The puck dropped in Europe for the 2008-2009 NHL season on October 4th, with the Rangers squaring off against the Lightning in Prague, Czech Republic and the Penguins and Senators battling in Stockholm, Sweden. And with that, another hockey season is underway. Enter TCF hockey guru Adam Burke. He checks in with us today with a preview of the NHL season, as well as outlooks for the Columbus Blue Jackets and Lake Erie Monsters.

The puck dropped in Europe for the 2008-2009 NHL season on October 4th, with the Rangers squaring off against the Lightning in Prague, Czech Republic and the Penguins and Senators battling in Stockholm, Sweden. New York took two games from Tampa Bay and the Pens and Sens split their two-game series. With that, the new season is underway and lots of players have changed addresses.

Player Movement Via Free Agency

D Brian Campbell - 8 years $56.5M with Chicago

D Wade Redden - 6 years $39.5M with the New York Rangers

D Mike Commodore - 5 years $18.75M with Columbus

D Mark Streit - 5 years $20.5M with the New York Islanders

D Ron Hainsey - 5 years $22.5M with Atlanta

F Marian Hossa - 1 year $7.45M with Detroit

F Brian Rolston - 4 years $20.25M with New Jersey

F Sean Avery - 4 years $15.5M with Dallas

F Kristian Huselius - 4 years $19M with Columbus

F Markus Naslund - 2 years $8M with the New York Rangers

G Cristobal Huet - 4 years $22.5M with Chicago

G Jose Theodore - 2 years $9M with Washington

Player Movement Via Trade

Columbus acquired **RJ Umberger** and a 4th round draft choice from Philadelphia in exchange for a 1st round pick and a 3rd round pick. Columbus also acquired **Fedor Tyutin** and **Christian Backman** from the New York Rangers in exchange for **Nikolai Zherdev** and **Dan Fritsche**.

Phoenix acquired **Olli Jokinen** from Florida in exchange for **Keith Ballard, Nick Boynton,** and a 1st round pick.

Calgary acquired **Michael Cammalleri** and a 2nd round draft choice from Los Angeles in exchange for a 1st round draft choice and a 2

nd

round draft choice.

Buffalo acquired **Craig Rivet** and a 7th round draft choice from San Jose in exchange for two 2nd round draft choices.

San Jose acquired **Dan Boyle** and **Brad Lukowich** from Tampa Bay in exchange for **Matt Carle, Tyler Wishart**, a 1st and a 4th.

Ottawa acquired **Filip Kuba** and **Alexandre Picard**
and a 1
st
round draft pick from Tampa Bay in exchange for
Andrej Meszaros
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Eastern Conference Projections

1. Montreal Canadiens

2. New York Rangers

3. Washington Capitals

4. Pittsburgh Penguins

5. Philadelphia Flyers

6. Ottawa Senators

7. Carolina Hurricanes

8. New Jersey Devils

9. Buffalo Sabres

10. Florida Panthers

11. Boston Bruins

12. Tampa Bay Lightning

13. Atlanta Thrashers

14. New York Islanders

15. Toronto Maple Leafs

Looking in depth at the local teams that our readership would be most concerned with:

The Pittsburgh Penguins return Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, despite losing some of the pieces of their Stanley Cup final team. They have injury problems already in Ryan Whitney and Sergei Gonchar, but they should overcome a rough start to be a solid playoff team. Marc-Andre Fleury was at the top of his game near the end of last season. If that continues, the Penguins

have a chance to go very deep again.

The Buffalo Sabres are a team in transition. They made some great moves this offseason, locking up Ryan Miller and Jason Pominville. The loss of Dmitri Kalinin will be filled by Mike Weber, and Buffalo has NHL-ready depth in Rochester in the event of an injury. But, can they put it all together to get back to the playoffs? I think they're a big question mark and that's why they're on the outside looking in.

Western Conference Projections

1. Detroit Red Wings

2. San Jose Sharks

3. Calgary Flames

4. Dallas Stars

5. Chicago Blackhawks

6. Minnesota Wild

7. Anaheim Mighty Ducks

8. Phoenix Coyotes

9. St. Louis Blues

10. Columbus Blue Jackets

11. Colorado Avalanche

12. Nashville Predators

13. Edmonton Oilers

14. Los Angeles Kings

15. Vancouver Canucks

Columbus Blue Jackets Season Outlook

The moves that GM Scott Howson made are going to be beneficial to the team. There's no question that the defense is

much more sound with the acquisitions of Tyutin, Commodore and Backman. Kristian Huselius is one of the free agents that I wanted them to go after once Rolston was off the board. He provides someone with vision to feed Rick Nash the puck and help to generate offense. RJ Umberger's going to improve with more ice time and should put up much better numbers.

The important thing for the Jackets is Scott Howson got players that will fit in Ken Hitchcock's defensive-minded system. Umberger is a solid two-way forward and Mike Commodore is a good physical presence on the right side. His contract will look like a bargain as the

market continues to grow. Howson got the most out of the money that he spent, especially with the contract extension of Pascal Leclaire.

How the Blue Jackets Can Be A Playoff Team

It starts in net, as it does for most teams. Pascal Leclaire needs to be the best player on that team for them to succeed. A better defense that is going to limit the shots that he will see and give him a chance to see into the shooting lanes.

The offense will be more potent. The Jackets still do not have the bona fide number-one center that they've been lacking since joining the league. They especially have lacked a top line center since Rick Nash cut his niche as an elite goal scorer in the league. With a number one line, the role players that have been forced into roles that are out of their comfort zone will be able to thrive more in the role in which they belong.

The defense will have to overachieve offensively. There's not really a threat on the powerplay from that group. A forward is going to have to play the point to quarterback the powerplay. They should be much better on special teams with the

additions of defensively-responsible Commodore, Tyutin, and Backman.

Why The Jackets Won't Be A Playoff Team

As I alluded to above, there are no true puck movers on defense. The transition game will not be a strength of the Blue Jackets. Commodore, for his defensive prowess, is not mobile with the puck. It's going to be hard for Columbus to capitalize on special teams and they could be in line for some difficult shifts in their own zone.

There are a lot of new faces carrying the flag this year. It takes a while for chemistry to develop among players. Training camp only provides some of that gelling, but in-game adjustments need to be made. Columbus is going in the right direction, but that direction hasn't come to a head yet. They still lack that bona fide centerman to complement Rick Nash.

Not to mention, one thing that is completely out of their control is that the rest of the conference has gotten better. As seen by my projections, I put Phoenix and Chicago in the postseason, two teams that did not make it in 2007-2008. St. Louis is a much better team. The

Jackets have a difficult division to play in. The theme of the Western Conference was parity last season. Everyone beat each other and it just works out that the doormats of the Western Conference are teams outside of Columbus's division. I put Columbus fourth in the Central division. But, anything can change.

For those who are all about prognostication, put your money on the Detroit Red Wings. I think they're a 55-60 win team. The only team that will be able to beat them is themselves. I see them as the Cup winner, over the New York Rangers. And if Dickie Dunn wrote

it, it must be true. So book it. The Wings drink from Lord Stanley's Cup again.

Lake Erie Monsters Season Outlook

For now, the Monsters look better on paper because TJ Hensick, Kyle Cumiskey, and Chris Stewart have been assigned to the team by Colorado. The goaltenders will be sound with the tandem of Jason Bacashihua and Tyler Weiman. But, the defense will still be a problem for the Monsters. Then, too, so will scoring goals.

The Monsters will not be a playoff team unless something drastic changes.

There you have it. The 2008-2009 season preview. One final note. Rest in peace Paul Newman, a.k.a. Reggie Dunlop. His jersey will be raised to the rafters in the Syracuse War Memorial Coliseum this upcoming Saturday. A deserved honor for the former Charlestown Chief.

Enjoy the season, everyone!

For the archived internet radio NHL preview done by myself and Tom Kennish, check out: http://www.blogtalkradio.com/TheClevelandFan/2008/10/09/NHL-Preview-The-Cleveland-Fan-Live