

Six teams will start in Europe in Oct.

By the Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NHL is sending more teams across the pond.

The league and its players' association announced Tuesday that six clubs will open the 2010-11 season in Europe, the fourth straight year the NHL will begin play overseas.

The Boston Bruins, Carolina Hurricanes, Columbus Blue Jackets, Minnesota Wild, Phoenix Coyotes and San Jose Sharks will combine to play a total of six games in Europe at the start of next season.

The Hurricanes and Wild will meet in a pair of games in Helsinki, Finland, on Oct. 7-8; Columbus plays San Jose in Stockholm, Sweden, on Oct. 8-9; and the Bruins and Coyotes face off in Prague, Czech Republic, on Oct. 9-10.

"We are extremely pleased that six teams — more than ever — will open their season in Europe," NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said in a statement. "With these games, nearly half of our clubs will have participated [in overseas openers], a testament to how excited our teams are to be playing before our outstanding fans in Europe."

The NHL is very popular in Finland, Sweden and the Czech Republic. The league's Web site gets more traffic from those countries than almost anywhere else outside North America.

And the clubs involved next season feature several players from the nations they will visit.

For example, the Blue Jackets' current roster includes four players from Sweden: forwards Fredrik Modin, Samuel Pahlsson and Kristian Huselius and defenseman Anton Stralman.

San Jose has Swedish defenseman Douglas Murray and recently acquired Niclas Wallin.

Modin, Pahlsson and Murray will repre-

sent the defending Olympic champions at the upcoming Vancouver Games.

"Having the chance to play these games is going to be special, especially for me and the other Swedish players," Pahlsson said. "It is really going to be great for fans in Sweden to be able to watch the NHL in person."

"They love hockey and games there are always pretty festive with a lot of singing and cheers.

"It is kind of like soccer a little bit. I'm looking forward to it and it should be a lot of fun."

Minnesota and Carolina each have three Finns on the roster.

The Wild feature captain Mikko Koivu, goalie Niklas Backstrom and right wing Antti Miettinen.

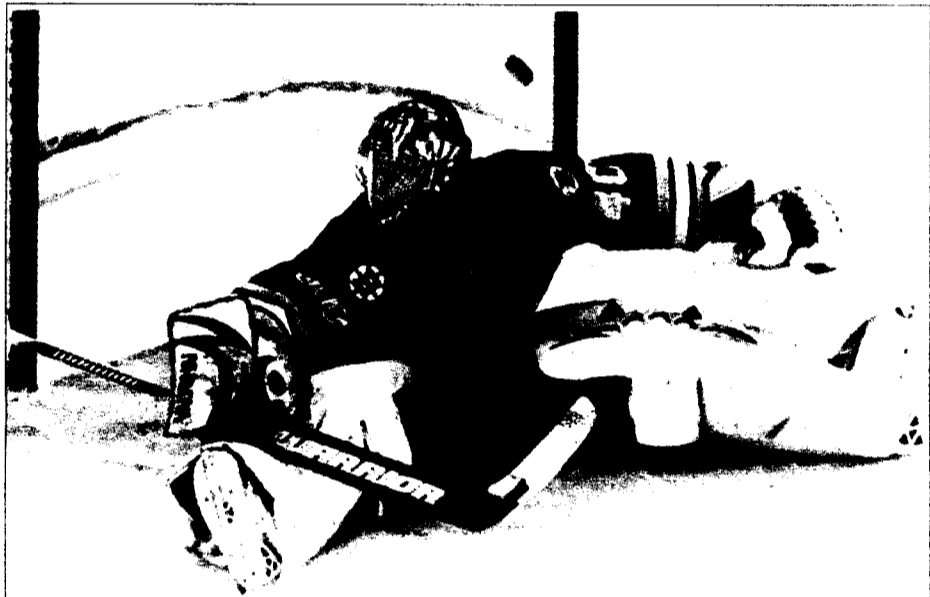
The Hurricanes have forwards Jussi Jokinen and Tuomo Ruutu, and defenseman Joni Pitkanen. Plus, Hurricanes owner Peter Karmanos Jr. is the CEO of Compuware Corp., the business software and services provider that is sponsoring the Compuware NHL Premiere in Europe.

"It's just pretty neat," Karmanos said, before joking about Carolina's poor start this season.

"Some of the teams last year were complaining about the slow start because they started in Europe, and I figured, 'We couldn't do much worse than we did this year.' So, no, I'm not going to hold any passports."

Boston's roster includes Czech players David Krejci and Vladimir Sobotka, while Phoenix's roster boasts Zbynek Michalek and Czech countrymen Petr Prucha, Martin Hanzal, Robert Lang and Radim Vrbata.

The Detroit Red Wings, St. Louis Blues, Chicago Blackhawks and Florida Panthers opened this season in Europe. The Blackhawks and Panthers played home-and-home games in Helsinki, while the Red Wings and Blues faced off in a home-and-home series in Stockholm.



Associated Press

Boston Bruins goalie Tuukka Rask fails to save a shootout goal against the Montreal Canadiens in Boston's 3-2 loss on Feb. 4.

Peppers no longer wants long deal with Panthers

Mike Chanston
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Julius Peppers no longer wants a long-term contract with Carolina, saying the Panthers have ignored him this offseason.

In an interview aired Tuesday morning on Charlotte radio station WFNZ-AM, the five-time Pro Bowl defensive end indicated he's irritated by the team's "silence" and has changed his stance on whether he wants to continue his career in Carolina.

"Last year, at the time, that was the option that I wanted most," Peppers said. "Now it's not."

While agent Carl Carey said last week he believes the Panthers aren't interested in retaining Peppers, Carolina's career sacks leader, team officials haven't announced their plans for the impending free agent. General manager Marty Hurney didn't immediately return a phone message Tuesday.

"How can you say you want to be somewhere when you're not really sure if they want you there because they're not even talking to you?" Peppers said.

It's another twist in a long-running saga between the two sides.

After being held to a career-low 2.5 sacks in 2007, the Panthers still offered to make Peppers the NFL's highest-paid defensive player. Peppers on Tuesday provided conflicting reasons on why he rejected the contract.

"That deal was to make me the highest-paid defensive player, but slightly, very slightly," Peppers said.

"I didn't really feel the sincerity behind that deal."

But later in the rambling answer during the radio phone interview, Peppers also indicated he wasn't worthy of such a deal.

"I had 2.5 sacks that season and they're coming to offer me being the highest-paid defensive player. Like, I can't even accept that," Peppers said. "I'm not deserving of that."

Peppers bounced back with a career-high 14.5 sacks in 2008, then announced he wanted to play elsewhere and pleaded with the Panthers to let him leave in free agency. He said Tuesday he wanted out because he was upset with the team's

direction under then-defensive coordinator Mike Trgovac.

"In my eyes I didn't see us getting any better on that side of the ball," Peppers said. "I felt like it was time to try somewhere else, do something else. But things changed. They brought in new people."

Trgovac and defensive line coach Sal Sunseri left. Ron Meeks took over the defense and Brian Baker replaced Sunseri. At the same time, the Panthers placed the restrictive franchise tag on Peppers, limiting his options in free agency.

"I never felt that they did that with the intent to keep me here," Peppers said. "I felt like they did that in attempt to send me off somewhere else to get compensation, draft picks or whatever."

There was no deal and Peppers eventually changed his tune, beginning negotiations on a long-term contract. But a deal couldn't be reached and Peppers played under the one-year tender worth an NFL-high \$16.7 million. After recording 10.5 sacks, Peppers made the Pro Bowl and earned a \$1.5 million bonus.

The Panthers could use the franchise tag again in 2010, but it would include a 20-percent raise. Peppers would be due \$20.1 million, plus another \$1.5 million Pro Bowl bonus and \$250,000 for each playoff victory.

Carolina could use the franchise tag again and try to trade Peppers, but Peppers would almost certainly first have to agree to a long-term deal with that team.

Several clubs, such as Philadelphia and New England, could be interested. But there are also questions about Peppers' inconsistency. He acknowledged on Tuesday that even former defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, now coach of the Jacksonville Jaguars, told him during his rookie year in 2002 that it doesn't appear he's playing hard on every down.

"I told him just because it doesn't look like I'm running as hard as the next man with my arms swinging, sweating and breathing hard doesn't mean I'm not trying as hard," Peppers said. "I'm still trying hard, it just doesn't look like it. I do it easier."

But despite 81 sacks in eight seasons, the 30-year-old Peppers' future is murky. The Panthers have until Feb. 25 to use the franchise tag.

"The silence says a lot without saying anything," Peppers said. "That is kind of a turn-off."



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