



The NHL regular season begins on Thursday and the Blue Jackets are relying on their depth to propel them to the second playoff berth in franchise history. With two offseason acquisitions in the press box, one due to suspension and one due to injury, some fill-ins will have to play key roles over the first couple weeks of the season before the Blue Jackets can play the roster they anticipated.

Here is my preview for the 2011-2012 Columbus Blue Jackets season which begins October 7.

First impressions: The first thing I get from the roster and the lines as they are currently constructed is that Scott Arniel is going attempt to play a fast game and rely on rolling all four lines. What that means is that the Blue Jackets lack a true fourth line. With Jared Boll shelved due to a broken hand, the de facto enforcer becomes Derek Dorsett. The Blue Jackets are going to try to be a finesse team this season, one that plays all 12 forwards and looks for scoring from all of them.

Lineup:

Prospal-Carter-Nash

Umberger-Vermette-Atkinson

Calvert-Pahlsson-Dorsett

Brassard-Johansen-Mayorov (McKenzie)

Defense pairings TBA, but without James Wisniewski, I see them being:

Tyutin-Russell

Methot-Martinek

Clitsome-Johnson/Savard

Mason

Sanford

Looking up and down the lineup, the Blue Jackets are very young and small. This will not be a physical team. To me, this poses a problem. The teams who are more skill-based in the Western Conference are those who typically look from outside the top eight come April. With the rigorous travel schedule, playing a speed game is not always effective.

The team lacks serious leadership on defense. Fedor Tyutin played very inconsistently last year. Plus, I'm not sure what his leadership qualities are. I don't see a calming influence on the blue line who the team can count on to play a solid game nightly. Wisniewski will certainly help this group, but they lack a veteran presence. I like the addition of Vinny Prospal for leadership up front. RJ Umberger was more vocal last year. Hopefully that will continue.

What this team lacks in leadership and size, it makes up for in potential. The idea of Jeff Carter and Rick Nash together on the same line and powerplay unit is very exciting. How will Ryan Johansen play with a good passer like Brassard? Can Matt Calvert develop into a two-way forward playing on the "shutdown" line?

Also, I think we'll see a team that works hard. There are a good portion of young players on the roster looking to make a statement and show that they belong. It should be a kick in the pants for the veterans on the team. With the ability to roll four lines, conditioning should not be an issue.

These lines are numbered only for organizational purposes. There really is no fourth line. The second line is 2A, 2B, and 2C because of the construction of the roster. This won't be a team with a "fourth" line playing six minutes each per game. On some level, it could be an issue for the coaching staff because they will have a hard time matching lines to shut down the other team's top unit. But, it could also be a benefit for the Blue Jackets because they have skill on all four lines and may be able to exploit other team's defensive-minded lines.

Keys to the Season: The way I see it, there are two keys to season. Steve Mason and Jeff Carter. I'll start with Steve Mason. The way this defense is put together, they will not be a physical force and they will not transition from defense to offense very quickly. Steve Mason will face a lot of shots. He needs to be good. He should get a greater margin for error with better skill at forward and the potential for more offense, but he still has to be good.

The other key, as far as I'm concerned, is Jeff Carter. Rick Nash will get his 35 goals and 45 assists, but Jeff Carter needs to be that first line center that Nash has lacked. He'll have to play well on a young team and be responsible defensively because the Blue Jackets will be extremely reliant on the forwards backchecking and handling their defensive responsibilities.

One secondary key to the season is that the Blue Jackets have to avoid the long stretches of bad play. The team has effectively killed its playoff chances in November/December each of the last two seasons. They cannot afford to have lengthy losing streaks. That is a character issue and one that, on paper, it doesn't appear that the organization has solved. Players like Prospal, a former Stanley Cup winner, will help, but the locker room remains Rick Nash's and he will have to grow as a captain.

Projections: Everybody wants to know where the Blue Jackets will finish. At risk of alienating my readers, I'm picking the team to finish outside the playoffs this season. They'll finish somewhere between ninth and eleventh. Two big problems I have with the team are that they are entirely too reliant on Steve Mason's inconsistent shoulders and they aren't physical enough.

People can say what they want about the skill players that the Blackhawks won the Stanley Cup with two years ago but it was the role players who carried them to that Cup. Last season's Bruins were very physical on defense and Tim Thomas was stellar.

The Blue Jackets are going in the right direction. They're acquiring skill and drafting better two-way forwards for the bottom two lines. They are exhausting every angle with improving Steve Mason and getting his development back on track. With any luck, moving to the Eastern Conference and having a more conducive travel schedule next season would be highly beneficial.

For now, however, they're a talented team that is lacking those couple extra pieces to push them into a serious playoff chase.