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Sleeper Picks for 2009-2010 – Part 1

Sleeper Picks for 2009-2010 – Part 2

Here are five more players to keep an eye on for next season...

Cody Franson – Nashville Predators. Franson would probably be in the NHL already if it weren't for the terrific defensive depth that Nashville possesses. He makes a great, crisp first pass and sees the ice very well. Playing in the AHL has also allowed him to work on his defensive game at the professional level, something that hampered him a bit even in his days as a Vancouver Giant. He will be with Nashville next season, that much is certain. He has an impressive 43 points in only 63 games with Milwaukee this season, and the Predators have several defensemen hitting unrestricted free agency this summer (Greg deVries, Greg Zanon, and Ville Koistinen). With Ryan Suter and Shea Weber both terrific power play defensemen, Franson will have to earn his keep. Look for him to have a solid 25-30 point rookie season, with bigger things to come in a few years. Franson has the play making ability and the heavy shot to be a consistent 50+ point defenseman in the NHL.

Matt Lashoff – Tampa Bay Lightning. Since coming over to Tampa Bay at the deadline, Lashoff has seen over 23 minutes of ice time in each of his first two games, and has two assists. He is obviously benefiting from Tampa's injuries at defense (both Andrej Meszaros and Paul Ranger have been injured for quite some time). Lashoff has some offensive talent, but his development seemed to be stagnating a bit with Providence in the AHL (not all that different from Braydon Coburn's when he was still in the Thrashers organization). He still did have 21 points in only 33 games though, so it is not like he was completely struggling at both ends of the ice. Tampa's defense was a mess this season, so look for them to try and solidify a top-six group in the summer. How Lashoff plays over the final 10 games will go a long way in helping the management with their decision.

Mike Smith – Tampa Bay Lightning. I try and stay away from making predictions with regards to goaltending, it is something that has burned me a few times in the past. However, Smith represents a great value pick for next season and beyond. He (like the rest of the Lightning) has had a season to forget in 2008-2009, battling inconsistent play and injuries along the way. He is a very good goalie when on his game though, and Tampa Bay will undoubtedly be quite improved next season. They boast a core of good, young, versatile defensemen, and some big names at the forward position. Smith will see a lot of action as well – Karri Ramo is a decent backup but lacks the consistency to play any significant stretch of time, and Riku Helenius is still a few years away from making an impact (not to mention Dustin Tokarski, another stellar prospect coming up the pipeline). Look for Smith to be a solid fantasy goalie next season – he will see enough starts to flirt with 30 wins. If Tampa can improve their defensive play (and personnel) this off-season, keep Smith in mind.

T.J. Hensick – Colorado Avalanche. A good strategy to keep in mind when trying to pick up undervalued players is to target young, offensive talent on struggling clubs. Usually these are the players hit hardest (ice time in particular) when things go bad, so their values tend to dip more than they should. Hensick was supposed to challenge for the Calder this season, but he has a disappointing four goals and 18 points in 51 appearances for Colorado. He was an absolute monster offensively in college, putting up 69 points in his final season at Michigan. The Avalanche have some important holes to fill in goal and at defense, but they possess the talent up front to score enough goals. It is just up to young players like Hensick, Wojtek Wolski, and Paul Stastny to rise (in Stastny's case he already has to a degree) to the opportunity (or challenge, depending how you look at the Avalanche moving forward).

Patric Hornqvist – Nashville Predators. Hornqvist was one of my sleeper picks for this season, but he was not quite top-six ready yet for the Predators, and he failed to earn the trust of coach Barry Trotz. Trotz played Hornqvist sparingly and often not on a scoring line, so it was tough for him to get into any sort of comfortable situation. As Dobber noted in his ramblings a few days ago, Hornqvist recently had an eight-game goalscoring streak for Milwaukee. If Hornqvist is able to show something either at the end of this season or early in 2009-2010, he could be a Calder contender next season. He has great hands, and very good offensive instincts. On a team starved for offense, one would assume that as long as he is willing to compete hard enough to earn time (Trotz is notoriously tough on offensive rookies, look at how he handled Alex Radulov), he will get a chance to produce.