I have a few general rules when it comes to building a team in a fantasy hockey keeper league. One of the more important ones is to not plan beyond a two or three year window. You are not building a real NHL club, and too often fantasy hockey poolies place an emphasis on youth and prospects over proven veterans with gas still left in the tank. So using my general rule, take a look at your team(s). Can you realistically say you will have a shot at winning the league at some point within the next two or three seasons? If not, time to scrap the rebuild and start adding proven NHL talent.

Keeping my rule in mind, I have compiled a list of the top 10 keeper league centers to own (assuming standard keeper league rules and scoring categories). Using the two or three season scope, I had to balance proven production with young players on the verge of breaking out. I hope you enjoy!

From a pure talent standpoint, center ice is the deepest position in fantasy hockey. Ryan Ma's latest article
does a fantastic job comparing production among the best players at each position. If you didn't check it out a few days ago, make sure you do now! Compiling a list of the 10 best keeper league centers to own was incredibly tough. After the top six, it was wide open. There are both

veterans and rookies who didn't make the list this time around, but could very easily slide into the top 10 with a strong 2010-11.

**1. Sidney Crosby – Pittsburgh Penguins**

**Age:** 22

**Contract:** $8.7 million/season, signed through 2012-13

Pittsburgh failed to get a scorer for Crosby to play with last summer, so he decided to become one. He scored 51 goals and recorded 109 points playing with the likes of Bill Guerin and Chris Kunitz. Imagine how he'll do if/when Pittsburgh develops or acquires an elite winger for him to play with? Crosby may never hit his upside if he is continually stuck with third line talent on the wings. My three year upside assumes that Pittsburgh is able to add a sidekick for Crosby at some point during that time.

**One year upside:** 115

**Three year upside:** 130

**2. Evgeni Malkin – Pittsburgh Penguins**

**Age:** 23

**Contract:** $8.7 million/season, signed through 2013-14

Malkin has taken a bit of a tumble since his spectacular 2008-09 season. That season he led the league in points with 113, and added an enormous 36 more points in the playoffs, en route to his first Stanley Cup and Conn Smythe. Malkin recorded only 77 points in 67 games for the

Penguins in 2009-10, and had only 11 in 12 postseason games. He is one of the most talented players in the game, but for whatever reason he was just a bit off this past season. Don't expect his struggles to carry over into 2010-11, though.

**One year upside:** 115

**Three year upside:** 125

**3. Steven Stamkos – Tampa Bay Lightning**

**Age: 20**

**Contract:** $3.725 million/season (including bonuses), signed through 2010-11

How good was his sophomore season? Stamkos finished his rookie campaign in 2008-09 with 46 points. He scored his 46th goal of his 2009-10 season on March 31st, and he finished the season with 51 goals, tying him with Crosby for the league lead. Stamkos is the first 20-year-old to break the 90-point barrier since... Crosby. Wayne Gretzky had his office behind the net. Brett Hull had the top of the slot. All of the great scorers had their domains on the offensive zone. Stamkos has ruled over the area just off the half wall, on his one-timer side. Of his 24 power play goals, at least 15 of them came from within a two or three foot spot on the ice. Knowing exactly what a player is going to do, and still being unable to stop him? Now that is scary.

**One year upside:** 105

**Three year upside:** 110

**4. Nicklas Backstrom – Washington Capitals**

**Age:** 22

**Contract:** RFA

Backstrom's progression as a goal scorer is something that no one could have predicted. He came over from Sweden in 2007, never having scored more than 12 goals in the SEL. He broke that mark with a 14-goal rookie season, and improved once again in 2008-09, firing 22 pucks past opposing goaltenders. Backstrom continued his incredible development as a goal scorer this past season, recording 33 tallies. Does he score 40 next year, or has he peaked? There is definite room for improvement on the 68 assists he dished out in 2009-10, as Washington's young core has nowhere to go but up. He lacks the physicality and intensity of Peter Forsberg, but he passes and protects the puck just like him. Backstrom and Ovechkin are going to make many poolies very successful over the next decade.

**One year upside:** 110

**Three year upside:** 115

**5. Ryan Getzlaf – Anaheim Ducks**

**Age:** 25

**Contract:** $5.3 million/season, signed through 2013-14

Getzlaf had a tough offensive season, for a few reasons. The 2009-10 edition of the Ducks paled in comparison to the deep and physically dominant Anaheim teams we have become accustomed to seeing. After Getzlaf and Saku Koivu (who both had 19 goals), the next highest scoring Anaheim center was Kyle Chipchura with six. Second, Getzlaf sustained an ankle injury right before the Olympics, and valiantly played through it, helping Canada win Gold in Vancouver. However, he also cut his disappointing season with the Ducks short because of it. Third and finally, he lost even more hair. Getzlaf is going bald faster than you can say “buy low” (which is what you should try and do).

**One year upside:** 100

**Three year upside:** 110

**6. Henrik Sedin – Vancouver Canucks**

**Age:** 29

**Contract:** $6.1 million/season, signed through 2013-14

If I wrote this article last year and put Sedin's one year upside at 112 points, I probably would have gotten an email from Dobber making sure I hadn't lost my sanity. Sedin's previous four point totals – 75, 81, 76, 82, were all nice, neat, and consistent. The Sedins had great value

because of this consistency – they were great picks because you had a great idea where they would end up production-wise. Henrik started the season on a hot streak, but then his twin Daniel went down with a foot injury. Most assumed Henrik would slump without Daniel, as the two had played exclusively together since entering the league nearly a decade ago. However, he pulled a Crosby and morphed into a scorer, scoring 10 times during the 18 games Daniel missed. After Daniel returned, he stepped up his production even more, recording a near-unfathomable 50 points in December and January.

He finished the season with 112 points, about 30 more than most expected from him. The biggest reason for his improvement, aside from the continual improvement both he and Daniel display, was Vancouver's offensive depth. The Canucks had the league's second most potent second line behind Washington (Mikael Samuelsson, Ryan Kesler, and Mason Raymond combined for 80 goals), and a defenseman who could ramp up the tempo of a game instantaneously (Christian Ehrhoff). The Canucks had six players finish with 50 or more points this season. Back in 2007-08, they had three. Sedin's big breakout season came immediately *af ter*
he signed a long-term extension – that tells you all you need to know about him.

**One year upside:** 105

**Three year upside:** 112 (cheeky?)

## 7. Anze Kopitar – Los Angeles Kings

**Age:** 22

**Contract:** $6.8 million/season, signed through 2015-16

Kopitar is only scratching the surface of his offensive potential. His 81 points this past season led the Kings by a significant margin (22 points over second-place Drew Doughty). He can play in all situations, and is a pretty decent defensive forward considering he is still only 22, and is primarily focused on playing well in offensive situations. It is only a matter of time (a little over a month if you subscribe to the rumours) until the Kings land a star winger to play with Kopitar. They have yet to find the right fit. Brown and Kopitar have never clicked. Justin Williams can't keep up after two serious knee operations, and Ryan Smyth never could. Because of his size (6'4" and 220 pounds), he has garnered comparisons to Mats Sundin. Imagine a young Sundin playing without all of the clutching and grabbing? How about with a line mate like Ilya Kovalchuk? Interesting times ahead for both Kopitar and the Kings...

**One year upside:** 95

**Three year upside:** 105

**8. Joe Thornton – San Jose Sharks**

**Age:** 30

**Contract:** $7.2 million/season, signed through 2010-11

Thornton is an interesting case study in fantasy hockey. I've wanted to write a full article about this, and probably will get around to it in the summer. Up until this season (premature, maybe), Thornton has been labelled as a playoff choker. He has always been able to rack up the points in the regular season (89 points with little fanfare in 2009-10 speaks to that), but he had been unable to elevate his intensity in the important postseason games. It looks like he has finally broken through this year, but back to my point – why should his lack of playoff production matter? If your pool doesn't count playoff production, why should it affect a player's value? Sure, if an unknown rookie steps in and produces, he bears watching the next season. But Thornton, a proven 90-100 point guy has fallen down many draft boards for reasons unrelated

to fantasy hockey. Give me a 90-point playoff choker over an 89-point Conn Smythe winner every day of the week!

Back to Thornton, it is doubtful that his line mate Patrick Marleau will be back in San Jose, unless Doug Wilson gets very creative. Evgeni Nabokov and Joe Pavelski are both free agents (unrestricted and restricted, respectively) this summer, and those two probably have priority over Marleau. The Sharks could let Nabokov walk and go cheap between the pipes – the next few weeks will probably help decide the appropriate course of action. Many expected Heatley and Thornton to light it up together – they showed some sparks this season, but little sizzle. Perhaps that comes in 2010-11?

**One year upside:** 110

**Three year upside:** 110

**9. Pavel Datsyuk – Detroit Red Wings**

**Age:** 31

**Contract:** $6.7 million/season, signed through 2013-14

I gain a new appreciation for Datsyuk every time I watch him play. Some great players (Crosby, Ovechkin) do things that other players wish they could do, but lack the speed/strength/coordination to pull off. Datsyuk does things that other players can't even comprehend doing. He is the best defensive forward in the game (by far), and he is probably the best two-way forward as well. Both he and Henrik Zetterberg and subpar offensive seasons in 2009-10 – Datsyuk's in particular was disappointing, as he had recorded consecutive 97-point seasons heading in to it. Expect a strong bounce back in 2010-11. This list got tough for me to compile after the top six, but I couldn't leave off one of the game's true elite talents.

**One year upside:** 100

**Three year upside:** 100

**10. John Tavares – New York Islanders**

**Age:** 19

**Contract:** $3.75 million/season (including bonuses), signed through 2011-12

Tavares started the season strong, with 19 points in his first 21 games. However, he struggled mightily as the season progressed, scoring only two goals during a miserable 34-game stretch. He finished the season on a high note though, with 18 points in his final 13 games (including a five-point night In Vancouver). The Islanders are still probably a year or two away from playoff contention, but they finally have the right pieces in place to start moving in the right direction. Tavares, Kyle Okposo, and Josh Bailey will be solid core players to build around, and they have depth forwards like Trent Hunter and Blake Comeau. The Islanders also have a lot of cap space, but it is up to ownership to decide how much of it they are willing to use. There are some rumours that Charles Wang may be looking to sell the team to the owner to the New York Mets, which should be viewed as a huge positive. More money to spend means more talent for Tavares to play with.

**One year upside:** 70

**Three year upside:** 95

**Honourable mentions:**

**Jason Spezza** – when he is “on,” Spezza is one of the game’s best players. However, he seems to always sustain at least an injury each season, and is prone to dry spells in the offensive zone. He has the talent to be a 100-point forward every season, but he still lacks the consistency that the more prolific scorers possess.

**Eric Staal** – I was deciding between Staal and Tavares for the final spot on the list. At this point, Staal’s 100-point season back in 2005-06 is looking like an anomaly, as he has averaged only 74 points per season since then.

**Brad Richards** – Richards tied his career-high with a 91-point campaign in 2009-10. He anchored the Dallas attack, and helped both Loui Eriksson and James Neal set career marks offensively. The Stars are going to try and shop Mike Ribeiro this summer, and hope to extend Richards, as his massive $7.8-million per season contract expires after 2010-11. Richards loses some fantasy hockey value because of his inability to be a plus player – over his career, he is a cumulative minus-73. He underwent surgery in April to repair a torn hip labrum, so keep an eye on how he recovers from that.

**Marc Savard –** the Bruins as a whole struggled offensively, going from one of the league's best offensive teams to one of the worst in only a calendar year. Savard missed considerable time with a concussion, and only managed to record 33 points in the 41 games he did play. He is only 32, though, so don't expect him to start trending downward yet.

**Cody Hodgson** – Hodgson missed considerable time due to a misdiagnosed back injury, but returned to Brampton late in the season, scoring eight times in the Battalion's final 13 games. He has to have a great camp in Vancouver to earn a spot on a very deep club up front – expect him to at least start the season off in the AHL with the Moose.

**Paul Stastny** – Stastny often gets overlooked because he lacks the flash of other point-per-game players. He isn't fast, he isn't big, and he isn't physical. However, he is a smart two-way player, and is a phenomenal playmaker as well. He has broken the 70-point mark in all three of his full NHL seasons (he missed significant time in 2008-09 due to injury).

**Jonathan Toews –** Toews may never win any scoring titles in the NHL, but he has already established himself as one of the best big game players in the world. He was Canada's best forward at the 2010 Olympics, and he has been Conn Smythe worthy for the Blackhawks through two rounds. He has yet to record more than 69 points in the NHL, but expect him to do just that in 2010-11.

**Mike Richards** – Richards has averaged 73 points over his past three seasons for the Flyers. 2009-10 marked the first time he managed to play all 82 games, the most he had played in any given season before was 79. He is not elite, but very, very close.

**Ryan Kesler** – Kesler's offensive progression has been extremely rapid. Many (including yours truly) wrote off any chance of him developing offensive skills after he put up only 16 points in 2006-07 (albeit in 48 games). Since then, he has seen his point total rise from 37, to 59, to 75. I don't expect another step up to 85 or 90, and wouldn't be surprised to see Kesler drop back from 75. However, last summer I didn't expect him to hit 59 points again, so what do I know?

**Jeff Carter –** Carter regressed a bit in 2009-10, scoring 13 less goals and recording 10 less assists than he did one season before. He still shot the puck a ton (his 309 shots placed him third in the league), but the puck simply didn't go in for him as much as it did in 2008-09. Does he bounce back? Most likely, but Philadelphia may toy with the idea of moving him to wing, as they really like Claude Giroux at center, and it would be a waste to have one of Richards/Carter/Giroux on the third line.

**Henrik Zetterberg** – I already included him on the left winger list, but he plays center now for the Red Wings.

**Vincent Lecavalier –** Lecavalier hasn't been the same player ever since he blew out his shoulder from a thunderous Matt Cooke body check. The way people complained about Lecavalier last season you'd have thought he finished with 40 or 50 points. He managed to put up 70, which isn't terrible. I don't see many teams that will be eager to take on his massive contract, but the same was said about Scott Gomez last summer. He makes a good buy low candidate though – he just turned 30 a few weeks ago, and has lots of time to regain his 90 or 100-point form.

**Matt Duchene** – Duchene will be a 40-45 goal scorer very soon. He is incredibly fast, and like all great players, can make plays at top speed. Colorado is set down the middle for the next decade with him and Stastny. Stylistically, they are very different players, which allow Colorado to build two very different offensive units (much like Sedin and Kesler in Vancouver).

**Tyler Seguin –** Stamkos wouldn't have made this list in 2008, but he now ranks third. Seguin will probably factor in to the top ten in 2011 or 2012, but not yet.