

## The Caps' Free Agency Manifesto

GM George McPhee likes to hide under a veil of secrecy when it comes to trades and free agency. "If there is something there that makes sense, we'll do it," is his favorite mantra (as he reiterated yesterday).

But there are a few guiding principles that he's likely to follow when free agency begins on Thursday:

- **Promote from within.** The Caps have qualified all nine of their restricted free agents and have a few players in Hershey that are ready for a promotion, specifically John Carlson (an early favorite for the Calder Trophy as rookie of the year) and Karl Alzner. But Michal Neuvirth, Keith Aucoin, Jay Beagle and Mathieu Perreault also will get a look as the GM thinks about next year's roster.
- **Find a second-line center.** This tune has been whistled before but the 2010-11 season might be the most important go-around. The Caps need a center who will bring out the best of Alex Semin. So far, the only person to do that is Nick Backstrom—and he's clearly the team's best pivot and should be playing with Alex Ovechkin. With Semin's future very much in the balance, McPhee must either find somebody to help the enigmatic Russian thrive or send No. 28 to another franchise. That player might be Matthew Lombardi (who quite possibly is the best center available) or maybe somebody else. But GMGM isn't going to take a chance after failing with Brendan Morrison (and Eric Belanger, to some extent) last season.
- **Find a shutdown defenseman.** Another common theme lately is who to pair with Mike Green. Soon-to-be-former Cap Shaone Morrisonn held this spot for a while and Jeff Schultz did a decent job last season. But the Caps need a no-nonsense guy like Hal Gill in this spot and Schultz doesn't exactly fit that bill. Many people endorse Anton Volchenkov in this spot, but he might price himself out of that market rather quickly. A better bet may be Henrik Tallinder, Willie Mitchell (if healthy), Paul Mara or Jay McKee.
- **Decide who's going to back up Semyon Varlamov.** There are two schools of thought on this one: either go with the "kids" and have Neuvirth up from the start or pick up a wily veteran to mentor Varly. If the Caps go with the latter, they need to look no further than their goalie coach (Artus Irbe) as a model. Martin Biron or Chris Mason might be ready for this role.
- **Don't overspend.** With extensions due to some of the RFAs, Brooks Laich set to be a UFA next summer (with Semin and Mike Knuble) and Varlamov heading for RFA-dom next summer, McPhee has many decisions to make on current Caps in the not-too-distant future. (Don't forget Mike Green has two years left on his deal and Carlson is only a year behind him.) Therefore, any free agent signing with the Caps might be lucky to earn \$3 million next season—and that might be pushing it. The Caps have a scary-good future and the madness that starts July 1, for the most part, is just adding to the riches already in the bank.