

This is one we will no doubt be debating for years to come. Jonathan Drouin and Nathan MacKinnon are two can't miss prospects in one of the best drafts in recent years (although we do seem to say that every year, don't we?) Each has the power to not just become an impact player right away but to help change the course of the team that drafts him at Sunday in

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Newark. And each one could have a similar impact for your fantasy team. But who should you choose?

MacKinnon will almost certainly go first overall in the NHL draft. Joe Sakic practically came out and said so when he declared that the Avalanche would draft a forward with the number one selection this year. And certainly that should carry a lot of weight. For the past decade or so NHL teams have proven very adept at identifying the top forward in a draft class and taking him ahead of other contenders and more often than not those top forwards have made an impact sooner and produced at a higher level than his rivals.

This isn't to say that this is always true. A perfect example being the 2006 NHL Entry Draft where Jordan Staal was selected as the top forward only to see Jonathan Toews, Nicklas Backstrom and Phil Kessel all selected with the next three picks go on to have much greater impacts on the score sheet.

Circumstances matter. And sometimes teams just miss. And that's not to say Toews, Backstrom or Kessel are better NHL players than Staal but certainly they've had more fantasy impact, which should be all that matters for you.

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And it's all true what they say about MacKinnon. He is the best NHL prospect in this draft class. You can talk about upside until you are blue in the face but smart teams will always take what's tangibly there and in MacKinnon you have a player who above anyone else in this draft class is ready to be an NHL player now. MacKinnon has the size, skill and skating ability to excel at the highest level. He absolutely has a lot to learn but that's part of his own upside. His current skill level makes him an NHL player now, which is as can't miss as it comes.

But it wasn't so long ago that Seth Jones was slated to be Colorado's pick at #1. That all seemingly fell apart in one play at the Memorial Cup where MacKinnon beat Jones to the outside for one of his three goals in a resounding 7-4 win. MacKinnon was dominant all Memorial Cup, taking home MVP honours scoring seven goals and 13 points in just four games.

MacKinnon basically blew the roof off. Everyone knew he was a solid prospect but here he was taking it to the best of his peers. On the biggest stage he was at his absolute best. He was a big game player – someone who you could win Stanley Cups with. But remember that number. Four games.

FOUR GAMES!

That's all it took and there was no longer any doubt, MacKinnon was the number one pick. The contrarian in me is fuming mad about this. The sample size on that is WAY too small. What if we had completed the draft following the World Junior Hockey Championships this year? Never

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mind that Jones looked fantastic, what about Drouin out-scoring and generally out-performing MacKinnon not just in the tournament (Drouin scored four points in six games, MacKinnon just one) but throughout Canada's selection camp as well.

Of course, you can argue that Drouin was given a different role than MacKinnon, one more offensively oriented with much better players and more optimal ice time and the fact that they only played six games runs the same small sample size problems as does MacKinnon's Memorial Cup performance but that's the point, really. I'd much rather put stock in scoring figures from much greater data sets because they are more reliable.

The result of such analysis is that Drouin is seemingly the more explosive scorer. We have only one year's worth of scoring to look at because of the age of these two but this season Drouin managed 105 points in 49 regular season games and then followed that up with 35 points in 17 QMJHL playoff games. MacKinnon on the other hand finished with a still very impressive 75 points in 44 regular season games and 33 points in 17 playoff games. If you add all those up and add in the Memorial Cup and World Junior totals you get:

Drouin – 153 points – 76 games – 2.01 points per game

MacKinnon – 122 points – 71 games – 1.72 points per game

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Wednesday, 26 June 2013 09:21 - Last Updated Thursday, 27 June 2013 08:34 It's damn close but over this larger sample of games Drouin has been the better scorer. But is there a bit of smoke and mirrors at play here? Cam Charron wrote a great piece comparing the scoring of Drouin and MacKinnon this season. Here are some of the highlights: Drouin shot an amazing 23.7% this season, which is impossibly unsustainable even in the junior ranks. MacKinnon shot a much more reasonable 15.9%. MacKinnon took more shots in close and more shots overall, meaning he was generating more scoring opportunities with his shots. And this final takeaway from the comments: Drouin was frequently used as the quarterback on the half-wall on the Halifax power play while MacKinnon was stationed beside the net. A lot of that hits home as pretty solid criticism of Drouin but I can't help but fall back on the old maxim that the best predictor of future scoring is past scoring. I like Drouin's past scoring. Also, as much as it's a knock that Drouin would be seeing the puck more than MacKinnon on the power play, ultimately that's a skill that's going to transfer over to the NHL level.

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You want to own players who quarterback the power play from the half-wall. Guys like Evgeni Malkin, Martin St. Louis, Claude Giroux and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins all rack up huge point totals on the power play because their elite vision and skill allows them to pick apart defenses on the power play and set up teammates. You could complain about them getting cheap points or you could embrace it and simply seek to own such players.

Of course, NHL teams aren't just worried about scoring at the next level. They are concerned about the whole package. A complete game, if you will. A player needs to play both sides of the ice and presently MacKinnon is certainly better at that. So you can understand why MacKinnon would still be ranked ahead of Drouin in the eyes of NHL scouts but the point is that may not mean he's the right choice for your fantasy squad.

But Drouin has some deficiencies beyond simply not being great defensively. A big part of that is his skating ability, which is lacking high end speed. This isn't to say it isn't good or that he can't get away with it at the next level but you would hope that a player Drouin's size (5'10" or so and below 200 lbs.) would be a faster skater. Instead it's MacKinnon who comes out ahead in skating ability, which is why he's able to play such an effective two-way game.

Don't take this to mean Drouin is a terrible skater though. He isn't the fastest but he is agile and strong on his skates, which makes him very effective in the cycle game despite his size. And with Drouin's vision and hands the ability to stay on his feet through traffic and wait for an opening is how he will make his money at the next level. Essentially, Drouin is a Patrick Kane replica. He just has to prove he can do it at the NHL level.

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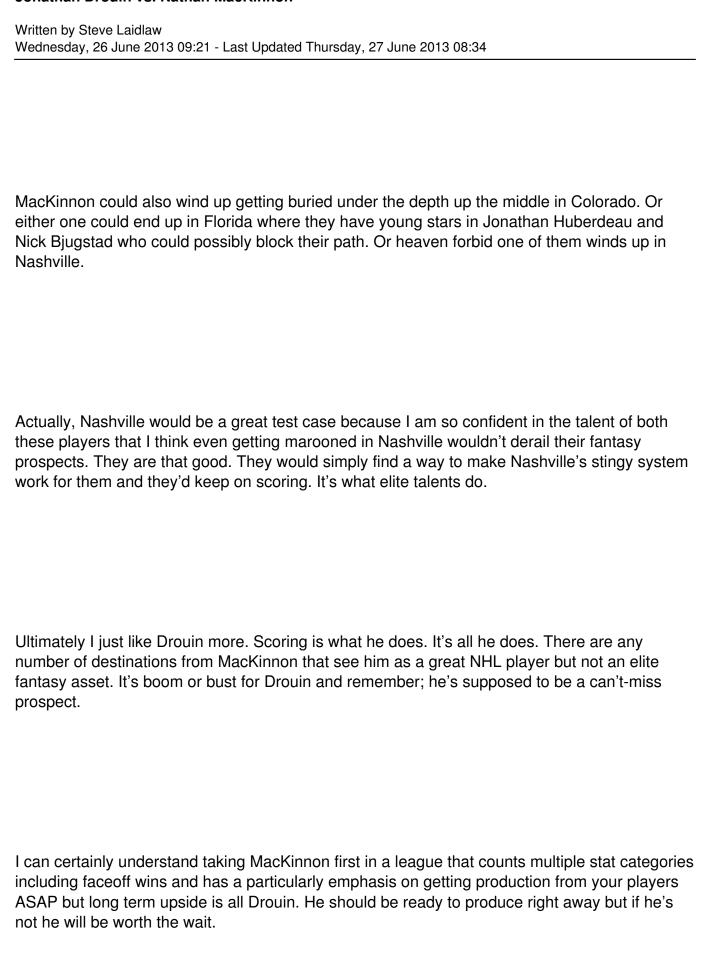
NHL scouts will also see Drouin's wing position as something of a downside, as center is a premium position but in many fantasy leagues the opposite is true and Drouin's wing position will actually be an asset to you.

But what does this all mean in terms of upside?

Well, MacKinnon and Drouin were teammates in junior this year. They helped each other to achieve these incredible heights. If Drouin is Patrick Kane with his magic hands on the wing then surely MacKinnon is Jonathan Toews, working his lethal but more dependable game up the middle but it isn't quite so simple.

There are any number of possibilities for each player along the road leading to his upside. Surely there is a version of Jonathan Toews where he is relied upon as more of a scorer and so too is there a potential future like that for MacKinnon. MacKinnon's NHL team may not choose to use him as the Blackhawks use Toews, constantly taking on the opponents' best and instead they may shield him and give him the opportunity to beat up on opponents' weaker lines.

Destination will certainly matter for these two but not as much as you think, mostly because we can't really predict how the coaches will deploy them once they get there. I know people are salivating at the idea Drouin might fall to Tampa Bay at three so that he can team up with Steven Stamkos and Martin St. Louis. Certainly that is a great scenario but might the coach decide to put Drouin with Lecavalier and roll with two powerful lines but ultimately sapping a bit of the potential production from Drouin?



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But don't just take my word for it. I am admittedly not a scout. There are plenty of great takes out there for you to read. Perhaps take a consensus. Ask your dog. Flip a coin. It's that freaking close! Definitely do yourself a favour and pick up Dobber's Prospects Guide if you haven't already. It will help you not only with this grand problem but all your prospect difficulties. I don't want to step on the work they did in the guide but I will state this much; of the six writers in the guide half voted MacKinnon the better fantasy prospect and half voted Drouin the better prospect. I didn't write for the guide so maybe you count my vote and give Drouin the edge or maybe you dismiss it altogether.

I look forward to your thoughts on this. I'm ready to be proven wrong.