OUT:** C Mike Modano, D Ruslan Salei, C Kris Draper, G Chris Osgood, D Brian Rafalski.
- **THE PREDICTION:** The Wings keep chugging away, and instead of tearing things down and starting over, Detroit just adds a few pieces. Detroit will make the playoffs for an astounding 21st consecutive season and could make some noise in the postseason.
- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Division champs, third in west.

#### NASHVILLE PREDATORS

- **LAST YEAR:** 44-27-11, 99 (won first playoff series ever, lost to Canucks in semis).
- **WHO’S IN:** RW Niclas Bergfors (Florida), C Craig Smith, D Ryan Ellis, D Jack Hillen.
- **WHO’S OUT:** C Marcel Goc (Florida), D Cody Franson, D Aaron Johnson, C Matthew Lombardi, LW Steve Sullivan.
- **THE PREDICTION:** The Predators are not going to change who they are. Coach Barry Trotz is a defensive-minded coach, and his approach has worked in Nashville. An infusion of young talent keeps the Preds going in the right direction.
- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Second in division, fifth in west.

#### CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

- **LAST YEAR:** 44-29-9, 97 (knocked out by Canucks in thrilling opening round).
- **WHO’S IN:** LW Rostislav Olesz (Florida), D Steve Montador, RW Jamal Meyers, LW Andrew Brunette, LW Dan Carcillo.
- **WHO’S OUT:** C Brian Campbell (Florida), LW Tomas Kopecky (Florida), G Marty Turco, D Chris Campoli.
- **THE PREDICTION:** Goalie Corey Crawford had a tremendous rookie season in which he picked up 33 wins for the Hawks. He will need to keep that going this year as the Hawks have championship aspirations. If the offense is there, Chicago could go very far.
- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Third in division, seventh in west.

#### ST. LOUIS BLUES

- **LAST YEAR:** 38-33-11, 87 (out of playoffs).
- **WHO’S IN:** RW Jonathan Cheechoo, C Jason Arnott, RW Jamie Langenbrunner, C Scott Nichol.
- **WHO’S OUT:** D Tyson Strachan (Florida), G Ty Conklin, D Dean Arsene, RW Cam Janssen.
- **THE PREDICTION:** After the past few seasons, it’s obvious the Blues can play when healthy. But that’s always the problem. St. Louis went after some leadership in Arnott and Langenbrunner. Welcome back to the playoffs.
- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Fourth in division, eighth in west.

#### COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

- **LAST YEAR:** 34-35-13, 81 (out of the playoffs).
- **WHO’S IN:** C Jeff Carter, D James Wisniewski, LW Vinny Prospal, D Radek Martinek.
- **WHO’S OUT:** RW Scottie Upshall (Florida), LW Nikita Filatov, RW Jakub Voracek, G Martin Gabor.
- **THE PREDICTION:** The Blue Jackets swung a huge deal to get star Rick Nash someone to play with in Jeff Carter. Then, Columbus went after Wisniewski. What’s going on in Buckeye Land? The Jackets are improved and still have some good talent waiting.
- **WHERE THEY LAND:** Fifth in division, 12th in west.

#### PACIFIC DIVISION
SAN JOSE SHARKS

• LAST YEAR: 48-25-9, 105 (division champs, lost to Canucks in west finals).
• WHO’S IN: C Michael Handzus, D Brent Burns, RW Martin Havlat, D Jim Vandermeer.
• THE PREDICTION: Despite their regular-season success, the Sharks are trying to make it to the Finals. By acquiring Burns and Havlat, San Jose thinks they have improved. They have. The Sharks are going deep in the playoffs.
• WHERE THEY LAND: Division champs, second in west.

LOS ANGELES KINGS

• LAST YEAR: 46-30-6, 98 (seventh seed, lost to Sharks in opening round).
• WHO’S IN: C Mike Richards, LW Simon Gagne, C Colin Fraser.
• WHO’S OUT: LW Ryan Smyth, RW Wayne Simmonds, C Brayden Schenn, LW Alexei Ponikarovsky, C Michal Handzus.
• THE PREDICTION: The time for waiting for Los Angeles to fulfill its potential ends now. By going after Richards and Gagne, Dean Lombardi turned the Kings into true contenders. Lord Stanley’s Cup meets Hollywood for the first time.
• WHERE THEY LAND: Second in division, fourth in west.

ANAHEIM DUCKS

• LAST YEAR: 47-30-5, 99 (fourth seed, loss to Preds in first round).
• WHO’S IN: C Andrew Cogliano.
• WHO’S OUT: D Andreas Lilja, C Todd Marchant.
• THE PREDICTION: The Ducks didn’t do much in the offseason because they didn’t need to. With three of the top forwards in the west (Bobby Ryan, Ryan Getzlaf and Corey Perry), the Mighty Ducks are going to score. Questions reside in goal, however.
• WHERE THEY LAND: Third in division, sixth in west.

DALLAS STARS

• LAST YEAR: 42-29-11, 95 (out of playoffs).
• WHO’S IN: RW Radek Dvorak, RW Michael Ryder, LW Vernon Fiddler, RW Eric Godard, D Sheldon Souray.
• WHO’S OUT: C Brad Richards, RW Jamie Langenbrunner, RW Jason Williams.
• THE PREDICTION: General manager Joe Nieuwendyk is doing a good job in Dallas despite ownership issues that continue to drag the organization down. The Stars lost Richards for nothing but brought in some nice pieces. If Dallas stays healthy, it will compete for one of the last spots.
• WHERE THEY LAND: Fourth in division, 11th in west.

PHOENIX COYOTES

• LAST YEAR: 43-26-13, 99 (lost in first round).
• WHO’S IN: F Daymond Langkow, LW Raffi Torres, G Mike Smith.
WHO’S OUT: G Ilya Bryzgalov, LW Vernon Fiddler, D Ed Jovanovski (Florida), D Nolan Yonkman (Florida/AHL).
• THE PREDICTION: The Coyotes have been a great story the past two years as they made the playoffs despite relocation talks. Even though Dave Tippett is one of the top bench bosses in the game, the loss of Bryzgalov - and more moving talk - will be tough to overcome.
• WHERE THEY LAND: Fifth in division, 14th in west.

NORTHWEST DIVISION

VANCOUVER CANUCKS

• LAST YEAR: 54-19-9, 117 (President's Trophy, loss in Cup Finals).
• WHO’S IN: LW Marco Sturm, LW Andrew Ebbett.
• WHO’S OUT: D Christian Ehrhoff, LW Raffi Torres, LW Jeff Tambellini, LW Tanner Glass.
• THE PREDICTION: The Canucks are ready to put last summer's Cup Finals loss behind them. Will Vancouver crash again? Yes. This time in the semifinals.
• WHERE THEY LAND: Division champs, first in west.

CALGARY FLAMES

• LAST YEAR: 41-29-12, 94 (out of playoffs).
• WHO’S IN: D Chris Butler
• WHO’S OUT: C Daymond Langkow, D Robyn Regehr.
• THE PREDICTION: Calgary’s strong second half have some believing the Flames are ready to challenge again. Problem is, Calgary isn’t very deep and a few key injuries will derail this train. Trading Regehr might come back to haunt new GM Jay Feaster.
• WHERE THEY LAND: Second in division, ninth in west.

COLORADO AVALANCHE

• LAST YEAR: 30-44-8, 68 (horrific season in Denver led to changes).
• WHO’S IN: LW Gabriel Landeskog, RW Joakim Lindstrom, RW Chuck Kobasew, D Jan Hejda, G Jean-Sebastien Giguere, G Semyon Varlamov.
• WHO’S OUT: G Peter Budaj, D Adam Foote, LW Tomas Fleischmann (Florida), D John-Michael Liles.
• THE PREDICTION: The Avs will be better in net after signing Giguere and trading for Varlamov. Colorado has had two poor seasons in its past three and an admittedly spoiled fan base is getting restless.
• WHERE THEY LAND: Third in division, 10th in west.

MINNESOTA WILD

• LAST YEAR: 39-35-8, 86 (out of playoffs).
• WHO’S IN: RW Dany Heatley, D Mike Lundin, RW Devin Setoguchi.
• WHO’S OUT: G Jose Theodore (Florida), D Brent Burns, D Cam Barker, LW Andrew Brunette, RW Martin Havlat, RW Chuck Kobasew.
• THE PREDICTION: GM Chuck Fletcher cleaned house during the offseason. Not only does the Wild have a new coach - and a new aggressive style - but a few new players. Wild is better, but still golfer early.
• WHERE THEY LAND: Fourth in division, 13th in west.

EDMONTON OILERS

• LAST YEAR: 25-45-12, 62 (out of playoffs).
• WHO’S OUT: D Sheldon Souray, D Kurtis Foster, D Jim Vandermeer, C Andrew Cogliano, LW Steve McIntyre.
• THE PREDICTION: The Oilers have a ton of young talent. No doubt there’s a light at the end of this tunnel, but it’s still a ways away.
• WHERE THEY LAND: Fifth in division, 15th in west.

Miami Herald LOADED: 10.06.2011
NHL preview: Sharks are team to beat in Western Conference
San Jose, Vancouver and Chicago will be strong in 2011-12.

By Helene Elliott

1. San Jose
First in the Pacific division, second in the West.
Brent Burns is the puck-moving defenseman they wanted to complement a corps of talented forwards. Logan Couture (32 goals, 56 points as a rookie) looks like the real deal.

2. Vancouver
2010-11 finish: 54-19-9 (117 points).
First in the Northwest, first in the West.
Prospect Cody Hodgson will replace Ryan Kesler, out until late October (hip surgery). They hope to build a tenacious fourth line around Maxim Lapierre. Goalie Roberto Luongo must rebound from erratic playoff performances.

3. Chicago
2010-11 finish: 44-29-9 (97 points).
Third in the Central, eighth in the West.
The Blackhawks’ porous defense contributed to their post-Cup stumbles last season. They should be tougher after adding Sean O’Donnell and Daniel Carcillo and score more thanks to winger Andrew Brunette.

4. Kings
2010-11 finish: 46-30-6 (98 points).
Fourth in the Pacific, seventh in the West.
Acquiring Mike Richards from Philadelphia made them imposing up the middle. Left wing Dustin Penner, in the final year of his contract, has motivation to be productive. Goalties Jonathan Quick and Jonathan Bernier will push each other. A decent power play would enable them to do some damage.

5. Detroit
2010-11 finish: 47-25-10 (104 points).
First in the Central, third in the West.
Core forwards Henrik Zetterberg (24 goals, 80 points), Pavel Datsyuk and Johan Franzen seem immune to age, as do defensemen Nicklas Lidstrom and Niklas Kronwall. Jimmy Howard’s goaltending is only adequate but that should be good enough.

6. Nashville
Second in the Central, fifth in the West.
Goaltender Pekka Rinne’s 2.12 goals-against average and .930 save percentage lifted them to fifth in the West and they beat the Ducks to win their first playoff series. They’re blessed on defense with Norris Trophy finalist Shea Weber, Ryan Suter and Jonathon Blum. Keeping them all will be a problem.

7. Ducks
Second in the Pacific, fourth in the West.
They can be dangerous if goalie Jonas Hiller avoids a recurrence of the vertigo symptoms that troubled last season and if Corey Perry can duplicate his 98-point MVP performance. Teemu Selanne (31 goals, 80 points in 73 games) remains a wonder. Their defense is still patchy and their bottom six forwards must have more impact.

8. St. Louis
2010-11 finish: 38-33-11 (87 points).
Fourth in the Central, 11th in the West.
Bruising winger David Backes was appointed captain after a 31-goal season. Winger Chris Stewart was impressive after being acquired from Colorado (15 goals in 26 games). Veterans Jason Arnott and Jamie Langenbrunner, signed as free agents, could lead them to the playoffs.

9. Minnesota
Third in the Northwest, 12th in the West.
The Wild was 14th in the West in goals and hopes to change that with the acquisitions of wingers Devin Setoguchi and Dany Heatley. New Coach Mike Yeo wants to open things up so the defense will face pressure.

10. Columbus
2010-11 finish: 34-35-13 (81 points).
Fifth in the Central, 13th in the West.
They made a good move in acquiring Jeff Carter from the Flyers to get a top-notch center for winger Rick Nash. Signing undisciplined defenseman James Wisniewski to a six-year, $33-million deal might backfire. They lack the scoring and defensive depth.

11. Calgary
2010-11 finish: 41-29-12 (94 points).
Second in the Northwest, 10th in the West.
Jarome Iginla had back spasms during training camp and center Mikael Backlund broke a finger (out six weeks), depleting their depth up front. Can Rene Bourque and Curtis Glencross top 20 goals again? The top four defensemen are OK, not great.

12. Phoenix
2010-11 finish: 43-26-13 (99 points).
Third in the Pacific, sixth in the West.
Losing goaltender Ilya Bryzgalov to free agency was deflating. Mike Smith will try to replace him. Defenseman Keith Yandle is a standout and Shane Doan is a fine leader but the Coyotes appear set for a fall.

13. Colorado
2010-11 finish: 30-44-8 (68 points).
Fourth in the Northwest, 14th in the West.
A league-worst 3.45 team goals-against average and .890 save percentage led to trading prime draft picks to Washington for promising Semyon Varlamov. Forwards Matt Duchene (27 goals) and Paul Stastny (22 goals, 57 points) need more support.

14. Dallas
2010-11 finish: 42-29-11 (95 points).
Fifth in the Pacific, ninth in the West.
Losing Brad Richards to free agency hurt a thin forward corps now led by Loui Eriksson (27 goals, 73 points). Defenseman Alex Goligoski had 15 points in 23 games after being acquired from Pittsburgh and will help the power play. Ownership issues have kept the payroll down, though the situation appears headed toward resolution.

15. Edmonton
2010-11 finish: 25-45-12 (62 points).
Fifth in the Northwest, 15th in the West.
The Oilers’ talent stockpile includes the No.1 draft picks of 2010 and 2011, Taylor Hall and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins. Their speedy forwards will confuse
many defenders but their defense is weak and goaltending a mess, with Nikolai Khabibulin's 3.40 goals-against average and .890 save percentage.

LA Times: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Former Sabres star Rick Martin had brain disease

By JAMES CHRISTIE

French Connection member had trauma-related illness linked to dementia, erratic behaviour

A study of the brain of former Buffalo Sabres star Rick Martin has shown the 52-goal scorer had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a neurodegenerative disease linked to repeated brain trauma.

Martin died of a heart attack at 59 last March.

The news follows postmortem CTE diagnoses on the brains of fellow former NHL players Bob Probert and Reggie Fleming. Martin is the first who did not play the role of fighter or enforcer.

"His CTE was definitely there and likely caused by repetitive blows to the head, received in hockey over the years," said Robert Stern, professor of neurology and neurosurgery at Boston University and co-director of the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy at the university's school of medicine.

Martin, who played most of his 11-year NHL career without a helmet, had a disease which can have no symptoms at the start but can present problems as one ages.

Stern said in an interview Martin died without showing CTE's typical symptoms of poor memory and other cognitive difficulties such as depression, suicidal thoughts or difficulties with impulse control.

"He didn't have them in any significant fashion," he said. But onset of symptoms can't always be predicted.

"We don't know why someone like Rick Martin would have a mild form of the disease at 59, and others who are younger would have much more significant severity of disease. That's one of the important things our centre is trying to understand," Stern said.

"What he was suffering from was a progressive brain disease ... it's a disease similar to Alzheimer's, though different. It starts developing earlier in life and progresses and eventually - when it's severe enough - will start having symptoms."

Martin did not suffer any known brain trauma outside of hockey and did not engage in fighting in his playing days. Martin wore a helmet his last four years in the NHL.

"We hope the decision makers at all levels of hockey consider this finding as they continue to make adjustments to hockey to make the game safer for participants," Centre for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy co-director Chris Nowinski said.

Richard Wennberg, professor of medicine and neurology at the University of Toronto, said it was interesting that pathological changes were in evidence. Martin suffered convulsions after a serious 1977 concussion and may have had other unreported concussions.

"Is one concussion enough to cause permanent damage? It's certainly possible it could be related to one concussion," Wennberg said.

The Toronto doctor warned the public shouldn't jump to the conclusion all sport is bad and should be banned: "You could be walking down the street and injure yourself."

A member of Buffalo's famed French Connection line with Gilbert Perreault and Rene Robert, Martin scored 52 goals in 1973-74 and again 1974-75. He finished his NHL career in 1981, with 384 goals and 701 points in 685 games.

Martin was diagnosed by neuropathologist Ann McKee, director of the largest CTE brain bank in the world, the Bedford (Mass.) Veterans Administration Medical Center.

McKee has completed the analysis of the brains of over 70 former athletes, and more than 50 have shown signs of CTE, including 14 of 15 former NFL players, as well as college and high-school football players, professional wrestlers and boxers. More than 500 living athletes have committed to donate their brains, including a dozen former hockey players.

"Someone who wasn't a fighter, by playing the game of hockey for the number of years that he did ... it put him at risk for developing this disease," Stern said of Martin.

"We can speculate symptoms would have gotten worse. The message is that we need to take brain trauma in hockey and in all sports much more seriously than we have before."

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 10.06.2011
The Luongo curse

By MATTHEW SEKERES

The Canucks goalie is likely to be a rock-solid pillar all through the regular season. But those playoffs ...

If there's one certainty about the Vancouver Canucks entering the 2011-12 NHL season, it's that they have absolutely no goaltending issues.

Until April.

Roberto Luongo's doubters have tons of ammunition when it comes to the Stanley Cup playoffs, but if you doubt him in the regular season, well, then you just haven't been paying attention.

As fantasy general managers know, the Canucks goaltender is an excellent bet for at least 30 wins. He will almost certainly post a low goals-against average, and a high save percentage. Throw in a half-dozen shutouts for No. 1, and know that he will be in a Vézina Trophy discussion at some point this year - just probably not at the end of October, traditionally his worst month.

After 11 years in the NHL, that is who Roberto Luongo is. That's how he rolls. Unless age catches up with him in one fell swoop - and at 32, that would be awfully young for a goaltender simply to lose it - then Luongo will once again be a driver of Canucks' success this season.

The playoffs? Now that's another matter.

When last seen, Luongo was on the losing end of the Cup final, beaten three times in a 4-0 loss to the Boston Bruins in Game 7. The more troubling stat came in the first six games of the series, when the Montreal native was pulled from two of three starts in Boston. He allowed 15 goals in 112 minutes at the TD Garden, looking helpless and hopeless when the games mattered most.

This year, Luongo's work rate will again decrease, and he has made yet another technical change. He is carrying his glove hand a little bit higher than before, but that's a simple adjustment compared to the overhaul introduced by goaltending coach Roland Melanson last season.

He adopted those changes - playing deeper in his net, pushing off one skate - with aplomb. He was a Vézina finalist and had "by far his best year with us," according to Canucks captain Henrik Sedin. "He made it look easy."

This year, Luongo thinks he can improve even more because he has had a second summer, and a second full training camp, to perfect his new style.

"Last year, at this point, there was still a lot of learning and getting comfortable with it," Luongo said. "Now, there's no thinking involved as far as that is concerned. It just comes natural."

The Canucks scaled back Luongo's workload and authority last season, using backup Cory Schneider for 25 games, and giving Sedin his captaincy. This year, Melanson intends on lightening Luongo's load even further after 84 starts last season, including 24 in the postseason, and a short summer.

"I'm giving him more days off, and I'm giving him more situations where I'm not going out [on the ice] before practice to work on certain things," the coach said. "We prepare here for the month of June. We don't prepare to just get into the playoffs.

"I think Lui is having more fun playing this way [because] he is conserving more energy and he's not finding himself worn down at times."

That is somewhat revolutionary for Luongo because he is so competitive, and because he so loves hockey, that the less-is-more concept was not something that seemed to mesh with his personality. He understands that the first sign of trouble this year will unearth the doubters, and that the playoffs will bring about another round of questions of whether he can perform on the big stage.

As much as greater regular seasons are Luongo, doubts and questions are part of the package, too.
Stay classy, Kes

By Matthew Sekeres

Canucks have been having fun with teammate's decision to pose nude for ESPN The Magazine

Ryan Kesler's appearance in ESPN The Magazine's "The Body Issue," was bound to draw some snickers in the Vancouver Canucks dressing room, given that their teammate agreed to pose nude.

You can find a photo gallery here [http://espn.go.com/espn/notebook/_/page/espnthemagbodyissue/espn-magazine-body-issue].

Among the teammates having a good time with the batting-practice material was goaltender Roberto Luongo, who said that he too was asked to pose, but that "this body is for one set of eyes only."

Kesler's retort to his teammates: "Jealousy. That's all they got."

Kesler, who was approached by ESPN, said he talked over the idea with his family before agreeing to the photoshoot, which took 90 minutes. Asked if he was airbrushed or touched up after the fact, he replied: "None. That's pure me," while praising the magazine for its professionalism.

"I knew what I was getting into," he said. "I knew it was going to be classy, to say the least."

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 10.06.2011
NHL 2011-12 preview: Russo's predictions

Article by: Michael Russo

Mike Russo picks the major awards and the Stanley Cup for the 2011-12 NHL season.

Look for defenseman Drew Doughty, front right, and the Los Angeles Kings to make a big splash in the NHL this season.

A look at award winners from 2010-11 and Michael Russo's predictions for 2011-12:

**HART TROPHY (MVP)**
2010-11: Corey Perry, Anaheim
Russo's pick: Steven Stamkos, Tampa Bay

**NORRIS TROPHY (OUTSTANDING DEFENSEMAN)**
2010-11: Nicklas Lidstrom, Detroit
Russo's pick: Drew Doughty, Los Angeles

**VEZINA TROPHY (OUTSTANDING GOALTENDER)**
2010-11: Tim Thomas, Boston
Russo's pick: Tim Thomas, Boston

**CALDER TROPHY (ROOKIE OF THE YEAR)**
2010-11: Jeff Skinner, Carolina
Russo's pick: Matt Read, Philadelphia

**LADY BYNG TROPHY (MOST GENTLEMANLY)**
2010-11: Martin St. Louis, Tampa Bay
Russo's pick: Brad Richards, N.Y. Rangers

**SELKE TROPHY (BEST DEFENSIVE FORWARD)**
2010-11: Ryan Kesler, Vancouver
Russo's pick: Mike Richards, Los Angeles

**JACK ADAMS AWARD (COACH OF THE YEAR)**
2010-11: Dan Bylsma, Pittsburgh
Russo's pick: Terry Murray, Los Angeles

**ART ROSS TROPHY (TOP POINT-GETTER)**
2010-11: Daniel Sedin, Vancouver
Russo's pick: Evgeni Malkin, Pittsburgh

**MAURICE RICHARD TROPHY (TOP GOAL-SCORER)**
2010-11: Corey Perry, Anaheim
Russo's pick: Steven Stamkos, Tampa Bay

**RUSSO PICKS THE PLAYOFFS**
Eastern Conference champion: Tampa Bay
Western Conference champion: Los Angeles
Stanley Cup champion: Los Angeles

(Who was the only beat writer in the league to nail a Boston-Vancouver final last year? You got it. So bank this one: Kings in six.)

Conn Smythe Trophy (Playoff MVP):
Drew Doughty, D, Kings
WESTERN CONFERENCE RANKINGS

Staff

(predicted order of finish)
1. SAN JOSE SHARKS
2010-11: 48-25-9 (105 points)
After going to the conference finals the past two seasons, the Sharks will bank on Brent Burns and Martin Havlat to get them over the hump.
2. VANCOUVER CANUCKS
2010-11: 54-19-9 (117 points)
Coughing up a Cup will make this team even more motivated, but it must survive the first month without Ryan Kesler.
3. CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS
2010-11: 44-29-9 (97 points)
Awesome core of Jonathan Toews, Patrick Kane, Patrick Sharp, Marian Hossa and Duncan Keith is complemented by veteran additions Andrew Brunette and Jamal Mayers.
4. LOS ANGELES KINGS
2010-11: 46-30-6 (98 points)
Anze Kopitar-Mike Richards punch can match up with any centers in the league, and suddenly-svelte Dustin Penner is motivated.
5. DETROIT RED WINGS
2010-11: 47-25-10 (104 points)
Plenty of holes and aging, but when you boast Pavel Datsyuk, Henrik Zetterberg, Johan Franzen and Nicklas Lidstrom, you'll be just fine.
6. NASHVILLE PREDATORS
2010-11: 44-27-11 (99 points)
Star goalie in Pekka Rinne, star defensemen in Shea Weber and Ryan Suter and a superstar coach in Barry Trotz.
7. ST. LOUIS BLUES
2010-11: 38-33-11 (87 points)
Been fooled by underachieving bunch for two years, so why not three? Look for Chris Stewart to have a monster year with David Backes.
8. ANAHEIM DUCKS
2010-11: 47-30-5 (99 points)
This is a one-line team, but that one line is Bobby Ryan-Ryan Getzlaf-Corey Perry. And goalie Jonas Hiller appears recovered from vertigo.
9. DALLAS STARS
2010-11: 42-29-11 (95 points)
Offensive threats with Loui Eriksson, Jamie Benn and Brenden Morrow; blue line, goaltending questionable.
10. MINNESOTA WILD
2010-11: 39-35-8
(86 points)
Healthy Guillaume Latendresse and Pierre-Marc Bouchard will be huge if Dany Heatley and Devin Setoguchi light lamp, but blue line could cause distress.
11. COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS
2010-11: 34-35-13 (81 points)
Rick Nash finally has a center next to him in Jeff Carter, and Fedor Tyutin is a star on the back end, but it all comes down to goalie Steve Mason.
12. PHOENIX COYOTES
2010-11: 43-26-13 (99 points)
Don't bet against coach Dave Tippett, but the goaltending switch of Ilya Bryzgalov for Mike Smith makes us skittish.
13. COLORADO AVALANCHE
2010-11: 30-44-8 (68 points)
This young, talented team is on the rise, but it is not mature enough yet to gain 30 points and make the playoffs.
14. CALGARY FLAMES
2010-11: 41-29-12 (94 points)
GM Jay Feaster inherited an aging lineup with a shallow prospects corps. Even Jarome Iginla can't keep this team from falling off map.
15. EDMONTON OILERS
2010-11: 25-46-12 (62 points)
Scintillating crop of forwards with Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Taylor Hall, Jordan Eberle and Magnus Paajarvi; worst blue line on face of the Earth.

EASTERN CONFERENCE RANKINGS

(predicted order of finish)
1. PITTSBURGH PENGUINS
2010-11: 49-25-8 (106 points)
Undefeated preseason without Sid the Kid. But Crosby should be back soon, and Evgeni Malkin clearly is back from major knee surgery.
2. WASHINGTON CAPITALS
2010-11: 48-23-11 (107 points)
Alex Ovechkin is beyond motivated. Agent's misstep in overpricing free-agent goalie Tomas Vokoun enabled him to fall into the Caps' laps.
3. BOSTON BRUINS
2010-11: 46-25-11 (103 points)
As deep a team as there is in the NHL. Can Tim Thomas even come close to duplicating an all-world season that lifted the B's to a Cup?
4. TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING
2010-11: 46-25-11 (103 points)
Steven Stamkos is a top-three NHL player, and the rest have taken to Guy Boucher's system. Will GM Steve Yzerman replace soon-to-be 42-year-old goalie Dwayne Roloson?
5. PHILADELPHIA FLYERS
2010-11: 47-23-12 (106 points)
Booted Mike Richards and Jeff Carter to change culture; handed reins to Claude Giroux and James van Riemsdyk.
6. NEW YORK RANGERS
2010-11: 44-33-5 (93 points)
Marian Gaborik finally has a center in Brad Richards. Now, can Gabby rebound from an atrocious 2010-11 season?
7. CAROLINA HURRICANES
2010-11: 40-31-11 (91 points)
Eric Staal and Cam Ward still might be the faces of the franchise, but make no mistake, this team belongs to Jeff Skinner and Brandon Sutter.
8. BUFFALO SABRES
2010-11: 43-29-10 (96 points)
New owner Terry Pegula threw the money around, giving Christian Ehrhoff and Ville Leino big bucks to complement a solid core.

9. WINNIPEG JETS
2010: 34-36-12 (80 points)
Tremendous first half last season was followed by a second-half swoon and an eventual move out of Atlanta. Stacked with rising kids.

10. MONTREAL CANADIENS
2010-11: 44-30-8 (96 points)
Had lots of trouble scoring last season (except against the Wild), but big addition Erik Cole hasn’t succeeded anywhere but Carolina.

11. NEW YORK ISLANDERS
2010-11: 30-39-13 (73 points)
They’re big time on the rise with John Tavares, Frans Nielsen, Michael Grabner and Matt Moulson. Slight problem: Goaltending is still kind of important in the NHL.

12. NEW JERSEY DEVILS
2010-11: 38-39-5 (81 points)
Travis Zajac injury will hurt, but Zach Parise and gang exploded in the second half. Of course, that could have been the Jacques Lemaire factor.

13. TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS
2010-11: 37-34-11 (85 points)
After failing to land Brad Richards, the No. 1 center brought in to play alongside Phil Kessel was, gulp, Tim Connolly. Good luck with that.

14. FLORIDA PANTHERS
2010-11: 30-40-12 (72 points)
Executed an offseason overhaul like no other, but it wouldn’t be a season without Florida missing the playoffs.

15. OTTAWA SENATORS
2010-11: 32-40-10 (74 points)
From Stanley Cup finalists to favorites for first overall pick in five long years, this team is rebuilding big-time.

Star Tribune LOADED: 10.06.2011
Questions and Relief at Season’s Start

By JEFF Z. KLEIN

It was another in a succession of strong years for the N.H.L.: exciting play, soaring television ratings, record revenue and the fourth straight Stanley Cup finals between traditional hockey cities. But even as the Boston Bruins were raising the silver chalice on June 15, the riot was on outside in the streets of Vancouver, a four-hour orgy of destruction that injured scores of people and caused millions of dollars in damage.

Thus began perhaps the N.H.L.’s worst off-season. A league reeling from the accidental death of Derek Boogaard from a drug and alcohol overdose was further saddened by the apparent suicide of two other enforcers and the deaths of several former players in the Lokomotiv plane crash near Yaroslavl, Russia.

It is with a sense of relief that the 2011-12 regular season begins Thursday with games in Boston, Toronto and, perhaps a bit ominously, Vancouver. But as the summer reminds us, in the N.H.L. nowadays enormous success and optimism coexist with dark clouds and trepidation. So it is with the season ahead.

The crackdown on concussion-causing boarding and checks to the head is burnishing the league’s reputation, but will that be offset by what could emerge about the widespread use of painkillers, or a civil trial involving a 2004 attack by Todd Bertuzzi that ended Steve Moore’s career?

Will the euphoria of the Winnipeg Jets’ rebirth be dampened by continued misery in Phoenix? Will financial growth and fan popularity be tempered by February’s talks on the expiring collective bargaining agreement?

Perhaps, but starting Thursday night, hockey takes center stage.

The Rangers look strongest among the three teams in the New York metropolitan area. The arrival of center Brad Richards, seventh among active players in assists per game, brings the promise of a potent scoring partnership with Marian Gaborik. The young core is a year older and, presumably, better, but can the blue-line linchpin Marc Staal recover from the concussion he returned from too early last season? Will goalie Henrik Lundqvist be overworked a sixth straight season, leaving him too tired to excel in the playoffs?

The Islanders may be a punch line to some, but their young team is on the rise, led by the impressive forward line of John Tavares, Michael Grabner and Matt Moulson, and buoyed by the return from injury of the workhorse defenseman Mark Streit. But after that they are thin, especially in goal, where Rick DiPietro will make yet another effort to stay healthy after missing much of the last three seasons.

The Devils are the biggest mystery. The $100 million forward Ilya Kovalchuk revived when Jacques Lemaire returned as coach last season and sparked the Devils to a thrilling rally that fell just short of the playoffs. And Zach Parise is back. But Lemaire has retired, replaced by Peter DeBoer, who has an undistinguished track record, and Martin Brodeur is 39 and looking increasingly pedestrian.

The Devils could be good, or they could be bad. The betting here is that they’ll duplicate last season’s 11th-place finish. The Islanders should move up to 12th from 14th. And the Rangers should go to fifth from eighth — a significant improvement, but not enough to challenge the top Eastern teams.

That group is headed by the Bruins, who will attempt to become the first repeat champions since the 1998 Red Wings. Boston has a lineup that is almost intact from last season. Zdeno Chara, David Krejci, Milan Lucic, Nathan Horton, Patrice Bergeron and Brad Marchand are back, but make no mistake, the Bruins’ regular-season and playoff success was mainly the product of Tim Thomas’s record-breaking goaltending. If Thomas can do it again, the Bruins can win it again.

The Penguins await the return of Sidney Crosby from the concussion he sustained in January, whenever that may be and however much his skills may be diminished. But Evgeni Malkin is back from knee surgery, and if he can return to the form that won him the Art Ross and Conn Smythe Trophies in 2009, the Penguins will contend, with or without Crosby. Tampa Bay missed the finals by the paper-thin margin of a 1-0 Game 7 road loss. The team remains a powerhouse led by the scoring machines Steven Stamkos and Martin St. Louis and backstopped by Dwayne Roloson, who turns 42 next week.

The Capitals turned to a defense-first philosophy last season, but that did not work either, as they blew a 3-1 lead in the playoffs against Tampa Bay. But now Alex Ovechkin and Company have in goal the superb former Panther Tomas Vokoun, perhaps the most important free-agent signing of the off-season. That could make their roly-poly, swears-like-a-sailor coach, Bruce Boudreau, a lot happier come spring.

Other Eastern teams to watch include Buffalo, whose enthusiastic and deep-pocketed new owner, Terry Pegula, has fans and players over the moon with optimism; Florida, which has not made the playoffs in an N.H.L.-record 10 straight seasons but signed 10 veteran free agents over the summer; and Philadelphia, which jetisoned Mike Richards, Jeff Carter and several others in a risky rebuilding effort.

Those moves enabled the Flyers to finally sign a proven goalie, Ilya Bryzgalov — but will their top forward really be 38-year-old Jaromir Jagr, back from three years in the K.H.L. for a last hurrah in North America?

The West is led by Vancouver, which ran away with the regular-season title last year and also became the first team since the 1978 Canadiens to lead the N.H.L. in goals for and goals against. Like the Bruins, the Canucks have almost all of their players back, the Sedins twins (Henrik and Daniel) and Ryan Kesler foremost among them. And should the excellent but ever-shaky goalie Roberto Luongo falter, the promising backup Cory Schneider is ready to step in.

San Jose is ready for another strong regular season, but what hurts are the repeated playoff disappointments, including going 1-8 against the Blackhawks and Canucks in the last two Western Conference finals. Joe Thornton, Patrick Marleau, Ryane Clowe and Logan Couture provide plenty of offense for the Sharks, and the new acquisition Brent Burns provides needed defense.

Detroit, the classiest team in the league, should contend again. Pavel Datsyuk, Henrik Zetterberg and Johan Franzen, all over 30, lead the forwards. But that’s nothing compared with defenseman Nicklas Lidstrom, still all-world at 41.

Los Angeles is a team worth watching, with the high-scoring Anze Kopitar back from a broken ankle, the top defenseman Drew Doughty finally signed after a long holdout and Dustin Brown ready for another season of two-way excellence. The addition of the productive free-agent forwards Mike Richards and Simon Gagne give the Kings an outside chance at the first Stanley Cup of their 44-year existence.

New York Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Former Star Had Disease Linked to Brain Trauma

By JEFF Z. KLEIN

Rick Martin, the former N.H.L. star, had chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a neurodegenerative disease linked to repeated brain trauma, when he died last March of a heart attack at age 59.

Researchers at the Boston University Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy made the announcement in a news release Wednesday night. Martin had only 14 fights in 14 seasons while playing in junior leagues and the N.H.L. He did not wear a helmet for most of his career and sustained no known brain trauma outside of hockey, the Boston University researchers said.

His only known concussion occurred in a 1978 game against the Rangers during which his head hit the ice, causing immediate convulsions. Martin wore a helmet for the rest of his career.

“Rick Martin’s case shows us that even hockey players who don’t engage in fighting are at risk for C.T.E., likely because of the repetitive brain trauma players receive throughout their career,” said Chris Nowinski, a director at the center and co-founder of the Sports Legacy Institute, which seeks to advance the study, treatment and prevention of brain trauma in athletes.

Boston University researchers found Martin was in the second stage of the disease, which was unlikely to significantly affect his cognitive abilities or behavior. There are four stages of the disease, and the fourth is the most severe. C.T.E. symptoms can include memory loss, depression and a lack of impulse control.

“Most of the brains we study come from very symptomatic people whose families donated their brains to find answers for things like dementia, depression or behavioral difficulties, but Rick Martin was not symptomatic,” said Dr. Robert Cantu, who is also a director at the center and a neurosurgeon for head trauma in sports. “He was living a very rich, productive life and was highly functional.”

Nowinski told CBC News that Martin’s relatively mild damage would have developed into more visible symptoms with time. “Who knows how quickly and who knows how badly, but he would have eventually developed dementia had he lived long enough,” Nowinski said. “No question.”

Martin was a seven-time All-Star in 11 seasons, nearly all with the Buffalo Sabres, scoring 382 goals and 701 points. He was the left wing on the French Connection line with Gilbert Perreault and Rene Robert, scoring 52 goals for the 1974-75 team that lost to the Philadelphia Flyers in the Stanley Cup finals.

After a 1980 knee injury effectively ended his career, Martin retired and settled in the Buffalo area, where he remained a popular figure.

Mike Robitaille, a Buffalo hockey commentator who played for the Sabres with Martin from 1971 to 1974 and saw him frequently in retirement, said he was surprised to hear of the finding. “Richard, if anything, was a really bright guy, well read, with a sharp, quick mind,” Robitaille said.

Researchers say that C.T.E., a degenerative disease, can be caused by repeated blows to the head over several years.

Martin’s C.T.E. diagnosis was made by Dr. Ann McKee, a neuropathologist and another center director. Previously, McKee made C.T.E. diagnoses after studying the brain tissue of the former N.H.L. enforcers Bob Probert and Reggie Fleming. Fleming had an estimated 104 fights in the N.H.L. and junior hockey, while Probert had 342.

Probert died in 2010 at 45 of heart disease. Cantu said Probert’s brain showed a “similar” level of C.T.E. damage to that of Martin. Neither Probert’s nor Martin’s heart problems were believed to have been caused by C.T.E., the center said.

Fleming, who died in 2009 at 73, had dementia and displayed 30 years of worsening behavioral and cognitive difficulties. Cantu said that Fleming’s brain showed “significantly more” C.T.E. damage than those of Martin and Probert.

McKee told CBC she believed Martin’s C.T.E. was caused by more than the one reported concussion he experienced. “I’m going to imagine that there were many other more trivial blows to the head,” she said. “He didn’t play with a helmet for most of his years, so any blow to the head may have been a contributing factor.”

There are 96 specimens in the program’s brain bank, including some from former N.H.L. players, Cantu said. The brain of the enforcer Derek Boogaard, who died last May at 28 of an overdose of painkillers and alcohol, is also being studied.

McKee has completed the analysis of the brains of more than 70 former athletes, with more than 50 with signs of C.T.E., the center said, including 14 of 15 former N.F.L. players, as well as college and high school football players, hockey players, professional wrestlers and boxers.

The details of Martin’s brain tissue analysis will be submitted to an academic medical journal, the center said.

Martin’s wife and three sons were not available for comment. The center’s news release said the family “requested that the diagnosis be made public at this time, believing that Rick Martin would have wanted to raise awareness of the dangers of brain trauma in sports and encourage greater efforts to make sports safer for the brain.”

The announcement comes on the eve of a season in which the N.H.L. is cracking down on hits that cause concussions. The sport’s governing bodies in the United States and Canada both banned head contact in youth hockey starting this season.

“We hope the decision makers at all levels of hockey consider this finding as they continue to make adjustments to hockey to make the game safer for participants,” Nowinski said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 6, 2011

Martin’s one known concussion occurred in a 1978 game, NOT 1977.

New York Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
NHL 2011-12 PREVIEW

Staff

NHL 2011-12 PREVIEW

Listed in order of 2010-11 division finish

EASTERN CONFERENCE Atlantic Division

Flyers

Ville Leino takes his scoring to Buffalo.
Ville Leino takes his scoring to Buffalo.
Flyers 2, Devils 1
Flyers 5, Rangers 3

2010-2011 Flyers fights

Coach: Peter Laviolette, 3d season with the Flyers.

Last season: 47-23-12, 106 points.
Playoffs: Beat the Sabres in the conference quarterfinals and lost to the Bruins in the semifinals.
Skinny: Gone are high-profile forwards Mike Richards and Jeff Carter, and with them, the Pens will look to goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury for help.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Coach: Dan Bylsma, 4th season with the Penguins.

Last season: 49-25-8, 106 points.
Playoffs: Lost to the Lightning in the conference quarterfinals.
Skinny: The Pens have relied on Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin to make them go. But Crosby is out with a concussion, and Malkin, while playing, is still recovering from knee surgery. Without them, the Pens will look to goalie Marc-Andre Fleury for help.

New York Rangers

Coach: John Tortorella, 5th season with the Rangers.

Last season: 44-33-5, 93 points.
Playoffs: Lost to the Capitals in the conference quarterfinals.
Skinny: Center Brad Richards, added as a free agent, will be expected to do for the young Rangers what Sidney Crosby does for the Penguins, and right winger Marian Gaborik will be expected to help. If they fail, general manager Glen Sather could be on the hot seat.

New Jersey Devils

Coach: Peter DeBoer, 1st season with the Devils.

Last season: 38-39-5, 81 points; missed the playoffs.
Skinny: The question here is whether 39-year-old goalie Martin Brodeur and left winger Ilya Kovalchuk can bring the Devils back to their glory days. They missed the playoffs last season for the first time since 1996.

New York Islanders

Coach: Jack Capuano, 2d season with the Islanders.

Last season: 30-39-13, 73 points; missed the playoffs.
Skinny: Although the Islanders have not made the playoffs since 2007 and are one of the youngest teams in the NHL, left winger Matt Moulson, center John Tavares, and right winger Michael Grabner should provide some needed scoring.

Northeast Division

Boston Bruins

Coach: Claude Julien, 5th season with the Bruins.

Last season: 46-25-11, 103 points.
Playoffs: Beat the Canadiens in the conference quarterfinals, the Flyers in the semifinals, the Lightning in the finals, and the Canucks to win the Stanley Cup.
Skinny: For long stretches last season, goalie Tim Thomas carried the defending Cup champs. Since few changes were made in the offseason, he may have to do it again. Defenseman Zdeno Chara and center Patrice Bergeron are back to help.

Montreal Canadiens

Coach: Jacques Martin, 3d season with the Canadiens.

Last season: 44-30-8, 96 points.
Playoffs: Lost to the Bruins in the conference quarterfinals.
Skinny: The demanding Montreal fan base is getting itchy for another Cup, and a solid season from goalie Carey Price will be needed to pay the bill. The addition of physical right winger Erik Cole should spark the offense.

Buffalo Sabres

Coach: Lindy Ruff, 14th season with the Sabres.

Last season: 43-29-10, 96 points.
Playoffs: Lost to the Flyers in the conference quarterfinals.
Skinny: Goalie Ryan Miller and defenseman Christian Ehrhoff give the Sabres a sound defense. But can they score enough to win? Former Flyers winger Ville Leino should help.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Coach: Ron Wilson, 4th season with the Maple Leafs.

Last season: 37-34-11, 85 points; missed the playoffs.
Skinny: Like their friends in Montreal, Toronto fans have not tasted success for a while and are not happy. The Leafs seek to make the postseason for the first time since 2004. The success of goalie James Reimer will likely be a key.

Ottawa Senators

Coach: Paul MacLean, 1st season with the Senators.

Last season: 32-40-10, 74 points; missed the playoffs.
Skinny: Center Jason Spezza was the top scorer last season with 21 goals and 57 points, and that will not cut it. The Sens need more firepower, but Craig Anderson may make a difference in goal.

Southeast Division

Washington Capitals

Coach: Bruce Boudreau, 5th season with the Capitals.

Last season: 48-23-11, 107 points.
Playoffs: Beat the Rangers in the conference quarterfinals and lost to the Lightning in the semifinals.
Skinny: The addition of goalie Tomas Vokoun to an offense led by Alex Ovechkin could finally propel the underachieving Caps deep into the playoffs.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Coach: Guy Boucher, 2d season with the Lightning.

Last season: 46-25-11, 103 points.
Playoffs: Beat the Penguins in the conference quarterfinals, the Capitals in the semifinals, and lost to the Bruins in the finals.
Skinny: High-scoring center Steven Stamkos, at 21, and star goalie Dwayne Roloson, at 42, booked a team of overachievers out to prove it can improve on last season's success.

Carolina Hurricanes
Columbus Blue Jackets
Coach: Scott Arniel, 2d season with the Blue Jackets.
Last season: 34-35-13, 81 points; missed the playoffs.
Skinny: Former Flyers center Jeff Carter joins right winger Rick Nash to give the Blue Jackets one of the league's best one-two scoring punches. Goaltie Steve Mason needs to match their energy and execution.

Northwest Division
Vancouver Canucks
Coach: Alain Vigneault, 6th season with the Canucks.
Last season: 54-19-9, 117 points.
Playoffs: Beat the Blackhawks in the conference quarterfinals, the Predators in the semifinals, the Sharks in the finals, and lost to the Bruins in the Stanley Cup Finals.
Skinny: The team's chances of going back to the Finals lie mainly with star goalie Roberto Luongo. The Canucks, with the NHL's best record last season, also feature a stellar top line of center Henrik Sedin and wingers Daniel Sedin and Alex Burrows.

Calgary Flames
Coach: Brent Sutter, 3d season with the Flames.
Last season: 41-29-12, 94 points; missed the playoffs.
Skinny: Like the Canucks, the goalie is a key, and Miikka Kiprusoff is one of the best. Team captain Jarome Iginla, if he stays healthy, should provide the kick on offense.

Minnesota Wild
Coach: Mike Yeo, 1st season with the Wild.
Last season: 39-35-8, 86 points; missed the playoffs.
Skinny: Devin Setoguchi and Dany Heatley should give the Wild plenty of points from the right wing. But will they get much help? Goaltie Niklas Backstrom anchors an unproven defense.

Colorado Avalanche
Coach: Joe Sacco, 3d season with the Avalanche.
Last season: 30-44-8, 68 points; missed the playoffs.
Skinny: The Avs are young this season, with center Matt Duchene and goalie Semyon Varlamov the most promising prospects.

Edmonton Oilers
Coach: Tom Renney, 2d season with the Oilers.
Last season: 25-45-12, 62 points; missed the playoffs.
Skinny: Another young team in the act of rebuilding, the Oilers will need the veteran experience of left winger Ryan Smyth. Former No.1 pick Taylor Hall, a left winger, and current top pick Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, a center, need to provide some goals.

Pacific Division
San Jose Sharks
Coach: Todd McLellan, 4th season with the Sharks.
Last season: 48-25-9, 105 points.
Playoffs: Beat the Kings in the conference quarterfinals, the Red Wings in the semifinals, and lost to the Canucks in the finals.
Skinny: The defense is one of the NHL's strongest with Brent Burns and Dan Boyle, and the Sharks could reach the conference finals for a third straight season. Goaltie Antti Niemi is solid.

Anaheim Ducks
Coach: Randy Carlyle, 7th season with the Ducks.
Last season: 47-30-5, 99 points.
Playoffs: Lost to the Predators in the conference quarterfinals.
Skinny: Right winger Corey Perry scored 50 goals and was named the NHL's most valuable player, but the key may be the play of goalie Jonas Hiller.

Phoenix Coyotes
Coach: Dave Tippett, 3d season with the Coyotes.
Last season: 43-26-13, 99 points.
Playoffs: Lost to the Red Wings in the conference quarterfinals.
Skinny: Goalie Mike Smith will be expected to replace Ilya Bryzgalov, and defenseman Keith Yandle will look to keep the crease clear. Former Flyers center Daymond Langkow was signed for his experience.

Los Angeles Kings
Coach: Terry Murray, 4th season with the Kings.
Last season: 46-30-6, 98 points.
Playoffs: Lost to the Sharks in the conference quarterfinals. Skinny: Former Flyers Mike Richards and Simone Gagne give the Kings some proven scoring punch, and young defenseman Drew Doughty added 11 goals and was a Norris Trophy finalist. Goalies Jonathan Quick and Jonathan Bernier will battle for playing time.

Dallas Stars
Coach: Glen Gulutzan, 1st season with the Stars.
Last season: 42-29-11, 95 points; missed the playoffs.
Skinny: The Stars have missed the playoffs for three straight seasons, and things don't look much better this season with free agent Brad Richards gone to the Rangers. Right winger Michael Ryder won the Cup with Boston last season and may bring a winning attitude. Goalie Kari Lehtonen needs to stay healthy.
Picking the San Jose Sharks to win the Stanley Cup

- Sam Carchidi

Dusting off my crystal ball to help give the NHL season some perspective, here are some predictions:

Champions
Vancouver's Daniel Sedin (22) collides with Andy Sutton of Edmonton. Sedin is mentioned as a candidate for the Hart Trophy.

Flyers 2, Devils 1
Flyers 5, Rangers 3

2010-2011 Flyers fights

Atlantic Division: Pittsburgh (Even if Sidney Crosby is in and out of the lineup.)
Northeast: Buffalo (Even though it grossly overpaid for talented forward Ville Leino.)
Southeast: Washington (Even though Tampa Bay is formidable.)
Central: Chicago (Even though Detroit is, well, Detroit.)
Northwest: Vancouver (Even the, um, worst prognosticators would get this one right.)
Pacific: San Jose (Even though I was tempted to go with Philly West, the Kings.)

Eastern Conference final: Pittsburgh over the Flyers (Great theater for former Penguins Jaromir Jagr and Max Talbot.)
Western Conference final: San Jose over Los Angeles (Defenseman Brent Burns is just what Sharks needed.)
Stanley Cup Final: San Jose over Pittsburgh (Sharks' long wait is finally over.)

Award winners
Goal-scoring champ: Washington's Alex Ovechkin (You were expecting Jody Shelley?)
Vezina Trophy (best goalie): Boston's Tim Thomas (Flyer Ilya Bryzgalov is runner-up.)
Norris Trophy (top defenseman): Nashville's Shea Weber (Does Chris Pronger have another elite season left?)
Calder Trophy (top rookie): Edmonton's Ryan Nugent-Hopkins (TSN's Bob McKenzie surprisingly picked the Flyers' Matt Read.)
Hart Trophy (MVP): Vancouver's Daniel Sedin (In a photo-finish over Ovechkin.)

Coach of the year: San Jose's Todd McLellan (Tempted to go with the Kings' Terry Murray but had a choking situation.)

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 10.06.2011
A Cup repeat could be brewin’ in Boston

By Wayne Fish

It’s been 13 years since hockey had a repeat champion but that streak could end this season.

Even though Mark Recchi has retired and Marc Savard is on the shelf with concussion problems, the Boston Bruins still look Stanley Cup worthy to us.

They have the best goalie (Tim Thomas), the scariest defenseman (Zdeno Chara) and a bunch of young guns up front who can shoot the eyes out of a mosquito.

The Flyers got a first-hand look at all this talent last May when they went down in four straight games. Tonight, they get to watch the gold and black raise the banner before their very eyes.

On the way to another celebration party in Beantown, here’s how the regular season shapes up:

EAST

In:

1. Washington: Many say the Caps’ time has arrived. Mr. Ovechkin will need a big comeback year.
2. Pittsburgh: Only if Sidney Crosby’s health takes a turn for the better.
3. Boston: Did we mention the Bruins are excellent on special teams, too?
4. FLYERS: In new regime, captain Pronger doesn’t allow complacency.
6. Tampa Bay: Bounce-back season for sniper Steven Stamkos.
7. Buffalo: Ryan Miller in goal makes up for a lot of mistakes.
8. Montreal: Canadiens almost always find a way to get it done.

Out:


WEST

In:

1. Chicago: After a year to regroup, Toews, Kane have Hawks back in business.
2. Vancouver: How much of a hangover left from embarrassing Cup Final loss?
3. San Jose: One of these days the Sharks are going to make it to June hockey.
4. Los Angeles: Mike Richards joins Flyers West for a serious run this season.
5. Anaheim: Getzlaf-Ryan-Perry best line in hockey.
7. Detroit: A lot depends on how well goalie Jimmy Howard plays.
8. St. Louis: Best team no one knows about.

Out:


Burlington County Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Rangers, Devils and Islanders Set Their Opening Night Rosters

By CHRISTOPHER BOTTA

Although the waiving of Sean Avery by the Rangers made headlines, there were few surprises among the three New York metropolitan area N.H.L. teams when final rosters were submitted Wednesday afternoon. In a league of one-way contracts, in which veterans are compensated equally whether they are in the N.H.L. or demoted to the minors, training camp competition is largely a myth.

The 2011-12 regular season starts Thursday night, with the Rangers debuting first among the locals with a 7 p.m. Eastern matchup on Friday against the Los Angeles Kings in Stockholm. On Saturday, the Islanders host the Panthers and the Devils play the Flyers at Prudential Center in Neward. Here are the final rosters for each team, with by some additional news and views.

RANGERS

Goaltenders Martin Biron, Henrik Lundqvist, Scott Stajcer

Defensemen Michael Del Zotto, Tim Erixon, Steve Eminger, Dan Girardi, Ryan McDonagh, Michael Sauer, Marc Staal (injured)

Centers Artem Anisimov, Brian Boyle, Erik Christensen, Brad Richards, Derek Stepan

Wings Ryan Callahan, Brandon Dubinsky, Ruslan Fedotenko, Marian Gaborik, Brandon Prust, Mike Rupp, Wojtek Wolski, Mats Zuccarello

Notes The Rangers may have been in denial or employed wishful thinking in the case of No. 1 defensemen Marc Staal, who continues to suffer from concussion symptoms and has not been cleared for contact. Staal is not joining the team for the games in Europe and is out indefinitely. General Manager Glen Sather recalled Tim Erixon, resulting in a nice story as the New York-born, Sweden-raised defensive prospect may make his N.H.L. debut at home. Sather is reportedly in discussions with the representatives for Paul Mara, at this point in his career a third-pair defensemen but a capable puck-mover.

Coach John Tortorella has decided to put Dubinsky to the left of Richards and Gaborik on the first line to start the season. Christensen is expected to start the season as the Rangers' extra forward. If Wolski cannot get his game together — he failed his first audition to play with Richards — Tortorella won't hesitate to call on Christensen and his shootout prowess.

Stajcer remains the third goaltender, allowed by the league for all teams opening the season in Europe. When the Rangers return home on Sunday, the young goalie will be bound for the minors.

DEVILS

Goaltenders Martin Brodeur, Johan Hedberg

Defensemen Mark Fayne, Andy Greene, Adam Larsson, Bryce Salvador, Henrik Tallinder, Anton Volchenkov

Centers Adam Henrique, Jacob Josefson, Bradley Mills, Travis Zajac (injured), Dainius Zubrus

Wings Eric Boulton, David Clarkson, Patrik Elias, Cam Janssen, Ilya Kovalchuk, Nick Palmieri, Zach Parise, Mattias Tedenby

Notes Sykora was signed to a one-year contract after attending camp as a tryout. He will start his comeback on a line with his longtime teammates, Elias, at center and Parise at left wing.

Anton Stralman, also a tryout, is still with the team but has yet to be signed to a contract. The Devils have to remove a roster player if they decide to sign the big defensemen.

The Devils named Parise captain on Wednesday. The selection was made by General Manager Lou Lamoriello and Coach Peter DeBoer.

ISLANDERS

Goaltenders Rick DiPietro, Al Montoya, Evgeni Nabokov

Defensemen Mark Eaton, Travis Hamonic, Milan Jurcina (injured), Andrew MacDonald, Mike Mottau, Steve Staios, Mark Streit

Centers Josh Bailey, Frans Nielsen, John Tavares, Marty Reasoner, Ryan Strome

Wings Blake Comeau, Trevor Gillies (injured), Michael Grabner, Matt Martin, Matt Moulson, Nino Niederreiter (injured), Kyle Okposo, Jay Pandolfo, P. A. Parenteau, Brian Rolston, Ryan Strome

Notes The Islanders signed Strome, the fifth overall pick in the 2011 draft, on Tuesday. At 178 pounds, the gifted 18-year-old center is not ready for regular action at the N.H.L. level, but the Islanders will keep him around for a while to watch and possibly substitute since Niederreiter is sidelined with a groin injury.

The Islanders' acquisitions for this season are all older than 33 years: Reasoner (34), Pandolfo (36), Nabokov (36), Staios (37) and Rolston (38). The team's youngsters required mentoring by experienced players. The first half of the season should tell whether the Islanders added the right ones.

According to the Web site Capgeek, the Islanders have a salary cap number of $52.6 million. But take away buyouts (Alexei Yashin, Brendan Witt) and bonuses — many highly unattainable — and the Islanders have a payroll of $38 million.

New York Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
The Devils submitted their 23-man roster to the NHL and it did not include defense man Anton Stralman.

Stralman, on a training camp tryout, may stay around for a few days while remaining unsigned. The Devils have done that with players in the past such as Tommy Albelin and Adam Mair.

"There is a possibility of that for a period of time," general manager Lou Lamoriello said. "We're still talking. No decisions have been made."

Lamoriello said if Stralman, whose tryout agreement officially ends on Oct. 6, is signed he will not have to return to Sweden to obtain a work visa. He can do that here.

The GM said he is pleased with his opening night roster.

"I feel very good about it," Lamoriello said. "Some players certainly came forward. Pete (DeBoer) and the coaches have run an excellent camp."

The opening night roster:

Forwards (14)
Ilya Kovalchuk
Dainius Zubrus
Nick Palmieri
Zach Parise
Patrik Elias
Petr Sykora
Adam Henrique
Jacob Josefson
David Clarkson
Mattias Tedenby
Brad Mills
Eric Boulton
Rod Pelley
Cam Janssen

Defensemen (7)
Andy Greene
Bryce Salvador
Mark Fraser
Adam Larsson
Anton Volchenkov
Henrik Tallinder
Mark Fayne.

Goalies (2)
Martin Brodeur
Johan Hedberg

Lamoriello on Zach Parise being named captain: "We have a lot of leaders in that room. When you choose a captain you have to select one and he's worthy of it."
He celebrated Tuesday night by going with teammates Nick Palmieri and Mark Fayne to the Capital Grill in the Garden State Plaza.

"I'm trying to stay humble and realize the job's not done," Mills said.

But he has realized a dream.

"I have a lot of friends working in finance but this was always my dream," Mills said. "It's always been my passion. This is what gets me out of bed in the morning. I can always go work in finance or whatever but you can't always play pro hockey."

Asked if he was a Skull and Bones secret society member or another such club at Yale, Mills smiled: "Even if I was, I couldn't say."

As first reported by The Star-Ledger, Sykora was signed to a contract (one year, $650,000) after a training camp tryout.

"It's just very exciting that it's done," Sykora said. "Now I can move on to the first game."

"I just believed (GM Lou Lamoriello) was going to make me an offer and he did. It worked out. I'm thrilled that I'm here."

He is, however, on a holiday visa and must get a work visa.

His family is still in the Czech Republic.

"It's so fresh now that I don't know what will happen," Sykora said. "My son is a U.S. citizen but it will take 2-3 weeks for my wife to get a visa."

Nevertheless, he accomplished his goal.

"Little things mean a lot. I know how disappointed my dad (Vladimir) was when I left the NHL," he said. "When I talked to him yesterday he sounded happy."

Sykora last played in the NHL for the Minnesota Wild (14 games) in 2009-10.

"Everybody's talking about my year with Minnesota like it was a disaster year," he said. "I had a huge concussion, the coach didn't like me and I had hip surgery, too. When you put all that together (it's a lot to overcome)."

Star Ledger LOADED: 10.06.2011
Adam Larsson isn’t taking anything for granted.
He has made the Devils’ opening night roster, but the rookie defenseman still sounded cautious.

"Actually, they haven't told me anything, but it looks like I've made it," Larsson said today. "It's a dream come true for me, but I haven't played a game yet."

He was given No. 5 today, the number he wore with the Swedish national team.

"I'm used to it, so it's nice to have," he said.

That was Colin White's old number.

* 

Defenseman Anton Stralman said he had not yet been signed to a contract.

"Nope. I would say there is a chance it could happen today. Still being here is a good sign," Stralman said.

Stralman said he doesn't have a work visa (neither does Petr Sykora) and indicated he’d have to go home and get one in Sweden.

A training camp tryout, Stralman continued to wear No. 45 in practice.

Fellow defenseman Mark Fayne was given No. 29.

* 

Rod Pelley and Mark Fraser, who cleared waivers on Tuesday, remained with the Devils and practiced today.

But Pelley admits he is not in a good spot.

"It's been a difficult last 24 or 48 hours. No lie about that," Pelley told me. "I would say from the looks of it, I'm definitely on the outside looking in. There are really two ways of taking that. There have been situations players have been in like this and they kept working hard. A lot of things can happen.

"I'm just going to continue to show up and work hard. I'm proud to be a Devil."

Star Ledger LOADED: 10.06.2011
Devs name Zach Parise captain; Ilya Kovalchuk, Patrik Elias alternates

Rich Chere/The Star-Ledger By Rich Chere/The Star-Ledger The Star-Ledger

It was no real surprise that the Devils named Zach Parise captain today. Except to Parise.

"I found out before practice. We had a meeting and I found out then," Parise said. "I was surprised because I didn't know it was coming. Nobody gave me the heads-up before the meeting so I was pretty surprised when Pete (DeBoer) said it."

Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias will each wear an 'A' as alternate captains.

"The last time I was captain was in Squirts when I was eight," Parise said. "I think I was in high school, too. A little bit of experience in high school but I guess this is a little different than that. It's on a little bigger stage but I've been around some pretty good leaders before. You learn a lot from those people."

Goalie Martin Brodeur was asked how he thought Parise would measure up to past captains like Scott Stevens, Scott Niedermayer, Elias, Bruce Driver and Jamie Langenbrunner.

"He's got to stay here. That's the bottom line," Brodeur said, referring to the fact Parise has only a one-year contract. "That's how we're going to know how good he is as a captain."

Parise smiled when the subject of his contract was brought up.

"What did that take, five questions before it was brought up? I was expecting that to be talked about today," he said. "I don't know how many times I have to say it. I like it here and I want to be here. So nothing has changed."

DeBoer repeated his earlier comment that Parise's contract status "never played a part at all. I'm assuming these guys are all going to be here for a long time."

Parise said he won't change significantly.

"Probably the only difference is they're going to sew that 'C' on the jersey," said Parise, who had been an alternate captain. "With Kovy and Patty, who have experience and have been captains in this league before, I'll rely on them for a lot of things and get a lot of help from them. But I'm for it. It's a big honor."

"Everything will be the same. My goals personally are to keep on doing the same thing. Lead by example and help get this team in the right direction, which I think we are."

DeBoer said it was a group decision.

"It wasn't a solo decision. This was something as a group we talked about from Lou (Lamoriello) to the coaching staff. I got an opportunity to spend the last 2-3 weeks around the group and we had the luxury here of a lot of leadership candidates. The group is much bigger than just the guys who are going to be wearing letters, starting with our goaltenders. There were a lot of good options."

Goalties are not allowed to wear a 'C' or 'A' in the NHL.

"I talked to Marty from Day 1 and I put (John) Hederberg in that leadership group, too," the coach said. "Those guys know despite not having a letter on their jersey. ... Actually, I was one of the first coaches to put a 'C' on a goalie in junior. I did that a long time ago. The kid's name was Rob Zep. It happened in the playoffs one year. I've done that once but I wasn't prepared to break any rules at the NHL level."

No one can be surprised by the decision.

"It's a good choice, no doubt about it," Brodeur said. "I don't think it would've been a bad choice if it was Kovy. You had to think about Kovy a little bit. But Zach is the face of the franchise now in New Jersey. You have to do certain things you didn't have to as a rookie. You just went with the flow. Now he's a little more responsible to represent this organization.

I had no doubt he was the best suited for it. It's well-deserved. He's huge for our organization and I think he's grown to be a prominent player and a prominent figure in our locker room. I think it's a wise decision for him where he's at in his career. You have to be a guy that wants it. I think he really wants to be the best player and he that guy. That's great for us."

Asked what the job means to him, Parise said: "Playing the game the right way and leading by example. It's not necessarily always vocal. When you feel things need to be said, there is a time and place for it. It's easy to lead and be a captain when you're winning, things are good and everyone is having a good time. I think it's important when things aren't great to maintain that level and be a leader and not let your game change."

DeBoer: "When you look at Zach, this guy plays the right way. He prepares the right way. He handles himself the right way. There are really not a lot of flaws in his character or how he plays the game. I've always believed your best players, if you're going to win, have to be your most honest players and people. I think he fits that category."

Brodeur suggested Parise might become a better player with the captaincy and pointed out that the left winger has been an All-Star, a key player for Team USA and was close friends to the club's last captain.

"It's going to bring him to another level, I think," the goalie predicted. "That's what we need from him."

Parise didn't dispute that.

"I'm hoping my play will be elevated," he said. "I don't see as any added pressure. Nothing is changing. It won't change me as a person. I don't expect it to be a burden by any means."

Parise and others were always impressed at the way Langenbrunner stood up for teammates and was a conduit between them and the coaching staff.

"I think that's always an understood thing between a captain and a coach," Parise said. "You have to get the pulse of the team and what the team is thinking. But we still have guys that have been around a lot longer than me. There are plenty of guys that should feel comfortable and do feel comfortable going to talk to the coach. It's not because I have the 'C' I'm the only one that can do it."

Brodeur pointed out that Parise "comes from a hard-working family. I don't see how he won't be a good captain."

That's a ringing endorsement.

"I think I will be," he said, "because I'm competitive like that. I play hard all the time and I play the game the way it should be played. That's just been one of my best qualities if you asked me. That's what you want out of a captain. You want somebody that you know is going to play hard every game. I'll do that and I've done that.""

Of course, many observers will wonder whether Devils' management decided to give the captaincy to Parise hoping it will convince him to stay beyond this season.

"I wasn't in those meetings, so I don't know," Parise said with a laugh.

Will it work?

"Yes," he answered with another laugh.

Star Ledger LOADED: 10.06.2011
New Jersey Devils

Devils' Adam Henrique gets No. 14; Adam Larsson given No. 5

Rich Chere/The Star-Ledger By Rich Chere/The Star-Ledger The Star-Ledger

It was indeed a numbers game for the Devils today.

Rookie defenseman Adam Larsson was given No. 5, which he wore for Sweden.

Newly-signed Petr Sykora was given No. 15.

Center Brad Mills got No. 11.

Defenseman Mark Fayne was wearing No. 29.

Adam Henrique got No. 14.

Players will wear numbers on both the front and back of helmets.

Defenseman Anton Stralman, who has No. 45, could still be unsigned. It would not be surprising if the Devils kept him around, as they did with Tommy Albelin and Adam Mair in past years, until someone falters.

If Stralman is not yet signed, the Devils are at 23 players with Travis Zajac starting the season on injured reserve. They must submit a 23-man roster by 3 p.m. today.

Practice lines today:

Ilya Kovalchuk-Dainius Zubrus-Nick Palmieri
Zach Parise-Patrick Elias-Petr Sykora
Adam Henrique-Jacob Josefson-David Clarkson
Mattias Tedenby-Brad Mills-Eric Boulton
Rod Pelley-Cam Janssen

Defensemen: Stralman, Andy Greene, Bryce Salvador, Fraser, Larsson, Anton Volchenkov, Henrik Tallinder, Mark Fayne.

Goalies: Martin Brodeur, Johan Hedberg.

When Sykora led stretching exercises from the middle of the faceoff circle, he was greeted by teammates who slapped their sticks. A nice moment.

Star Ledger LOADED: 10.06.2011
Devils sign Petr Sykora after impressive tryout

Rich Chere/The Star-Ledger By Rich Chere/The Star-Ledger The Star-Ledger

Petr Sykora has completed his improbable comeback.
The 34-year-old winger agreed to a one-year, $650,000 contract with the Devils today and will be on the club's opening night roster after a successful training camp tryout.

"I'm ecstatic," Sykora told The Star-Ledger. "Of course I'm very happy. It's something that seemed very far away a couple of weeks ago and it happened."

He scored two goals in four preseason games and was impressive during team scrimmages, scoring a hat trick in one to impress coach Pete DeBoer from the start.

Although he knew it was a longshot, Sykora said he kept the faith.

"Yes, I did believe. I always believed," he said. "I just took it day by day. I got a chance to play with a lot of good players."

Sykora will physically sign the contract today. The Devils practice in Newark this morning.

The team will reveal today whether room could be made to sign veteran defenseman Anton Stralman, another training camp tryout.

No. 5 is, of course, Colin White's old number.

Rookie defenseman Adam Larsson has been given No. 5. It's the number he wore in Sweden.

Larsson wore No. 42 in camp, but his new number is already on his helmet.

Star Ledger LOADED: 10.06.2011
NEWARK – Zach Parise was always the obvious choice to become the Devils' next captain.

From the moment Jamie Langenbrunner was traded in January, Parise's teammates pointed to him as the clear successor.

The only doubt now, after he was given the "C" Wednesday morning by coach Pete DeBoer, is how long he will keep it. Parise, 27, is slated to become an unrestricted free agent July 1, and if he isn't re-signed before then, this could be his last season as a Devil.

"I was expecting that to be talked about today, too," said Parise, the ninth captain in Devils history. "I don't know how many times I have to say I like it here and I want to be here. So, nothing has changed."

Goaltender Martin Brodeur believes that Parise, who served as an alternate captain the last two seasons, will do a "great" job as captain, but for him to have a successful reign he needs to stick around for a while.

"He's got to stay here," Brodeur said. "That's how we're going to know how good he is in New Jersey [as] captain. But I think that he's a guy that takes a lot of pride in the way that he plays and the way that he prepares himself. He's a great example for younger players."

There was some thought that the Devils should hold off on giving the "C" to Parise until they know for sure he's going to be with the team beyond this season. The other theory was that making him captain might help convince him to re-sign.

DeBoer said that wasn't something that factored into the decision. He called it "a group decision" that he made with general manager Lou Lamoriello and his assistant coaches. Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias, the Devils' captain in 2006-07, also were retained as alternate captains.

DeBoer said there were "a lot of things" that made Parise the right choice.

"When you look at Zach as a coach, this guy plays the right way," DeBoer said. "He prepares the right way. He handles himself the right way. I've always been a believer that your best players, if you're going to win, have to be your most honest players and people. And I think he fits that category."

Parise said he learned a lot from Langenbrunner, Elias and Scott Stevens, who captained the Devils to their three Stanley Cups. He said his style will be one of leadership by example.

"The only difference is they're going to sew the 'C' on my jersey," Parise said. "With Kovy and [Elias], those guys have experience being captains before. You're going to rely on them for a lot of things and get a lot of help from them. But I'm excited for it. It's a big honor. ..."

"My goals personally are just to keep doing the same thing and more lead by example, and help get the team going in the right direction."

BRIEFS: As expected, RW Petr Sykora signed a one-year, $650,000 contract Wednesday, completing his return to the team via training camp tryout. "It feels really special because this is home for me," said the 34-year-old Sykora, who was a member of the Devils' 2000 Stanley Cup team.

Defenseman Anton Stralman, who also attended camp as a tryout, said he has not been offered a contract. He continues to practice with the team.

Rookie D Adam Larsson (5), C Adam Henrique (14), C Brad Mills (11), D Mark Fayne (29) and Sykora (15) were given new jersey numbers, signifying they had made the team.
Devils, Sykora agree to one-year deal; Parise named captain

By MARK EVERSON

After agreeing to a one-year contract with the Devils this morning, Petr Sykora was promptly issued jersey No. 15, vacated Tuesday when the Devils traded David Steckel to Toronto for a fourth-round pick.

Sykora, 34, agreed to a $650,000 deal after sharing the team lead with two goals and three points in the preseason as an unsigned tryout. The 10-time 20-goal scorer practiced on right wing with Patrik Elias and Zach Parise on Wednesday.

After signing Sykora, the Devils named Parise captain and Ilya Kovalchuk and Elias the alternates.

"I don't know what else he could do in camp," coach Pete DeBoer said of Sykora on Sunday. "If you could script up a camp for a guy walking on . . . I don't think he can have any regrets about how he [played]."

The Devils must make one assignment by Wednesday's 3 p.m. deadline for a 23-man roster. Both defenseman Mark Fraser and center Rod Pelley practiced with the team after clearing waivers Tuesday, and rookie centers Adam Henrique (14) and Brad Mills (11) were assigned new numbers.

Defenseman Mark Fayne was given No. 29, rather than the 34 he wore last season. Tryout defenseman Anton Stralman was also in practice, wearing No. 45, as he did in camp.

First-rounder Adam Larsson took over the No. 5 shirt, last worn by Colin White.

The Devils reached their 23-man roster limit after the Steckel trade Tuesday night. Stralman appears likely to serve as an unsigned one-man taxi squad.

New York Post LOADED: 10.06.2011
Rangers, Devils and Islanders Set Their Opening Night Rosters

By CHRISTOPHER BOTTA

Although the waiving of Sean Avery by the Rangers made headlines, there were few surprises among the three New York metropolitan area N.H.L. teams when final rosters were submitted Wednesday afternoon. In a league of one-way contracts, in which veterans are compensated equally whether they are in the N.H.L. or demoted to the minors, training camp competition is largely a myth.

The 2011-12 regular season starts Thursday night, with the Rangers debuting first among the locals with a 1 p.m. Eastern matchup on Friday against the Los Angeles Kings in Stockholm. On Saturday, the Islanders host the Panthers and the Devils play the Flyers at Prudential Center in Newark. Here are the final rosters for each team, with by some additional news and views.

RANGERS

Goaltenders Martin Biron, Henrik Lundqvist, Scott Stajcer

Defensemen Michael Del Zotto, Tim Erixon, Steve Eminger, Dan Girardi, Ryan McDonagh, Michael Sauer, Marc Staal (injured)

Centers Artem Anisimov, Brian Boyle, Erik Christensen, Brad Richards, Derek Stepan

Wings Ryan Callahan, Brandon Dubinsky, Ruslan Fedotenko, Marian Gaborik, Brandon Prust, Mike Rupp, Wojtek Wolski, Mats Zuccarello

Notes The Rangers may have been in denial or employed wishful thinking in the case of No. 1 defenseman Marc Staal, who continues to suffer from concussion symptoms and has not been cleared for contact. Staal is not joining the team for the games in Europe and is out indefinitely. General Manager Glen Sather recalled Tim Erixon, resulting in a nice story as the New York-born, Sweden-raised defensive prospect may make his N.H.L. debut at home. Sather is reportedly in discussions with the representatives for Paul Mara, at this point in his career a third-pair defenseman but a capable puck-mover.

Coach John Tortorella has decided to put Dubinsky to the left of Richards and Gaborik on the first line to start the season. Christensen is expected to start the season as the Rangers’ extra forward. If Wolski cannot get his game together — he failed his first audition to play with Richards — Tortorella won’t hesitate to call on Christensen and his shootout prowess.

Stajcer remains the third goaltender, allowed by the league for all teams opening the season in Europe. When the Rangers return home on Sunday, the young goalie will be bound for the minors.

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Wings Eric Boulton, David Clarkson, Patrik Elias, Cam Janssen, Ilya Kovalchuk, Nick Palmieri, Zach Parise, Mattias Tedenby

Notes Sykora was signed to a one-year contract after attending camp as a tryout. He will start his comeback on a line with his longtime teammate, Elias, at center and Parise at left wing.

Anton Stralman, also a tryout, is still with the team but has yet to be signed to a contract. The Devils will have to remove a roster player if they decide to sign the big defenseman.

The Devils named Parise captain on Wednesday. The selection was made by General Manager Lou Lamoriello and Coach Peter DeBoer.

ISLANDERS

Goaltenders Rick DiPietro, Al Montoya, Evgeni Nabokov

Defensemen Mark Eaton, Travis Hamonic, Milan Jurcina (injured), Andrew MacDonald, Mike Mottau, Steve Staicos, Mark Streit

Centers Josh Bailey, Frans Nielsen, John Tavares, Marty Reasoner, Ryan Strome

Wings Blake Comeau, Trevor Gillies (injured), Michael Grabner, Matt Martin, Matt Moulson, Nino Niederreiter (injured), Kyle Okposo, Jay Pandolfo, P. A. Parenteau, Brian Rolston, Ryan Strome

Notes The Islanders signed Strome, the fifth overall pick in the 2011 draft, on Tuesday. At 178 pounds, the gifted 18-year-old center is not ready for regular action at the N.H.L. level, but the Islanders will keep him around for a while to watch and possibly substitute since Niederreiter is sidelined with a groin injury.

The Islanders’ acquisitions for this season are all older than 33 years: Reasoner (34). Pandolfo (36). Nabokov (36), Staicos (37) and Rolston (38). The team’s youngsters required mentoring by experienced players. The first half of the season should tell whether the Islanders added the right ones.

According to the Web site Capgeek, the Islanders have a salary cap number of $52.6 million. But take away buyouts (Alexei Yashin, Brendan Witt) and bonuses — many highly unattainable — and the Islanders have a payroll of $38 million.

New York Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
2-on-1: Do the Islanders Have the Defense and Goaltending to Make the Playoffs?

By CHRISTOPHER BOTTA and JEFF Z. KLEIN

The return of defenseman Mark Streit, left, should lift the Islanders this season. Christopher Pasatieri/Getty Images North America, via Getty Images

The return of defenseman Mark Streit, left, should lift the Islanders this season.

In the first of three conversations previewing the upcoming seasons of the tri-state area’s hockey teams, New York Times hockey writers Jeff Z. Klein and Christopher Botta discuss the chances of the Islanders qualifying for the Stanley Cup playoffs for the first time since 2007.

Botta: Jeff, some of our colleagues around N.H.L. press boxes have selected the Islanders as the team most likely to surprise this season in the Eastern Conference. A few have picked them to make the playoffs, while the rest have only gone so far as predicting that they’ll push for a spot. What do you think?

Klein: I think there are likelier teams to surprise than the Isles, but they should improve. Simply having Mark Streit back on the blue line after he missed all of last year should do wonders. The guy’s a horse — look how he made Switzerland competitive at the Olympics, where he was easily among the top four blueliners in the tourney. (If I’m saying “tourney.”) And they’ve got Michael Grabner, Matt Moulson and of course, John Tavares.

Botta: A healthy Kyle Okposo from game 1 should help, and Frans Nielsen is an effective checking forward capable of scoring 40-50 points. The forward corps gives Islanders supporters reason to be optimistic.

Klein: No question, Chris. Goal scoring should be the last of their worries.

Botta: Defense appears to be a weakness, however, even with Streit back. Andrew MacDonald is very underrated in my opinion and Travis Hamonic has top-pair potential, barring a sophomore setback. But General Manager Garth Snow acknowledged a need for a top defenseman when he traded for the negotiating rights to Christian Ehrhoff and was unable to sign him. Snow still hasn’t added one. He signed Steve Staios off his training camp tryout and he’s a quality vet, but a third-pair guy. Do you think the Islanders can get by in the back end with Milan Jurcina, Mark Eaton, Mike Mottau and Staios?

Klein: You’ve got a point, Chris. Outside of Streit, there’s not a whole lot there. I’m not as keen on MacDonald and Hamonic as you are. But I’ll say it again: Streit by himself can make even an anonymous defense … acceptable.

Botta: Streit is a terrific player and good choice as the new captain. Keep an eye on Hamonic the next time you see the Islanders live, Jeff. You’ll be converted. MacDonald needs to stay healthy. It’s not easy because he’s got a thin build. But he’s such a smart defenseman.

Now for the real brain-teaser, Jeff. Is it possible to predict what will happen with the Islanders this season in goal? They’ll start the season with Rick DiPietro, Al Montoya and Evgeni Nabokov at the N.H.L. level and three good prospects — Kevin Poulin, Anders Nilsson and Mikko Koskinen — in Bridgeport.

Klein: Even if DiPietro is healthy, he is just not a good goalie, despite the millions the Isles have heaped upon him. Since getting drafted in 2000 he’s had only one good N.H.L. season (2006-7). Nabokov bombed out at SKA in the K.H.L. last year, does not want to be on the Island, and at 36, has all the earmarks of a player fading into retirement.

The club’s best hope is for Montoya to be No. 1 and continue the strong play of his 21-game 2010-11 campaign. Then maybe one of those prospects can be brought up. But really, considering the way the Islanders have handled their goalies over the last 20 years or so, I wouldn’t hold my breath that they’ll handle them right this year.

Botta: Let’s hope they give Poulin all the starts he needs in the minors to develop properly. He’s an under-the-radar prospect, the real deal if he’s ever allowed to come out of DiPietro’s shadow.

On a positive note, I think we can agree it would be a welcome sight if the Islanders can stay in the race. There’s a lot of exciting young talent, especially up front.

Klein: Agreed.

Botta: And that’s with recent top-5 picks Nino Niederreiter and Ryan Strome on the way, plus a few intriguing prospects like the Russians Kirill Kabanov and Kirill Petrov. O.K., Jeff. So where will the Islanders finish in the East?

Klein: I see them improving by about 10 points and moving up from last year’s 14th to 10th or 11th. You?

Botta: They must have an excellent start. This is a franchise that needs positive momentum after the loss of the arena referendum in August and all the uncertainty about the club’s future. They open the season with a four-game homestand against Florida, Minnesota, Tampa Bay and those world-traveling Rangers, so it’s very possible. I’m confident they’ll be in the thick of the race in March for the final two playoff berths.

But in the end, they’ll have a hard time clinching a spot. There’s always a chance of an early-season acquisition or important waiver wire pickup, but I was surprised they didn’t do more this summer to improve the team. Upgrades from Zenon Konopka and Trent Hunter to Marty Reasoner and Brian Rolston are not enough and neither is Staios. I also question whether this team is tough enough. They have enough players to scrap, but are they big enough, durable, able to battle through more than six months against so much size and skill in their conference?

The East is getting stronger. Unless Snow makes a key move, it will be an exciting season – an above .500 season – for an up-and-coming team on the Island, but they’ll finish in 10th place.

New York Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Islanders keeping Strome around to learn

By ARTHUR STAPLE arthur.staple@newsday.com

Ryan Strome made the 3 p.m. roster cutoff Wednesday with the Islanders, just a day after signing his three-year, entry-level contract.

Neither of those achievements guarantees that Strome, the fifth pick in June's NHL draft, will be an Islander beyond this weekend, or next week, or all the way through Oct. 29, which is the date of the Islanders' ninth game this season. That's the cutoff point for junior-eligible players to either return to their junior teams or stay with the big club the whole season.

He's here now, though, and he'll be in Nassau Coliseum on Saturday when the Isles open the 2011-12 season against the Panthers. Barring an injury, Strome won't play in that game, or likely in any regular-season games, which may seem like an odd decision in keeping the 18-year-old around.

But he's staying to learn by watching rather than by doing.

"He's learned a lot so far, from the rookie camp to the rookie games to playing games against NHL players in the preseason, and we want him to keep on learning, being around all our guys," coach Jack Capuano said. "He's one of those kids who gets it. He understands, he evaluates himself and he knows he's here to soak it all up."

Strome played in three of the five preseason games and the only time he made the stat sheet was when he received a boarding major and a game misconduct for a hit from behind on the Devils' Stephen Gionta on Friday.

But Capuano liked what he saw, and Strome just liked being a part of his first NHL camp.

"Everything now is just an added bonus," he said.

Of what he needs to work on when he goes back to Niagara of the Ontario League, Strome said, "I just need to get quicker. The game moves a lot faster up here -- I know everyone says that, but until you actually get in a game and see it for yourself, it's hard to know. I just need to be able to make quicker decisions and quicker plays with the puck."

He will be limited to practice now. Nino Niederreiter and Trevor Gillies are both on injured reserve with groin strains; when Niederreiter comes off IR, likely in a week or two, Strome may be headed back to Niagara.

"If I'm here a day, then I'm going to work my hardest for that day," Strome said. "If it's a week, I'll work my hardest for that week. I'm not thinking about anything except what's right in front of me."

Notes & quotes: Capuano said Niederreiter, who is eligible to come off IR Friday, is "still in the early stages" with his injury. .. D Milan Jurcina (groin) skated and is still day to day ... To get to the 23-man roster (plus players on IR), the Isles sent C Trevor Frischmon and D Dylan Reese to Bridgeport and sent F Kirill Kabanov to his junior team, Blainville-Boisbriand of the Quebec League.

Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 10.06.2011
A proposal to build a new Nassau Coliseum at Belmont Raceway drew support and some skepticism Wednesday from a variety of Nassau officials and civic leaders with a stake in the development plans.

The idea, floated Tuesday by Hofstra University president Stuart Rabinowitz at a meeting of the Long Island Regional Economic Development Council, could spur creation of a sports-entertainment complex in western Nassau and a research and development center in the Hub area in Uniondale.

At Belmont, such a move could bring together the racetrack, an arena and a casino proposed by the Shinnecock Indian Nation.

Nassau County Executive Edward Mangano said Wednesday that he will submit a "job creation" plan to the Council by Oct. 14 that will include Belmont and the Hub. Ten councils across the state will evaluate proposals for economic development that will compete for $200 million in state aid.

"We can truly jump-start job creation at Belmont Park in the west, at Nassau's Hub in the center of our county, and at the former U.S. Navy-Grunman property," in Bethpage, Mangano said in a statement. "Residents should stay tuned for our exciting announcement."

County officials declined to comment on whether the plan would include an arena at Belmont. But Rabinowitz, the council's vice chairman, said that by submitting a plan by the Oct. 14 deadline, Mangano is "going to show his hand."

"We'll look at the merits of the plan, consider its impact on the surrounding community and on other facilities in the area, and determine if there is any benefit to the state of New York," said Michael Whyland, spokesman for Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan). Building a new arena at Belmont would allow the county to develop the Hub as a research and development park, said Hempstead Town Board member and Mangano special counsel Ed Ambrosino.

"This type of creative reinvention of Belmont . . . allows Mitchell Field to be reconsidered as an economic engine that works even closer with Hofstra," said Desmond Ryan, executive director of the Association for a Better Long island, a real estate group.

Hempstead Town Supervisor Kate Murray said a research and development would "fit in beautifully" with the town's zoning for the Hub. She added that a carefully crafted plan would likely require no approval from the town.

Rangers, Devils and Islanders Set Their Opening Night Rosters

By CHRISTOPHER BOTTA

Ryan Strome of the Islanders playing against the Bruins last month. Bruce Bennett/Getty Images Ryan Strome of the Islanders playing against the Bruins last month.

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Centers Artem Anisimov, Brian Boyle, Erik Christensen, Brad Richards, Derek Stepan

Wings Ryan Callahan, Brandon Dubinsky, Ruslan Fedotenko, Marian Gaborik, Brandon Prust, Mike Rupp, Wojtek Wolski, Mats Zuccarello

Notes The Rangers may have been in denial or employed wishful thinking in the case of No. 1 defensemen Marc Staal, who continues to suffer from concussion symptoms and has not been cleared for contact. Staal is not joining the team for the games in Europe and is out indefinitely. General Manager Glen Sather recalled Tim Erixon, resulting in a nice story as the New York-born, Sweden-raised defensive prospect may make his N.H.L. debut at home. Sather is reportedly in discussions with the representatives for Paul Mara, at this point in his career a third-pair defender but a capable puck-mover.

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Centers Josh Bailey, Frans Nielsen, John Tavares, Marty Reasoner, Ryan Strome

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Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Avery Clears Waivers

By LYNN ZINSER

The Rangers agitator Sean Avery cleared N.H.L. waivers on Wednesday, 24 hours after the Rangers placed him there. He was assigned to the team’s American Hockey League affiliate in Hartford, the Connecticut Whale.

It came as little surprise that Avery went unclaimed by another team, which would have had to pay him $2 million this season, high for a player who scored three goals last season.

When Avery was waived, his agent Pat Morris said he could explore avenues for Avery to play in Europe. The Rangers would have to agree to that.

The Rangers also placed defenseman Marc Staal on injured reserve as he recovers from the affects of a concussion and recalled defenseman Tim Erixon from the Whale.

New York Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
NY Rangers roster moves: Marc Staal to injured reserve, Sean Avery to Hartford, Tim Erixon to Sweden

By Pat Leonard

STOCKHOLM - The Rangers' greatest concern at the beginning of the offseason was their lack of a playmaker. Now, it's their depth on defense.

The Blueshirts placed All-Star defenseman Marc Staal on seven-day injured reserve Wednesday, and recalled 20-year-old rookie defenseman Tim Erixon from their AHL affiliate to set their 23-man roster for Friday's opener against the Los Angeles Kings in Sweden's capital.

They also assigned winger Sean Avery, who cleared waivers at noon, along with defensemen Stu Bickel and Brendan Bell, to Hartford of the AHL.

Avery's agent, Pat Morris, told ESPN Wednesday that the winger is already receiving interest from European clubs but is willing to play wherever the Rangers want him.

But the focus after Wednesday morning's practice remained on the big-name Ranger who didn't make the trip to Europe.

Staal continues to battle headaches related to a concussion he sustained in February on a hit from his brother, Eric, and the Rangers have no timetable for his return. But GM Glen Sather reportedly said Wednesday that the 24-year-old defenseman could be sidelined long-term.

As a potential insurance policy, the front office has kept a line open to 32-year-old free-agent defenseman Paul Mara, who played 156 games for the Rangers between the 2006-07 and 2008-09 seasons.

"We've been talking with them all along ...all summer," said Mara's agent, Matt Keator, who noted he is in discussions with several teams about the seventh pick of the 1997 draft.

If Staal is ready, he can come off IR in seven days, which would make him eligible to play Oct. 16 against the Islanders. For now, only five of their eight defensemen return from last season, two who have never played an NHL regular-season game (Bickel and Erixon), and one 29-year-old journeyman (Brendan Bell).

"We haven't really heard how Marc's doing other than the fact that he's not coming here, so I don't know if it is long-term or not," said Ryan McDonagh, who will slide up to fill Staal's spot alongside Dan Girardi on the top defensive pairing. "But you can't be worried about adding another piece when he's the piece that we want. We want to get him back as soon as possible, because he's part of this team."

John Tortorella said Michael Del Zotto, a third-year defenseman who was sent down to the AHL last year midseason after a strong rookie campaign in 2009-10, will begin the season getting top-four minutes on the blue line paired with Michael Sauer.

"He's done some good things on the power play, he's had some good outlet passes within our exhibition games," Tortorella said of Del Zotto, who practiced on the Rangers' first power-play unit yesterday with Brad Richards, Marian Gaborik, Brandon Dubinsky and captain Ryan Callahan.

Sauer, who has been recovering from a right shoulder injury said Wednesday it's feeling good and that he's "ready to go" for Friday's opener.

THE FIRST LINE

Despite playing winger Wojtek Wolski on the first line for most of the preseason with Richards and Gaborik, Tortorella said Dubinsky will open the season on the first line.

Ruslan Fedotenko will slide up and start on the second line with Artem Anisimov and Callahan.

New York Daily News LOADED: 10.06.2011
RANGERS PREVIEW: Richards right star to add to Black-and-Blueshirts

By LARRY BROOKS

STOCKHOLM — It was not so long ago that stability and building from within were alien concepts when applied to the Rangers, but, oh boy, just look at them now.

They’re just about all back, bolstered by the free-agent signing of blue-chip first-line center Brad Richards.

Every upper-echelon player on the roster with the exception of Richards and Marian Gaborik is a born-and-raised Ranger, with the Blueblood Line of Brandon Dubinsky, Artem Anisimov and freshly minted captain Ryan Callahan ready to skate in lock step toward prominence.

The clouded prognosis regarding Marc Staal, who had been experiencing intermittent headaches since the summer in the aftermath of the concussion he sustained in Carolina last Feb. 22 on a hit from his older brother, Eric, hangs over the Rangers like, well, a dark cloud. It’s one team with him at full strength; quite another without him.

The group established a Black-and-Blueshirt identity last season with a unified willingness to do all the grunt work required. The plan is to carry that mentality into this season but with an added dollop of talent provided by Richards so that the Rangers won’t have to block as many shots because they’ll have the puck much more often.

OFFENSE

Richards, one of the league’s elite dispatchers for almost a decade, was hired to get the puck to Gaborik, who struggled through an unhappy 22-goal season, a decline of 20, and create a legitimate first line. There is, however, no evidence the Rangers at this point have found a complementary left wing for the dynamic duo. The accelerated development of Anisimov, who had a terrific European portion of camp, should key bookend, straight-line wingers Callahan and Dubinsky to career-bests.

There’s depth below with Brian Boyle needing more offense-intense ice time than may be available at the outset, and with Derek Stepan, a first-line pivot at times last year, perhaps opening on the fourth unit. The Rangers will battle for pucks, but with most of the size in the heart, it will be important for the club’s talent — including Mats Zuccarello — to produce its share of pretty goals.

DEFENSE

If Staal can maintain his health and be the player into which he was developing into last year, the Rangers have two very solid matchup pairs in Staal-Dan Girardi and Ryan McDonagh-Michael Sauer. If not, it will be a scramble, with every one behind the indefatigable Girardi stepping up in class while being asked to play more and tougher minutes. The Rangers need far more offense created from the back end. This is where a Michael Del Zotto revival would be most valuable.

GOALTENDING

Henrik Lundqvist, who struggled during the early months to accommodate a rotation featuring reliable backup Marty Biron but was at the top of his game down the stretch run, appears energized by the European tour and primed for the best season of his NHL career.

COACHING

John Tortorella has the team and personnel he wants, there is no doubt about that. What we will not have here is a failure to communicate, though it will be interesting to see how much carrot as opposed to how much stick he uses in dealing with Wojtek Wolski.

PREDICTION

Training camp was an endurance test. The club will play its first seven games on the road because of the Garden transformation. The players insist these will not be burdens. The loss of Staal for any significant period would, however, be a huge burden to bear. Assuming Staal’s return to health, the Rangers not only should be good enough to make the playoffs, but to avoid the quagmire between seventh and 12th that connotes a fight to the final day to qualify.

THE ROSTER

Goaltenders: Henrik Lundqvist, Marty Biron
Defense: Marc Staal, Dan Girardi, Ryan McDonagh, Michael Sauer, Michael Del Zotto, Steve Eminger
Left wings: Brandon Dubinsky, Wojtek Wolski, Ruslan Fedotenko, Michael Rupp
Centers: Brad Richards, Artem Anisimov, Brian Boyle, Derek Stepan, Erik Christensen
Right wings: Marian Gaborik, Ryan Callahan, Mats Zuccarello, Brandon Prust

KEYS TO THE SEASON

Most Important Offensive Player: So much is going to fall on Richards, not only because he’s being counted on to provide the talent and creativity down the middle to give the Rangers a legitimate first line, but also because he’s going to be the quarterback on a power play that was dysfunctional so much of last season.

Most Important Defensive Player: If Staal is not healthy enough for a reprise of his matchup, shutdown role, the Rangers’ most important defenseman will be, A) McDonagh, if he moves up to pair with Girardi on the first pair, or, B) McDonagh and Sauer both, if the coach decides to keep that pair intact and use the combination as the No. 1 match-up unit.

Top Rookie: Well, guess what, other than current eighth defenseman Stu Bickel, there isn’t a single one here in Stockholm, though it may not be all that long before Tim Erixon gets the call.

Key Coaching Decision: Two of them, right off the top for Tortorella: How to handle the defense pairings and matchups in Staal’s absence, and whether to shift Brian Boyle to first-line left wing if Wolski is not up to the task, a move that would dilute the team’s depth down the middle.

Five must-see games
1. Oct. 27 vs. Toronto. At long last the Garden opener.
2. Nov. 11 at Carolina. The Rangers pay a visit to the home of the elder Staal brother.
5. April 7 vs. Washington. Perhaps this year the Rangers won’t have to gather following the finale to watch a TV game determine their fate.

New York Post LOADED: 10.06.2011
GM says Avery could return to Rangers from AHL

By LARRY BROOKS

STOCKHOLM -- Perhaps Glen Sather might want to check with his coach on this one, but the general manager told The Post on Wednesday that Sean Avery could play his way back to the Rangers from the AHL Whale after the exiled winger landed there after clearing NHL waivers.

"Of course we could recall him if he's in Hartford and earns that," Sather said as the Rangers skated on an NHL-sized rink for the first time in nine days. "You never know; somebody could play his way off this team.

"I think Sean has been a good player for us but you have to get the perspective from the coaches on that."

The perspective from coach John Tortorella doesn't seem to include a vision of Avery returning to Broadway even if the Rangers' situation on left wing deteriorates.

Sather said he disagreed with the notion that Avery, who has been given permission by the Rangers to explore options in Europe rather than joining the Whale, hadn't been given a fair shot at making this year's club.

"I thought Sean would come to camp and light it up, but that didn't happen," said Sather, who alerted teams to Avery's availability within the last week. "I don't think he had a bad camp, but other guys had better camps and with that the case, we have to evolve as a team.

"Personally, I like Sean. I like a lot of things about him. He thinks outside the box. From a management perspective, I'd like to see him in the league because he's colorful and adds excitement.

"But from my point of view I have only one interest," the GM said. "And that's in putting together the roster that we think is best for our team to win."

Avery was assigned to the Whale Wednesday, and the move clears his $1.93 million from the Rangers' salary cap.

Avery was in the final season of the contract he originally signed with the Dallas Stars. He didn't play in the Rangers' final two exhibition games in Europe.

New York Post LOADED: 10.06.2011
Rangers reopen talks with defenseman Mara, place Staal on injured list

By LARRY BROOKS

STOCKHOLM — Facing the prospect of perhaps playing the first month of the season without Marc Staal, the Rangers have reopened discussions with 32-year-old free agent defenseman Paul Mara, The Post has learned.

If a contract agreement is reached, the idea would be for Mara, who played 156 games for the Rangers from late in 2006-07 through 2008-09, to join the club in New York on Monday after it returns from Europe.

Mara would then have a full week of practice with the team before its next game, a week from Saturday against the Islanders at the Coliseum.

More immediately, the Rangers recalled freshman Tim Erixon from the AHL Whale in time to play in the opening two games of the season here, Friday against the Kings and Saturday against the Ducks.

Erixon was dispatched to Connecticut last Saturday but coach John Tortorella seems far more comfortable with the prospect of using the Swedish rookie on the line with Steve Eminger as the third pair than he is with giving minutes to either Brendan Bell or Stu Bickel.

Ryan McDonagh will move up to skate on the left side of the first pair with Dan Girardi, and Michael Del Zotto will skate on the second pair with Michael Sauer.

General Manager Glen Sather told The Post this morning that there is no timetable on Staal, who has been suffering from post-concussion intermittent headaches, but that his absence could be long-term.

Staal was placed on the injured list Wednesday and would be eligible to play Oct. 15 against the Islanders.

“Doctors have said that it could be a week, but it could also be a month,” Sather said of the No. 1 defenseman, who has been receiving treatment back home. "I wish we had something absolute, but we don’t."

"If Marc’s out for a substantial length of time, it’s going to have an impact on our club, no doubt about that. He’s our top defenseman, one of our top players, gets the most ice time and is always on against the other team’s top players.

“But it’s something we’ll just have to deal with.”

New York Post LOADED: 10.06.2011
Breaking down the 2011-12 Rangers

The Rangers’ roster includes five newcomers, a relatively small number inflated by the presence of three defensemen: Brendan Bell and rookies Tim Erixon and Stu Bickel, who likely would have started the season in the AHL if not for All-Star Marc Staal’s lingering post-concussion headaches.

Essentially, marquee free agent Brad Richards and gritty veteran Mike Rupp have been added to a solid core as the Rangers try to advance to the Eastern Conference finals for the first time since 1997.

Here’s a position-by-position look at the team:

Forwards: Richards teams with right wing Marian Gaborik and, for now, Brandon Dubinsky, to potentially form one of the best top lines in the NHL. Rupp, along with center Brian Boyle and Brandon Prust, gives the Rangers a big fourth line that can score. Artem Anisimov, 23, and Derek Stepan, 21, center the other lines, while new captain Ryan Callahan looks to better his career-high 23 goals and 25 assists from last season. Well-traveled Wojtek Wolski, 25, must produce or his NHL career could be at risk.

Defensemen: The indefinite nature of Staal’s absence has put the defense in flux. Ryan McDonagh, brilliant as a rookie in the second half of last season in a second pair with fellow rookie Mike Sauer, will take Staal’s spot in the top pair with Dan Girardi. Michael Del Zotto, 21, looks to reestablish himself as a viable NHL player after a mistake-filled sophomore campaign that was split between the Rangers and Connecticut (AHL). Bell and Bickel are stopgaps as GM Glen Sather searches to add a veteran.

Goalies: Henrik Lundqvist, 29, almost certainly will play fewer than 70 games for the second straight season, but can extend his NHL record to seven seasons of at least 30 wins to start a career. He had a career-high 11 shutouts last season. The healthy return of Marty Biron, 34, is crucial after he missed the rest of the season after injuring his left collarbone March 1.

Special teams: The addition of Richards to quarterback the power play will bring consistency to a unit that was 18th in the league last season and, at times, seemed reluctant to shoot. If Del Zotto can return to his rookie form – four goals and 18 assists on the power play – the Rangers might have an advantage man-up. The penalty kill unit was 10th in the league, and if Callahan can stay healthy all season, the absence of ex-captain Chris Drury (bought out and retired due to a chronic knee injury) will be minimized.

Coaching: John Tortorella believes he has his strongest roster since taking over Feb. 23, 2009. He must compensate for Staal’s absence and the inevitable injuries that will come from the Rangers’ fanatical shot-blocking, while finding ice time for all four of his forward lines. But his philosophy is to let the top players play, so Richards and Gaborik will be asked to lead the way.

— Andrew Gross

Bergen Record LOADED: 10.06.2011
Rangers put Staal on injured reserve

By STEVE ZIPAY  steve.zipay@newsday.com

As the Rangers set their 23-man roster for the season opener Friday in Stockholm, Marc Staal was placed on injured reserve, rookie defenseman Tim Erixon was recalled from Connecticut to make his NHL debut, and the banished Sean Avery went unclaimed in waivers and was assigned to the AHL.

Staal, who has been suffering from intermittent headaches stemming from a concussion on Feb. 22 against the Carolina Hurricanes, is out indefinitely, but under terms of injured reserve could be activated in seven days. The All-Star defenseman has been seeing doctors in New York and working out with the Connecticut Whale.

With Erixon, 20, who flew to Sweden yesterday, the Rangers are carrying eight defensemen, 13 forwards and two goaltenders on the active roster. Scott Stajcer is in Europe on standby as an emergency goalie.

Erixon, the son of former Ranger Jan Erixon, joins defenseman Stu Bickel, 25, as the rookies on the roster. Brendan Bell, 28, a former Maple Leaf who played in Switzerland last season, also made the cut, at least for the moment, leaving about $427,000 under the salary cap.

Avery's $1.93-million cap hit is off the books, and his agent is hoping to find him a spot on a European team rather than in the minors. This is the final year of his contract.

Gone from last October's opening night roster are five forwards (Avery, Alex Frolov, Derek Boogaard, Tim Kennedy, Todd White) and two defensemen (Michal Rozsival, Matt Gilroy). Chris Drury and Vinny Prospal were on injured reserve then. Mats Zuccarello, Wojtek Wolski, Brad Richards and Mike Rupp are the additions up front, as well as Ryan McDonagh on defense.

Coach John Tortorella has said that the club is hoping to add an experienced defenseman, either via trade, waiver or free-agent signing, perhaps by next week, so moves would have to be made to create space. Erixon's cap hit is $1.75 million, Bickel's $600,000 and Bell's $525,000.

One switch that has been made: Brandon Dubinsky will open the season as the left wing on the No. 1 line with Richards and Marian Gaborik. Ruslan Fedotenko will start in Dubinsky's place with Artem Anisimov and Ryan Callahan.

Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Rangers: position-by-position analysis

Rick Carpiniello

A position-by-position look at the 2011-12 Rangers:

Forwards
The whole look changed when Brad Richards signed for $60 million over nine, years. Throw a legitimate No. 1 center onto any roster, and it trickles down mightily.

Now the Rangers have an elite, playmaking center to skate with Marian Gaborik, who had a terrible second season (22 goals, a 20-goal drop from the season before) as a Ranger, and they have, in Richards, a proven power-play point man, theoretically fixing what were two glaring weaknesses last season. But Gaborik, who has played two seasons without another legit No. 1 linemate, must rebound, and this pairing must work.

At the start, Brandon Dubinsky, who is perfect for the role, will play left wing on that line.

But Dubinsky played on a cohesive, effective line with new captain Ryan Callahan on the right and Artem Anisimov in the middle, and coach John Tortorella hesitated to break that up. That was the Rangers’ de facto first line last season, and it will reap benefits of facing lesser checking by opponents if Richards-Gaborik-whomever click.

Tortorella thought about using Brian Boyle on Richards-Gaborik’s left after Boyle’s breakout season, in which he became a team leader.

Again, though, Tortorella leaned on Boyle and Brandon Prust, often with Ruslan Fedotenko, to be an effective third line, check opponents’ top lines, play critical late minutes and kill penalties.

Sophomore center Derek Stepan probably has too much upside to play fourth-line minutes, but, at the start, he probably will play with newly-signed Mike Rupp, a tough, huge, versatile forward, and Mats Zuccarello, who struggled at times in his rookie season but had a good camp.

Wojtek Wolski didn’t do enough with his preseason shot at the top-line left wing spot, so where he plays is another question.

Inconsistent Erik Christensen, if he remains, will be the 13th forward, despite his puck skills.

Defencemen
The fly in the ointment of a returning, young and very good top four is Marc Staal’s headache issues, believed to be post-concussion symptoms.

He didn’t make the trip to Europe, and there is no timetable for Staal to play, and no way to guess if/when/or for how long he plays once he’s better.

That would be a major hit for the Rangers and could force them to make a trade. His partner, Dan Girardi, got better and better right to the end of the last playoff game last season, and the second pair of Michael Sauer and Ryan McDonagh, both rookies last season, has cornerstone written all over it, though Sauer had knee and shoulder injuries in camp and the preseason.

The third pair is where the questions arise. Michael Del Zotto still has all that potential, after a sophomore slump last season. Steve Eminger, who was the seventh defenseman last season, was signed to serve in that role again. With Matt Gilroy and Bryan McCabe gone, there’s an opening on the third pair. Who gets it? Again, a trade is possible.

Goalies
No questions here. Henrik Lundqvist proved — again — down the stretch last season that he is one of the top goalies in the NHL when he had to start every game after Martin Biron suffered a broken collarbone. Biron is the ideal backup — good teammate and funny guy who can go in and throw in a big performance after not playing for a while. Lundqvist needs rest, and Biron provides that without costing the Rangers.

Rockland Journal News: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Rangers' Avery clears waivers, sent to AHL

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Sean Avery's days with the Rangers appear over.

The noted agitator cleared waivers Wednesday and was assigned to the Connecticut Whale of the AHL. The move clears his $1.93 million from the team's salary cap.

Avery was in the final season of the contract he originally signed with the Dallas Stars. He didn't play in the Rangers' final two exhibition games in Europe, and it became inevitable he would be cut.

Rangers coach John Tortorella said Tuesday the club had better players than Avery. It is not known if the forward will report to the AHL team or try to join a club in Europe.

The Rangers were busy Wednesday solidifying the roster that will open the regular season Friday in Sweden against the Los Angeles Kings.

All-Star defenseman Marc Staal was placed on the injured list because of lingering effects from a concussion on Feb. 22 when he was hit by brother Eric, a star forward with the Carolina Hurricanes.

Staal, who stayed home from Europe to skate and practice, had already been ruled out of the opening two games in Sweden. He would be eligible to play Oct. 15 against the Islanders, but there is no timetable for his return.

Filling his place on the blue line will be 20-year-old rookie Tim Erixon, who was recalled from Connecticut after being sent down on Saturday. Erixon, acquired from Calgary in June, had two assists and a plus-3 rating in five preseason games with the Rangers.

Brendan Bell and Stu Bickel also cleared waivers and remained on the Rangers' 23-man roster, giving the team eight defensemen.

Rockland Journal News: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Sens coach MacLean preaching skating, puck movement

By Ken Warren

DETROIT — For almost a decade, Paul MacLean had served dutifully in the background, generally anonymous, yet trusted assistant to Mike Babcock with both the Anaheim Ducks and Detroit Red Wings.

When he contributed to the success, he received limited fanfare. When the team failed to reach expectations, he received limited blame. That has all changed.

MacLean, 53, is now the boss, charged with rebuilding the Ottawa Senators into an NHL contender again, acting as a head coach for the first time since being behind the bench for the Quad City Mallards of the United Hockey League from 2000 until 2002.

He repeatedly cautions that the job won’t be complete tomorrow. Or even the day after that. He has a three-year contract, buying himself time to eventually make the Senators into a consistent swift-skating, up-tempo squad, similar to the Senators team that came out of the 2004-05 lockout flying high.

The coincidence is that MacLean will be making his NHL head coaching debut at Joe Louis Arena on Friday, carrying memories of being an assistant in Detroit when the Red Wings won the Stanley Cup in 2008 and lost in the 2009 final.

“It’s my first game as a head coach in the NHL, so it didn’t matter where it was going to be,” MacLean mused earlier this week. “It could have been 29 other places, but the fact that it’s against the Red Wings was, at first, a little bit like, ‘Could it be anybody else’? But I am comfortable in the Joe Louis Arena.”

Unquestionably, MacLean has brought a piece of his past with him. His first month on the job in Ottawa has been all about skating and more skating, which has been the basis of the Red Wings’ success. MacLean says he’s generally pleased with what the team accomplished during training camp, but acknowledges it’s a work in progress.

He didn’t like what he saw in several pre-season games, particularly the final exhibition game against the Boston Bruins, when the Senators won 2-1, thanks primarily to Craig Anderson’s goaltending. He took a hands-on approach to training camp, loudly barking out instructions when mistakes were made.

“I think we still have a ways to go, but we wanted to build a foundation for the future, not just for this season, and I think we’ve established that foundation,” he said. “We want to try and skate 200 feet, be able to play the whole rink and defend in our end quickly, and make sure we’re pressuring the other team’s net, which is something we haven’t done to this point. But those are all stages and steps that you have to take one day at a time.”

Playing at speed game is easier said than done. In a perfect world, every team would choose to play a free-flowing style all the time. It definitely sells a lot better than suggesting success is about clogging up the neutral zone, slowing down the other team and capitalizing on turnovers, which is the model the New Jersey Devils have employed for years.

You also need the personnel to match the style. Senators general manager Bryan Murray claims that MacLean’s approach will accentuate the players the team has, especially on defence. While cynics will suggest the Senators’ defence is soft, Murray says the strength of the team’s defence is its ability to move the puck quickly.

“You talk about (Filip) Kuba and (Sergei) Gonchar, they’re not shutdown defencemen, they’re skilled defencemen,” he said. “We have (Erik) Karlsson, (David) Rundblad, and Brian Lee is also a good first-pass player, it’s like having a good quarterback in football when he can pass the ball and find the open receiver. The receiver looks faster.”

It also takes a salesman to sell a system.

MacLean’s advantage is that he was a front-line scorer himself, spending much of his career as Dale Hawerchuk’s trigger man with the Winnipeg Jets in the 1980s.

In his 11-year NHL career, he scored 324 goals and 349 assists. That alone earns him a degree of respect.

“He’s a talker, he’s a communicator, a guy who has some credibility because he played,” said Murray. “He’s not a beginning coach, he has coached in minors and in the NHL, and in Detroit where they won the Cup. That kind of background helps a great deal.”

Murray also believes that MacLean’s chief assistants, Dave Cameron and Mark Reeds, will complement MacLean’s communication skills. Both come directly from junior, giving them a fresh idea of the issues and challenges facing young players. Cameron is in charge of the power play and Reeds handles the penalty killing.

The veterans have been encouraged by the coaching staff’s approach. Captain Daniel Alfredsson says the upbeat tempo of training camp was welcome, Gonchar is hoping MacLean’s emphasis on skating and quick puck movement will aid his style and Jason Spezza believes MacLean’s tough camp will pay dividends.

“Coach has really pushed us physically and I haven’t heard any complaints from anyone, and everyone is kind of rip roaring, ready to go and excited about the season,” said Spezza.

You also get the sense that MacLean is anxious to finally take centre stage behind an NHL bench in games that matter. 

Ottawa Citizen LOADED: 10.06.2011
DETROIT — The signs of age creep up on everyone. A few wrinkles around the eyes.

A touch of grey in the hair.

Or, in the case of 37-year-old Ottawa Senators defenceman Sergei Gonchar, it's in the company he's keeping.

Gonchar will begin his 17th NHL season on Friday with 20-year-old Jared Cowen as his defence partner. And that's not the end of it.

"You know what made me feel old?," he asked rhetorically Wednesday. "It was when I played against Montreal (in the pre-season) and (Mark) Tinordi's son was playing against us."

Gonchar was referring to 19-year-old Canadiens prospect Jarred Tinordi, who will spend the year as the captain of the Ontario Hockey League's London Knights, but figures to be a big part of Montreal's future.

"I remember him in the locker-room in (Washington), a little guy running around, and I was playing with him. Now, that makes you feel old," said Gonchar.

Gonchar knows time is running out on his career and that the chances of him winning the Stanley Cup this season are remote, but he says he feels a lot more comfortable with his environment than he did at this time a year ago.

He likes the style new coach Paul MacLean has brought to the team, a marked change from the way former coach Cory Clouston wanted him to play.

"It's similar to the way I played in Pittsburgh and I know more of the details," he said. "It's more automatic to me, it's more a habit to me on the ice, rather than learning something new and thinking through the game, about where you should be."

Gonchar freely acknowledges he had a terrible 2010-11 season, along with the rest of the team.

After signing a three-year, $15.5-million US contract as a free agent, he never found his feet, finishing the year with seven goals and 20 assists.

With the exception of 2008-09, when he played only 25 games due to injuries, it was his lowest offensive output since the 1997-98 season with Washington.

Naturally, he's hoping to find his old form and he likes being paired with the more physical, stay-at-home Cowen in even-strength situations, which should allow him to join the rush more often.

If, as expected, the Senators struggle to score goals, Gonchar's role on the power play will also be vital to any success.

As the Senators spent time Wednesday practising their play with the man advantage, Gonchar and Erik Karlsson held the point positions on what appears to be the first unit.

"I think we're going to see more power plays at the beginning of the season — we usually do — so it's very important to have a good one early, making sure we have lots of chances to score and to create momentum," Gonchar said.
DETROIT — Erik Condra is back home and the Detroit Red Wings are ecstatic.

Well, at least the ticket-sales department is pumped that he will play here on Friday night.

Condra, the always-in-the-right-place Ottawa Senators winger who figures to find a home somewhere on the club’s third or fourth lines this season, grew up in Trenton, Michigan, a long slap shot away from Detroit’s Joe Louis Arena.

“It’s 20 minutes from home,” Condra said Wednesday as the Senators took the 2 hour bus trip to Detroit from their brief retreat in London, Ont., in advance of the season opener against the Red Wings.

“I’m excited, really excited, about it.”

Just how many friends and family are coming to the Condra homecoming?

“A ton,” he said. “I’ve got a box full of about 40 people, so at least that, and I’m sure a bunch more.”

Condra, 25, a Notre Dame graduate, played in the Joe Louis Arena growing up, but this is now the big time, playing in front of a packed crowd in the NHL, against the team he grew up idolizing.

“Oh, yeah, Detroit was my team,” said Condra, who made the jump to the Senators from Binghamton of the American Hockey League in the final two months last season, scoring six goals and five assists in 26 games.

“They were everything, right around 1996-97, when they were winning the Cup … (Steve) Yzerman was my role model, I always looked up to him.

“But I think everybody did, didn’t they? It didn’t matter where you came from.”

Ottawa Citizen LOADED: 10.06.2011
Gonchar putting lost season behind him

By BRUCE GARRIOCH

LONDON, ONT. - Sergei Gonchar can only look back on last season with disappointment and frustration. After a signing a three-year, $16.5-million deal on July 1, 2010 with the Senators, he turned in a miserable season under a coaching system by Cory Clouston he didn't like.

"Yes I was (disappointed)," said Gonchar after a practice Tuesday at the John Labatt Centre. "I don't think I was the only one. I think everyone else was disappointed.

"We had pretty high expectations going into the season and then everything just went south on us. It was a bad season for me, but as a team we didn't play well either."

As the Senators open a new year Friday against the Detroit Red Wings at Joe Louis Arena, Gonchar returns to a place where he had one of his greatest memories -- winning the Stanley Cup with Pittsburgh in Game 7 in 2009.

If the Senators are going to have success, they need Gonchar to return to the form that helped the Penguins win the Cup. That was when he played some of his best hockey and was a force to be reckoned with.

Gonchar, 37, is one of the few veterans the Sens have kept in what's become a franchise transformation. He's going to have to be a big contributor if the team has any hope of making the playoffs.

"I'm not hoping (Gonchar can bounce back). I really like knowing instead of hope," said coach Paul MacLean. "I know Sergei is a proud man. He doesn't like to be inconsistent. Neither does Milan Michalek or Filip Kuba.

"They all had their reasons last year. They all struggled with injuries, and I understand. We expect him to be better and we know, as a group, they're all going to be better."

Gonchar said the system used by MacLean should help.

"The system we use now is more like the system we used in Pittsburgh (under coach Dan Bylsma). There's more details and it's more automatic to me. It's more like a habit to me on the ice.

"When you're learning something new, you can start thinking about it when the game is going on. This is more natural to me."

Gonchar said this is a chance for him to get back on track. An area where he has to contribute is on the power play. He was on the first unit Wednesday with Erik Karlsson, Jason Spezza, Nikita Filatov and Michalek.

"We're working hard at it every practice and I think we're getting better and better," said Gonchar. "We're going to continue to work hard so that we can have success through the season.

"You're going to see more penalties at the beginning of the season, so you're going to get more power plays. Those are good chances to score, so it's very important to have a good one. You can create momentum. It's huge nowadays."

Gonchar has been paired with 21-year-old rookie Jared Cowen through camp.

Asked if he felt old beside Cowen, Gonchar smiled.

"You know what's make me feel old?" said Gonchar. "When we play against Montreal and (Mark) Tinordi's son (Jarred) is on the other side. I remember being (a kid) in the locker room (in Washington) and playing with (Mark)."
Sens teammates battle to keep Alfredsson on

By BRUCE GARRIOCH

LONDON, ONT. - The Senators are going to spend this season trying to convince Daniel Alfredsson to stay.

While the NHL’s longest-serving captain has been talking about the possibility this could be his last season, the Sens are hopeful by the end of the season it will be all talk and no action.

"We’re going to try to influence (Alfredsson) to play as long as possible," said centre Jason Spezza. "The better the year we have as a team and as individuals, the more maybe he’ll want to stick around.

"He’s talked about (retirement before). He’s said the last couple of years he didn’t know if they were going to be his last. For him, it’s a great approach. You know he’s going to give it his all.”

Spezza said he understands Alfredsson’s health concerns.

"He’s thinking more about his body right now, but if he’s healthy maybe he’ll want to play longer if he’s feeling good.”

Spezza said coach Paul MacLean has been a key change to the attitude around the Ottawa room.

"(MacLean) has brought in a really good, hard-working attitude," said Spezza. "He has confidence in himself and it rubs off on the players. Everybody is having a good time, but our practices have been really hard.

"It’s still been competitive and fun and the team still seems to have a really good attitude going into the season. Nobody is worried about what happened last year. We’re really in the present right now and that means a lot for us.”

REGIN GETTING BETTER

No decision has been made on whether centre Peter Regin will suit up against the Wings. He took part in the club’s one-hour practice but didn’t take any contact.

Coach Paul MacLean said it was a step in the right direction.

"We’re still optimistic for Friday,” said MacLean. "I thought he was more of a participant— which is a good sign. We’ll take the day (Thursday) and get a better read to see how he is. I thought it was a good sign that he did more in the practice than he did (Wednesday).”

NEXT UP

The Senators will practice in the Joe Louis Arena Thursday in preparation for Friday’s game against the Wings. The club made a two-hour bus ride from London and had a team dinner in downtown Detroit Wednesday night.

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 10.06.2011
Sens head for Detroit, season opener

By BRUCE GARRIOCH

LONDON, ONT., - The Senators’ stay here was short but sweet. The players had a one-hour skate followed by a team meeting at the John Labatt Centre Wednesday before hitting the road for Detroit. The Senators are preparing to face the Red Wings Friday in their NHL season opener at the Joe Louis Arena.

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The Senators will skate Friday at the Joe Louis Arena.

MacLean made one minor change with his lines. Colin Greening skated with Mika Zibanejad and Daniel Alfredsson while Milan Michalek was with Jason Spezza and Nikita Filatov.

Much of the practice was spent on the power play. The top unit: Michalek, Spezza and Filatov up front with Sergei Gonchar and Erik Karlsson on the points.
Regin questionable for Sens opener

By BRUCE GARRIOCH

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No decision has been made on whether centre Peter Regin will suit up against the Wings. He took part in practice but didn’t take any contact.

Coach Paul MacLean said it was a step in the right direction.

“We’re still optimistic for Friday,” said MacLean. “I thought he was more of a participant, which is a good sign. We’ll take the day (Thursday) and get a better read to see how he is. I thought it was a good sign that he did more in the practice than he did (Wednesday).”

The Senators will skate Friday at the Joe Louis Arena.

MacLean made one minor change with his lines. Colin Greening skated with Mika Zibanejad and Daniel Alfredsson while Milan Michalek was with Jason Spezza and Nikita Filatov.

Much of the practice was spent on the power play. The top unit: Michalek, Spezza and Filatov up front with Sergei Gonchar and Erik Karlsson on the points.

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 10.06.2011
As expected, Flyers forward Blair Betts was plucked off waivers yesterday by Montreal. The Canadiens will be responsible for his $700,000 salary and he will make his Montreal debut tonight in Toronto.

Betts, 31, is an excellent penalty killer and role player, but his services were made expendable by the additions of Max Talbot and Wayne Simmonds, two younger and more durable players. He played 138 games with the Flyers over two seasons after making the team as a tryout in 2009.

Betts' departure also clears a contract spot in the Flyers' organization, which leaves them at 49 contracts toward the league-enforced 50-contract limit. That ultimately could pave the way for Couturier to remain with the Flyers throughout the season if he impresses enough in the early going.

Slap shots

Matt Walker and Oskars Bartulis also cleared waivers. Walker is expected to be the Flyers' sixth defenseman tonight, on a pairing with Braydon Coburn. Andreas Lilja will be the healthy scratch on defense. Bartulis was assigned to AHL Adirondack. The Flyers are not carrying an extra forward. Rookies Matt Read and Zac Rinaldo will both make their NHL regular-season debuts tonight.

Ian Laperriere was on the Opening Day roster and counts against the salary cap on the injured reserve. He does not need to be sent to the long-term injured reserve until the Flyers need to make another roster move.

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 10.06.2011
Flyers hoping Bryzgalov is a great story

By Frank Seravalli

ILYA BRYZGALOV loves to tell a good story.

And inside the Flyers' locker room, the $51 million goalie has yet to meet an audience that does not appreciate his humor and candor.

Just a few days ago, beaming from ear to ear, he started weaving his latest tale.

"There's this story," Bryzgalov began with his Russian accent, where stories don't always translate well to English and American culture. "Once, evil met this guy. The guy, this random guy, he chose a chair with a high seat. He always wanted to see things from the top.

"Once, when sitting there, he fell down from the seat and spilled water all over his pants and everything, and he looked ridiculous. Stepping down, he decided that he liked the seat lower."

So, Bryz, where exactly are you going with this?

"When you fall from a low seat, it's not as painful," Bryzgalov responded. "I am new here. I want to take small steps. Let's go step-by-step, day-by-day, and try to build something."

Like it or not, Bryzgalov is already on that pedestal - not only in the Flyers organization, but around the NHL.

When the Flyers open their 44th season tonight in Boston, as they watch the Bruins raise their Stanley Cup banner to the rafters, they will do so with an entirely different organizational philosophy put into practice on the ice.

Paul Holmgren's new experiment starts with Bryzgalov, the league's highest-paid goaltender this season, whose acquisition was the leading domino when the Flyers' roster crumbled last summer. This is the most the Flyers have ever spent on one position in the proud history of their franchise.

Now, with perhaps the best one-two goaltending punch in the league, the Flyers will try to tackle their Stanley Cup drought from a different angle.

"I came here to win," Bryzgalov said. "No other reason. I came here for the long haul."

Chris Pronger was raving about Bryzgalov's resume and pedigree on Tuesday. In addition to injecting life and laughter into the locker room, he has been worth his weight in gold for bringing confidence to others.

"I guess we just went out and got the funniest guys from every team," Bryzgalov said about the Flyers' suddenly bright locker room.

He has not even played a regular-season game for the Flyers, but few names in hockey can quell fears in the crease like Bryzgalov.

For once, goaltending isn't the Flyers' question mark. One or two players won't need to shoulder the weight of an entire team in the blame column, unlike the seemingly last decade-and-a-half since Ron Hextall began to falter.

And that's no disrespect to backup Sergei Bobrovsky or former goalies Brian Boucher, Roman Cechmanek, John Vanbiesbrouck, Tommy Soderstrom, et al.

"The last few years, it was getting old hearing the same stories again and again," forward Danny Briere said. "It was probably even tougher for those goalies, hearing their names mentioned as the concerns for the Flyers."

"It's exciting going into a season where there is really no question mark there. We know who they are and what they will give us. It's a nice change."

For Bryzgalov, 31, it will be a nice change, too. More money. Better living situation. He just settled on a house in South Jersey earlier this week after living in Rittenhouse Square since August. He has a daughter, Valery, who is 7, and a son, Vladislav, who is 5.

He's also finally playing in a true hockey market - something he could not say about stops in Anaheim and Phoenix.

And the geography, as well as the opponents, should pad his already excellent statistics. Instead of back-to-back games in, say, Denver and St. Louis, the Flyers play the bulk of their schedule within a 1-hour flight in the same time zone. That's important for a goaltender who has not played fewer than 65 games in each of the last three seasons.

In front of him, he has the best defense corps in the Eastern Conference - one that will make him look far better than anything he played behind in Phoenix.

With all of those nice perks comes pressure to win. It's a real pressure that is not included on the job descriptions in probably 24 or 25 of the other NHL markets.

"So far, everybody expects for me like every game we're playing during the season that we need to win by a shootout or that we can't give up more than one goal," Bryzgalov said. "That's not going to happen every night. Some nights, yes, it will be like that. Some nights, not. It's hard to predict."

Hard to predict. Hard to reason why the Flyers have waited this long. Starting tonight, that wait is over. This is the starter, in his prime, who the fan base has craved.

"I can't promise everything," Bryzgalov said. "But I can promise that I will be faithful, be honest and work hard."

He might just have another, slightly more magical tale brewing for this season.

ILYA's INKLINGS

If you don't follow Flyers goaltender Ilya Bryzgalov on Twitter (@bryzgoalie30), you're missing out on one of the truly hilarious and honest streams of consciousness of a professional athlete.

Here's the Best of Bryz on Twitter (all spelling and phrasings are his own):

"I saw man today in park, he dressed in women clothes and high hills." - Strolling through Rittenhouse

"You don't have to go to Amsterdam, we have lots of mushrooms here in Philly." - Tweeting a picture of a mushroom in the grass on Sept. 13

"I can't wait to see Lion King in 3D, pumba my hero." followed by "Pumba just saved Simba. Great guy." - Sept. 17

"We all have to make choice in our lives, I choose to be happy!" - Sept. 20

Hot chocolate: such nice drink." - Sept. 20

"Childhood is when you are running from the bathroom in the middle of the night, happy you didn't get eaten." - Sept. 11

"Choosing the house it's nightmare." - Picking out a house in South Jersey on Aug. 20

"Today was driving around Moscow city and was amazed by one dog! This dog was crossing the road exactly at pedestrian crossing. What an amazing dog?! - June 20

"Driving through Brooklyn, I've never seen this side of NY." - Driving to JFK Airport June 18 on the way back to Moscow

"Dolphin tail heartwarming movie. This is the way the world should be." - After watching the new movie, "Dolphin Tale," on Sept. 24

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 10.06.2011
Most decisions." 

"You move." 

"I think it's blown way out of proportion, who's the captain and the assistants. We don't need to have letters on our jerseys to be able to speak up and make guys accountable. It was the same thing last year."

But Briere acknowledged, "Other guys are stepping up. You add a guy like Jagr, guys like [Claude] Giroux and [James] van Riemsdyk and Matt Carle are now being counted on to have a bigger voice. I think that's where the change will be."

Because of the Great Makeover, the preseason was important for the players to learn Laviolette's system and to establish relationships with each other. Based on the laughter in the locker room, the team seemed to pass Chemistry 101.

The process, Laviolette said, is ongoing.

"We've got a lot of work to do. We have to build something here, not only on the ice but off the ice," he said. "That requires a lot of investment from our players. It's a good challenge."

Said Giroux, the crafty little center who seems on the verge of stardom: "We've been here for three weeks now, and we're trying to get to know each other. We went to the Phillies game the other day; the whole team was there. Doing stuff like that is going to help everybody be on the same page. I had a chance to meet some of the new guys' wives. Little details like that are huge."

Asked his impressions of the revamped team, Pronger was his blunt self.

"You know what? I don't know," he said. "I think we're just scratching the surface because the whole team has not played one game together."

Can a team with such a drastic makeover win a Stanley Cup?

"I do believe that," Pronger said. "But you have to continue to get better. We can go 0-10 and still win. We can go 10-0 and not win. It's how you build and develop. We've got a lot of young guys that are going to develop over the course of a year. We're going to make mistakes. We're going to do a lot of positive things. How we add them up and learn from them is going to create our identity."

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 10.06.2011

BOSTON - When the Flyers skate onto the ice for Thursday's season opener in Boston, they will bear little resemblance to the team that reached the Stanley Cup Finals two seasons ago.

By design.

Flyers 2, Devils 1 
Flyers 5, Rangers 3 
2010-2011 Flyers fights

After being swept by Boston in four games in the second round of the playoffs last season, general manager Paul Holmgren daringly gutted the roster. The Flyers now have just eight players from the "almost" championship in 2010.

Oh, and 10 players who were with the Flyers at the end of last season - when they finished second in the Eastern Conference with 106 points - are no longer here.

Holmgren, of course, wasn't alone in his decisions to remake the team, getting input from coach Peter Laviolette, among others.

"Yes, there were conversations. No, it's not my job. That's Paul's job, and he did a great job at it," Laviolette said the other day. "He confides in different people, but ultimately it's the job of the general manager."

The New Flyers have strong leaders and players who will buy into Laviolette's system.

The New Flyers will miss the scoring of Jeff Carter, Mike Richards, and Ville Leino, but they got stronger on the power play because of the ageless Jaromir Jagr and they became younger and faster because of players like Jakub Voracek, Wayne Simmonds, Sean Couturier, Matt Read, and Brayden Schenn, who will start the season in the minors.

Most important, they got better at the game's most important position, goalie. They are hoping chatty Ilya Bryzgalov becomes the franchise's first Vezina Trophy winner since Ron Hextall in 1987.

"This group will have to make their own mark and their own identity," Laviolette said. "They're going to get to battle through 82 games, and from there we'll see where we land. We'll get an opportunity - hopefully, based on a good regular season - to play for the Cup, and then we'll have to make our own noise as a group."

Provided Chris Pronger bounces back from an injury-ravaged season, Bryzgalov will benefit from a veteran defense, the only part of the team that has retained its core.

"Our big five guys are intact, and if they're healthy, it's a real strength of our team - our defense and our goaltending," said Holmgren. "Youth and enthusiasm and a little more size on the wing, I think, is a good thing."

Pronger agreed.

"Obviously, we've got a new-look team, a lot of new faces," he said. "It's exciting to get back, be healthy, be in the mix."

During a 4-2-1 preseason, the Flyers looked noticeably faster.

"I like the fact we seem to have a quick pace to us," Laviolette said.

"You look up and down our lineup, you've got guys who can skate and move and play the game at a high tempo," Pronger said. "In today's NHL, if you take a look around, that seems to be a huge factor in a lot of personnel decisions."

In addition to the personnel changes, the Flyers have a new captain, Pronger, who is vocal and will challenge his teammates - a much different style than the one used by the previous captain, the quiet Richards.

Most of the Flyers downplayed the switch in captains.

"Honestly, this is not going change much. Those are just letters," said Danny Briere, who, along with Kimmo Timonen, is one of the alternate captains. "I think it's blown way out of proportion, who's the captain and the assistants. We don't need to have letters on our jerseys to be able to speak up and make guys accountable. It was the same thing last year."

(LOADED: 10.06.2011)
As Bruins raise Stanley Cup banner, Flyers want revenge for loss in conference semifinal

By Sam Carchidi

BOSTON - In each of the last three seasons, the Flyers have lost in the playoffs to the team that eventually won the Stanley Cup.

When they open the season Thursday night at TD Garden, they will face the latest of their playoff conquerors, the Boston Bruins, who will raise the Stanley Cup banner to the rafters in a pregame ceremony.

"It's always kind of a shot in the groin when you're in the building for something like that," defenseman Matt Carle said.

"We want to ruin their night, obviously," winger James van Riemsdyk said. "Emotions are going to be running high for them; they'll be all amped up with that banner going up. . . . We're going to be revved up as well."

The Flyers, who were swept in four games by the Bruins in last year's conference semifinals, won't be watching when the championship banner is raised. They'll be in the locker room.

"We'll let them enjoy their time; they've earned it," coach Peter Laviolette said of the Bruins. "We'll get ourselves ready to play hockey."

Roster moves. Defenseman Matt Walker, who had a strong preseason, cleared waivers and earned a spot on the roster. He gives the Flyers some physicality and a righthanded shot from the blue line - and is expected to be paired with Braydon Coburn in the opener.

"After last season, life's pretty good right now," said Walker, who underwent surgeries to both hips last year. "Last year, every morning I got up I didn't know if I'd be able to put my shoes on or pull my socks up."

The Flyers will start the season about $65,000 under the cap, but they could get more relief if Ian Laperriere ($1.16 million cap hit) is placed on the long-term injured list.

Blair Betts was claimed off waivers by Montreal. That means the Flyers have 49 players on their 50-man contract limit. Sean Couturier would be the 50th if he plays his 11th game.

Oskars Bartulis cleared waivers and was sent to the AHL Phantoms.

Lineup. Here are the lines and pairings the Flyers are expected to use in the opener:

Claude Giroux centering van Riemsdyk and Jaromir Jagr.

Danny Briere centering Jakub Voracek and Wayne Simmonds.

Couturier centering Scott Hartnell and Matt Read.

Max Talbot centering Zac Rinaldo and Andreas Nodl.

Defensive pairings: Chris Pronger and Carle; Kimmo Timonen and Andrej Meszaros; Coburn and Walker.

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 10.06.2011
Danny Briere. Coming off a season-high 34 goals last season, Briere is in his prime. It's reasonable to wonder how much Briere will miss playing alongside playmaking winger Ville Leino, who signed with Buffalo.

Scott Hartnell. Hartnell led the Flyers in penalty minutes (142) and, unofficially, in times fallen to the ice last year. The hustling left winger is a presence out front, and he is coming off a 24-goal season.

Andreas Nodl. A hard-working player who excels on defense and the penalty kill, Nodl will have to raise his offense to get increased playing time because there is talent waiting in the wings.

Matt Read. The 25-year-old rookie tied Claude Giroux for the team scoring leadership (seven points) in the preseason. Read plays with a hard-nosed style and was effective on the power play and penalty kill in the preseason.

Scott Rinaldo. With Jody Shelley suspended for the first five games, Rinaldo figures to get some time displaying his feistiness. He plays with an edge, a la Dan Carcillo, and has shown surprisingly good hands around the net.

Brayden Schenn. Sent to the AHL Phantoms to start the season, Schenn is expected to be recalled early in the season. The super prospect was considered the key in the Mike Richards trade with Los Angeles.

Jody Shelley. The Flyers' enforcer and locker-room leader will miss the first five games because of a suspension. They will need his heavy weight presence against certain teams, though minor-leaguer Tom Sestito is waiting for an opportunity.

Wayne Simmonds. A rugged player along the boards, Simmonds had an outstanding preseason (four goals) and was effective on the penalty kill. The Flyers believe Simmonds has 20-goal potential.

Max Talbot. Signed as a free agent, the former Penguin will be one of the Flyers' primary penalty killers - and will keep things loose in the locker room. He scored both goals in the Pens' 2-1 Cup-clinching Game 7 win over Detroit in 2009.

James van Riemsdyk. He raised eyebrows by erupting for seven goals in 11 playoff games last spring and was dominating in camp this preseason. The left winger, coming off a 21-goal campaign, seems primed for a breakout season.

Jakub Voracek. Coming off a 50-point season in Columbus, the speedy Voracek was acquired as part of the Jeff Carter trade. Voracek won't make fans forget the explosive Carter, but he is only 22 and he is percolating with potential.

Defencemen

Matt Carle. The Alaska native is coming off his best season, one in which he had personal bests in points (40), assists (37) and plus-minus rating (plus-30, tied for No. 1 on the team and fifth in NHL). Carle led NHL defencemen with 37 even-strength assists.

Braydon Coburn. He is an underrated defender who excelled in last season's playoffs against Buffalo. Coburn was acquired from Atlanta on Feb. 24, 2007, making him the longest-tenured current Flyer.

Andreas Lilja. The Sweden native signed as a free agent during the summer, he replaces Sean O'Donnell on the Flyers' blue line. Playing for Anaheim last year, Lilja blocked 113 shots.
Walker in Flyers' lineup; Betts goes to Montreal

Sam Carchidi

Walker gives the Flyers physicality and a much-needed RH shot on D.

The Flyers will start the season about $65,000 under the cap, but they could get more relief if Ian Laperriere ($1.16 million cap hit) is placed on the long-term injured list.

With Betts going to Montreal, the Flyers have 49 players on their 50-man contract limit. Couturier will be the 50th player when/if he plays his 11th game.

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 10.06.2011
Canadiens claim Blair Betts

Frank Seravalli

Blair Betts has been claimed by the Montreal Canadiens on waivers.

Matt Walker and Oskars Bartulis have cleared waivers.

General manager Paul Holmgren said it was a “tough conversation” to let Betts know he was on the waiver wire. Betts, 31, was an attractive option for teams as a prototypical fourth-line center, faceoff expert and ace penalty killer for a manageable $700,000.

Holmgren said he made a few phone calls to gauge interest in his players before finally putting them on waivers.

Walker, 31, was praised for a strong training camp after missing nearly all of last season with three different surgeries. He has cleared waivers before and his $1.7 million salary, with 2 years remaining, made him a tough sell for teams as a depth defenseman.
Flyers Thursday

Staff

What: Flyers at Boston Bruins
When: 7:05
Where: TD Garden
TV/Radio: VERSUS/94 WIP FM; 610 AM

What to watch: The Flyers say they will stay in their locker room until the Bruins finish their Stanley Cup banner-raising ceremony prior to the game. ... Defenseman Andreas Lilja is expected to be a healthy scratch as Matt Walker grabbed the No. 6 spot late in training camp. ... Rookie Zac Rinaldo jumps into the lineup as fellow tough guy Jody Shelley begins a five-game suspension.

Flyers tentative lines, defense pairings, goalies:

Forwards
1. James van Riemsdyk-Claude Giroux-Jaromir Jagr
2. Jakub Voracek-Daniel Briere-Wayne Simmonds
3. Scott Hartnell-Sean Couturier-Matt Read
4. Andreas Nodl-Max Talbot-Zac Rinaldo

Defense
1. Chris Pronger-Matt Carle
2. Kimmo Timonen-Andrej Meszaros
3. Braydon Coburn-Matt Walker

Goaltenders
1. Ilya Bryzgalov
2. Sergei Bobrovsky

Burlington County Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Possible pros and cons to Flyers season

Wayne Fish

So you’re asking yourself, is the Flyers’ water bottle half empty or half full?

Good question.

A lot can go right, a lot can go wrong in this new season.

Here are five things that could be on the plus side, another five on the negative:

RIGHT

1. All the new kids — Sean Couturier, Zac Rinaldo, Matt Read to name a few — play like 27-year-olds at both ends of the ice.

2. The Russian Remedy, aka Ilya Bryzgalov, brings stability to the Flyer net for the first time in decades and does it with style.

3. Chris Pronger’s string of unlucky injuries finally comes to an end and he plays a full season.

4. Max Talbot and Claude Giroux take up the penalty kill slack left by the departure of Mike Richards and Blair Betts.

5. Jaromir Jagr gives the power play the sort of puck control it has been lacking the past few seasons.

WRONG

1. Pronger’s 37-year-old back starts behaving like a 73-year-old’s.

2. Players start straying out of coach Peter Laviolette’s system again, and the Flyers fade in the stretch as they did last year.

3. Daniel Briere can’t find chemistry with his new line of Wayne Simmonds and Jakub Voracek.

4. The aforementioned youngsters — Couturier, Rinaldo, Read — revert back to playing like 17-year-olds.

5. It’s 70 and sunny the morning of Jan. 2 and the Winter Classic has to be moved indoors. The Phillies play an exhibition game instead to get ready for spring training.

Burlington County Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Pronger set to steer ship into new era

VOORHEES — Some say a big reason why the Anaheim Ducks were able to win the 2007 Stanley Cup had a lot to do with their captain.

With so many young players on the team, management felt like it needed a veteran presence in the top leadership position.

So, back when the season started, it went to defenseman Chris Pronger and gave him the "C."

The move paid off as Pronger, an emotional lightning rod for players, fans, media and just about everyone else hanging around pucks and rinks, succeeded in getting everyone on the same page.

Funny the term “same page” should come up. In Philadelphia last season, the players, no less, made no secret of the fact that they weren’t on the same page — whether that meant with their coach, Peter Laviolette, or with each other.

Whatever the case, that probably won’t be the case this year.

As the Flyers move away from the Mike Richards-Jeff Carter era, starting tonight in Boston, there doesn’t seem to be any gray area about who’s running the show and how it’s going to be run.

In their past, the Flyers have had captains like Bob Clarke and Keith Primeau who were hardly reluctant to get a wandering player back in line.

By all accounts, Pronger employs a similar approach. About to turn 37 on Monday, he still has a fire in his belly. At 6-foot-6, and with a career guaranteeing a future trip to the Hall of Fame, Pronger commands respect just by walking in the room.

But that isn’t enough, and he will be happy to explain why players have to buy into a system … every day.

Here’s what Pronger expects from the Flyers this year:

“It’s not good enough just to be in this room,” he says. “It’s not just good enough that you’re in the National Hockey League. You want to achieve. You want to win games. You want to have a long, illustrious career and do all these great things.

“Well, that takes hard work and it takes passion and it takes dedication. You have to be willing to make some sacrifices to do it.”

How far Pronger will go to make players accountable remains to be seen. But he’s spelling out what he wants to see in this locker room. And once the season is underway, there shouldn’t be any more talk of “not being on the same page.”

Can a captain speed up the process of getting everyone on the same page?

“To a certain extent, yes,” he says. “But at the end of the day, it comes down to the guys in the locker room coming together. Everybody’s got to be pulling the rope the same way.

“I could pull out 25 different clichés about it, but everybody has to be on the same page. We all have to want the same goal.”

Kimmo Timonen, who along with Danny Briere will serve as alternate captain, says too much was made of a so-called “fractured” room last season. But, having said that, he observes nothing but a positive atmosphere in this year’s preparation period.

“I think it’s been the best training camp in the five years I’ve been here,” he says. “We practice hard. There’s a good tempo. If that’s an indicator, that’s a good sign.”

Briere was a captain of the Buffalo Sabres before arriving in Philadelphia in 2007. He remembers how those Sabre teams seemed to almost overachieve. That’s the sort of atmosphere he hopes to have here, just 16 months removed from Game 6 of the 2010 Stanley Cup Finals.

He says it’s going to take more than just Pronger to make this team accountable for its actions. It has to come from within all the players.

“We don’t need to have letters on our jerseys to be able to speak up and make guys accountable,” he said. “It was the same thing last year. There’s many guys that made each other accountable last year so it’s not going to change. Obviously, we lost Jeff and Mike as far as leaders in the room, but other guys are stepping up.”

But at the end of the day, it helps to have a leader the coach can have a good line of communication with.

That’s what makes the 2011-12 season look so promising.

Season preview

Forwards: The additions of Jaromir Jagr, Jakub Voracek, Wayne Simmonds, Max Talbot, Sean Couturier and Matt Read perhaps raise some chemistry issues, at least early in the season, but Peter Laviolette seems to enjoy the challenge.

Laviolette will start the season by breaking up the successful Briere-Scott Hartnell pairing. Briere will center Voracek and Simmonds; Jagr skates with center Claude Giroux and James van Riemsdyk. Read, Couturier and Hartnell figure to play the third line with Talbot, Zac Rinaldo and Andreas Nodl on the fourth line.

There should be enough scoring here to make up for the loss of Richards, Carter, Kris Versteeg and Ville Leino, among others.

Defense: This should be the Flyers strong suit, with five of the six veterans back from last year. A healthy Pronger, who played in only 50 games last year, is the key. The Timonen-Braydon Coburn pairing has been broken up, with Timonen playing with Andrej Meszaros. Coburn will start the season with Matt Walker.

Goaltender: Ilya Bryzgalov brings instant credibility in the net, plus a humorous personality to a somewhat staid locker room. The Russian is big, fast and hungry for some postseason success. His understudy, Sergei Bobrovsky, can play with less pressure after an overloaded work schedule his rookie year.

Burlington County Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Walker clears waivers, Betts claimed

Wayne Fish

VOORHEES — The long and winding road to finalize the Flyers’ roster finally came to an end Wednesday.

At high noon, 24 hours after making some waiver moves on Tuesday, the Flyers learned that defenseman Matt Walker will remain with the team after going unclaimed.

Another veteran, center Blair Betts, will not be on the team. He was claimed by the Montreal Canadiens.

So heading into tonight’s opener at Boston, it looks like the lines and defense pairings are pretty much set.

Walker, 31, is likely to be paired with Braydon Coburn. The Betts departure means that Max Talbot will shift to center on the fourth line between rookie Zac Rinaldo and Andreas Nodl.

Walker looked relieved that the process was over. He struggled through a pair of hip operations last season and is anxious to prove he’s worth the big money he’s getting.

"After last year, I knew I wouldn’t be in a perfect situation this year," said Walker of the uncertain situation over the past day. "But it (clearing waivers) is part of the business.

"I’m good to go. I’m ready to play on Thursday."

As for being paired with Coburn, Walker said there’s really not a lot of adjusting to do.

"I’ve played with so many guys in the last 10 years...obviously the more you play with a single person, the better it is, the easier it gets," Walker said. "So many things like injuries can happen, I just want to play.

"Compared to last season, life’s pretty good right now. Last year, I woke up and didn’t know if I could pull my socks on. I’m definitely in a better state of mind this year."

Coburn has been practicing with Walker, so the two are starting to get to know each other’s moves.

For Coburn, it’s a move back to the left side, his more natural position. He had been playing the right with Kimmo Timonen.

"There are definitely some advantages to being paired up like that," he said. "It’s good to have had a couple days of practice. A lot of it is chemistry and knowing where a guy is going to be.

"It’s a partnership you develop and we’re trying to make sure we communicate a lot."

Betts will be missed on the penalty kill but Talbot and others are expected to fill that void. Betts played 138 games over two seasons in Philadelphia with 13 goals and 30 points.

"He (Betts) is a professional in every sense of the word," coach Peter Laviolette said. "He’s done a lot for the organization so I was really happy to see him get picked up and get an opportunity."

Oskars Bartulis also cleared waivers and reportedly will be assigned to the Adirondack Phantoms of the AHL.
Schenn to Phantoms; Betts, Walker waived

By Wayne Fish

VOORHEES — The new look of the Flyers just got a little newer.

On Tuesday, one day before NHL rosters must be finalized, the Flyers were busier than a power play in the last minute of a tie game.

General manager Paul Holmgren announced that highly regarded prospect Brayden Schenn, the centerpiece of the Mike Richards trade, will begin the season with the Adirondack Phantoms.

Some of that decision has to do with Schenn’s playing status, which was slowed in the preseason by an injury.

Also headed to the American Hockey League affiliate are defenseman Erik Gustafsson and forward Harry Zolnierczyk.

In addition to those moves, the Flyers placed veteran center Blair Betts, plus defensemen Matt Walker and Oskars Bartulis, on waivers.

The Schenn assignment didn’t come as a complete surprise. He had seen limited playing time in the preseason. Plus, he’s a big payroll ticket at $3.1 million (which will drop to $1.7 million if he plays one game in the minors).

“He (Schenn) needs to play a bit,” Holmgren said. “I don’t know how long it will be. He’s healthy now, ready to take part in things. We have to get him playing.”

The Walker decision was a bit unexpected, seeing as how both Holmgren and coach Peter Laviolette have been singing his praises. Walker is another expensive commodity at $1.9 million.

But Holmgren gives the impression that he probably won’t lose Walker, having gauged interest around the league before exposing the 31-year-old backliner.

“I don’t know what will happen, obviously he’s available right now,” Holmgren said. “I wouldn’t read into who is on waivers. We need to make decisions tomorrow (Wednesday). We’ll file our roster tomorrow and in all likelihood, Matt will be on there.”

Betts has been the team’s fourth-line center the past two years but the Cinderella story of 25-year-old Matt Read may have pushed the 31-year-old Betts out the door.

“I happen to think a lot of Blair as a penalty killer, faceoff guy,” Holmgren said. “He’s really an ideal fourth-line guy. (But) some of the young guys we acquired in the summer can fill that role, I think. Blair’s been a big part of things the past couple years here ... that was a difficult (exit) conversation today.”

Couturier confident

Holmgren reiterated it’s likely 18-year-old center Couturier will be in the opening night lineup in Boston on Thursday.

“I’m still here, so that’s good news,” Couturier said. “I’m happy everything went well and just glad to be here. I’m just trying to get better. Once you have a good day, it’s over, and if you have a bad day the next day, just forget it.”

New lines, defense pairings

In addition to personnel moves, the Flyers also unveiled what is thought to be their lines and defense pairings for the Boston game.

True to his word, Laviolette shuffled things a bit, splitting up Danny Briere and Scott Hartnell. Briere will center Jakub Voracek (left) and Wayne Simmonds (right). Claude Giroux centers James van Riemsdyk and Jaromir Jagr.

After that, it looks like Read in between Hartnell and Couturier and possibly Max Talbot working with Zac Rinaldo and Andreas Nodl.

On defense, the three-year pairing of Kimmo Timonen and Braydon Coburn was dismantled. Timonen will play with Andrej Meszaros while Coburn waits to find out a new partner. Only Chris Pronger and Matt Carle stay together.

“It’s not a big deal,” Timonen said. “But it’s going to take a little bit more time ... we want to be on the same page. That’s the main thing with a partner.”

Briere, Hartnell and the departing Ville Leino were the best Flyer line in the stretch run last year. For Briere, it will be somewhat of an adjustment.

“Well, it was my first time with Simmonds today,” Briere said. “I like how he works. He’s good along the boards. He’s got a good stick in front of the net. I’m someone that goes a lot in front of the net. I had Hartsy there before so I need someone to be around the crease to help me out and getting some of the traffic out of the way so I can find the garbage.

“With Voracek, so far in training camp, we’ve played a lot together. I like how he thinks. It seems like there’s a little bit of chemistry there, so we’ll see when the real games start.”

Burlington County Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Off-season changes make Flyers a rarity

JAY GREENBERG

Only 13 months after being one goal short of Game 7 of a Stanley Cup final, the Flyers tore it up.

Carter, who failed to lift the puck over the flopping Antti Niemi soon after the Flyers had tied Game 6 with 3:59 remaining, did not score that goal. The winning goal also was not stopped by Michael Leighton, who allowed the worst Cup clincher of the expansion era. Leighton and the injured goalie he replaced that spring, Brian Boucher, also are gone, like the moment the Flyers failed to seize.

Carter, who as a Flyer averaged .392 goals per game in the regular season and .276 in the playoffs, is now a Columbus Blue Jacket. He was sent to Ohio in exchange for Jakub Voracek and an eighth-overall pick that turned into Sean Couturier. Free agent Ilya Bryzgalov is now the goalie through the salary cap space created in part by the Carter deal (See story).

Time not only doesn’t stand still, it moves at warped speed in a copped league where the window to win may be even smaller than the space over Niemi had seemed to Carter with a Game 7 on his stick. But if, after missing 16 games over the last two playoffs, Carter had become disappointing and expendable, nobody saw coming the trade that sent Mike Richards to Los Angeles for Brayden Schenn and Wayne Simmonds.

The NHL, in fact, had not seen such a shakeup of a young, successful nucleus in a long time. Historically, the list of good players, in their primes, allowed to become free agents for signability reasons, is a long one.

But Richards and Carter, both 26 and not even yet in their theoretical peak years, had four seasons left on their respective contracts. Twin 2003 first-round picks that helped attract Danny Briere and enable the franchise to do a lightning rebuild from their 2006-07 sink to the bottom of the NHL, they were keys to a team in first place overall just six months before their trades.

Nevertheless, GM Paul Holmgren went right to what he clearly thought was a fast-rotting foundation and dug up a good portion of it. And it’s hard to find precedents for such bold moves. When, in 2005, the Bruins dealt 1997 first-overall pick Joe Thornton for three Sharks, Boston had won one playoff round in seven years, not six series in four years like the Flyers had with Carter and Richards.

The closest to such a shakeup in Flyer history was their summer 1982 trade of Ken Linseman, the seventh-overall pick in the 1978 draft, in a three-way for Mark Howe. But the Flyers had followed up their 1980 finals appearance with just one series win the next two years, their defense was in tatters and Linseman was neither a captain nor a leading scorer.

Ultimately, Wayne Gretzky’s trade and sale from the Oilers to the Kings was a precursor of owner Peter Pocklington’s eventual bankruptcy. So really, the last great shakeup of such magnitude, made almost strictly for hockey purposes, may have been when the Bruins, one year removed from their 1974 finals loss to the Flyers, traded Phil Esposito and Ken Hodge to the Rangers for Jean Ratelle and Brad Park.

In one deal, that’s three Hall of Famers, which Carter and Richards are unlikely to become. But our point is how rare is this example of a team willing to make dramatic moves for reasons other than the desire to get younger and cheaper.

The Flyers certainly remove some years in the L.A. trade, picking up Schenn, 20, Simmonds, 23, plus a No. 2 pick. But when your indispensable defenseman, Chris Pronger is about to turn 37, your second-best defenseman, Kimmo Timonen, is 36 and you just spent $51 million on a 31-year-old goalie, this is not a major rebuild, but a retool on the fly.

Adding to the intrigue is Holmgren’s refusal to hint at any problems the Flyers had with Richards, when clearly they must have had some. The need to get bigger on the wings, which the Flyers did with Simmonds and Voracek, was a factor secondary to … we really don’t know.

What is clear is that the locker room now belongs to Pronger, a concept with which the Flyers are more than just content. Pronger and Timonen also will reach a level of comfort with allowing Bryzgalov to stop everything he can see, reducing anxiety throughout the team. The last time the Flyers moved to get the best mid-career goalie available, things worked out fine for themselves and Bernie Parent.

We’ll see in a few years whether Sergei Bobrovsky, 23, proves as good or better than Bryzgalov. But until a first-string-caliber backup inevitably becomes an unaffordable luxury, the Flyers will have two talented goalies for this year at least, nothing but a positive.

A useful, sometimes dynamic Ville Leino was a cap casualty, replaced by Jaromir Jagr, one of the best 20 players in the history of an NHL, he last played in three seasons ago. The exhibition games demonstrated that even at age 39, Jagr can still one-time a puck. We’ll see what he has left for April.

The Penguins thought shoulder surgery had made Max Talbot, the Game 7 hero of the 2009 Cup, signed by the Flyers as a free agent, a fourth-line center. If Schenn, injured during the exhibition season, is not ready to play regularly on a playoff team, Talbot necessarily becomes a third-line player. And no amount of step-up by Claude Giroux into the No. 1 center’s position, or even normal production from 33-year-old Briere, makes the Flyers as deep up the middle as they were a year ago, never mind how often Carter wound up on the wing.

The Flyers, seeking redemption from a second-round sweep by the Stanley Cup champion Bruins, have fresh energy players in Simmonds and Voracek, almost always a good thing, plus new motivation for Giroux and James van Riemsdyk in larger roles management obviously feels they are prepared to handle.

The shakeout from all these changes will be extensive, potentially debilitating, perhaps exhilarating. The last time the Flyers changed this much coming off a playoff season, sophomores Dave Poulin, Ron Sutter and Murray Craven, plus rookies Rick Tocchet, Peter Zezel, and Derrick Smith, replaced the just-retired Bob Clarke and Bill Barber, plus the traded Darryl Sittler. That season, 1984-85, the Flyers astounded the league with a President’s Trophy and a finals berth.

To dream, one’s lids do not have to close. If nothing else, these dramatically altered Flyers are going to be hard to take your eyes from.

Jay Greenberg covered the Flyers for 14 years for the Daily News and Evening Bulletin. His history of the Flyers, Full Spectrum, was published in 1996. He can be reached at jayg616@aol.com.

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Pressure’s on Bryzgalov to lead Flyers to a Cup

SARAH BAICKER

The Flyers were media darlings last spring, but not because the team was surrounded by feel-good stories or because they’d accomplished any particularly impressive feats.

No, the Flyers were simply easy to make fun of. You might remember, they had a goalie “situation.” Or, for those into metaphor, a “goalie carousel.” Or was it “goalie roulette”?

Coach Peter Laviolette elected to pull his goalie an almost unthinkable seven times through the Flyers’ 11 playoff games. And after the team was ousted from the playoffs by the vengeful Boston Bruins, it was clear the “situation” in net needed to change.

Everyone knew it. In fact, Flyers chairman Ed Snider even said so.

Almost five months to the day after the Bruins completed a sweep of the Flyers, we now know Snider was the driving force behind the Flyers’ decision to all but disband and rebuild the team around one of the best – and most expensive – goalies of the current era: Ilya Bryzgalov.

The team’s next chapter begins Thursday against those very same aforementioned Bruins, when the Flyers open the 2011-12 season with Bryzgalov between the pipes. He will be the Flyers’ fifth starting goalie in the past six seasons.

And the Flyers hope he’ll maintain that responsibility for the foreseeable future.

The pressure – and there will be a lot of it – is now on Bryzgalov to lead the new-look Flyers to the Stanley Cup. Nothing less will be acceptable, especially considering Bryzgalov’s monstrous nine-year, $51-million contract, and the changes the team made in order to make space for it.

That pressure will be palpable, but it won’t be coming from the goaltender himself.

“I never put the pressure on myself,” Bryzgalov told reporters this summer. “I know my job and I know what I have to do.”

General manager Paul Holmgren, in effect, chose to implode his team because of what the Flyers believe Bryzgalov can do. Gone are stars Mike Richards and Jeff Carter. There’s no longer Ville Leino to back up Danny Briere’s stellar second line. There’s no more solid backup netminder Brian Boucher. The entire locker room is full of new faces.

That’s a lot of change for one man to make up for.

And that’s OK with Bryz.

“I think I can handle it,” he said earlier this off-season. “I know what I have to do. I know when I play bad and what I have to do to fix it.”

That’s been the workhorse goalie’s mantra throughout the preseason. Bryzgalov took the loss in two of the three full games he played through September and early October, but he’s consistently reminded the media he knows how to zero in on his flaws and fix them – quickly.

“It’s like Formula One,” Bryzgalov said after his Flyers debut, a 4-2 loss on home ice, in which he looked shaky and gave up three goals to the Maple Leafs.

“You get on the track the first time and check to see what’s working properly and what’s not. I think it was a good test for me. I have some understanding of where I’m at right now and what I can fix.”

He was in net for the Flyers’ final preseason game, a 2-1 loss to the New Jersey Devils. But in that game, he made very clear he’s meant what he has said all along. He made some tune-ups to his game. The quality saves missing from his first couple of outings were suddenly routine. All along, he appeared calm and composed – a sign of things to come, certainly.

The Flyers expect Bryzgalov to easily play 60-plus regular-season games, leaving backup Sergei Bobrovsky (remember him?) perhaps 20 starts.
Canadiens pluck ex-Flyer Betts from waiver wire

TIM PANACCIO

There’s always a need for a tenacious penalty killer in hockey.

Combine that skill with a proficiency at winning defensive faceoffs, and there’s a chance that player will find a job in the National Hockey League.

Hence, Blair Betts is now a Montreal Canadien, having been claimed off waivers on Wednesday for a little over $3,000.

Meanwhile, two other Flyers cleared as the opening day roster was set to be handed in at 3 p.m. this afternoon.

Matt Walker is headed back onto the Flyers roster where is expected to be on the right side Thursday night in Boston with partner Braydon Coburn.

Oskars Bartulis? He appears headed to the Phantoms. No decision there yet.

The loss of Betts was tempered by the fact the Flyers have younger bodies to replace him. Yet there’s no denying the 31-year-old center was a calming influence in the room.

“He’s a professional in every sense of the word,” said coach Peter Laviolette. “He’s done a lot for the organization, so I was happy to see he got picked up and gets an opportunity.”

The trickle-down effect from losing Betts saw Max Talbot slotted as the fourth line center between Andreas Nodl and Zac Rinaldo. This was based on practice.

Rookie Sean Couturier advanced between Scott Hartnell and Matt Read.

The top line remains Claude Giroux centering James van Riemsdyk and Jaromir Jagr. The second line features Danny Briere between Jakub Voracek and Wayne Simmonds.

Hence, the roster that likely gets turned in today has 23 players totaling $64.23 million against the salary cap. It wouldn’t include Brayden Schenn (Phantoms) or Bartulis. That leaves the Flyers with $65,704 in cap space, according to capgeek.com.

And until Schenn is physically ready to play with the Flyers, there’s no need to place Ian Laperriere (post-concussion syndrome) on long-term injury. So, he likely sticks around on the roster until cap space is needed.

The bad? Because of Shelley’s five-game suspension, the Flyers are carrying 14 forwards but the two extra players – Shelley and Laperriere – can’t play. So, for five games, the Flyers have no margin for error at forward.

No one was happier about clearing waivers than Walker, who goes from the waiver wire to the opening day lineup against the Bruins.

“Business side of things I guess,” Walker said. “Nothing’s really changed on my part. I tried to play well and I think I did. It’s kind of goofy all the money and cap situations the teams are in.”

Walker said general manager Paul Holmgren explained what was involved and why. Still, just being out there was odd given how good a camp Walker had.

“That part was surprising a bit but on the other hand, I kinda see how things are and after what happened last year [with injuries], I knew I wouldn’t be in a perfect situation for the start of this year.”

Walker rehabbed very intently over the summer from dual hip surgeries with a positive outlook. He was also in terrific shape.

“From what I’ve heard ... I’m good to go [against Boston],” he said.

The Flyers now have 49 players under contract in the organization with losing Betts. If Couturier is kept around past 10 games, he will be the 50th and final contract, barring a roster move.

Here’s the 23-man roster the Flyers turned in at the deadline:
When Jaromir Jagr left the NHL for Russia three years ago, he did so with the knowledge he was abandoning his quest for a number of personal and league milestones.

The biggest prize? Jagr was one measly point shy of 1,600, which would make him the ninth player in league history to achieve that mark.

Overall, he needs 42 points to tie Joe Sakic (1,641) for eighth place all-time.

"I knew about the one point, but I don’t pay attention to it," Jagr said. "How to explain it? Everything happens for a reason. That’s the way I look at it. Maybe because I went to Russia. I will be a better player even though I’m three years older (Jagr is now 39).

"Had I stayed here, I would have had different milestones. Playing here just to get the points? That’s not me. I want to play to be happy and help a team. Maybe I could have had 1,800 points by now, but that’s not me."

Jagr also needs 47 assists for 1,000, which would make the Czech winger the 12th player in history to hit that plateau.

He needs 10 goals to tie Brendan Shanahan (656) for 11th place all-time. And he needs just three assists to tie Mark Recchi (956) for 13th place all-time. Jagr can also tie Doug Gilmour for 12th place in assists (964) with 11.

Needless to say, Jagr’s first year as a Flyer is going to be one of record-breaking proportion. Which has to be doubly painful for the Pittsburgh Penguins, no?

Goals

Calgary’s Jarome Iginla needs 16 to hit 500. A healthy Daniel Alfredsson in Ottawa needs 11 for 400, while Chicago’s Marian Hossa needs 12 for the same total. New Jersey’s Ilya Kovalchuk needs 31 for 400. Ex-Flyer Simon Gagne is one of five players looking for a 300th career goal. Gagne, playing in Los Angeles, needs 24.

Assists

San Jose’s Joe Thornton is the only NHL player close to 700 assists. He needs just five while Phoenix’s Ray Whitney needs 15 for 600.

Games

Quite a few NHL players should hit the 1,000th game played mark this season, but only one will hit 1,500 – Detroit’s Nick Lidstrom will do it in his sixth game to become the 14th player to reach that plateau.

Head coaches

Barry Trotz (Nashville) and Terry Murray (Los Angeles) will each coach their 1,000th NHL game this season. Trotz needs 16 games while Murray needs 17. Murray also needs 14 victories for 500 while Trotz needs 45 to reach 500 wins.

Goalties

Edmonton’s Nikolai Khabibulin needs one game to tie Chris Osgood (744) for 18th place all-time and eight wins to tie Sean Burke (324) for 19th place all-time.

Man games lost due to injury

The Flyers had 244 lost games due top injury last season. If that sounds high, consider that four other times since 2001-02, they’ve had more than 300 man games lost due to injury. So, 244 looks pretty good compared to that. Here’s the breakdown:

2001-02: 213
2002-03: 212
2003-04: 241
2005-06: 388

2006-07: 300
2007-08: 315
2008-09: 330
2009-10: 205
2010-11: 244

And the winner is … Brad Richards.

The former Dallas Star wanted to play for John Tortorella, with whom he won a Stanley Cup in Tampa Bay (2004). Richards got his wish in free agency, signing the largest contract of the summer: nine years for $60 million.

Did you know?

Claude Julien’s Boston Bruins became the first NHL club to win a Stanley Cup last summer by winning three seven-game playoff series?

No repeats

The last team to repeat as Stanley Cup champions were the Detroit Red Wings, who won back-to-back in 1997 and 1998. Flyers fans will forever remember that because Terry Murray’s 1996-97 club was swept by the Red Wings in the final.

No chance

Since winning the Cup in 2006, the Carolina Hurricanes have missed the playoffs four times over a five-year stretch. Had the ‘Canes, with 91 points, gotten one more win last season, they would have made it.

Start over

Time to start over. Again. For the third time, no less.

Obviously, we’re talking about the ever-disappointing Dany Heatley, who survived the car wreck in Atlanta and asked to be traded to Ottawa … then hated Ottawa and asked to be traded again, but wouldn’t go to Edmonton and ended up in San Jose … and didn’t want to leave the Sharks, but was not respected in the dressing room by key teammates and had to be traded again … and now he finds himself buried in Minnesnowda.

Anyone who thinks he’s going to resurrect his career is only kidding themselves. If Heatley had played with any ounce of gumption in the Western Conference Finals against Vancouver, the Sharks would have met Boston for the Cup.

Curved glass

Remember all the fuss made over Zdeno Chara’s hit on Montreal’s Max Pacioretty at the player bench last season? It again called into the question the dangerously padded areas at the bench known as “stanchions.” After months of testing, the NHL has replaced the stanchions this year with curved glass. Additionally, the glass is designed to push back into an absorption post before bouncing back into place.

All in the family

That would be the Sutter family of the Carolina Hurricanes organization. Brandon Sutter scored 14 goals for the ‘Canes last season; cousin Brett toiled with the Charlotte Checkers; and GM Jim Rutherford drafted Brody Sutter on the seventh round this past June.

Thanks to NHL.com for some of the tidbits used in this story.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 10.06.2011
Matt Read for ROY?

TIM PANACCIO

It’s one thing for Matt Read, the overage rookie, to play his first NHL game on Thursday night in Boston for the Flyers.

It’s another for the 25-year-old grad from Bemidji State to play knowing that TSN senior hockey analyst Bob McKenzie picked him to win the Calder Trophy as rookie of the year.

McKenzie’s Tweet on Tuesday went out to more than 210,000 followers:

Nobody asked, but I am picking 25-year-old Matt Read of PHI to win this year’s Calder Trophy as top rookie in the NHL.

How did Read take this news?

“It surprised me, but I didn’t think much of it,” Read said. “It’s just someone’s opinion. It doesn’t really count. I’ve got to worry about myself … do my job and work hard every minute on the ice.”

Nonetheless, Read heard about it all day from friends.

“I got a couple texts from friends who said, ‘hey did you see this?'” Read said. “I didn’t know what they were talking about so I checked it out myself. It’s cool to get the recognition and everything but it’s preseason. Now the regular season starts.”

Let the hype begin.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 10.06.2011
Flyers preseason by the numbers

TIM RIDAY

As the Flyers prepare their final roster for opening night on Thursday, here are some notes from the Flyers 2011 preseason, courtesy of philadelphiaflyers.com.

The Flyers finished the preseason with a 4-2-1 record and outscored their opponents 20-15.

Jaromir Jagr scored four goals on eight shots in the preseason. Three of Jagr's four goals came on the power play. Two were game-winners.

Claude Giroux and Matt Read led the team in scoring with seven points each in the preseason.

James van Riemsdyk netted three goals and added an assist to go along with a plus-3 rating in three preseason outings.

Through 151 minutes of play, goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky posted a 0.40 goals-against average and .984 save percentage.

The Flyers' power play produced eight goals, going 8 for 32 in the preseason.

The Flyers' penalty-kill unit allowed just three goals on 33 attempts to kill off 91 percent of the opponent's man advantage time.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 10.06.2011
Phoenix Coyotes sign forward Paul Bissonnette to two-year contract extension

By Jim Gintonio –

An "ecstatic" Paul Bissonnette, who signed a two-year contract extension Wednesday, is looking forward to the next step: showing the Coyotes that he can repay their faith in him.

"I just think it's a good fit," said Bissonnette, the enforcer forward who led the Coyotes in penalty minutes last season (71) while playing a career-high 48 games.

"I came in and thought I had a pretty good camp, and they thought the same and I think that it's one of those scenarios where they see the potential and hope that I can rise to the occasion and give them that."

Financial terms of the deal were not disclosed, but Bissonnette, who was set to become an unrestricted free agent at the end of the season, made just over $600,000 in 2010-11.

"We are very pleased to sign Paul to a multiyear extension," General Manager Don Maloney said. "He plays an important role on our team and we are looking for him to take his game to the next level this season."

Bissonnette, 26, recorded only one goal last season, and his benchmark this season is to become a better all-around player. In 104 NHL games with the Coyotes and the Penguins, who drafted him in the fourth round (121st overall) in 2003, he has four goals, three assists and 210 penalty minutes.

Once again, the Coyotes are in the position of entering a season without much respect from the national media, and Bissonnette is eager to prove a lot of people wrong as the Coyotes seek their third consecutive playoff appearance.

"We basically just need a lot of guys coming together and working as one," he said. "As cliché as that sounds, that has been the case for the last two years. We're at the bottom of the salary-cap floor there, and we just kind of have guys that overachieve and get the job done for a coach that knows his players and puts them in a good system.

"Personally, I just want to be one of those guys that can contribute more and hopefully overachieve. I'm a fourth-liner, but I'm hoping to produce some six, seven, eight quality minutes a night and to help my team make the playoffs and succeed."

Ice chips

Defenseman Nathan Oystrick and goaltender Curtis McElhinney cleared waivers and will report to Portland, the Coyotes' affiliate in the AHL.

- Goaltender Jason LaBarbera, whose mask is a tribute to Pat Tillman, will make a donation of $420 to the Tillman foundation for every win he records this season. "I have a tremendous amount of respect for Pat Tillman and everything he did for this country," LaBarbera said.

Arizona Republic LOADED: 10.06.2011
Pens' Orpik closer to returning to action

By Josh Yohe, PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — There is a chance, albeit a small one, that defenseman Brooks Orpik will play Wednesday night when the Penguins open the season against the Canucks.

Orpik, who had hernia surgery this summer and did not play in any exhibition games, has practiced with the team three times in the past week and reported no lingering issues with the injury.

Although it would register as a surprise if Orpik plays against the Canucks, it would not be a shock.

"I wouldn't say there's zero chance I'll play," Orpik said Wednesday.

He has stressed all along that he won't force the issue with this injury. Given the Penguins' depth on the blue line and the reality that the postseason doesn't begin for another six months, there is hardly a need to force the veteran into the lineup until he's completely healthy.

Still, Orpik made it clear that his return is coming soon. Maybe even tonight.

"You never want to miss opening day," Orpik said.

» A Sidney Crosby appearance in western Canada is always a big deal, even when he's not playing. Crosby practiced with the Penguins on Wednesday and then was swamped by dozens of Canadian reporters. As Crosby has told local reporters for weeks, he continues to feel healthy but isn't sure when he will return. Crosby did shed some light on the timeline of his symptoms, saying he has been symptom-free for "less than a month."

» If Wednesday's practice is any indication, the Penguins will use these line combinations in their season opener: Steve Sullivan-Evgeni Malkin-James Neal, Chris Kunitz-Jordan Staal-Tyler Kennedy; Matt Cooke-Mark Letestu-Pascal Dupuis; Joe Vitale-Craig Adams-Arron Asham. In this alignment, forwards Richard Park and Steve MacIntyre would be healthy scratches.

DIGITS

595 — Number of days since Crosby scored in overtime to win the Olympic gold medal for Canada, which is the last time he appeared in Vancouver

200 — Number of days since Matt Cooke's last NHL game, after which he was suspended for 17 games.

46 — Team owner Mario Lemieux celebrated his 46th birthday yesterday.

Tribune Review LOADED: 10.06.2011
By Josh Yohe, PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — The Penguins are dodging a bullet because one of hockey’s great two-way players, Canucks center Ryan Kesler, is nursing a hip injury and won’t be available for Thursday night’s season opener.

Center Jordan Staal, entering his sixth NHL season at age 23, might be poised to see his offensive numbers spike just like Kesler’s did.

Both became NHL regulars because of strong defensive play, and Canucks captain Henrik Sedin suggested Staal could follow Kesler’s lead and become a dynamic offensive player.

"I see so many similarities between Jordan and Kesler,” Sedin said. “It seems like Jordan has been in the league forever, but you must remember how young he is. The offense will come.”

Even if Staal doesn’t post 30-plus goals every season, the Penguins won’t complain. At worst, he’s the league’s best third-line center and a penalty-killing monster who elevates his game in the playoffs.

There’s nothing wrong with that, but Staal may be capable of more. Coach Dan Bylsma believes Staal’s good health — he missed all of training camp and the first half of last season after foot surgeries and a broken hand — will lead to a strong season.

"We see many players struggle after not having training camp and miss half the year,” Bylsma said. “No one gives Jordan credit for that. He got better in his numbers; he played a more significant role.”

Instead of methodically working himself into NHL shape last season, Staal became the Penguins’ first-line center for the first time. With Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin out with season-ending injuries, Staal became the player that the opposition focused on.

"He did well,” Sedin said. “He makes great plays all the time, just like Kesler. It took Kesler a while before he scored lots of goals. It will be the same thing with Staal.”

Kesler didn’t crack the 40-point barrier until his fifth NHL season, when he posted 26 goals and 33 assists for 59 points in 2008-09. He surged the following year, finishing with 25 goals and 50 assists. He capped that last season with a career-high 41 goals among 73 points.

Staal had at least 40 points in three of his first four NHL seasons. Last year’s 30 points — 11 goals and 19 assists — in 42 games would have yielded 59 points over an 82-game schedule.

Bylsma said he witnessed a new Staal during training camp. Finally able to enjoy a healthy summer and camp, Staal was more poised with the puck than in previous seasons.

"I think there’s been a significant boost in the way he’s skating and going to the net,” Bylsma said. “You’re going to see him get better. I wouldn’t be surprised to see him get 10 more points (than his career high) this year.”

Staal’s teammates have long appreciated his work.

"He’s asked to shut down the best players on the other team, score points, kill penalties and help on the power play,” left wing Chris Kunitz said. "That’s a lot.”

Kesler is asked to do all of those things, too.

"Great player,” Staal said. “I don’t get to see him play that often, but he can do it all.”

Drafted three years before Staal, Kesler only recently became an offensive force. Staal could be on the same path.

"He’s going to keep getting better and better,” Sedin said. "You’ll see.”

Tribune Review LOADED: 10.06.2011
By Joe Starkey, PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

The Penguins’ six-month, 82-game odyssey begins Thursday night in Vancouver. As always, predicting their path is pure folly.

If following this club teaches you anything, it’s that the sheer length of the season, combined with the mercurial nature of the franchise, prohibits anything approaching an accurate forecast.

Oh, you can make a pretty good estimate of their final point total. But you’ll never imagine the way they get there. Choose a season, any season, and you’ll see.

Ten years ago, the Penguins fired Ivan Hlinka four games in, to be replaced by the first human being who walked past Craig Patrick’s office. It happened to be Rick Kehoe.

In Kehoe’s first game, Toby Petersen scored a hat trick playing next to Mario Lemieux. The season soon fell apart, finishing in a 10-game winless streak.

I didn’t predict that (though I did have Kris Beech pegged to go minus-25). Five years ago, a team rife with promise was piddling along at .500 in January when it ran off a 15-game unbeaten streak. Ray Shero then altered the culture by adding an insane person — Gary Roberts — and the heavyweight champion of the league, Georges Laraque, who promptly decided he would rather attempt to play hockey than fight.

Didn’t see that comin’.

Nor was I alone in butchering the palm reading last year. Who could have foretold the Penguins losing Sidney Crosby in January and Evgeni Malkin in February and still putting up 100 points?

Who, in October, could have imagined Alex Kovalev running the spring power play (into the ground)?

Nobody can say who will flourish and who’ll flop, who’ll stay healthy and who won’t. By the time this Penguins odyssey ends, the Pirates will be sailing toward a 20th consecutive losing season.

Having said all that, let’s get right to the predictions (with notable dates sprinkled in) ...

» Thursday night, in Vancouver: Penguins measure their newfangled power play against the league’s best from last season. I asked Shero about the risk of using four forwards. “I’m open to anything — five forwards if you want,” he joked. “Pull the goalie and use six. I don’t know.”

» Friday, in Vancouver: Royal Canadian Mounted Police move in to protect what’s left of Vancouver after fans wreck the city following the Penguins’ 4-2 win.

» Oct. 11, home opener vs. endangered Panthers: New Florida coach Kevin Dineen was a Hartford Whaler, so he’ll adapt nicely to coaching the Kansas City Panthers next season.

» Oct. 13, first Capitals visit: Should be emotional, with both teams wearing commemorative Lokomotiv patches in honor of the KHL tragedy.

» Oct. 17, at Winnipeg: Nobody will be happier than Arron Asham, who grew up in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, rooting for the old Jets. “The only other things we had to root for were a minor league baseball team and the (CFL) Blue Bombers,” Asham said.

» Oct. 25, first trip to Long Island: Probably not the right night to bring back Crosby, it’s Dan Bylsma’s 200th NHL game, at the site of his first.

» Oct. 27, Islanders visit: Twice in three days? The NHL must want mayhem.

» Oct. 29, at Toronto: Wouldn’t it be something if Crosby returned against David Steckel’s new team? More likely it’ll be a home game.

» Nov. 29, at Rangers: And nobody misses Sean Avery.

» Dec. 5: Cup champ Bruins in town.

» Dec. 8, at Philadelphia: First in-person sighting of Max Talbot in orange. “He knew it wasn’t going to work out here,” Brooks Orpik said. “But Philly was probably the last place I thought he’d sign.”

» Dec. 13, vs. Detroit: Cup Final preview, anyone?

» Dec. 20, vs. Chicago: Cup Final preview, anyone?

» Dec. 23, at Winnipeg: Twitter follower Eric Spada said it well: “Couldn’t be happier that NHL moved team from town where nobody cares to town where everybody cares.”


» Dec. 30: World ends.

» Jan. 1: World resumes.

» Jan. 29: The Penguins have four reps (Malkin, Crosby, Marc-Andre Fleury, Kris Letang) at the All-Star Game in Ottawa.

» Feb. 14: Colby Armstrong-to-Pens rumors heat up.

» Feb. 27: Trade deadline. The Penguins pick up at least one radically underachieving winger.

» March 16: Ten-year anniversary of the Penguins claiming Jeff Toms off waivers.

» March 17: At annual GMs meetings in Florida, Brian Burke leads a movement to revoke Rule 48, reinstitute all head shots.

» March 22: Nothing speaks to the season being 20 games too long like a spring visit from the Predators. It is, however, Penguins Garden Gnome Night. (Really, it is.)

» April 2: Brendan Shanahan, upon handing out his 613th suspension, drops from exhaustion while filming the video explanation.

» April 5: “Frozen Four” begins in Tampa, Fla.

» April 6: World ends.

» April 7: World resumes. Penguins host — who else? — the Flyers to finish the regular season. Crosby nets a hat trick to win the scoring title with 108 points (in 88 games). Jagr makes his final ‘Burgh appearance, ironically enough, on Fan Appreciation Night.

Which brings us back to the safest prediction of the year. Orpik made it, when he said of Jagr: “I’m sure he’ll get booed pretty good when he gets here.”

Pretty good won’t begin to describe it.

Tribune Review LOADED: 10.06.2011
Fright of violent night lingers in Vancouver

By Josh Yohe, PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — Having just lost Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final on home ice, the Vancouver Canucks wanted nothing more than to bolt from Rogers Arena.

Kumar Hudad, who works at a nearby hotel, wanted nothing more than to get to work.

Nobody got their way June 15.

With Vancouver burning at the hands of rioters, the Canucks were told by police to remain in Rogers Arena for almost three hours.

"I don't know if I'd say I was scared for my life, but it was scary," captain Henrik Sedin said on the eve of the new hockey season. "We saw on TV what was going on. It was bad."

Almost four months later, the Vancouver Police Department is on the verge of making many more arrests. In an interview with the Tribune-Review on Wednesday, police department spokesperson Lindsey Houghton said charges are likely to be filed by the end of October.

"This could be, for a single event, the most charges there have ever been in Canadian history," Houghton said. "This is the largest investigation we've ever undertaken."

In the 24 hours following the Canucks' 4-0 loss to the Boston Bruins, 117 were arrested, 140 were reported injured and nine were stabbed. Since then, Vancouver police have dedicated dozens of officers to investigate the case and review 1,600 hours of video that citizens turned in.

"Citizens have come to us with so many videos," Houghton said. "It has been helpful."

While the Canucks were trying to get out — "They locked us in, basically," defenseman Andrew Alberts said — mayhem broke loose a half-mile away on Georgia Street. The city hosted a party that night, and 150,000 were on the streets, hoping to celebrate the Canucks winning the Stanley Cup for the first time.

Hudad tried driving to work after the game.

"The cops wouldn't let me in the city and said I'd be fined if I didn't turn around and go home," he said.

The evening provided an image that will remain with Hudad.

"A female cop was telling me to go home," he said. "I argued at first because I had to go to work but then said I'd go home. Right then, some moron on a skateboard, moving downhill and very fast, hit the woman in the head and kept going. That's what it was like. It was totally nuts."

A member of the Vancouver media described the scene as a "war zone" and said the only thing visible from Rogers Arena was smoke.

Three Vancouver business owners refused to reveal the names of their businesses, a sign they remain rattled from the events of that night.

The Canucks remain sensitive about the subject and defended the city.

"It wasn't our fans who did it," Alberts said. "That's what everyone thinks. It wasn't our fans or the people in the city. It was people who came in from outside the city."

Sedin quickly forgot about losing the biggest game of his life.

"I was so worried about our fans leaving the building," he said. "Luckily for us, most of those people were just stealing material things and hurting material things. But we were all worried."

Tribune Review LOADED: 10.06.2011
Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby skated with the team on Wednesday, but still doesn't know when he will be able to play in a game.

The star center has been sidelined since Jan. 5 because of post-concussion symptoms.

Crosby hasn't been cleared for contact in practice and will miss at least the first few games of the regular season, which opens on Thursday when the Penguins face the Vancouver Canucks.

"It's a day at a time," Crosby said with a smile. "I don't think I've ever appreciated just being able to do this every day as much as lately because for a long time I wasn't able to.

"You just get up every day and try and go as hard as you can and hope you feel good. For me the last few weeks have been great. No complaints."

The last time Crosby played a hockey game in Vancouver, he scored the overtime goal in Canada's gold-medal victory against the United States at the 2010 Winter Olympics. He remembered that quite clearly Wednesday.

"It's full of great memories," Crosby said. "It's pretty easy for that to creep back into your head."

Crosby isn't expected to play in Pittsburgh's three-game trip to Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton. He is disappointed about missing the season opener but believes he's on the road to recovery.

"When you've gone through something for this long ... you appreciate the little victories and having the opportunity to just go out and go as hard as you can and feel good," he said. "You go into each day and hope you feel better. It's been really good so far."

Crosby skated the whole practice, was fast on his feet and handled the puck well. The hope is that he is close to being back to full health.

"They're just going to try and keep an eye on me here as far as communicating with the doctors. I'll just continue to do that," he said. "I'm just basically updating them every day and that's where it stands."

Penguins goalie Marc-Andre Fleury said it's good to have Crosby traveling with the team.

"He's our leader," Fleury said. "I'm hoping he comes back soon. He loves hockey so much.

"He looks pretty good. He's himself. He's got good hands and a good shot."

Crosby said he is free of post-concussion symptoms. Gone are the headaches, the dizziness and the inability to concentrate that bothered him for months.

He knows one of the true tests will come the first time he takes a hard hit.

"You're going to get hit again," he said. "I think, if anything, you try to prepare yourself mentally.

"If you know you're healthy, and you know you took the necessary steps to get ready, you're not going to fear that nearly as much as if you rush into things and you know there's still something wrong. I have been happy with the way things have gone."

Crosby applauded the steep suspensions NHL disciplinarian Brendan Shanahan has handed out during the exhibition season.

"I think the best thing he's probably done is treat each individual case differently," Crosby said. "He's really going over each part and making sure he plans it, as well."

Still, Crosby doubts if hits to the head will ever be eliminated from the game.

"People are learning, and hopefully with time they'll go down," he said. "I don't think anybody is out there expecting head shots are going to be totally
Sid's emotions mixed on eve of the opener

By Shelly Anderson and Dave Molinari, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

VANCOUVER. British Columbia -- Sidney Crosby does not get to Western Canada very often, so it becomes a media event.

Although the Penguins captain is not quite far enough along in his comeback from a concussion to play tonight against Vancouver in the teams' season opener, there still was a topic of high interest here as he was surrounded by reporters while pressed against a Canucks-blue wall at Rogers Arena.

In February 2010, the venue was temporarily being called Canada's Hockey Place, and Crosby further embedded himself in the hearts of fellow Canadians when he scored the winning goal in overtime of the Olympic gold-medal game.

"It's full of great memories," Crosby said after participating in practice with his teammates. "This being the first time back, it's pretty easy to kind of go through that in your head."

Scouting report

Matchup: Penguins at Vancouver Canucks, 10:08 p.m. today, Rogers Arena.

TV, radio: Versus, WXDX-FM (105.9).


Penguins: Own all-time record of 18-19-6 in season openers. ... LW Steve Sullivan has 15 goals in 37 career games against Canucks. ... Are 1-3 in past four visits to Vancouver after getting five victories and a tie in previous six.

Canucks: Lost to Boston in seven games in Stanley Cup final. ... LW Daniel Sedin is defending NHL scoring champion. ... Were 3-4 in preseason play.

Hidden stat: Penguins have won first road game in four of past five seasons.

As far as his physical status, Crosby said nothing has changed. He has not been cleared for contact but is practicing hard.

Now, though, comes the reality of missing the start of the 2011-12 season after sitting out the second half of last season and the playoffs.

"When you've gone through something for this long, I think you appreciate the little victories and having the opportunity to just go out there and go as hard as you can and feel good," Crosby said. "You go into each day and hope you feel better. It's been really good so far, so I think more or less, that has just been something that I've been happy about.

"I'm not happy about missing the first game, but I'm happy with the improvement and happy to be going hard."

Crosby noted that he has been symptom-free for less than a month, "but it's been a pretty long period of time considering the months prior to that. So, yeah, it's been a good chunk of time."

Icing a hot topic

Talk of the merits of adopting no-touch icing in the NHL has spiked again after Edmonton defenseman Taylor Fedun sustained a badly broken leg when he crashed into the boards in a preseason game Friday.

Fedun was racing to the puck with Minnesota Wild forward Eric Nystrom, who reached around Fedun with his stick to negate the potential icing, but got the stick caught in Fedun's skate.

The early word was that Fedun's injury might be career-threatening, although the prognosis subsequently became more upbeat.

There is, however, no consensus that no-touch icing is the way to go, and a number of Penguins were surprisingly ambivalent when asked if they would endorse it.

"I don't think it will have an effect, either way," defenseman Deryk Engelland said. "There are very limited times during the season when it's going to have any effect on the play. The majority of the time, the defensive team is going to touch the puck.

"For the safety aspect, it's not a bad thing to throw in there, but either way, it doesn't bother me."

Coach Dan Bylsma said he wanted to see strict enforcement of the rules that already are in place.

Bylsma likes early schedule

The Penguins are starting the season as far from home as possible without being one of the NHL clubs opening in Europe and will play three games before going home. They have dates Saturday at Calgary and Sunday at Edmonton.

These are among the 13 games they have in October, seven of them on the road.

"We play a lot of hockey games this month," Bylsma said. "I like getting on the road. We do that a couple times. And we have a trip out here.

"I like that trip at the beginning of the year. I think it has a different flavor, a different excitement with the guys getting together early as a team for the first time."

Tip-ins

Penguins center Jordan Staal, given the day off Tuesday, practiced Wednesday. ... Defenseman Brooks Orpik, who had offseason abdominal surgery, practiced but is not sure if he will play against the Canucks.

Post Gazette LOADED: 10.06.2011
Matt Cooke is attempting to shed his reputation as one of the NHL's premier cheap-shot artists.

This is not about simply tweaking his game, and Matt Cooke knows it.

A minor adjustment, a little fine-tuning, won't do it. Not even close.

There are habits -- deep-rooted habits -- to be broken. A mindset to be changed.

Cooke has come by his reputation as one of the NHL’s premier cheap-shot artists players honestly -- if he has not been the league’s dirtiest player in recent years, he has at least been a medalist -- and he realizes he will not shed it easily. Or quickly.

**Scouting report**

**Matchup:** Penguins at Vancouver Canucks, 10:08 p.m. today, Rogers Arena.

TV, radio: Versus, WXDX-FM (105.9).


Penguins: Own all-time record of 18-19-6 in season openers. ... LW Steve Sullivan has 15 goals in 37 career games against Canucks. ... Are 1-3 in past four visits to Vancouver after getting five victories and a tie in previous six.

Canucks: Lost to Boston in seven games in Stanley Cup final. ... LW Daniel Sedin is defending NHL scoring champion. ... Were 3-4 in preseason play.

Hidden stat: Penguins have won first road game in four of past five seasons.

Changing one's game, or rehabilitating a toxic image, can be a daunting challenge. But Cooke is, from all indications, intent on doing it.

For most of his teammates, the Penguins regular-season opener against Vancouver at 10:08 p.m. today at Rogers Arena will be their first game of consequence since a 1-0 loss to Tampa Bay in Game 7 of their first-round playoff series in April.

Cooke, however, will be playing in his first since March 20, when he drove an elbow into the head of New York Rangers defenseman Ryan McDonagh in a game at Consol Energy Center.

That hit, which came just weeks after the league ordered Cooke to sit out four games because of a hit behind on Fedor Tyutin of Columbus, led to a 17-game suspension. After the punishment -- technically, it covered the final 10 regular-season games and the duration of the Penguins' Round 1 playoff series -- for the hit on McDonagh was handed down, Cooke spoke of the need to go about his work differently, to exorcise dangerous, often despicable, hits from his repertoire.

He got a little counseling and a lot of criticism early in his suspension, and did much soul-searching during and after it. And, finally, there were four preseason games in recent weeks during which his restraint faced its first meaningful test.

Cooke passed. Because of, well, passing.

There were, he said, "at least a handful" of occasions when he passed on opportunities to launch his body into an opponent because he was not certain he could deliver the hit within the confines of the rules.

"You certainly have to make a conscious effort to make an adjustment in your play," said assistant coach Tony Granato, who oversees the forwards.

"And I think he's done that in training camp."

It has not been automatic. Cooke acknowledged that he still is at a point where he pauses to think about whether to deliver a check, rather than acting instinctively, as he did for so many seasons.

"When you play a certain way for the better part of 30 years, it's not easy to change," he said. "But I'm confident that with the amount of time and effort and support that I've had throughout all of this that the changes I've made are here to stay."

"There is a process that goes with read-and-react situations and there was before that I just didn't go through. That's something that's in my head now, and I trust it."

Much as Cooke trusts his decision-making ability now, opponents and officials probably will not. Not anytime soon, at least. If he delivers anything resembling an illegal hit, the general reaction will be that he is guilty until proven innocent.

"I'm not going to get the benefit of the doubt for a long time," he said. "And I'm not naive enough to think that I'm going to."

Fact is, many likely will define Cooke's career by some of the wicked hits of which he has been guilty, especially the blindside one in March 2010 from which Boston's Marc Savard still has not recovered.

The reality, though, is that he is a capable, useful winger. He's an effective forechecker, works diligently in his own end and is an integral member of what was the NHL's top penalty-killing unit last season.

And those are things the Penguins don't want to -- or believe will -- change this season.

"He's such a big part of how we play," Granato said.

That does not figure to be different, even if his personal stats line will be.

"Am I going to get eight hits a game?" Cooke said. "No. But I'm getting three or four or five more steals a game, instead. So, it's benefiting in different areas."

So there will be fewer hits. Especially the kind that make it into the highlights and grab the attention of the league office. A balance, however, must be struck. If Cooke tries to get by strictly on finesse, his role, ice time and value would plummet.

"He can't take the physical part out of his game," Granato said. "That is what makes him special. When players play against him, they know he's coming in on the forecheck and they know that when he's on the ice, he's got to be physical."

Even if it's not always the way he used to be.
HBO miniseries will be on DVD

HBO Home Entertainment will release the mini-series "Penguins/Capitals: Road to the NHL Winter Classic," on DVD Dec. 6 priced at $19.99.

The four-part series, which first ran on HBO from December through January, followed key players and coaches from both teams as they prepared for the Bridgestone NHL Winter Classic on New Year's Day 2011. The Penguins lost that game -- and Sidney Crosby was dazed by a hit to the head -- at Heinz Field. The behind-the-scenes show was HBO's first foray into a 24/7 production beyond boxing and race cars.

Squirrel Hill native Bentley Weiner was coordinating producer for the show, which won a 2011 Sports Emmy for outstanding edited sports show.

Post Gazette LOADED: 10.06.2011
San Jose Sharks still unsure if Martin Havlat will play in season opener

By David Pollak

Will Martin Havlat be in the lineup when the Sharks open the NHL season Saturday night, or won't he?

Sharks general manager Doug Wilson said Wednesday night that a final decision has not yet been made, contradicting an ESPN.com report that Havlat is out for the opener but could get the green light to play in the second game of the season Oct. 14.

Havlat flew back to Cleveland for a meeting Wednesday with the surgeon who repaired a damaged shoulder last May, and ideally the right wing would have returned to San Jose with the OK to play against the Phoenix Coyotes at HP Pavilion.

Wilson said neither he nor trainer Ray Tufts had talked with Havlat after his medical examination as Havlat was still en route back to San Jose. One thing Wilson stressed earlier in the day was that he wanted any player *to be 100 percent -- not 98 percent, not 99 percent* -- before returning from an injury.

"We have a beneficial schedule," Wilson said. "And if it makes sense to have him wait another week, that's what we'll do."

Havlat suffered a partial tear in his labrum while competing for the Czech Republic in the World Championships after his season with the Minnesota Wild ended. The Sharks knew of the injury in July when they sent Dany Heatley to the Wild in a one-for-one trade.

If Havlat cannot play, second-year pro Tommy Wingels appears to be the choice to fill the vacancy on the second line alongside Ryane

Advertisement

Clowe and Logan Couture.

Wingels was in the lineup a year ago when the Sharks started the season in Sweden but played in only four additional NHL games after that. Sharks coach Todd McLellan said Wingels has made big strides in the past 12 months.

*"He's stronger and quicker," McLellan said of Wingels, who led the team with three preseason goals. "Where he maybe hoped to fit in last year, I think he believes he can fit in now. And that's a huge difference in the confidence level."

Wingels, 23, scored 33 points in 69 games with Worcester last season.

Goalie Antti Niemi, whose status for Saturday night is also uncertain, did not practice for the first time this week. But McLellan said he didn't look at it as a setback for Niemi, who has been recovering from the removal of a cyst on his leg just before the start of training camp.

*"Sometimes just a rest is a good thing as well," McLellan said.*

Teams had until noon Wednesday to reach the 23-man roster limit, and the Sharks sent defensemen Mike Moore and forward Cam MacIntyre to Worcester to help accomplish that.

Wilson also put Havlat and Niemi on his list of "nonroster" players, though that status can be changed daily and does not preclude either from playing Saturday night.

Other players dealing with injuries such as Frazer McLaren, Antero Niittymaki and James Sheppard are in that category as well.

The active roster includes seven defensemen, with veterans Colin White and James Vandermeer likely to share time on the third pairing with Jason Demers.

*I prefer not to have anybody sitting for a long time," McLellan said.*

The Sharks have a new representative on the NHL's board of governors. Greg Jamison held onto that role after stepping down as CEO a little more than a year ago. But because Jamison is now involved with a group trying to purchase the Phoenix Coyotes from the league, he has been replaced by Kevin Compton, a key member of the Sharks ownership group.

San Jose Mercury News: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Report says Havlat out of opener, added confidence in Wingels, Niemi skips practice, roster moves and more

Posted by David Pollak

UPDATING THE UPDATE: Doug Wilson said that a final decision hasn’t been made yet on Marty Havlat’s availability Saturday night, that the process includes face-to-face meetings between the player and training staff, and that hasn’t happened yet because Havlat is still in transit.

UPDATE: Checking for confirmation of ESPN report that Marty Havlat won’t play in the season opener, but could be ready for second game on Oct. 14.

Still trying to figure out how to balance the blog and the Twitter universe before dealing with the print edition.

News of the day is there won’t be any news on Martin Havlat’s availability for opening night on Saturday.

GM Doug Wilson said Havlat wasn’t getting back from his trip to Cleveland until tonight, and until they talked, nothing would be forthcoming.

Either way, his coach didn’t sound too worried.

“If his doctor says he needs a little more time, we can live with that,” Todd McLellan said, noting the long break between the first and second games of the season.

*****McLellan had Tommy Wingels skating in Havlat’s spot again, alongside Ryane Clowe and Logan Couture. And since Wingels name was on the roster turned into the NHL today, it’s a good bet he’s Plan A when it comes to a backup.

A second-year pro, Wingels also was in the lineup on opening night a year ago in Sweden, but his time in the NHL was brief before he headed to Worcester.

McLellan sees improved strength, quickness and confidence in Wingels’ game.

“Where he maybe hoped to fit in last year, I think he believes he can fit in now,” the coach said. “And that’s a huge difference in the confidence level.”

Added McLellan: “The way he’s played throughout the exhibition season, he’s earned the opportunity to compete here.”

Wingels, who led the Sharks with three pre-season goals, said he benefited from his five-game taste of NHL action last season.

“I got to see how the best players in the world be the first and last ones off the ice,” he said. “It really hit me that I had to work harder this summer.”

*****Antti Niemi did not take part in today’s practice, but McLellan played down his goaltender’s absence.

“Sometimes just a rest is a good thing as well. We had two really long practices in the days prior,” McLellan said, adding he didn’t believe today was a setback.

McLellan did say he wanted to know Friday whether it would be Niemi or Thomas Greiss in net the next night against Phoenix.

*****Both Niemi and Havlat were “non-roster” players on the official roster that Wilson had to file with the NHL by noon. But that allows for day-to-day movement, the GM said, and either could be in the lineup Saturday night.

Frazer McLaren is in that same category as well as James Sheppard and Antero Niittymaki, but expect to see the latter two parked on an injured player list soon.

The Sharks did reassign Mike Moore (who had to clear waivers) and Cam MacIntyre to Worcester, leaving these 21 names on the roster for now:

Goalies: Thomas Greiss, Harri Sateri.

Defensemen: Dan Boyle, Douglas Murray, Brent Burns, Marc-Edouard Vlasic, Jason Demers, Colin White, Jim Vandermeer.

Forwards: Patrick Marleau, Joe Thornton, Joe Pavelski, Ryane Clowe, Logan Couture, Tommy Wingels, Jamie McGinn, Michal Handzus, Torrey Mitchell, Brad Winchester, Andrew Desjardins, Andrew Murray.

*****Finally, Handzus and Mitchell have been given extra responsibility for the team’s penalty kill unit as the Sharks look to improve on the 24th place finish of last season.

“It’s their team within a team,” McLellan said. “They’re in charge of it, they’re going to take the pulse.”

San Jose Mercury News: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Sharks lose preseason finale to Phoenix

Associated Press

Mike Smith made 28 saves in the Coyotes’ 3-1 victory over the visiting Sharks on Saturday night, the preseason finale for both teams.

Smith was perfect through two periods, and only a fluke goal prevented the shutout. Martin Hanzal had a goal and an assist, and Radim Vrbata added two assists for the Coyotes (3-4).

The Sharks (5-1) spoiled Smith’s shutout bid just more than eight minutes into the final period, when defenseman Marc-Edouard Vlasic’s shot from the right point deflected off the Phoenix defense and over Smith’s shoulder.

Crosby to miss opener: Sidney Crosby continues to practice with the team but is expected to miss the Penguins’ season opener because of a concussion sustained in January. Crosby said Saturday he didn’t think there was a realistic chance he would play in Vancouver on Thursday.
Thomas Greiss earned a 25-shot shutout and the Sharks remained unbeaten in preseason play, beating the Canucks 3-0 on Thursday night at HP Pavilion.

Joe Pavelski, Dan Boyle and Jamie McGinn scored for San Jose (5-0). Joe Thornton assisted on the first two goals, and Ryane Clowe got his team-leading fourth assist on the final goal.

The Sharks used their regulars for longer periods than previously in the preseason. Vancouver (2-5), meanwhile, chose to keep most of its top players off the ice. Mikael Samuelsson and former San Jose center Manny Malhotra were the only players in the Canucks' lineup who recorded double figures in goals last season.

San Jose's final preseason game is Saturday in Phoenix.

San Francisco Chronicle LOADED: 10.06.2011
Tommy Wingels scored his second goal of the game with 6:04 left in the second period to put San Jose ahead, and the Sharks continued their perfect preseason with a 4-3 win on the road over the Canucks in Vancouver on Sunday.

Brad Winchester, playing on a tryout contract, and Andrew Desjardins also scored, and Thomas Greiss made 26 saves for the Sharks (4-0-0).

San Jose dressed most of its regulars, including the top line of Joe Thornton, Joe Pavelski and Patrick Marleau, and top defensive pairing of Dan Boyle and Douglas Murray.

Cody Hodgson, Alexander Sulzer and Nolan Baumgartner scored for the Canucks (2-3-0), who eliminated San Jose in the Western Conference final last May.

Third-string goalie Eddie Lack made 30 saves as Vancouver continued to rest all of its top players for a fifth straight preseason game.

Canucks defenseman Aaron Rome didn't play the third period with an injured hand. Vancouver minor-league forward Steven Pinzotto also left in the first period with a shoulder injury.

Crosby goes five-on-five: Pittsburgh star Sidney Crosby participated in a controlled scrimmage as he continues his comeback from concussion-like symptoms that have kept him off the ice since January.

Crosby took face-offs and worked on set plays alongside his teammates in his first five-on-five training camp action.

The former MVP says he has been symptom-free throughout camp but continues to wear a white helmet during practice to indicate he still hasn't been cleared for contact.

"Everything's been really good," Crosby said. "I haven't ran into any issues so far, so it's been pretty smooth."

Crosby has worked relentlessly during the first week of camp during drills, often to the point of exhaustion.

Crosby added he's been impressed with the Penguins, who are unbeaten in three preseason games. Center Evgeni Malkin, who missed the second half of last season with a knee injury, has two goals and three assists.

Perron to rejoin Blues: St. Louis forward David Perron, sidelined since November by a concussion, is set to join the team today. The 23-year-old Perron was injured Nov. 4 on a hit by San Jose's Thornton. He missed the last 72 games of the season after getting five goals and two assists the first 10 games.

Preseason games:

Cam Ward made 36 saves and Carolina got its offense going in a 4-0 victory over Winnipeg. ... Todd Bertuzzi and Henrik Zetterberg scored shootout goals to propel Detroit past Chicago 4-3. ... Joe Corvo and Brad Marchand each scored power-play goals to lift Boston over Montreal 7-3.

Dane Byers had a goal and two assists to lead Columbus to a 4-1 victory over Buffalo. ...Ryan O'Reilly scored two goals, Jean Sebastian Giguere stopped 16 shots and Colorado beat Dallas 3-0. ...Devan Dubnyk made 30 saves as Edmonton beat Calgary 3-0. ...Andrew Gordon and Patrick Maroon scored in an 11-second span in the final minute of the second period and Anaheim defeated Los Angeles 3-1.

San Francisco Chronicle LOADED: 10.06.2011
Blues have verbal deal to sell team

By JEREMY RUTHERFORD

Dave Checketts has a verbal agreement to sell a majority stake in the Blues to Chicago businessman Matthew Hulsizer in a deal in which Checketts could remain with the club in some capacity, three sources involved in the process have told the Post-Dispatch.

Two of the sources said Checketts has signed a letter of intent with Hulsizer, although one source indicated that it's a verbal agreement and is far from being completed. The deal is not considered binding and would not become official until the two sides enter a purchase agreement and it's approved by the National Hockey League.

It appears, however, that if the negotiations progress in the current direction, Hulsizer would become the Blues' No. 1 investor and Checketts could remain in management of the franchise.

Checketts was unavailable for comment Wednesday, according to a spokesman for his company, SCP Worldwide. Neither Hulsizer nor his business partner, Brad Goldberg, has returned messages left by the Post-Dispatch.

The Blues have been for sale since mid-March, when Checketts announced that he and TowerBrook Capital Partners, the club's current top investor, could not reach an agreement on a price for TCP's 70 percent stake in the club. At that point, Checketts made it clear that the "whole kit and kaboodle" was for sale.

"The bottom line is, I've been unable to make a deal with" TCP, said Checketts, who said he owns 20 percent of the club. "As a result, I've got to turn from being a buyer to a seller."

Game Plan LLC, the firm conducting the sale, set a deadline of Aug. 22 for prospective buyers to submit an informal bid for the Blues. The Post-Dispatch reported that two of the offers came from current minority owner Tom Stillman, who Checketts has said owns 10 percent of the team, and Calgary businessman Max Chambers. Chambers acknowledged last month that his offer of $167 million was rejected.

Hulsizer submitted one previous offer that was rejected, but it was unclear whether he had made a second offer before the team's self-imposed deadline.

Hulsizer, according to one source, was working on his own schedule and, according to another source, said the asking price — believed to be $190 million — was too high and he would re-enter the picture only if the price dropped.

There has been an option all along, however, that Hulsizer could invest in the Blues and keep Checketts in charge, and according to sources, that now appears to be the plan. The details of that arrangement remain unclear.

In July, when Checketts was asked about such a configuration with Hulsizer, he said: "I haven't been approached by anybody that way. We went through that process (of finding investors to keep the current ownership intact) for a while, and we didn't find anybody that way. I had to agree with TowerBrook that I'd put the whole thing up for sale. That's the direction it's headed."

But that appears to have changed.

Meanwhile, there continues to be some pressure to get a sale finalized soon. The deadline for Checketts' extension on his $120 million loan with Citigroup was Sept. 30, but a source says the bank is working with Checketts until a sale can be completed.

St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 10.06.2011
Langenbrunner will join Backes and McDonald on Blues top line

By JEREMY RUTHERFORD

Before Jamie Langenbrunner signed with the Blues in July, he had a conversation with head coach Davis Payne about how the club envisioned his role, even what line he might be joining.

"I thought I'd be playing with 'Arny' and 'Steener,'" Langenbrunner said, referring to Jason Arnott and Alex Steen.

But Langenbrunner showed up for training camp Sept. 16 and the right winger learned that he was on a line with David Backes at center. The duo showed enough in the preseason that they will open the season on a line with left winger Andy McDonald.

"We knew that we were going to take a look at that right away," Payne said.
"You think that something is going to look good all summer long, and all of the sudden guys get on the ice, and they're reading each other and communicating and things happen. We like what we see with those guys now. We'll continue to monitor it, and if it's continuing to get results, then perfect. ... If not, we've got lots of combinations that we can go to."

A year ago, Backes led the Blues with 31 goals and 62 points, spending much of the season with right winger Matt D'Agostini, who responded with a career-high 21 goals. The club indicated over the offseason that D'Agostini might start out on that line, but it appears that D'Agostini will be the one with Arnott and Steen.

Langenbrunner had four assists in four preseason games, while Backes had two goals and three assists to share the Blues' points lead with five. They only played one game with McDonald, and in that game, they each had a hand in the first goal of the club's 3-1 win over Colorado on Sept. 29.

"It was kind of a trial," Backes said. "Obviously with (D'Agostini), it worked for a while last year. But you like to have options and it worked so well (with Langenbrunner in the preseason), we're going to start that way. With Andy's speed on the other side, it's a pretty dynamic line."

The question surely will surface as to how 'dynamic' Langenbrunner can be at age 36, coming off a season in which he posted just nine goals and 32 points in 70 games. The nine goals represented a career low in seasons in which the 16-year veteran played at least 53 games.

"He's a guy, it's not going to be done with a great deal of flash, but a high level of efficiency and it's going to be from playing in the right areas on the ice," Payne said. "He understands the give-and-go game, he understands getting to the right spot, he understands how to take advantage of defenders when they extend themselves and he gets to the net-front. ..."

Backes hasn't been a flashy player in his career and perhaps that's why they've gelled.

"He's such a smart player, his intelligence out there is one of the tops in the league," Backes said. "He knows when my energy is low and he'll do a little extra, and when we're open, we seem to find each other. To have a guy like that on your line, who also has some grit and determination to play hard, he can play on my right side all year ... that's fine by me."

Langenbrunner has been in Backes' shoes before as the former captain of New Jersey.

"Hopefully, I'm a little bit of a calming influence on him out there, taking a little pressure off him from trying to be perfect," Langenbrunner said.
"Sometimes when you're captain, you want to do more than your game, but he's done a great job of just being himself out there. I think we see the game pretty similarly. ... (Andy) has a ton of speed and really can create things by himself, but Backes and I seem to work off each other pretty well."

Three seasons ago, (Langenbrunner) had his most productive offensive season with 29 goals and 69 points. That came while playing with two of the Devils' top play makers at the time in Zach Parise and Travis Zajac.

"Big upgrade to me and Andy Mac!" Backes joked.

Kidding aside, asked if he'd come close to those types of numbers with Backes and McDonald, Langenbrunner still smiled.

"Well, I don't know," he said. "I don't know how much you'll see me on the power play. I'm ready for whatever. I'm going to all the meetings, so I definitely know what's going on. But I'm definitely not concerned about that. We can be a good 5-on-5 line and that's my focus right now.

"I came in here with the idea that it didn't really matter where I played. I'm not too concerned about who I'm playing with. I just want to go out there and do what I can. I think everybody is going with that attitude and pushing each other along. I've been around this league long enough to know that things can change."
Blues have verbal agreement for sale to Chicago businessman

By JEREMY RUTHERFORD

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St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 10.06.2011
Blackhawks and Red Wings should be teams to beat in Central Division

From staff and wire reports

While the St. Louis Blues figure to challenge for a NHL Western Conference playoff spot this season, how do they stack up against their NHL Central Division rivals?

Here's a team-by-team look at the Central, focusing on offseason moves, key additions and important areas to watch:


Say goodbye to: RW Troy Brouwer, D Brian Campbell, D Chris Campoli.

Sizing up the Blackhawks: Team strength is at forward, where the Hawks' nuclear arsenal includes Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews, Marian Hossa and Patrick Sharp. Coach Joel Quenneville gives extremely high defense minutes to workhorses Duncan Keith and Brent Seabrook.

Net result: Corey Crawford remains entrenched as the starter, but surprising Ray Emery won the backup job over rookie Alexander Salak.

Player to watch: LW Michael Frolik has scored 20 goals twice with the Florida Panthers. He should prove to be a solid fit in Chicago.

Detroit Red Wings

2010-11 record: 47-25-10

Say hello to: D Mike Commodore, D Ian White, goalie Ty Conklin.

Say goodbye to: C Kris Draper, D Brian Rafalski, goalie Chris Osgood.

Sizing up the Red Wings: Losing the retired Rafalski will hurt in a variety of areas, but 41-year-old captain and Norris Trophy hoarder Nicklas Lidstrom is back and showing little in the way of slowing down. The Red Wings, with four Stanley Cup titles since 1997, still have two of the top forwards on the planet in Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg.

Net result: Jimmy Howard picked it up in the playoffs after a so-so regular season and the Red Wings have faith in the young netminder, as evidenced by a two-year contract extension. Former Blues goalie Ty Conklin replaced another ex-Blue Chris Osgood as the backup.

Player to watch: Darren Helm’s speed and willingness to get physical helps create space for some of the team's aging forwards.

Nashville Predators

2010-11 record: 44-27-11


Sizing up the Predators: It all starts on the back end for Nashville, which relies heavily on goaltender Pekka Rinne and two of the NHL's top young defensemen in Ryan Suter and Shea Weber. Scoring remains an issue for the offensively challenged Predators, who won their first playoff series last season before losing to Vancouver in the conference semifinals.

Net result: Rinne has quietly become one of the top goaltenders in the NHL, using his 6-foot-5-inch frame with quick movement. Anders Lindback is the backup.

Player to watch: The Preds will go about as far as Rinne can take them.

Columbus Blue Jackets

2010-11 record: 34-35-13

Say hello to: C Jeff Carter, D James Wisniewski, D Radek Martinek, LW Vaclav Prospal, F Ryan Johansen.
All Teddy Purcell needed was a fresh start and a team that believed in his abilities.

Last season, he found that with Tampa Bay, and it paid off for both parties.

During Tampa Bay's push to the Eastern Conference final, Purcell scored six goals and added 11 assists to finish with 17 points in 18 playoffs games. He also set career highs with 17 goals and 51 points in 81 regular-season games.

Coming off a one-year contract that paid him $750,000 last season, Purcell agreed to a two-year deal with the Lightning over the summer that will pay $2.35 million this season and $2.375 million in 2012-13.

"Experience is a big thing for me," Purcell said. "Coming in last year, it was a fresh start from (Los Angeles), where things didn't work out and I kind of got caught in a numbers game out there.

"I worked hard to get where I was, but at the same time the coaching staff gave me a real good opportunity here to let me play my game and develop that confidence and experience to become a well-rounded player."

Signed by the Los Angeles Kings in 2007 as an undrafted free agent after one year at the University of Maine, Purcell played two years in the Kings' system before being traded to Tampa Bay in 2009. In 91 games with Los Angeles, Purcell had eight goals and 25 points.

Since coming to Tampa, he's scored 20 goals and 60 points in 100 games.

"With the season he had last year, he's proven himself," Lightning center Vinny Lecavalier said. "He's a great player and now with a couple of years in the league, his leadership role is going to change and he's got more responsibilities on the ice and off the ice. We know he's up for the challenge this year."

Lightning coach Guy Boucher said Purcell still has room to grow.

"He's showed last year at the end of the season and in the playoffs that he can be a top-two liner, but consistency has always been his weakness and from the beginning of the year to now, it still is," he said. "Sometimes he looks great and sometimes he needs to be reminded of what he needs to do out there. For him it's a question of activation and a question of not forgetting his speed because when he slows down the game he loses his assets."

Purcell agrees with the need to be consistent.

"The best players in the league are the best players because they're consistent, right in and night out," Purcell said. "I think I took a big step last year in my game but I want to take a bigger step this year and become a more important player on this team and a contributor, and in order to do that I have to be consistent."

With Tampa Bay unable to retain forward Simon Gagne, who signed a two-year deal with Los Angeles worth $7 million, it will create more chances for Purcell to contribute.

"I would expect Teddy Purcell is probably looking at probably between 22 and 27, maybe even 30 goals this year if he gets the quality ice time and he's healthy," said NBC hockey analyst Pierre McGuire. "He's probably the one guy that's going to have to really step in and replace the presence of a Gagne. And I believe he can do that."

Purcell embraces the opportunity.

"I put a lot of pressure and responsibility on myself to step up and help this team win and I think Coach is going to give me more opportunity with guys like (Sean) Bergenheim and Gagne gone," Purcell said. "I've got to take advantage of that, work hard and make sure he keeps me there."
It's time for Tampa Bay Lightning, Teddy Purcell to find out how good he is

By Damian Cristodero,

BRANDON - Here's the thing about Teddy Purcell's shot:

"It's outstanding," Lightning coach Guy Boucher said.

But ...

"I don't think he knows how outstanding it is."

Same with Purcell's skating.

"We keep telling him he has great speed. He just doesn't know how much."

Same with Purcell's game.

"He just doesn't know," Boucher said, "how good he is."

It is time for the right wing and the Lightning to find out.

Purcell, 26, has an enormous opportunity this season. He will be on a line with center Vinny Lecavalier and Ryan Malone in Friday's opener at Carolina. And with Simon Gagne gone as a free agent, Purcell is in line for more minutes and more chances to contribute and solidify himself as the top-six forward Tampa Bay sorely needs.

If he plays like he did during last season's playoffs - when he had six goals and 17 points in 18 games - his new two-year, $4.725 million deal will be a bargain.

But if Purcell, acquired in March 2010 from the Kings for Jeff Halpern, falls into his old pattern of inconsistency, well, that will be a concern.

Consider that last season, despite career bests of 17 goals, 34 assists and 51 points, Purcell had stretches of 19, 15 and 14 games with one goal.

"I was more consistent throughout the playoffs," Purcell said Wednesday at the Ice Sports Forum. "That's something I've tried to work on since I got to Tampa Bay. I've talked to the coaching staff, trying to be a more consistent player instead of having so many ups and downs. I want to be more of a complete player and more of a go-to guy."

The starting point is his shot, a zippy wrister Lecavalier said is "one of the best on the team."

But Purcell admitted, "Sometimes I'm not as confident in it. Things happen quick in the NHL. If you hesitate that one second, the shot isn't there anymore."

He also admitted to a pass-first sensibility, something he said is from childhood and was reinforced when he came to a Lightning team with stars such as Lecavalier, Steven Stamkos and Marty St. Louis.

"Not really knowing them, you want to give them the puck," Purcell said. "But from getting to know them and being more comfortable, I'll have more of that shoot-first mentality, maybe not waste as many opportunities."

Boucher said he wants Purcell to play at a high tempo because "when he slows down the game, he loses his assets."

Purcell said he will visualize shooting more before games.

Most of all, though, Purcell realizes his opportunity.

"You're never satisfied," he said, "You always want more. That's our team motto, and it's what I want for myself, too."

Even so, "A leopard doesn't change his spots," Boucher said. "He's still the same person he was last year with a bit more confidence but still not the confidence he will get eventually."

How good is Purcell?

"You haven't seen it yet," Boucher said. "You think you've seen it because he's played great, but he's even better than that. That's what I think."

St. Petersburg Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Rookie Brett Connolly has no problem playing on Tampa Bay Lightning’s third line

By Damian Cristodero, Times Staff Writer

BRANDON - Playing in the preseason on a line with C Steven Stamkos and Marty St. Louis was a blast, RW Brett Connolly said. But he has no problem getting bumped to the third line for Friday’s opener at Carolina.

"Obviously, I’m going to play wherever they want me to play, so I’m not too worried about that," Connolly said Wednesday. "I just want to help the team as well as I can."

Connolly, 19, in his first NHL regular-season game, likely will start on the third line with C Dominic Moore and Ryan Shannon. Coach Guy Boucher said that is to "take the pressure off," considering Connolly’s nine-game tryout.

That is how many games the No. 6 overall pick of the 2010 draft can play before he either must go back to juniors or the clock starts on his three-year, $2.7 million contract.

"I’ve lived it in the past," Boucher said. "Young guys go from being at the top, and some weeks later, they go down on the roster and they lose their confidence. It would be unrealistic, unfair to expect a young kid to do it day in and day out.

"Can (Connolly) do it eventually? I think he will. But now we have to give him all the chance possible to do well, and that’s not putting him against the top lines and top defensemen from other teams."

CALLING BLAIR JONES: Blair Jones snagged the final forward position, a fourth-line gig with C Nate Thompson and RW Adam Hall.

Jones, 25, will be part of a rotation with forwards Tom Pyatt and Mattias Ritola, both of whom will be scratched for at least the first game.

How did Jones get so lucky?

"He was with us last year," Boucher said. "He played in the playoffs, came in outstanding shape and with an incredible attitude, and has been steady in every practice and every game he played, so he deserves it."

That said, Jones shouldn’t get comfortable.

"We go with the guys who were here to start," Boucher said, "but after that, it is all open."

LINING UP: The other lines are St. Louis-Stamkos-Steve Dow-nie and Ryan Malone-Vinny Lecavalier-Teddy Puroell. The defensive pairings are Victor Hedman-Eric Brewer, Brett Clark-Matt Gilroy and Marc-Andre Bergeron-Pavel Kubina.

THE BUSINESS: Boucher said Dana Tyrell’s demotion to AHL Norfolk was "sending a player down who doesn’t deserve to be sent down." Tyrell, 22, was the final cut because he was the only bubble player who did not need to clear waivers.

"It’s the business," Boucher said. "But we’re not going to lose sight of the fact that he was the most in-shape player in camp. But we built our depth at forward, and there’s a lot of guys who can play in the NHL who have different contracts, and we have to look at that."

NO DAMAGE: Moore said his sore back is just "one of those things," and expects to play Friday. "You want to make sure your alignment and everything is working the way it should," said Moore, who had an MRI exam that showed no damage. "Now is the time to take care of it before it gets more out of whack."

WATCH PARTY: The team will host a watch party at 7 p.m. Friday at the Brick House Tavern, 1102 N Dale Mabry Highway, Tampa.

ODDS AND ENDS: With D Mattias Ohlund (knee) out of the lineup, expect Stamkos or Brewer to wear an A as an alternate captain. … Thompson on Wednesday turned 27.
Blair Jones seems to grab final line spot for Tampa Bay Lightning's Friday opener

Staff

The forward lines are taking shape for the Tampa Bay Lightning ahead of its Friday opener at Carolina. The last spot available seems to have been grabbed by Blair Jones, who has been practicing on a line with center Nate Thompson and Adam Hall. That means Mattias Ritola and Tom Pyatt likely will sit out the first game.

"If we would start today we'd have Thompson Hall and Jones," coach Guy Boucher said after Wednesday's practice. "The reason is that Jones was with us last year, played in the playoffs, came in in outstanding shape and with an incredible attitude and has been steady in every practice and every game he's played, so he deserves it. Plus, he can win faceoffs, too."

Ritola and Pyatt will get their turns, Boucher said. For now, though, "We'll go with the guys who are here to start." But after that, "It is all wide open."

Here are the projected lines for Friday's opener:
Marty St. Louis-Steven Stamkos-Steve Downie
Ryan Malone-Vinny Lecavalier-Teddy Purcell
Ryan Shannon-Dominic Moore-Brett Connolly
Blair Jones-Nate Thompson-Adam Hall

Defensive pairings:
Victor Hedman-Eric Brewer
Marc-Andre Bergeron-Pavel Kubina
Brett Clark-Matt Gilroy

Goaltender:
Dwayne Roloson

St. Petersburg Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Cammalleri excited for opening night at home

david shoalts

Mike Cammalleri is entering his third season with the Montreal Canadiens but this is the first time he will have the chance to step on the ice in his hometown for a season-opener against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

One year ago, the native of Richmond Hill, Ont., a few traffic lights north of Toronto, missed his chance because he was serving a one-game suspension for whacking another player with his stick in the Canadiens’ final pre-season game. Playing at the Air Canada Centre in the NHL’s oldest rivalry on Thursday night in front of his friends and family is so important, Cammalleri made sure he was not part of NHL vice-president Brendan Shanahan’s crackdown on head shots.

“I got some congratulations today from the boys for making it through the preseason without a suspension,” Cammalleri, 29, said Wednesday as the Canadiens wrapped up a team-building session on Georgian Bay. “It’s special for me to play in Toronto: Opening night, Habs-Leafs, all the implications, it’s a dream come true, that’s for sure.”

When he was growing up, Cammalleri got to see a few Leaf games at Maple Leaf Gardens when his father Leo would score some tickets. The younger Cammalleri said his father would sometimes exchange the pricy red tickets for greys up in the rafters “because he said that was where the real fans sit.”

But one memorable night in the early nineties, Leo Cammalleri managed to get tickets right behind the Buffalo Sabres’ bench and hung on to them.

“I was really young, I must have been 10 or 11,” the younger Cammalleri said. “I got Benoit Hogue’s stick. He broke it a little bit in the warmup and the trainer gave me it plus a roll of tape, I still have both.

“The [television] camera guy said, ‘Okay, I’m going to put you on.’ I think it was Hockey Night In Canada, coast-to-coast. I was right there and my friends saw me, so that was a big thrill for me.”

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 10.06.2011
Maple Leafs make the playoffs - in video game simulation

The Canadian Press

A simulation using EA Sports’ “NHL 12” video game has the Pittsburgh Penguins winning the Stanley Cup, aided by Sidney Crosby’s comeback.

The made-in-Canada video game sees Crosby returning after 17 games and leading the Pens to second place in the East.

Pittsburgh defeats Chicago four games to two in the Cup final with Crosby earning the Conn Smythe Trophy.

Vancouver wins the Presidents’ Trophy again, with 114 points, but loses the Western Conference final to Chicago in seven games.

The simulation is good news for Maple Leafs fans, since Toronto finishes eighth in the East to make the playoffs.

The Canadiens just miss out, placing ninth, while Winnipeg is 11th and Ottawa 14th in the East. Edmonton finishes 13th in the West, just ahead of Calgary.

The simulation sees the defending champion Bruins losing to Philadelphia in the first round in five games.

The game is developed in Burnaby, B.C.

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 10.06.2011
Ron Wilson, the coach of the Maple Leafs, is a self-professed lover of televised drama of the non-NHL variety — specifically, he enjoys the program Dexter.

Wilson told reporters recently that the show, about a police lab expert who moonlights as a serial killer, “is a way for me to learn how to handle people.” He was joking, maybe. With the deadpan former defenceman, maybe you can never be sure.

In any event, speaking of being driven to psychopathy in Leafland, welcome to Thursday’s season opener at the Air Canada Centre. The Canadiens are in town. A buzz is in the air. Wilson, entering the fourth year of a four-year contract, is on the hot seat. And Brian Burke, the Leafs GM who has promised to remove his friend-coach from the boil if the club starts strong, is behaving like a chef who’s suddenly uneasy about the menu he’s prepared, re-spicing the soup in a Tuesday trade during a week that has seen him working the phones in pursuit of yet more roster stirring.

Maybe that means nothing. Maybe Burke’s never-ending Toronto retuning, which celebrates its three-year anniversary next month, will finally produce the team that ends a circa-2004 playoff drought.

Certainly we suspect it’s almost as simple as this: Wilson will be as good a coach as James Reimer is a goalie. Burke’s managerial acumen will appear as deft as Reimer, the Leafs’ anointed No. 1, is brilliant. Sure, it would help to score more goals. And improving the Wilson-era special teams, bad enough to be coach-killing some places, wouldn’t hurt.

But the Leafs made like a credible playoff contender after Reimer, beginning with a 5-1 New Year’s Day win over Ottawa, played the role of the toast of the town late last season, racking up 20 wins in 37 games. If the 23-year-old from Morweena, Man., can replicate that form for a good chunk of the full 82? Well, maybe it wouldn’t much matter whether or not Tim Connolly gets healthy or Phil Kessel pops 40 goals or the power play improves. Goaltending, a team-carrying practitioner of which the Leafs haven’t employed since the last great days of Reimer’s fellow rural Manitoban Eddie Belfour, is where it begins and — if the finish line is a playoff berth — mostly ends.

“He’s just got to do what he does well and shut out all the noise,” Wilson said of Reimer on Wednesday. “We believe he’s a No. 1 goalie and he’s going to have a great year.”

Shutting out the noise will not be easy; that the locals are beyond impatient goes without saying. Last Friday, when the Leafs won their second-to-last pre-season game at Joe Louis Arena, Leaf fans turned the Detroit-Windsor tunnel into a raucous scene complete with horn-honking and chanting worthy of a 1987 parade.

Reimer points out that he and his teammates cannot be held responsible for the futility that preceded them.

“Like, I’ve been on this team for 37 games,” he said with a laugh. This time last year Reimer was finishing up another day of practice in the minors — “getting ready to watch the Leafs on TV, probably,” he said. But despite his short tenure in the Big Smoke, he has already learned about the hair-trigger nature of the Air Canada Centre rabble, and the volatility of its pent-up angst.

“I remember when Chicago came to town (on March 5). They announced my name, big cheer. And then I let in two goals on four shots or something, and they gave me the Bronx cheer,” Reimer said of the home crowd. “Whatever. It happens.”

Reimer, at least, seems sympathetic to what the franchise’s supporters have endured.

“I’m a fan, too. I remember going to games and being mad if the home team’s losing. I’ve been in the stands. I’ve paid money to see a game. I get riled up, too. That’s the beauty of the game,” he said. “The fans keep you accountable. The city keeps you accountable. And it’s good. The worst-case scenario is if there was no one there. ... Those are the downs that
TORONTO — The next time a player talks about not hearing the fans and feeling the pressure of playing in Toronto, consider what Mike Komisarek has gone through as a Maple Leaf.

In two full seasons here, he has battled injury and some struggles in his game.

But as Year 3 in the blue and white approaches, the big defenceman believes he has put his struggles behind him.

"You are quickly reminded in this city of what it takes. I can’t wait to get down here and play games."

Komisarek will begin the season beside rookie Jake Gardiner, and loves what he sees in the youngster.

"He’s mature beyond his years,” Komisarek said. “You just love to see a guy like that around here.

40 FOR PHIL?

Leafs sniper Phil Kessel figures he has 40 goals in him at some point in his career, but will it be this season?

“I don’t set a number, but hopefully I can improve on last year,” said Kessel, who had 32 last season. “I hopefully can get to the 40 mark some time.”

WELCOME MATT

If Matthew Lombardi comes back as a fourth-liner, so be it. With his career in jeopardy for so many months, any role will suit him.

“I just want to get in there and contribute,” said Lombardi, who is expected to centre a plumbers’ union of Mike Brown and Jay Rosehill on Thursday.

He played one pre-season game after his methodical return from the severe concussion he suffered last October.

“I have to keep pushing myself and get better every day. This is the perfect (motivation), a divisional game, a rival and the opportunity to set the tone the rest of the year.”

CLEAN START?

Brown shaved off his Fu Manchu moustache on Tuesday night, explaining that a change of luck was in order.

“Too many injuries,” Brown said with a smile on Wednesday. “Had to change something up. I took that puck off the face in practice (on Tuesday) and it was looking all crooked anyway.”

Without the facial hair, Brown looks like just one of the guys. Don’t expect it to be gone for good. Brown said it takes two to three weeks for it to grow back in, and fans could see it again. Of course, if he scores in the regular-season opener on Thursday, we might never see it again.

A SPECIAL SEASON?

Beginning Thursday, the team’s off-season commitment to improved special teams will be tested. Though slightly better by the end of 2010-11, years of penalty killing and power play woes combined to slow the Leafs from moving up the standings and helped lead to a change in assistant coaches.

“We’ve made some personnel changes and addressed some issues,” Leafs head coach Ron Wilson said of three hard weeks of practice.

“We have a excellent power-play point man in John-Michael Liles. I think Jake Gardiner will help there, too. Up front, with Lombardi being healthy, bringing in David Steckel and some other guys like Philippe Dupuis (it’s better), but we have to work on this all the time, every day. Other teams see what you’re doing on the power play and we have to have different wrinkles to negate their advance scouting.”

LOOSE LEAFS

Nazem Kadri said there has been progress with his MCL injury and he is hopeful of resuming skating next week.

Toronto Sun LOADED: 10.06.2011
Price was right, critics wrong 0

By Mike Zeisberger ,Toronto Sun

Some 365 days ago, on the eve of the Montreal Canadiens 2010-11 season opener against the Maple Leafs, Habs management types were being ripped by fans and media alike for trading away the popular Jaroslav Halak in favour of the younger Carey Price.

Obviously hockey’s most storied franchise had shipped out the wrong goalie, critics such as yours truly claimed at the time.

Now, upon further review, Price needs to be told one thing.

We were all wrong.

Indeed, instead of melting down under the pressure of the Bell Centre boos and the blistering barbs from the press, Price turned in an outstanding season, posting 38 victories, eight shutouts and a fine 2.35 goals-against average. His Habs then stretched the eventual Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins to Game 7 on their first-round playoff series before a Nathan Horton overtime goal spoiled the party.

A year later, Price admits he feels much more comfortable this time around as the Canadiens once again get set to kick off their season versus Toronto at the Air Canada Centre.

“This year there are a lot less doubts,” Price admitted on Wednesday. “It’s certainly made things easier by not having to worry about that other stuff.”

By “other stuff,” Price was referring to the goalie controversy with Halak.

Of course, it wasn’t the first time Price has dealt with “other stuff” in his time in Montreal. There were wild off-ice rumours. There were suggestions that his glove hand had suddenly slowed down. And there was his infamous mockery of the home fans during the 2009 playoffs when he reacted to Bronx cheers at the Bell Centre by doing his best Patrick Roy imitation, waving his arms in the air.

Carey Price says he has grown up since then. And so does his coach, Jacques Martin.

“I’ve been here for four years. That’s a long time for a 24 year old,” Price said. “Being in Montreal, it’s definitely felt longer.

“But it’s definitely helped me at the same time. You learn a lot more about life on and off the ice when you play in a hockey market. It’s helped my development.”

When Martin looks at Price, he sees a much more grown-up young man than he did a couple of years ago.

“Carey has really matured the past two years,” Martin said. “He was outstanding last year. And we expect him to continue to get better.”

Price, a native of B.C., admits watching the Bruins skating around Vancouver’s Rogers Arena hoisting the Stanley Cup back in June. Didn’t it bug him knowing how close his Habs had come to eliminating those same Bruins in the first round?

“Not really,” he said. “We didn’t win.”

A very mature outlook from a more mature Carey Price.

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Toronto Sun LOADED: 10.06.2011
581451  Toronto Maple Leafs

Meet the 2011-12 Maple Leafs 0

By Lance Hornby, Toronto Sun

GOALTENDERS

#34 James Reimer, Age: 23

Last year: 20-10-5, 2.60. Few in the hockey world heard of him in October, then he started all but three games from Jan. 25 onwards. NHL rookie of the month in March. Great positional goalie and humble attitude made him immediate team and fan favourite. Played for Canada at the world championship.

This year: Signed new three-year deal that pays $2.2 million this season. He’s acquired all the team playoff pressure and lost the element of surprise against rival shooters. But also spent his most intense summer in the gym and worked on being more ‘explosive’ in the torso area to improve reaction time and get post-to-post.

Did you know: Of all the nicknames he’s been given, like ‘Optimus Reim’ or the ‘Reim Minister’.

#50 Jonas Gustavsson, Age: 26

Last year: 6-13-2, 3.29. It was difficult to measure his NHL progression in his second season in Toronto. There was another heart-related problem and the rise of Reimer limited his playing time. When he was healthy, he continued to over-play many pucks. Was 3-1-1 in a conditioning stint with the Marlies.

This year: Management has done everything it can to pump him up, ultimately keeping him as back-up after a strong push by Ben Scrivens. Gustavsson was hot and cold for most of his pre-season gig. Of his 65 games as a Leaf, 39 have been regulation or overtime defeats. That ratio can’t continue if he hopes to stay in the plans beyond 2011-12.

Did you know: Installed Manchester United as his favourite for FIFA 2012 soccer because native Swedish clubs are so bad.

DEFENCEMEN

#2 Luke Schenn Age: 21

Last year: 82 GP, 5-17-22, 34 PIM. Led NHL defencemen in hits (251) and the team in blocked shots (168). Despite his young age, had the courage to call out teammates last year when effort was slipping. Averaged 22:22 in ice time last season. Has steadily brought his penalty minutes down in his first three NHL years.

This year: After a drawn-out contract negotiation, signed for five years and $18 million US on the eve of camp. Will likely start the year paired with veteran John-Michael Liles. Leafs need another full season from him, the only team blueliner to play all 82 last year. He’s missed just three games the past two terms.

Did you know: Parents Rita and Jeff made the home opener of both Luke and brother Brayden last year when latter was with L.A.

#3 Dion Phaneuf Age 26

Last year: 66 GP, 8-22-30, 88 PIM. First year as captain was marred by a freak leg injury that cost him 16 games, but he had a great second half. Reached the 30-minute mark for ice time on a couple of occasions. Had six points in a four-game stretch in mid-March and 22 assists to reach a minimum of 20 since 2005-06.

This year: Getting more comfortable in his role with the ‘C’, with officials, teammates and media. A great open-ice hitter, though one who could run foul of more stringent league rules about contact to the head. His power-play numbers could perk up now that Liles is feeding him.

Did you know: He was the Leafs’ rep on the NHL summer media tour, visiting Sports Illustrated, the New York Times and major TV stations.

#8 Mike Komisarek Age 29

Last year: 75 GP, 1-9-10, 86 PIM. Despite some rough patches, a post-lockout low of 13:38 in ice time and a brush with the law in L.A., he ranked third on the Leafs in hits. As always, when he simplified his game it led to better results. Scored his first goal as a Leaf and reached a career high in assists.

This year: There was summer speculation the Leafs would try and stick Komisarek in the minors to erase his $4.6 million US salary, but he dedicated himself to getting lighter and had a productive camp. The Leafs will start him as explosive rookie Jake Gardiner’s stay-at-home partner.

Did you know: He’s the Leafs’ NHLPA rep, pending re-election in late October.

#24 John-Michael Liles Age 30

Last year: 76 GP, 6-40-46, 35 PIM. Ended his seven years with the Colorado Avalanche with a bang, a career high in assists. That included one in each of the team’s first nine games, an NHL record. At 22 minutes he was the Avs’ leader in ice time. Ranked 16th in scoring among NHL defencemen, 10th in assists.

This year: Replaces Tomas Kaberle as the first-pass breakouk defenceman, but real impact should be on the power play where he helped Colorado to 11th place. Continues to be a late-draft bonus from 2000, a year when he, Travis Moen, new Leaf teammate Matthew Lombardi and Henrik Lundqvist were picked 155th or higher.

Did you know: Liles was born in Indianapolis and is a huge supporter of Peyton Manning and the Colts.

#22 Cody Franson Age: 24

Last year: 80 GP, 8-21-29, 30 PIM. What’s this, a Leaf with recent playoff experience? Franson played 12 games for Nashville, more post-season work than anyone in camp except for the juniors. That was on top of his career high in goals.

This year: The knock against the 6-foot-5 Franson is that he doesn’t use his size effectively, something the often timid Leafs want him to exploit. He also has a cannon of a shot that might find its way on to the power play. The Leafs made an astute move to shuffle cap space to get Franson and Lombardi, but now it’s playoff time.

Did you know: His uncle, Chris Franson, bought him a Wendel Clark jersey when he was born in Salmon Arm, B.C.

#36 Carl Gunnarsson Age: 24

Last year: 68 GP, 4-16-20, 14 PIM. Continued to battle on the fringe of the roster, and solidified a spot late in the year during the spring surge. Given more offensive duties after Tomas Kaberle was traded, he played more than 21 minutes a game down the stretch, with a little points’ streak in March.

This year: He signed a new contract in June, but the arrival of higher-profile defencemen threaten his role. He might have to play with more of an edge to stay in the top six.

Did you know: His hometown of Orebö, Sweden is noted for a 13th century medieval castle.

#51 Jake Gardiner Age 21

Last year: 41 GP, 10-31-41, 24 PIM. His University of Wisconsin mates held their breath sometimes when Gardiner took off with the puck, but it was often worth the risks. Gardiner has the speed to get out of trouble as fast as he gets in. Getting his feet wet with the Marlies for 10 games last year was a big help.

This year: Definitely going to be one of the most exciting Leafs to watch, either here or with Marlies. He was judged a better bet than a shaky Keith Aulie in camp, but the stipulation is that Gardiner must play if he stays with the big club.

Did you know: Majored in consumer affairs at Wisconsin.

FORWARDS

#9 RW Colby Armstrong Age 28

Last year: 50 GP 8-15-23, 38 PIM. Despite a rash of injuries, literally from head to toe, Armstrong was one of the most inspirational Leafs and provided a visible boost when in the lineup. Established on third line right
wing, he had a five-game points’ streak and a three-point night before a broken foot finally finished him.

This year: Likely to be named an alternate captain, he might get a chance to show his offensive side if paired with Matthew Lombardi or Nazem Kadri when the latter returns. In a full season, Armstrong is capable of 40 points.

Did You Know: Armstrong’s father and Clarke MacArthur’s dad were senior hockey foes on either side of the Saskatchewan-Alberta border town of Lloydminster.

#11 C Philippe Dupuis Age 26

Last Year: 74 GP, 6-11-17, 40 PIM. Even those familiar with his checking and penalty-killing prowess wondered if he could escape the minors for a whole season and stay in the NHL. But Dupuis became a staple in Colorado and played a career-high 74 games. Came to the attention of new Leaf player personnel boss Rick Dudley, who likes his moxy.

This year: Beat out the popular Darryl Boyce for a role, based on his penalty killing. But with a two-way contract, he can’t afford a let-up with so many like-minded forwards here. He once had 105 points for Moncton in the QMJHL and could put a couple of goals off turnovers to enhance his position.

Did you know: His first NHL goal was a short-handed effort against ex-Leaf Andrew Raycroft.

#12 C Tim Connolly Age 30

Last year: 68 GP, 13-29-42, 20 PIM. Cursed by injuries in Buffalo, but also lack of playoff production that helped pave his way out of town. With just two assists in six games last year, it extended a streak of no goals in 28 post-season matches. But when healthy and motivated, Connolly could be a force in the middle.

This year: Projected to centre Phil Kessel and Joffrey Lupul, Connolly had two non-descript pre-season games and then hurt his shoulder. He has stated often that the change of scenery and the challenge of picking up the Toronto offence appeals to him, but the early injury could be a bad omen.

Did you know: Only two of the four players picked ahead of Connolly in the ’99 draft are still active — the Sedin twins.

#15 C/LW Matthew Lombardi Age: 29

Last year: 2 GP, 0-0-0, 0 PIM. Lombardi’s season came to a violent end just two games into the Predators’ schedule when he took a nasty head-first tumble into the boards. The concussion symptoms did not abate until well into the summer, by which time the Leafs had taken his salary off Nashville hands.

This year: A series of milestones culminated in Lombardi playing in Toronto’s final exhibition game with permission for contact. As other Leafs have fallen in pre-season, Lombardi has gained strength and has well-respected speed.

Did you know: Lombardi was picked 215th by the Edmonton Oilers, didn’t sign, went back in the pool and was selected 90th by Calgary.

#16 LW Clarke MacArthur Age 26

Last year: 82 GP, 21-41-62, 37 PIM. A late addition after a salary row with Atlanta GM Rick Dudley (now a Leaf), MacArthur was the perfect complement for the Leafs’ Russian-speaking duo, Mikhail Grabovski and Nikolai Kulemin. MacArthur reached career highs across the board, but tailed off a bit after the all-star break.

Finally nailed the contract he’d waited for and enjoyed a fine pre-season with his old linemates. Until he lost his cool on a hit in a game against Detroit that will cost him two regular season games.

Did you know: Shares coach Ron Wilson’s affinity for the TV show Dexter.

#18 LW Mike Brown Age 26

Last year: 50 GP, 3-5-8, 69 PIM. Another poster boy for pain, Brown put his body on the line several times to block shots, to fight and take some punishing hits, But he did reach a career-high in points and felt comfortable in his new surroundings.

This year: Lingering problems from last season and extending his playing calendar to the world championship for Team USA caused him an off-season groin injury and slowed his camp progress. But he should be able to play a strong fourth-line role again.

Did you know: He was a rollerblader until his mother saw a learn-to-skate brochure and signed him up.

#19 LW Joffrey Lupul Age 28

Last year: 56 GP, 14-17-31 33 PIM. By the end of 2010-11, people had forgotten Lupul had missed a chunk of time with a back injury. He looked at ease on first line left wing, with a drive-the-net presence that Phil Kessel sorely needed. Since 2007, he has missed 115 games.

This year: Lupul hopes to get back to his 20-plus goal pace of a few years ago, but that depends on finding chemistry with Connolly or whoever might end up at centre. He is not a stranger to the Eastern Conference after a couple of years in Philadelphia.

Did you know: Of Ukrainian descent, he plays guitar for relaxation.

#20 C/LW David Steckel Age: 29

Last year: 75 GP, 6-6-12, 26 PIM. Dealt to Jersey by the Caps for Jason Arnott near the deadline. Led NHL in faceoff percentage with 62.3% last season. Has placed in the top seven of top faceoff men in the league in his first four NHL campaigns.

This year: Acquired Tuesday for a fourth rounder, the 6-foot-5 Steckel will be Toronto’s biggest forward and addresses concerns about lack of size down the middle and success in the dots. Has the Sidney Crosby hit hanging over him, but his penalty minutes have been in decline since posting 103 in ’08-09.

Did You Know: A first round pick of the L.A. Kings in 2001, he was in the same draft class as new teammates Komisarek and Armstrong.

#28 RW Colton Orr Age 29

Last Year: 46 GP, 2-0-2, 128 PIM. Team enforcer’s role came to a screeching halt in January when he was decked by Anaheim’s George Parros. Resulting concussion eventually subsided, but cast some doubt on Orr’s future effectiveness. Did score twice to give him six goals in two years.

This Year: Showing no ill effects from his injury and continues to play a smart defensive game. But the Leafs have Jay Rosehill to use in similar situations and might have to squeeze other forwards into the lineup at Orr’s expense.

Did you know: Did not skate until age 11, while trying to emulate his father, a semi-pro basketball player.

#38 LW/RW Jay Rosehill Age: 26

Last year: 26 GP, 1-2-3, 71 PIM. Started the season in the minors again, but was called up twice and finished in a regular role. Has gained respect for being a good soldier with the Leafs and Marlies.

This year: Earned himself a coveted new one-way contract in the summer, but Orr is back and the Leafs have added some fiesty fourth-line players.

Did you know: First time since being drafted by Tampa Bay in 2003 that he’ll stick on an opening day roster.

#39 LW Matt Frattin Age: 23

Last year 1 GP, 0-0-0, 0 PIM. NCAA star at North Dakota played in the Leafs’ last game of the season after lighting it up right through to the Frozen Four tourney. His 60 points in 44 games made him a Hobey Baker finalist and quite a find for the Leafs, who picked him 99th overall in 2007.

This year: Beat out fellow rookie Joe Colborne and was neck-and-neck with Kadri when the latter was hurt. But as is the case with Gardiner, he’ll have to play a lot and score at the start to dodge an eventual assignment to the Marlies.

Did you know: Was MVP of the Archbishop O’Leary High School soccer team in Edmonton as a senior in 2006. He also played on the volleyball squad.

#41 RW Nikolai Kulemin Age: 25

Last year: 82 GP, 30-27-57, 26 PIM. The most reliable two-way forward continued to hone his defensive game and become one the Leafs’ best penalty killers. Good speed and net savvy complements the line with Grabovski and MacArthur. Has missed just 13 games in his three NHL seasons.
This year: The expectations increase, although Wilson says he’ll be happy if the goal output remains the same and he stays strong on the other side of centre. Command of English is much better, thus the Russian is more comfortable in the room and around the city.

Did you know: Watches TV shows to increase his vocabulary.

#42 C Tyler Bozak Age: 25

Last Year: 82 GP, 15-17-32, 14 PIM. Square peg in a round hole was not a good overall fit with first liner Phil Kessel. A whopping minus-29 eventually convinced management to go in another direction in the off-season. But he was good on faceoffs and in different roles.

This year: Looked great in camp on the third line with Armstrong and Kadri, but ironically, will be starting in his old job because of Connolly’s injury. He has played underweight for many years, but applied himself to conditioning in the off-season, in anticipation of more physical play in his new position.

Did you know: To fatten himself when at home in Saskatchewan, he loads up on grandma’s perogies and cabbage rolls.

#43 C/LW Nazem Kadri Age: 21

Last Year: 29 GP 3-9-12, 8 PIM. Things didn’t start out as he hoped with a crash and burn at camp, but he persevered and eventually won himself a third-line left wing job. He was constantly challenged by Burke and Wilson, in public and in private, and was a more well rounded player by April.

This year: Suffered an MCL injury in an exhibition game and will be out at least the first two games. Started camp with a bang, but gave ground to college sniper Frattin. Could be back at centre depending how other experiments work out or might be demoted in a numbers’ crunch.

Did You Know: Fourth NHLer of Lebanese descent after John Hanna, Alain Nasreddine and Ed Hatoum.

#81 RW Phil Kessel Age: 24

Last year: 82 GP, 32-32-64, 24 PIM. By the end of his second year as a Leaf, Kessel finally stopped people from calling the Boston trade a one-sided defeat and showing some versatility. He now has 20 power play goals, though a minus 20 stood out as well.

This year: Pre-season reviews haven’t been great, but that’s due in part to the Connolly injury. Leafs are optimistic he can get to 40 goals under the right circumstances and that balanced scoring will get checkers off of him.

Did you know: Phil Kessel Sr., was drafted by the Washington Redskins and was the third quarterback of the 1984 Birmingham Stallions of the defunct USFL.

#84 C Mikhail Grabovskvi Age: 27

Last Year: 81 GP 29-29-58, 60 PIM. Made full conversion to a well-adjusted every-day centre. His ability to take a pounding also won praise from the coaches. In turn, Grabovski credited the extra ice time Wilson gave him, up around 20 minutes, with improving his outlook.

This year: Pre-season scoring leader was attacking the net in camp, a weak spot among Toronto forwards the past couple of years. But Wilson would like to see him get a lot better on faceoffs.

Did You Know: Liked the Colorado Avalanche as a young fan.

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Come on Burke, stick your neck out 0

Fans deserve something if Leafs fail to make playoffs again

By Steve Boffery, Toronto Sun

Toronto Maple Leafs

TORONTO - No one would expect Brian Burke to fall on his sword.

He is, after all, a GM, not a Samurai warrior, though the facial expression is somewhat the same.

But you know what would be great? If Burke, or somebody in the Maple Leafs organization, issued a guarantee that the Leafs would make the playoffs this season, it would give long-suffering fans something to grasp on to (so to speak).

(MLSE president Richard Peddie made the guarantee a few weeks ago, but he was somewhat delirious from being dunked in a water tank).

We keep hearing about how this year’s edition of the Toronto Maple Leafs is better, how they finished last season on a strong note (which supposedly bodes well for this season), and how they only missed the playoffs by eight points in 2010-11. But no one in the front office is brash enough to actually step up and promise a playoff finish.

Well, maybe it’s time somebody did. The last time the Leafs qualified for the post-season was 2003-04. Six long, frustrating seasons have come and gone (not counting the 2004-05 lockout season), the longest stretch by a Leafs team ever not to make the playoffs. And yet, all we get from the Leafs brass is the same old song and dance: How the team’s better, how the team’s rebuild is on the right track, and how the fans have to be patient.

Burke keeps saying that the Leafs are on the right track. But it’s Year 4 of his great rebuild and that’s long enough. The 1950s Chinese agricultural reforms came to fruition quicker than the Leafs’ “long march” to the playoffs.

It’s time for Burke to stick his neck out and pledge to do something drastic if the Leafs fail to qualify for the playoffs for a seventh consecutive season.

Promise something.

Make it fun. Put something on the line. Show the fans that you actually feel their pain.

My colleague Terry Jones, the lead sports columnist at the Edmonton Sun, and a man who once ordered me eight rum and cokes at last call, wrote last season that if the Oilers finished in last place again, he’d eat his column.

And guess what, a week ago Jonsey set up a table at Centre Ice at Rexall Place and actually ate his column (with sauerkraut, sour cream and bitter lemon).

Great stuff.

Basically, he put his tummy where his mouth is.

Burke should do the same.

I’m not saying eat a newspaper (we all know Burke has a distaste for certain newspapers), but promise something that would get the fans worked up.

Show them just how optimistic he really is (if he truly is optimistic). Professional sports, after all, is supposed to be about fun, so why not throw the fans a bone?

Promise to take 30 fans fishing next summer if the Leafs fail to make the playoffs, OR, promise to borrow Don Cherry’s Lil’ Burkey tie and wear it at the GMs meetings if the Leafs fail to make the playoffs.

Burke has said the team’s “goal” this year is to make the playoffs. That’s playing it too safe.

Head coach Ron Wilson said on Wednesday it would be “ridiculous” for him to guarantee a playoff spot.

The closest anybody on the team came to promising a playoff spot was forward Colby Armstrong, who said after practice on Wednesday that he promises Leafs fans on the street all the time that the club would make the playoffs.

“I say yes, absolutely,” said Armstrong. “It’s something I think everyone (on the team) gets asked all the time, whether you’re at the grocery store or pumping gas at a gas station.”

As opposed to pumping gas at a florist.

“That’s our goal,” said Armstrong. “We talk about it all the time. We talk about what we have to do, we talk about the feeling we had last year at the end of the year, we talk about the depth from the new guys that we have, we talk about our attitude and our preparation going into the start of the year.

“We had a big lull last year at the start of the year, and we can’t have that this year. We talk about (making the playoffs) all the time. It’s where we want to be and it’s what we want.”

That’s great. But talk is cheap. The Leafs have 82 games to end this ridiculous streak of ineptitude.

Somebody should stick their neck out.

Come on Burke. What say you?

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Canucks up for Cup

By STEVE MACFARLANE, QMI Agency

Vancouver Canucks center Ryan Kesler (2nd R) hugs goalie Roberto Luongo (R) after their win over the Boston Bruins in Game 5 of the NHL Stanley Cup hockey playoff in Vancouver, British Columbia June 10, 2011. (REUTERS/Andy Clark)

There's a reason the Vancouver Canucks are the odds-on favourite to win the Stanley Cup.

Even over the team they lost it to just a few months ago.

The Canucks are still that strong, on paper.

Add that to the motivation of getting to Game 7 against the Boston Bruins and then losing it in embarrassing fashion, and you've got a hungry and talented group.

Those are the two elements a team needs most -- and maybe a little luck -- to win the NHL crown.

So talk all you want about the Washington Capitals finally living up to their regular-season hype or the Bruins proving they weren't a one-hit wonder. I'm banking on the Canucks.

Fans either love them or hate them, so there are already no doubt a large majority of haters moving on from this column.

For the record, I don't root for the Canucks. I haven't really rooted for anything but a good story for almost a decade -- ever since I came to grips with the fact my hometown Toronto Maple Leafs will never win a Cup in my lifetime.

The Canucks are my pick for all the right reasons.

Roberto Luongo is an elite goalie. You can stop laughing now. He has nights where he looks like anything but one of the best 'tenders in the league. However, most of the top goalies in the league look mortal every now and then.

Besides, his backup, Cory Schneider, is no slouch.

It wasn't Luongo's lacklustre performances that lost them the ultimate prize last spring. The Sedin Twins didn't live up to their top billing. In fact, the heavily armed Canucks offence shot blanks in the final against the Bruins. I don't expect them to wilt when they get back to the big stage.

And despite injuries that could keep Ryan Kesler from starting the season and definitely will keep speedster Mason Raymond out for a while, the Canucks are still loaded with weapons.

Daniel and Henrik Sedin will challenge for the Art Ross, and Alex Burrows, Mikael Samuelsson, Christopher Higgins and Marco Sturm provide plenty of secondary scoring.

Their defence took a hit when Christian Ehrhoff signed a 10-year deal with the Buffalo Sabres for way more money than the Canucks were prepared to shell out, but they still have Dan Hamhuis, Kevin Bieksa, Alex Edler, Sami Salo and Keith Ballard anchoring the blueline.

Aaron Rome and Nolan Baumgartner are hurting, but Andrew Alberts, Christopher Tanev and Alexander Sulzer -- a free-agent pickup from the Nashville Predators -- provide depth.

It's still a winning roster -- a Presidents' Trophy candidate.

The only thing they didn't win last year was the Stanley Cup ... and they'll be doing everything they can to correct that this spring.

steve.macfarlane@sunmedia.ca On Twitter: @SUNMacfarlane
Kesler kidded for doffing clothes

By HOSEA CHEUNG, QMI Agency

Canucks forward Ryan Kesler during a stoppage in play in a game against the Sharks in Vancouver, B.C., May 18, 2011. (BEN NELMS/Reuters)

VANCOUVER - The biggest Ryan Kesler news Wednesday was not that he participated in a full practice with the Vancouver Canucks.

Instead the reigning Selke trophy winner, who is sidelined with a hip injury, was the centre of attention for posing nude in the latest issue of ESPN magazine.

"It turned out well," said Kesler, who is not expected to start the season with the Canucks. "I had a lot of fun doing it."

The centre said he spoke with his family first before agreeing to take part.

"I'm happy I did it. (My wife) supported it 100%," Kesler said.

His teammates, though, had fun at Kesler's expense. The photo was set as a desktop wallpaper on a computer in the players lounge for all to see.

Goalie Roberto Luongo, when asked if he would consider doing the same thing, said, "I actually declined the invitation. This body is for one set of eyes only."

Said coach Alain Vigneault: "I didn't recognize (Kesler) this morning when he walked in with clothes."

Kevin Bieksa had the best dig.

"I don't think he's ever going to live this one down," said the defenceman, who rooms with Kesler on the road. "As 'Kes' would say, he has the body of a Greek god so he can pull it off. I'm sure we'll get it on a billboard somehow, maybe in the rink up in the banners. This picture is going to float around for a while.

"We're the most hated team in hockey? This isn't going to help us."

Winnipeg Sun LOADED: 10.06.2011
New season’s potential erases bad memories for Canucks

‘We know we have another great chance to do something good,’ forward Alex Burrows says

By YVONNE ZACHARIAS, Vancouver Sun October 5, 2011

This young Vancouver Canucks fan, shown in full face paint at a game during last year’s Stanley Cup Final series, is hoping his team will have another championship shot this season.

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This young Vancouver Canucks fan, shown in full face paint at a game during last year’s Stanley Cup Final series, is hoping his team will have another championship shot this season.

Photograph by: Jeff Vinnick, NHLI via Getty Images

The cheering has faded to a whisper. The wreckage of the riot has been cleared away. Those scary television Images of burned, overturned cars are now stashed in the archive of memory. And the future over the Vancouver Canucks near-win of the Stanley Cup is a distant rumble.

Over the summer, the city took a collective deep breath after the heartbreaking Game 7 loss to the Boston Bruins. The chill of fall in the air can mean only one thing: another hockey season is about to begin.

Listen carefully and you can hear the buzz in this hockey-crazed city. It begins as a low but steady hum, builds in volume in a gradual crescendo until it becomes a mighty roar.

From the Canucks dressing room to downtown sports bars to messages on Twitter, fans and players are exuding optimism.

“As a team, we are over it for sure,” said defenceman Kevin Bieksa after practice at UBC’s Thunderbird Arena last week. “We’ve looked past that and we’ve had the summer to kind of get over that. Now we are focusing on Game 1. As a city, I think it’s the same thing. We had a great run for two months. I think it took everybody else all summer to recover but I think they are ready for hockey again.”

Because he says he doesn’t read the papers or watch television, forward Alex Burrows said it’s tough for him to say whether fans are over the tantalizingly close brush with hockey’s biggest prize.

As a team, “I know we have got over it,” said the eternally pumped Burrows. “You can’t linger on it too long. Obviously, it’s a new year, a new season. We know we have another great chance to do something good.”

A similar upbeat feeling is starting to percolate on downtown streets and in bars around town.

“I think the Stanley Cup hangover is starting to lift now,” said Tim Murphy, general manager of the Shark Club. He said the buzz among patrons is all about who among the younger players is going to make the team. “People are definitely starting to talk hockey again.”

Ron McGillivray, general manager of the Kingston Taphouse and Grill, summed up the mood of the city in two words: quiet confidence.

“I think the buzz is there. It’s just that it takes time to build. You can’t go from such a high to get back to that same level.”

It’s going to be a roller-coaster ride for sure. But in the end, McGillivray is confident the Canucks are going to clinch the Stanley Cup.

“They have put in their time. They have learned from it.”

He said fans are grateful to the players who gave it their all last season, even playing with injuries. “I feel there is more of a connection early on as opposed to feeling ripped off.”

Now that the embers of the riot have died down, Mark Brown, a bartender at the Library Square pub, can see the positives that have emerged from the smoke and shadows.

“Vancouver became a true Canadian hockey city again,” he said while serving customers from behind the bar. “Call them bandwagon jumpers, call them diehard fans, people got excited.”

The near-win of the Stanley Cup "brought a lot of wishy-washy fans out of the woodwork and educated a lot of people in the sport of hockey.”

Count him in the diehard category. He has been a fan since the age of five when he met up with Trevor Linden at a Safeway in North Vancouver when the former Canucks captain was in his rookie year.

He senses that the gapping wound left by the final loss and the ensuing riot has started to heal but he figures the city won’t completely recover until those responsible for the rampage and destruction in downtown Vancouver are brought to justice.

If demand for Canucks merchandise is any barometer of enthusiasm, the city is on its way to another big hurrah.

John Czelka, owner of VanCity Sports in downtown Pacific Centre, said there is already demand for Canucks jerseys. Ryan Kesler and Bieksa are proving the most popular. He is finding, too, that Canucks rookie and hopeful Cody Hodgson is a sentimental favourite. “A lot of my customers are coming in and saying they hope he gets a good shot.”

He describes the mood going into the season as high optimism. "I think the Stanley Cup hangover has been over for a while.”

Far from being disillusioned by the crushing disappointment in the eleventh hour of the playoff season, “hockey is still No. 1, hockey is No. 2, hockey is No. 3. Then it’s the Lions and the Whitecaps.”

Kai Buchan, a sales rep in the store and an ardent Canucks fan, admitted he took the final loss to the Boston Bruins hard.

“It took me a while to get over it. Now I’m ready to go for the 2011-12 season.”

He predicts the Canucks will have a slow start to the season. “We won’t probably kick into full gear until mid-November or December.”

But when the team starts rolling, look out.

“We can make it happen,” said a confident Bieksa.

Comparing the coming season to the one that wrapped in June, he could cite only one difference. “Hopefully we will win one more game.”

Vancouver Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Nice guy Alain Vigneault gets job done without histrionics
Canucks coach says his highly motivated team doesn’t need contrived tantrums from the bench

By ELLIOTT PAP

Alain Vigneault is in his sixth season behind the Vancouver Canucks bench and, with 236 regular-season victories, is 10 behind Marc Crawford, who holds the all-time franchise lead.

Alain Vigneault is in his sixth season behind the Vancouver Canucks bench and, with 236 regular-season victories, is 10 behind Marc Crawford, who holds the all-time franchise lead.

Photograph by: NICK PROCAYLO, PNG

The days of stick-breaking, fire-breathing, nail-spitting coaches appear to be over. At least they are in the Vancouver Canucks’ world, according to none other than Canucks head coach Alain Vigneault.

“I did some of that a few times when I was younger,” Vigneault, 50, said with a twinkle in his eye. “But with this group, ever since I’ve been here, they have been highly motivated. They’re motivated because they’re accountable to one another and they’re motivated mainly because they want to win. And because they want to win, they prepare themselves accordingly.

“So I shouldn’t say motivation is the least of my concerns but, on my list of things I have to be on top of, motivation is probably one of the least ones.”

In today’s modern, corporate National Hockey League, coaches are responsible for putting systems into place, setting up game plans and creating an environment in which the players can flourish and be happy. Based on last season’s results, it worked pretty well considering the Canucks finished first overall, led the league in numerous categories, won an armful of individual awards and came within one victory of capturing the franchise’s first Stanley Cup.

Vigneault isn’t concerned about his voice becoming tired and his words becoming stale with this core group. This is his sixth season behind the Canucks bench and, with 236 regular-season victories on his resume, he is only 10 behind Marc Crawford for the all-time franchise lead. He is already the franchise leader in playoff victories with 32, one more than the sainted Pat Quinn.

“You know what?” continued Vigneault, who was born in Quebec City and raised in Hull. “I do think the environment we have here with the Canucks has a lot to do with it. We try to create one that is positive. We use a business-like approach here – we have work to do, let’s do our work and, after that, if we can have fun, we’ll have fun. But winning makes it fun.

“Our players are all professional guys who understand the responsibility that comes with that.

“So motivation [from the coach] is not a big part of getting this group up. It’s about players finding ways to get themselves in their mental zone so they can go out and perform. They are ready for every game.”

Right winger Jannik Hansen, now in his fourth season with the big club, doesn’t even think a coach needs to motivate his players at the NHL level. Hansen says motivation comes from within the player.

“If you don’t have the motivation, the drive and the desire, you shouldn’t be here,” noted the Dane, 25. “It’s something that goes hand-in-hand. You want to be here, you want to play here and you want to perform here. Obviously the players have to hold themselves accountable and make sure they are ready and prepared and whatnot.

“The coaches come with the guidelines and the systems and all that stuff,” Hansen added, “and then it’s our job as players to make sure we’re ready. If you’re not, I’m sure there is another player down the line who will be.”

Even if things slide a bit, Hansen doesn’t expect to hear many tantrums, either real or contrived, from head coach Vigneault. “I think the way we
Burrows to finally get his chance on first-unit power play for Canucks

By BRAD ZIEMER, VANCOUVER SUN October 5, 2011

Alex Burrows figures to see more power play time for the Vancouver Canucks this season than he has in years past.

In his six seasons with the Vancouver Canucks, Alex Burrows has scored 111 goals.

Only six of them have come via the power play.

In fact, Burrows has scored more than twice as many short-handed goals (14) than he has with the man advantage.

That's mainly because he hasn't had much power-play time, but that's about to change.

Burrows figures to be a busy guy in the first month of the NHL season, which begins tonight for the Vancouver Canucks when they play host to the Pittsburgh Penguins at Rogers Arena.

In addition to his first-line duties with the Sedin twins, Burrows will begin the season on the first-unit power play. And he'll still pull penalty-kill duty, although probably not quite as much as he has been accustomed to.

There doesn't figure to be any complaints from Burrows about his minutes in the early days of the season.

"For sure, every year you look forward to a new season and you want to have a bigger role and right now for me at the start of the year it is going to be a bigger role," Burrows said Wednesday. "We want to get out of the gate with a good start and get some wins early. So I'll have to be sharp right off the get-go and hopefully play well."

The Canucks expect no less from Burrows, who has scored 99 goals the past three seasons.

Burrows will fill in for the injured Ryan Kesler as the net-front presence on Vancouver's first-unit power play and head coach Alain Vigneault does not think he'll require any adjustment time.

"That is one of his best assets, that he goes to the net, not just on the power play, but five-on-five," Vigneault said. "He's really good at staying there, he's really good at tipping pucks, at finding rebounds, so the only real difference between him and Ryan as far as the net presence is Ryan is a right-hander and he's a left-hander. He's very good."

Very good doesn't even begin to describe last season's power play, which was the best in the league. The Canucks clicked on 24.3 per cent of their power-play opportunities last season and scored a league-high 72 goals with the man advantage. The Canucks surrendered only two short-handed goals last season.

About the only time the power play failed the Canucks last season was in the Stanley Cup final, when it was an abysmal 2-for-34 against the Boston Bruins.

Daniel Sedin knows a great power play benefits teams more than just in the goals-scored column.

"I think it backs teams off a little bit," Sedin said. "They are worried about taking penalties so they maybe can't go at you as hard as they would like. They are not going to take those stupid penalties. I think it backs them off for sure."

Sedin is also sure that Burrows will be able to step right in and fill the void left by Kesler's injury.

"He is probably the best guy we have in front," Sedin said of Burrows. "Kes is always up there, too, but Burr five-on-five and power plays has shown he can tip pucks, he can set screens. . .It's well deserved, he deserved the ice time and I know he'll be up for the challenge."

The one area where Burrows can't replace Kesler is on defensive zone faceoffs.

"The one thing we are probably going to miss is the faceoffs on the right side where Kes was always really good," Sedin said. "So we are going to have to work on that."

Burrows has never once complained about the fact that despite his goal-scoring prowess he has seldom been used on the power play. But there's no doubt he appreciates the opportunity.

"I have always said even if I don't play power play and I just play PK, I just want to win at the end of the day. Whatever the coaches decide to do with the lineup is fine. If it's best for him that I play more power play, that's completely fine with me."

Burrows figures the biggest challenge in his net-presence role on the power play will be to stay out of the penalty box.

"I have to have sure I don't get called for goalie interference," he said. "It's a fine line being at the top of the crease and sometimes you get bumped into the goalie. And goalies are pretty good at coming out and trying to sell the bump or that kind of thing."

"I have to have sure I stay outside the paint and try to stay away from the penalty box . . . that's probably going to be the biggest challenge. Besides that, I am comfortable being the net-front guy, screening goalies, tipping pucks and being strong on puck recovery after rebounds. That's pretty much it."

Burrows for Kesler isn't the only change on Vancouver's main power-play unit. The departure of defenceman Christian Ehrhoff, who tallied 28 of his 50 points on the power play, has also left a hole. Alex Edler and forward Mikael Samuelsson will now work the points with Burrows and the twins up front.

Despite the changes, Daniel Sedin sees no reason why the Canuck power play can't be just as good this season.

"Absolutely, Hoffer and Kes were obviously big parts of our group, but I think anyone can step into the power play and be effective," Sedin said. "It's how you work as a group and we have the guys to do it in here. So I'm not too worried about that."

Neither is coach Alain Vigneault.

"I am very confident," Vigneault said. "Throughout last season we had injuries to that first unit and we were able to make sure that our power play was able to perform. We have got some really good players that can read off each other and I am confident our power play is going to be fine."

Vancouver Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
For the Sedin brothers, the Stanley Cup is all that really matters

Swedes realize winning an NHL title would trump all their individual honours

By BRAD ZIEMER, Vancouver Sun October 5, 2011

Vancouver Canuck Henrik Sedin (left) takes a pass from his twin brother Daniel as Edmonton Oiler Cam Barker looks on during NHL pre-season action at Rogers Arena. The Sedins have an impressive collection of individual trophies, but are hoping for a Stanley Cup win to truly complete their collection.

Vancouver Canuck Henrik Sedin (left) takes a pass from his twin brother Daniel as Edmonton Oiler Cam Barker looks on during NHL pre-season action at Rogers Arena. The Sedins have an impressive collection of individual trophies, but are hoping for a Stanley Cup win to truly complete their collection.

Photograph by: Ric Ernst, PNG

When they first arrived here 11 years ago as two shy 20-year-olds seemingly a million miles from their home in northern Sweden, Daniel and Henrik Sedin really didn't know much about the Stanley Cup.

They knew even less about how tough a trophy it is to win.

As young players trying to establish themselves in the National Hockey League, the Sedins naively almost assumed that the Stanley Cup would come their way, probably sooner rather than later. Now, more than a decade later and having come so agonizingly close to getting their hands on it this past spring, they understand.

"I remember our first few years the older guys would say you have got to take this opportunity because you might not get another chance," Daniel recalls.

"And I thought we would get a chance every year, it’s not that hard. But now that we are here, 11 years later, it’s tough. It’s really tough."

And for the Sedins, who have accomplished so much individually the past couple of seasons, winning it is all that really matters.

"I think our main focus back then was to get a lot better," Henrik says of their early years in the league.

"Winning a Cup was really far away in our minds. I think, but now we feel like we are right there and we have the team to do it."

Two years ago, Henrik won the Art Ross Trophy as the NHL’s leading scorer and also took home the Hart Trophy as the league’s most valuable player. Last year, it was Daniel’s turn. He won the Art Ross Trophy and also collected the Ted Lindsay Award as the players’ selection as the league’s MVP. The twins are now recognized as elite players, although Daniel isn’t quite convinced.

"I have always said you really can’t be counted among the elite players if you haven’t won a Stanley Cup," he says. "That’s our goal and that’s this team’s goal."

Last week, the Sedins turned 31 and not for the first time the thought that their playing careers are closer to the end than the beginning crossed their minds.

"We know we have three years left here, for sure," Henrik says. "That’s not a lot of time to get something done. It’s tough. We have a team now that is capable of winning and we have to take advantage of that."

And the twins are more than ready to sacrifice individual success to win the ultimate prize.

"Like I said last year before the season, a good year for us didn’t mean I was going to score 110 points," Henrik says.

"For us, it was winning our division and conference. And I think the same focus has to be on this year. We can’t expect Danny to go out there and put up 100 points. If he scores 85 and we win the conference, we have to be happy with that."

Their teammates see the twins as ultimate team-first players and say it rubs off on the rest of the group.

“They are unselfish, they are humble and they work hard,” says defenceman Keith Ballard. “When your best players have that attitude, everyone just falls into place or falls into line. That’s how it has been with those two. They are great leaders and great examples for all of us.”

This past summer, although short by Canucks standards, at times felt long. There was lots to think about. Both Daniel and Henrik acknowledge that they at times dwelled on that Game 7 loss to the Boston Bruins and thought long and hard about how things could have ended differently.

What if they had been able to solve Boston goalie Tim Thomas? What if they had played better in the finals? What if the Canucks’ lethal power play had not gone ice cold? What if ...?

"It’s still in the back of your mind,” Henrik says. "It’s always going to be there when you are that close. But I think it motivates you more coming into this year, that you were that close, you know what it felt like. We are focused on a new season, but it’s important that you still have some parts of the feelings left in your head."

Henrik has replayed Game 7 in his mind countless times.

"Yeah, going into the last game there’s always, ‘What if we had scored on the first chance? What if this or that would have happened,’ but again it didn’t happen so we’ve got to move on.”

What the twins won’t do is write off last season as a disappointment. They prefer to dwell on all the positives. The President’s Trophy, the Western Conference title and the fact they are no longer that team that can’t get out of the second round.

"We’re not that team any more,” Daniel says with a hint of pride.

Both of the twins are convinced that everything the team went through last season, all the successes and even that bitter Game 7 disappointment, can be used to its advantage this season.

"Absolutely, we went all the way,” Daniel says.

"We lost in the last game, but we have gone through everything you can go through in the playoffs and in the regular season, too. You have to remember all the injuries we had last year, too, and we just kept playing.

"We know it’s going to take a lot of hard work, a lot of preparation to get to that point again. But for us, we have been through everything. Nothing should surprise us.”

Vancouver Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
By BRAD ZIEMER, VANCOUVER SUN October 5, 2011

Here's the naked truth about Ryan Kesler. He is probably not going to miss as much time as some have suggested.

Kesler, who is recovering from off-season hip surgery, practised Wednesday with the Vancouver Canucks. And yes, he had his jersey on.

Kesler's first full practice was overshadowed by the release of his nude picture in ESPN magazine.

Kesler was the subject of considerable ribbing from his teammates.

"I think everybody has seen it by now," defenceman Kevin Bieksa said. "It's on the wallpaper on one of the computers in the (players') lounge, so it's out there now. I don't think he is ever going to live this one down."

Kesler was peppered with questions about the photo when he met with reporters after practice.

"Jealousy, that's all they've got is jealousy," Kesler said when asked about the reaction from his teammates.

He said he was happy with the photo.

"It turned out well and I had a lot of fun doing it."

Other athletes featured in the magazine's Body Issue include Blake Griffin, Helio Castroneves, Apolo Ohno, Alicia Sacramone, Belen Mozo and Gretchen Bleiler. Kesler said it didn't take him long to decide to do the photo after being approached with the idea.

"I spoke with my family first and talked about it with them and thought it would be a good thing to do and I was happy I did it," he said.

Kesler smiled when it was suggested that airbrushes may have been involved.

"Nope, that's pure me."

Goalie Roberto Luongo said he was also approached by ESPN to do the shoot but declined.

"This body is for one set of eyes only," Luongo said.

Bieksa later joked about that being a good thing.

"I don't care how good technology is these days, there's a lot of hair on that body," he said of Luongo.

Kesler called his return to full practice a positive sign. While he wouldn't speculate on his return to the lineup, it now seems likely he could be back within the next couple of weeks. Many had expected he might miss the first month of the season.

"It's another step in the right direction," he said. "I felt good out there."

Kesler is expected to travel and practise with the team next week on the road.

"It looks like he hasn't even missed a beat," winger Alex Burrows said of Kesler. "He was skating very well. He is a big part of this team and we are looking forward to having him back."

TRAVELLING MAN: Newly acquired winger Dale Weise, who joined the Canucks for his first practice Wednesday, has done his share of travelling the past couple of days.

"It's been a bit of a whirlwind," he said. "I went from Europe, back to New York, then a quick drive to Hartford and had a practice there and then got called off the ice after that and found out I was claimed, so I flew here last night."

Weise was claimed by the Canucks after he was put on waivers by the New York Rangers. He is delighted to join the Canucks.

"I am just excited to get an opportunity to play in the NHL," Weise said. "I was down in the minors there in New York and for them to bring me here and put me right in the lineup is obviously exciting. And to come, in my mind, to the best team in the league ... I'm just excited to be part of a Canadian team. I grew up in Winnipeg. I am just ecstatic to be here."

Weise, who will skate on Vancouver's fourth line tonight with Maxim Lapierre and Aaron Volpatti, does not want to be known as an enforcer, although he's happy to drop the gloves when needed.

"I don't really see myself as strictly a guy who goes out and picks fights," he said. "I don't see myself strictly as just a guy who does that but I'm happy to do that job and stand up for my teammates."

Coach Alain Vigneault has acknowledged that he doesn't know much about Weise, a 6-foot-2, 210-pound 23-year-old who only has 10 NHL games on his resume.

"For the amount of time I watched him during practice I thought he was fine," Vigneault said. "He was what I had been told by our scouts, a big body, brings energy and we'll see what he can do in a game."

ICE CHIPS: Winger Chris Higgins missed Wednesday's practice with a sore groin, but Vigneault said he expects Higgins to play tonight. ... The Canucks have opened the season one other time against the Penguins -- in 1976 in Pittsburgh -- and lost 9-5. Rick Blight scored four goals for the Canucks that night.

Vancouver Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Alex Edler ready to step into bigger offensive role for Canucks

Team looks to Swedish defenceman to pile up some points to fill void created after Ehrhoff bolted to Buffalo

By BRAD ZIEMER, Vancouver Sun October 5, 2011

Canuck Alex Edler, who will be expected to step up his points production this season, practises at UBC’s Thunderbird Arena.

Inside almost every defenceman sits a frustrated forward and Alex Edler is no different.

Like so many of his blue-line colleagues in the NHL, Edler loves mixing in a little offence with his defence. He’ll never get a better chance to do just that than this season.

When defenceman Christian Ehrhoff shuffled off to Buffalo as a free agent this summer, he took with him 50 points the Vancouver Canucks didn’t even attempt to replace. The Canucks are gambling that those points can be replaced from within and are looking for Edler to lead the way.

“That’s part of my game, I want to be involved in the offence,” says Edler, a 25-year-old soft-spoken Swede. “We lost a guy who was very good offensively so some of us have to step up and fill that spot. I think we have a great D corps that has a lot of offensive skills so I’m sure we can absolutely do that.”

Only six NHL defencemen had more points than Ehrhoff collected last season. More than half of his 50 points — 28 — came on a Vancouver power play that was the best in the NHL.

Edler will start the season on the first-unit power play, working the point along with winger Mikael Samuelsson. More times than not, it figures to be Edler moving the puck up the ice into the offensive zone and once there he’ll have a chance to use his big shot.

“Alex sees the ice as well as anyone, he finds guys, he has a great shot, he jumps up in the play very, very well,” said Canucks associate coach Rick Bowness, who handles the team’s defencemen. “With experience, more confidence and timing and everything else, his numbers will continue to grow. He’ll always be a big part of our power play and a big part of our defence joining the rush, which we have emphasized from Day 1.”

Bowness notes that before Edler was sidelined last season following back surgery, he was almost on pace with Ehrhoff in terms of points. He ended up with 33 points in just 51 games. It’s not a stretch to suggest that if Edler remains healthy, he could approach or even surpass the 50-point plateau.

“When he went down with the back surgery both he and Christian were in the top 10 among D in the league in scoring,” Bowness says. “That set our defensive numbers back in terms of goals and points from our D, but Alex will be right back up there as one of the top offensive Ds in this league.”

Both Bowness and Edler stress that Edler alone will not fill the void left by Ehrhoff’s departure. Kevin Bieksa, Sami Salo and Dan Hamhuis are all being counted on to increase their offensive numbers.

It seems hard to believe, but Edler is about to begin his fifth full season with the Canucks.

“I guess you could say I’m a young veteran,” he says with a smile.

Before last season’s injury-plagued season, Edler had piled up 79 points the previous two seasons.

“It’s definitely a big part of my game, I feel like I can help out in the offensive end,” he says. “Sometimes it’s about a breakout pass, sometimes it’s a goal or an assist. It doesn’t always have to be the points, but that is one important part, obviously.”

The fact he spent a large part of his minor hockey career in Sweden as a forward undoubtedly helped Edler develop his offensive skills.

“I started as a defenceman and then I was a forward for a few years until I was about 15 or 16,” Edler says. “A coach talked me into going back on defence.”

The Canucks are thankful for that. When they drafted him in the fourth round of the 2004 draft, the Canucks hoped they had a player who would, over time, develop into a solid NHL defenceman.

But it happened more quickly than they imagined. Edler played just one season with the Kelowna Rockets of the WHL and spent less than a full season with the Manitoba Moose before cracking the Vancouver lineup.

Bowness has had a close-up look at Edler’s development.

“Alex has gotten better almost every day, every month, and he will continue to grow,” Bowness says. “His numbers will continue to improve.”

In his early years in the NHL, Bowness was constantly on Edler about his intensity, or lack thereof. Too often, Edler’s laid-back quiet personality was reflected in his play.

Bowness thinks he has cleared that hurdle.

“Right now it’s consistency and playing with that intensity at a high level on more of a consistent basis,” Bowness says.

Edler does not quarrel with that assessment.

“I think consistency has always been something that I have had to work on from Day 1. Looking up at Ollie (Mattias Ohlund) and those guys, they never played a bad game and I think that’s something you have to work on a lot and I still do. Usually, it comes more with experience, I think.”

One thing Edler does not have to work on a lot is his shot. He is blessed with a heavy shot, one that he tries to model after his friend and teammate Salo.

“You always work on your shot,” Edler says. “You can have a hard shot and miss the net all the time, too. Sami has a very hard shot and it’s very accurate, too. That’s the kind of shot that you want and that is what I am trying to get.”

Chances are, Edler is going to have the chance to take a lot of them this season.

Vancouver Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Keith Ballard is going into the 2011-12 season healthy. He started last year hampered by hip surgery that limited his training regimen.

Staff

When defenceman Keith Ballard was a frequent healthy scratch during last spring’s playoff run, he appeared to have little future with the Vancouver Canucks.

After all, if the coaches didn’t have faith in you, didn’t believe in you, didn’t think you could get the job done, what was the point of sticking around? Maybe a parting of the ways would benefit both parties. (Of course, that assumed the Canucks could find someone willing to take Ballard and the four years remaining on his contract at $4.2 million per season.)

But there was no parting of ways. Canucks GM Mike Gillis and head coach Alain Vigneault sent Ballard home for the summer with the message that 2011-12 was a new season. So now Ballard is back, refreshed and ready to resurrect his career.

“Sometimes you just need to put things in perspective,” said Ballard, 28, when asked how he was able to overcome his travails of last season. “Your day might be tough but, in the grand scheme of things, it’s not that bad. I mean, if you look at everything going on in the world, a bad game, or a bad couple of games, well, like I said, it’s not that bad.

“At the end of the season, I had a good meeting with Mike and with Alain and I think that really helped my mindset going into the summer. It was basically put this behind you and start fresh.”

So far, so good. Ballard had a fine pre-season and appears to have regained his confidence and a spot in Vigneault’s lineup. He’ll likely start Thursday against the Pittsburgh Penguins on the third pairing with sophomore Chris Tanev. He was happy with the way he performed in camp.

“I feel much better with my skating, much more comfortable moving on the ice and with that comes being able to get up in the play a little more, keeping a tighter gap and playing a little more physical,” explained Ballard, a Minnesota native. “For me, my whole game starts from my skating, so comparing this training camp to last year’s, it’s just night and day how I feel. I think when the physical side of it is there, it takes some of the mental strain away.”

Ballard’s preparation for the 2010-11 season was severely hampered by hip surgery that limited his training regimen. This past summer, it was all systems go and that, more than anything, helped to restore his confidence.

“That was the biggest thing,” he emphasized. “It was my mindset all summer just to make sure that I was prepared physically for the season.”

Ballard admits he did have to lean on people, especially wife Jamie, when things looked so bleak for him professionally during the playoffs. With the whole hockey world watching, his struggles were well documented.

“I think everyone has people that they trust and talk to and lean on for emotional support and I was no different,” he said. “It’s also one of those things where you don’t want to get too many opinions and then have too much going on in your mind. So I was able to move past that. I was more disappointed about losing Game 7 than I was about my season. It was tough not playing as much as I would have liked but nothing can come close to the feeling of losing that Game 7.”

According to fellow Canuck blueliner Kevin Bieksa, Ballard never let his personal situation spill over into the dressing room and drag down his teammates. Bieksa said Ballard’s attitude remained “great” throughout his ordeal.

“It shows that he is a professional,” Bieksa noted. “He is the ultimate teammate, a great teammate. He’s never negative and always in a good mood. I think maybe he learned in his first year that Vancouver is a different organization in a different market than maybe Florida and Phoenix. He’s come back stronger and I think he looks great out there. He looks really hungry.”

Vancouver Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011
It's no secret the Bruins appeared to have their way physically with the Canucks in the Stanley Cup Final, with Vancouver offering little, if any resistance. With the loss of two of its tougher players from last year — Raffi Torres and Tanner Glass, both to free agency — the Canucks will be looking for even more sandpaper from its fourth line, most notably Aaron Volpatti and the newly acquired Dale Weise. Players seem unconcerned however, arguing toughness should be measured as a team, not by one or two individuals.

“As a group we’re going to be a physical team and obviously my line is going to want to finish a lot of checks and show it will be a long night for the opposing team,” said fourth-line centre Maxim Lapiere. “A lot has been made about our toughness, but as a team we have nothing to worry about. We showed last year we can play that way and I expect no different this season.”

Will Cory Schneider be traded?

With Roberto Luongo locked up for the next 10 years, it's possible Vancouver could choose to move its backup in order to fill a need. Schneider was spectacular last season — going 16-4-2 with a .923 goals-against average and .929 save percentage — and his services could fetch a lot in return. Another factor to consider is that the 25-year-old native of Marblehead, Mass., becomes a restricted free agent after this season and will command more than the $900,000 he’s on the books for this year.

“I’d like to be here in the end, I think this team is going to do great things, but it’s not really up to me,” said Schneider. “Things change throughout the course of the season, so it's basically whatever management decides is the best for the team is what will happen. Personally, I’m enjoying my time here and my teammates so it's not in my nature to want to move right now. I've been part of this organization for seven years and want to do whatever I can while I'm here and not worry about that other stuff.”

Vancouver Sun: LOADED: 10.06.2011

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Vancouver Canucks hope to break trend and get back to the Stanley Cup Final

Here are five question facing the Vancouver Canucks as they head into the 2011-2012 season

By Ian Walker, Vancouver Sun October 5, 2011

One of the big questions facing the Canucks this season involves backup goalie Cory Schneider: will he be traded?

One of the big questions facing the Canucks this season involves backup goalie Cory Schneider: will he be traded?

Photograph by: Steve Bosch, PNG

We look at the top questions facing last year’s President’s Trophy winners heading into the 2011-12 season.

Do the Vancouver Canucks have the cure for the dreaded Stanley Cup hangover?

No one can say for sure when the term was derived, but it describes the letdown a team faces one year after advancing to the post-season finale and one that has become quite en vogue in the new salary cap era. Of the 10 teams that played for a Stanley Cup from 2006 through 2010, only two had a better regular season the following year while the average decline in the standings was a staggering 12 points.

Of course, there’s an exception to the rule, like when the Detroit Red Wings and the Pittsburgh Penguins had a Stanley Cup rematch in 2009, but throw that out the window and eight finalists over the last five seasons have combined to win a grand total of three playoff rounds the year after going all the way.

“It could be real, if you want it to be,” said winger Mikael Samuelsson, who was a member of the 2008 and 2009 Red Wings. “People think that because you have a short summer you’re not going to come prepared but I don’t believe in it. It’s like a built-in excuse if things don’t go your way, but we have to find our way.”

Is Marco Sturm the answer to more scoring depth?

Vancouver’s lack of scoring was a key factor in its seven-game loss to the Boston Bruins in the Stanley Cup Final. Sturm was the biggest free agent acquisition for the team, but whether or not the 33-year-old can return to his former 20-goal-scorer status is the big question. Yes, the German winger is coming off a pair of knee surgeries, but he will also have an opportunity to play with better players than he has in the recent past. He’ll start the year on Vancouver’s second line with Cody Hodgson and Samuelsson.

“I expect to be the player I was before my injuries,” says Sturm, who has scored 20 or more goals eight times. “That means hopefully 20 goals again. ... But it’s not just me, we definitely have a lot of talent and secondary scoring on this team.”

Who will replace Christian Ehrhoff this season?

With no new additions to last year’s defensive corps, it will require a total team effort to replace the 50 points Ehrhoff provided from the back end.

Sure a healthy Sami Salo, along with improved play from fellow blue-liner Keith Ballard will help replace the production of the now Buffalo Sabres blue-liner, but the health of Vancouver’s defence will also go a long way to determining its success as a unit.

“Something is always going to happen to someone during the season, either from a blocked shot or a concussion, but that’s why they have seven or eight of us here,” said Andrew Alberts, who played in 41 regular-season games and nine playoff contests for the Canucks last season.

“You never know and that’s why you always have to be ready to go and there’s competition for jobs every day with guys wanting to get into the lineup.”

Are the Canucks tough enough?
Maxim Lapierre said the Canucks have helped him regain his confidence after being traded twice last season.

The labels stuck like gum to their shoes.

Chris Higgins wasn't the consummate professional. Maxim Lapierre had the gift of gab but didn't bring much else to the table. That baggage accompanied the well-travelled forwards to Vancouver last season at the NHL trade deadline, but it didn't take them long to get rid of it. Arriving at the right place and at the right time in careers that were clearly at the crossroads, Higgins and Lapierre became versatile and invaluable performers during a march to the Stanley Cup final.

You can argue the Canucks wouldn't have advanced to a seven-game showdown with the Boston Bruins without Higgins able to play second or third-line wing, score four playoff goals and be willing to drop in front of shots. And the same can be said for Lapierre, who scored three times in the postseason, drove the opposition crazy and did more than just fill in for the injured Manny Malhotra as a third-line centre. It's why Higgins was signed to a two-year, $3.8 million US extension and Lapierre a two-year, $2 million extension.

The image of Higgins blocking a shot during a second-round series win over Nashville and then aggravating the left foot again against San Jose and Boston was burned into management's memory banks for all the right reasons.

"The hardest part was getting over the first couple of games because it was really swollen and the pain level was the highest right after it happened," recalled Higgins. "It then plateaued."

When the Canucks start playing for keeps on Thursday against Pittsburgh at Rogers Arena, Higgins will play through a slight groin strain and it will be yet another reminder of his heightened pain threshold and willingness to endure.

"He wants to win," said Canucks coach Alain Vigneault. "He loves the environment and he is used to the attention and scrutiny. He's been a real helpful player for us."

The versatility of Higgins and Lapierre may show again during the upcoming four-game road trip. If Marco Sturm struggles or Cody Hodgson comes up cold in the middle, Higgins can move to the second line wing and he also played centre with Montreal. And if Manny Malhotra has any kind of difficulty in coming back from two offseason procedures on his left eye, Lapierre can move back up to the third line. Higgins laboured through his summer training because his foot didn't require surgery, but it needed time to heal. The fact the winger still tried to skate on it didn't help, but Higgins approached it just like he approached the postseason. No pain, no gain.

"All you want to do is play in the playoffs and it means the most," Higgins said. "Every game you treat it like the game of your life and it's fun to have a committed group of guys who approach every game like that."

It's commonplace for newcomers to any team to trumpet the environment and spout about how good it is. But it's not just lip service in Vancouver, according to Higgins.

"When I was traded to this organization, I thought this was the best team in the league and it set in that this was probably the best chance to win the Cup," Higgins said, who has also played for Florida, Calgary and the Rangers. "You just have to do your part because there is so much talent and focus on this team. And they want to the player to feel comfortable in every way. They cater to what a player wants and needs."

All Lapierre wanted was to regain his confidence after being traded twice last season, first from Montreal to Anaheim and then to the Canucks. It was mentally draining and his determination dropped along with his minutes with the Ducks.

"When I came here, I wasn't really confident," Lapierre said. "That's the main thing. They helped me get out of that hole because when I walked in the dressing room I was really surprised. They treat you like family and you don't really feel like you're at work. It's like being with your buddies and it's unreal. It really helps mentally."

"I thought I could get back to my real game and it's easier to do with this type of team."

Not that it's going to be easy to replicate last season. Climbing the mountain the first time is tough enough. It will seem higher without Ryan Kesler and Mason Raymond to open the season and with Mikael Samuelsson and Dan Hamhuis also coming off significant offseason surgeries. The Canucks will be in the crosshairs every night.

"It's why you play," Lapierre said. "The leadership in this room is unreal and we know what it takes and how hard it is to get to the top. We're going to have to send the message right away."

Vancouver Province: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Luongo is accustomed to pressure of playing in Vancouver

By Jason Botchford, The Province October 5, 2011

Roberto Luongo #1 of the Vancouver Canucks looks on during Game Seven against the Boston Bruins in the 2011 NHL Stanley Cup Final at Rogers Arena on June 15, 2011 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

More Images »

At this point, you walk into the Canucks dressing room and you half expect Roberto Luongo to be on a couch, not a locker stall.

You've surely heard it all by now. He's got problems and they're not all related to his five hole. He's too sensitive, emotional, and fragile. He's said to be prone to swings in play and mood. It's been suggested he's at risk of being buried by his critics from the sheer pressure of it all.

You listen to people long enough and then walk into the dressing room and you half expect Luongo to be dreading another season in Vancouver where his relationship with the fans is sometimes toxic.

But the reality is much different. Luongo is loose, calm and confident. There's some good reasons. For starters, the season is just beginning and he's not going through the rather significant style changes he made last year. There's comfort in that.

The changes this year are subtle in comparison. His glove hand will be higher and he wants more active hands. Again, he wants to evolve his game. His emotions, too. He's setting out to stay more even keel. He wants to be less reactive. Sounds like a good idea, which may be easier to hope for than to execute.

At least he knows what he's getting into in this market. By now, he must have seen and heard it all.

"This is my sixth year here, I've become accustomed to certain things," he said. "You become used to it. I understand the type of market I'm in. When the team is not playing well, when I'm not playing well, when we're not winning games, (the scrutiny) is going to there."

Maybe more than ever. For all the positives Cory Schneider will do to help Luongo by absorbing some of his workload, there may be some negatives in having a backup who is ready to start in the NHL. As long as Schneider is here, the city and its hockey fans will be mired in a goalie controversy.

It's not always a bad thing. It's worked in Boston where even now head coach Claude Julien is refusing to name Tim Thomas his No. 1 goalie. That's after Thomas had a season for the ages. He won the Vezina, the Stanley Cup and the Conn Smythe. What more can he do?

So, although a goalie controversy can be aggravating, some, like Julien, must believe it can be motivating.

What we do know, is Luongo is going to hear about it.

"You're going to have questions about it probably on a daily basis if things don't get out on the right foot," Luongo said.

"I know what you guys are asking me and I can figure out what's being written and said. But as an athlete you can't let that stuff get to you. We're all human, I would say 99% of the time I'm okay with most of the stuff.

"But I don't know anyone who wants to hear negative stuff about themselves."

It seems no one considers Luongo the best goalie in hockey. Some will tell you he's not even the best goalie on his team. The TSN ranking of the best 50 players in hockey had Luongo at No. 41. He was sixth among goalies. This, after a career season. This, after he was a Vezina finalist. This, after he pitched two shutouts in the Stanley Cup final, winning both games 1-0.

But with the peaks, came Luongo's valleys. He struggled and was benched in Chicago. He was terrible in Boston in the finale. It hasn't deterred him. "No matter what happened last year, this is the game I love and the game I love to play," Luongo said. "I want to get back at it as soon as possible. It's fun being around the guys again, doing what I love."

Luongo may be a lot of things, but overrated isn't one of them. You could argue he's come full circle. From overrated to overlooked. It could be a good thing. Most believe the pressure is more intense than ever. But the expectations are lower than ever. That's the way it's going to be until the playoffs.

"But we have a lot of work to do to get back there," Luongo said. "It's a tough grind. We have to focus on right now. We can't worry about the playoffs.

"Once we get there, we'll be ready for it."

Vancouver Province: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Penguins' Cooke vows he's learned from his mistakes

By Ben Kuzma, The Province October 5, 2011

Pittsburgh Penguins player Matt Cooke spoke to The Province after the team's practice at Rogers Arena on Oct. 5. The Vancouver Canucks host the Penguins in their season opener Thursday night.

Matt Cooke is convinced he has changed.

The most hated player in the NHL was telling anyone within earshot Wednesday that he has learned from his mistakes and that the punishment he received last March for an elbow to the head of Ryan McDonagh — suspended for the final 10 games of the regular season and first round of the playoffs — was a wake-up call. Cooke has watched video and worked with coaches to avoid being in the wrong place at the wrong time and being the subject of another Brendan Shanahan discipline video.

Cooke stressed he was already altering his style in that March 21 game against the New York Rangers. The Pittsburgh Penguins agitator passed on several earlier opportunities to inflict the wrong kind of damage.

"I was in the process of making changes in that game," said Cooke, a former Vancouver Canucks agitator. "I hadn't hit twice coming through the middle and eight or 10 years ago it was a great hit and you got applauded for it. Twice on the forecheck, I turned away from guys who turned their back because I had been suspended for that earlier in the season and this [McDonagh hit] was a complete accident.

"That fact alone was enough that even when I'm not trying to do something and avoid a situation, the game is so fast. If I don't change the approach, things are never going to change whether I want them to or not. If I want to continue, I had to change my approach."

Cooke said he can continue to have a physical presence as long as he's aware of the new standard in the NHL regarding targeted hits to the head under the amended Rule 48.

"After what happened at the end of last year, I probably put probably 30 hours of video work in plus another 15 hours of work with the coaching staff preparing myself to go back and play in the second round — had we made it that far," added Cooke. "I watched our games, I watched certain players and as you get a sense of how you're going to eliminate certain situations — or the high-risk situations — then you try to figure out how to do that.

"I found a system in the pre-season that has worked pretty good."

Vancouver Province: LOADED: 10.06.2011
Weise falling into comfort zone with Canucks after first practice

By Ben Kuzma, The Province October 5, 2011

Vancouver Canucks Dale Weise (right) stands in front of goalie Cory Schneider (left) during the team’s practice at Rogers Arena in Vancouver on Oct. 5. The Canucks host the Pittsburgh Penguins in their season opener on Oct. 6.

Vancouver Canucks Dale Weise (right) stands in front of goalie Cory Schneider (left) during the team’s practice at Rogers Arena in Vancouver on Oct. 5. The Canucks host the Pittsburgh Penguins in their season opener on Oct. 6.

Photograph by: Ric Ernst, PNG

If Dale Weise’s legs work as well as his lips, the fourth-line winger will make an instant impact in the season opener for the Vancouver Canucks.

Following his first practice after being claimed off waivers from the New York Rangers, he had nothing but good things to say about his new team. Not so much about his old team. Chalk it up to enthusiasm, adrenaline and opportunity for a guy who was on the Canucks’ radar at the NHL trade deadline last season and will play with Maxim Lapierre and Aaron Volpatti against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday at Rogers Arena.

"It’s great to be somewhere you’re wanted — I’m more comfortable after one practice than four years in New York," Weise said Wednesday. "I’m just excited to get an opportunity to play in the NHL. I was down in the minors and for them to bring me here and put my right into the lineup is exciting.

"And to come to what is in my mind the best team in the league, I’m just excited to be a part of it. Coming to a Canadian team and growing up in Winnipeg, I’m ecstatic to be here. I had nine different guys call me. I’ve never been here before and I’m just excited to walk around the city."

Did we mention that Weise is excited? He should be but should also be aware of recent history.

It’s one thing to bring size to a fourth line has been in a constant state of flux. A year ago, the Canucks opened with Tanner Glass and Guillaume Desbiens between Alex Bolduc and they used 14 players on that line through the course of the season. And if the Boston Bruins taught the Canucks anything during the Stanley Cup final, it’s that the fourth line can’t be an afterthought. It can’t be a dumping ground for struggling players and those coming off injury because you need everybody to win it all.

That’s why there’s been so much focus on the fourth-line derby. With Lapierre the frontrunner, it was a late charge by Volpatti and the acquisition of Weise that put Victor Oreskovich, Mike Duco and Mark Mancari in the AHL and Steve Pinizzotto on the sideline with a separated shoulder.

Pointless in 10 games with the Rangers last season and the loser of two preseason bouts — according to hockeyfights.com — the 6-foot-2, 206 pound Weise was deemed expendable, even though he has done more than scrap. The former Swift Current Bronco had a 28-goal minor-league season with Hartford in 2009-2010 that included 114 penalty minutes. Then again, he fought Daniel Carcillo, Steve Ott and Luke Schenn last season.

"I’m very confident in my abilities," said Weise. "I’m only 23 and put up good numbers in the AHL and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to be here and I think that’s a trait a lot of teams would be interested in. I’m going to bring some energy and be physical and I think we can make some things happen down low. I’ll do what I do. Stand up for my teammates if need be and provide a spark and chip in a little offence if I can.

"I don’t see myself strictly as a guy who goes out and picks fights. I’m the type if a guy is going to run around and take advantage, I’m willing to step up."

Since the start of training camp, Canucks coach Alain Vigneault has been searching for a fourth-line identity. He wants players who can skate, punish the opposition and stay out of the penalty box. If anything, he’s got a motivated player in Weise who’s on the last year of a two-way deal that pays $605,000 US at the NHL level.

“For the amount of time I watched him during practice, I thought he was fine,” said Vigneault. "He was what I was told by our scouts, a big body who brings energy and we’ll see what he can do in a game."

Vancouver Province: LOADED: 10.06.2011
By Ben Kuzma

Vancouver Canucks Aaron Volpatti (center right) battles for the puck with several Edmonton Oilers during first period NHL preseason action at Rogers Arena in Vancouver October 1, 2011.

Vancouver Canucks Aaron Volpatti (center right) battles for the puck with several Edmonton Oilers during first period NHL preseason action at Rogers Arena in Vancouver October 1, 2011.

Photograph by: Ric Ernst, PNG

Burn marks remain visible amid skin grafts on his right hand, arm and legs. And the mangled skin on his abdomen is a constant reminder of how Aaron Volpatti's hockey career was put in serious jeopardy.

It's not the kind of story the Vancouver Canucks fourth-line winger is eager to tell because the chapters include bravado, stupidity, adversity and the resolve to turn the recklessness of youth into the maturity of a purposeful and well-educated NHL player. However, in the summer of 2005 it was more about a wide-eyed kid and his buddies playing with fire during a Vernon Vipers postseason camping trip. Volpatti not only received burns to 35 per cent of his body in the process, the Revelstoke native spent five weeks in hospital and was told that his playing days may have come to an end.

"It was a real eye-opener," Volpatti recalled Tuesday. "Teenage kids sometimes think they're invincible and I learned the hard way. I was 19 and we had lost out in the [BCHL] final against Surrey and we went camping as a team and one thing led to another. We were being a little bit stupid and I spilled a little bit of gas on myself and the next thing you know, I got badly burned.

"It's pretty emotional when you're told there might not be a chance of playing and I was lucky because somebody was watching over me. I didn't get any scarring over my joints and my face was burned, but it's fine."

Those who know Volpatti will tell you there's something special about the guy who's in the final year of a two-year, free-agent contract. The 15 NHL games Volpatti played last season only strengthened his resolve to become a mainstay and not an afterthought when all the preseason hype was about newcomers Steve Pinizzotto, Mike Duco and Mark Mancari, plus departed veteran Victor Oreskovich vying to be Maxim Lapierre's wingers.

Far from brash and boisterous like many fourth-liners, Volpatti punched his ticket to roster prominence with a memorable preseason effort in San Jose on Thursday. It included four hits, four blocked shots and a quick one-sided decision in a bout with Brad Winchester. That wouldn't have been possible if Volpatti gave up six years ago. Many would have. He didn't.

"At that point, they said you're definitely a couple of years away from playing again and if you play again, I may not be able to use my right hand again," recalled Volpatti. "It was pretty cool to come back that fall. I only played 25 of 60 games just because it was a little too much at times. The burns on my legs were bad enough that I had some muscles issues."

That's a Cole's Notes version of what really occurred. Because of his humble nature, Volpatti doesn't dwell on the long road he's travelled from Junior A, to captain at Brown University and lining up with Dale Weise and Lapierre when the Canucks start playing for keeps on Thursday against Pittsburgh at Rogers Arena. The longer version of the tale is one of pain and perseverance because there was nothing ordinary about his long climb back up the career ladder. There were skin grafts and soreness and wearing a pressure suit 24 hours a day to control scarring. And as much as Volpatti has improved his skating, there was a time when he wasn't even mobile after leaving hospital.

"I couldn't walk for another month," he added. "It was a process and I didn't get much training in. It's funny how it worked out. I was in the hospital when I heard from Brown to get my scholarship and I committed to them that November because my goal at the end of that season was to get a scholarship."

Volpatti majored in human biology at Brown and isn't sure how he'll apply that degree in the future, but his offseason focus was power skating to improve a decent stride. In searching for a fourth-line identity, coach Alain Vigneault wants equal parts of ability and aggression.

"I felt like I had a good camp and not only physically — which was pretty obvious in a few situations — but I was comfortable with the puck and I thought I made good decisions," Volpatti said. "And my skating has improved. I feel a lot quicker and faster."

Vigneault believes Volpatti's willingness to bring a physical dimension while working on his game is what has brought the rugged winger to this point. After all, Volpatti didn't really get noticed until his senior year at Brown and playing pro in some league at some point was always a goal.

"Like any other player, you've got to be able to play," the coach said. "Those two or three-minute players, we don't want them and I don't think the NHL wants them any more. You've got to be able to play in different situations and Aaron is very mature. I see progression and a lot of excitement there for our team."

Vancouver Province: LOADED: 10.06.2011
As any serious hockey pool type knows if he's looked at the big picture, Evgeni Malkin could win another Art Ross trophy this year.

One of the very few superstars who has won the Ross, the Calder, the Smythe and the Stanley Cup by age 23, Malkin is poised for a huge bounce back year upon recovery from his ACL injury last season and if teammate Sidney Crosby is a little late getting out of the gate and still has a good year, the two could be front and centre in the scoring race.

This fountain of optimism springs from something of a personality blossoming from the big gifted Russian, his work ethic much improved, his improved understanding of what is required both on and off the ice from a star in this league and the fact it all was very nearly taken away from him with the knee problem. All those factors have worked very much in his and the Pens’ favor. He trained like a Spartan before, during and after a three-week stretch back home with the Pens' strength and conditioning coach Mike Kadar, whom he hired to fly to Russia and put him in absolutely the best shape he’s ever been in. He’s taking his profession much more seriously than he did, admitting a few days ago that “maybe I was lazy in the past, just playing hockey” instead of going it at a commensurate with his standing and pay scale in the game.

“Maybe not lazy,” he back peddled with humor in his ever improving and more adventuresome English. “But I work hard this year. First three years in league pretty good, but last two years not so good and I want to get back.”

While this is a "maturity" story which is so common in this and lots of other pro sports, it doesn’t really do much for the Penguins who have been paying him the big money over his "lazy" years and perhaps not getting their money’s worth. Maybe the lean, 206-pound Russian star is about to start making some back payments and begin to earn that same $8.7 million U.S. pay packet as Crosby is getting.

At age 25, he most certainly appears ready to bounce back with a vengeance and his high profile teammates certainly seem to think there’s a good chance it will happen.

“You know when you get an injury like he had, you have to work hard to make it back and that’s certainly what he’s been doing," says Jordan Staal, who himself has had his share of injury rehab early in his still young career.

“Look at him now and he’s definitely got the talent, the total package and when he wants he can just take over a game out there. Really, when he’s into it he’s a very special player.”

Crosby also thinks he’s really going to be ready. And given his history in this building, what with the Russian drinking stories from the Olympics which emerged after they were hammered by Canada, and earlier his emotional disappointment at the 5-0 loss to Canada in the world junior final in '06 when the team was expected to do so well, he’ll have something to prove.

“I definitely think he’ll be flying out there tomorrow,” said Crosby. “He’s in great shape and he’s had a great pre-season and he’s around some other guys who are good players as well.”

He’s expected to start with James Neal and Chris Kunitz on what could be called the Pens top line as the season opens in Crosby’s absence, the Penguins picked to get to the final by the EA Sports computer this year the same way the Canucks were selected for the west last season.

“In last two years, (it's a) long season and after a hard game, maybe I don’t feel so good,” says Malkin. “I want to get in better shape, so I feel good all the time no matter how many games. We got good leaders in here and yes, I'm trying to be one.”

He’s become quite the leader off the ice as well, finally feeling he should chip in and help Crosby with those duties given he makes the same money. So far all the public relations burden has fallen on the Canadian's shoulders and he’s trying to remedy that. He’s spear-headed an NHL fund raising effort whereby Washington and Pittsburgh players are going to wear patches on their jersey when they play each other for the first time this season and the sweaters from the game are going to be auctioned off for the families of the Lokomotiv players. He's literally bursting out of his shell after years of hiding despite his ongoing battles with the language.

“Maybe I can win again,” he said when asked about another Art Ross trophy. “But lots of good guys in the league. Two good guys here you know.”

Vancouver Province: LOADED: 10.06.2011
2011-12 Capitals: It’s time for the Young Guns to grow up

By Katie Carrera,

In the middle of the 2007-08 season, the Washington Capitals designed a promotional poster to appear yellowed and aged featuring the Wild West-style type. Pictured were four shaggy-haired players: Mike Green, Alex Ovechkin, Nicklas Backstrom and Alexander Semin. The label below them? “Young Guns.”

As the Capitals prepare to begin their 2011-12 campaign against Carolina on Saturday night at Verizon Center, the moniker still exists, but the guns aren’t so young anymore. Four years — and four straight postseason disappointments — later, each must bounce back from an individually lackluster season while shouldering the greater burden of leading Washington’s pursuit of the franchise’s first Stanley Cup.

“It’s time that we stepped up, grew up and became, or at least try harder to become, the leaders of this team in everything we do,” Green said. “The time is now. It has to be. At the end of the day, we play the game to win a Stanley Cup, not for anything else. We’ve wasted enough time.”

Last season, Ovechkin and Backstrom each suffered career lows in multiple statistical categories. All four players saw their offensive totals dip anywhere from 24 to 52 points from the previous year. Against the Tampa Bay Lightning in the playoffs, the Capitals were swept without much resistance from the big four who combined for three goals and five assists in the series. In Game 4, the only one to record a point was Ovechkin, who tallied an assist.

“We’re experienced guys now, not young guys, and you learn what missing an opportunity costs you,” Ovechkin said. “It can be our last chance, us guys. You never know what’s going to happen, how many chances, opportunities you’re going to get. How many players was a great player but never won a Stanley Cup? A lot. I don’t want to be that. None of us do. We must do better.”

There is a feeling among those close to the organization that if the Capitals depart the postseason early once again, there will be significant changes. Green and Semin are set to become free agents next summer, the same time the NHL’s collective bargaining agreement expires and likely alters which players teams can afford to keep.

“Things can go fast in this league,” General Manager George McPhee said. “If you look at Semin, Green, Backstrom, Ovi, they’re five, six, seven years into their career. Their careers could be half over, and I think they’ve started to realize this isn’t going to last forever. They don’t want to leave anything on the table, because the opportunity is there.”

After the Capitals were swept out of the second round by Tampa Bay last spring, McPhee could have made sweeping changes to the Washington roster. Rather than dismantle the core of Ovechkin, Backstrom, Semin and Green, though, McPhee altered the supporting cast.

Out went players with several years in the organization and in came a Stanley Cup winner (Troy Brouwer), an undisputed top goaltender (Tomas Vokoun), a wily veteran defenseman (Roman Hamrlik), a rugged grinder (Joel Ward) and a former captain (Jeff Halpern) to create what might be, at least on paper, the best roster to surround the team’s four pillars.

“When Ovechkin arrived in Washington before training camp last month, everyone in the organization, from owner Ted Leonsis to strength and conditioning coach Mark Nemish, said the 26-year-old was in the best shape of his career. By all appearances during the preseason, the two-time MVP has lived up to the hype after beginning his offseason training regimen early.

Ovechkin made the mistake of believing he could gradually play himself into shape during the 2010-11 campaign, a year in which he recorded career lows in goals (32) and points (85) and was hampered by what is believed to have been a knee injury.

“I need to be ready mentally, physically right away,” Ovechkin said. “From the first game to the last game. Last year it wasn’t this way...??. Now I know I need to be ready for the year. These months are to build our team for playoffs, we must all be ready at the start.”

A return to past form and scoring prowess by Ovechkin would go a long way to help spark the Capitals’ offense, but his ability to mature as a captain is equally important to Washington’s success.

“One thing we talked to Alex about was in terms of leadership and how he can be a great captain,” McPhee said of the offseason discussions with his star left wing. Both declined to share specifics, but it’s likely Ovechkin was encouraged to speak up a little more when necessary in the dressing room.

“It’s my seventh [season], it’s time to understand what kind position we’re in where there are no more excuses,” Ovechkin said. “If there’s something to say, I will.”

For real change to take place, adoption of the new mind-set needs to be evidenced in the actions of everyone, especially the Young Guns. That includes attending practice to being willing to play in a less familiar position if it would benefit the team. And there is no player whose dedication and actions have been questioned publicly more than Semin.

The 27-year-old Russian sniper came under more scrutiny this offseason when he was the subject of criticism raised by former teammates Matt Bradley, who stated in August that the winger “just doesn’t care,” and David Steckel, who gave his approval to the assessment.

Washington’s management rallied to defend Semin, and Coach Bruce Boudreau stood up for him, stating that the team’s longest-tenured player has been “committed to doing what’s right” since arriving at training camp. Semin also granted multiple interviews in English during the preseason, something that had been unheard of since his NHL debut in 2003.

“This is important year for Caps and for me, too,” Semin said last week. “I want to try to speak English.”

Many of the troubles Green, 25, and Backstrom, 23, faced last season were because of injuries. Backstrom was limited much more than he let on by nagging problems with his fractured thumb and its tendons. This year, he knows he has a chance to re-establish himself as one of the game’s dominant offensive centers and bounce back from a 36-point dip in production.

Meanwhile, Green, who will be a restricted free agent at season’s end, can make the next move in his career, whether as a natural, free-flowing scoring threat, as the two-way player he evolved into in 2010-11 before injuries took their toll, or a hybrid of the two. The biggest difference now, the two-time Norris Trophy finalist said, is that the team’s core players have learned how to carry the weight of expectations.

“I think that in the past we’ve always had that responsibility because people looked up to us on the ice and expected big things,” Green said. “We’re better prepared now. It’s just a matter of us being more mature, making hockey and winning a Stanley Cup our main focus.”

In early July, McPhee flew into the Calgary, Alberta, airport to meet with Green and Backstrom, who was visiting in order to attend the defenseman’s charity golf tournament. The trio had lunch in the terminal and McPhee departed immediately afterward, without ever leaving the airport.

Neither player shared details of their meeting with McPhee, except to say it was about the direction of the team and the expectations for this year. Green added that the conversation was “personal” in nature.

“It was a big thing,” Backstrom said. “We were still upset about last season, and it was good to have the meeting.”

Over the past four years, the Young Guns have each gone through their own phases of accomplishment and struggle, and they’ve experienced the same bewildered disappointment following each postseason exit. To take advantage of the shot they have before it’s no longer available, they have to be the ones to force a change.

“They have to lead the team,” McPhee said. “They’re exceptional talents and they have to play better than they did last year. All of them underperformed, to some degree. They weren’t at the levels they’ve been at before and we need them to get back to those levels. It looks like they’re prepared to have good years, because they’re physically and mentally in the right place now.”

Washington Post LOADED: 10.06.2011
The Capitals set the bulk of their roster that will start the 2011-12 NHL season on Tuesday, when a final round of cuts were announced from training camp. But before the league’s 3 p.m. deadline on Wednesday they finalized the group with two injury designations.

In what should not come as a surprise, defenseman Tom Poti was placed on long-term injured reserve. Poti was limited to only 21 games last season with a nagging groin muscle pull and is not expected to be available to Washington in the near future. General Manager George McPhee has previously expressed concern that Poti’s groin problems could be career threatening.

By placing Poti on LTI, the Capitals get relief under the salary cap in the amount of the veteran defenseman’s $2.875 million salary.

Washington also designated John Erskine as injured non-roster. Erskine, who did not pass his training camp physical, is still recovering from shoulder surgery in May and has not been cleared for contact yet.

Being designated as ‘injured non-roster’ means the Capitals can activate Erskine at any time because there is no minimum number of days he is required to miss for this classification compared to injured reserve, which mandates a player must miss at least seven days. Erskine’s contract still counts against the salary cap.
Capitals keys to the season

By Katie Carrera

Captain Ovechkin

Alex Ovechkin's competitive nature is never questioned, but the Capitals’ inability to advance past the second round of the playoffs in his career reflects back on the two-time Hart Trophy winner. He has been asked to step up his role as a leader on the ice and off it this season. In 2010-11, Ovechkin tried to gradually work himself into shape, and his play, along with point production, suffered as a result, with career lows in goals (32) and points (85). This year he is not only expected to rebound statistically, but he'll also need to take another step forward in his second full season as Washington's captain.

The power play

Once touted for their intimidating ability to score at will, the Capitals last season watched their power play dry up to a disappointing 17.5 percent success rate, 16th in the league. Getting the unit on track is critical to rebooting Washington's offense and ensuring that stars Alex Ovechkin, Nicklas Backstrom, Mike Green and Alexander Semin rebound from their sub-par production of 2010-11. Ovechkin has started spending more time on the half-wall, making room for the club's plethora of offensive defensemen on the point, but if the Capitals fall into their bad habit of trying to be "too cute," they could end up plagued by the same problems again.

Ego management

This summer, General Manager George McPhee added an influx of established, NHL players to Washington's dressing room. The five new faces — Troy Brouwer, Jeff Halpern, Roman Hamrlik, Tomas Vokoun and Joel Ward — are all comfortable in their skill sets and were brought in partially because of their leadership qualities. Coach Bruce Boudreau will face a staunch challenge when it comes to managing the expectations and ice times of the newcomers, the Capitals' stars and his trusted role players. He will also draw in the reins for a season that is expected to hold a tougher standard, from conditioning to practice to end result.
When Coach Bruce Boudreau said he was sending a message to an un-named player on Tuesday by putting Mathieu Perreault on the second line, it wasn’t hard to read between the lines that the most likely recipient was Marcus Johansson.

Johansson appeared in five preseason games, skating with Alex Ovechkin on multiple occasions, but he failed to record a point and took just four shots on goal.

“I think the obvious answer is yeah we’d like to see more from him,” Boudreau said. “Maybe we expected too much from him at the start. He’s only a second year guy, even though he played great at the second half of the [2010-11] season. But I thought yesterday was his best practice and I thought today he worked really hard.”

The two had a talk, according to Johansson, and he knows that despite a slow start in the preseason it’s time for him to increase his intensity level now that games that matter are only three days away.

“It’s been alright. Not as good as I know I can play,” Johansson said when asked to evaluate himself in the preseason. “Still, it is the preseason and it’s the first couple games and as I said, it’s the same for everybody. You’ve got to step your game up and really be on your toes and be on your best when [the regular season] starts.”

Johansson skated as the left wing on the top line in Ovechkin’s absence Wednesday, but Boudreau wouldn’t go so far as to say that means the young Swede is the odd man out when the opening-night lineup comes together.

The slow start in training camp brings to light the other potential concern with Johansson, who will need to make sure he doesn’t fall into the trap of the sophomore slump that seems to plague so many young NHLers.

“Keep talking to them and not let them get complacent,” Boudreau said of how to help them through it. “I still think Marcus is going to have a great year, let’s not kid ourselves. He’s going to be a very important part to our team. When we’re putting it together in the summer, he’s a very big part of our team. He just started slow and he’s now starting to play the way we thought he could.”
Mike Knuble ‘the best early fit’ for Capitals’ top line

By Katie Carrera

Part of the reason why Coach Bruce Boudreau likes to have the practice group whittled down to the 23-man roster is that it allows the players to all keep active while working through drills. No one spends too much time waiting on the boards for their turn.

It also allows the lines to settle into the combinations that he believes are the best fit. On Wednesday, Boudreau offered some insight into his thoughts behind the line combinations. To be certain these are subject to change at any time.

One familiar unit, that wasn’t used during the preseason at all, seems to be the way Boudreau is leaning for the top line: the combination of Alex Ovechkin with Nicklas Backstrom and Mike Knuble. Granted, this line may depend on when Ovechkin returns from Moscow following the death of his uncle, and his frame of mind as well.

“I always think that Nicky and Alex in the end are meant for each other, so to speak.” Boudreau said. “So that’s a fit and who knows, Mike has been on that line for two years and I think he’s the best early fit.”

Boudreau praised the third line group of Jason Chimera, Brooks Laich and Joel Ward, saying that they made the most of their time together in the preseason finale and he thought they fit well together.

He also stressed that he liked the fourth-line unit of Matt Hendricks, Jeff Halpern and Jay Beagle together and that group has spent most of the preseason and the last two days of practice working together.

Which brings us to the second line, where there has been a lot of movement. On Tuesday, it was Troy Brouwer on the left with Mathieu Perreault and Alexander Semin, but Boudreau wouldn’t say much as to how long that group may be together. Marcus Johansson, who was likely the intended recipient of a message by Boudreau on Tuesday, could fit in the second-line center role as well.

Boudreau wouldn’t go so far as to say Johansson would be the odd man out when the season started, though.

“Mathieu is a guy who brings energy and has the knack of creating scoring chances,” Boudreau said. “Nobody created too many scoring chances for Alex Semin during the preseason. We need somebody to create stuff. If it’s Mathieu, if it’s Marcus, we’ll see on Saturday night.”

Keep an eye out for a post about Johansson later on today.

Washington Post LOADED: 10.06.2011
For Perreault, Beagle, fight to stay in Washington has only just begun

By Katie Carrera

While both Mathieu Perreault and Jay Beagle took a little time to celebrate their place on the Capitals roster for the start of the 2011-12 season, both know their jobs have only just begun. It’s one thing to make room for yourself on a roster, it’s another to make sure you stay there.

“It’s definitely a starting point. You’re obviously happy and very excited,” Beagle said. “But in another sense it’s just the start. The goal was to make the team and now it’s time to go and try to make an impact to help this team win games and eventually win the Stanley Cup.”

Beagle, like Perreault, managed to crack the NHL lineup out of camp for the first time in his career and is looking to spend more time on the ice than in the press box. In all likelihood, though, both will be competing to not be the 13th forward and to get more games instead of the extra bag skates that scratches partake in after morning skates.

Their true test lies when the hits are harder, the speed ratchets up another gear and all of the league’s star players are focused for games that matter when the season begins on Thursday (or Saturday, if you’re the Capitals).

“Because, let’s face it, there’s an awful lot of guys in preseason on every team in the National Hockey League that didn’t give it their all,” Coach Bruce Boudreau said. “But come Thursday the intensity and everything else is going to be ramped up an awful lot. So if that was the best they’ve got – whether it’s the best player on our team or the worst player – if that was their best, then it’s not good enough.”

Washington Post LOADED: 10.06.2011
Capitals, Penguins team up to benefit KHL’s Lokomotiv

By Katie Carrera

The Capitals and Penguins yesterday announced a joint project to raise funds for the families of the KHL’s Lokomotiv Yaroslavl, the team that died in a plane crash on Sept. 7 in Russia.

Players from both teams will wear jerseys with commemorative Lokomotiv patches during their first meeting of the 2011-12 season, Oct. 13 at Consol Energy Center in Pittsburgh, that will be autographed and auctioned off at NHL.com. All proceeds will benefit the families of the Lokomotiv team.

The auction begins at puck drop and will run through Oct. 27.

There will also be a ceremonial opening faceoff for the contest, between Alex Ovechkin and Evgeni Malkin. Wives and girlfriends of Capitals and Penguins players will also be selling remembrance bracelets to benefit the Lokomotiv families as well.

Washington Post LOADED: 10.06.2011
Mathieu Perreault cracks Capitals' lineup

By Katie Carrera

After years of trying to become more than a callup from Hershey, Mathieu Perreault cracked Washington's roster out of training camp. And for the first time, barring any unforeseen changes, he'll be in Washington when the 2011-12 season kicks off Saturday.

"It feels good. I've been waiting for it the past three years, and finally I got in," Perreault said. "I've been working really hard. I think I deserved it. I showed up in good shape and ready to go. I got a few points in the games I got in, and that's what helped me make the team."

(Charles Dharapak - AP) Perreault, who finished as the Capitals' top scorer in the preseason with five points, beat out prospects Cody Eakin and Mattias Sjogren for a spot on the roster that could range from a third-line center job or a role as the 13th forward, fighting for ice time.

Either way, though, Perreault has a chance to finally stick in Washington. He played in 35 games last year but was sent to the Bears in late February and finished his season in the AHL. As has often been the case in Perreault's career, determining how long of a stay he has with the Capitals will be his ability to find consistency.

"He was probably depressed with the organization at the end of the year, but we told him we hadn't given up on him or lost faith in him," Coach Bruce Boudreau said. "There are just things that he has to do to be solid. And that's why I'm continually on him in practice, to make him better. It's not cause I don't want him to be better, I want him to succeed. Quite frankly he reminds me very much of somebody like me when I played."

Perreault, who would have needed to clear waivers if he had been assigned to Hershey, said after being sent down at the end of last season, he focused his energy toward finding a way to remain in Washington. He's working on establishing good habits in his preparation, from getting more sleep to maintaining proper nutrition and so on.

"He's older, he knows more. Experience is a great teacher," Boudreau said when asked why he thinks Perreault can grow out of his past mistakes. "You can go through the times that he's stayed for awhile then the reasons, we've always told him why, he's gotten sent down. So, I mean, he knows what he has to do. Hopefully he's not like Samson because he is going to get his hair cut."

Washington Post LOADED: 10.06.2011
Caps GM McPhee explains why he stuck with Boudreau

By Stephen Whyno

On exit day following the Capitals' playoff loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning last spring, talk swirled outside the organization about coach Bruce Boudreau's job status.

General manager George McPhee said "I expect him to be back," and complimented Boudreau's accomplishments. But there was no declaration from McPhee or owner Ted Leonsis, and team spokesmen said there wouldn't be one.

This week in a sit-down interview with The Washington Times, McPhee explained why he decided to stick with Boudreau after another early playoff exit.

"I think we change coaches too much in this business. I think it's easy to finger people after things don't go the way you want them to," McPhee said. "But this happens with every organization in every sport: Automatically you go after the manager, you go after the coach.

"I look at a coach who's got the best winning percentage in the regular season of any coach in the history of the league. No coach has had a better record after this many games. He's won four straight division titles, he's won a Presidents' Trophy, he's won two Eastern Conference titles — pretty good record. It doesn't always go your way in the playoffs, but as long as you're getting there and playing well and competing, that's what we want."

Going into this season, national analysts are wondering if Boudreau is on the hot seat and what it would take for the Caps to fire him.

"This is a team that most people think they would've replaced the coach by now," TSN's Bob McKenzie said recently. "George said the problem's not the coach, so full credit to George for showing loyalty to Bruce Boudreau."

"But the results have to be here. I don't think the Caps can afford to get off to a slow start."

Naturally, the hockey world will be looking at the Caps' situation — but maybe not until the playoffs, which is the time they have something to prove.

"I think there's got to be a couple of bulls-eyes in my opinion. And yes, Bruce is certainly going to have scrutiny on what he does," NBC Sports' Mike Milbury said on a teleconference this week.

But when asked if he thought such criticism of Boudreau and questioning of his job status was unfair, McPhee was brief.

"How would they know?" he said. "We're just going to keep putting good teams on the ice and see what happens."

Washington Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Shanahan set for crackdown on NHL rule breakers

By DAN GELSTON

Brendan Shanahan never won the Lady Byng Trophy, awarded to an NHL star exhibiting sportsmanship and gentlemanly play.

He was suspended five times during his 21-year, Hall of Fame-bound career.

Shanahan was even suspended for a cross-check he delivered in his Detroit debut: Hi and bye all at once.

For the most part, Shanahan knows he merited his punishments.

"I certainly did some things that deserved suspensions and certainly did some things I wanted to take back," Shanahan said. "Sometimes with the passion and the speed of the game, things happen. That experience has taught me that I do believe players have respect for one another. Sometimes it's just the environment of the game, and how things can get away from people a little bit."

This season, that reasoning sounds like a perfect defense for an accused player about to plead his case to Shanahan.

Shanahan is judge and jury of his former peers in his first year as the NHL's head disciplinarian, reviewing cases of the scores of rule-breaking players who aim for the head or commit various other infractions. His grace period in his new job lasted about as long as a power-play shift.

He's become the stern-faced spokesman for the NHL rule book, suspending this preseason a whopping nine players for a total of 31 regular-season games. On the eve of the NHL season, Shanahan has swiftly made his mark as a discipline czar whose wants to protect the best interests of the sport he loves and respects -- even if he loses a popularity contest to make his mark.

Shanahan is not out to make a kinder, gentler NHL.

Just a safer one.

"The focus has gone on the players that we've punished, and I understand that," Shanahan said. "But from my perspective, it's about the ones we intend to protect. That's important to me."

Shanahan, who took over for Colin Campbell, has already revolutionized the job and created a more transparent process with videotaped explanations that should allow the rest of the league, fans and media to form a logical understanding of his decisions.

Take his video (found on video.nhl.com or linked through Twitter.com/NHLShanahan) on Toronto Maple Leafs forward Clarke MacArthur's preseason plus two regular-season game suspension for hitting Detroit's Justin Abdelkader in the head.

Shanahan describes the play over video of the act. The video cuts to a written explanation of the rule 48.1 (Illegal check to the head). "A hit resulting in contact with an opponent's head, where the head is targeted and the principal point of contact, is not permitted."

He then refers for additional clarification to the rules and regulation video, "that all NHL players were required to watch." Shanahan explained MacArthur's hit was not intentional and _ combined with the facts that MacArthur didn't have a previous history, and Abdelkader wasn't injured _ meant the penalty would not be as harsh as it would be for a repeat offender.

All summed up in 90 seconds for everyone to see.

"I think that's the best part," Bruins forward Milan Lucic said. "He's clarifying things. It's more black and white. Videos don't lie. How are you going to complain if the evidence and the video is there."

In a mostly thankless role, however, there are bound to be complaints.

Shanahan's punishments are mostly a reaction to the sensitive nature of crushing blows to the head.

A year ago, the NHL banned blindside shots to the head. The rule was expanded this season to include penalties for any hit that involves primary contact to the head and shots that target an opponent's head and make it the principal point of contact. The original wording to Rule 48 applied only to hits that came from the lateral or blindside. Those words have been eliminated. The ban applies to hits anywhere on the ice and from any direction.

It means Columbus Blue Jackets forward James Wisniewski gets nailed for eight regular-season games for his shot to the head of Minnesota's Cal Clutterbuck.

It means Detroit Red Wings defenseman Brendan Smith gets suspended for the first five regular-season games for an illegal hit to the head of Chicago forward Ben Smith.

NBC's Mike Milbury complained that enforcement of some of these rules means the league could turn into "touch football."

"I think if this goes the way it's going right now, it'll do more than if they took fighting out of the game," Milbury said. "People don't want to lose tens of thousands of dollars, going out for 10 and 20 games for what have been, sometimes, really vicious hits and sometimes questionable calls, in my opinion."

Shanahan insists there is a way to mix safety and physical play.

He is still learning about a new job he needed two months to decide to accept after Campbell stepped down after 13 years in the high-profile position.

But it's just the kind of job that suits his style.

Shanahan conducted a summit during the NHL's 2004-05 lockout, and that gathering of people from all aspects of hockey produced several suggestions that led to rules changes after a new collective bargaining agreement was reached.

Shanahan said he has never considered his various roles as a sense of service in hockey, only a commitment to making the NHL a better product.

"I'm protective of the people who play it," he said.

He played it as well as anyone around.

Shanahan joined the NHL front office as vice president of hockey and business development less than a month after he retired as a three-time Stanley Cup champion. The eight-time All-Star played on the Red Wings' Stanley Cup championship teams in 1997, 1998 and 2002. He also won a gold medal with Canada at the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics.

His resume earns him credibility.

His decisions could only strengthen the NHL.

"It was just too important of an endeavor to say no to," he said.

Washington Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Alexander Daly: Jeff Halpern regains home-ice advantage

By Dan Daly

Center Jeff Halpern, who grew up in Potomac, is back with the Capitals for the first time since leaving Washington to sign with Dallas for the 2006-07 season. (Associated Press) Center Jeff Halpern, who grew up in Potomac, is back with the Capitals for the first time since leaving Washington to sign with Dallas for the 2006-07 season. (Associated Press)

Jeff Halpern used to laugh when Chris Simon, his old Washington Capitals teammate, would refer to players as "suitcases." Of course, Halpern was just breaking into the league then. In his first six seasons, he knew only one club: his hometown Caps. For frequent-flyer Simon, on the other hand, Washington was just the latest stop in an odyssey that would take him to Quebec, Colorado, Chicago, New York (both franchises), Calgary and Minnesota.

But then a not-so-funny thing happened: Halpern became a "suitcase" himself. In 2006, when he qualified for free agency, he fell victim to the Capitals’ youth movement — not to mention the constraints of the salary cap - and ended up signing with Dallas. For the next five years he lived your basic American Tourister existence, riding the NHL carousel to Tampa Bay, Los Angeles and finally Montreal.

It was never what Halpern wanted. He was, after all, the Caps’ captain. He had grown up, in Potomac, following the team. But the business of sports is notoriously unsentimental — kind of like a baggage handler at an airport.

"You never envision that," he says of his years as a hockey journeyman. "There’s a tremendous sense of pride in being able to play for one organization your whole career and feeling like you’re wanted by that group and important to that team’s winning. ... The bottom line is, you build roots and you build friendships, and it’s always hard to leave a place."

Stories like Halpern’s rarely have Walt Disney endings. Indeed, most veteran players wind up, sooner or later, on the Island of Lost Luggage — unclaimed and unloved. So it’ll be quite a scene at Verizon Center on Saturday night when Jeff pulls on a Capitals sweater and skates out for the season opener against Carolina. He’ll be wearing No. 15 this time around, not No. 11, which was retired in honor of Mike Gartner in 2008. But everything else about him should be familiar: the solid 5-foot-11, 198-pound frame, the boyish face (even at the age of 35) and especially the rink-rat determination and fundamental soundness that made him so popular with the fans.

Bruce Boudreau has had Halpern for only a handful of preseason games, but he’s already developed an appreciation for him. "He works and he’s in the right position at the right time and he gives you everything he’s got," he says. "Last year [with the Canadians] he scored 10 goals. He can move up and play second line, third line, fourth line. He kills penalties. He wins faceoffs. He does all the little things right. I don’t know how many ways I can say he’s a great contributor."

Let’s face it, the Capitals haven’t had enough players in recent years who have done "all the little things right." They’ve had enough talent to finish with the best record in the conference two years running, but winning the Stanley Cup usually comes down to the finer points of the game — such as doing your job. All 60 minutes of it (or longer, if need be). All 200 feet of it.

Naturally, Halpern is excited to be back on his home turf, excited to be playing on a club he considers "a powerhouse." It’s a big change from when he was last here. The ’05-06 Caps team, under Glen Hanlon, brought up the rear in the Southeast Division with a 28-41-12 record, 15 points worse than anybody else.

But even then, he says, "you could see signs that there was going to be a huge upswing. They had a lot of real good pieces in place. A lot of the guys [from that club] weren’t around anymore, but they helped build the framework and create assets and pieces that are in place now."

The "good pieces" were Alex Ovechkin, Mike Green, Brooks Laich and Alexander Semin. Those are the only holdovers from Halpern’s first stint with the Capitals. But remember (as he pointed out): The Caps wouldn’t have Green if they hadn’t traded Robert Lang to Detroit, and they wouldn’t have Laich if they hadn’t dealt Peter Bondra to Ottawa. (Another player on that ’05-06 team, defenseman Steve Eminger, went to Philadelphia for a first-round draft pick that produced John Carlson.)

"It’s hard to think about the business side of the game," he says, "but it’s a tremendous opportunity to come back. I’m happy they were able to believe in me, and I’m happy to be able to contribute to the group."

His bride Kelley, father Mel and a fair number of friends will be at Verizon for Saturday’s homecoming. (Would that his mother Gloria could be, too. Alas, she died in a highway accident in 2005.) Halpern expects be nervous — not just because it’s the first game but because of "the need to perform and do things that help the team." On top of that, he says, "you’re coming to a new team where you’re trying to gain the respect of your teammates and coaches."

From the sound of things, he already has. "People respect everything he says and does," his coach says.

Jeff Halpern is back where he belongs, back skating for the Caps. At long last, he can unpack his suitcase. How great would it be if he didn’t need it again?

Washington Times LOADED: 10.06.2011
Thom Loverro: This season Capitals needs an alternate ending

By: Thom Loverro

This season is supposed to be different for the Washington Capitals, who open at Verizon Center on Saturday against the Carolina Hurricanes.

This season is not supposed to end in an embarrassing early playoff exit.

This season the most talented team on the ice during the regular season is not expected to fold in the playoffs.

This season, with the additions of veterans like goaltender Tomas Vokoun, defenseman Roman Hamrlik and forwards Joel Ward, Troy Brouwer and the returning Jeff Halpern, the talented corps of Alex Ovechkin and Co. will not be allowed to disappear in the playoffs.

Stop me if you've heard variations on this theme before.

Truth is, this October seems to be no different for the Caps than last October, which followed an embarrassing first-round loss to the eighth-seeded Montreal Canadiens.

Following that defeat, last season was supposed to be different. Only it ended in a nearly equally embarrassing four-game sweep by the Tampa Bay Lightning in the second round.

So here we are, another October when Caps fans again have to wait seven months to get the answers they want. It's a tough spot for Washington hockey fans.

Here you have a first-class organization with an admired owner in Ted Leonsis and a beloved coach in Bruce Boudreau that over the past two regular seasons has played the best hockey in the NHL. You have a superstar athlete in Ovechkin. You have a franchise that wins in a town surrounded by losers and a rocking, fun atmosphere night in and night out at Verizon Center.

There's nothing like being a Caps fan from October to April. It's great.

But it's not enough.

No regular season is more meaningless in sports than the NHL. It borders on one long exhibition season leading up to the revered Stanley Cup playoffs.

This is the challenge going into the 2011-2012 NHL season for the organization and its fans. Can you separate the two -- regular season and playoffs -- and enjoy the success of one enough to overcome the frustration of another?

Perhaps it is a dilemma that will take care of itself this season. You have to believe that sooner or later the talent of the Caps will trump the playoff dysfunction and this team will produce a playoff performance its fans can be proud of -- an Eastern Conference finals appearance, at the very least.

At least fans will enjoy the view.

The Caps quickly abandoned the white protective netting they had put up at Verizon Center and went back to the old black netting.

"It hinders the fan experience," Leonsis wrote in his blog in response to complaints.

So do early playoff exits.

Washington Examiner LOADED: 10.06.2011
Fake Jets jerseys seized

By: Staff Writer

The RCMP have made a second seizure of fake Jets jerseys.

The RCMP said this morning that 190 counterfeit Jets jerseys were seized Saturday in a joint operation with the Canadian Border Services Agency.

Previously, police had seized 40 jerseys August 31.

The RCMP said the jerseys in the second seizure had been made in China and shipped to Winnipeg. The retail value is estimated to be more than $76,000.

The RCMP said the seized jerseys are poor copies of the official Jets jersey, with the names of players in both home and away colors.

No arrests have been announced and the investigation is continuing.

Winnipeg Free Press LOADED 10.06.2011
It was all about working together* Working to get in sync

By: Ed Tait

It might not have been the best choice of attire on a day when his hockey club had gathered at the Winnipeg Rowing Club for a team-building exercise.

Then again, it could also have been viewed as brilliantly inspirational.

Yes, there was Jets' head coach Claude Noel barking out orders, making friendly wagers and generally being the life of the party all the while wearing a black T-shirt featuring a skull and crossbones and the message: "The beatings will continue until morale improves."

Funny dude, that Claude.

Following a blueprint now commonplace in the sporting world, and most certainly in hockey, the Jets opted to take a day off from the on-ice routine and gather at the historic 130-year-old rowing club on an afternoon that featured record-breaking temperatures and with the downtown skyline serving as a backdrop. The team was schooled by rowing club members and former Olympian/national team coach Jeff Powell before being split into four teams, one of them featuring the coaching staff and owner Mark Chipman, and taking to the waters of the Red River for roughly two hours.

Just for the record, Team Beefcake -- including Dustin Byfuglien, Tanner Glass, Patrice Cormier, Evander Kane, Randy Jones, Jim Slater, Mark Stuart and Kaitin Rempel of the Manitoba provincial team -- went undefeated in two races to claim the unofficial title and dressing room bragging rights.

"That was fun, that was a lot of fun," said Stuart. "It was really hard at first, actually, to learn it. But we worked on it for about an hour and a half. It was cool. Not to be corny, but it was all about working together. It was a good team event. There was definitely some chatter beforehand and I'm sure there will be more after.

"It's nice to get away from the rink. I think that's important... obviously we need the practice time, but days away from the rink are just as important, sometimes more important, in bringing a team together.

"I figured the first time I'd be in a boat in Winnipeg would be for fishing or out on a lake ice fishing," Stuart added with a chuckle. "But we lucked out today with this weather and this event."

The Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins, just FYI, headed to Maine in the last few days for kayaking and zip-lining. The Tampa Bay Lightning retreated to Mont Tremblant in Quebec for a team-building event that included eight stations, including Frisbee golf and a slingshot competition. The Columbus Blue Jackets played golf, did the paintball thing and a cookout.

A year ago the Washington Capitals travelled to the FBI training facility in Quantico, Va., while in recent seasons the Philadelphia Flyers visited West Point and the Carolina Hurricanes, then featuring current Jet captain Andrew Ladd, were drilled at Fort Bragg.

"It was tough," said Ladd of the rowing experience on Wednesday. "You watch it on TV and it definitely looks a lot easier than it was out there. It's great because it's a total team thing -- everyone has got to get balanced and rowing at the same time.

"It's nice to get away from the rink, coaches included, in a different setting and a little more relaxed. It's all about getting to know each other and working together. Obviously we know a lot of guys from last year, but there are some new guys this year and it's a little bit of a new group, coaching-wise. It's nice to get out and do stuff like this and have fun.

"It's tough to find original things so that you're not doing the same (team-building) things over and over, but this was definitely something I don't think anyone has done yet."

Noel said the light bulb first went on about this idea in August and, yes, there were concerns about what kind of day they'd get in early October in Winnipeg. But the point here wasn't just about getting together -- teams do that every time they head out on the road, after all -- it was more about having them understand how they need each other.

That lesson was hammered home on the Red on Wednesday: one rower isn't in sync, one oar doesn't do its part and a boat can struggle. And when it's all working together, it can look like... well, Team Beefcake.

"It was good. It was a great exercise today," Noel said. "You know what, I've never done this before, but it was awesome. There were so many lessons to learn and I'm just hoping that our team becomes a better team because of it. I think we will."

Winnipeg Free Press LOADED 10.06.2011
Winnipeg Jets

Jets seek off-ice chemistry

By PAUL FRIESEN, QMI Agency

WINNIPEG - Nik Antropov lay sprawled out on the deck, bare arms and legs soaking up the impossibly warm day as the river gently lapped at his boat.

Just another 30-degree October day in Winnipeg, right?

"Now it's like Atlanta," the Winnipeg Jets forward said, barely opening his eyes before returning to his state of bliss.

It's Wednesday on the shores of the Red River, the hot south breeze belying the shades of autumn along the banks.

Antropov and the rest of the Jets have gathered at the Winnipeg Rowing Club in St. Boniface, although it must have felt like they were back in their old southern U.S. haunt instead of the coldest big city on the planet.

But there will be no ice on this day. The highly anticipated NHL season opener against the Montreal Canadiens may be just four days away, but the Jets aren't going near a puck.

Instead, it's row, row, row their boats not-so-gently down the stream, in a day designed to produce some off-ice chemistry in a group still finding its legs in a new home.

This exercise was head coach Claude Noel's idea, and while everybody in the NHL does team-building activities, learning how to row is believed to be a first.

"It's tough to find original things and not do the same things over and over," captain Andrew Ladd said, recalling a trip to an army base when he was with Carolina. "But this was definitely something I don't think anyone has ever done."

Leave it to Noel to spurn the usual for something a little more cerebral.

"I figured the first time I'd be in a boat in Winnipeg would be fishing," defenceman Mark Stuart said. "Or out on a lake, ice-fishing."

There was certainly a method to Noel's madness.

As finely tuned as these athletes are, it was comical to see them wobbling as they first got into the four boats, about seven players in each, rowing in all kinds of directions except the right one.

The lead comic was none other than the coach, who showed up wearing a T-shirt that read: Beating will continue until morale improves.

"Wave at the tourists," Noel yelled as a tour boat carrying media types cruised by.

"We've got it figured out. The secrets are right here," Noel said, fingers aimed at his head after a pre-race practice outing in a boat led by Jets owner Mark Chipman.

Alas, brass played second fiddle to brawn, as the boat led by Stuart ruled the day.

Asked for the key to the win, Stuart pointed to the man they call "Beefcake."

"Our motor in the middle — Big Buff," Stuart said. "He's just all power."

Yes, Dustin Byfuglien and Co. looked right at home in their boat (hold the one-liners, please), while Noel knew where the blame sat in his.

"Bad leader," the coach said.

But a good idea.

"It was a great exercise," Noel said. "There are so many lessons to learn. I'm just hoping our team becomes a better team because of it. I think we will."

Never one to let a potential lesson go unlearned, Noel planned to question his players to find out what lessons they picked up along Winnipeg's major waterway.

"It was tough," Ladd said. "You watch it on TV and it definitely looks a lot easier than it was out there. Everyone's gotta be balanced and rowing at the same time.

"It's nice to get away from the rink and see guys in a different setting, a little more relaxed. It's all just about getting to know each other and working together."

Stuart recalled a similar, rope-climbing expedition when he was with Boston.

"It's important. It goes a long way to bringing a team together," Stuart said. "Obviously, we need the practice time, but days away from the rink are sometimes just as important or more important.

"You wouldn't think so, but you can relate so much of this to what we're doing, just as far as teamwork. I mean, that boat doesn't go unless everyone's working together. Off the start in the second race we almost tipped over because we were kind of out of whack. But once we got our rhythm we were fine."

Beginning Sunday, as this city dips its oar into the NHL waters for the first time in 15 years, being out of whack at the start could cost two points in the standings, not just some good-natured ribbing from teammates.

So if the bond between players strengthened, even a bit, Wednesday's outing will have been worth it.

At the very least, they enjoyed one last blast of a seemingly endless Winnipeg summer.

Because as Antropov said, come December this won't be Atlanta anymore.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 10.06.2011
Seized Jets jerseys obvious fakes

By QMI Agency

WINNIPEG - That's not polar night blue.
Fake Jets jerseys seized as they made their way from China to Winnipeg got the colours wrong, RCMP said.

The 190 jerseys, estimated to be worth $76,000, were also of poor quality. They are, however, the first counterfeit jerseys to feature players' names and numbers.

Border Services made the seizure Sept. 29.

"It was just a matter of time until we intercepted copies of the official Jets jersey," said Cpl. John Montgomery of the RCMP's Federal Enforcement Unit. "This was very quick, as the Jets just released the official jersey a few weeks ago."

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 10.06.2011
By KEN WIEBE, QMI Agency

WINNIPEG - Blake Wheeler looks like a man on a mission.

And for a Winnipeg Jets franchise that is expecting several players to elevate their games to the next level, Wheeler just might be the poster boy for a breakout season.

After joining the Atlanta Thrashers in a trade with the Boston Bruins late last season, Wheeler was quick to adjust to the change of scenery, putting up nearly a point a game to finish the campaign with 18 goals, 26 assists and 44 points in 81 games.

Now that the Thrashers are making their home in Winnipeg as the Jets, Wheeler is looking to build on the strong finish.

Cracking the 20-goal barrier is definitely on the to-do list for Wheeler, who is expected to start the season on the Jets top line with captain Andrew Ladd and centre Bryan Little.

“He’s definitely capable of it and we saw that last year,” said Little. “He got more of an opportunity with us, more ice time and he took off with it and almost had a point a game. He’s going to get that here and he definitely has the potential to have a career year.

“He’s an all-around power forward. He’s a big guy, he protects the puck well but he’s also got those soft hands and can shoot the puck. He’s a fun guy to play with.”

Wheeler embraces the opportunity to be a go-to guy on this Jets team.

“Hopefully I’ll have an opportunity to have a big role on this team, that gives you a lot of energy out there,” said Wheeler, who was originally drafted fifth overall by the Phoenix Coyotes in the 2004 NHL Entry Draft and signed a two-year contract with the Jets on July 18. “You want to be out there and you want to earn that position. The three of us did a really good job last year, we’ve had a good preseason and hopefully we can hit the ground running this year.

“There’s a lot of excitement. Not only with myself, but with the whole team. We can feel the energy in the city and it’s given this whole group renewed, fresh life just knowing we really matter in this city.”

Having a young core of developing players like Evander Kane, Alex Burmistrov and 2011 first rounder Mark Scheifele helps foster an environment where guys can grow together.

Whether that means scoring 20, 25 or 30 goals remains to be seen.

“Increasing statistically is obviously a goal and you want to be productive when you’re on the ice,” said Wheeler, who had a career-high 21 goals and 45 points as a rookie with the Bruins in 2008-09. “If you’re playing an increased role playing 18-to-20 minutes a night and you’re not doing much with it, you probably don’t deserve to be out there. I don’t set any barriers for myself.”

Wheeler has already made a strong impression.

“He skates, he can finish and I think he can be a big upside guy, as far as where his career goes,” Jets head coach Claude Noel said. “He’s smart, he’s hard to handle weight-wise. He takes pucks to the net hard and I like him a lot. He’s a good player.”

But where will the next step take Wheeler?

“I think he is, but what is the next step? That’s something you’re going to deal with all of the time,” Noel said. “You want players to reach all the time and we want (Wheeler) to reach in potential as well. You’re trying to find people’s A-games and it’s too early in the relationship to know exactly what it is.”

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 10.06.2011
As Jets close in on opening-day roster, Stapleton injured

By KEN WIEBE, QMI Agency

WINNIPEG - If it wasn’t for bad luck, it seems Tim Stapleton would have no luck at all.

After clearing waivers on Monday, Stapleton was back on the ice with the Winnipeg Jets on Tuesday but midway through practice, he took a redirected shot to the face from defenceman Toby Enstrom that drew blood and required several stitches.

Jets head coach Claude Noel was unable to provide an update on the severity of Stapleton’s injury after the workout.

STILL WAITING: The Jets appear to be going down to the wire to name their opening-day roster.

The clock is ticking and the club must find a way to get down to a maximum of 23 players be Wednesday afternoon. As of Tuesday, the Jets still had 29 players in camp, though four players (Eric Fehr, Aaron Gagnon, Kenndal McArdle and Ben Maxwell) were injured, goalie David Aebischer is expected to be sent to the AHL and forward Troy Bodie remains in camp without a contract.

Since he’s already cleared waivers, it’s also possible Stapleton could be sent to St. John’s or loaned to another AHL club.

Based on that math and provided that the four injured players start on injured reserve, the Jets are set with two goalies, eight defence and should start with 13 forwards.

The big question left, it appears, is whether Stapleton is the 13th forward or if the Jets plan to sign Bodie and keep him instead.

A message left with Bodie’s agent, Kevin Epp, was not returned.

NO INTEREST IN AVERY: Noel wasn’t willing to go into detail, but he made it clear on Tuesday the Jets weren’t interested in claiming Sean Avery off waivers from the New York Rangers.

"I have no comment on Sean Avery," said Noel. "That would get me in trouble and I’m not going there."

WEISE CLAIMED: Speaking of the Rangers, Winnipegger Dale Weise was claimed by the Vancouver Canucks.

The 6-foot-2, 202-pound right-winger played his first 10 NHL games last season with the Rangers, picking up no points and 19 penalty minutes.

JAFFRAY CHOSEN: Former Moose forward Jason Jaffray was named captain of the St. John’s IceCaps on Tuesday.

The alternates will be named at a later date, but expected to include former Moose Mark Flood and Marco Rosa.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 10.06.2011
Aebischer does enough to earn deal

By KEN WIEBE, QMI Agency

WINNIPEG - David Aebischer has chosen The Rock over the Swiss Alps.

Well, actually the veteran goalie is opting for one last shot at the NHL, which is why he’s signed a one-year, American Hockey League deal with the St. John’s IceCaps rather than return to Lugano in the Swiss A-League.

“When I came here, I didn’t really know what the Jets were looking for,” said Aebischer, a 33-year-old who attended training camp on a tryout. “I got the opportunity and took it. I’m happy I had the chance to sign here. I still have a ways to go (to get back to the NHL) but I made the first step and now I have to make the second one.”

The Jets already have Peter Mannino, Edward Pasquale and Chris Carrozzi under contract but it would appear the addition of Aebischer means that Carrozzi is heading to the Colorado Eagles of the ECHL and Pasquale might be as well.

Aebischer doesn’t expect to have the No. 1 job in St. John’s handed to him, but there’s a good chance he could be the starter and provide some stability to the position.

“You always have to prove yourself and play well,” said Aebischer, who signed his deal late Monday in order to beat the deadline imposed by his former team in Switzerland.

Aebischer and Mannino were roommates for roughly 10 days in training camp, so playing the role of mentor is something he embraces.

“I don’t have any problems with that,” said Aebischer, who was part of the Colorado Avalanche team that captured the Stanley Cup in 2001 and has 214 NHL games and 106 wins on his resume. “Each goaltender tandem can help each other and usually I get along with people well.”

Aebischer has only been to Newfoundland once, when he was a member of the Hershey Bears in the AHL, but he’s looking forward to getting to know that part of the country.

“It was still in the old rink, so I think it’s better now,” he said. “I’ve heard good things about St. John’s and I’m going to find out for myself.”

Jets head coach Claude Noel was happy the organization added depth in goal.

“He’s a good goalie,” Noel said. “He’s a guy we’ve liked from the beginning. He looks like he’s capable to play, at what level will be determined by him and we’ll go from there. We have to have comfort in who we have here, if somebody gets hurt.”

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 10.06.2011
ESPN / Crosby returns to scene of Olympic glory

By Scott Burnside

VANCOUVER, British Columbia -- The last time Sidney Crosby was in Rogers Arena, he was sending a hockey-mad nation into fits of delirium with his golden goal at the 2010 Olympics.

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since that Sunday afternoon when Crosby's goal beat the United States with an overtime winner from the far boards.

"It's full of great memories, and being the first time back [here], it's pretty easy to kind of go through that in your head," Crosby acknowledged Wednesday after he and his Pittsburgh Penguins enjoyed their last practice before the start of the 2011-12 regular season Thursday night against the Vancouver Canucks.

Crosby won't be joining his teammates on the ice as he continues to work through post-concussion issues. He has worked hard during training camp and has been symptom-free for the better part of a month, but he's still not ready for contact and his return to action remains unknown.

"I've been feeling good the last few weeks here. Kind of ramped it up. Haven't had any issues," Crosby said.

If there is any melancholy about missing his first season-opener since coming into the league in 2005, Crosby does not betray it. In fact, his rehabilitation from a concussion sustained in early January has included a healthy dose of perspective.

Yes, he is disappointed he is not playing Thursday, he said, "but when you've gone through something for this long, it's just, I think you appreciate the little victories and having the opportunity to just go out and go as hard as you can and feel good. You go through each day and hope you feel better and it's been really good so far."

"I'm not happy about missing the first game, but I'm happy with the improvement, happy to be going hard. It's a day at a time," he added. "I know it's a cliché. I don't think I've ever appreciated just being able to do this every day as much as lately, because for a long time, I wasn't able to. You just get up every day, try and go as hard as you can, and hope you feel good, and for me, the last few weeks have been great. No complaints."

When he does return to action, Crosby said he won't be worried about getting hit again.

"Can't control them. You're going to get hit again," he said. "I think, if anything, you try to prepare yourself mentally. If you know you're healthy and you know you take the necessary steps to get ready, you're not going to fear that nearly as much as if you rush into things and you know that there's still something wrong. I've been happy with the way things have gone."

The game's highest-profile player also threw his support behind the work of the league's new master of discipline, Brendan Shanahan, who has been busy this preseason handing out suspensions, mostly to players who have targeted opponents' heads.

"I think he's done a great job. It's not easy, but I think the best thing he's probably done is treat each individual case differently," Crosby said. "He's really going over each part and making sure he explains it, as well.

"If anything, people are learning, and hopefully with time, they'll [the number of head shots] go down. I don't think anybody is out there expecting that head shots are going to be totally gone. They're going to happen, but they're going to be a lot less if we keep doing the same thing we're doing."

ESPN LOADED: 10.06.2011
VANCOUVER -- It was hard to know which was of more import to the Vancouver Canucks on Wednesday: Ryan Kesler's hip or, well, Ryan Kesler's body.

The fact the defending Frank J. Selke Trophy winner was cleared for contact and skated for the first time with his teammates in a full practice Wednesday will have far-reaching implications for the team over the long haul.

The Canucks are hoping, of course, to return to the Stanley Cup finals this season after losing in seven games to Boston in June in a series they led 2-0 and 3-2, and a healthy Kesler will be crucial to that goal.

"I'm good," Kesler told reporters as the Canucks prepared for their season-opener Thursday night here against the Pittsburgh Penguins. "It was good. It's another step. It's a step in the right direction. I felt good out there."

After a breakout season where he tied for fourth in the NHL with 41 goals, Kesler enjoyed a strong playoff run, but was not at 100 percent by the time the Canucks and Bruins met in the finals. He underwent offseason surgery to correct hip problems and wasn't sure when he would be back to game-readiness. He's still not sure when he'll join the Canucks' lineup, but Wednesday was a positive sign.

"It's whenever my hip is strong enough, ready enough," he said. "I can't put a timetable on it. Whenever I feel good, I will play."

As for not starting the season with his teammates, Kesler seemed to be taking it in stride.

"It is what it is. I can't be upset," he said. "It's a positive step for me today. I can't think about the negatives right now. Right now, it's one step at a time."

As for seeing him in action as early as next week, Kesler didn't think that was a likely option.

"By no means do I want to limp in and play 10 minutes a night," Kesler said. "I want to come back in and get my minutes and play with more normal linemates. I want to come back in, have an immediate impact and help the team."

And in other Kesler news ...

Almost drawing as much interest today was reaction to Kesler's appearance in ESPN The Magazine's The Body issue, which features a range of athletes sans clothing. He said he spoke to his family first about the idea and then decided it would be a fun thing to do.

"Yes, it turned out well. I had a lot of fun doing it," he said.

His teammates? There was no shortage of fun poked at Kesler in the wake of the magazine pictorial. Netminder Roberto Luongo said he declined an invitation to appear in the issue.

"This body is for one set of eyes only," Luongo said. "I turned it down, unfortunately Kes accepted."

Henrik Sedin, the 2010 NHL scoring champ, said he thinks it's good exposure, um, for the game.

"I didn't take a deeper look at [the pictures]," he said. "It's good for him and it's good for hockey to get some publicity out there."

Canucks coach Alain Vigneault joked that he didn't recognize his star winger with his duds on.

"I didn't recognize him this morning when he came in with clothes on. I saw the picture once. It was interesting," he said.

Kesler, for his part, seemed nonplussed by the digs. "Jealousy. That's all they've got," he quipped.

ESPN LOADED: 10.06.2011
ESPN / Rumblings: Avery's next step, Turris' progress, Doan's future in the desert

By Pierre LeBrun

So what now for Sean Avery?
The New York Rangers assigned him to AHL Connecticut on Wednesday, which, as a matter of due process, was a must.

The question is, where will he end up for good this season? His agent, Pat Morris, told ESPN.com on Wednesday that he was in talks with clubs in Sweden, Switzerland and Russia.

It doesn't surprise us at all that there is interest from those clubs. The Avery waiver story Tuesday created massive buzz around the hockey world. Say what you want about Avery, but there are a few teams overseas that would crave that kind of attention.

Whatever deal Morris ends up negotiating for his client, the Rangers must sign off on it because they will officially "loan" the player to a European club. That's if and when a deal is actually reached with a European club.

But know this: Morris said Avery still wants to play.

Turris waits
On the eve of the NHL season, Kyle Turris remains unsigned. Still no progress, either.

"We continue to have discussions with the Coyotes and are positive that over time Kyle will be playing," his agent, Kurt Overhardt, told ESPN.com on Wednesday. "Kyle is in great shape and training hard in B.C."

What Overhardt didn't say, but we believe is the case, is that they'd be open to a trade to end this impasse. However, we don't think Coyotes GM Don Maloney feels compelled to do that at this point. We'll see whether that changes.

Shanahan meets with TSN

NHL sheriff Brendan Shanahan met with a bunch of us at TSN headquarters in Toronto on Wednesday. His presentation was impressive, and his video examples of dos and don'ts helped explain the widened scope of Rule 48 that goes into effect this season.

Still, he's going to be met with controversy and anger from teams this season. He knows that but doesn't accept the criticism that his suspensions will take hitting out of the game.

"We want it to be hockey; we want it to be physical," Shanahan said. "We're not looking to get rid of hitting. We want to get rid of certain types of hits."

Doan in Coyotes' plans
Phoenix captain Shane Doan is slated for unrestricted free agency July 1, but the club is hoping to lock him up before then.

"Shane Doan will remain a Coyote for as long as he wants to remain a Coyote," Maloney told ESPN.com on Tuesday. "He is symbolic of who we are and how we want to play, both on and off the ice. I met with Shane in the offseason, and we agreed to defer contract discussions until our ownership situation is resolved. However, I am very confident, at the appropriate time, we will negotiate a contract that keeps Shane a Coyote for the remainder of his playing career."

If you're Doan and his agent, J.P. Barry of CAA Sports, you definitely want to wait until the ownership situation is finally settled. You can't take the chance of signing a contract with a team that could be on the move.

Jackets' surprise rookie

Cam Atkinson has been the rookie surprise of Blue Jackets camp; not only has he made the team, but he will open the regular season on the second line with R.J. Umberger and Antoine Vermette.

"He's had a really strong camp," Jackets GM Scott Howson told ESPN.com. "He's had two outstanding seasons at Boston College, won a national championship, had two seasons of over 30 goals. We're all a bit surprised he showed so well here, and he just kept getting better and better during camp. Now the real challenge is to see if he can keep it up during the regular season."

Atkinson, 22, was taken in the sixth round (157th overall) in the 2008 NHL draft. He's only 5-foot-7 and 172 pounds, but he showed he was a dangerous threat in the preseason. Meanwhile, 19-year-old rookie Ryan Johansen also made the team, although he needs to impress more if he's going to stick around all year.

"It's a week-by-week situation," Howson said. "He's here to start the season, and we'll see where it goes. We have to do what's right for the team and what's right for him. Right now, we think it's better for him to stay here. He's on the fourth line right now. There might be some games where he doesn't play. We'll take it week by week."

Meaning the Jackets will have to decide at the nine-game mark whether to send him back to junior or let him play the whole season in the NHL.

More tidbits ...

• Matt Duchene enters the final season of his entry-level contract. Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and John Tavares are among the young stars who signed their extensions a year out before their entry-level deals expired. At this point, however, there's nothing happening on the contract front with Colorado.

"No, we haven't had any talks," Duchene's agent, Pat Brisson, told ESPN.com.

• It's not a shock that the Vancouver Canucks claimed Dale Weise off waivers this week from the New York Rangers. A source told ESPN.com the Canucks actually tried to trade for Weise last season. He'll open the season in Vancouver on the fourth line alongside Maxim Lapierre and Aaron Volpatti.

• Mike Fisher is likely to miss the opening two games of the season as he continues to recover from offseason shoulder surgery. Nashville Predators coach Barry Trotz told ESPN.com the club is eyeing the third game of the season, the Preds' home opener, for his return.

• Veteran goalie Marty Turco is still hoping to catch on with an NHL team this season.

"Marty plans to play a few more seasons in the NHL, is in great shape and is training in Sault Ste. Marie [Ontario]," his agent, Kurt Overhardt, told ESPN.com. "We are patient but ready when a 1 [starting goalie] or 2 [backup] opportunity opens up with an NHL club. He will be doing some weekend media with the NHL Network, but his priority is training to be ready."

• Rookie forward Brett Connolly, 19, had a knockout camp with the Tampa Bay Lightning. The sixth overall draft pick from 2010 has really improved his game compared to a year ago. We're told he trained a lot harder this summer, on and off the ice, which made him stronger and faster. He also worked on his skating and has improved his stride.

ESPN LOADED: 10.06.2011
It’s time once again for all of us here at PHT to put our butts on the line. To put our money where our mouths are. To come up with another cliche for things.

That’s right, it’s our Stanley Cup predictions. We’ll give you who we think is making the finals and who’s going to take it all. As a bonus, we’ll even tell you who we think will take home the NHL’s biggest awards. As we’re expecting, you’ll make sure to remember all of these predictions by the end of the year and hold them over our heads when we’re wrong. Of course, if we turn out to be right, we’re going to gloat. A lot.

Without further ado, here’s our thoughts on the Stanley Cup finalists and winner. If you think we got it wrong, go ahead and comment here or vote in our poll. And make sure to check out previews for all 30 teams here.

Joe Yerdon

Stanley Cup finalists: Los Angeles Kings vs. Washington Capitals

I picked the Sharks to win the Pacific, but the Kings sport the West’s best makeup for the playoffs – two impressive goalies, two first line-caliber centers and perhaps the best defense in the NHL (their fragile group of wingers needs to stay healthy, though). They’re a tough matchup for any West team, but Washington will have just enough of everything to steal the Cup away. The Capitals have a more potent offensive attack, a versatile defense and one of the best goalies in the world. It’s now or never for a significant chunk of this Capitals team – coach Bruce Boudreau included – and I’m leaning toward “Now.”

Matt Reitz

Stanley Cup Finalists: Vancouver Canucks vs. Pittsburgh Penguins

The Pens lost the best player on the planet AND a former Hart winner, yet still were able to transform themselves into a defensive team and earn the 4th seed. Crosby and Malkin rejoin and already strong team–no teams’ offseason moves can compare.

source: Getty Images

As for our award predictions, here goes nothing.

Joe Yerdon

Hart Trophy: Evgeni Malkin, Penguins
Art Ross Trophy: Henrik Sedin, Canucks
Rocket Richard Trophy: Steve Stamkos, Lightning
Vezina Trophy: Tomas Vokoun, Capitals

NBCSports.com / PHT staff predicts the Stanley Cup finals and award winners

NBCSports.com / LOADED: 10.06.2011

Norris Trophy: Zdeno Chara, Bruins
Calder Trophy: Adam Larsson, Devils
James O’Brien says:
Hart Trophy: Alex Ovechkin, Capitals
Art Ross Trophy: Henrik Sedin, Canucks
Rocket Richard Trophy: Alex Ovechkin, Capitals
source: AP
Vezina Trophy: Ryan Miller, Sabres
Norris Trophy: Duncan Keith, Blackhawks
Calder Trophy: Gabriel Landeskog, Avalanche

Matt Reitz says:
Hart Trophy: Alex Ovechkin, Capitals
Art Ross Trophy: Sidney Crosby, Penguins
Rocket Richard Trophy: Alex Ovechkin, Capitals
Vezina Trophy: Tomas Vokoun, Capitals
Norris Trophy: Duncan Keith, Blackhawks
Calder Trophy: Gabriel Landeskog, Avalanche
It is one thing for a Calgary Flames fan to question the course of his hockey team. To say to general manager Jay Feaster, "How come you're doing this?" Or, "Why aren't you doing it that way?"

But when the question ends with "...like the Edmonton Oilers are doing it?" Well, Feaster turns into The Champ. He s-naaps!

"I'm sorry -- Edmonton finished where last year, caller? Want to wager on where we finish relative to Edmonton this year? I'm tired of this question, I'll tell you very honestly. I'm getting a little sour.

"How many teams ... every year, for the last 10 years, five years, eight years, have finished in the bottom five, bottom seven, bottom 10? They've had a pick anywhere from No. 1 to No. 10, year after year after year, and they still wander in the desert. And they're no closer to getting out than they were 10 years ago.

"You know what? I look forward to the Battle of Alberta for the next X number of years. If the idea is, 'Burn it to the ground,' then Ken (Flames president King) can find another manager to do it."

Let the record show that the first serious, verbal volley to be fired in the Battle of Alberta in the last X numbers of years came on Sept. 1, 2011, the above quote from Feaster, speaking at a Town Hall forum at a team-owned venue called Flames Central.

Truly, the dichotomy of the National Hockey League's two Alberta clubs is perfectly summed up inside of Feaster's dilemma.

On the ice, Calgary owns the Oilers. They've won five of six meetings in each of the past two seasons. Since the lockout, Calgary has made the playoffs four times, while Edmonton made it to the '06 Cup final and hasn't qualified for the post-season since. In the last two years, while Calgary was missing the playoffs by four and six points, the Oilers were finishing dead last in the entire NHL.

Calgary has been competitive. Edmonton has been beyond brutal.

Yet today, some Flames fans look at the two teams and ask Feaster, "Why can't you be more like Edmonton?"

"It's something I've been hearing ever since I took over as acting general manager at the end of December," Feaster admits. "Why don't you blow it up? Why don't you blow it up?"

You can argue whether Oilers general manager Steve Tambellini ever truly intended to "blow it up" or not. But what can't be disputed is the young Oilers crop of up-and-coming, elite talent -- which clearly is the basis for any comparison that would have Edmonton coming out ahead of Calgary.

The Flames are likely going to be a better team this season, but the Calgary core is ageing. Jaromie Iginla turned 34 on Canada Day, and missed most of camp with back troubles. Brendan Morrison is 36 and coming off of ACL surgery. Miikka Kiprusoff turns 35 in October; Alex Tanguay is 32 in November. Even baby-faced Rene Bourque will be 30 before the New Year.

And the organization can not boast of budding Top 6 forward prospects the way Edmonton can, with Taylor Hall, Jordan Eberle, Magnus Paajarvi or Ryan Nugent-Hopkins all 21 years or younger.

Add to that group a veteran Oilers forward line of Shawn Horcoff between Ryan Smyth and Ales Hemsky, and head coach Tom Renney admits that the group he's standing behind this pre-season is closing in on what he's been waiting for since coming to Edmonton two seasons ago.

"You actually looked down, and you had weapons," he said of his position behind the pre-season bench.

Feaster will have to pull off some slick GM'ing to avoid the crash that usually accompanies an ageing roster. And give him credit: He's already unloaded age and salary for youth, and has more cap room now than this organization has enjoyed in years.

But Feaster has to do something here. Nobody is happy with a team that doesn't get a playoff game, but doesn't get a Top 5 draft pick either.

"I don't think it is a rebuild," he said of the Calgary project. "We've got guys, obviously some of them are older, and the window is closing on some of those guys. We recognize that. At the same time, we're not ready just to jettison these guys, blow it up and hope we finish 30th."

Meanwhile, they've been through the most painful times in Edmonton. The playoffs may be unrealistic this season, but it's hard not to see a team with a chance at prolonged success in Edmonton, beginning sooner than later.

"We're in Year 2," said GM Steve Tambellini. "We introduced some young people to the lineup last year, and now we're seeing the next wave coming in."

Leading that wave is the young centresman Nugent-Hopkins, who just may have world class vision one day.

"Ryan's goal, he's come to this camp to play for this team," Tambellini said. "But, we've made it very clear to him: Come to rookie camp, come to main camp, just be yourself. Let's just see what happens here."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.06.2011
Sportsnet.ca / The next step

Mark Spector | October 5, 2011, 8:29 pm

VANCOUVER - "We're the most hated team in hockey?" Kevin Bieksa said, by way of confirming what he believes to be his Vancouver Canucks' status across the National Hockey League.

"This isn't going to help."

The "this" he refers to is Ryan Kesler's beefcake photo in Body Issue of ESPN's The Magazine.

It has gone viral on the 'net, while inside the Canucks dressing room -where these guys see each other naked everyday for 10 months - the picture has been viewed as, well, somewhat bold.

"Jealousy," Kesler said of his teammates. "That's all they've got is jealousy."

"As Kes would say, he's got the body of a Greek god. So he can pull it off," said Bieksa. "We'll get it on a billboard somehow. Maybe in the rink, up in the banners."

Ah, the banners.

That, of course, is why we're here in Vancouver on the eve of the opening of the 2011-12 season, isn't it? To talk about the state of the Rogers Arena rafters, and whether or not the close-but-no-cigar Western Conference banner will one day soon be accompanied by another, more meaningful one.

Wednesday, on the day Kesler was cleared for contact after his summer hip surgery and practiced well with his teammates, the 2010-2011 Western Conference Champions banner hung quietly overtrop the ice surface at Rogers Arena. It was hung without ceremony, and while the Boston Bruins hold a ceremony Thursday to lift their banner to the ceiling, Vancouver's will serve as a reminder of business left undone.

How to make sure that banner gets replaced with a bigger, better one a year from now? Who better to ask than Penguins defenceman Brooks Orpik, who manned the blueline for Pittsburgh in 2008 and 2009 - the last time a team lost the Stanley Cup final one spring, only to return the following season and win it.

"You'll have a lot of people telling you, 'It's hard to do... You're supposed to be tired....' he said. "You have to try and block that out, because that can really get to you. If you think you're supposed to be tired, you'll probably be tired."

And, of course, the opposition will give the Canucks every reason to feel tired this winter.

"Once you get there, whether you win or you lose it, you don't sneak up on anyone anymore," Orpik said. "Every building you go to, that team has had the date checked off for a while. There are just no easy games.

"It's about getting your workouts in. Away from the rink, being a little smarter. Whether you've got to sacrifice a few things ... it's tough."

Kesler stands as a metaphor for his team. So beaten and abused by the playoff run was Kesler, that only Wednesday did he recover enough to fully practice with his teammates.

Later, he admitted that playing injured in the Stanley Cup final likely made the hip injury even worse - not that there was any question a player of his stature would suit up in that situation.

"It's tough to say, but I think it did (get worse). It was definitely more extensive of a surgery (because of the Final). But who knows?" he said, reaffirming that he won't hurry back to the lineup this fall.

"I don't want to limp back in," he said, even though he looked like he could play in a week. "No, probably not to be honest. I'm not going to come limping in. I want to be an immediate impact. Get my minutes. I'm going to be patient with this, wait on my hip. That's the tough thing about it.

"I can't get much more out of skating on my own, at this point. This was the next step."

"The next step."

There is one of those allusions again.

How will the Canucks take "the next step?" What is it that makes these Canucks a better team today than it was a year ago?

"It's more up here," Daniel Sedin said, pointing to his head. "The grind we did last year, it will help us a lot. But right now, we're starting a new regular season. We have to be careful not to think we can make it to the playoffs easily."

The experience of climbing the mountain is a two-edged sword, points out his brother Henrik.

"It's good to know what it takes to get there, but it makes it tough, too," he said. "You know what it takes to get there."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.06.2011
James Reimer comes off the ice with the familiar ear-to-ear grin that has become his trademark and comfortably stands before the media for his daily grilling. Okay, maybe grilling is a little too harsh, but the fact of the matter is there probably isn’t a question he hasn’t been asked about being anointed the No. 1 goaltender for the Toronto Maple Leafs in the last month.

He has handled himself with grace and you can tell he really has fun, but now it’s the moment of truth as Thursday night he’ll be in the spotlight when the Maple Leafs kick off their 2011-12 season with the first in a five-game home stand against the Montreal Canadiens.

All eyes will be on the crease where Reimer will stand, building on a 37-game NHL resume during which time he has become something of a local hero. He said he’s ready to get things rolling.

"Tonight I’ll be excited...probably a little nervous and just looking forward to tomorrow," Reimer said. "I’ve never had a home opener or a season opener in the NHL. I’ve had a lot of firsts as far as last year goes, but never a home opener. It’ll be pretty exciting."

You really can’t take the pre-season too seriously because nobody has ever been awarded the Stanley Cup or an individual honour in September of October. Remember last season, when after a bit of a stinker in his first pre-season game in which he allowed four goals on nine shots, Montreal goalie Carey Price told Habs fans to, "chill out"? Price went on to have an amazing season.

Reimer was not so great in this year’s pre-season. He went 1-3 with a 3.29 goals-against average and 88.8 save percentage. Reimer said he’s not the least bit concerned. Rather, he’s feeling pretty good about his game as reality approaches.

"I don’t really think about it at all, to tell you the truth," he said. "It was a weird pre-season. Obviously you don’t want to let in a lot of goals, but the pre-season is a tough part of the year to play in sometimes and the important thing is to stay solid and do things right. As far as (goalie coach) Francois Allaire was concerned he thought my game was really good. He didn’t see any flaws and said I wasn’t cheating or doing anything wrong technically. Everything is good."

Reimer, as it has been widely reported, lost weight in the off-season and is ready to embrace the physical challenges of being a No. 1 goalie in the NHL. One thing hasn’t changed, though, and that’s his passion for the sport. That, along with strong spiritual beliefs, are what drives him.

"Things have changed, for sure, but the more important things haven’t changed and that’s me just loving the game...loving to play the game and having fun with it," Reimer said. "Even now, after practice, the last five minutes I spent goofing off in the net and having fun making terribly non-fundamental saves, I love it. I love skating and being out there. It doesn’t matter where I am; whether it’s the Coast, the AHL or here. Obviously here it’s bigger crowds and more hype and maybe the excitement is a little more, but really, it’s about having fun."

Any way you slice it, there will be more pressure on Reimer this season. He has been given the No. 1 job, but he’ll have to continue to earn it on a nightly basis. For as good as he was in constructing a 20-10-5 record last season, everyone knows there have been plenty of young goalies who came in on a high and disappeared just as quickly. Steve Penny, Blaine Lacher. Jim Carey.

"Sure there’s a little more pressure, but that makes it more fun, too," Reimer said. "It's the great part about the game. When you are playing on the street you're never playing Game 1 of the playoffs or a midseason game; it's always Game 7. You love the pressure."

Maple Leafs coach Ron Wilson doesn’t believe pressure will be an issue for his goaltender.

"I don't think it will be any different than last year because by the last two months of the season he was clearly our No. 1 goalie and he handled that," Wilson said. "He's just got to do what he does well and shut out all the noise and we believe he's a No. 1 goalie who will have a great year."

**STECKEL STOCKED**

Newcomer David Steckel stood before a hoard of media after his first practice with the Maple Leafs and basically said, "Wow! I think this is the first time I've seen this many cameras around for practice before."

Steckel was brought to town to play a defensive role and to win faceoffs. The 6-foot-5 and 215-pound Milwaukee, Wisc., native led the NHL with a 62.3 winning percentage in the faceoff circle and coach Ron Wilson is convinced he'll be an asset in Toronto.

"David is going to help a lot on faceoffs," Wilson said. "That's something that, outside of Tyler Bozak, we might be a little weak on. That'll help our penalty killing. If he can continue winning 60 percent of his faceoffs rather than somebody only winning 42 or 43 percent, that just improves your odds that you can get the puck down the ice on your PK."

Steckel, who was dealt to New Jersey just last season from the Washington Capitals, said he was not surprised to be moved prior to the start of this season.

"No; not at all," he said. "I sat down and had a meeting with management in New Jersey and it just wasn’t going to work out. I was fortunate that Mr. (Lou) Lamoriello was kind enough to get something done for me. It's going to be great. There's a rich tradition and history here and I'm glad to be a part of it."

Winning faceoffs isn't something he's done forever. Rather, it is something he has worked hard on to perfect and it has clearly paid dividends. Steckel has never scored more than eight goals in a season and yet he earns $1.1 million a year with this year and next left on his contract.

"I had a coach, Bob Mancini, who kind of reamed me out one practice and told me, 'If you want to be an asset as a third-line or fourth-line centre you've got to do something else,' " and winning draws was that," Steckel said.

**KOMISAREK AND THE KID**

Veteran defenceman Mike Komisarek is under the gun to find the game that has abandoned him his first two years in Toronto since signing a massive free agent contract. He beat out newcomer Cody Franson to remain in the top six and if he's going to find his game, he'll do it teamed with a green 21-year-old whiz kid.

Call it Komo and the kid.

Komisarek and Jake Gardiner will be one of the three featured defensive pairs that will play in the season opener against Montreal. So far Komisarek has been blown away by what he has seen from Gardiner who had a goal and five points in six pre-season games.

"How old is he, 20? 21? Geez, he can't even drink," Komisarek said. "He's a great kid. I wish I was half the defenceman he is when I was his age. He is a tremendous player on the ice. Everybody has seen that in the pre-season. A guy like that comes into camp and he's eager to learn. He's mature beyond his year, but he's still trying to soak everything in and learn as much as he can every day. You love to see a guy like that around here. He's going to be a great defenceman in this league for a long time, but he's coming to the rink with the right attitude. He handles himself in a very mature, veteran-like manner."

It isn’t only at the rink that Komisarek has been impressed with his young partner.

"I had the opportunity to meet and practice with Gards at the World Championship, so I got to know him there a little bit," Komisarek recalled. "He's a guy who, when we were over in Slovakia we were allowed to bring a guest, he brought his mom. I remember it was Mother's Day and here's a kid who buys flowers for his mother. That left a pretty good impression on me - as well as my girlfriend. She hit it off pretty well with Jake's mom. We all got together last Sunday to watch football and he's telling my girlfriend that his mom said to say hello to her. She didn't say hi to me."

Veteran hockey columnist Mike Brophy

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 10.06.2011
It's called the "Hot Seat" and every coach understands its definition, although some jokingly refer to it as the "hit list". Plain and simply, the NHL coaches we are identifying are those under the most pressure entering the season. Some are more vulnerable than others. Toronto's Ron Wilson enters the regular season in the final year of his contract.

There has been no offer of an extension and no plan to negotiate until management gets a solid read on the direction of the Leafs. A bad start could spell the end of Wilson's four-year run in Toronto. Washington's Bruce Boudreau survived off-season speculation of his demise after another disappointing playoffs performance by the Caps. But, an early or mid-season slump could be enough to finally get Boudreau bounced. Calgary's Brent Sutter, Colorado's Joe Sacco and St Louis Blues coach Davis Payne are facing medium heat in their organizations. Following two seasons of non-playoff hockey, fans are restless in Calgary. The Flames should be better. If they're not, Sutter could be replaced.

Colorado is still very young, but capable of being competitive. If the Avs fail to meet that standard, Sacco will likely pay the price. And there's a complicating factor in Denver: GM Greg Sherman traded away the team's 2012 No. 1 draft pick to Washington for Semyon Varlamov; the worse the Avs do this year the higher the draft pick for the Caps. Payne's Blues should hold their own in a tough Western Conference, but with ownership uncertainty, St. Louis needs to be strong or Payne could be an easy mark if things go south early.

Meanwhile, three coaches facing back burner heat are Philadelphia's Peter Laviolette, Vancouver's Alain Vigneault and Montreal's Jacques Martin. The Flyers made drastic changes and spent a ton of money on Ilya Bryzgalov, so if the direction of this team stalls, or takes a turn for the worse, fingers will be pointed. Losing Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Championship to Boston only increased Vancouver's thirst to be first. And Martin is entering his third season in the pressure-packed Montreal hockey environment.

It's highly unlikely Vigneault or Martin would face the music during the regular season, but an early post-season exit might prompt change. This list of coaches on the hot seat may be too long, or too short, but when the regular season opens, the clock starts ticking.

TSN.CA LOADED: 10.06.2011
USA TODAY / Ex-Sabre Rick Martin had degenerative brain disease CTE

By Erik Brady, USA TODAY

Former NHL tough guys Bob Probert (fighting Ken Belanger in photo on left) and Reggie Fleming (photo on right) were earlier found to have the degenerative brain disease.

Former NHL tough guys Bob Probert (fighting Ken Belanger in photo on left) and Reggie Fleming (photo on right) were earlier found to have the degenerative brain disease.

Probert by Fred Jewell, AP; Fleming by New York Rangers

Rick Martin, the former Buffalo Sabres star, had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), the neurodegenerative disorder caused by repeated brain trauma, researchers at Boston University said Wednesday evening.

Rick Martin, with Sabres owner Terry Pegula, is the third NHL player found to have a degenerative brain disease, but he wasn't a fighter.

By David Duprey, AP

Rick Martin, with Sabres owner Terry Pegula, is the third NHL player found to have a degenerative brain disease, but he wasn't a fighter.

Rick Martin, with Sabres owner Terry Pegula, is the third NHL player found to have a degenerative brain disease, but he wasn't a fighter.

Martin, who died of a heart attack in March at 59, had stage 2 of the disease, with stage 4 being its most severe form. He is the third former NHL player to be diagnosed with CTE but the first who was not a so-called enforcer, the term for players who fight regularly.

Martin, a left winger who played 11 NHL seasons, most famously on the Sabres' "French Connection" line of the mid-1970s, suffered only one known concussion, when his head slammed on the ice during a 1977 game, causing immediate convulsions. He began wearing a helmet after that.

STORY: Shanahan making headway on head shots

Researchers say CTE can be caused by concussions and by repeated sub-concussive blows to the head, as often happens in contact sports such as hockey.

Martin's CTE was diagnosed by Ann McKee, co-director of BU's Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy and director of the world's largest CTE brain bank, located at the Bedford VA Medical Center in Massachusetts. She previously diagnosed former NHL enforcers Bob Probert, who died of heart disease in 2010 at 45, and Reggie Fleming, who died in 2009 at 73 with dementia.

"So the question was: 'Could all of the CTE issues in hockey players be due exclusively to fighting?'" Robert Cantu, co-director of the center, said Wednesday evening. "And I think this suggests that the answer to that is no because Rick Martin was not a fighter."

Cantu said as far as he knows Martin did not exhibit cognitive difficulties, a common symptom of CTE. "His brain showed modest CTE," Cantu said. "Had he lived another 10 or 20 years, he might have exhibited symptoms, most probably would have."

Cantu said he is unsure of what stages of CTE were found in Probert and Fleming.

"I think Bob Probert's brain was similar to Rick Martin's and I think Reggie Fleming's was far more severely involved," Cantu said.

The center reports that McKee has completed analysis of the brains of more than 70 former athletes and found more than 50 of those had some form of CTE, including 14 of 15 former NFL players. Others include former college and high school football players and former pro wrestlers and boxers.

All three of the former NHL players whose brain studies have been completed had CTE. Results for the brain of Derek Boogaard, a New York Rangers player who died earlier this year at 28, are pending.

More than 500 living current and former athletes — including about a dozen from hockey — have committed to donating their brains at their deaths, as CTE can only be diagnosed post-mortem.

Martin died while driving his car in suburban Buffalo on March 13. An autopsy showed that he had heart disease.

The BU center said in a statement that details of Martin's brain tissue analysis will not be released pending submission to an academic journal, but that it was releasing the major finding now because Martin's family believes he "would have wanted to raise awareness of the dangers of brain trauma in sports and encourage greater efforts to make sports safer for the brain."

The center, which studies the long-term effects of repetitive brain trauma in sports and the military, was founded in 2008 by Boston University, the Sports Legacy Institute and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

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