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Flames secure their future

Iggy, Regehr ink five-year deals

By PIERRE LEBRUN

(CP) - The Calgary Flames could have been next summer's Buffalo Sabres. Now they won't be.

The Flames locked up captain Jarome Iginla to a US\$35-million, five-year contract extension Wednesday as well as top defenceman Robyn Regehr to a \$20-million, five-year extension, erasing any of the drama that could have occurred next summer when both players were slated to be unrestricted free agents.

So while centres Chris Drury and Daniel Briere escaped Buffalo's grasp Sunday as unrestricted free agents, Flames fans can sit back and relax thanks to GM Darryl Sutter.

"I think a lot of people can really learn something from Darryl, the way he's handled our team the last couple of years as a general manager," said the 27-year-old Regehr. "He doesn't like to go into a season with question marks. He's a guy that's very aggressive when he sees players that he likes or with certain situations coming up around the corner he doesn't waste any time. He tries to resolve those as quickly as possible. I think that's a good way to do it.

"He doesn't allow the team and the players to be in a bind like Buffalo was. It's also good for the fans, too, because they know the players are going to be around."

To be fair, Sabres GM Darcy Regier is among the game's best, and losing Drury and Briere should not cloud the fact he's built a great team from the ground up through the draft.

But the reality remains that he may have waited too long to lock up his co-captains and now they're gone. That won't happen in Calgary.

"You have to give credit to Darryl Sutter for his adept handling of his core players," an industry source said Wednesday. "Unlike other GMs who have dithered, somehow thinking that the market will de-escalate over time, Sutter has been proactive. He knows Iginla and Regehr could wait and get more as UFAs next summer so he stepped up to the plate within hours of July 1 and gave these two the term and no-move clauses they desired with very fair deals for both sides.

"He understands the players and the system. This is a model franchise for many years to come as a result."

Sutter has also fostered an environment that players want to be part of. Calgary is a cool place to play right now. Getting Iginla and Regehr to sign long-term deals and forgo the open market next summer speaks volumes.

"I think it does send a message," said Iginla, 30. "People who play in Calgary really enjoy it. We enjoy playing together, we enjoy the city, the passion that the city has for hockey. ...

"And the way the organization handles itself and treats us as players is definitely first-class."

Regehr echoed his teammate's comments.

"I think it speaks very highly of the Flames organization, right from the owners all the way on down," he said. "It also speaks very highly for the city of Calgary as well. I think people look at that and other players look at that and say, 'That must be a good place to play.' ... I think it sends a very powerful message."



Calgary Flames' captain Jarome Iginla has signed a new five-year contract extension believed to be worth US\$35 million. (Sun Media file/AL CHAREST)

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The love affair goes both ways. Sutter spoke glowingly of Iginla and Regehr, underlining that fact that the contract negotiations with both players did not begin with salary figures. First they talked about where the team was headed, then about how long they wanted to sign for. The money came last.

"There are a lot of players in this league that say it's not about the money, believe me, they constantly move around because it's about the money," Sutter said.

Iginla on the open market next summer could probably have fetched at least \$8 million a year and Regehr around \$5 million. But they're more interested in winning a Stanley Cup than raking in the highest possible salary figure.

"In free agency, I don't know what the numbers would have been, but the biggest thing is getting a chance to being with a team that believes it can win," said Iginla. "And I believe we can do that in Calgary."

And as Sutter pointed out, there's only so much money to dole out under the salary cap but several top players to take care of.

"Because the cap is at \$50 million, technically a player could get \$10 million, but I don't know if you can build a top team if one player is going to have his AAV (average salary) at \$10 million," said Sutter. "I just don't think that's possible."

Sutter's next challenge to get goalie Miikka Kirpusoff to sign an extension. The 30-year-old Finn will be an unrestricted free agent next summer.

"We've talked lots," said Sutter. "It's just a matter that it's hard when Miikka is overseas (in Finland). It's a lot better when you're sitting down together and you're laying out in terms of what you're trying to do. ..."

"We'll continue to talk and we'll continue to work at it," added Sutter. "And it's something we hope that works out. It's got to be something that's a number that works for both sides. And the length of it is going to come into it."

Iginla hopes to persuade his goalie to stay on long-term.

"I've talked with him, and he's always been very positive about Calgary and the team and wanting to win," said Iginla. "I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't be pushing him in that way. But I know he loves Calgary. I'm very hopeful that things will get done."

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