

2010-11 Blues Season Preview

By Brian Hunter | NHL.com

The St. Louis Blues were the toast of the town in the spring of 2009 after their second-half surge saw them climb all the way from last place in the Western Conference in mid-January to the franchise's first berth in the Stanley Cup Playoffs in four seasons.

Even after being swept by Vancouver in the first round, optimism still abounded heading into the offseason. St. Louis had smart leadership in the form of John Davidson, the team president, an exciting young nucleus of talent, and a wealth of positive momentum on its side.

Unfortunately for the 2009-10 version of the Blues, they attempted to take a similar path to the postseason and watched it backfire when another poor start -- particularly on home ice at Scottrade Center -- proved too much to overcome.

Despite winning seven of eight games sandwiched around the Olympic break and another streak of six victories in eight tries at the tail end of the season, the Blues finished in a tie for ninth in the West, five points behind Colorado for the final playoff berth.

In trying to shake the team up, the Blues replaced coach Andy Murray on Jan. 2 with 39-year-old Davis Payne, who held the same position for their AHL affiliate in Peoria since July 2008. Payne, who played 22 NHL games for the Bruins during the mid-90s, became the youngest active coach in the League and had the interim tag removed from his job title after leading the team to a 23-15-4 record.

Payne will be expected to lead St. Louis back into the playoffs this season, and he's certainly been set up to succeed. The Blues still boast that stable full of up-and-coming thoroughbreds like defensemen [Erik Johnson](#) and [Alex Pietrangelo](#), with [Patrik Berglund](#), [T.J. Oshie](#) and [David Perron](#) up front. All of those players enter training camp age 23 or younger.

Adding excitement among the fan base, one of the most dynamic players from the 2010 postseason will now be wearing the BlueNote on his sweater: [Jaroslav Halak](#), the goalie who drew comparisons to former Montreal greats like Ken Dryden and Patrick Roy while leading the Canadiens to upsets of the heavily favored Capitals and Penguins on a surprise run to the Eastern Conference Finals, was acquired via trade for a couple of prospects.

The hope in St. Louis is that this season the Blues will spend March and April jockeying for better playoff positioning instead of trying to make up ground just to get into the dance.

Departures

Although the Blues still have their fair share of veteran leadership in the form of players like [Andy McDonald](#) and [Eric Brewer](#), they lost a valuable cog when power forward

Keith Tkachuk announced his retirement just before the end of last season. Tkachuk, who had several seasons of 40-plus goals and 200-plus penalty minutes in his heyday, still brought grit, toughness and a decent scoring touch to the lineup and will be sorely missed not only on the ice, but in the dressing room.

Defenseman Darryl Sydor, who finished his career with the Blues after winning Stanley Cups in Dallas and Tampa Bay, also hung up his skates. Sydor tallied 8 assists in 47 games last season.

Paul Kariya is expected to continue playing somewhere in the League, but it won't be St. Louis. The former 50-goal scorer compiled 18 goals and 43 points during his third season with the team.

As NHL general managers are fond of pointing out, you have to give in order to get, and the Blues parted ways with a pair of young prospects in bringing Halak into the fold. Lars Eller is a former first round pick who got his first taste with the big club by scoring 2 goals in seven games late last season, while Ian Schultz is a rugged forward who showed some scoring touch in juniors.

Acquiring Halak also meant the end of Chris Mason's tenure with the club, and the former No. 1 goaltender was allowed to leave for Atlanta via free agency. Mason won a career-high 30 games last season with a respectable 2.53 goals-against average and .913 save percentage, but at 34 years of age he doesn't have anywhere near the upside of his successor.

Veteran defenseman Mike Weaver, who contributed 10 points and a plus-10 rating in 77 games, was signed by Florida, which also acquired young defenseman T.J. Fast via trade. Physical forward D.J. King, who compiled 185 penalty minutes in 101 career games, was dealt to Washington, defenseman David Warsofsky was shipped to Boston and defenseman David Rundbland, a first-round pick in 2009, was sent to Ottawa in a 2010 draft-day deal.

Arrivals

Halak, without doubt, is the headliner of the new 2010-11 class for the Blues. After battling it out with Carey Price for the No. 1 job in Montreal the past few seasons, he's the undisputed man between the pipes in St. Louis.

Halak won a career-high 26 games during the regular season, but it was once the calendar reached mid-April that he really began to shine. He led all playoff goalies with a .923 save percentage and turned in numerous brilliant performances as the Canadiens went seven games to first dispatch the Capitals, who won the Presidents' Trophy, and then the Penguins, the defending Stanley Cup champions.

In Game 6 against Washington, Halak stopped 53 of 54 shots. He followed that up in Game 7 with a 41-save effort, taking a shutout into the final minutes of what ended up a 2-1 victory. It remains to be seen what Halak will do now that he's the clear-cut starter,

but Blues fans are well aware of what he's capable.

Depth at center was added in multiple forms thanks to the free-agent market. [Vladimir Sobotka](#), only 23, had already established himself as a regular contributor for the Bruins, while veteran [Dave Scatchard](#) has played in 651 career games for the Canucks, Bruins, Islanders, Coyotes and Predators.

[Stefan Della Rovere](#) came over in the King trade and gives St. Louis an additional prospect in the wake of trading Eller and Schultz. He scored 27 goals in 57 games for Barrie of the OHL two seasons ago and was also a member of Canada's gold-medal winning team at the 2009 World Junior Championships.

Defenseman [Dean Arsene](#), who played 13 games for Edmonton last season, was signed as a free agent, as was another blueliner, [Brennan Evans](#), who has two games of NHL playoff experience with the Flames. Journeyman forward Graham Mink was acquired in the trade for Fast.

Outlook

One of the big turnarounds the Blues made under Payne was giving their home fans reason to cheer. After starting 5-13-3 at the Scottrade Center (a sixth "home" win actually came during their season-opening sweep of Detroit in Sweden, where each team served as the home team for one game), they went 12-5-2 there after the coaching change, including six wins in a row to close the season.

More will be expected from players like [Brad Boyes](#), whose goal total has declined from 43 in 2007-08 to 33 and then just 14, and [David Backes](#), who slumped from 31 goals during the playoff season in 2008-09 to 17 last season. Even [Patrik Berglund](#) slipped from 21 goals and 47 points as a rookie to 13 goals and 26 points in his sophomore campaign, though his upside is still tremendous. Oshie's production took a jump in his second season, while Perron's goal output has increased from 13 as a rookie to 15 and then 20 last season.

Johnson returned from missing a full season due to a serious knee injury and took the next step in his development with 10 goals and 39 points. He is the lynchpin of the St. Louis defense, with the 20-year-old Pietrangelo expected to take the next step toward claiming a full-time job among the top six.

It's easy to say the Blues will go as far as Halak takes them, but with this talented cast the pressure shouldn't rest squarely on any one player's shoulders. It's more of a matter of consistency, and playing for a full season the way the team has during the last two stretch runs.