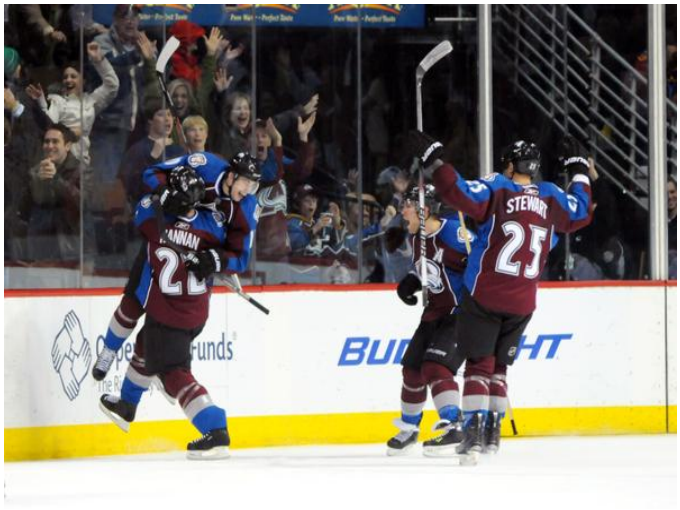

The Colorado Avalanche, expected to be out of playoff contention this season in the Western Conference, have surprised even the wildest of optimists with their play to date. They were entering 2009-10 with an unproven starting goaltender in Craig Anderson, and a roster which featured a potentially disjointed mix of old and young players. However, first year Coach Joe Sacco has brought the mixture together and made it work in a big way. Thanks in large part to the strong goaltending from Anderson, The Avalanche are currently leading the Northwest Division.

Colorado's young talent has impressively stepped in seamlessly and contributed to the team's success. First year forward Matt Duchene is the cream of the crop, but he has been joined by the likes of Chris Stewart, TJ Galiardi, Ryan O'Reilly, Brandon Yip, and Kyle Cumiskey.

Matt Duchene

Duchene started the season slowly, with only seven points in his first 20 games. However, since then he has 33 points in 38 games, and currently leads all NHL rookies in scoring. Duchene has had some unproductive stretches throughout the season, but that should be expected with any young player, especially an 18 year old playing an important role on a playoff club. He is on pace for 25 goals and 56 points, and is playing over 17 minutes per night. Colorado mixes and matches their lines quite often, and Duchene has lined up with a wide variety of players. His most common line mates have been Milan Hejduk, Galiardi, and Yip. Of his 18 goals, only four of them have come at the Pepsi Center. Most players tend to produce at a better rate at home compared to on the road, but Duchene is bucking that trend. He will very shortly leapfrog Paul Stastny as Colorado's top line center, possibly as early as next season. Expect Duchene to be a 30-40 goal scorer each year, with the capability to put up more with good linemates. Duchene already has the speed and skill to routinely make NHL defensemen look foolish. Not much else really needs to be said – if you own him, sit back and enjoy.

Chris Stewart

Aside from Anderson, Stewart has been the biggest surprise this season in Colorado. Unlike his brother Anthony, who Florida drafted in the stacked 2003 1st round, Chris has an impressive work ethic and it has propelled him to great things offensively. He tips the scales at close to 230 pounds, and is more than willing to use it. Stewart is on pace for 26 goals and 57 points – nearly identical totals as Duchene. He has played the majority of the time with Stastny and Wojtek Wolski on Colorado's top line, and his physicality and net presence have been a great fit with those two. Stewart also possesses a ton of skill, both as a playmaker and a goal scorer. He has

soft hands and a very quick release on his shot. This is his first full NHL season (he had 11 goals in 53 games last year in Colorado), and he is already on pace for close to 30 goals. How much higher can he go? Questions like this make fantasy hockey interesting. Stewart could continue his rapid offensive progression and develop into a 40 goal scorer, but only eight players in the entire league hit that total last season, so it may be optimistic to expect that from Stewart. The unique thing about Colorado is that their young core is all coming in to the league as every day players at the same time, so they have the benefit of learning and developing together.

TJ Galiardi

Although Galiardi is only 21 years old, he is playing an integral role on Colorado's penalty kill (the 12th best in the league). He is averaging 3:15 of shorthanded ice time per game, second on the entire team (including defensemen) to Scott Hannan. The fact that Colorado has two forwards under the age of 21 (O'Reilly being the other) on their top penalty kill unit is incredibly impressive. The top nine forwards in Colorado are an average age of 24, and this number includes a 34-year-old Darcy Tucker. Galiardi's offensive upside may be a bit limited by the two-way role Colorado envisions him playing, but even then he should become a steady 15-25 goal, 45-60 point top six forward. His importance to the team has only been highlighted in the last three games. Colorado has won all three, and Galiardi has logged over 20 minutes of ice time in each contest.

Ryan O'Reilly

Like Duchene, O'Reilly has made a huge impact in Colorado at only the age of 18 (he turned 19 only four days ago). And like Galiardi, he is doing most of his work on the penalty kill. 14 of his 20 points game in Colorado's first 24 games. Since that point, O'Reilly only has six in 34 games. However, he has found other ways to help the team win. Trying to figure out his upside is extremely difficult, both because of his age and because a lot of it depends on how the Avalanche view him for the future. He only played two full seasons in the OHL, scoring 19 goals in 2007-08 and 16 in 2008-09. With Duchene and Stastny occupying the top two lines, he may face a situation similar to that of Jordan Staal in Pittsburgh and to a lesser degree Martin Hanzal in Phoenix – the sacrifice of offense for defence. O'Reilly is still on pace for close to 30 points, a number that is all the more impressive considering the fact that he wasn't even a 1st round draft pick last year (Colorado selected him 34th overall). Aside from Patrice Bergeron with Boston in 2003-04, I can't recall a forward selected in the 2nd round who stepped in to the NHL right away and had such a big impact.

Brandon Yip

Yip hasn't been in Colorado all season like the others mentioned in this article, but he has had an impact just as big. In only 23 games, he has 11 goals and 18 points. That projects to just fewer than 40 goals and close to 70 points over the course of an 82 game season. His shooting percentage is abnormally high at 23.4 percent, and that is usually an indicator that a player is producing at a rate above where they should be. He had his best game of the season two nights ago against the Blues, scoring twice and playing over 20 minutes. He has been able to work himself on to the second power play unit, and four of his 11 goals have come with the man advantage. In his final season at Boston University, Yip scored 20 goals and had close to 120 penalty minutes in 45 games. He has only 12 penalty minutes through 23 games, but plays with a physical edge and should be a valuable guy for the future in leagues that count penalty minutes. Yip is listed in most places as being 6'1" and 181 pounds, but he looks to be a bit taller and a lot heavier, so those numbers may be dated. The Avalanche have a lot of cap space to

use with so many cheap young players on the roster, so it remains to be seen if Yip will have an opportunity to play a regular shift on the second line next season. Marek Svatos won't be back. Darcy Tucker might, but he may also choose to retire. Milan Hejduk has a year left on his contract, but is only a shadow of what he used to be because of the knee injuries. That leaves only Wolski, Galiardi, Stewart, and David Jones ahead of Yip on the winger depth chart right now.

Kyle Cumiskey

Cumiskey is one of the most fluid skaters in the game. If you ever get a chance to watch Colorado play, keep your eyes peeled for him. The way he can rush the puck and close gaps effortlessly is very reminiscent of a young Scott Niedermayer. Even as a defenseman, Cumiskey has never been a goal scorer at any level before, with his highest goal total (seven, which he has matched this season in Colorado) coming way back in 2006-07 with the Albany River Rats. He leads all Colorado defensemen in goals, but is only fourth in overall point production (14 points). It appears that John-Michael Liles is on the way out in Colorado, so look for Cumiskey to play more minutes (he is currently averaging just fewer than 20 per game) as the season progresses. He is playing 2:15 of power play time per game, compared to the 3:30 averaged by Liles. If Liles is traded, his minutes will get spread out amongst the defensemen, but Liles and Cumiskey are similar defensemen so a transition makes sense. It remains to be seen if Cumiskey will develop into a viable fantasy option (30-40 point defenseman), or if he will become more of a swift-skating, two-way defenseman like Bret Hedican.