

3 Big Questions Facing the Colorado Avalanche

Rookie's Column- Joe Barbieri

After missing the playoffs last season by 6 points (trailed Minnesota Wild) the Colorado Avalanche went into the offseason stumped once more. The team has been in a semi-rebuild state since hall of fame goaltender Patrick Roy returned to the Pepsi Center as head coach of the organization in the 2013-2014 season. That year the Avs made it to the playoffs with an outstanding Central Division leading 112 points (52-22-8). Just 2 years later they are stuck near the bottom of the Central Division with a meager 82 points (39-39-4). Many questions float around the young team, but these three stick out as the next season approaches. Here are the three big questions facing the Colorado Avalanche after a rather quiet offseason.

1. Can Semyon Varlamov Rebound?

One of the biggest concerns for the Avs is the status of starting goalie Semyon Varlamov. After trading Reto Berra to Florida for young forward Rocco Grimaldi, it looks as if Joe Sakic and Patrick Roy are ready to take once third string goalie Calvin Pickard to the next step. Having such a young backup may result in more playing time for veteran Varlamov. The question stands though; can Varlamov retain the superstar Vezina competitor status he held a mere two years ago? The Avs coaching staff are hoping for a resounding 'yes' to this question. It's no secret that the Avs aren't a defense first team, so having your main man in goal shine is a necessity to win games. Unfortunately, Varly wasn't performing well last season. He ranked third overall in the 2015-2016 season in losses (25) and only had 27 wins' total. With a .914 save percentage, (50th overall) we can safely assume that Varly had a tough year last season. If the Avs are going to make a postseason appearance, they'll need Varlamov to be on top of his game in the blue paint. Their success hinges on it, but his own success could be boosted by a better defensive showing. This leads to the second big question.

2. Will the Defensive Offseason Adjustments Help the Avalanche?

The Colorado Avalanche struggled once again last season with spotty defensive play, which hurt their chances of a postseason berth in the long run. The Avs allowed the 3rd highest amount of shots against per game (32.3). It doesn't take an analyst to connect the dots here. The Avs were constantly trapped inside their defensive zone and consistently let their goalies be peppered by rubber all night. The Avs also allowed nearly 3 goals against per game (2.93) compared to their goals for (2.59). Defense stuck out like a sore thumb this offseason and Joe Sakic tried his best to address the issue. He traded away Nick Holden to the New York Rangers and replaced him with veteran Columbus Blue Jacket defensemen Fedor Tyutin. Tyutin only had 3 points (1 goal 2 assists) in 61 games last season with the Jackets. The Avs hope to have the 33-year-old Izhevsk, Russia native mold their young defensive core alongside Francois Beauchemin. They also brought former Calgary Flames defensemen Patrick Wiercioch into the mix as well. Weiercioch

has appeared in 211 regular season NHL games and has tallied 62 points in that time (12 goals, 50 assists).

3. Can Nathan Mackinnon Live Up to His Contract?

The last big question facing the Avs before the season begins relates to young star center Nathan Mackinnon. Early July had Avs fans worried because Mackinnon hadn't signed yet. Fears were lifted when reports of a seven-year contract being signed were released. Mackinnon is now the highest paid player on the roster, making around 6.4 million per year. The message from the Avalanche upstairs was clear: it was time for Mackinnon to step up his game. Despite finishing third on the team in scoring last season (52 points, 21 goals, 31 assists) coach Patrick Roy clearly wants Mackinnon to take up a leading position next season. Can the young forward answer the call and finally breakout as an all-star player? Only time will tell, but the Avalanche coaching staff certainly seems positive. It's clear that Mackinnon is part of the team's core, and rebuild phases are built around a team's core players. It's a lot of pressure for a young NHL forward, but Mackinnon is no stranger to being under the microscope of the hockey community. We'll see if Mackinnon can take up a bigger role in both the team's offensive production and overall leadership when the season begins on Saturday October 15, against the visiting Dallas Stars.

<https://www.nhl.com/>

<http://avalanche.nhl.com/>