Oshie Up for a Pay Raise This Summer

Written by Jeff Ponder Thursday, 08 March 2012 05:33

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When Blues GM Doug Armstrong signed T.J. Oshie to a one-year contract extension in late June, it was meant to be a *show-us-what-you-can-do* contract.

65 regular season games later, Oshie has proved his worth to the St. Louis Blues hockey club.

The start of the 2011-12 season did not exactly showcase Oshie's skills. He scored just one goal in 11 games in the month of October and even found himself under scrutiny by his head coach. Davis Payne made the decision to bench Oshie for the entire second period of the Blues' 4-2 win over the Philadelphia Flyers on October 22. Payne gave no reason to the press about his decision but it came just after a turnover by Oshie late in the first period.

This was the second time in seven months that Oshie received the spotlight in a negative manner. The season before, Oshie missed a mandatory team practice on March 28 and received a two-game suspension from the team. Payne called Oshie's truancy an "unexcused absence" and he was not allowed to practice or travel with the team during the suspension.

"There's a responsibility for the players and [Oshie] didn't meet that responsibility," Armstrong said at the time. "He'll pay the consequences as we move forward."

Isn't it amazing how a year's time can change everything?

Oshie has found the meaning of responsibility in his game. He has been as responsible in the offensive zone as he has been on his own side of the center red line.

The Mount Vernon, Washington native currently leads the Blues with 47 points (17G-30A), including 3 game-winning goals. He is tied for 4th amongst Blues forwards with a plus-14 rating

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and is also tied for 2 time-on-ice for forwards (19:30 per game).

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Oshie needs just one more goal and one more point to tie his career-best set in the 2009-10 season.

It is looking like he will be doing that sooner rather than later as he was the Blues' top point-scorer during their recent six-game road trip, amassing one goal and six assists. The lone goal was the game-winning goal against the San Jose Sharks on Saturday.

Oshie followed up his play on the road with a strong effort in Tuesday's 5-1 rout of the Chicago Blackhawks at Scottrade Center. He recorded the first goal of the game and was a force on the penalty-kill late in the game.

"He's a perfect example of less is more," current Head Coach Ken Hitchcock said after Tuesday's game. "He's played a simpler game, a more straight line game and it's made him way more effective. He's cut down on the East-West stuff offensively and it's made him a way more effective player. He's got one of the best work-ethics and he's one of the best forecheckers. He's got a great stick. When he plays the type of game that he's playing right now, which is in straight lines with a lot of speed and determination, he's a really good player."

Currently, Oshie's price tag is \$2.35 million for the season. His contract will expire on July 1 and he will become a restricted free-agent. With the problems Oshie faced last season (including missing 31 games with a broken ankle), he was able to be signed to a much smaller contract than what he was likely seeking. The 25-year old will have much more to bring to the bargaining table this time around.

It is hard to say what the market-value would be for someone of Oshie's caliber. He has already had numerous ups-and-downs in his career, but his focus and work ethic seems to be at the highest level that Blues management has seen to this point. That can only drive his price up.

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There may be a similar situation going on this summer with another Western Conference team.

Sam Gagner, Edmonton Oilers center who can play on either of the top two lines, may be considered as important to the Oilers' future as Oshie is to the Blues' future. Gagner is 22 years old and, like Oshie, is in his fourth NHL season. He has posted 42 points this season (15G-27A), but his career-high came in his rookie year when he notched 49 points (13G-36A). Gagner is also up for restricted free-agency as he earned \$2.275 million this season. If the Oilers reach a deal with Gagner before the Blues can with Oshie, it would be wise for Oshie and his agent, Matt Oates, to use Gagner's contract as a starting point in negotiations.

Of course, this works both ways.

I would expect both the Blues and Oilers management teams to watch how each situation unfolds. Whoever signs their forward first may be dictating the contract for the other team and their restricted free-agent.

Oshie will be getting a raise but he has to keep up his torrid pace to prove that he deserves a big contract. At the rate he is going, he will make the Blues forget about his issues in the past and focus on what he has accomplished this season.

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