



The NHL season was hanging in the balance when representatives from the NHL, the players' association, and a federal mediator burned the midnight oil deep into Sunday morning to reach an agreement and ensure that a 2013 NHL season would be played. Facing pressure from both sides, Commissioner Gary Bettman and Donald Fehr of the NHLPA found a way to salvage a partial season. The season is expected to begin within the next couple of weeks and proposals have been drawn up to fit a 50-game schedule or a 48-game schedule.

Both sides made concessions and the owners appear to have gotten a better end of the bargain. Player contracts, which used to be restricted in length, are now capped at eight years for players re-signing with the same team and seven years in free agency. The \$64.7M salary cap falls in between what both parties were asking for, higher than the owners' proposal of \$60M and below the players' proposal of \$67M. Regarding arbitration, teams cannot walk away from an arbitration award below \$3.5M. A lot of the financial aspects of contracts seem to favor the players, while the owners get a manageable salary cap and capped contract lengths. One of the major points of contention, hockey-related revenue, will be a 50/50 split. The minimum salary for 2013 will be \$525,000 and up to \$750,000 by the end of the agreement.

One of the things that led to this lockout was salary cap circumvention. Contracts counted against the salary cap as an average of the total contract value divided by years. There are a number of 10+-year contracts and they are front-loaded in salary. Players will make a lot of money early in the contract and down to as much as \$1M in the last year or two.

Other interesting elements of the agreement include a revamped draft lottery where all 14 non-playoff teams have a shot at getting the first overall pick. A new process will be instituted for player discipline, with Brendan Shanahan still having a big say in the process. Teams will be allowed two "amnesty" contracts to help get under the lower salary cap in a hurry with the season starting quickly.

Schedule information has yet to be released, however some reports say that the schedule will be comprised of only conference games, which makes sense given the shortened schedule and need to make the playoff standings as fair as possible in the condensed season. Bettman had instituted a drop dead date of January 11, which would have meant the cancellation of the season.

The agreement is for 10 years, with an opt-out clause after eight years. The new collective bargaining agreement did not address realignment, the NHL's participation in the 2014 Olympics, or the 2013 All-Star Game, which was supposed to be held in Columbus, but was canceled in the last round of game cancellations. In total, 625 games were canceled.

The official announcement (at time of writing) was still pending a vote from the players' association, but that appears to be a minor stumbling block. The next step will be the official schedule, which is expected to begin on January 19. Common thought seems to be that a one-week training camp with no exhibition games will suffice as the preseason and then the season would begin.

As far as the Columbus Blue Jackets go, there is a lot of anticipation for the season. For starters, with a condensed schedule, nearly everybody in the Western Conference will have a shot at the playoffs. All it takes is a couple really hot weeks to put yourself in a good position to be a playoff team. The Blue Jackets have only made the playoffs once in franchise history and were swept by the Detroit Red Wings. With John Davidson in the fold, a fresh start for head coach Todd Richards, and some new players to watch, the Blue Jackets have no shortage of storylines as the season begins.

Overall, it's just a major sense of relief for all involved. The NHL would have had a very difficult time winning fans back if another season was canceled. Some damage has already been done, but a season where the importance of every game is magnified will make for some great television for fans.

By no means is it a perfect system, but the fact that the NHL will be filling up arenas for at least four months is some of the best news in a long time.