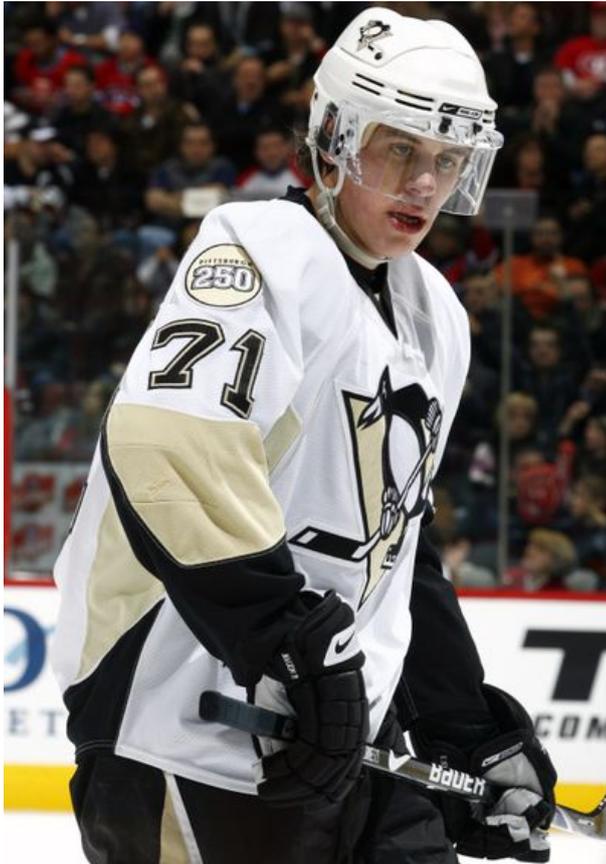


## Prime Cuts of the Year (Part One of Three)

Written by Jeff Angus

Friday, 21 March 2008 18:04 - Last Updated Saturday, 22 March 2008 13:18

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It has been a lot of fun putting this team together. As much as we all love fantasy hockey, there is more to the game than just stats. There are obviously some high scoring players that made my squad, but it was not solely for their point-producing abilities. Intangibles, such as determination, teamwork, and hockey IQ also played a large factor. There will be a few surprises on this squad I am sure, and hopefully it sparks some debate over at the DobberHockey forums. Read on to see the full line-up, and below is a comprehensive breakdown of each line, pairing, and goaltender. Enjoy!

In this, the first installment, I am going to break down by choices for the top forward line, the top defensive pairing, and the starting goalie.

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### **The Top Line:**

*Alexander Ovechkin – Evgeni Malkin – Alex Kovalev*

The top line is going to light the lamp a lot. As I have said before, to make this team the players selected had to show a mix of stats and intangibles. While picking a guy like Alex Ovechkin may seem like a no-brainer, there is more to it. He is the best goal scorer in the league, but coupled with that is his insatiable will to win. He hits, he skates like a madman, and he forechecks the hell out of the opposition. At center is his 2004 draft counterpart, Evgeni Malkin. When Sidney Crosby went down with a nasty high ankle injury, Malkin took the Penguins on his back and the NHL by storm. The lanky pivot has insane hands, especially in close, and like all great players always seems to love having the puck on his stick in crucial situations. Malkin has earned his place among hockey's young, elite trio with Ovechkin and Crosby.

The final member of this all-Russian line is Montreal sniper Alex Kovalev. Like numerous other sublimely talented Russians, Kovalev has always left fans salivating for more. He has arguably the best hands in the league, and his wrist is up there as well. Montreal has generally never had a big scorer on their team, but Kovalev will change that this season. He has been a huge part of the development of a pair of talented youngsters, Tomas Plekanec and Andrei Kostitsyn. Kovalev is deadly on the powerplay, and his vision and creativity is second to none. Don't cross him either, he plays with a very nasty edge to his game when called upon. Ask Ryan Hollweg if you don't believe me.

### **The First Pairing:**

*Nicklas Lidstrom – Brent Burns*

This top pairing is made up by arguably the best player in the league right now paired with unarguably my favorite defenseman. Nicklas Lidstrom was an easy choice for me when I started picking this team, even with the time he missed due to his injury. He is the backbone of the best team in the league, and has been for over 10 years. The Wings remain so good because he is there to run the ship night after night. His importance to that team is and has been unrivaled, even by great teammates like Steve Yzerman, Brendan Shanahan, Sergei Fedorov, Henrik Zetterberg, and Pavel Datsyuk. Lidstrom is the best passing defenseman, the best one-on-one defenseman, and by far the smartest. His ability to play such a dominant game without much physical play is truly astounding. True hockey purists get as much joy watching him effortlessly break up an opposing rush as the casual fan does with the shootout.

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Lidstrom's partner on this top pairing is by far the most underrated star defenseman in the league. Brent Burns, after bouncing between wing and defense over the past few seasons, has stuck in a big way on the Wild back end. These Wild are still a solid defensive club, but play a much more wide-open game than they used to, and players like Burns allow them to do that. He is dominating physically, and his progression in the defensive end has been ludicrous. The main reason why I was hyping him to start the season was for his offensive game, though. He has already hit 40 points and projects to be a consistent 50-point guy with 15-20 goals. He takes chances offensively and has a rocket of a shot.

### Starting Goalie:

*Evgeni Nabokov*

The decision for starting goalie was a tough one, and ultimately came down to either Evgeni Nabokov or Martin Brodeur. I went with the San Jose 'tender. Nabokov has been a horse for the Sharks this season, playing in nearly every game. He is a battler, and really stepped up his game after former San Jose coach Warren Strelow died late last season. He is not a very big goalie, but is extremely agile and technically solid. The Sharks appear primed to go on a deep run, and with Nabokov between the pipes they possess the right guy to carry them there.

Check out [Angus's Blog right here](#) , or comment/discuss his [Prime Cuts right here in our forum](#) !