

Penguins swept up by post-Stanley Cup changes

By ALAN ROBINSON
AP SPORTS WRITER

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Sidney Crosby understood the Pittsburgh Penguins wouldn't begin this season with the same team that finished two victories away from winning the Stanley Cup only 17 weeks ago.

Free agency made that an inevitability. So did the salary cap, and the need by some players to go elsewhere to seek out the roles they felt best suited them. Change is inevitable in sports, and the Pittsburgh Penguins were not spared the inevitability of change.

But this many changes, brought on not only by personnel movement but by injury?

When the Penguins begin the new season Saturday in Stockholm against the Ottawa Senators, four months to the day since they lost Game 6 of the Stanley Cup finals to Detroit, they will be enveloped by change.

Changes for the better? There may be some of those as younger defensemen Kris Letang and Alex Goligoski begin playing bigger, more prominent roles. Changes for the worse? The Penguins may be worrying there are far more of those than anticipated.

"It's going to be motivating for

sure, but it's done," Crosby said of trying to avenge last season's finals defeat. "There's not a lot of thought about it any more. It's a new season and a clean slate."

So clean is the Penguins' slate that Crosby is expected to begin the new season with Miroslav Satan and Ruslan Fedotenko as linemates. Neither of the longtime NHL forwards was with the team last season.

Marian Hossa, the All-Star forward who finally gave Crosby a linemate talented enough to take full advantage of his playmaking skill? He turned down nearly \$50 million over seven seasons from the Penguins to play with Detroit for slightly more than \$7 million in one season.

Just like that, Hossa turned his back on the team and the star with which he thrived, effectively telling the Penguins he had a better chance to win the Stanley Cup with the Red Wings.

"It's over and done with," Crosby said. "We're going to move on."

Sergei Gonchar and Ryan Whitney won't move on, at least not immediately. The Penguins' top two defensemen are injured and out — Gonchar with a dislocated shoulder until March, Whitney following foot surgery until at least January. Gonchar is

to have surgery Thursday.

Coupled with the departures of enforcer Georges Laraque, agitator Jarkko Ruutu, tough-guy forward Gary Roberts and reliable scorer Ryan Malone, those are numerous changes for the Penguins to absorb in such short time.

What hasn't changed: Crosby, now 21, is arguably the NHL's best player and Evgeni Malkin, now 22, is close behind. Crosby probably would have won a second consecutive scoring title last season if he hadn't missed nearly 40 percent of it with a high ankle sprain. In his absence, Malkin nearly did win that title with 47 goals and 106 points, finishing second to Washington's Alex Ovechkin.

"The important thing for us is we do have a lot of guys who went through that (playoff) stretch and who have played together for a while, so I think the new guys coming in are going to fit in nicely," Crosby said.

Jordan Staal, whose offensive production went down after returning to his natural position of center — he went from 29 goals as a rookie in 2006-07 to 12 in 2007-08 — is expected to go back to the wing on Malkin's line. Petr Sykora may be the other wing on that No. 2 line, one

led by last season's NHL No. 2 scorer.

Matt Cooke, who may be teamed with Pascal Dupuis on the No. 3 line centered by Max Talbot, will be the agitator-type forward. The new enforcer is Eric Godard, who played last season with Calgary.

"We brought in Cooke and Godard, and those guys are tough," Crosby said. "We're a skilled team for the most part, but we know that in order to win you have to have some of that grit."

Still, much of the toughness is gone from a team that — surprise — allowed the third-fewest goals in the Eastern Conference but is missing Ruutu, Laraque and Roberts. To compensate, the Penguins will need a big contribution from Brooks Orpik, who signed a \$22.5 million, six-year contract during the offseason, and — here's another surprise — Darryl Sydor.

Sydor was banished to the bench for all but four games during the playoff run, but becomes a valuable piece again with Whitney and Gonchar out.

Marc-Andre Fleury, arguably the best goalie in the playoffs, is back with Dany Sabourin behind him. Sabourin was the No. 3 goalie most of last season. Ty Conklin did not return.

"We've still got a great core,"

Crosby said.

There's also this challenge for a team that went from being last in the Eastern Conference to Stanley Cup finalist in two years. Since the NHL expanded in 1967, only one team — Edmonton in 1984 — won the Stanley Cup the season after losing in the finals.

One reason is the extra wear and tear of a two-month playoff run that ends in disappointment rather than a victory parade can take a toll, especially when the following season rolls around so soon.

Fedotenko and Satan, for example, haven't played a game that counted in six months; many of their new teammates have gone through the last 12-plus months with only two full months, July and August, that contained no hockey.

"But it's a young team, and last year they made it to the finals, and I think they still have an upside," Satan said.

For the Penguins, who won 94 games the last two seasons after winning only 100 the previous four seasons, that's what has changed the least: They still have Crosby and Malkin.

"There are not too many players like that," Satan said. "I've never had a chance to play with centers of that quality."

Emotions connect old OJ acquittal, new conviction

By KEN RITTER
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LAS VEGAS (AP) — Jurors had been told to ignore what they knew about O.J. Simpson's past, but for many observers, the line connecting the former NFL star's murder acquittal last decade and his new conviction for robbing memorabilia peddlers couldn't have been clearer.

The attorney for the family of Ronald Goldman — who was killed along with Simpson's ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson in Los Angeles in 1994 — said he thought his hounding of Simpson for years to collect a \$33.5 million wrongful death judgment pushed him to a desperate gambit to recover personal items he had lost.

"We drove him into that room to grab the sports memorabilia before we could seize the stuff," said David Cook, who represents

Goldman's father, Fred. "Going to jail for beating Fred Goldman out of footballs and family mementos. Is this closure for Fred Goldman? No. Is this closure for America? Yes."

Simpson lawyer Yale Galanter said Saturday, the day after Simpson and Clarence "C.J." Stewart were convicted of all 12 charges against them in the hotel room confrontation, that the Las Vegas jury was "on an agenda" to make up for Simpson's murder acquittal. The two face up to life in prison.

"This was just payback," Galanter said.

"A lynching from the first second to the end," agreed Thomas Scotto, a close Simpson friend who testified and was overcome by emotion in the courtroom after the verdicts were read. "It's a total injustice."

Scotto later told reporters he would remain in Las Vegas to

seek out witnesses and show they were forced into their testimony.

"I need these witnesses to come forward and start telling the truth," he said.

The case against Simpson was won the moment the jury was chosen, according to the consultant who helped prosecutors pick the panel.

"That was the best possible jury prosecutors could ever have," said Howard Varinsky, who drafted a questionnaire for the prosecution that formed the basis of a survey used to cull 12 jurors and six alternates from a pool of 500 prospects.

"I was surprised that we got all the counts," he said Saturday. "But it wasn't an accident that the jury wound up looking like that."

Whatever the jury was thinking, Fred Goldman praised the verdict.

"We're absolutely thrilled to see the potential that he could serve the rest of his life in jail where the scumbag belongs," he told CNN.

Brown Simpson's relatives said in a statement that they want to be left alone as they "work through many mixed emotions." They said they are primarily concerned about the children from the marriage, Sydney and Justin.

The jury that convicted Simpson consisted of three men and nine women, including one woman who identified herself as Hispanic, a court spokesman said. The jury contained no blacks, the race of both defendants.

Jurors declined interviews and avoided the media after the verdicts were read.

According to jury questionnaires released Saturday, five of the 12 jurors wrote that they disagreed with the 1995 verdict that cleared

Simpson of murder. Most others claimed to be uncertain or did not answer the question.

Redacted versions of the questionnaires were made public by Clark County District Judge Jackie Glass after The Associated Press and Stephens Media LLC, owner of the Las Vegas Review-Journal, petitioned for their release.

Prosecutors have declined to comment throughout the trial.

Lawyers and jury analysts recalled that prosecutors succeeded in removing two black jurors from the final panel.

Varinsky insisted that Simpson and Stewart got fair trials, saying jurors answered several questions attesting to their ability to set aside their feelings about the Los Angeles case.

But he acknowledged the questions also reminded jurors about that case.