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# Kevin Oklobzija's Hockey O-zone

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## Bringing you an as-it-happens look at NHL free agency

Posted by [Kevin Oklobzija](#) • July 1, 2011 • 11:59 am • [Read Comments\(9\)](#) • [Recommend\(6\)](#)

We're a mere 5 seconds away from the start of NHL free agency and we're going to have a little fun this afternoon.

I'll be the fly on the wall in the office of agent Steve Bartlett, who operates Sports Consulting Group in Pittsford with his son, Brian.

They represent about 50 NHLers, plus others in the minors and Europe.

Among the players that should be signing soon: Tyler Kennedy, who has been with the Pittsburgh Penguins and is probably staying; Erik Cole, the veteran winger of the Carolina Hurricanes; and local long-time NHLer Marty Reasoner of Honeoye Falls.

Ryan Callahan of Greece is a restricted free agent but there probably won't be action on him today.

\*\*\*\*\*

12:04 p.m.: The Penguins have announced the deal with Kennedy. Two years, \$2 million per.

The deal is great for Kennedy from a public relations standpoint because he was free to sign anywhere and chose to stay in Pittsburgh.

The negotiation had to be amicable, since Penguins G.M. Ray Shero was Bartlett's partner years ago in SCG.

Four NHL teams have already called to start inquiring about clients. The list also includes Steve Sullivan, who has been with Nashville.

Cole will be a hot commodity.

\*\*\*\*\*

12:07 p.m.: This really is crazy. The office landline is ringing, Steve Bartlett is talking an NHL G.M. on his cell phone and his son, Brian, is working at home in Boston and speaking to another G.M.

How did anyone get anything done years ago when limited to a landline with call waiting.

\*\*\*\*\*

12:12 p.m.: A rival team just phoned to inquire about Kennedy. That's the second team to call, unaware that he re-signed with the Penguins.

Steve Bartlett to the general manager: "If you go down aisle 3, maybe I have someone for you."

He's now on the phone with Erik Cole to give an update on what interested teams are thinking.

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\*\*\*\*\*

12:18 p.m.: The negotiation process is very straight-forward. I always wondered how the numbers game begins and it's pretty simple, really. The G.M. throws out a number and the length of contract (one year, two years, whatever they're willing to go), then Bartlett says it make sense or that he's thinking of a little more.

Jamie Langenbrunner of the New Jersey Devils appears to be a popular commodity.

\*\*\*\*\*

12:27 p.m.: So if any Rochester Americans fans thought one-time Amerk hero Scott Nichol could be signed by the Buffalo Sabres as a depth player — highly unlikely.

Some NHL teams have already inquired, and Nichol should get a one-way deal; maybe not today, but very likely before the weekend ends. Teams love his grit, his character and his faceoff savvy.

\*\*\*\*\*

12:32 p.m.: Even with cell phones, text messaging and landlines, messages from general managers are still going to voicemail.

Erik Cole remains a very popular player.

The Bartletts have heard from, or called, at least 14 NHL teams and discussed nine or 10 players, some in depth some it passing.

\*\*\*\*\*

Said one NHL G.M. to Steve Bartlett: "Just seeing if you have anybody left."

\*\*\*\*\*

12:36 p.m.: A team may phone asking about one player. If the money is too rich for their blood, they'll go fishing to see what other players the Bartletts represent. Or Steve may throw out a name and gently push.

\*\*\*\*\*

12:40 p.m.: Steve Bartlett is back on the phone for the second time with Erik Cole. An update on what teams are interested and what they're offering.

\*\*\*\*\*

12:48 p.m.: An offer is in on Marty Reasoner. A couple other teams have said he could be in the mix, depending on how successful they are in pursuit of other free agents.

The conversation is now underway between Steve Bartlett and Reasoner. Steve is laying out all scenarios. Decision time could come sooner than later.

\*\*\*\*\*

12:59 p.m.: The phones have died down a bit. Now it's time for the Bartletts to go back to some teams to inquire if they will go higher.

Much of it courtesy. Throughout much of the first chats, even with a firm offer already in, Steve Bartlett has promised to get back to other teams to let them know where things stand on a certain player.

Still LOTS of interest in Erik Cole.

\*\*\*\*\*

1:11 p.m.: In speaking with an NHL G.M., Bartlett ensures "I'm not wasting your time. We're trying to get this done."

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Much of the action in the office now is back-and-forth with clients to find out exactly what they want in terms of a destination.

Brian Bartlett, based in Boston, is phoning one team now while Steve Bartlett is calling another.

\*\*\*\*\*

1:21 p.m.: The real negotiating has begun. Some back-and-forth with a couple teams is taking place, as well as some pointed talk with clients now that decision time is nearing.

Does a player like Erik Cole uproot the family from Carolina, which has been home for a lot of years? Does bigger money elsewhere ease the pain/hassle of relocation?

\*\*\*\*\*

1:25 p.m.: Steve Bartlett shoots a call off to Jamie Langenbrunner to give a status update on where the interest has come from so far, but also to explain better offers could come later today or tomorrow after other teams win or lose in their efforts to sign others they are chasing.

\*\*\*\*\*

1:27 p.m.: Yet another team has inquired about Erik Cole but when told where the money stands right now, the G.M. says "you just knocked me out of the water."

\*\*\*\*\*

1:29 p.m.: There is a short list of "today" players and a longer list of "second-day" free agents.

NHL teams have UFA's listed as their priority players. Erik Cole is one of those guys. So, obviously, is Brad Richards. When those guys sign, the intense attention goes to the next list of players.

Bartlett has a list of his players that are free and has been jotting down next to names the numbers and teams that have either inquired or bailed from the bidding.

\*\*\*\*\*

1:46 p.m.: And now for some AHL news, already done, a one-year AHL deal for former Amerk D-man Paul Baier. He signs with the Hershey Bears. He's a solid AHLer and a GREAT team and community guy.

Baier by himself created interest in Amerk hockey this past season with his hours at libraries, schools and team functions.

Oh, and as his teammate last year, goalie Jacob Markstrom says, he's "the smartest guy in the AHL." There is no question Baier's Brown education is very real.

\*\*\*\*\*

1:54 p.m.: Baier, by the way, will get in the \$40,000-\$45,000 range. Well worth it for what he brings on and off the ice.

\*\*\*\*\*

1:55 p.m.: How's this for a crazy day. Goalie Mark Dekanich, previously of the Milwaukee Admirals/Nashville Predators, is a subject of bidding right now. And tomorrow he's getting married. His rehearsal dinner is just hours away, so he'd like to say "I do" to the NHL team and then go practice saying "I do" at the church.

\*\*\*\*\*

2:14 p.m.: The fun — and tense — part of negotiating is the gambling part. Do you wait to see if an offer will go up? If you do, you run the risk of an interested team jumping at someone else and then the money is gone.

"It's a little bit of Russian Roulette," Steve Bartlett tells a client.

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2:17 p.m.: A team has just come in with, as Steve Bartlett says, is their "last last offer" on a player.

Sometimes the last offer isn't the last.

\*\*\*\*\*

2:26 p.m.: Down to the nitty-gritty with Cole. Numbers crunching between Steve and Brian Bartlett, via their Skype connection, on how they'd like to structure the total money.

Then, of course, a team must agree, or they fire back a counter-offer.

\*\*\*\*\*

2:41 p.m.: A big factor in the structuring of a contract is what lies ahead in labor relations. The current collective bargaining agreement expires on Sept. 1, 2012.

Considering the NHL lost the 2004-05 season due to out-of-control spending by owners, there is fear that there could again be another work stoppage. Thus, the goal is to get more money up front in contracts.

\*\*\*\*\*

2:48 p.m.: It's quieting down now at the Sports Consulting Group office in Pittsford. Oh, still plenty of work. Brian is working on a deal in Boston, with his brother, Scott, monitoring continuing free-agent action.

Here in Pittsford, Steve is finalizing another contract proposal to email to a team.

Jason Pastore, Steve's assistant here, continues to man the phones and keep abreast on other signings.

What other players sign for money-wise very much plays a part in what the Bartletts ask for when they negotiate contracts for similar players.

Marcel Goc was signed for around \$1.7 a year for three years by the Florida Panthers. Boyd Gordon received \$1.325 each year on a two-year deal from Phoenix. Gordon scored 3 goals, 6 assists and 9 points last season with the Capitals. Thus, you'd think Marty Reasoner would get at least that; he scored 14-18-32 last season.

\*\*\*\*\*

3:06 p.m.: Some deals are virtually done, including Erik Cole. Marty Reasoner's close to being finalized.

\*\*\*\*\*

3:12 p.m.: Expect to see official word on Marty Reasoner's signing within minutes. He's leaving Florida.

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3:15 p.m.: As Steve Sullivan just tweeted, he's joining the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Reports on Twitter of Erik Cole headed to Montreal Canadiens are very true.

\*\*\*\*\*

3:20 p.m.: The Reasoner contract is done. He's getting two years from the New York Islanders. He'll get between \$2.5 and \$2.7 million total money.

He scored 14-18-32 for the Panthers last season but the truly impressive number was that he was a plus-2 in plus/minus. That's impressive for a team that couldn't score a goal.

\*\*\*\*\*

3:36 p.m.: Goalie Mark Dekanich has the best wedding present he's going to get. He's getting a one-way contract from the Columbus Blue Jackets. NHL-type minimum money (\$525,000). He gets married tomorrow.

\*\*\*\*\*

3:44 p.m.: Good fun observing the Erik Cole negotiations. From what I can gather, all along the Canadiens wanted him bad. The clock struck noon and they were the first team calling the Bartlett office.

Once the total money was agreed upon, there was a collaborative effort in structuring the contract, too, between all of the Bartletts: Steve, Brian and Scott, and then off the proposal went via mail to Montreal.

\*\*\*\*\*

4:03 p.m.: Sorry for the lull in updates. I just got off the phone with Marty Reasoner. He's quite happy to be signed already. No stress for the rest of the summer, although he didn't necessary expect to sign on the first day of free agency.

"It kind of gets you in a little bit of a panic," Reasoner said, "because it seemed like it's a far-off thing and then all of a sudden you have to make a decision."

With two young kids, Allie, 2, and Ryan, 4 months, he and his wife had to decide that they wanted to move again. He played for the Panthers last season but Florida didn't make a strong initial offer. The Panthers apparently had interest but the Islanders willingness to do a deal today showed that they really want him.

\*\*\*\*\*

4:12 p.m.: From Twitter, a Matt Moulson tweet: "Really excited about the signing of Marty Reasoner...great veteran player...will fit in great on the Island."

\*\*\*\*\*

4:28 p.m.: The phone calls have slowed down. The first-day flurry is sort of over for SCG, but lots of back-and-forth will be taking place still today and through the weekend on guys like Jamie Langenbrunner, and depth/5th-6th D-men Shawn Belle, D-man Peter Harold and Derek Smith.

Also still on the get-signed list is winger Derek Whitmore of Greece.

Media from Montreal has inquired to interview Steve Bartlett about Erik Cole's signing by the Canadiens, and Pittsburgh broadcast folks have wanted him to discuss the Tyler Kennedy and Steve Sullivan signings with the Penguins.

\*\*\*\*\*

4:44: A couple calls have come in on Derek Whitmore. He's a UFA after three years in Portland as a member of the Buffalo Sabres organization.

I'm guessing teams view him as someone who can earn NHL ice time and be a call-up guy. He never got the NHL chance with the Sabres.

We're closing down operations for now. Might add a bit more as the evening approaches, but I need to write stories for the morning print and online editions.

Amazing learning experience of how this whole process goes down.

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