

**HOCKEY ARBITRATION COMPETITION OF CANADA**

**CODY FRANSON**

**– AND –**

**THE TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS HOCKEY CLUB**

*Submission on Behalf of the Toronto Maple Leafs*

*Team 13*

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## **I. OVERVIEW**

Pursuant to Article 12.9 of the NHL Collective Bargaining Agreement<sup>1</sup>, this brief will analyze the performance and contributions of Cody Franson, defenseman for the Toronto Maple Leaf Hockey Club (the “Toronto Maple Leafs”). Given Mr. Franson’s limited career upside, his diminishing role with his hockey club and his lack of contribution to team success, Mr. Franson should receive an award below the \$3.3 million midpoint figure. In light of his current abilities and career potential, the Toronto Maple Leafs submit that \$3.1 million for the 2014-2015 NHL season is an appropriate arbitration award for Mr. Franson.

## **II. ANALYSIS OF CODY FRANSON’S VALUE**

### **A. Limited Career Upside**

Mr. Franson is an offensive defenseman and as such, his value to a hockey team can largely be evaluated based on his offensive performance. Throughout his career, Mr. Franson has generally been a consistent point-producing defenseman, ranging between 21 and 33 points in five NHL seasons.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Franson has a solid 0.41 career points per game average during his career.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Franson’s consistent offensive performance peaked during the 2012-2013 season, where he appeared to have a “breakout” year. During this season, Mr. Franson recorded 29 points in 45 games for a 0.64 points per game total.<sup>4</sup> The Toronto Maple Leafs hoped this year would be an indication that Mr. Franson was maturing into an elite, offensive-defenseman. However, during

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<sup>1</sup> NHL Collective Bargaining Agreement, 2012, Article 12.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nhl.com/ice/playerstats.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

his platform year (2013-2014), Mr. Franson's point production fell to a disappointing 33 points in 79 games for a 0.42 points per game total.<sup>5</sup> His performance in 2013-2014 was nearly identical to his 0.41 career point per game average. While Mr. Franson has undoubtedly been a consistent offensive performer, his "breakout" season appears to have been an anomaly due to a lockout-shortened NHL season. Mr. Franson's return to performance proportionate to his other NHL seasons indicates that he has reached his career scoring potential.

A large increase in Mr. Franson's salary would not be commensurate with his recent dip in performance. Therefore, Mr. Franson should receive an award less than the \$3.3 million midpoint.

#### **B. Diminishing Role with the Hockey Club**

An offensive defenseman that scores 30-35 points per year is indeed a valuable asset for an NHL team. However, after five seasons in the league, it is clear that Mr. Franson will not likely evolve into an elite point-producing defenseman. Given Mr. Franson's recent plateau in offensive performance, he is expected to receive less ice time in favour of younger, faster defensemen with higher offensive ceilings. The Toronto Maple Leafs have two young and elite prospects, Jake Gardiner and Morgan Rielly who will begin to see more ice time as their careers evolve. In each of their three seasons with the Toronto Maple Leafs, Mr. Gardiner's time on ice per game eclipsed that of Mr. Franson.<sup>6</sup> Morgan Rielly is entering into his second year in the NHL and appears to be on a similar trajectory to that of Mr. Gardiner. As Mr. Franson moves to a secondary or tertiary defensive scoring role, his value as an offensive-defenseman will likely decline.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

The trend away from utilizing Mr. Franson in favour of higher-potential offensive defensemen by the Toronto Maple Leafs is further evident by the team's diminishing utility of Mr. Franson throughout the 2013-2014 season. During the first half of his 2013-2014 season (39 games), Mr. Franson had an average time on ice of 21:26 per game, scoring 13 of his 18 powerplay points.<sup>7</sup> However, as the season progressed, Mr. Franson's average time on ice per game dropped by almost a full minute and a half to 19:57 for the last 40 games of his season.<sup>8</sup> During these last 40 games, Mr. Franson recorded only 5 powerplay points.<sup>9</sup>

Mr. Franson has certainly played a role in the offensive success of the Toronto Maple Leafs. However, this role will likely continue to diminish starting in the 2014-2015 given the quality of rising talent on the team. For this reason, the Toronto Maple Leafs submit that a salary of \$3.1 million is an appropriate arbitration award for Mr. Franson.

### **C. Lack of Contribution to Team Success**

During his three seasons as a Toronto Maple Leaf, Mr. Franson has failed to help the team live up to expectations and achieve meaningful success. In these three seasons, the Maple Leafs made the playoffs one time and were knocked out in the first round that season.

As a defenseman, Mr. Franson can be evaluated in part on the defensive success of his team. During the 2013-2014 NHL season, the Maple Leafs had the 5<sup>th</sup> worst goals against per game and had the worst shots against average in the NHL.<sup>10</sup> Despite these defensive struggles, the team looked poised to make the playoffs for the majority of the season. However, the Maple Leafs

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nhl.com/ice/gamestats.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nhl.com/ice/teamstats.htm>.

suffered one of the largest collapses in team history, winning 2 of the last 16 games, finishing 12<sup>th</sup> in the Eastern Conference and missing the playoffs by 9 points.<sup>11</sup>

Defensemen can also be individually evaluated on their contributions to team success. One important measure of defensive contribution is a player's plus/minus rating. During the 2013-2014 season, Cody Franson's plus/minus was -20, worse than any other player on the Maple Leafs.<sup>12</sup> While the plus/minus statistic may prove too inconsistent to compare players on different teams, its usefulness cannot be understated when comparing teammates on the same club. A defenseman's primary job is to defend against the opposing team's offensive threats. While Mr. Franson's offensive production is impressive, he was on the ice for 20 more even-strength goals against than he was able to help produce. This is not the mark of an elite NHL defenceman.

Given his plateau in offensive production, diminishing role with his hockey team and underwhelming defense performance, Mr. Franson should be granted an award of \$3.1 million for the 2014-2015 NHL season. An analysis of comparable players will make this further evident.

## **II. COMPARABLE PLAYER ANALYSIS**

### **A. Jeff Petry – Edmonton Oilers**

In July, 2014, Jeff Petry re-signed with the Edmonton Oilers to a one-year, \$3.075 million contract.<sup>13</sup> Mr. Petry's style of play is similar to Mr. Franson's in many respects, making him a close comparator for salary arbitration purposes. Both players play a physical game, leading their

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.capgeek.com/player/1659>.

respective teams in hits by a defenseman for the 2013-2014 season.<sup>14</sup> Further, both Mr. Petry and Mr. Franson are solid shot-blockers recording 132 and 111 blocks, respectively.<sup>15</sup> The similarities between the two players go beyond their individual playing styles. Both play on young, fast teams that struggle in the defensive zone. During the 2013-2014 NHL season, the Edmonton Oilers and Toronto Maple Leafs both finished in the bottom 5 in the NHL in both goals against per game average and shots against per game average.<sup>16</sup>

These similarities diverge when one considers the role each has on their respective team. Mr. Petry is paired with Justin Schultz, forming the team's top defensive unit.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Mr. Franson is usually a second-pairing defenseman, facing weaker opposition and playing fewer minutes. Mr. Petry has had more time on ice per game than Mr. Franson on his respective team in each NHL season they have played. In 2013-2014, Mr. Petry had an average time on ice per game of 21:35 compared to Mr. Franson's 20:41.<sup>18</sup>

Mr. Franson has a significantly higher career point total than Mr. Petry; however, this can be attributed to the different role each player has with his respective hockey club. Mr. Petry plays a more defensive role for his team, averaging 3:03 minutes of shorthanded time on ice per game compared to Mr. Franson's 1:38.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, Mr. Franson plays significantly more on the powerplay. During the 2013-2014 season, Mr. Franson averaged 2:54 per game on the powerplay, scoring 18 of his 33 points with the man advantage.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Mr. Petry's average powerplay

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nhl.com/ice/playerstats.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nhl.com/ice/teamstats.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.nhl.com/ice/playerstats.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

time on ice per game of only 0:50 is consistent with his role as a defensive-defenseman.<sup>21</sup> Mr. Franson's added time on the powerplay provides him with significantly more scoring opportunities than Mr. Petry and helps explain the discrepancy in scoring between the two players.

It is clear that Mr. Petry plays a greater role for his respective hockey club than Mr. Franson, however, this can be offset by the fact that Mr. Franson has more experience as an NHL defenseman. In four NHL seasons, Mr. Petry has played in 236 regular season NHL games and has never played an NHL playoff game.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Mr. Franson has played 322 regular season NHL games and 23 career playoff games, where he has contributed 4 goals and 9 assists.<sup>23</sup>

Mr. Franson and Mr. Petry share many traits that make them close salary comparators. Both are young, large defensemen who play important roles for their respective defensive units. Mr. Franson is an offensive defenseman who receives significant time on the powerplay, whereas Mr. Petry is a defensive defenseman, who operates most effectively on the penalty kill. While Mr. Petry plays a more important role for his team, this is offset by the greater NHL experience that Mr. Franson brings to the table. These factors indicate that Mr. Franson should receive a salary similar to Mr. Petry's \$3.075 million contract.

## **B. Jason Demers – San Jose Sharks**

In July, 2014, Jason Demers signed with the San Jose Sharks to a 2-year deal worth \$3.4 million per year.<sup>24</sup> Mr. Demers plays a similar role for his hockey club in many respects, making him an effective salary comparable. Like Mr. Franson, Mr. Demers is an offensive defenseman who plays

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.capgeek.com/player/155>.



second-pairing minutes.<sup>25</sup> However, Mr. Demers' relative importance to his team's defensive unit and his strong defensive abilities make him a more valuable player than Franson. As such, Mr. Franson should receive an arbitration award significantly less than Mr. Demers' \$3.4 million.

As offensive defensemen, Mr. Franson and Mr. Demers can be evaluated, in part, on their scoring abilities. During the 2013-2014 NHL season, Mr. Demers and Mr. Franson had nearly identical offensive numbers, scoring 34 and 33 points respectively.<sup>26</sup> While this represented a plateau in performance for Mr. Franson, this amounted to a "breakout" season for Mr. Demers. Mr. Franson has had a more consistent career; however, Mr. Demers' recent breakout season indicates potentially greater career upside, as he has not yet appeared to hit an offensive "ceiling".

Both Mr. Franson and Mr. Demers play second pairing defensive minutes for their respective hockey clubs; however, the importance of each player to their team will be starkly different during the 2014-2015 season and beyond. As noted above, Mr. Franson's expected role as an offensive defenseman with his hockey club will likely decrease in the near future. By contrast, Mr. Demers will likely see increased playing time in both the offensive and defensive zones. His recent spike in offensive performance, combined with the loss of veteran defenseman Dan Boyle will certainly allow Mr. Demers to see more playing time with his team in the near future.

Another factor that should be considered when comparing the two players is the defensive abilities that each brings to their respective hockey clubs. As noted above, Mr. Franson lacks defensive prowess and relies on his offensive abilities to contribute to team success. By contrast, Mr. Demers is the total package for an elite defenseman, providing significant offense while remaining

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.nhl.com/ice/playerstats.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

consistent in his own end. Mr. Demers' defensive abilities are evidenced by his plus/minus rating of +14.<sup>27</sup> It could be argued that Mr. Demers was playing with stronger teammates than Mr. Franson; however, it is important to note that his plus/minus rating was 7<sup>th</sup> of all skaters on the team.<sup>28</sup> Mr. Demers proved to be a solid defensive asset on an otherwise strong team. By contrast, Mr. Franson had the worst plus/minus rating on a defensively weak team.

At first glance, Mr. Franson and Mr. Demers appear to be close comparators. However, Mr. Demers is expected to have a greater role with his hockey club and has shown significantly stronger defensive abilities. For these reasons, the Toronto Maple Leafs submit that Mr. Franson should receive an arbitration award significantly less than Mr. Demers' \$3.4 million salary.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

There is no doubt that Cody Franson is a skilled hockey player. He plays a physical game and provides consistent offense for the Toronto Maple Leafs. However, given Mr. Franson's limited career upside potential, his diminishing role with his hockey club and his lack of contribution to team success, Mr. Franson should receive an award of \$3.1 million for the 2014-2015 NHL season.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.nhl.com/ice/teamstats.htm>.