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Ryan Callahan and Rangers Avoid Unpleasantness of Arbitration

By JEFF Z. KLEIN

The [Rangers](#) and [Ryan Callahan](#), their linchpin player of the future, agreed to terms for a contract extension Wednesday afternoon, only hours before a scheduled salary-arbitration meeting in Toronto on Thursday.

"It took till the 11th-and-a-half hour, but we avoided arbitration," Callahan's agent, Steve Bartlett, said by telephone from his office in suburban Rochester.

Avoiding the potentially destructive experience of an arbitration hearing is a high priority for N.H.L. clubs as well as for players and their agents. Of the 22 restricted free agents eligible for arbitration at the start of the month, Callahan is the 17th to reach agreement with his team. Four others still face hearings. Only one player has gone to arbitration.

Bartlett said Callahan's new contract is a three-year deal worth \$12.825 million, with Callahan receiving \$4 million in each of the first two years and \$4.825 million in the third. Last season, he made \$2.4 million.

Callahan, a 26-year-old right wing entering his sixth season with the club, scored 48 points in 60 games last season. He also missed the playoffs because of an injury, a crippling blow to the Rangers that contributed to their first-round exit.

A United States Olympian respected for his hurtling, terrier-like effort in Coach John Tortorella's aggressive forechecking system, Callahan is viewed as a future Rangers captain.

As late as Tuesday night, Bartlett said he was still waiting to hear from the Rangers and expected to go to arbitration in Toronto, with travel arrangements made and hotels booked.

But Bartlett said he called the Rangers on Wednesday morning.

"I reached out to Jeff Gorton, the Rangers' assistant general manager, and we beat each other up for a few hours this morning," Bartlett said. "We found a compromise, which was close enough for both sides and better than the alternative of going to a hearing."

Bartlett said he did not want to go before an arbitrator — he and Callahan on one side, a lawyer for the Rangers on the other — and engage in a debate over Callahan's game so that the arbitrator could arrive at a salary figure.

"It can be hard for a player, or for anyone, to sit in a room and hear why his employer doesn't want to pay him as much as he thinks he's worth," Bartlett said..

Only one player so far this summer, defenseman Chris Campoli, has gone to a hearing, but the Blackhawks already announced that they were not interested in re-signing him for the \$2.75 million he was seeking. After the arbitrator awarded Campoli \$2.5 million, the Blackhawks walked away, making him an unrestricted free agent.

The other players who face arbitration hearings over the next week are Devils forward Zach Parise, Islanders forward Blake Comeau, Predators defenseman Shea Weber and Kings defenseman Drew Doughty.

The Rangers, like many other teams, have come to late agreements with their other restricted free agents, as they did last week in settling with Callahan's linemate Brandon Dubinsky, who got a four-year, \$16.8 million deal.

One particular 1997 arbitration hearing, between the Islanders and their 25-year-old goaltender at the time, Tommy Salo, still resonates as a benchmark for contentious hearings, and a central reason parties try to avoid them.

Salo entered the hearing not knowing how adamantly Islanders General Manager Mike Milbury would argue against him in order to get a lower salary award. So devastating were the comments of Milbury — himself a lawyer and, as fans have come to know from his work as a television commentator, often a tactless speaker — Salo broke down in tears.

The hearing took 14 hours, including breaks. Milbury cited conditioning tests to point out that Salo was the worst-conditioned athlete on the team and that it resulted in several late-game losses, that his mental approach was suspect, that he was inconsistent and that younger goalies in the organization were likely to supplant him as No. 1.

In the end, the arbitrator awarded Salo a \$750,000 salary, a difference-splitting decision that represented a raise from the \$300,000 Salo earned the season before but short of the \$1.1 million he was seeking. But the damage was never undone. Salo had a good 1997-98 season, then was traded to Edmonton, a team on the rise while the Islanders were on a downward slide.

"It feels different when you have a G.M. and coaches who believe in you," Salo said after the trade. "I never got that from Mike. Never."

Bartlett, Callahan's agent, said: "It's become a far more formal and professional process in the last few years. I used to get teams bringing up unfounded things about players, like 'He's a drinker,' or 'He's a gambler.'

"But that was when it was just the G.M. and the player and the agent in the room. Now there are rules that confine the proceedings strictly to players' performance, and sometimes there will be someone from the players association in the room, and all of that has made it much more professional."