

Cage Match - Zach Bogosian vs. Erik Johnson

The trend with the recent *Cage Match* articles is about giving the people what they want so by request we will get our bust on this week looking at Zach

Bogosian

and

Erik Johnson

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. Now you might argue that the bust label is unfair so allow me to qualify. It's completely unfair to label a guy who skates over 20 minutes a night for his team a bust, regardless of his draft position but from a fantasy perspective well that gets a bit more reasonable. When a defenseman gets drafted that high we assume he has some offensive acumen and we hope he's going to be the next

Chris Pronger

. The problem is that there's only one

Chris Pronger

and even with him the dividends were slow to arrive. So even when considering fantasy hockey you have to be really careful when applying that bust label to a defenseman because they can take forever to develop.

Let's look at Johnson first, the older of the pair. Johnson is still only 25 years old, if you can believe it. He could easily be two or three years from hitting his offensive stride. The issue with making that argument is that Johnson's fantasy output has spiralled away with each consecutive year. That bears a deeper investigation though because it's entirely possible this is just a reflection of Johnson's changing role on his team.

Consider that in Johnson's rookie season he was eased in with very easy minutes. He led all Blues defensemen that year with 3:45 minutes per game on the power play but actually only played 18:11 per game and 50.1% of his shifts came in the offensive zone good for second on the team. Johnson scored a very solid 33 points in 69 games, which only gave us more reason for excitement. That's when disaster struck. As you certainly know, Johnson would miss the entire 2008-09 season recovering from knee surgery following a freak golf accident. Johnson would bounce back in 2009-10 though with more of the easy minutes.

Johnson would ultimately play a bigger role skating 21:46 per game in 2009-10 but still led the Blues defensemen in power play time and also received the most offensive zone starts with a whopping 59.9%. That season Johnson would score a promising 10 goals and 39 points in 79 games seemingly showing few ill effects of his knee injury. More over he'd also suit up for the Silver Medal winning USA hockey team at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, which only further cemented his place as one of the best up-and-comers.

2010-11 is where things start to go south, which coincides with Alex Pietrangelo 's arrival in St.

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Louis full time. Pietrangelo was the new young stud and needed the easy minutes so Johnson's role changed. He continued to see big minutes but was reduced to second unit power play time and also saw a lot less power play time. The specific figures on this are a bit sketchy since Johnson was dealt to Colorado at the deadline but we know from his FrozenPool profile

for that season that he didn't become a real offensive threat until after he landed in Colorado. Johnson scored 10 points in 22 games for Colorado but just 29 in 77 overall. Still, there were positives to take away from his time in Colorado.

Unfortunately those positives would all but whittle away in 2011-12. Sure, Johnson was still treated to an in-human 59.2% rate of offensive zone starts but that was somehow only good for third on the Avalanche among defensemen. He was also reduced to skating 20:50 per game with just 2:14 on the power play. Part of the reason for this is the reduced number of penalties drawn by the Avalanche that season but he was also only a second unit power play man for much of the year. He would score just 26 points in 73 games that year.

The bottom completely fell out this season for Johnson. He not only missed a third of this already shortened season due to injury but the minute-sapping continued as Johnson was reduced to 20:45 per game with just 1:53 on the power play – still quality minutes but not top minutes. The result: four points in 31 games. You can attribute some of this to luck but Johnson was also down to fourth among defensemen for offensive zone starts at just 51.1%.

So where does Johnson go from here? Well he's never had the privilege of playing for a top offensive team (save for 2010-11 when the Blues were a top 10 scoring team but he was also dealt part-way through that season) so he could certainly be suffering from so poor situational luck. He also has shown some ability to produce when given a healthy number of minutes but it remains to be seen if he deserves to be given those minutes. 55 of Johnson's 131 career points have come via the power play, which would seem to indicate he really needs to get those heavy power play minutes but he's never had a super-productive year on the power play because he simply isn't a dynamic power play quarterback. He has a heavy shot and that makes him an asset on the power play but you don't want him to be the guy running the show. Colorado may not have that guy.

Johnson probably shouldn't see his minutes bounce back up. He's not a brilliant puck-mover, nor is he a dynamic individual threat. What he is is big, reliable and capable of playing tough minutes. He never has played the toughest minutes – in Colorado the likes of <u>Jan Hejda</u> and <u>Greg Zanon</u>

see more of those but former head coach Joe Sacco still realized that Johnson wasn't the

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answer as a top puck mover but a new head coach may see things differently.

It's hard to say for sure what the new Avalanche head coach will decide. As the highest paid defenseman on the roster you would think the Avalanche would seek to get more out of Johnson than just second pairing minutes but perhaps they've resigned themselves to that being his fate or a new head coach could push him back out there on the top power play unit.

One wrinkle that must be considered is that the Avalanche will almost certainly draft defenseman Seth Jones first overall this summer, making him the first defenseman to go in the top spot since Johnson. Logic dictates that when Jones makes the leap – and he will likely do so next season – the team will seek to ease him in much like the Blues did Johnson. That would mean the offensive zone starts and the easy matchups and the top power play minutes would all go to Jones – Johnson would be left picking up the scraps. You don't want to speculate too much but it's just hard to envision Johnson sneaking back into a top power play role. The Avalanche have better puck movers like Tyson Barrie to steal minutes as well as Jones. And we also don't know that the Avalanche will even start to develop into a higher scoring team any time soon.

Believe it or not Bogosian might be in even bigger trouble. With top defensemen like <u>Dustin</u> Byfuglien

and

Tobias Enstrom

already blocking his path to top minutes Bogosian also has top prospect Jacob Trouba coming to muddy the waters as well as pros like

Paul Postma

and

Zach Redmond

battling for minutes as well. The Jets are in an enviable position having so many talented young defensemen but it may force some tough decisions.

The Jets have experimented with Byfuglien at forward, but it's just hard to see them sticking with that full time. They gave Byfuglien a big fat contract so that he could gobble up minutes on the blue line, not park his butt in front of the net. Oh sure, he's good at doing that too but the going rate for guys like that (think Patric Hornqvist) is about two million dollars a year cheaper than what they are paying Byfuglien.

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But let's say for a second that Byfuglien was moved up to forward, does that mean that Bogosian would take over on the top unit? No, probably not. When the Jets experimented with Byfuglien at forward it often involved moving Olli Jokinen back to the point so it was still three forwards and two defensemen out there just in a different configuration. Now Jokinen was a colossal failure this year but even moving him off the top unit and keeping Byfuglien in front doesn't necessarily save Bogosian a spot. Another forward could take over or perhaps Trouba or one of the other defensemen could take the spot. After all, we've seen that teams like to treat their young talented defensemen with easy minutes to start out – with Bogosian somehow being an exception.

Yes Bogosian has never really gotten the easy treatment. Even in his rookie season Bogosian received just the third most offensive zone starts at even strength. All told he skated just 18:10 per game with just 1:06 on the power play as a rookie. His minutes did pick up down the stretch and he rewarded with a hot finish but overall he scored just 19 points in 47 games in a mediocre and injury plagued rookie season.

Things got better for Bogosian as a sophomore as far as health is concerned but otherwise not so much. Oh sure, his minutes went up to 21:24 per game but he still saw just 1:39 on the power play as he skidded to a 23 point sophomore season in 81 games played.

Injuries would prove to be an issue over the next few seasons as Bogosian would miss 11, 17 and 15 games the following three seasons but otherwise things have improved some. 2010-11 was more of the same in terms of minutes with Bogosian skating 22:24 per game with 1:58 on the power play resulting in just 17 points in 71 games.

The last two seasons have been much more promising though. Bogosian scored 30 points in 65 games last season seeing 23:19 per game with 2:28 on the power play. This season Bogosian scored 14 points in 33 games seeing 23:07 per game with just 1:45 on the power play.

Bogosian is seemingly stuck as a second fiddle, playing tough defensive minutes and seeing little reward in terms of offensive minutes. It's hard to see Bogosian shaking that role any time soon as he is perhaps the best suited defenseman for those minutes in Winnipeg. But he is a RFA this summer and could perhaps be stolen away by a needier team. That could see him take on a much bigger offensive role. We don't know for certain what he would do with that role (although he has shown flashes of scoring punch when Byfuglien has been out of the lineup) but he definitely has the air of mystery on his side.

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Bogosian also has time as he is still just 22 years old. Bogosian may have to wait until Byfuglien is gone but he'd still be just 26 by the time Byfuglien's contract is up. That's essentially where Johnson is now and he still doesn't seem on the cusp of breaking out so who knows what the future holds.

I am fairly optimistic that Bogosian will at least get a chance somewhere else though. Trouba is NHL ready and his arrival basically makes someone expendable. With the cap where it is it may be tough to move Byfuglien's contract and with Bogosian's RFA status the Jets may decide that paying a bunch of defensemen over five million dollars a year is more burden than privilege. In that scenario they could move Bogosian for a forward and slot Trouba into his minutes. Easier said than done of course but it's possible. The thing to like about Bogosian is that it almost certainly can't get worse.

Bogosian is also intriguing because his big shot has yet to truly be tested as a power play weapon. Maybe he winds up a lot like Johnson in that respect but a third of Bogosian's career points have been goals and yet only six of his 34 career goals have come on the power play. He probably deserves to be given a chance. Worst case scenario he's just like Johnson - a second line guy with intriguing upside in a pinch – but maybe, just maybe there's more to be had. So I'm taking Bogosian mostly because Johnson hasn't given us any reason not to gamble on Bogosian's youth.

All zone start stats courtesy of Gabriel Desjardins fantastic BehindTheNet.

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