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Khabibulin to undergo back surgery Thursday for herniated disc

BY JIM MATHESON, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM JANUARY 14, 2010 COMMENTS (42)

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Edmonton Oilers' Nikolai Khabibulin of Russia makes a save against the Columbus Blue Jackets during the second period of an NHL hockey game in Columbus, Ohio, November 16, 2009.

Photograph by: Jay LaPrete, Reuters

EDMONTON — Daryl Katz's Rexall Family of Pharmacies owns the Edmonton Oilers, but don't count on any Band-Aids for the ailing goaltending situation, with their No. 1 guy Nikolai Khabibulin needing back surgery.

Khabibulin, as has been rumoured for weeks, will have a herniated disc repaired today in Los Angeles by famed back surgeon Dr. Robert Watkins, which will put him out at least 12 weeks. That effectively means the rest of the season, but there are no plans to rush out and bring in a more tested NHL goalie to help the two kids, Jeff Deslauriers and Devan Dubnyk, who have 39 career games between them.

Those rumours about the Oilers racing after Slovak Olympic teamer

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Jaroslav Halak in Montreal are all hot air for now, and besides, that would give them four netminders. As the Oilers know, three's a crowd. If they got the 24-year-old Halak, who is chafing at sharing duties with Carey Price in Montreal, the price would be high. And what would they do with Khabibulin, who turned 37 Wednesday? He has three years left on his \$15-million contract.

A more expedient move would be to rush out and get Martin Biron from the New York Islanders because he's No. 3 there behind ex-Oiler Dwayne Roloson and Rick DiPietro, who is coming back from major knee problems, and Biron's one-year contract only has a few months to run. But Oilers general manager Steve Tambellini plans on going with the kids, for the present and the future.

The Oilers are in 29th place, but they could have the No. 1 draft pick in June, which would give them a shot at winger Taylor Hall or centre Tyler Seguin. If they could obtain more experienced goaltending it would help for now, maybe, because Deslauriers is like most kids finding their way; alternately good and shaky. He has a 3.07 goals-against average and an .899 save percentage, and Dubnyk has only played 204 NHL minutes. But GMs look at tomorrow as much as today, so it will be the Double Ds in net.

"These are our options for now, and I'm fine with that," said Tambellini. "There was so much push last season for J.D. (Deslauriers) to get some playing time (with Roloson eating up so many games), and now he is. He's had some really good games and others, I'm sure, he would like back. Devan was maybe the best goalie in the American League last season, playing over 60 games. Devan deserves a chance here, too.

Dubnyk would have to get into more of a rotation here with Deslauriers to give the organization a more accurate barometer of his long-term potential. Starting next season, he has to clear waivers to return to the American Hockey League.

With Deslauriers giving up 13 goals in his last seven periods, he's stumbled under the heavy weight of a team that's won only once in its last 13 games -- against the Toronto Maple Leafs, the 28th-place NHL club. He knows he has to be better, but tonight he might be on the bench.

Dubnyk, who was strong in relief against the Nashville Predators on Tuesday, giving up one goal on 14 shots, could get a hard exam tonight against Sidney Crosby and the Pittsburgh Penguins, but it beats being in Springfield.

"We have two young men, both considered top prospects," said coach Pat Quinn. "We've said all along this is our team and we'll improve from within.

"They are part of our future growth and, hopefully, we can help them a little more. Deslauriers won the chance to be the guy behind Khabibulin at training camp and we wanted Dubnyk playing games so we sent him to the American League. But he's here now and we can't let him sit. He'll see some action."

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"It's a big opportunity to play as many games as I've played now (25) and learn as I am," said Deslauriers, who got into 10 games last season with Roloson playing 63.

"It has been a tough stretch lately, but it might be a good thing in the future to have learned the hard way. The Nashville game was a hard one, obviously (four goals in 14 shots)," said Oilers centre Shawn Horcoff.

"This is a great opportunity (for both young goalies). Players wait their whole lives to play games in the NHL. If you make the most of it, you can set yourself up nicely."

As for Khabibulin, his surgery is no surprise. He hadn't even been on the ice in almost two months. His last action was a shootout loss in Columbus on Nov. 16.

Khabibulin tried some injections to see if his back discomfort would ease, but it didn't.

If he had the surgery a month ago, he might have got back before the season ended, but an operating theatre is always a last option. Rest and other remedies are almost always the first course of treatment.

Khabibulin's back problems didn't result from a collision or anything. It sounds more like wear and tear on a guy who's played 696 NHL games.

"Clearly, he wasn't able to even come to the rink," said Quinn. "We've been preparing like he's not here. In the past the shots would take the pain away, but it didn't happen this time.

"We had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but while it wasn't getting any worse, it wasn't getting any better," said Tambellini, who felt the Oilers needed an experienced goalie when free agency opened on July 1.

Tambellini jumped at the 37-year-old Khabibulin after deciding the Oilers wouldn't give their incumbent netminder Roloson a two-year contract.

In hindsight, it's backfired on the Oilers, for now, because the 40-year-old Roloson (18-7-7, 2.70 goals-against average, .913 save percentage), has been a rock for the Islanders.

It would have been much cheaper (two years at about \$5 million total) for the Oilers to keep Roloson, but Khabibulin was very good for 18 games until his back flared up.

"Better he gets it done now, than waiting until the post-season and struggling to be ready for training camp," said Tambellini, who knew Khabibulin had back issues in Chicago, too, but nothing this serious.

"He had a disc issue a couple of years ago which was minor, but after this procedure, the back will be strong."

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YOUR COMMENTS

Miguel

January 14, 2010 - 6:10 PM

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 @ the other John; Eberle, Svensson, Hall, Omark; that's a nice start. JDD is turning into a solid NHL goalie. Smid is becoming a gritty shut-down defenceman. I say let this team ride! They sink or swim together this year. And as the inflated contracts expire over the next few years replace them with younger guys at the right salary.



BC Vernon Nose

January 14, 2010 - 2:24 PM

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 Ya Afternoon Steve but unfortunately we don't have enough hospital beds for all the spleens the whole team requires so in the meantime let'm keep drink'n and lets focuss on the #1 draft!



WONGER

January 14, 2010 - 11:42 AM

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 GODARD is in town tonight and somebody's gonna getta BEATING - I hope it's not Stortini- he is too good of a player. Hey Storts- watch out for the sneaky Godard cowardly cross checks to the kidney and spleen area!!!! GODARD is a great fighter, great team guy but sneaky dirty-I don't respect the sneaky dirty part. Too bad we didn't have BIG JOHN SCOTT OR BOOGIE in our line-up!!!!!! We should have a top-notch enforcer and Zack Stortini should be allowed to be a solid third line player- he deserves it and has worked very hard for it!!!!



A.G.

January 14, 2010 - 11:33 AM

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 Horcoff is the man , he has borderline talent no work ethic and has a no hitting clause in his agreement but best of all he has job security NO BODY WANT'S HIM. ***** What does Canada Post and the Oilers have in common? , they both wear uniforms and don't deliver *****



Afternoon Steve

January 14, 2010 - 10:35 AM

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 Maybe they should all get new spines.



SCOTT

January 14, 2010 - 9:45 AM

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 Time to take the team apart - try to secure the 1st pick and another in the top 5 this year - try give up players to carolina hurricanes. Rebuild with taylor hall and a guy like tyler seguin.



The other John

January 14, 2010 - 9:18 AM

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 Whatever "John" is smoking must be pretty good. I don't see any Gretzkys, Messiers, Coffeys or Fuhrs in this pathetic group. A Chimpanzee could have looked at that early 80's team and saw the potential. It'll take a lot of bananas for a vision like that with this team John.



gg

January 14, 2010 - 9:13 AM



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 we need defence that can keep the puck in the zone. We are always chasing the puck back to our end.


John

January 14, 2010 - 7:56 AM


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 I like the direction Tambellini is going. Quick fix's are for Toronto. In the early 80's the Oilers suffered through a couple of years of growing pains and let the kids (Messier, Coffey, Gretzky, Fuhr and group) learn their trade and grow together and look what happened. And Trust me when I say back then we didn't think those kids were very good either when they first came into the league. So I think we all just take a Valium and watch the process and give the kids our support. It was fun to watch back then with its ups and downs and it can be fun again as long as they continue to work hard to get a little better each game. To the entitlement generation out there that wants it all right now I suggest you switch your allegiances to Toronto. Half the fun in the 80's was watching the process.


Dave Edmonton

January 14, 2010 - 5:25 AM



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 Another good multi million dollar signing. Should have kept Rolly. Keep signing other injury prone players.


Blahblahblah

January 14, 2010 - 2:27 AM



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 Actually Shag we did fire our goalie coach to start the season and hired a new one but that's irrelevant. As an Oiler fan I hate to say it but Luongo is one of the top goalies in the league and battling Martin Brodeur in goal for the Olympics. JDD was just supposed to be the backup and was a question mark at that. In some ways he's exceeded expectations and in some ways he's lived down to expectations but this was supposed to be the Nikolai Khabibulin show and he's going to surgery. Apparently we might just suck enough to grab a nice pick...


Jesse James

January 13, 2010 - 10:41 PM



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 Tambi is following the President K Lowe in his duties. This way it makes Tambi look like the fool while K Lowe makes the decisions. No one can work under such a dictatorship and expect to build a team. K Lowe probably has Tambi doing the Springfield business, as maybe K Lowe can't trust him yet to make a decision. Another thing is that Tambi will not be able to trade anyone who is a friend of Lowe's or else he will be up the creek. So guess who will stay here protected by Santa himself, Horcoff one of the biggest problems on this team.


joey

January 13, 2010 - 7:39 PM



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 Wow. Is he every lucky to get treatment so soon. I have 4 herniated discs and a torn shoulder from a car accident a couple of years ago and still wait for treatment. Guess I should have got my injuries in a sport instead.


sheldon

January 13, 2010 - 7:30 PM

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 nice job Oilers we never see a cup


Defensive woes

January 13, 2010 - 5:40 PM

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Shag...no...the goalies are not really at fault here...the Defence became worse when they let go of Huddy. The defensive core listened to Huddy...firing the goalie coach does not help. Goals need to be put in and the D and is supposed to make the first break out past...that's part of the Oilers long list of issues, not the goalie coach.

[all »](#)

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