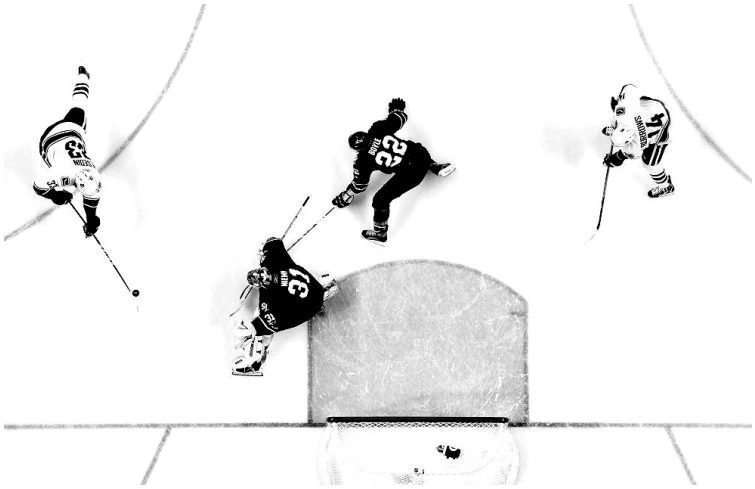

The first edition of this list was put together last year, and it is something I am going to update at least once each season. I have a few general rules when it comes to building a team in a fantasy hockey keeper league. One of the more important ones is to not plan beyond a two or three year window. You are not building a real NHL club, and too often I see poolies place too much of an emphasis on youth and prospects instead of trying to add players who could help them win now.

Using this 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 the two-to-three-year window 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 scope, the long-term upside of these players is balanced with their NHL readiness.

This list is in order, which means that I wouldn't trade the fourth player straight across for the fifth player, and so on. The one year upside is for 2011-12, and the three year upside is for any season between the next and 2013-14.

1. Sidney Crosby

A horrific concussion isn't enough to slide Crosby down this list. When healthy, he is the best hockey player on the planet. He was hoping to return to the Pittsburgh lineup this spring before suffering a setback during the recovery process, and Crosby owners (like myself) have to be at least somewhat concerned about his long-term health.

There isn't really much else to say – he scores goals, he is the best playmaker in the game, he racks up a respectable amount of PIM with the gritty edge he plays with, and he wins more faceoffs than the rest of the league… combined (at least it seems that way). It will be interesting to see if having a legitimate scoring threat on his line (James Neal, no offense to Chris Kunitz) will change his role back from a scorer to more of a playmaker. Neal hasn't proven much in the NHL without a star center to play with (Brad Richards in Dallas). Thankfully he won't have to in Pittsburgh, unless Crosby and the number two on this list are both injured at the same time again.

I may be alone, but Crosby's upside depends a lot on the role he plays. If he goes back to being primarily a playmaker, I could see some consistent 30-40 goal, 110+ point seasons. If he keeps shooting the puck, his goal total should hover closer to 50, but his overall points would be a bit less. Either way, hope his brain heals, even if you don't own him. Simply put, he's good for the game of hockey, both fantasy and on the ice.

One year upside: 50-80-130, 100 PIM

Three year upside: 50-80-130, 100 PIM

2**. Evgeni Malkin**

Fool me once, shame on you. I drafted Malkin ahead of any other player outside of Crosby and Ovechkin in my one year pool last year. His ability to fill a variety of categories was too enticing to pass up, and I didn't think Steven Stamkos would be morphing into Brett Hull 2.0 just yet. Fool me twice, shame on me. Call me stubborn, but I'd still take Malkin over Stamkos in both one-year and keeper league formats. His knee injury was serious, but doctors are so good nowadays that I have little concern for any long-term ramifications.

When at the top of his game, he is arguably a better player than Crosby and Ovechkin. Malkin skates like Sergei Fedorov, and he handles the puck like Jean Beliveau. He's not gritty or overly physical, but like his countryman Pavel Bure, he'll fight back if provoked. He's had at least 78 PIM in each of his full NHL seasons. With the upside number below, it assumes a "perfect storm" of a season. I'm not sure if the NHL is fit for a 130 or 140-point player any more, but Malkin and Crosby are the only two that have that potential – however small it is.

One year upside: 45-70-115, 100 PIM

Three year upside: 50-80-140, 100 PIM

3. Steven Stamkos

The most impressive showing from Stamkos in 2010-11 wasn't his 45 goals, nor his second-straight 82 games played. It wasn't his 74 PIM, almost exactly double his previous career high. The fresh-faced Jeff Spicoli lookalike surprised the hockey world with his lumberjack beard. In recent years, several young players have dazzled with their postseason play, while their wispy beards have left much to be desired (Crosby and Jonathan Toews, I'm looking at you two). More seriously, Stamkos further cemented his spot as one of the most dangerous scorers in the league with another stellar season.

He has the best one-timer in the league. He plays with terrific linemates. He has improved each season (although his goal total dropped by six, he was on pace for about 80 until a midseason slump got in the way). He relies on Martin St. Louis for a lot of his production, but who cares? A

goal is a goal – great players work well with other great players because they can operate and succeed at such a high level offensively. His plus-minus rating is nothing to write home about, but he more than makes up for it with his offensive numbers. He was 14th in the league with 272 shots on goal, 25 less than he fired on net in 2009-10. He needs to be closer to 300 or above.

One year upside: 55-50-105, 80 PIM

Three year upside: 60-55-115, 80 PIM

4. Henrik Sedin

If you are desperate for goals, Henrik isn't the fourth best center available. If you are desperate for consistency and assists, he may be number two. The Sedin twins entered their prime just as the Canucks made the climb to the top of the NHL. Henrik will always be playing with the best left winger in the game after Alex Ovechkin, something that the other nine on this list can't say. He has 188 assists in his last 194 games, including both the regular season and playoffs.

He probably won't score 29 again like he did during his magical 2009-10 season, but 18-22 goals per season won't be a problem for one of the league's best playmakers.

One year upside: 25-85-110, 60 PIM

Three year upside: 25-85-110, 60 PIM

5. Nicklas Backstrom

Backstrom was one of the biggest fantasy disappointments of the 2010-11 season. His offensive progression since coming to Washington had been incredible – 14 goals, to 22, to 33;

69 points, to 88, to 101. His 18 goals and 65 points this past season were both career lows.

The Capitals dialed back their high octane system this year, and Backstrom suffered as much as any player (save for Mike Green). Look for him to get back on track offensively in 2011-12 – he's simply too talented and playing with players who are too talented to continue to slump.

Backstrom doesn't shoot the puck a lot, but playmaking centers aren't often known for exorbitantly high SOG numbers. He had only 20 less SOG this season compared to last, but saw a six percent reduction in his shooting percentage. Time to break out the shooter tutor.

One year upside: 30-65-95-50 PIM

Three year upside: 35-70-105-50 PIM

6. Eric Staal

Eric Staal will get you goals, assists, points (obviously), PIM, and SOG. He led the league in SOG from a center with 296. Aside from missing 12 games in 2009-10, he has missed two total games in his NHL career. He has scored at least 30 goals each season but one. He's hit the 100 point mark once, and has tallied at least 70 each season but his first. The best is yet to come, as he has never really played with elite top line talent. Carolina has a tremendous crop of prospects, no shortage of which play on the wing.

There are a few players below Staal on the list who have more offensive upside, but I like him for the sixth spot because of his consistency and ability to deliver for a number of different statistical areas.

One year upside: 45-50-95, 50 PIM

Three year upside: 45-50-95, 50 PIM

7. John Tavares

It is a question of when, not if, Tavares will score 50 goals in the NHL. As a shoot-first center, he'll benefit in a big way from the development of many of his young teammates, as well as from the return of Mark Streit. Streit's impact on the Islanders cannot be ignored – he is an offensive catalyst who immediately will give everyone on the first power play unit an additional boost in production. Tavares is already one of the deadliest players in the game around the net – he combines ridiculous hand-eye coordination with the ability to make plays in space that doesn't really exist.

He'll be closer to 300 shots (243 in 2010-11) as he grows more comfortable in his role as offensive leader. His plus-minus will improve as the Islanders improve.

One year upside: 40-40-80, 60 PIM

Three year upside: 55-45-100, 65 PIM

8. Jonathan Toews

On my first draft of this list, I left Toews off. I have always felt that his fantasy value will never truly reflect his value to the Blackhawks in real life. After looking at the numbers and projecting the next couple of seasons, I realized I was foolish for leaving ‘Captain Serious’ on the sidelines. He has proven that he has an extra gear he can shift to in important games (postseason, 2010 Olympics, down the stretch in 2011). He is too smart of a player to ever put up noteworthy PIM numbers, but he fills just about every other standard fantasy hockey category.

Dave Bolland will take away some of the defensive responsibilities that Toews faces, but he will still see heavy minutes in tight games and on the penalty kill. He'll never be given sheltered or easy minutes, which poolies may not like to hear. Toews plays to win, regardless of the magnitude of the game.

One year upside: 40-45-85, 30 PIM

Three year upside: 45-50-90, 30 PIM

9. Anze Kopitar

The first "surprise" of this list, Kopitar should quickly move up this list once he gets some help in Los Angeles. He is the total package – big, strong, skilled, smart, and almost impossible to

knock off the puck. He looks a bit like a young Jaromir Jagr when the puck is on his stick. He plays more of a north-south game than Jagr did, though.

It is amazing what Kopitar has done in his NHL career without a legitimate top line talent to play with (Dustin Brown, Dustin Penner, and Ryan Smyth don't count). Kopitar's season ended with a nasty ankle injury, but he is on his way to a full recovery. If/when the Kings find him a legitimate top line winger to play with, expect his production to skyrocket.

One year upside: 35-55-90, 30 PIM

Three year upside: 40-60-100, 30 PIM

10. Pavel Datsyuk

If this list was for one-year leagues, Datsyuk would be much closer to the top. I polled my twitter followers and many felt that due to age, he should be left off in favor of a younger player. He turns 33 in July, which is considered ancient in the hockey world by some. I simply couldn't leave him off this list. If you want to win your pool within the next three years, he's better than any of the honorable mentions.

Datsyuk's 2010-11 season projects very well over a full 82-game schedule (he only played 56 due to injury): 34 goals and 87 points. He had consecutive 97-point campaigns in 2007-08 and 2008-09 before having an "off "year in 2009-10 with 70 points. Like Toews, Datsyuk won't give you much in terms of PIM.

One year upside: 35-60-95, 20 PIM

Three year upside: 35-60-95, 20 PIM

Honorable Mentions:

Joe Thornton – offense has suffered as his overall game has matured.

Ryan Getzlaf – doesn't fill enough categories, durability is an issue.

Ryan Kesler – two-way force, but may be hard-pressed to score 40 again.

Matt Duchene – give him a few years to crack the list.

Vincent Lecavalier – is Vinny back?

Henrik Zetterberg – when healthy, one of the best in the game.