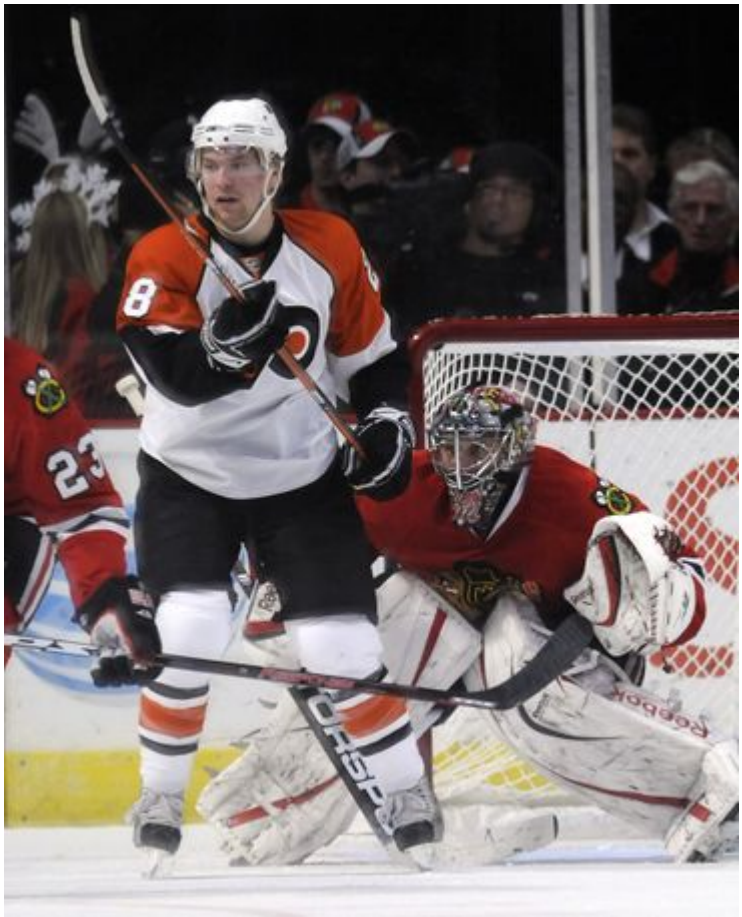

Trying to predict the next breakout star in the NHL is something we all enjoy. It involves both research and prognosticating, and often taking a risk or two. I tend to take moderate risks when proclaiming my picks for breakout stars. No guts, no glory, right? (Might be a bit of an exaggeration, as we are simply talking fantasy hockey here, but who cares!)

Two seasons ago my guy was Zach Parise (hit). Last season it was Brent Burns (jury is back and forth on this one). However, this season it was Steve Bernier (miss), proving even the

“experts“ (a term self-proclaimed at times) are far from perfect. Having a breakout season requires a combination of factors, many outside of the players‘ control. A supremely skilled player may never break out until given the right opportunity, and a less skilled player may break out if put in a position to succeed. In addition, Dobber has noticed and proven the statistical trend of the “fourth year breakout.”

A few of the players on this list may seem more obvious than others. Read on to find out about three players (in no specific order) I have noticed showing signs of breaking out in the not-too-distant future.

James Neal - Dallas Stars. I was a bit hesitant to put Neal on this list because he as essentially already broken out. However, I believe Neal is only scratching the surface of his offensive potential, and due to both skill and opportunity, next season will be a big one for him. Firstly, lets start with the skill. He gained coach Dave Tippett’s trust right off the bat by showing an ability to play at both ends of the ice. Neal was given ample ice time (on both the PP and PK), which undoubtedly helped his game develop further. He skates very well for such a big guy, and has some jam to his game as well. And with regards to an opportunity, Neal could not have asked for more this season. Captain and fellow left-winger Brenden Morrow went down for the season, allowing Neal to step in and play offensive minutes. Sean Avery, another left-winger, spoke his way off the team. Fellow rookie Fabian Brunnstrom was injured and sick as well, giving Neal even more responsibility. Now that he has taken advantage of his opportunity, an even bigger one will arise next season when Morrow and Mike Ribeiro will be looking for a full time line mate. Jere Lehtinen will most likely be brought back at a reduced price, but his days as a top line winger are long gone (although his recent hot streak says otherwise). If Neal keeps his recent level of play up, he will be a Calder finalist. Neal is on a 30 goal pace this season, a number he will smash in 2009-2010.

Claude Giroux – Philadelphia Flyers. If frequent the DobberHockey.com message boards, you would know that I am a big fan of Giroux. His offensive skills are fantastic, and he plays a smart enough game to get away with his small stature. He took some time to adjust to the AHL, but currently has the highest PPG among all rookies in the league with 32 points in 34 games with the Phantoms. Since being called up he has five points in 13 games in a Flyers uniform. His ice-time has risen as well, starting with 11 minutes back in early January and climbing to as high as 19 minutes in early February. His playmaking skills are going to be a fantastic compliment to the sniping ability of Jeff Carter. Giroux’s opportunity beckons particularly next season for a few reasons. The Flyers are tight against the cap, so they will be in tough trying to re-sign winger Mike Knuble. There are also rumors they are shopping winger Scottie Upshall. Potentially, the only right wing ahead of Giroux on the depth chart next season will be Joffrey Lupul. Giroux has proven that he is ready to play pro hockey after a disappointing camp. As for next season, he will be in contention for the Calder, and is a safe bet for 45-55 points playing in the Flyers top six.

Nate Gerbe – Buffalo Sabres. After an extremely impressive three-year career at Boston College, the Sabres signed the pint-sized Gerbe (a 5’6” measurement may even be generous). He dominated the prospects camp and has been equally as dominant in the AHL, potting 19 goals and 36 points in 31 games for the Portland Pirates. He is the next in line to be called up to

Buffalo in case of an injury. Speaking of injuries, Gerbe battled a minor concussion that made him miss seven games, but he returned on February 7th, recording an assist on a Mark Mancari goal. Gerbe's real opportunity to shine will come next season. Maxim Afinogenov is as good as gone in Buffalo, and would have been dealt by now if he had any value whatsoever. Ales Kotalik is also a free agent, and Buffalo may let him walk if he demands anything over $3 million per season (a number he could surely get on the open market). Gerbe can line up at both wing and center, but his best bet of sticking around in the NHL is on the wing. Derek Roy is firmly entrenched as the top pivot in Buffalo, and the oft-injured Tim Connolly will be re-signed if you believe recent remarks by Sabres GM Darcy Regier. Look for the dynamic Gerbe to be on the Sabres roster fulltime next season. Like Giroux and Neal, he will be playing an important offensive role.