The Road to Return: The New England Patriots return to the Super Bowl

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The New England Patriots entered Super Bowl Sunday looking for a response to critics who doubted their chances against Sam Darnold and the Seattle Seahawks. New England struggled early, as Seattle's defense dominated and built a lead that the Patriots could not overcome. By the fourth quarter, the Seahawks had a commanding advantage over New England that would eventually end of their season without the Lombardi Trophy

Seattle's "Dark Side" defense silenced star Drake Maye all night, forcing him into some tough throwing lanes while also causing multiple turnovers. The defensive line for Seattle was also strong, as they got home six times against a lackluster Patriots offensive line.

This offseason, New England has their blueprint. They will need to make some key additions if they want to return to the Super Bowl next year, and it all starts with that offensive line. New England has some great pieces; however, moving rookie Will Campbell back to his natural position at guard will help him and the team in the long run. Then the Patriots will need to sign and draft two tackles that can play immediately, with an aging Morgan Moses and a free hole following Campbell's move to guard.

Look for the Patriots to target Alabama product Caden Proctor in the draft and in free agency, looking at big names such as Braden Smith and Jonah Williams.

New England will also need to provide a few more weapons for Maye next year, as his support group was decent at best. Adding an impact receiver or number one guy would turn the tables for this roster and open more avenues for some of their other playmakers. Names to look at vary, however, the best option for New England is to go out and trade for a big-time guy such as AJ Brown or make an offer to Deebo Samuel in free agency.

Defensively, New England does not need to do much. Their defense was arguably, outside of Seattle's, the best this year. The only thing that New England will and should do is resign a few depth pieces, such as Khyiris Tonga and K'Lavon Chaisson, and then hopefully nail a late-round pick for a high upside defender that can provide depth.

Luckily for Mike Vrabel and staff, they will have the cap space to do it all and the backing from ownership in Robert and Jonathan Kraft, as they look to get back to where they were this year.

The schedule will be harder, and the road will not be as easy; however, what you cannot undervalue is the experience that a deep playoff run brings you. Maye is 23-years-old and just finished his first full season as a starter, along with Campbell, who was playing hurt all postseason at LT. These are excuses but let's also offer some context; they cannot fully excuse an offense that struggled with consistency, protection breakdowns and much more during the playoffs. It will most certainly be back to the drawing board in Foxboro; however, this drawing board is very much a few scribbles and marks from being done.



New England Patriots quarterback Drake Maye and wide receiver Stefon Diggs. Drake Maye had a stellar year in his first year as a starter, throwing for over 3000 yards and 30 touchdowns.
PHOTO COURTESY OF @PATRIOTS ON INSTAGRAM

Everything you need to know about Olympic Men's Hockey

ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF CREAZILLA

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For the first time since 2014, NHL players will be permitted to compete in the Olympics in Milan, Italy. The US, Canada and other countries with NHL players have still participated in the Olympics in other years, but these teams have mostly consisted of NCAA players as well as prospects.

The All-Star game will not occur this year, and the 4 Nations tournament is expected by many to be every four years as opposed to yearly. The NHL has confirmed that NHL players will be able to return to the Olympics in 2030 as well.

Twelve teams will compete in the tournament: Canada, U.S.A., Finland, Sweden, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Latvia and hosts Italy. Russia is currently banned by the Olympic committee; they have also been disallowed from the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) in recent tournaments such as World Juniors.

The twelve teams are organized into three groups of four, with Canada in Group A and the USA in Group C. Teams will play in a round robin against teams in their group for the preliminary rounds to determine tournament seeding. This will use the 3-2-1-0 point system as opposed to the NHL's 2-1-0.

The team with the best record in each group, as well as the highest-ranking team across the board who did not win their group, will receive the top four seeds and a first-round bye.

The remaining teams are seeded by record and play a single-elimination game to begin the elimination bracket, with five playing twelve and so on.

The tournament will be played on ice that is similar to NHL size, which is unusual for the Olympics.

For overtime scenarios, the preliminaries and first round will be like the NHL regular season, with the only change being five shootout skaters instead of three. The quarterfinals, semifinals and bronze medal games change the length of the three-on-three overtime period to be 10 minutes instead of five.

Should the gold medal game reach the extra frame, it will be a continuous five-on-five overtime until somebody scores, creating the possibility for a golden goal scenario.

The Olympic rosters will feature around 147 NHL players, though this number is dependent on how many games qualifies a player as an active NHL player.

Aside from players who are injured and Russians ineligible to play, most of the big names will be playing in Milan.

Connor Bedard, Mark Scheifele and Jason Robertson are names who shockingly did not make their countries' rosters. Adam Fox was also a surprise, though setbacks on his injuries mean he likely would've come regardless.

The nations widely considered to be the best are the USA, Canada, Finland and Sweden. Switzerland and the Czech Republic are next up, with Germany and Slovakia given low chances and the remaining four considered heavy longshots.

Canada is the odds-on favorite across the board. Sidney Crosby being projected in the bottom six is enough evidence as is, and the forward core led by Connor McDavid and Nathan Mackinnon is possibly the strongest ever assembled.

Cale Makar and Devon Toews are the top pairing in Colorado and will be the top pairing for Canada, but beyond that it does get weaker. In net is Logan Thompson, a good but sometimes inconsistent goalie.

Canada's weaknesses are stronger than most team's strengths. If Sweden, USA or Finland wants to see a non-Canada gold medal winner, it'll come down to them to expose that defensive side. Hockey will always be Canada's medal to lose.

The USA has a slightly worse forward core, but an arguably better defense. Quinn Hughes and Zach Werenski lead an absurd defense, with Jack Eichel, Auston Matthews, the Tkachuk brothers and UConn alum Tage Thompson up front.

Reigning Hart recipient Connor Hellebuyck will be in net for the Americans. Though he is an incredible netminder, injuries this year and a very questionable playoff track record are red flags for Hellebuyck. His play likely determines how far the USA can go.

There isn't really any gamebreakers on Sweden, but there's very little bad on their roster either. With a deep roster, Sweden has the power to put up a fight against anybody, but the lack of star power could cause them to be overwhelmed by that of other teams.

A lackluster forward core is the main concern of Finland, but the main question comes in net. Juuse Saros was a top goalie a few years ago but has since struggled after receiving a large contract. If he plays like his old self, the sky's the limit. But if he plays like he has been, he very well could lose the starting job.

Switzerland consists of more non-NHL players than NHLers, but their roster still has some strengths. The country is known for defense in hockey, with Nico Hischier being one of the best defensive forwards in hockey right now. The Swiss' top six isn't bad, and a good connection could turn some heads.

The Czech Republic's success will fall on David Pastrnak. He has shown with the Boston Bruins his ability to drive an offense almost singlehandedly, and while he will have good players on his roster, it's hard to deny the weakness compared to other countries.

The remainder of the countries will need exceptional coaching and performances from players to have a real shot. But in a single-elimination tournament, truly anything is possible.

The men's hockey portion of the Olympics begins with Finland against Slovakia today at 10:40 a.m., while the USA kicks off their chase for gold at 3:10 p.m. tomorrow against Latvia.



Players from the USA men's hockey team pose for a team picture. The USA team are dark horses for a gold medal, given that they have a worse forward care yet better defensive core than Canada. PHOTO COURTESY OF @NHL ON INSTAGRAM