Written by Jeff Ponder
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Just days after the Blues relieved Head Coach Davis Payne of his coaching duties and replaced him with former Columbus Head Coach Ken Hitchcock, the team struck a deal late Thursday night that will send defenseman Nikita Nikitin to Columbus for defenseman Kris Russell.

The trade leaked just minutes after the Blues lost in a shootout to the Toronto Maple Leafs, 3-2.

Nikitin, 25, played in seven games this season for the Blues, registering 0 points and a minus-5 rating. Nikitin was selected in the fifth round, 136th overall, of the 2004 NHL Entry Draft by the Blues. He has one full season played in his NHL career, recording 1 goal, 8 assists and 9 points in 41 games played last season.

The native of Omsk, Russia has been a healthy scratch in eight of the last nine games.

Russell, 24, has played in 12 of Columbus' 15 games this season, recording 2 goals and 1 assist with a -1 rating. Russell was selected by the Blue Jackets in the third round, 67th overall, in the 2005 NHL Entry Draft. Currently in his fifth NHL season, Russell has 18 goals, 61 assists and 79 points in 288 games played. He has a career minus-28 rating.

Russell was a healthy scratch in Columbus' 6-3 loss to the Chicago Blackhawks Thursday night.

Both Jeremy Rutherford of St. Louis Post-Dispatch and Aaron Portzline of the Columbus Dispatch confirmed this trade early Friday morning.

Russell will likely join the Blues during their current home-stand, as they have gone 1-0-1 in the first two games. The Blues will host the Tampa Bay Lightning on Saturday and the Detroit Red Wings next Tuesday. The five-game set will conclude next Thursday, when the Blues will battle the Florida Panthers at Scottrade Center.

Both St. Louis GM Doug Armstrong and Columbus GM Scott Howson were unavailable for comment. The trade will likely be officially announced Friday morning before the Blues' morning skate at the St. Louis Mills Ice Zone.

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