

These moves will change your life—or at least your team

At the start of the NHL season, the *Gateway* picks our biggest off-season deals



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Commentary

The NHL season kicked off yesterday, and the Oilers raise the Western Conference banner to the roof in Rexall tonight, but before all that, we thought you, dear reader, should know exactly who amongst those players that switched teams this summer, will make the biggest impact in his new hometown—besides, of course, the Oilers' decision to get rid of Ty Conklin. There's only one problem with our attempt: we couldn't even decide amongst ourselves. Of course, none of these will matter when the Tyleless Oilers avenge his boneheaded play and win the Stanley Cup this year. Call it destiny.

Trevor Phillips

The deal with the biggest impact on the upcoming NHL season is one that not only benefits both clubs, but will affect the other teams in their respective divisions. That's why the '06 off-season's most beneficial trade was the one that sent Fredrik Modin and Fredrik Norrena from Tampa Bay to Columbus for Marc Denis on 30 June.

Arguably, the 2004/05 Stanley Cup champs were a goaltender away from knocking off the Ottawa Senators in last year's playoffs. The beleaguered duo of John Grahame and Sean Burke were pretty much run out of town afterwards by head coach John Tortorella. With Denis, the Lightning get a quality puck-stopper who is capable of handling a consistent workload and is used to facing an abundance of shots—something that's become a necessity for playing in the wide-open Southeast Division.

Meanwhile, Columbus—a team that already had a maturing batch of young forwards lead by Rick Nash—was seeking some stability up front and some help for an offensive-minded defence. Modin, a 2006 Olympic gold medallist and member of that Tampa championship team, brings a winning attitude to a franchise that has never finished above .500. Along with his rings, Modin is a three-time 30 goal scorer and has played less than 74 games only twice in his nine-year NHL career. Finally, Modin hasn't finished below zero in plus/minus since 2001 and gives Columbus some much needed size on their second line.

With the acquisition of Anson Carter, and the late signing of Nikolai Zherdev, the Blue Jackets have a very talented front nine—supplemented by rookie sensations Jaroslav Balastik and Gilbert Brule, and veteran David Vyborny.

It's time for the Blue Jackets to climb out of the Western Conference cellar and into playoff contention in 2006. But didn't Doug MacLean guarantee that last year?

Scott Drebit

With all the big moves that occurred this NHL off-season, there was one that was constantly overlooked: Bill Guerin's departure from Dallas to the St Louis Blues. Yes, the sad-sack Blues.

After a dismal season in the Big D

that saw Billy score only 40 points, he's ready for a resurrection in St Loo. He will be reunited with his old Edmonton linemate Doug Weight, who returned to the Blues fresh off his first Cup with the Hurricanes. With Weight feeding him the biscuit, Guerin should put up much better numbers than last year and regain his old form that saw him notch 100 goals in the three seasons before last. He probably won't experience a drop in ice-time either, as he's a skilled forward and should be a fixture on the Blues' power play.

Guerin is also a veteran voice in the dressing room, something the Blues sorely missed last season. A former Team USA forward, his leadership should be advantageous for the younger crop of players on the team. Guerin can probably pot over 30 goals and close to 70 points in the Gateway City, and that should help the Blues move back into playoff contention.

Nick Frost

As much as it pains me to say it, it's entirely possible that we could be seeing a team from Nashville, Tennessee sipping Dom Pérignon from hockey's Holy Grail this year. After making a couple significant off-season acquisitions, this year's Predators look fucking scary.

The two big pickups were the free-agent signings of Jason Arnott and Jean-Pierre Dumont. Arnott will, undoubtedly, play on Nashville's first line—being a huge-framed centre with good mobility and an eye for the net—to compliment a bevy of small and speedy potential-first-line wingers, such as Paul Kariya, Steve Sullivan and Martin Erat. Dumont will be pencilled in on either of the top-two lines, and while his defensive ability sometimes comes into question, he makes up for it in spades with strong skating and the ability to set up goals.

Another possible addition to watch for throughout the upcoming year is Memorial Cup MVP, Alexander Radulov. If he can't crack one of the top-three lines on opening day, expect to see him at some point during the season, via call-up, to provide a dose of explosive offence.

With all the talent they're now boasting, top to bottom, the Preds are a heavy favourite to take the West, and possibly even hoist Lord Stanley's mug. But, God help them if they're wearing those motherfugly mustard-yellow jerseys while doing so.

Paul Owen

As much as those of us in Edmonton hate to admit it, the biggest off-season move was pulled off by Brian Burke, GM of the Anaheim Ducks. Burke was in charge of the Hartford Whalers back in the early '90s, when he became enamoured with a studly young defenceman and sold the kitchen sink to draft him second overall. 13 years later, Burke got his second chance to acquire Chris Pronger and did so without hesitation.

Pronger immediately makes the Western Conference finalists' odds-on favourite to win the Stanley Cup this season—and both teams knew it when they pulled off the deal. As part of the terms of the trade, Edmonton receives an additional first-round pick when the Ducks make the Finals. While Pronger is now every northern Albertan's Judas, he still is fresh off the best showing by a

defenceman in the playoffs since Brian Leetch in 1993/94, and had the Oilers pulled off a Cup victory, we'd probably be talking about Prongs in terms of 1970 Bobby Orr: he was just that good. Replacing Ruslan Salei with Pronger was easily the biggest and best move of the summer.

Mike Kendrick

It pained me greatly last season to watch the Calgary Flames fall from grace in the playoffs. It doesn't make sense that a team that places first in its division and has one of the top defences in the league should shit the bed in game seven of the first round. Then again, they've been there before, and their 27th-ranked offence probably had a lot to do with their disappointing playoff performance. They could only rely on Kiprusoff to play God for so long before it came back and bit them in the ass.

Now that Darryl Sutter has passed coaching duties to Jim Playfair in order to work as full-time GM, his moves on the business end of things are starting to make a little more sense.

I was thrilled to see the return of Jamie McClellan, the only decent backup the team has had in years, but the most significant acquisition comes on the top line in the form of Alex Tanguay. The Flames' offence has been dying for a wingman to play Iceman to Jarome Iginla's Maverick, as Iggy has essentially been carrying the weight of the team. Tanguay's speed paired with Iginla's ruggedness is a match that's perfect enough for a TGIF sitcom. While he's not the be-all and end-all of the Flames hockey club, Tanguay demonstrates a huge step in the right direction for a team that badly needs to balance its offence.

Ross Prusakowski

All of the sensible Oilers fans—and the *Hockey News*—apparently think it's the departure of Chris Pronger. All of the Calgary Flames fans think it's the addition of Alex Tanguay. All of the Vancouver Canucks homers think it's the arrival of Roberto Luongo on the west coast.

When it comes to the trying to figure out which off-season move will have the biggest impact on the season, nearly all of the western Canadian teams can make a case for one of theirs. However, as big as all of those moves were for each club, each pales in comparison to a move made by their divisional rival, the Minnesota Wild.

By trading away top prospect and last year's AHL Rookie of the Year Patrick O'Sullivan to the Los Angeles Kings for Pavol Demitra, the Wild made a big statement and tilted the balance of power in the Northwest Division. Not only does Demitra add another offensive weapon to a team that was sorely lacking up front, he provided a reason for Marian Gaborik to commit to Minnesota long-term, and a reason for other free agents, like Keith Carney and the underrated Kim Johnsson, to come to the Land of a Thousand Lakes.

These additions, and the fact that the Wild will now have some offensive pop to go with their stifling defence, will ensure that, though they may be overlooked by partisan fans north of the border now, they won't be by the time they cruise into the playoffs.

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