

## Looking Ahead to 2010-11 - Part II

Written by Jeff Angus

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The trade deadline has come and gone in the NHL and the same holds true for most fantasy hockey leagues. For those of you in contention for first place, more time is now spent focusing on which categories you need to improve during the final few weeks, and if there are any players available on the waiver wire that can help you in that regard. For those of you who have no shot at winning this year, now is the time to focus on next season (provided you are in a keeper league, of course). Once trading opens back up in the summer, the build for the future will continue. Trading for unproven prospects and young players is always a risk, but there are ways to mitigate that. (Reading DobberHockey is a great start!) There are several young players who are ready to step in and produce next season in the NHL, and you may be able to get a few of them below value this summer.

**Colin Wilson**

Wilson's 2009-10 season started off miserably, as he suffered a groin injury in training camp and it took him over two months to completely recover from the injury. The Predators implemented a much more vigorous training program at camp this past September, and about five or six other players in the organization sustained similar injuries to Wilson (none missed as much time, though). They wanted to test player durability, but ended up causing unnecessary damage. After receiving a plasma injection into his groin (I don't even want to begin to understand what that is or how it feels), Wilson got back to playing hockey. It took him a little while to get his legs under him with Milwaukee, but he eventually played well enough to earn a promotion to Nashville in early February.

With Milwaukee this season, Wilson has scored 13 goals and recorded 21 assists in 40 games. His goal total is far from impressive, but he has only fired 66 shots on goal, or only about one and a half per game. However, as mentioned earlier, Wilson was able to improve his play enough with the Admirals to get called up. 10 of his 13 goals were scored after January 1<sup>st</sup>, and he had nine points in his final seven games with Milwaukee.

With the Predators, he has shifted to right wing on a line with Jason Arnott and Martin Erat. Wilson projects as a center because of his skating ability and strong two-way play, but sometimes young centers have more room and more opportunity to do things offensively when they get some time at the wing early on. Vancouver did this with Ryan Kesler a bit, both early in his career and last season after the signing of Mats Sundin. With the Predators, Wilson has seven goals in only 27 games (and four in his last 10 contests). He is shooting the puck a bit more, as well (66 shots so far). At 6'1" and well over 210 pounds, Wilson has had an NHL body for a few years now. Some wondered if his early physical development would actually hinder his upside (less room to grow), but I don't think that will be the case. His best attributes include speed, vision, and puck protection. Once Wilson gets up to speed, he is very, very hard to knock off the puck.

Aside from the required skills to succeed in the NHL, young players need a great opportunity to break out. Wilson has just that in Nashville. Jason Arnott has only one year left on his current deal, and he is both aging and injury prone. After him, the Predators have David Legwand, a glorified checking center who is massively overpaid (he carries an annual cap hit of \$4.5 million). Cal O'Reilly is lurking down the depth chart as well, but he doesn't have Wilson's upside at the NHL level. Look for the Predators to continue to use Wilson at wing as long as Arnott is healthy, but he is already the second most talented center on the team from an offensive standpoint. 20 goals and 45-50 points should be expected out of Wilson for next season.

### Logan Couture

Couture is a very safe bet to develop into a dependable NHL player. He has always been a bit overlooked because his game lacks flash (much like current Shark Joe Pavelski), but he does everything at an above average level. In fact, many in the organization are comparing him to Pavelski. Both were very polished defensively at a young age, but struggled with skating and acceleration. Pavelski has really improved in that regard since joining the Sharks, and most expect Couture to do the same.

He has 20 goals and 33 assists in only 40 games this season with Worcester, and has fired an impressive 130 shots on goal. At the NHL level, he hasn't seen the minutes required to produce

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points. His most common linemates have been Jody Shelley, Brad Staubitz, and Manny Malhotra. The Sharks currently boast three elite centers on the team (Pavelski, Joe Thornton, and Patrick Marleau), but a lot can happen this summer. Couture should be pencilled in as the third line center next season, but there is a good chance that one of Marleau (free agent) or Thornton (depending on how the playoffs go this season) will not be back in teal for 2010-11. It doesn't make sense to move Couture to wing, because he is more of a playmaker, and he is already a strong defensive player. The same case can be made for Pavelski, who is one of the best faceoff men in the league already.

In 16 games with the Sharks this season, Couture has a goal and two assists. He is playing a shade under nine minutes per game. His immediate upside depends a lot on what San Jose does in the summer. If he makes the team as the third line center next year, he could hit the 40-45 point mark. The potential for more exists if he is able to earn a spot on the second power play unit. His upside is similar to Pavelski's – both players have high-end hockey sense, decent speed and acceleration, and determination in spades.

### Lars Eller

Like Couture, Eller is one of the safest bets among prospects to develop into a very good NHL player. He has been compared to Henrik Zetterberg because of his strong skating, awareness in all three zones, and ability to both score and distribute the puck. The fact that he can play both wing and center is very valuable, and is a trait shared by many players on the Blues (McDonald, Boyes, Backes, and Oshie have all lined up at wing and center this season). It will

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also be a valuable trait to Eller owners, because McDonald, Backes, and Berglund project as the centers in St. Louis for the immediate future.

Eller has only played five games at the NHL level this season, and skated mostly on a line with Oshie and Patrik Berglund. With Peoria, he has 15 goals and 35 assists in 63 games, including 145 shots on goal. One thing to keep in mind with Eller (and other Blues prospects), is the familiarity with coach Davis Payne. Often times when AHL coaches are promoted to run the NHL team, prospects that have played under them have a bit of a head start when it comes to earning a roster spot. It happened in Vancouver with Alain Vigneault and Kevin Bieksa, Rick Rypien, Alex Burrows, and Ryan Kesler, it happened in Washington with Bruce Boudreau and Tomas Fleischmann, and the same thing happened this season in Ottawa with Cory Clouston and Peter Regin. A rule of thumb should be to always check which prospects played under a recently promoted coach. Look for Eller to earn a spot on St. Louis' top nine for next season, and to score between 10-15 goals and add 25-35 assists. Like Couture, a lot of his short-term upside depends on what goes on this summer with his team.

Here is Payne's take on Eller, "Right from day one, he's shown a high level of skill... and ability to make plays with the puck. He's an explosive skater, he thinks the game, and he's creative." Here are some more words of praise, from Blues President John Davidson, "When you see a young man come over from Europe, you're not sure how long it will take him to adapt to the smaller ice surface... you have to pay the price, but he was willing to do that. There's others that aren't willing to do that. We appreciate his attitude."

**Mathieu Perreault**

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Perreault was extremely impressive earlier this season during a brief stint with the Caps. You only needed to watch him play a few times to get an appreciation for his work ethic, awareness (seems to be the theme for this article), and tenacity in all three zones. He skated on a unit with Eric Fehr and Tomas Fleischmann, and the three clicked right away. He had seven points in 18 games, but only fired 23 shots on goal, and played an average of 11:22 per game. Perreault fell victim to the incredible depth possessed by Washington, and was subsequently sent back down to Hershey.

Where it gets interesting with him (and other Caps prospects) is how GM George McPhee handles the free agency situation this summer. Washington is always going to be tight to the cap because they have invested so much in Ovechkin and Green, and will undoubtedly do the same this summer when they re-sign Nick Backstrom. Aside from those big three, Alex Semin is only signed through 2010-11, and there may not be money for him to come back after that. Fehr and Fleischmann, who both have enjoyed career years, are set to become restricted free agents this summer. Perreault's cap hit of \$700,000 will look very, very good to Washington as they try and fit the pieces together this summer and beyond.

Beyond Backstrom at center, the Capitals currently have Eric Belanger, Brendan Morrison, and David Steckel. Steckel will always be a checking line player, and both Belanger and Morrison are unrestricted free agents this summer. Brooks Laich can play center as well, but he is more effective on the wing (and he is also due for a massive raise this summer). Look for Perreault to slide in somewhere in the top nine next season. He may play an energy role until an offensive spot opens up, but don't sleep on him – 50 points is attainable if he plays with offensive players and sees time with the man advantage.

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