The Jeff Carter trade marked a good start to the 2011 offseason for the Blue Jackets, but a lot more work still needs to be done. That work can begin tomorrow, July 1, as free agency begins in the NHL. Despite an ever-growing salary cap, reported to be $64 million for the 2011-12 season, there are some good players available who can help the team immensely.

One player in particular, James Wisniewski, had his exclusive negotiating rights traded to the Blue Jackets in exchange for a seventh round draft pick in the 2012 draft. Montreal, the team who previously had Wisniewski, would receive a fifth round pick if Wisniewski signs.

Wisniewski would help the Jackets immediately. He would be a second pairing defenseman and accumulated 29 powerplay points, 51 total, last season. He's a right handed shot and is responsible defensively as well, having blocked 119 shots between Montreal and the New York Islanders. The Jackets have been optimistic that he will sign and Wisniewski and his agent have been in Columbus since early Thursday morning touring facilities and discussing a contract. A deal should be done tonight/early tomorrow

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As I see it, the Blue Jackets have needs at forward and on defense, as well as needing a new backup goaltender as Mathieu Garon will test free agency. Here are some players to keep an eye on:

Forwards

Cory Stillman – Stillman would solve a few needs for the Blue Jackets. First, he would give the team some veteran leadership that they lack. Second, he would fit nicely as a good two-way presence with guys like Derick Brassard or Matt Calvert. It remains to be seen if Stillman will be available, but at age 37, he still had 39 points. Not an impressive total, but he is a player with a long track record and has been part of several playoff runs. Now that Jussi Jokinen has signed in Carolina, Stillman will likely be let go.

Jeff Halpern – Halpern is a similar player to Stillman in terms of providing leadership, but Halpern is a more defensively-sound player. He was +6 last year with Montreal, playing in 72 games and chipping in 26 points. Halpern would be a great help to Sami Pahlsson and could form a very good defensive line of Halpern-Pahlsson-Vermette, with all three guys able to win faceoffs. Also, they would be a very savvy group, capable of shutting down opposition forwards.

Overall, the forward group in free agency is fairly weak. Columbus as a city does not really have much allure for free agents and none of the guys who are available are worth blowing the bank over. As Columbus saw with Kristian Huselius, overpaying for free agents is not the answer. JP Dumont from Nashville is another name to watch for.

Defensemen

Radek Martinek – Martinek might be able to come cheap to Columbus because he just wants to get out of Long Island. The Czech-born defenseman has played 453 losing games in Long Island and has managed to only be -10 for his career. Martinek would be a steady, consistent defenseman for the Blue Jackets. He's another right handed shot who would come reasonably cheap. Martinek blocked an average of two shots per game (128 in 64 GP) and would mesh well with fellow Czech blueliner Jan Hejda, if the Blue Jackets can re-sign him.

Jim Vandermeer – Another non-household name, but Vandermeer would give the Blue Jackets' defense something it is severely lacking – sandpaper. Vandermeer had 122 hits last year and was able to chip in 14 points. He's 6'1 215 with a pretty good mean streak and enough talent and skating ability to get by. He will not sell tickets, but he will help protect the team's players and strike a little fear in the hearts of guys who try to stand in front of Steve Mason.

Sami Salo – Salo would come to the Blue Jackets with a well-traveled insurance card, as he has had just about every injury known to man, but when he's healthy, he can be a huge help for the Blue Jackets. He has a heavy right handed shot and can be of great assistance on the powerplay. But, again, as an injury risk, Columbus could potentially have another Huselius situation with Salo. Salo also would have to be overpaid to come to Columbus as he should have a handful of suitors.

Again, like the forwards, there are very few big names available on defense. Really, if the Blue Jackets delve in to the free agent market, it will be for small fixes and role players. There are next to no big impact guys available. Wisniewski is probably a top three free agent defenseman, so it is imperative that the Blue Jackets get him under contract by July 1's 11:59 a.m. EST deadline.

Goalies:

Josh Harding – Josh Harding is coming off a horrible knee injury, which should make him a bargain bin price. He has tremendous upside and potential still, depending on how he comes back from his injury. The Blue Jackets would get a steal if they can snag him to be a backup because, if healthy, he could replace Mason if Steve struggles again.

Peter Budaj – Peter Budaj would be another one year band-aid for the Blue Jackets while they hope for a backup goaltender to emerge out of the system. He has been with Colorado for the past few seasons and is used to playing 15-20 games and staying as sharp as possible.

The Blue Jackets have plenty of holes to plug with free agency, it's just a matter of spending wisely.