

It Takes Two

Written by Jeff Angus

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The Vancouver Canucks are in the middle of a dogfight for the final few playoff spots in the always-intense Western Conference. They are getting balanced production, solid defense, and great goaltending from Luongo. The best offense is a good defense is an age-old adage in pro sports, and it applies to the Canucks right now. Their two best defensive forwards have been their two best offensive forwards over the past few weeks.

Ryan Kesler and Alex Burrows are making a joint case for the next dominant checking line in the NHL, capable of affecting the outcome of games at both end of the ice. Kesler's speed and size have always been there, but this is the first season where the offensive package is there.

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Through March 10th, Kesler has 19 goals. He can skate with any forward in the league, is a good fighter, and has a way of making every opposing player hate him. His name will definitely be in Selke nomination this season – and many more in the future. Kesler worked hard on his offensive game in the off-season, and the difference shows. He has 30 goal upside, and if you combine that with what else he brings (shutdown defense and a pain-in-the-ass playing style), you have the makings of a very, very good NHL player

Burrows has followed a much different route to the NHL than Kesler, who was a first-rounder in 2003. He started off playing in the ECHL, where he quickly adjusted to the league and began to dominate. He made the move up to the AHL, where a similar progression trend emerged. Burrows struggled a bit adjusting in his first season, but then became a star, putting up nearly a point-per game in 2005-2006 before being recalled to the Canucks.

His stats in the NHL have been that of a decent fourth liner the past few seasons, but Burrows has really flourished playing in Alain Vigneault's aggressive system. He has always had the skill (in fact, he is considered one the best ball hockey players in the world), but his skating and balance have been issues. Those issues appear to have been corrected, and Burrows has been a huge contributor this season – especially lately. He is arguably the top agitator in the NHL right now, and has very solid hands and vision in the offensive zone.

Burrows and Kesler compare a bit to the "Grind Line" that dominated in Detroit for so many years. Burrows is a feisty agitator, much like Kirk Maltby. Difference being Burrows has way, way more offensive skill than Maltby ever did. Draper and Kesler are both speed demons that can shadow any forward in the game. Again, Kesler's offensive skill and upside far surpass anything Draper hit. Kesler reminds me of a young, faster Keith Primeau, especially the way he skates with the puck on his stick. Obviously that line lacks their "Darren McCarty" right now. Brad Isbister is a big body and a smart player, but he is not a long-term solution. Firey Dane Jannik Hansen seems like a logical fit. He has been great in the AHL last season, and much like Kesler and Burrows has a motor that doesn't stop.

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