

Kovalchuk decides to stay with Devils

By Tom Canavan
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

NEWARK, N.J. -- Ilya Kovalchuk is staying with the New Jersey Devils.

Kovalchuk's agent and the team announced on Monday that the biggest prize of the NHL free agent market agreed to a new contract, ending weeks of speculation where the high-scoring left wing would play next season. Terms were not immediately available.

"This was a long arduous process that has taken frankly a little longer than I thought," agent Jay Grossman said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press. "But you know what, noth-

ing is worth anything unless you work for it. I can tell you he is very happy to be with the New Jersey Devils."

The Los Angeles Kings, New York Islanders, Devils and SKA St. Petersburg of Russia's Kontinental Hockey League talked with Kovalchuk since free agency started on July 1.

The final decision came down to the Kings and Devils. New Jersey will officially reintroduce Kovalchuk to New Jersey at a news conference on Tuesday.

Grossman refused to say that Kovalchuk decided to stay because he felt the Devils had a better chance to win the Stanley Cup.

"This was so far complex that I don't want to get into those questions," Grossman said. "Obviously

his goal is to win the Stanley Cup. If he didn't think there was an opportunity to do that, then he would not have gone there."

Neither Devils president and general manager Lou Lamoriello nor star forward Zach Parise immediately returned telephone messages seeking comment.

The team's only major loss during the offseason was defenseman Paul Martin, who signed with the Atlantic Division-rival Pittsburgh Penguins.

The 27-year-old Kovalchuk was traded to the Devils by Atlanta in February after rejecting a 12-year, \$101 million extension offered by the Thrashers.

Kovalchuk (KOH'-vul-chuck) had 41 goals and 44 assists last season while earning \$7.5 million, but he posted only 10 goals and 17

assists with the Devils.

When the trade with the Thrashers was completed, Lamoriello felt his team finally had the goal scorer it needed to make a run at a fourth Stanley Cup title since 1995.

It didn't work out that way. Kovalchuk had two goals in the postseason, but the Devils were eliminated by the Philadelphia Flyers in five games in the opening round. It was New Jersey's third straight exit in the first round.

Kovalchuk has won only one playoff game in his NHL career.

The first pick overall in the 2001 NHL draft, Kovalchuk has scored 338 career goals, the most by any player in the league in that period. He has only been to the playoffs only twice in eight NHL seasons.



Gregory Smith/Associated Press

Ilya Kovalchuk will remain a Devil.

Beat-up Red Sox trying to stay in playoff race

HOWARD ULMAN
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

BOSTON -- The floor of the Red Sox clubhouse was filled with black equipment bags as players packed for their 10-day West Coast trip. Amid the clutter, the stuff that revealed the team's current condition was still hard to miss.

The protective boot on Dustin Pedroia's broken left foot. The splint on Victor Martinez's fractured left thumb. The crutches leaning against Jason Varitek's locker, and the boot on his broken right foot.

Battered physically and beaten in eight of the last 11 games, the Red Sox flew across the country Sunday night to face the Oakland Athletics, Seattle Mariners and Los Angeles Angels.

It's a crucial stretch for the Red Sox to stay in contention, but to Boston manager Terry Francona it's just another road trip.

"I feel like I always feel," he said after Sunday's 4-2 home loss to the Texas Rangers.

"Pack our bags and go play. I don't think that ever changes. I don't know if I really feel any different than ever. I hope they have good food on the plane."

His team's troubles are no laughing matter.

The offense sputtered in losing three of four games at home to Texas in the club's first series since the All-Star break. They were outscored 21-11 and out-hit 40-25.

The Red Sox dropped from a half-game behind the AL East-leading New York Yankees on July 3 to 6½ games off the pace after Sunday's loss — a span of just 15 days. Going into Monday night's game against the A's, who were



Michael Dwyer/Associated Press

Jason Varitek (left) is one of several key Red Sox players out with injury.

riding a five-game winning streak, the Red Sox trailed Tampa Bay by 3½ games in the AL wild-card race.

Boston can't afford to fall much further back before the ailing players return.

That process starts this week

with Clay Buchholz set to pitch Wednesday in the finale of a three-game series at Oakland. Josh Beckett is expected to return Friday for the second of four games in Seattle if all goes well

during an extended bullpen session on Tuesday.

Buchholz (10-4) was named to the All-Star team but has been on the disabled list since July 5 with a strained left hamstring. Beckett, who began the season as the Red Sox No. 1 starter, went on the DL on May 19 because of a lower back strain and is just 1-1 with a 7.29 ERA in eight starts.

Beckett allowed three runs in four innings during a rehab start for the Pawtucket Red Sox on Saturday night.

"I threw 80 pitches (Saturday). I felt like I still had gas in the tank," he said. "I'm ready to start Friday."

Pedroia is to be re-evaluated in late July after a CT scan Friday was encouraging, meaning he will probably miss the entire trip. Varitek's recovery is going slower. Center fielder Jacoby Ellsbury has played in only nine games because of broken ribs and hasn't appeared in any rehab games yet. Martinez played catch Sunday for the first time since being hurt on June 27, but Francona called it "a baby step."

In their places, Boston has used Eric Patterson, Daniel Nava, Darnell McDonald, Bill Hall, Kevin Cash, Dusty Brown and other little-known players.

Backup outfielder Jeremy Hermida has been sidelined since June 10 with fractured ribs, but he could play in Seattle. Infielder Jed Lowrie, coming back from mononucleosis, has played in rehab games, and Mike Baseman-first baseman Third Lowell, with hip problems, could return to action this week.

Meanwhile, the roster keeps changing. From Friday through Sunday, the Red Sox promoted or demoted eight players.

"Every day there's something new going on, so I try to stay away

from it," Kevin Youkilis said. "When guys come back, guys will be back. For me, I've just got to go out there and focus on getting myself prepared every day. You can't worry about who's coming back, who's coming up, all that, because it's going to be crazy for the next month."

Youkilis has missed just four games and is one of the Red Sox few productive hitters since the All-Star break. On Saturday night, he hit a tying double in the ninth inning and a winning sacrifice fly in the 11th for a 3-2 victory over Texas.

"You can't say enough about this club," said John Lackey, who allowed two runs in seven innings in that game. "We've got a lot of things going against us right now. We kept battling. We kept grinding."

When, or if, all the injured players are back, the Red Sox should have a dangerous lineup. Even with the recent slump, they lead the majors in runs, RBIs, slugging percentage and doubles. Boston is second in homers and on base percentage, and fifth in batting average.

Off the speedy Ellsbury leading off, opposing pitchers would likely throw more fastballs to No. 2 hitter Pedroia to keep Ellsbury from stealing. They're followed by David Ortiz, Youkilis and Martinez.

Then come J.D. Drew, Adrian Beltre, Mike Cameron and Marco Scutaro.

Martinez's thumb was still sore and painful on Sunday, but he took a positive step.

"I tried to squeeze the glove, but at least I was able to put my hand in the glove," he said. "It's definitely a lot better."

By Aug. 15, the Red Sox would still have 46 games left and, possibly, all their disabled players back.

EYES ON ANFIELD



Tom Hevez/Associated Press

Midfielder Joe Cole kicks a ball while playing for Chelsea in last year's UEFA Champion's League match at Stamford Bridge against Apoel. Cole, a player of England's Premier League, was released by Chelsea and decided to sign a four-year contract with Liverpool of the English Premier League on Monday.

South Africa lauds Oosthuizen's victory

By Paul Newberry
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

ST. ANDREWS, Scotland -- One at its historic hosting of pride in the world of football's World Cup. the nation torn apart by apartheid just

a generation ago watched as a white Afrikaner with a black caddie on his bag crossed over the Swilcan Bridge, tapped in the last putt and lifted the claret jug.

Oosthuizen (WUHST'-hy-zen) just wanted to celebrate the moment with family and friends. Others realized there was something more significant going on at the Old Course, another instance of sports transcending a societal divide.

"It's fantastic," said Gary Player, the most prominent golfer to come out of South Africa. "Wonderful things are happening to South Africa. I went back for the final match of the World Cup, and they did a way better job than people imagined."

Of course, football's biggest event won't solve the everyday problems and racial tensions that still linger in South Africa. Nor will one man winning a golf tournament.

But there's no denying the pride felt by those who cheered on Oosthuizen while waving the post-apartheid colors of their nation — red, blue, green, yellow and black — or wearing jackets and shirts bearing the words "Bafana Bafana," the nickname of South Africa's football team.

"It is a great event for all South Africans, especially because it is the birthday of Nelson Mandela," said caddie

Zack Rasego, who usually converses with Oosthuizen in Afrikaans, the language despised by blacks during apartheid as a symbol of the ruling white minority. "It's a great day for us."

It was a great week for Oosthuizen, who started the week as such an unknown that the Royal & Ancient felt compelled to put out a fact sheet with 11 things one needed to know about the 27-year-old from Mossel Bay.

None of those tidbits was as compelling as his golf game, which was rock-solid for all four rounds and never gave anyone a chance to make it close. He led over the final 48 holes of the championship, closing with a 1-under 71 that left him at 16-under 272 overall.

No one else was within seven strokes.

"It felt a bit special out there," he said.

Oosthuizen, who had made the cut only once in eight previous majors, claimed the lead for good way back in the second round. Some figured he was the beneficiary of a fortuitous tee time — in the morning, before the wind started gusting more than 40 mph (64 kph) — and would surely falter in the spotlight of the weekend.

He turned in 13 pars and four birdies on Saturday, giving him a commanding four-stroke lead going into the finale. He started Sunday with seven more pars before his bogey-free streak finally ended with a 6-foot miss at No. 8. Again, everyone wondered if he might finally realize this was a position he'd never been in before. Again, he quickly snuffed out the hopes of England's Paul Casey, the only guy who really had a chance to catch him in the final round.