

The (Minnesota) Wild West

Written by Jeff Angus

Monday, 15 October 2007 20:26 - Last Updated Wednesday, 17 October 2007 07:57



Five wins, three of them by shutout. Only four goals allowed. The Minnesota Wild have absolutely rocketed out of the gates this season, thanks to sublime goaltending, rock-solid defense, and timely offense. They have also amassed an undefeated record with only small contributions from star forwards Marian Gaborik and Pavol Demitra. Once Gaborik gets his offensive game on track, watch out.

In net, both Nicklas Backstrom and Josh Harding have looked like Vezina candidates. Sure the Wild play a defensive system that can make many goalies shine beyond their true capabilities (Manny Fernandez, for example), but both Backstrom and Harding have played extremely well. The Wild are not the complete defensively stifling team they used to be. Harding's game last

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night was particularly dominating. He is going to be a future all-star in this league, and possesses a very calm demeanor, as well as outstanding rebound control. Backstrom will still see more games this season (expect the split to be around 50 for him and 30 for Harding). If you managed to grab one or both of them in your pool, congratulations!

After signing a few free agents over the past few seasons, Jacques Lemaire has opened up the offensive game a bit, allowing more freedom to the top scoring lines. Eric Belanger, who they brought in this off-season, has been a significant upgrade on Todd White. He has been the most consistent Wild forward, anchoring the most dangerous line with Pierre-Marc Bouchard and Brian Rolston. The Wild have an extremely opportunistic forward core due to their speed and ability to sneak in behind opposing defenses. Expect them to produce a decent amount of goals this season – in particular Gaborik, who is just itching to bust out.

On the backend, the Wild have been lead by one of newcomers to the elite class of NHL defensemen – Brent Burns. Burns plays a physical game and has a booming slap shot. He has become the rock on that blue line, and the sky is the limit for him. He deserves to be mentioned in the class with Dion Phaneuf and Shea Weber. Nick Schultz has also been impressive this season. His steady play has been combined with more grit – take note of his fight with the much bigger Ryan Getzlaf last night. Kim Johnsson has been a disappointment since being signed, especially at nearly \$5 million per season.

Angus' Prime Cut in the West from October 3rd to October 15th, 2007.

It is not such a coincidence that my pick for this award is a player on the Minnesota Wild. If you have been checking up on my [blog](#) , you wouldn't have to read any further to know who it is.

Brent Burns has been a revelation for even the most optimistic of Wild fans over the past season and a half. The Wild seemed intent on bouncing him back and forth from forward to defense, slowing down his development. It wasn't until they finally decided to let him grow on defense did he begin to blossom. Burns uses his imposing 6'4" frame to intimidate in the defensive end (similar to another tall, lanky defenseman on the Anaheim Ducks), and he is able to deliver a punishing check or a deft poke check, depending on what the situation calls for. It is Burns' development at the other end of the ice that is more intriguing, however. His ability to shoot the puck is not hard to see. Get him the puck, let him shoot, and he will score some goals. It has been his ability to read the game and make smart pinches that is going to allow him to become one of the next dominant two-way fantasy defensemen. He is on pace for an astounding 30+ goals this season, which is completely unrealistic. However, scoring 15-20 goals and playing in his first ever All-Star game is not out of the question. The sky is the limit for Burns, and if you didn't consider him among the elite in terms of young defensemen, try staying awake for a few more Wild games!