One of the most interesting teams to watch this off-season has been the Columbus Blue Jackets. After making a splash to start the summer, acquiring superstar Jeff Carter from Philadelphia just before the NHL Entry Draft, the Jackets stayed out of the headlines for the rest of the summer.

Nonetheless, the Jackets will be a completely different team in 2011-12.

Coming in

Forwards: Jeff Carter, Vinny Prospal.

Defensemen: Radek Martinek, James Wisniewski.

Goaltenders: Mark Dekanich, Curtis Sanford

On the outs

Forwards: Chris Clark (unsigned), Nikita Filatov (OTT), Ethan Moreau (LAK), Andrew Murray (SJS), Scottie Upshall (FLA), Jakub Voracek (PHI), Kyle Wilson (NAS).

Defensemen: Mike Commodore (DET), Jan Hejda (COL), Rostislav Klesla (PHO), Sami Lepisto (CHI), Anton Stralman (unsigned).

Goaltenders: Mathieu Garon (TBL).

2010-11 team statistics

NHL standings: 5th in Central Division, 13th in Western Conference, 24th in NHL.

Goals for: 24th in NHL (2.56 GF per game).

Goals against: 26th in NHL (3.05 GA per game).

Power-play: 29th in NHL (14.0%).

Penalty-kill: 22nd in NHL (80.2%).

Offensive Boost

Since Rick Nash came into the league in 2002-03, the Blue Jackets have been searching for a player that can match his skills and get the puck to him more often. They may have done that

this summer.

Jeff Carter, a former 46-goal scorer, is a shoot-first and pass-later type of player. He will not be setting up Nash in the traditional way, but he will get the puck to the net and expect Nash to pump in anything that pops in front of the goaltender.
With both of these guys on the top power-play unit, the Jackets will be making other teams think twice about taking penalties.
Expect those power-play numbers to drastically improve this season.

Player to Watch

Ryan Johansen, drafted in the first round, fourth overall in 2010, is almost a shoe-in to make the Blue Jackets' roster this season. After barely missing the cut in 2010, Johansen will be pushing hard to crack into the NHL in 2011.

As a member of the Portland Winterhawks of the WHL, Johansen led his club last season with 92 points in just 63 games played. He finished first on the team in assists (52) and second on the club in goals scored (40). There is no doubt that these numbers really pop out at Columbus GM Scott Howson.

Johansen, 6'2" 192 lbs, plays about the same game as newly acquired forward Jeff Carter. His vision on the ice rivals any player in the National Hockey League and his shot accuracy is one of the best in the WHL.
Chris Roberts of HockeysFuture.com says that Johansen may be held back another season for precautionary reasons, but also states that the young man "has nothing left to prove in junior."

Lack of Depth on Defense

Looking at anything behind the top scoring line, the Blue Jackets have a lot of question marks heading into the 2011-12 season. The biggest one will be the steadiness of the entire defensive unit.

The Blue Jackets finished 26th last season in goals-allowed with 3.05 goals-against per game. Scott Howson addressed this issue by refusing to bring back five defensemen from last season, but his replacements are not exactly all-stars.
James Wisniewski is definitely serviceable, tying for fifth in points scored by a defenseman (10G-41A—51P) last season for the New York Islanders and Montreal Canadiens.
He will get the puck to the sticks of his forwards, but how strong will he be as the likely #1 defenseman next season in a well-rounded defensive division?

The Jackets' top-six heading into training camp goes as follows:

James Wisniewski – Fedor Tyutin

Radek Martinek – Kris Russell

Marc Methot – Grant Clitsome

This could be troublesome for the Jackets, especially if the offense is not clicking every single night.

Big Question Mark in Net

Three seasons ago, Steve Mason was on top of the world. Finishing the 2008-09 season with a 33-20-7 record and posting a .916 save percentage with a 2.29 GAA, Mason was the undisputed best rookie. He proved that by taking home the Calder Trophy as rookie of the year.

How things can change so fast in the NHL.

Mason has not been as impressive since that time. In the past two seasons, Mason has recorded a 44-47-16 record with a .901 save percentage and a 3.05 GAA.
He has been shaky at best since his rookie season and has even lost his starting job multiple times for long stretches to his backup for the last two seasons, Mathieu Garon.
With Garon's departure, the Blue Jackets now have unproven goaltender Mark Dekanich, who has appeared in just one NHL game, and the oft-injured 31-year old goaltender, Curtis Sanford to replace him.

If Mason cannot find his rookie-form this season, it will be a disastrous season for the Blue Jackets. With a dubious defensive lineup and an uncertain team of goaltenders in net, this team will likely be sitting on the outside of the playoff picture yet again.

The upside is that this team is slowly improving and will be a threat in a few short years after some of the young talent can progress into NHL ready players.

Read the rest of the Central Division previews:

Chicago Blackhawks

Detroit Red Wings

Nashville Predators

St. Louis Blues

Discuss this article in the LetsGoBlues.com Forums!