

## This is the Caps' Year, Take III

The Washington Capitals, once again, went through a makeover during the off-season in the hopes of finding the right formula to win the franchise's first Stanley Cup. But this year's recruits—Joel Ward, Troy Brouwer, Jeff Halpern (for his second stint with the team), Roman Hamrlik, and Tomas Vokoun—have a different feel than previous additions.

For one, they're all going to play Coach Bruce Boudreau's system—which indicates that GM George McPhee finally acknowledged that getting players to adhere to a system is easier than changing the ways of existing players. Secondly, only Brouwer has a Stanley Cup and, at age 26, is extremely hungry for more.

And, finally, bringing in Vokoun indicates that McPhee and Boudreau have officially acknowledged that the former starting tandem of Michael Neuvirth and Semyon Varlamov wasn't enough to get them over the proverbial hump. (Neuvirth is still the Goalie of the Future—for now—while Varly's trade to Colorado yielded a first-round draft pick that could be a top-five selection come June.)

### *Keys to the Season*

- **Motivation:** Although this should have been decided long ago, this team needs to show that it won't take a night off and will not play less than a full 60 minutes every game. This is the season to prove everybody wrong -- and one where how they play matters more than whether they win or lose.
- **Playing for Each Other:** This is perhaps the most important trait of a champion. Teams that win aren't selfish and don't care about any trophy except the Stanley Cup. It's time to put aside all of the "playoff style" comments and show that they're striving for excellence from day one. The new folks made the team deeper and more balanced, and now they've got to prove it on the ice.
- **Tougher Competition:** Like it or not, the Caps have a major target on their back. Not only have they won the Southeast Division four times in a row and the Eastern Conference twice, but they've got to improve to keep up with the competition. The defending champion Boston Bruins won their division but, seeded third, were somewhat quiet throughout the regular season before dominating in the playoffs. The Philadelphia Flyers are undergoing a chemistry experience that could end up being downright scary for their competition (or their locker room), while the Pittsburgh Penguins and Tampa Bay Lightning are only getting better. It's time for the Caps to go deep into the playoffs and prove that they're for real.

### *Predictions*

**Best Case Scenario:** As we've said for a while, the Caps' only ideal ending to the season is a Stanley Cup. They've got the roster to do it and GMGM always finds a way under the salary cap to make the right moves. It's up to the players to make history.

**Worst Case Scenario:** As in previous seasons, there's always the possibility that this group is a disaster, injuries hit like wildfire and the team falls apart -- leading to Boudreau's firing. Doubtful but possible.

**What Should Happen:** The team wins its fifth-straight division title, Vokoun has a career season and everything goes according to plan. I'm not saying they'll win the Cup, but a berth in the Eastern Conference finals should be a given unless the wheels fall off the wagon (as detailed above).

#### *League-Wide Picks*

**Regular season division winners:** Flyers (Atlantic), Bruins (Northeast), Caps (Southeast), Detroit Red Wings (Central), Vancouver Canucks (Northwest), and San Jose Sharks (Pacific).

**Eastern Conference playoff teams (in no particular order):** Flyers, Bruins, Caps, Penguins, Lightning, Buffalo Sabres, Montreal Canadiens, and Toronto Maple Leafs.

**Western Conference playoff teams (in no particular order):** Red Wings, Canucks, Sharks, L.A. Kings, Anaheim Ducks, Nashville Predators, Chicago Blackhawks, and Dallas Stars.

**Playoff conference champions:** Flyers and Red Wings.

**Your 2011-12 Stanley Cup champion:** Flyers (as I first predicted in June).