

Tarasenko Adds Offensive Boost to St. Louis Lineup

Written by Jeff Ponder
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Great things come to those who wait.

This is true for Blues management and fans alike, as Russian prospect and 2010 first-round draft choice Vladimir Tarasenko has signed a three-year entry-level deal with the St. Louis Blues. Terms of the deal were not disclosed, but the maximum allowed amount that a 2010 draft choice can receive under the current NHL collective-bargaining agreement is \$900,000 per season.

Tarasenko, 20, was the Blues second selection, 16th overall, in the 2010 NHL Entry Draft. After drafting Jaden Schwartz with their 14th overall pick, the Blues sent their 2009 first round selection, David Rundblad, to the Ottawa Senators in order to select Tarasenko.

The Russian right-winger's decision to leave the KHL comes just weeks after he was left off the Russian World Championships roster. Tarasenko and Blues GM Doug Armstrong had planned a meeting in Finland, the location of the World Championships, but Tarasenko cancelled that meeting and returned home to Russia when he received word that he would not play for his home country.

Tarasenko did not leave Armstrong to hang out and dry, though.

"I knew that he was serious [about joining the Blues] because he took an 11-hour train ride from Moscow for a two-hour meeting and an 11-hour train ride back," Armstrong told Blues beat-writer Jeremy Rutherford of stltoday.com.

Reportedly, Tarasenko did receive a fruitful offer to return to the KHL. The offer was likely worth a lot more than a NHL entry-level contract. Terms of the offer have not been released, but sources say that it "dwarfs" the maximum NHL entry-level contract.

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The contract has not yet been signed due to NHL stipulations. Under the current collective-bargaining agreement, unsigned draft picks cannot sign with teams from 5 pm Eastern on June 1 until July 1. Armstrong says that the two sides have “agreed to a contract in principle.”

Tarasenko’s decision to leave Russia proves that he truly does have the desire to play in the best league in the world. Since the Alexander Radulov debacle in 2008 and the Jiri Hudler drama in 2009, teams have been weary of drafting or signing Russian players. Tarasenko has been voicing his desire to play in the NHL since being drafted, but has continued to play in the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) every season.

Being left off the Russian national team and getting traded from Novosibirsk Siber to St. Petersburg SKA mid-season may have been monumental factors in Tarasenko’s decision.

Things have worked in Tarasenko’s favor on this side of the pond as well. The Blues skyrocketed from 87 points in 2010-11 (finishing 10th in the Western Conference) to 109 points in 2011-12 (2nd in the Western Conference). The team’s drastic improvement has to be a motivating factor that Tarasenko took into consideration.

The Blues are also looking at these seven players without a contract heading into July 1:

Jason Arnott (UFA)
Jamie Langenbrunner (UFA)
Scott Nichol (UFA)
T.J. Oshie (RFA)
David Perron (RFA)
Chris Porter (UFA)
Chris Stewart (RFA)

Oshie and Perron are shoe-ins to receive extensions for 2012-13, but the other four players are completely up in the air. This would leave a lot of room for Tarasenko to battle for a top-nine

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spot on the Blues' roster.

There is a lot of young forward depth on the roster heading into next season. Jaden Schwartz (19) is expected to battle for a spot as he had a good showing in seven games for the Blues late in the season (2G-1A—3P). Center Phil McRae spent an entire season with the Peoria Rivermen of the AHL in 2011-12, playing a big role on the defensive side on the ice while still tying for second on the team with 23 goals. He will be looked at as the best candidate for the third or a fourth line center role.

Tarasenko will be at the center of it all though. He was ranked as the best prospect not currently in the NHL by hockeyfuture.com. He mixes a very gritty style to the prototypical Russian finesse game that calls for smooth hands and the ability to pinpoint shots. His game should transfer well to the NHL but Blues nation should not expect a 40-goal season in his first attempt to the NHL.

Tarasenko should fit the Blues' style very well, though. Head Coach Ken Hitchcock expects his team to get into the mucky areas of the ice, causing turnovers and scoring chances that result from not-so-typical offensive plays. Tarasenko delivers hard hits and can shake off defenders with the best of them, but the adjustment to the NHL is usually a long and grinding road.

Tarasenko is willing to make the drive; he is a workhorse that is in impeccable shape. His 6'0 202 lb. frame allows him to move through the ice with ease. Playing in 15 games with St. Petersburg SKA after being traded on January 13, Tarasenko tallied 5 goals and 4 assists. [His highlights speak for themselves.](#)

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