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The Capitals continue to put their trust in a veteran core. Can it hold up?

Not that long ago, the start of the Washington Capitals' season was set to feel so familiar. After all, the team's veteran core was returning. Its longtime captain, Alex Ovechkin — owner of a new contract that was signed without drama — was about to pick up his pursuit of Wayne Gretzky's career goals record.

But now Nicklas Backstrom is still rehabbing an injured hip. He will start the season on long-term injured reserve, meaning he'll miss at least the first 10 games.

And Ovechkin, so durable for so long, was injured in the team's preseason finale. His status for Wednesday night's opener, a home game against the New York Rangers, remained unclear Tuesday.

All of which means the Capitals — built around Ovechkin, Backstrom, T.J. Oshie and John

Carlson — will begin their 2021-22 campaign with new questions about their aging core, its durability and whether this team has enough firepower to keep up in the tough Metropolitan Division.

“We have an experienced team, and we have a core group of guys that work well together. And obviously, right now back in the regular season, everything is normal, and so I’m pretty sure we are confident,” Ovechkin said. “When you feel confident, you feel free.”

Alex Ovechkin and Nicklas Backstrom ask ‘What then?’ in new commercial

The Capitals won the Stanley Cup in 2018 but have stumbled in the postseason in the years since. In 2021, they exited in the first round of the playoffs for the third straight season. But in an offseason that could have seen the start of a rebuild, Washington instead recommitted to its leaders, notably signing Ovechkin, 36, to a five-year, \$47.5 million deal.

“[Ovechkin and Backstrom have] defined our organization, so it is important for us ... that they finish,” Capitals General Manager Brian MacLellan said. “I don’t know how it is going to look, but we are going to give them the opportunity to end it the way they want to end it, and if it ends in a different way and we have to adjust to it, that is the adjustment we are going to make.”

The Capitals signed Ovechkin through the 2025-26 season and did not expose Oshie in the Seattle Kraken expansion draft. Oshie, 34, is signed through 2024-25, as is Backstrom. Carlson’s contract ends with Ovechkin’s, and Evgeny Kuznetsov, despite a rocky 2020-21 campaign and an offseason full of trade rumors, is also back.

The Seattle Kraken is ready to be released on the NHL. Here’s what you need to know.

“I think they’ve just seen what we’ve been able to do when we were at our absolute best,” Oshie said. “I’m confident the fifth gear is still there.”

Around its core, Washington also will look to Tom Wilson, 27, a lightning rod who is among the new wave of leaders in the dressing room. Anthony Mantha, a 27-year-old who joined the Capitals in a blockbuster trade in April, hopes to contribute. Ilya Samsonov, 24, is the goalie of the present and still could be the goalie of the future. He signed a one-year contract in the summer but still needs to prove he can handle the role. Daniel Sprong, 24, is another offensive weapon.

Hendrix Lapierre will be the youngest player to join the mix this season, filling in for an injured Backstrom. The 19-year-old center dazzled in the preseason, showcasing his maturity and flashy skills on the ice. He is expected to make his NHL debut Wednesday. Fellow center Connor McMichael, 20, also will start the season on the roster, and Martin Fehervary, 22, expects to hold a significant role on the blue line.

Capitals Coach Peter Laviolette said all of the younger players handled themselves well during the preseason but noted that their development will have to continue. If it does, that supports the organization's bigger hope: that these young players are the beginning of a well-balanced — and not rushed — transition.

“The point is that if you have young guys — if Lapierre turns out, if McMichael turns out — it takes pressure off these [veterans] to carry the team,” MacLellan said.

Backstrom starts the season on long-term injured reserve and will not be eligible to play until early November. The 33-year-old center is expected to take his time to get back on the ice. Nights without both Backstrom and Ovechkin are rare for Washington. Since 2007-08, they have missed just seven games together.

“Especially when you are older, you realize you don't have many opportunities left, and so I think you got to take advantage of every time you get,” Backstrom said. “We got a little bit of the taste of it in 2018, so that's the taste you want, and every time you don't it's a disappointment. I feel like the core group in here has the hunger and want to be as good as we can.”

That hunger will matter in the tough Metropolitan. The Carolina Hurricanes have bolstered their lineup, and the New York Rangers have added physical, gritty players to complement their offensive stars. The New York Islanders are locked-in defensively and still have Coach Barry Trotz at the helm. Like the Capitals, the Pittsburgh Penguins are grappling with injury concerns but still have franchise icons Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin.

“When you are younger, you feel like you are just going to make the playoffs every year and every year is going to be a chance. And as you get older, you are like, ‘Gosh, I don't know; maybe I only have four more chances potentially,’” Oshie said. “It gives you a little bit of that extra drive that that clock is ticking and there is going to be an end eventually and so you want to win now.”

Oshie said a lot of his teammates have become his “best friends” and those bonds hold players more accountable. Not only do they want to bear witness to their teammates' individual accolades, they believe such accomplishments help the team.

Many of their young families have grown up together, and team dinners and parties have become staples. It is routine for their kids to visit the practice rink and go up to the glass, waving hello not only to their fathers but to their dads' teammates, too.

“Definitely a lot of kids on this team,” Carlson said with a chuckle. “It is great to be able to build actual relationships. ... It's a special type of situation that we are in, and we definitely don't take it for granted.”

The wait is over. Opening Night for the Capitals' 2021-22 season is finally here, as they get set to take on the Rangers Wednesday night at Capital One Arena.

It's another year for Alex Ovechkin, Peter Laviolette is entering his second season as coach of the Capitals and after a COVID-stricken 2021 campaign, the NHL is back to normal this time around. Here's everything you need to know about the game.

Capitals Vs. Rangers: What to Watch

Alex Ovechkin's injury status should be a major storyline entering the game. The Capitals' icon suffered a lower body injury in Washington's preseason finale on Friday, and while the injury isn't considered serious, Ovechkin's status for the first game of the year isn't certain.

We could also be in line for another chapter of the Tom Wilson vs. Ryan Reaves enforcer rivalry in this one. The Rangers signed Reaves as a way of improving their team's overall toughness, and he has a history with Wilson. If anyone's going to drop the gloves in the season opener, it'll probably be one of these two players, if not both.

There's a youth movement to look out for with the Caps as well. With Nicklas Backstrom out with a hip injury, Peter Laviolette is leaning on young centers Connor McMichael and Hendrix Lapierre to inject some youth and energy into Washington's veteran lineup.

Capitals Vs. Rangers: Players to Watch

Capitals: Connor McMichael/Hendrix Lapierre: If Ovechkin has to miss the season opener, both Lapierre and McMichael should expect to see some time on the ice. If he plays, only one of them should expect to get significant time. If one of these young centers can provide a spark and flash their potential, the Caps could have a much higher ceiling this year than the last few seasons.

Rangers: Ryan Reaves: The Rangers signed Reaves to get tougher and deal with players like Wilson. Will he bring a level of toughness New York needs right away, or will the Capitals push the Rangers around all night? Reaves will likely have a hand in what happens in that aspect of the game.