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CAPITALS

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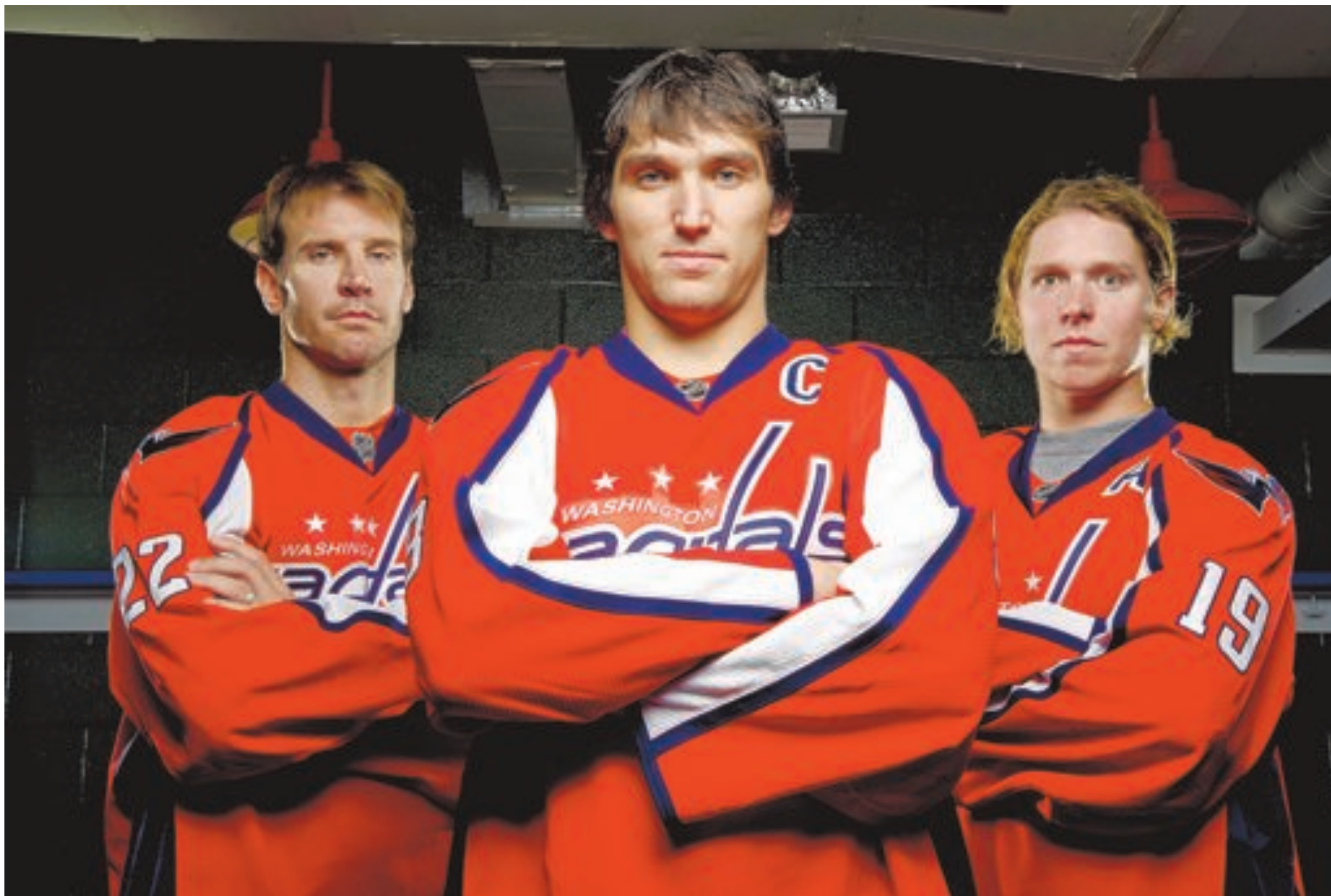
SECTION E



Is this the year they grab it?

COVER STORY

A CUP FOR THE CAPS?



ANDREW HARNIK/THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Right wing Mike Knuble (from left), left wing Alex Ovechkin and center Nicklas Backstrom constitute the bulk of the firepower on the Capitals' top two lines and serve as the foundation for leadership. They again will be counted on to provide ample offense as Washington takes aim at its first Stanley Cup.

By STEPHEN WHYNO

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

It's the dream of owner Ted Leonsis, who said he'd "cry like a baby" if it happened. It's the dream of public address announcer Wes Johnson, who said he wouldn't be able to hear himself if it happened. It's the dream of every kid who wants to play in the NHL.

Winning the Stanley Cup, hockey's Holy Grail, is no longer just wishful thinking for the Washington Capitals and their fans. It's the only real benchmark for a successful season.

Captain Alex Ovechkin has had time to adjust to a leadership role. Coach Bruce Boudreau taught his team how to win with defense. General manager George McPhee went out in the offseason and got a proven goaltender and patched some holes on a playoff club.

Nothing less than a celebration in June is acceptable.

"We're definitely setting the bar high this year," defenseman John Erskine said. "If we don't go all the way, I think it'll be a disappointment."

Visions of champions

Self-motivation is one part of the Caps' mantra, but nationally the expectations were ratcheted up over the summer when *The Hockey News* tabbed Washington as its pick to finally break through and win the Cup.

Senior writer Ken Campbell cited McPhee's moves of signing goalie Tomas Vokoun, defenseman Roman Hamrlík, forwards Jeff Halpern and Joel Ward and trading for forward Troy Brouwer as major reasons for the pick.

Capitals 2011-12

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It's not unrealistic to think this is the season Washington brings home a championship

Some fans decried the magazine's prediction as a jinx, just like a picture last season that depicted the Caps in medieval garb having won it all. Defenseman Jeff Schultz called predictions "garbage" but conceded this is the best team he's been on and therefore the group with the best chance to make good of preseason expectations.

"If people are saying, 'You've got a chance to win,' I'm all for that. Picking us to win the Cup, that's nice, but I'm more interested in the process and getting this right and getting this team to play right all the way through," McPhee said. "And if you play it right all the way through, then you won't break down in the playoffs."

Another part of the hype centers on Ovechkin, center Nicklas Backstrom, defenseman Mike Green and right wing Alexander Semin — the so-called "Young Guns" — growing up. They're not kids anymore, right wing Mike Knuble has said, and other veterans have preached accountability across the board.

"They're building themselves to [where] playoffs aren't really a goal for them," Nashville Predators coach Barry Trotz said. "There's only one goal for the Caps."

But the talent has been evident for a couple of seasons, so it's no surprise that from the inside there is confidence.

"We've had a team to win it the last few years and it just hasn't worked out," defenseman Karl Alzner said. "For me, every year is the year to win the Cup. Whether it's off of losing, getting swept in the second round, or not making the playoffs every year, you want to win it and you expect to win it."

'Never' again

Two seasons ago, the Caps captured the Presidents' Trophy with the most

points in the NHL. Even last season, they made a run to finish atop the Eastern Conference.

Those were both supposed to be "the year," but losses to the Montreal Canadiens in the first round in 2010 and to the Tampa Bay Lightning in the second round in 2011 brought high hopes to an end in low-blow fashion.

Last year's sweep by the Lightning stung particularly hard. Boudreau talked over the summer about just wanting to get back on the ice to put the postseason behind him, and his players weren't able to forget.

"It wasn't fun for anybody. It was terrible," center Marcus Johansson said. "We never want to have that happen again, so of course you think about it."

Reasons for the early exit abound, from injuries to defensemen to stars not being able to match the intensity and production of Tampa Bay's supporting cast. Even now, it's still frustrating for many around the team to think about the missed opportunity.

"You just don't have that many chances as a group to do well," Knuble said. "You have to realize when you're a good team in a good position that the time is right and the players are out there, and you've got to take advantage of it."

All the right moves

NBC hockey play-by-play man Mike Emrick doesn't make postseason predictions until after the trade deadline. That's when, he said, you can see what a team has to offer in April, May and June.

At last year's deadline, McPhee acquired defenseman Dennis Wideman and center Jason Arnott and claimed wing Marco Sturm off waivers. It was the hope that those veterans would add the right voices in the room and the right play on the ice

to win a title.

When it didn't work out, McPhee took a similar tone in free agency: Not blowing the Caps up but getting Ward, Halpern, Vokoun and Hamrlík after dealing away a first-round pick for Brouwer.

"I think [McPhee] did a great job. They didn't just go willy-nilly and pick free agents," Boudreau said. "They picked guys that they thought were not only really good but would be good fits for our hockey club."

Toughness for the skaters and experience all around was the common theme. Except for Brouwer, who won it all with the Chicago Blackhawks two seasons ago, none have had team success in the playoffs.

But all fit the bill of leaders either vocally or quietly as the Caps look to squeeze more out of the entire team come playoff time. And the Caps brought back Laich at \$4.5 million per year because he fits into the mix as a leader, too.

"We believe that we have the group that can win in here, Laich said.

'C' is for pressure

Brouwer talked about not trying to be the captain in Washington. That job is already filled, as Ovechkin goes into just his second full season with the "C" on his chest.

Increased maturity has been a noticeable part of Ovechkin since he returned to the area in August. Questions about him being out of shape were quickly extinguished as the highest-paid player showed off some renewed commitment in on-ice drills and sprints.

And he's approaching this season as captain differently, willing to sacrifice some offensive firepower for team success.

"It doesn't matter — personal stats is personal stats. Everybody forget I was 65-goal scorer a couple years ago and everybody talking about Boston or Chicago because they were Stanley Cup champions," Ovechkin said. "I think for this team right now it's most important thing is just raise the Cup and bring it home like everybody wants in all organizations."

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Caps burdened by urgency to win Cup now



DAN DALY

Only one of Washington's pro teams — the Big Four, I mean — is much burdened by expectations: the Capitals. With the others, the fans' mindset is entirely different.

Redskins fans just want the club to be respectable enough so they can show their faces at work on Mondays.

Wizards fans don't even ask for that much. They simply hope their heroes can get through the season with a minimum of locker-room gunplay.

As for Nationals fans, they're absolutely thrilled the team won 80 games this year, especially with Stephen Strasburg throwing almost as many rehab-assignment innings (20⅓) as major league innings (24).

All three of those clubs are in various stages of rebuilding. It isn't about the present with them, it's about the future (however uncertain it may be). But for the Caps, it's about the here and now. They've been division champs for four years running, not that they have much to show for it. So they're not just dealing with expectations, they're dealing with accumulated expectations, expectations that have built up over the past few seasons as they've flamed out, repeatedly, in the playoffs.

Accumulated expectations are the worst kind of expectations. They're like compounded debt, like being maxed out on your credit card. Let's face it, after being swept by the Tampa Bay Lightning in the second round last May — on the heels of a first-round loss to 8th-seeded Montreal the previous spring — they're not quite the darlings they used to be. Besides, at a certain point, the bill becomes due and the leg-breaker appears at the door.

If the Capitals listen closely, they might hear Javier Bardem knocking. (OK, I'm being overly dramatic. It might only be Steve Buscemi knocking. But the pounding has never been louder.)

Not that Mike Knuble pays it much mind. "It's a privilege," the



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Michal Neuvirth and the Capitals were swept by the Tampa Bay Lightning in last season's playoffs. Washington's latest postseason disappointment prompted the team to sign a new No. 1 goaltender in veteran Tomas Vokoun.

right wing says, "to be in a town where you've got a chance to do well and where people have hopes for you. As an athlete, you want to play in cities where it matters and where you have a chance to win.

Our fans recognize that, and I think the guys in the room recognize it.

"The regular season has been the easy part for us. It's all going to be about the spring and how we do there. For the fans, it's still kinda

like: Six months to go, 'til we get to what everybody wants to see."

Yes, it pretty much has come down to that for the Capitals. They've finished with the best record in the conference the past two

years and the best in the league in 2010, only to watch lower seeds — Philadelphia (No. 7) and Boston (No. 3) — catch fire and advance to the finals, with the Bruins winning the Stanley Cup. Of course, the Presidents' Trophy is plated with fool's gold . . . unless it leads to a lengthy playoff run. The Caps, for all their glamour, haven't been able to get out of the second round.

When they were done being electrocuted by the Lightning five months ago, Knuble said, "There will be different faces next year. That's a guarantee." But George McPhee resisted the urge to break out the dynamite, convinced that every young team — and the Capitals are still that — is going to suffer growing pains. There were no major subtractions from the roster (unless you count Semyon Varlamov, who, statistically, was their third-best goaltender), and Bruce Boudreau was brought back as coach. Instead, McPhee tried to make meaningful veteran additions, specifically forwards Troy Brouwer, Joel Ward and Jeff Halpern, defenseman Roman Hamrlík and goalie Tomas Vokoun.

"When you add people like that," Jason Chimera says, "you can't help but get excited about a season. People have high expectations for us, sure, but we have high expectations ourselves. We want to win, and we realize how good a team we've got. We really don't want to leave anything to chance. We want to stick with this team the whole year — and then, when the trade deadline comes, not make any moves and just keep rolling right through."

If the Capitals are looking for encouragement, last season's finalists, the Bruins and Vancouver Canucks, offer plenty. They, too, ranked high on the Accumulated Expectations Scale before finally breaking through last spring. It can take a while, no matter how talented you are, for everything to come together.

This year, maybe the San Jose Sharks will be that team — and all the pieces will fall into place. Or maybe Alex Ovechkin will go back to being Alex Ovechkin, Nick Backstrom will go back to being Nick Backstrom, and the Caps will be that team. As Knuble says: Only six months of tiresome regular-season games until we find out.

"Let's wait to see what happens in the playoffs. They can't really prove what they've got to prove until the playoffs. If they don't step up now and play the game at a high level, then one could suggest that they never will."

— Bob McKenzie, TSN hockey analyst

CUP

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Like the Penguins' Sidney Crosby before him, Ovechkin was made captain in addition to already being the face of the franchise.

"Unlike the traditional Scott Stevens/Mark Messier types, now you have [the trend] that the best player winds up being the captain," Emrick said. "Only the guys in the room can tell you is he the best leader?"

The Caps certainly hope Ovechkin can take preseason progress and turn it into results next spring, because that question will go a long way toward determining whether the Russian left wing will be lifting the Stanley Cup over his head.

The right ingredients

It takes something special to win a Stanley Cup, something that's hard to define. Obviously talent is a major part, and having great or at least very good goaltending is essential.

But plenty of teams, like last year's Caps, put that mix together and came up short.

"I think the word 'will' is the most important. You have to have all 22 guys or at least the key players they have to have the will to win," said Blackhawks defenseman Sean O'Donnell, who won the Cup with the Anaheim Ducks in 2007. "Playing in the league is great, making a lot of money is great, but guys have to feel like their careers aren't complete until they win one."

Only two players in the Caps' locker room — Knuble (Red Wings, 1998) and Brouwer (Blackhawks, 2010) — own Stanley Cup rings. Plenty have won at the AHL level, as Boudreau did with the Hershey Bears. But it's just not the same.

Halpern knows the pain of losing in the playoffs perhaps more than anyone, having never been on a team that won a playoff series.

"If you have any sort of weakness, it

CUP CONTENDER CHECKLIST

The Caps finally appear to have just about all the pieces to succeed in their quest for the Stanley Cup.

Star players

✓ The core of Alex Ovechkin, Nicklas Backstrom, Alexander Semin and Mike Green has been together for years, with additions along the way. But to win in playoffs, the best players need to perform better.

Goaltending

✓ Signing veteran Tomas Vokoun was a "steal" for the Caps, and general manager George McPhee said, "We got lucky." To win in the playoffs, great — or at least very good — goaltending is a must.

Leadership

✓ Ovechkin, by the accounts of McPhee and Coach Bruce Boudreau, already has shown increased maturity before his second full season as captain. Brooks Laich and Mike Knuble are a support system.

Defensive depth

✓ Much of the blame for last year's loss to Tampa Bay centered on defensemen being hurt. The acquisition of Roman Hamrlík and potential of Dmitry Orlov should alleviate that this season.

Grit

✓ Fighting isn't paramount to playoff success, but having rough-around-the-edges players to grind down opponents and win battles is. Joel Ward and Troy Brouwer fit the bill — and they can score.

Shutdown defenseman

✓ Karl Alzner is just 23, but the defenseman always has been set on shutting down opponents' best players. He and John Carlson are a prodigious shutdown pair for the Caps.

Coaching

✓ Bruce Boudreau's job status was questioned from the outside, but the organization believes in the coach, who has won titles at the ECHL and AHL levels.

Luck

? Winning a Stanley Cup is part good fortune and part matchups — like avoiding a red-hot goaltender. Stay tuned until April.



ANDREW HARNIK/THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The heat will be turned up on Capitals coach Bruce Boudreau if Washington fails to make a significant playoff run. The Caps failed to get past the second round each of the past two seasons despite being the top seed in the East.

gets exploited in the playoffs," he said. "You can cover it up sometimes with goaltender or speciality times, but things definitely surface in the playoffs."

The Caps know that feeling all too well, and yet there's an optimism that this could be the chance.

'You never know'

During Halpern's rookie season, Ulf Dahlen pulled him aside to deliver an important message: "You never know when you have a good chance at winning a Cup," Halpern recalled.

Now 35 years old after a tour of four other NHL teams, the ex-Caps captain

sees this as his best chance to do just that.

On paper, it's hard to doubt the depth of two goaltenders with proven success, seven defensemen with plenty of experience and at least three lines that can score with reliability. And don't doubt the desire, either, after how things went last year.

"They're a group that wants to win, believe me," Knuble said. "People that think they don't, they're vastly mistaken and they don't know them."

National analysts are mixed on whether this is "the year." Emrick thinks the Caps can again finish atop

the Eastern Conference in the regular season, while Adam Proteau of *The Hockey News* wrote that this is the time for Washington to "put up or blow up."

When the Caps were eliminated by Tampa Bay, some expected Boudreau to be handed a pink slip. It's fair to reason that without a deep run in 2012, the popular coach could be in trouble.

That's added pressure on a group that is already feeling the weight of expectations. Boudreau won't be the only one whose seat is hot if things don't go well.

"Let's wait to see what happens in

the playoffs," TSN analyst Bob McKenzie said. "They can't really prove what they've got to prove until the playoffs."

Leonsis came out recently and said the Caps need to make sure they remember the regular season is important, too. But more than anything else, it's a means to an end getting into the top eight in the East to exorcise the demons.

This is the one shot, the one opportunity to put it all to rest.

"If they don't step up now and play the game at a high level," McKenzie said, "then one could suggest that they never will."

GOALTENDING



ANDREW HARNIK/THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Capitals goaltender Tomas Vokoun was solid for expansion Nashville and also ran Florida before signing with Washington as a free agent July 2, his 35th birthday.

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Vokoun long languished on losing teams, but Caps give him chance to win it all

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Tomas Vokoun is not a loser. He has lost 267 games during his NHL career, fourth-most among active goaltenders — but he's also fourth in save percentage and fifth in goals-against average.

Playing with the expansion Nashville Predators and then the lowly Florida Panthers, Vokoun was the proof that bad things can happen to a good goalie.

Even the games he won took a toll on the 35-year-old.

"Obviously, it's demanding. Every little mistake gets magnified because that can decide the game," Vokoun said. "If you're looking at scoring an average of two goals a game, you can only give up two. It was hard playing that way."

And while it wasn't Vokoun's first choice to sign a one-year deal worth \$1.5 million, he's with the Washington Capitals now and has a chance to not only put losing behind him but also capture a Stanley Cup with his career winding down.

"I think everybody who plays NHL — that's their goal. Obviously for various reasons, I didn't have the chance very often in my career," he said. "I would say this is the first time, legitimately, that I'm on a team that is considered one of the top teams."

'You give up that goal and we lost'

Predators coach Barry Trotz speaks in glowing terms about Vokoun, who was the franchise's first star while the teams were pretty bad. Nashville missed the playoffs five times, and Vokoun lost 159 games (not counting overtime losses). He won 161.

"We were an expansion franchise and ... the way to sort of get through the expansion phase and get to the competitive phase is win some hockey games," Trotz said. "He gave us a chance to be successful — to take the first step."

When he was traded to the Panthers, it didn't get much better. He led the league in losses twice, and Florida finished in last place the past two seasons.

LOT OF LOSING

During his 12-year NHL career, Tomas Vokoun hasn't experienced a lot of team success. But his personal numbers stick out despite playing on some bad teams.

Team	Year	W	L	T/OTL	GAA	Sv Pct.
Predators	1998-99	12	8	4	2.95	.908
Predators	1999-00	9	20	1	2.78	.904
Predators	2000-01	13	17	5	2.44	.910
Predators	2001-02	5	14	4	2.69	.903
Predators	2002-03	25	31	11	2.20	.918
Predators	2003-04*	34	29	10	2.53	.909
Predators	2005-06	36	18	7	2.67	.919
Predators	2006-07*	27	12	4	2.40	.920
Panthers	2007-08	30	29	8	2.68	.919
Panthers	2008-09	26	23	6	2.49	.926
Panthers	2009-10	23	28	11	2.55	.925
Panthers	2010-11	22	28	5	2.55	.922

* Led Nashville to playoffs

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

"Every mistake you make, people tell you, 'You give up that goal and we lost,'" Vokoun said. "It's kind of hard when every game is like that."

Vokoun called it "tough" to constantly be on bottom-feeding teams. It didn't matter that he posted impressive save percentages above .920 in each of the last three years.

"I'm a competitive person, and what was the toughest part about it — when you play professional sports, you hate to lose," he said. "I did my share of it the last few years in Florida. That's one of the reasons I decided I want to change scenery, and I didn't sign an extension in Florida, because I didn't think the team was going to be anywhere near close to where I want to be hockeywise."

Stealing Vokoun

Just about every single person around the Caps asked about Vokoun since July 2 has used the word "steal." To get a goaltender of his caliber for the bargain-basement price of \$1.5 million on a one-year deal seemed too good to be true.

It should have been. A week earlier, the Philadelphia Flyers signed Ilya Bryzgalov to a nine-year, \$51 million contract, and Vokoun — as the top option on the free agent market — looked

in line for a pay day. He didn't want to go back to the Panthers, who offered him three years on a deal believed to be worth \$10 million.

But then the other teams in need of goalies went in other directions. The Phoenix Coyotes signed Mike Smith; the Colorado Avalanche traded a couple of high draft picks to the Caps for Semyon Varlamov, and the market dried up.

Then, Vokoun said, it became simple: similar offers from the Caps and Detroit Red Wings, one to start and one to back up Jimmy Howard, and Washington nabbed the steal of the off-season. Coach Bruce Boudreau called it "quite a coup" by general manager George McPhee.

And while Vokoun admitted even then that the money wasn't what he had liked, it's not the worst thing in the world to stumble into a chance like this.

Change of plans

Dealing Varlamov seemed to signal the Caps' desire to go with the kids — last year's playoff starter Michal Neuvirth and Braden Holtby. But with Vokoun too good to pass on, Holtby was again relegated to third on the organizational depth chart.

"Obviously, my goal is to play in the

NHL, and that's a step back — I think everyone knows that. At the same time, Tomas is going to help this team immensely," Holtby said. "When you get a guy like that available to bring him into your team and your organization, obviously you take it. I've never faulted once George for doing that; I think that's the best for the team, and I know that."

Goaltending coach Dave Prior even called Holtby soon after Vokoun signed, with the message: "We weren't [kidding] anybody. We believed we could go with him and Michal." Now Holtby's year could be spent mostly in Hershey, with cameos in Washington, and Neuvirth's fighting for Caps starts.

But Neuvirth is approaching this season the same as last and pushing himself as much as his fellow Czech countryman is.

"When I was a little kid, he was my hero and I always wanted to be like him. Now I want to be like him," Neuvirth said. "My goal is to be No. 1 goalie, and I proved last year I can be the guy. He's a great goaltender; he's been No. 1 goalie for a long time in the NHL, but I'm pretty confident about myself."

Vokoun isn't here to be a mentor to Neuvirth — he's here to start and win — but Prior mentioned that having something of an idol around to "access" might not hurt. And Vokoun's presence around the Caps is seen as another step toward being ready to make a serious playoff run.

Pedigree to win it

Vokoun hasn't won a whole lot in the NHL and really hasn't had many chances to prove himself in the Stanley Cup playoffs. But that doesn't mean

he's a stranger to playing well in and winning big-time games — thanks to international competition.

Vokoun helped the Czech Republic to a bronze medal at the 2006 Olympics and then put up a 1.78 goals-against average and .936 save percentage in the 2010 Games.

Analyst Justin Goldman of the Goalie Guild compared Vokoun's increased confidence from those performances to that of countryman Dominik Hasek, who made it to the Cup final with the Buffalo Sabres in 1999 and won it all with the Red Wings in 2002.

"It's not going to be tough for him to elevate his game. It's not going to be tough for him to be confident," Goldman said. "You don't want his demeanor to change. You want him to play like it's any other game."

That's exactly how Vokoun talks, too, saying, "my job is stop the puck, and that never changes." And when you look at the common denominator among Stanley Cup champions, goaltending is the most important piece. It's hard to handicap how he'll perform in the playoffs, but the same

could be said for Nikolai Khabibulin, who led the Tampa Bay Lightning to the Cup in 2004.

"That's not [Vokoun's] fault. He has put up tremendous numbers," NBC Sports' Mike Emrick said. "Now we'll get an idea how he can do with a really good team."

On a one-year contract and at 35 years old, Vokoun's chances seem limited. But his focus is on lifting the Cup.

"The one thing I'm the most excited about is the chance to be on a team like that and show people and show myself what you can do with it," he said.

"When you play professional sports, you hate to lose. I did my share of it the last few years in Florida. That's one of the reasons I ... didn't sign an extension in Florida, because I didn't think the team was going to be anywhere near close to where I want to be hockeywise."

— Tomas Vokoun

SEASON STORY LINES



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Alex Ovechkin is seeking a return to form this season, saying, "My goal is to score goals, create some dangerous moments and find my partners so they find moments to score goals."

TSN hockey analyst Bob McKenzie has no trouble calling the Capitals "one of the more fascinating teams in the league." There are reasons for that, going beyond Alex Ovechkin's star power that has made the Caps a national television draw. Here's a look at five story lines to keep an eye on this season:

1. Wake me up when the regular season ends: Even if the Capitals finish first in the Eastern Conference and look downright invincible in the regular season, skeptics will question playoff success. These players can't exorcise those demons until April and beyond.

But owner Ted Leonsis doesn't want to just hit the fast-forward button.

"We want to make sure that we never fall into 'the regular season doesn't matter.' The regular season's very, very important," he said last month. "It's where you develop the habits that take you into the playoffs and carry you in the playoffs."

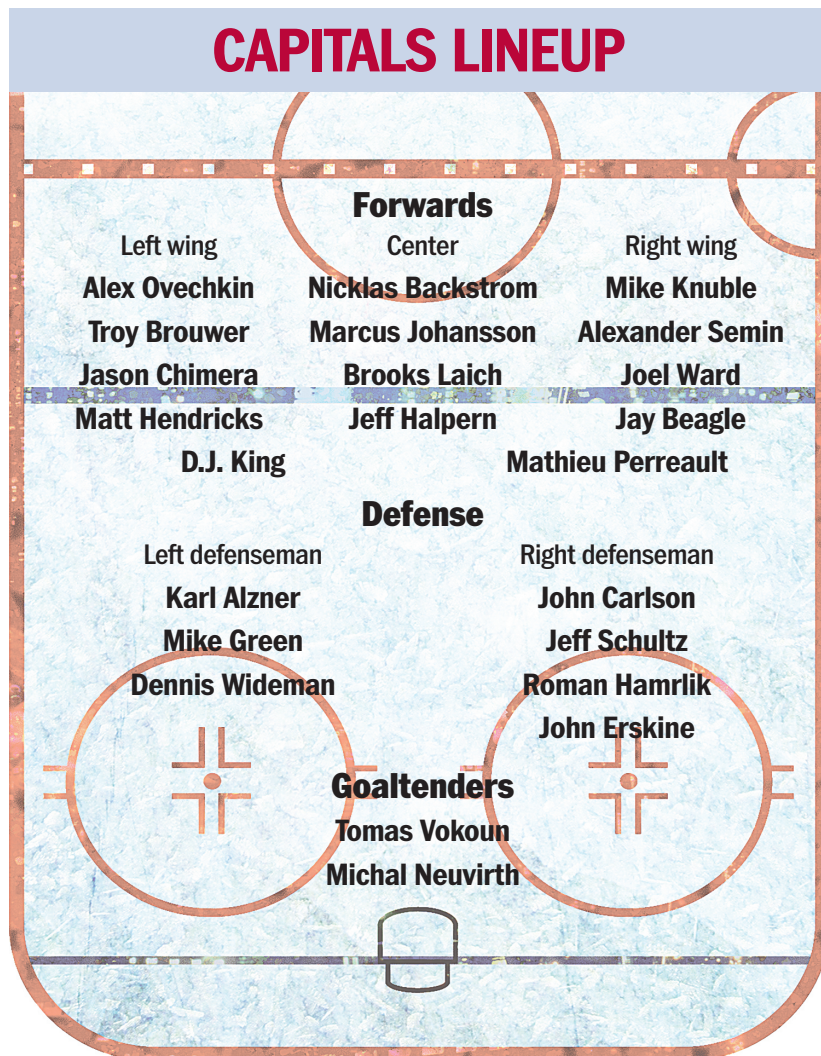
2. Ovechkin back at it: Injuries hampered the captain's 2010-11 season, and yet he still managed 32 goals and 53 assists. If that is his minimum level of production, a healthy Ovechkin could be scary.

He'd like to be better defensively, but Ovechkin seeks a return to some impressive numbers.

"My goal is to score goals, create some dangerous moments and find my partners so they find moments to score goals," he said.

3. Johansson center of attention: Coach Bruce Boudreau loves to juggle his lines, so it might not last long, but Marcus Johansson won't start the season as the No. 1 center, even though he spent much of training camp there.

Johansson felt a burden of proof being in that spot, but this past week Boudreau wanted to send a "message" after some lackluster performances.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Marcus Johansson could start the season as the center on the Capitals' No. 2 line, and coach Bruce Boudreau says he just wants "Marcus to be Marcus and play the way that he showed us the last half of last year."



ANDREW HARNIK / THE WASHINGTON TIMES

New Washington goaltender Tomas Vokoun is still in the "learning stage," according to goaltending coach Dave Prior. For the Capitals to succeed, however, the 35-year-old will have to adjust quickly once the regular season begins.

"I just want Marcus to be Marcus and play the way that he showed us the last half of last year and that'll be more than enough than we need: using his great speed, using his passing and vision ability," the coach said. "If he does that, then that's more than enough for us."

4. Vokoun fitting in: At 35 years old, Tomas Vokoun has a set pattern for how he approaches the regular season. But this is a new town and team for him after four seasons with the Florida Panthers.

The adjustment period will go beyond the preseason, as goaltending coach Dave Prior said he was still in a "learning stage."

"I'm still studying his game so I can try to identify things that he may want to focus on," Prior said. "When you're trying to help a goaltender stay in his game, it's important you know what he does in situations. That's where it's going to take some time."

Vokoun figuring out communication with his defensemen also is something that will be a major point

early on.

5. Left-Right, Left-Right: When healthy, the Caps have the ideal blue line for Boudreau — three left-handed defensemen and three right-handed defensemen. From there, the combinations can vary, assuming the shutdown pairing of Karl Alzner (righty) and John Carlson (lefty) stick together.

With lefties Roman Hamrlik, Jeff Schultz and John Erskine thinking defense first and righties Mike Green and Dennis Wideman adding some offense, the mix seems good. Green and Wideman also can star at the point on the power play, something that could help a much-maligned area for the Caps.

"Hamrlik, too. Hamrlik's good on the point, too — and Carlson," Wideman pointed out. "When you have depth like that, then you can go hard for 50 seconds and then change. I think it'll make our power play that much better."

— Stephen Whyno

ON THE FARM

Cultivating a winning mindset

Hershey has claimed AHL title three of the past six seasons

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

At the NHL level, the Washington Capitals are seeking their first Stanley Cup. But their top minor league affiliate, the Hershey Bears, are used to the sweet taste of victory: They've won 11 Calder Cup championships in the American Hockey League, including three in the past six seasons.

Winning is the standard.

"I think there are certain teams that expect to win every year, whatever league you play in, and we're no different in Hershey," coach Mark French said. "We've had very good success since we've been with Washington, so as a coach you're thankful that you have the type of depth that we usually have there."

This year could be special, too. An offseason of retooling for the Capitals also was one of restocking for the Bears, who brought back Boyd Kane and Graham Mink and also will get several players on Caps contracts who are experienced AHL players, such as wing Jacob Micflikier and goalie Dany Sabourin. Add that to a mix that already includes goalie Braden Holtby, defensemen Dmitry Orlov and Sean Collins — and minor league scoring ace Keith Aucoin — and it's no surprise Hershey will be one of the favorites to win it all.

"I love it," said Mink, a right wing. "I've been in organizations or areas where there's not as much pressure from the city standpoint or from the organization standpoint. It matches well and meshes well with my personality. I want to win every game every night, and I'm very comfortable in Hershey, and I don't look at it as pressure at all."

Last year didn't mesh with Hershey's usual winning ways. The Bears' stabilizing force on the blue line, Collins, was on recall with the Caps, and Holtby struggled after being sent back down to the AHL (.893 save percentage in playoffs). The result was a first-round exit.

Holtby called it something of a wake-up call.

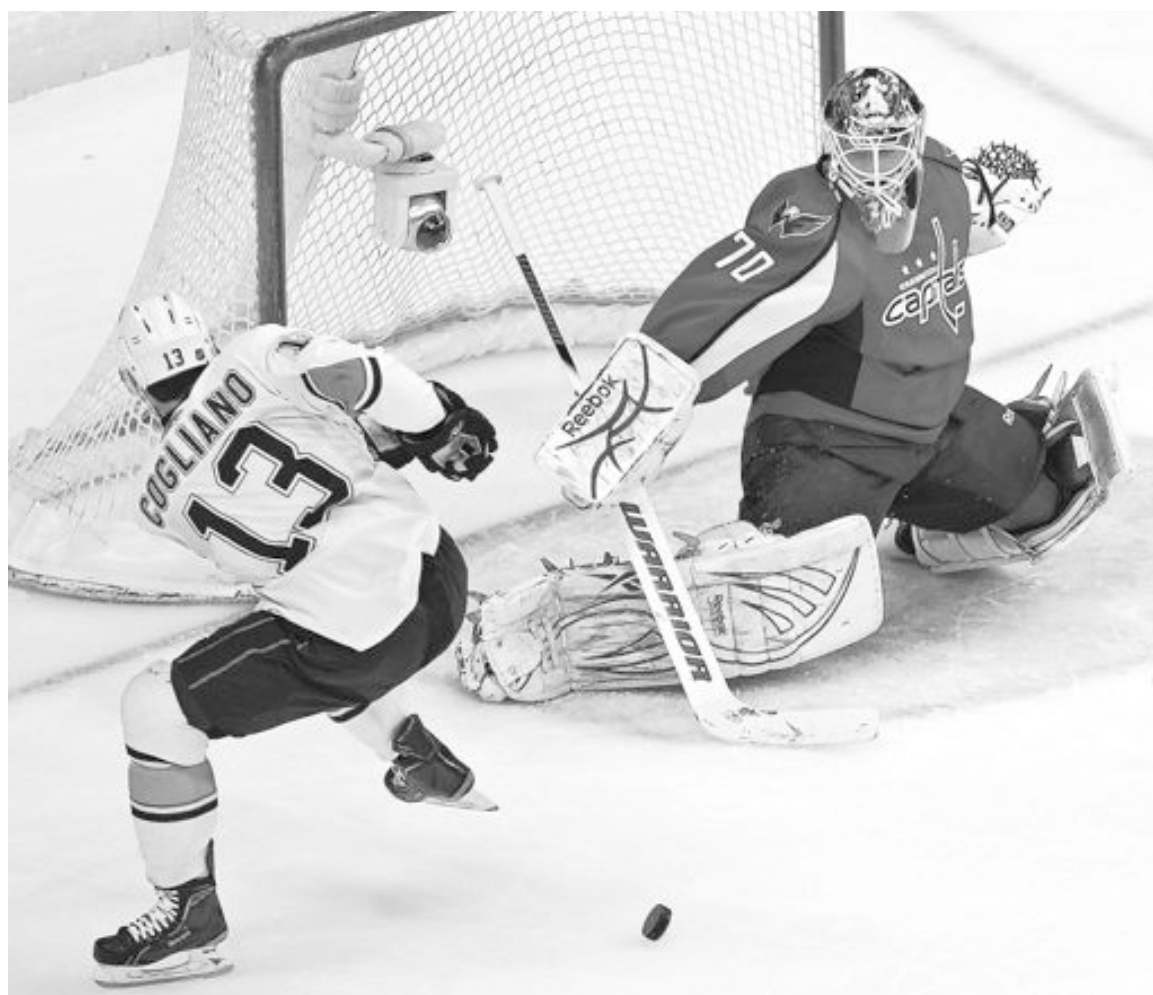
"We've kind of gotten over the fact that that's going to happen, that it's going to come easy," he said. "I think we have a bit of a chip on our shoulder from last year. I think there's a lot of excuses we can put into it, but the bottom line is that we didn't win."

Perhaps more than any other NHL club, the Capitals foster success at the minor league level, whether it's with the Bears or South Carolina Stingrays (ECHL).

French noted that player development is "first and foremost," but that doesn't just include blue chip prospects such as Holtby and Orlov, and it explains why Collins and Patrick McNeill likely be the top defensive pair and Sabourin could start more games than expected.

"We really try to focus on the process," French said. "We want to develop their life skills; we want to make sure that today we're getting better. We don't focus on the wins and losses — we focus on the process and make sure we're doing the right things."

But there's no hiding the fact that wins and losses are how the Bears are measured. And if things go according to plan, last year was a blip and 2012 will feature a 12th Calder Cup banner being raised at Giant Center.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Braden Holtby fashioned a 10-2-2 record with a 1.79 goals-against average in 14 appearances with the Capitals last season. At Hershey, he was 17-10-2 with a 2.29 GAA.



ANDREW HARNIK/THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Center Cody Eakin, just 20, was a force in the Western Hockey League last season, combining for 36 goals and 47 assists with Swift Current and Kootenay.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Defenseman Dmitry Orlov had two goals and seven assists in 19 games with Hershey in 2010-11. He'll be back with the Bears for more seasoning this year.

BOOK EXCERPT



"Transition Game: The Story of the 2010-11 Washington Capitals," by Washington Times web producer Ted Starkey, chronicles a unique season in the NHL. From being on the ice as the Hershey Bears captured their second consecutive Calder Cup to an HBO reality series and playing in the Winter Classic in Pittsburgh to the season's end in the second round of the playoffs, take a look inside a campaign that was filled with ups and downs.

"Transition Game" is now available in hardback through Lulu.com, and digitally on iTunes. Readers interested in an autographed copy of the book can also contact the author at CapitalsBook@aol.com or on Twitter at @TedStarkey.

The following chapter tells of the team returning to training camp in September, 2010, looking to atone for its stunning first-round upset loss to the Montreal Canadiens and trying to "stay angry."

At the end of a long summer in which the team had to digest the bitter pill of a first-round exit from the playoffs, the Capitals reconvened at Kettler Capitals Iceplex in Arlington on Sept. 18 to begin what they hoped would be a long season extending deep into spring.

The last time the team was together at the suburban Virginia complex had been four months before.

Washington's players met a day after their Game 7 loss to the Montreal Canadiens to meet with media and meet their coaches for evaluations and the tough task of packing up their gear and belongings before splitting up for the summer.

The team also had the difficult task of trying to explain to reporters just how its 121-point Presidents' Trophy season unraveled in just five short days, losing a 3-1 series edge against the eighth-seeded Habs with three straight losses.

The modern twin-rink facility on top of a shopping mall in Arlington that opened in 2006 is one of the best in the NHL and has a lot of bells and whistles, but it certainly lacked what the team was really looking for that April day: a reset button to erase the previous season's meltdown.

"They got to camp, and nobody wanted to be at camp, they wanted to be in the playoffs," the team's then-vice president of communications Nate Ewell recalled. "It was just all a long preamble that you had to get through."

Reporters got the vibe from the players that unlike previous campaigns in Washington that had seen some Hart Trophy-winning performances from their captain and three Southeast Division titles and a Presidents' Trophy, the regular season was just an 82-game grind to get to before they could try and focus on having some playoff success.

"I think the Caps were totally focused on what they could do to be better once the playoffs started," Ed Frankovic of WNST in Baltimore said of the team's mood as camp opened. "It was clear that the regular season didn't matter much to them."

"[General manager] George McPhee said that to me on Media Day. He said the only thing that mattered to him was a long playoff run. So if the man at the helm is saying that, then the players were likely thinking the same way."

But, of course, before you can actually qualify for the playoffs, there is the long marathon of camp, preseason and regular season games.

So the team returned to work wearing T-shirts that said "Stay Angry."

"That's the way everyone feels about the way things ended last season," McPhee said of the shirts. "For six-and-a-half months, we had a fabulous season, and in five days, we lost it."

"I think it's done," Alex Ovechkin said of the Montreal series. "It's a new season. No looking back. . . . It was a long summer. I missed hockey."

"I think the Caps were totally focused on what they could do to be better once the playoffs started," Ed Frankovic of WNST in Baltimore said of the team's mood as camp opened. "It was clear that the regular season didn't matter much to them."

ONE STEP AWAY

A few guys Capitals fans could be seeing this season:

1. Braden Holtby, G, 22 — Until the arrival of Tomas Vokoun, 2011-12 was supposed to be Holtby's chance in the NHL. But he's still young and now must prove he can win in the playoffs in the AHL.

2. Cody Eakin, C, 20 — Some seasoning in Hershey couldn't hurt Eakin, who already possesses a nice all-around game but needs to play against grown men and get stronger.

3. Mattias Sjogren, C, 23 — The big Swedish center can push people around after a few years playing professionally overseas, but his skating could use some improvement.

4. Dmitry Orlov, D, 20 — It's always encouraging when European players are eager to come over and play in North America. In his first full season with the Bears, he'll try to refine defensive part of game.

5. Brett Flemming, D, 20 — Kitchener Rangers coach Steve Spott at Caps development camp in July called him a true "hockey player" because Flemming has impressive grit and offensive skill.

Top prospects not in Hershey: C Evgeny Kuznetsov (KHL), LW Stan Galiev (QMJHL), G Philipp Grubauer (ECHL)

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S	M	T	W	T	F	S
OCTOBER						
			HOME AWAY			
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
						Hurricanes 7:00pm
9	Lightning 7:00pm	11				
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
		Panthers 7:00pm		Flyers 7:00pm		Red Wings 7:00pm
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
				Oilers 9:30pm		Canucks 10:00pm

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
NOVEMBER						
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
		Stars 7:00pm				Devils 7:00pm
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
		Predators 8:00pm		Jets 8:30pm		Toronto Maple Leafs 7:00pm
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
	Coyotes 7:00pm		Jets 7:00pm		New York Rangers 4:00pm	Sabres 7:00pm
27	28	29	30			
		Blues 7:00pm				

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
DECEMBER						
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Panthers 7:30pm		Senators 7:00pm		Toronto Maple Leafs 7:00pm	Senators 7:00pm
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
		Flyers 7:00pm		Jets 8:30pm		Avalanche 9:00pm
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
		Predators 7:00pm				
25	26	27	28	29	30	31
	Sabres 7:00pm		New York Rangers 7:30pm		Devils 7:00pm	Blue Jackets 7:00pm

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
JANUARY						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
		Flames 7:00pm				Sharks 10:30pm
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
	Kings 10:30pm		Penguins 7:30pm		Lightning 7:00pm	
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Hurricanes 5:00pm		New York Islanders 7:00pm	Columbus Blue Jackets 7:30pm		Hurricanes 7:00pm	
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Penguins 3:00pm		Boston Bruins 7:00pm				
29	30	31				
ALL-STAR GAME IN OTTAWA		Lightning 7:30pm				

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
FEBRUARY						
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Boston Bruins 12:30pm		Panthers 7:00pm	Panthers 8:00pm			Columbus Blue Jackets 2:00pm
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
	Sharks 7:30pm		Toronto Maple Leafs 7:00pm		Panthers 7:30pm	Lightning 7:00pm
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
	Hurricanes 7:30pm		Senators 7:00pm		Columbus Blue Jackets 7:00pm	Toronto Maple Leafs 7:00pm
26	27	28	29			
		New York Islanders 7:00pm				

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
MARCH						
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Flyers 7:00pm		Hurricanes 7:00pm		Lightning 7:00pm		Boston Bruins 1:00pm
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Toronto Maple Leafs 5:00pm		New York Islanders 7:00pm		Toronto Maple Leafs 8:30pm		
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Blackhawks 7:00pm	Red Wings 7:30pm		Flyers 7:00pm		Toronto Maple Leafs 7:00pm	
25	26	27	28	29	30	31
Wild 5:00pm		Sabres 7:00pm		Boston Bruins 7:00pm	Columbus Blue Jackets 7:00pm	

WASHINGTON CAPITALS 2011-12

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
APRIL						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Lightning 7:00pm			Panthers 7:00pm	New York Rangers 3:00pm	

ALL TIMES EASTERN

DEFENSE



ANDREW HARNIK/THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Defenseman Karl Alzner, 23, is praised by Capitals brass for his sound technique, and he wants to add offense to his repertoire. "I've been working on handling the puck more and making better plays."

A BLAST FROM THE PAST

Shutdown-specialist Alzner is drawing comparisons to Hall of Famer Langway

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

There are times in a game when Karl Alzner knows he made a mistake. It's likely no one else in the arena notices — not even on his own bench.

But it bothers him because even at 23, Alzner isn't a defenseman who beats himself.

"He's very responsible. He makes the right plays 95 percent of the time," Washington Capitals assistant coach Bob Woods said. "He's one of those reliable, steady guys that's not going to do anything flashy, but he's going to do things right and do them very well."

The Caps quickly have grown accustomed to Alzner as their top shutdown defenseman, a former fifth overall pick who has exceeded expectations. But as the kid from Burnaby, British Columbia, chugs along, a comparison to the greatest defenseman in franchise history beckons.

It will take some time and growth, but Alzner could be turning into this generation's Rod Langway — a defenseman whose dependability is a cornerstone of winning.

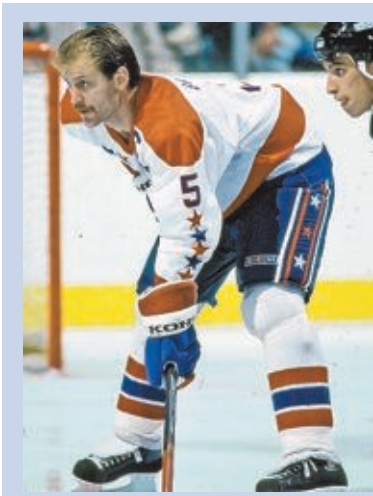
"Between those two guys, I see the simplicity to their game. You notice Karl, obviously, because the game's played at such a pace. And you notice Langway because at the time, his size and his mammoth reach," said Craig Laughlin, the Capitals' color analyst who played parts of seven seasons with Langway in Montreal and Washington. "But what I see in similarities is you never see them cough the puck up. Both Alzner and Langway make the good pass. When in doubt, they throw it off the glass. There's never big miscues by either of them."

Fans of yesteryear might consider the comparison sacrilege and will undoubtedly point to Langway's 202 career points in Washington and his intimidating physical style. Alzner may never become a feared offensive player or a player who's going to crush opponents into the glass, but

it's sometimes easy to forget his game still is developing.

While doing that, Alzner is very rarely — if ever — the goat. PA announcer Wes Johnson has likened the Alzner-John Carlson pairing to a superhero duo. Carlson provides the bulk of the offense and jumps up into the play, but Alzner is the safety valve that prevents plays from going awry. "That's just my nature is I'm a defensive guy. It doesn't matter if I'm playing with Derian Hatcher — just somebody who's safe themselves," Alzner said. "I'm always going to be that guy that's going to be back."

Langway's accomplishments, including two Norris trophies and six All-Star



ASSOCIATED PRESS

ALZNER VS. LANGWAY

Through three NHL seasons, the stats favor Langway — except for penalties, which showcases Alzner's maturity:

	Gms	Goals	Asst	PIM
Langway	202	21	67	331
Alzner	133	3	19	34

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

wanted it to go," Langway said. "It's all about angles. If you angle things the way you want it, my teammates knew what I was doing. If it got into a situation where I did something different, usually the puck was in the net."

That's Alzner's job, too — to keep the puck out of the Caps' net. But in not scoring much — just three goals and 19 assists in 133 NHL games — it's difficult for some to appreciate him as a top-of-the-line defenseman.

"People from the naked eye who don't know too much about hockey might think otherwise," Carlson said. "People that study it and know it, they know what type of player he is and how cru-

THE ALZNER TIMELINE

Sept. 24, 1988: Alzner born in Burnaby, British Columbia. By then Langway already had won the Norris Trophy twice, captured a Stanley Cup with the Canadiens and made the All-Star Game six times.

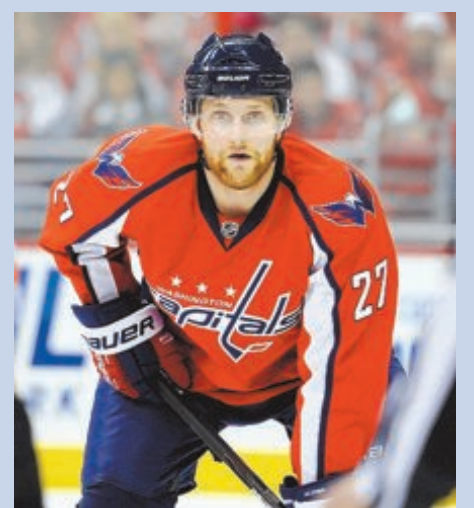
June 22, 2007: Capitals select Alzner with the fifth pick in the 2007 draft after three full seasons with the Calgary Hitmen of the Western Hockey League.

Nov. 26, 2008: Alzner makes NHL debut against the Atlanta Thrashers at Verizon Center, playing 21:06.

Dec. 6, 2008: Alzner scores first career NHL goal vs. Toronto. He also assisted on the game-winner.

June 13, 2009: Alzner, Hershey Bears beat the Manitoba Moose in Game 6 to win the Calder Cup. A year later, Alzner and the Bears beat the Texas Stars to make it back-to-back championships.

April 28, 2010: Alzner makes his NHL playoff debut in Game 7 against Montreal, which the Caps lost to complete their first-round exit.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Capitals defenseman Karl Alzner looks on during Game 5 of a first-round playoff series against the Rangers on April 23.

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

"You notice Karl, obviously, because the game's played at such a pace. And you notice Langway because at the time, his size and his mammoth reach. But what I see in similarities is you never see them cough the puck up. Both Alzner and Langway make the good pass. When in doubt, they throw it off the glass. There's never big miscues by either of them."

— Craig Laughlin, Capitals color analyst

cial he is to our game."

In some ways, Alzner is ahead of Langway. While Langway needed a few years to tone down the penalties (he had 120 PIM in 1980-81 with the Canadiens), Alzner has just 34 penalty minutes ... in his career.

"That shows me about Alzner that he is so positionally sound," Laughlin said. "You take penalties as a defenseman when you are out of position — you don't move your feet or you're not in the right lane or you're not blocking a shot or there's some miscue."

That's never been Alzner, dating to his days in junior with the Calgary Hitmen of the Western Hockey League. All the hype back then about the dependable kid who was a big-time NHL prospect, teammate Jeff Schultz said, has been justified.

As for the comparison to Langway, Alzner jokingly asked if he would have to grow a mustache to mimic the Caps legend but also understands the grand compliment that it is.

"I'd love to be able to live up to those expectations," he said, "and I'm without a doubt going to try."

To get even closer, Alzner talked up adding

more offense to his repertoire. It wouldn't be a totally new trick, as he managed 47 points during one junior season. He's also been telling Carlson to be ready to get back while he jumps up into the play more often.

"That's just something that I want to try a little bit more. I've been working on handling the puck more and making better plays and just making better reads up ice," Alzner said. "You don't have to be the most skilled guy, but if you can read the play well then you're going to get those chances."

Adding offense, and maybe some more bite, would go a long way toward not only getting his No. 27 in the Verizon Center rafters alongside Langway's No. 5 but delivering a Stanley Cup banner, too. It's hard for a team to make a deep playoff run without a guy like Alzner, who is counted on not to make critical mistakes.

And as hard as it may be to quantify greatness for defensive defensemen such as Alzner, Langway pointed out when it's easy.

"When you win championships," he said. "You understand how good he is when you win key games and you're a big part of it."

FORWARDS

A NEW SHOW OF FORCE

Caps add grit in offseason to help survive grind of the postseason

By Nick EILERSON

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

When Washington Capitals general manager George McPhee began making roster changes this past summer, he didn't target skaters who could score goals or stop shots.

He didn't go after a flashy forward to complement Alex Ovechkin's prodigious skill set, nor did he look to pick up young talent in the draft.

McPhee wanted only one thing: experienced players who knew how to win in that baleful month of April, when the Caps always seem to melt down.

McPhee's playoff mentality was most clearly manifested in the offseason signings of veteran wingers Troy Brouwer and Joel Ward, both of whom have tasted success in games that count the most.

ROD LAMKEY JR.
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Instead of standing pat, GM George McPhee sought veteran forwards who have enjoyed playoff success.

While they might lack the kind of upside that would turn heads on a stat sheet, each player brings a sense of grit and determination that could make the Caps tougher when the playoffs come around.

"They're character guys," Caps forward Matt Hendricks said. "Anytime you look at Brouwer with a Stanley Cup, he brings a lot of skill and grit to our lineup but also has kind of a veteran presence. He's been there, he's been to the Holy Grail, he's got it. Joel Ward did a great job in the playoffs, kind of an older gentleman as well, and they can just help spark our room."

In trading their first round draft pick (26th overall) to Chicago for Brouwer, the Caps made clear their desire to build their 2011-12 team around proven winners rather than promising youth.

The 26-year-old right wing won a Stanley Cup with the Blackhawks in 2010, chipping in four goals and four assists in the playoffs. Brouwer racked up 17 goals and 19 assists last season, but it is not his goal-scoring attributes that define him.

His relentless tenacity and 6-foot-3, 215-pound frame give the Caps a formidable presence on the offensive end, an area some critics deemed too soft during last season's playoff push. After ranking fifth in the NHL with 262 hits last season, Brouwer should add a bruising option to a group looking to toughen up on its forecheck.

That blend of toughness and Stanley Cup experience could serve as a guiding light for a club that has consistently come up short during the postseason. It also could light a fire under players such as left wing Alexander Semin, who was criticized by ex-teammates for not caring.

"I've got some experience in the league and in the playoffs, and that's part of the reason they brought me in," Brouwer said. "I'm not trying to be the captain or assistant captain or anything. We already have guys for that. Any team will tell you that everyone needs to be a leader in their own way. I like to lead by my example. Hard work's contagious, and hopefully guys will follow after that."

Brouwer's arrival means 39-year-old Mike Knuble's starting spot at right wing is no longer a given, even though he's expected to begin the season there. Washington coach Bruce Boudreau has expressed interest in an Ovechkin-Brouwer combination up top, saying Brouwer's rugged style and ability to clean up rebounds around the goal could complement Ovechkin's finesse approach nicely.

Depth at right wing has been further strengthened by the addition of Ward, who was signed in free agency from Nashville one week after Brouwer's arrival.

With just 10 goals and 19 assists during the 2010-11 regular season, it might seem odd that 20 teams clamored for his services during the offseason.



ANDREW HARNIK/THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Offseason acquisitions Joel Ward (left) and Troy Brouwer will give the Capitals a physical dimension that some critics said was lacking in the playoffs last season. Brouwer won the Stanley Cup with Chicago in 2010, and Ward was a scoring surprise with Nashville in last year's postseason.

It was his impressive production during the postseason, however, that made him such an attractive acquisition, particularly to the Caps.

The 30-year-old right wing nearly matched his 80-game regular season numbers in the playoffs, leading the Predators with seven goals and six assists during that 12-game stretch. His dynamic performance helped Nashville capture its first playoff series victory.

Coming to a hungry franchise that will settle for nothing less than a Stanley Cup, Ward is confident he can help keep his teammates loose when the pressure mounts toward season's end.

"The expectations are pretty high," Ward said. "There's definitely a sense of urgency, but you can't put too much pressure on yourself. You definitely can't execute when you do that. You just have to relax and just trust in one another and try to bond well as a team."

Like Brouwer, the 6-foot-1, 218-pound Ward offers a gritty, physical presence that can bang opponents against the boards and force turnovers on the offensive end.

His checking ability helps fill the voids left by Matt Bradley and Boyd Gordon, who combined for just eight goals and 12 assists last season.

Ward's versatility and willingness to do whatever is asked of him means he could fit into just about any of the team's four lines. He knows his job isn't to lead the squad in goal scoring, meaning he can focus on helping the Caps win in other ways.

"I think I know my role. It's no secret I'm not going to go out there and score 50 goals," Ward said. "For myself, it's just to keep pucks out and make things happen for my linemen, and the main thing is just winning hockey games. If we can do that and jell and grow as a team, I think things will work out."

EYES ON PLAYOFFS

The Caps' offseason involved moves all pointing toward April, May and June. Here are some notable playoff numbers for new additions and old favorites:

	Gms	Gls	Asts	+/-
Troy Brouwer (2010 Blackhawks)	19	4	4	-1
Joel Ward (2011 Predators)	12	7	6	+4
Alex Ovechkin (2009 Capitals)	14	11	10	+10
Nicklas Backstrom (2010 Capitals)	7	5	4	+7

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

"They're character guys. Anytime you look at [Troy] Brouwer with a Stanley Cup, he brings a lot of skill and grit to our lineup but also has kind of a veteran presence. He's been there, he's been to the Holy Grail, he's got it. Joel Ward did a great job in the playoffs, kind of an older gentleman as well, and they can just help spark our room."

— Matt Hendricks

WHERE'S THE POWER?

Many of the same players have been on the Capitals' power play for a few years, and yet results declined last season. Here's a look at the decrease in production:

Season	PPG	Pct.	Rank
2008-09	85	25.2	2nd
2009-10	57	25.2	1st
2010-11	46	17.5	16th

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

