*Doughty or Weber? Pietrangelo or Suter? Bogosian or Phaneuf?*

The 2003 NHL Entry Draft is already regarded as the best in league history. Every single pick from the 1st round has suited up for NHL action (including the immortal Hugh Jessiman), and

stars like Loui Eriksson, David Backes, Patrice Bergeron, and Joe Pavelski were all discovered in later rounds.

2003 was also rich in defensive talent. Dion Phaneuf emerged post-lockout as a hard-hitting rookie with Calgary. Shea Weber, Ryan Suter, Brent Seabrook, Brent Burns, Tobias Enstrom, Dustin Byfuglien, and Braydon Coburn have all come into their own as top pairing stars, and there are several other defensemen from 2003 who have become impact players.

Additionally, we wouldn't have been treated to Paul Bissonnette's social media prowess (yes, Biznasty was drafted as a defenseman), Shane O'Brien's love of the Roxy, or Ryan O'Byrne's sticky fingers without the 2003 draft.

Like Teemu Selanne, the 2003 draft class benefitted greatly from the 2004-05 lockout. Every player drafted in 2003 received an extra year of development at a lower level, be it the CHL, AHL, or somewhere in Europe. Some of them may not have needed it, but they all benefitted from it. 2003 1st overall pick Eric Staal had a mediocre rookie season before the lockout (11 goals and 31 points), but he emerged in 2005-06 after a year in the AHL as a superstar – Staal finished the regular season and playoffs with a combined 128 points, leading the Hurricanes to the Stanley Cup.

This isn't to say a lockout was good for the sport, but it did force teams to be patient with their prospects.

The 2003 draft class may be the best of all-time, but its star-studded group of defensemen may have the title of best defensive draft class usurped by Drew Doughty, Alex Pietrangelo, Erik Karlsson, and the rest of the 2008 defensive draft class.

12 defensemen from each draft class were paired off and compared. Some stars, some very good defensemen, and some further down their respective depth charts. Skill, size, and playing style all factored in to each matchup. Some of the comparisons aren't perfect (if only Ryan Suter could be cloned three or four times). Read on – the results may surprise you.

## The Heavyweights:

## Round 1 – Shea Weber and Drew Doughty

## Claims to Fame:

**Doughty –** One of the best two-way defensemen in the game, a 59-point sophomore season, weight fluctuations that rival Oprah's.

**Weber –** Shooting the puck *through* the net at the 2010 Olympics, physically dominating the NHL, using Henrik Zetterberg's head as a squeeze toy.

Doughty's offensive game has tapered off since his 59-point season in 2009-10. His defensive game is excellent, and he is an incredibly gifted skater. He has proven his worth in the NHL postseason, and he is a huge reason why the Kings are four wins away from doing something even the Great One couldn't – bringing the Stanley Cup to Los Angeles.

Shea Weber is already a rich man. An NHL arbitrator awarded him a one-year deal worth $7.5 million last summer. His future in Nashville is up in the air, and it will be interesting to see how he copes without Ryan Suter (if Suter, as predicted, moves on this summer). Weber has no holes in his game – he is strong, mobile, and his offensive game is well-rounded.

**The Verdict: Weber**

Doughty is four years younger than Weber, and both defensemen have the ability to take over a game. Weber gets the edge because of his physical play and his mean playoff beard.

**Round 2 – Ryan Suter and Alex Pietrangelo**

**Claims to Fame:**

**Suter –** Six weeks away from being able to buy his own private jet, being the nephew of the guy who ruined Paul Kariya's career.

**Pietrangelo –** Having a name only Pierre McGuire could pronounce correctly for the first few years.

Ryan Suter rarely makes mistakes defensively. He is incredibly durable, and he is about to become incredibly rich, as well. He doesn't dominate offensively, but he has recorded a respectable 238 points in 542 NHL regular season games. Pietrangelo doesn't have Suter's

defensive ability yet, but he is bigger, stronger, just as mobile, and miles better offensively. He's also five years younger. Pietrangelo had 43 points as a rookie with the Blues in 2010-11, and 51 points this past season. Don't be surprised to see him flirt with 60 in 2012-13.

**The Verdict: Pietrangelo**

The only thing holding Pietrangelo back from the NHL's elite is experience.

**Round 3 – Dion Phaneuf and Zach Bogosian**

**Claims to Fame:**

**Phaneuf –** Back-to-back 20-goal seasons as a rookie and sophomore, truculence, terrorizing opposing forwards, an allergy to smiling.

**Bogosian –** Being the guy drafted after Doughty and before Pietrangelo.

Phaneuf's level of play at the NHL has ranged from Denis Potvin to Denis Gauthier. When he is playing at his best, he is a no-nonsense physical defenseman who makes safe plays in his own zone and scores a lot of goals. When he is off his game, he is usually out of position seeking a big hit. Calgary traded him because of his clashes with Jarome Iginla, and because the deal netted them the highly-coveted Matt Stajan.

Bogosian was a superstar in the OHL with Peterborough, scoring 61 points in 60 games in 2007-08. His defensive play has been an adventure at the NHL level, but showed big improvements in the first season after the move from Atlanta to Winnipeg. The offensive production hasn't arrived yet, as he is stuck behind Tobias Enstrom and Dustin Byfuglien on the Jets depth chart.

**The Verdict: Phaneuf**

Bogosian's upside is immense, but Phaneuf takes round three because of his proven offense and proven – but inconsistent – defense.

**Round 4 – Brent Seabrook and Travis Hamonic**

**Claims to Fame:**

**Seabrook –** Showing the quiet room who is boss, resembling Wolverine after a few months of beard growth, being a facilitator to Raffi Torres' plan of concussing the entire league.

**Hamonic –** Being touted as the next Brent Seabrook, having a type of meat in his last name (always appreciated by myself).

Seabrook was a huge part of the 2010 Chicago team that won the Cup, playing significant minutes in all situations. Best known for his physical defensive style and huge point shot, he has settled in as one of the best two-way defenders in the league.

The Islanders hope Hamonic can become a similar player to Seabrook. Both starred in the WHL, and Hamonic has had two pretty good years on Long Island, as well. Seabrook has the edge based on experience and offense, but Hamonic could catch him in a few years.

**The Verdict: Seabrook**

**Round 5 – Brent Burns and Tyler Myers**

**Claims to Fame:**

**Burns –** Possessing a reptile collection that would make most zoos jealous, having a Harry

Potter tattoo.

**Myers –** Being 6-7 and great at ice hockey.

Brent Burns is one of the most dynamic defensemen in the league. The Sharks paid a lot to get him (prospect Charlie Coyle, who was sent to Minnesota along with Devin Setoguchi, is going to be a star), and there is room for improvement after an 11-goal season with the Sharks.

Myers, like Burns, was underwhelming offensively in 2011-12. The Sabres were a disappointment through the first 40 or 50 games, and only found their game near the end of the season. Myers had an amazing rookie year in 2009-10, finishing with 48 points and a plus-13 rating as a 19-year-old. Since then, he has produced 37 points and 23 points (in 55 games), respectively. Even with his declining numbers, he is a top pairing defenseman who can play in

all situations.

**The Verdict: Burns**

Myers is five years younger than Burns, but that is his only edge. Burns was far and away San Jose's most effective defenseman in the defensive zone last season, while Myers was outperformed by the likes of Andrej Sekera and Alexander Sulzer.

So far the 2003 defensemen have a decided 4-1 advantage. Will it continue?

**Round 6 – Dustin Byfuglien and Erik Karlsson** (bear with me on this one)

**Claims to Fame:**

**Byfuglien –** Turning an entire stadium against him faster than Nickelback, weighing over 260 pounds and making skating look easy.

**Karlsson –** Putting up points like he's playing NHL 12 on rookie mode.

While Karlsson and Byfuglien bear little resemblance to each other physically (Byfuglien outweighs Karlsson by at least 75 pounds), they are both dominant offensive defenseman who love to rush the puck up the ice. Stopping Byfuglien with a full head of steam is a tough task and the same goes for Karlsson. Byfuglien will go through opposing players; Karlsson around them.

Atlanta/Winnipeg made an astute move putting Byfuglien back on defense. He played the position in junior, and was much more comfortable there than at right wing. It also allowed him to be on the ice more frequently. He won't ever be mistaken for Shea Weber defensively, but Byfuglien is very capable in his own zone. Karlsson should win the Norris, but he may lose some votes because his defensive game isn't at the level of the other finalists (Weber and Zdeno Chara). A voter should never overlook the defensive side of the game when selecting the best defenseman in the league, but Karlsson's offensive exploits are impossible to ignore.

### The Verdict: Karlsson

Let’s hope he doesn’t pull a Mike Green.

### Round 7 – Tobias Enstrom and Jake Gardiner

### Claims to Fame:

**Enstrom –** Consecutive 50-point seasons, being drafted after a country music star.

**Gardiner –** One of the best pure skaters in the league, excelling defensively under Ron Wilson.

Enstrom battled injury during his first season in Winnipeg, suiting up for only 62 games. After consecutive 50+ point seasons in Atlanta, he finished 2011-12 with 33 points. Enstrom gets overpowered by bigger forwards at times, but is an asset on the power play, and creates offense with his skating and puck moving ability at even strength. Gardiner was a revelation for the Leafs this season. His adjustment from the NCAA to the NHL took less time than most had anticipated. Like Enstrom, his best assets are his skating and puck moving. Size isn't a problem, but he needs to get stronger and better positionally to consistently handle opposing forwards.

**The Verdict: Enstrom**

Gardiner may become Toronto's best defenseman in a few years, but Enstrom is better offensively and defensively.

**Round 8 – Braydon Coburn and John Carlson**

**Claims to Fame:**

**Coburn –** Being traded for Alexei Zhitnik (and you wonder why the Thrashers moved), somehow flying under the radar in one of America's biggest sports towns.

**Carlson –** Forming one-half of the NHL's youngest shutdown duo, breaking hearts across Canada.

{youtube}aphR4n8dZj0{/youtube}

Coburn uses his size (6-5 and 220 pounds) and elite skating ability to shut down opposing forwards, and he also contributes at the offensive end. He hasn't become the point-producer that Atlanta was hoping for when they picked him 8th overall in 2003, but he is a very good defenseman.

Like Coburn, Carlson uses his size (6-3 and 210 pounds) and elite skating ability to excel as a shut down defenseman. He is more skilled than Coburn offensively, but doesn't play in an offensive role with the Capitals. Carlson's elite defensive ability means that the bulk of the power play minutes are distributed the less defensively-inclined – Dennis Wideman and Mike Green. Carlson had 76 points in his final OHL season, and will be a 50-point blue liner if he starts to see first unit power play ice time. Carlson and Karl Alzner form Washington's shut down duo, and they are a combined five years younger than Chris Chelios. The sky is the limit.

**The Verdict: John Carlson**

A convincing 5-3 score for the ’03 class after the heavyweight matchups.

**The Middleweights:**

**Round 9 – Matt Carle and Michael Del Zotto**

**Claims to Fame:**

**Carle –** Surviving the Len Barrie/Oren Koules debacle in Tampa Bay, the only junior in NCAA history to win the Hobey Baker.

**Del Zotto –** Following the sophomore slump rule to a tee.

Carle and Del Zotto are different players. Both are of average size. Carle relies on hockey sense to excel, while Del Zotto uses his impressive skating and offensive creativity. Carle was the main part of the package which brought Dan Boyle from Tampa Bay to San Jose. He lasted in Tampa Bay for a few weeks before their owners (emphasis on the plural) decided he wasn't the right fit. Because as we all know, 12 games is a big enough sample size to get a read on a player's ability.

Del Zotto was an impressive rookie for the Rangers in 2009-10, recording 37 points in 80 games. He played so good that season that he decided to take the summer off from training or doing anything hockey related (at least it seemed that way if you watched him play in 2010-11). After a miserable second NHL season, Del Zotto rebounded under the guidance of John Tortorella and the mentorship of Brad Richards in 2011-12. He finished the regular season with 41 points, and added 10 points in 20 postseason games. The Rangers have big plans for him, assuming they don't sign Ryan Suter and/or Justin Schultz. July 1 makes Glen Sather do crazy things…

**The Verdict: Carle**

Del Zotto will be the better defenseman in a few years, but Carle takes the cake for now.

**Round 10 – Kevin Klein and Slava Voynov**

**Claims to Fame:**

**Klein –** His work in a Fish Called Wanda. More seriously, developing into a steady defenseman behind the Suter-Weber monster, sporting a mean mo-hawk.

**Voynov –** Thanks to the media telling us thousands of times, allowing the Kings to use Jack Johnson as trade bait.

Klein is a defensive defenseman who excels on the penalty kill. He may see a large increase in responsibility with Nashville if/when Suter leaves. He has gone from whipping boy to indispensable player in a little over two years.

Voynov, largely unheard of in the hockey world before the Johnson-for-Jeff Carter trade, has stepped in and played a significant role for the Western Conference Champions. He is big, strong, mobile, and positionally sound. Voynov is also a great example of patience paying off. He came over to North America as an 18-year-old to play in the AHL, and the Kings kept him down there for almost four years before calling him up. Voynov showed great patience too, as he received lucrative offers to play in the KHL.

**The Verdict: Voynov**

Klein is a solid second-pairing defenseman, but Voynov is something special.

**Round 11 – Mark Stuart and Luke Schenn**

**Claims to Fame:**

**Stuart –** Um….

**Schenn –** Having his confidence shattered by Ron Wilson, peaking as an NHLer at the age of 19.

Stuart is a solid defensive defenseman. He plays an honest, no nonsense game and is the type of player every team would love to have and players love to have on their side. He has done nothing noteworthy in his career, which is a good thing for a defensive defenseman.

Schenn entered the league as a 19-year-old. He was the Leafs highest draft pick in almost a quarter-century, and already had the size and strength to play in the NHL as a teenager. The Leafs figured the rest of his game would catch up. Four years later they are still waiting. Hindsight is 20/20, but the Leafs would have been best off keeping him in the WHL for another year or two.

Schenn's confidence with the puck completely eroded under Wilson, and it will be interesting to see if he can rebuild his game under Randy Carlyle.

**The Verdict: Schenn**

Even with Schenn's faults, he has too much upside to ignore.

With many solid defensemen left from each draft class, the final round was tough to pick.

**Round 12 – Shane O'Brien and Luca Sbisa (with special guest referee Paul Bissonnette)**

**Claims to Fame:**

**O'Brien –** being traded four times before the age of 28, developing a much-deserved party boy reputation, being a beloved teammate and media interview and a miserable player to coach or manage.

**Sbisa –** being traded for Chris Pronger.

Sbisa is a better defenseman than O'Brien. He's younger, more positionally sound, and understands his role. O'Brien can be a good defenseman, but seems to forget his role as a defensive defenseman from time to time.

Bissonnette is a defenseman who the Coyotes converted into a press box regular (and social media superstar). He isn't really an NHL player, but he takes his lack of ability in stride with a self-deprecating sense of humor. Some like him, some hate him, but it is impossible to ignore Biznasty, an impressive feat considering he has five goals in his entire NHL career.

**The Verdict: Sbisa**

The matchups picked aren't all perfect comparisons. The 6-6 tie does highlight how close the two draft classes are. 2003 may have more high-end talent and holds the edge in experience, but in most cases the only thing holding the 2008 draftees back is lack of developmental time.

Some more notables from each draft class:

2003:

Bruno Gervais, Ryan O'Byrne, Marc Methot, Kyle Quincey, Jan Hejda

2008:

TJ Brodie, Colby Robak, Marc-Andre Bourdon, Jason Demers, Philip Larsen, Roman Josi, and Jared Spurgeon

The depth of the 2008 draft class is amazing. Of the players listed above, Larsen and Josi have top-four upside. Spurgeon was Minnesota's most effective defenseman in 2011-12, and Demers and Brodie have established themselves as NHL regulars

Defensemen are interesting case studies. The 2003 players all benefitted from an extra year of development before playing NHL hockey. The 2008 defensemen didn't have the same opportunity, and many of them were promoted to the NHL as teenagers. Doughty was ready for it, as was Tyler Myers. Schenn and Bogosian weren't. The Blues were patient with Pietrangelo, and he has become one of the best defensemen in the league. In another year or two, don't be surprised if he has a Norris Trophy under his belt.

Oh, and the 2008 draft class also boasts Justin Schultz. You may have heard of him by now.

***This column was originally posted at Angus Certified, but I wanted to share it with the Dobber community as well.***