

Chicago Blackhawks Face Difficult Off-Season Decisions

Written by Matthew Coller
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For the Chicago Blackhawks, it all started with GM Dale Tallon being ousted after a fax-machine-folly cost the 'Hawks to sign several unwanted long-term contracts. It ended with Tallon being sent a Stanley Cup ring. But, the mix up may cost Chicago in the long run. The league salary cap is expected to be around \$59 million, the Blackhawks have \$57 million wrapped up in 14 players. The Blackhawks' cap space for 2009-10 was 0.336.

The fax machine problem wasn't the only Tallon blunder that cost Chi-town long term. He is also responsible for two enormous contracts that have the Cup champs in a stranglehold. Cristobal Huet will make \$5.625 million through 2011-12 and defenseman Brian Campbell is wrapped up until 2015-16 at the price of \$7.140 million.

What will they do?

Campbell could be traded, but his price and long deal may scare away potential buyers. They could also deal center Patrick Sharp, who is scheduled to make \$4.200 million next season, will be an unrestricted free agent after the 2011-12 season. This makes him a good candidate to be a cap-clearing victim via a trade. Defenseman Brent Sopel is in a similar boat being unrestricted after 2012 and making a decent pay check of \$2.000 million.

The Blackhawks will likely lose center John Madden, who made \$2.750 million during the team's championship season, but he's one in a very short list that can leave without a trade. The only other unrestricted free agents this off-season are Adam Burish, Kim Johnsson and Nick Boynton.

Restricted free agents are far more plentiful. The group also includes Andrew Ladd, Ben Eager,

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Bryan Bickell, Niklas Hjalmarsson and Jordan Hendry. Cup-winning goaltender Antti Niemi is also a restricted free agent. Niemi, who made \$827,000 in 2009-10, is considered by many to be an average and replicable goalie, but his playoff victories have likely put him in position for a large pay day.

If Niemi gets the big bucks, what happens to Huet? Trade suitors are unlikely for a goalie who makes \$5.625 million and was permanently benched mid-season, so the team is all but forced to send him to the AHL next season where his salary will not count against the cap.

Here's how all Chicago's players' contracts play out (including players' cap numbers):

Forwards:

Marian Hossa – Signed through 2020-21, making \$7.900 million until 2015-16. 2010-11 Cap Number: \$5.275

Patrick Sharp – Will make \$4.200 million in 2011-12 then become unrestricted free agent. Cap Number: \$3.900

Patrick Kane – Signed through 2014-15 making \$6.500 in 2010-11. CN: \$6.300

Dave Bolland - Will become unrestricted free agent after 2013-14 and will make \$3.375 until then. CN: \$3.375

Kris Versteeg – Will become restricted free agent after 2011-12 season making \$3.083. CN: \$3.067

Dustin Byfuglien - Will become restricted free agent after 2010-11 making \$3.000. CN: \$3.000

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Jonathan Toews – Signed through 2014-15 making as much as \$6.500. CN: \$6.300

John Madden – Currently unrestricted free agent.

Andrew Ladd - Currently restricted free agent.

Tomas Kopecky – Signed through 2010-11 for \$1.200. CN: \$1.200

Troy Brouwer – Will become restricted free agent after 2011, will make \$1.050. CN: \$1.025

Ben Eager – Currently unrestricted free agent

Adam Burish – Currently unrestricted free agent

Colin Fraser – Currently unrestricted free agent

Defenseman:

Brian Campbell – Signed through 2015-16 making \$7.140. CN: \$7.143

Brent Seabrook – Signed through 2010-11 at \$3.500, will become restricted free agent. CN: \$3.500

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Brent Sopel – Will make \$2.000 in 2010-11 then become unrestricted free agent. CN: \$2.333

Kim Johnsson – Currently unrestricted free agent

Duncan Keith – Signed through 2021-22, will make as much as \$8.000. CN: \$5.540

Niklas Hjalmarsson – Currently restricted free agent

Jordan Hendry – Currently restricted free agent

Cristobal Huet – Signed through 2011-12, will become unrestricted free agent. CN: \$5.625

Antti Niemi – Currently restricted free agent

Total Cap Number for currently signed players: \$57.6 million

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