

Teams on the Bubble – Eastern Conference

Written by Jeff Angus

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Since the shootout debuted back in 2005, there has been much more parity among NHL clubs (due to the arrival of the three-point game). Although some will argue that this parity is artificial, it has increased the competition for playoff spots in both conferences. The Florida Panthers missed the playoffs last season, even though they had an identical record to eighth-seeded Montreal (41 wins and 93 points). Buffalo was only two points back of Florida, and they had 41 wins as well. In the West, Anaheim finished in eighth with 91 points, two up on Minnesota, and three up on Nashville. As the above situations illustrate, there is not a whole lot of difference between making and missing the playoffs in today's NHL. Montreal was buoyed by late-season acquisition Mathieu Schneider and Anaheim rode the hot goaltending of Jonas Hiller. Who will be the difference maker(s) for the bubble teams in 2009-10?

Predicting the final standings in either conference is a tough task, especially in September. However, there are a few locks and some teams will have better chances than others. One

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could logically assume that Boston, Washington, Pittsburgh, New Jersey, and Philadelphia will make it into the playoffs. That leaves 10 teams in the East. One could also logically assume that Long Island misses the playoffs. That leaves nine bubble teams: Carolina, New York, Montreal, Florida, Buffalo, Ottawa, Toronto, Atlanta, and Tampa Bay.

Carolina

Why? The Hurricanes are deep up front, have one of the better goalies in the league, and have a trio of impressive forward prospects (Brandon Sutter, Zach Boychuk, and Drayson Bowman) itching to earn a spot up front. Update: Bowman was cut on September 22, but he should see some NHL action this season once injuries occur.

Why not? There are some up-and-coming teams in the Southeast Division, as it won't be a two-horse race between the Hurricanes and Capitals for much longer. Cam Ward needs to prove last season was not a fluke, and Carolina needs some young defensemen to step up after losing both Anton Babchuk and Dennis Seidenberg this off-season.

Fantasy X-Factor – Erik Cole had an awful 2008-09 season in Edmonton, and his offensive slump continued even after returning to Carolina. He will be lining up with Eric Staal and Tuomo Ruutu on the top line. Why is he so important to the Hurricanes? Ruutu had a breakout season last year but is injury-prone. After that, the ageless Ray Whitney is bound to start slowing down soon, and Chad LaRose/Scott Walker are more two-way grinders than offensive players. Sergei

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Samsonov is in the mix as well, but he is tough to rely on. Cole is a multi-category stud and Carolina will need a scoring winger to emerge to take some of the spotlight away from Staal.

New York

Why? The Rangers boast one of the best goalies in the game, a mobile defensive group, and some up-and-coming talent up front (Brandon Dubinsky, Ryan Callahan, Artem Anisimov, and Evgeni Grachev).

Why not? They are banking on some young d-men handling some big responsibilities (Matt Gilroy and Bobby Sanguenetti/Michael Del Zotto). How will Lundqvist adapt his game to cover for Tortorella's aggressive, up-tempo offensive system? The biggest question mark is definitely Marian Gaborik's groin/hip/body in general. When healthy he is the best pure scorer in the league not named Ovechkin.

Fantasy X-Factor – Wade Redden was paid over \$2 million per goal last season, and that obviously has to change. Tortorella will ride him hard if he doesn't rebound, and the Rangers need him to step up and run the first power play unit. Redden's game has gone way south since being an elite defenseman with the Senators before the lockout. He may never return to that level, but he needs to play like a consistent top-four defenseman (and put up 40 or more points) if the Rangers plan on doing anything with their powerplay this season.

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Montreal

Why? A ton of new faces join a solid core of players, including the criminally underrated Andrei Markov. Carey Price has proven he is a talented young goalie; he just needs to return to the level of his rookie season. Scott Gomez and Brian Gionta had great chemistry together with the Devils, and Mike Cammalleri is a powerplay stud.

Why not? The Habs may struggle out of the gate to find chemistry with so many new faces around, although it will be tough for the Habs to have as many disruptions and chemistry issues as they did last season. There is a glaring lack of size in the top six up front, which may be a problem when facing the more physical Bruins, Leafs, and Senators.

Fantasy X-Factor – If Carey Price plays like he did in 2007-08, the Habs will make the playoffs. He will see the bulk of the starts, and his numbers should improve playing behind Jacques Martin-coached club. However, he won't see enough games to be a star fantasy goalie as long as Jaroslav Halak is around.

Florida

Why? The Panthers have depth at both forward and defense, and Tomas Vokoun is a solid goaltender.

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Why not? Vokoun is also maddeningly inconsistent and Florida lost Jay Bouwmeester without really replacing him. Their only real off-season acquisition up front was Steven Reinprecht, who – when healthy – is nothing more than a decent second line player. Keith Ballard is a fantastic two-way defenseman but he may be in over his head trying to run the first unit. Ville Koistinen is being paid a pretty penny considering his lack of NHL experience, so the Panthers may have to be ready to dress him on a nightly basis, something Nashville was reluctant to do.

Fantasy X-Factor – Michael Frolik is on his way to stardom, but if he can take a big leap forward this season, Florida looks considerably more dangerous up front. Nathan Horton needs to have a breakout season as well, but Frolik has the potential to be one of the best in the league. If he puts up close to 70 points, expect the trickle down effect throughout the lineup to be huge.

Buffalo

Why? The Sabres are fast and skilled up front. They have some young talent on defense (Andrej Sekera, Chris Butler, and Tyler Myers), and Ryan Miller is a workhorse.

Why not? Some see Buffalo as being a soft team. Steve Montador brings grit and he can play both forward and defense, but he is nothing more than a role player. Jason Pominville needs to bounce back offensively, but he is often moved around the lineup to spread out the scoring

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depth, so a return to 70-plus points may be difficult. Some of the young forwards need to break through to support better support Thomas Vanek and Derek Roy.

Fantasy X-Factor – If Tim Connolly plays close to 70 games, Buffalo will make the playoffs. That may seem like a weird statement to make about a forward (and not just because Connolly may never see that many games), but Connolly brings so much to the Sabres when he is healthy, both on the power play and at even strength. He relieves some of the stress on Roy, he can quarterback the power play (something Buffalo desperately needs), and most of all he can pass the puck better than anyone else on the roster.

Ottawa

Why? The Senators finally have a goalie they are comfortable with (Pascal Leclaire). They also have a lot more depth up front than they have had in previous seasons. Rookie Erik Karlsson looks poised to help run the power play. Milan Michalek has the talent to be a top line winger; he just needs to become a consistent finisher. He will get more of an offensive opportunity in Ottawa than he got in San Jose last season.

Why not? No Dany Heatley is a huge loss on the ice, as he is one of the best pure snipers in the game. The Senators also lack mobility on the back end, and they don't have anything at center behind Jason Spezza from a fantasy standpoint (although Mike Fisher has been a scoring machine so far in the pre-season). Alex Kovalev will bring his 'A' game at least six times this year - anything more is gravy for Ottawa.

Fantasy X-Factor – If either Karlsson or Chris Campoli can step in and provide 35-40 points, the Senators should be fine on the power play. They obviously need good goaltending to go anywhere, but with so much high-end talent up front, it will be vital to have some puck movers capable of getting the puck up the ice quickly.

Toronto

Why? A completely rebuilt defensive group will keep the Leafs in a lot of games. A healthy Vesa Toskala will have a capable backup (Jonas Gustavsson) to spell him off when he needs a rest, something Curtis Joseph couldn't do last season. The Leafs also have a legitimate sniper up front in Phil Kessel, who should quickly become the go-to guy in all situations. The Leafs also have some impressive, NHL-ready prospects in Viktor Stalberg and Tyler Bozak.

Why not? After Kessel, there isn't much offense up front. This team will need to win a lot of 2-1 and 3-2 games to have any shot at the playoffs this season.

Fantasy X-Factor – It is tough to single out a single forward on the Leafs (besides Kessel) who really stands out in terms of importance to the overall success of the team, as there is so much parity among the top five or six Leaf forwards. However, that isn't the case on the back end. Since the Leafs will be so goal-starved, they will need to capitalize on powerplay opportunities. Tomas Kaberle becomes vital, as he is one of the better powerplay defensemen in the league. The Leafs have enough defensive defensemen that Kaberle will finally be able to focus on offense. Look for him to be among the scoring leaders for defensemen in 2009-10.

Atlanta

Why? The Thrashers brought in talent to play with Ilya Kovalchuk (Nik Antropov in particular), and will benefit from a full season of soon-to-be-superstar Zach Bogosian. Brian Little will continue his rapid offensive development with 35-plus goals skating on the top line. Atlanta made a great move in getting Pavol Kubina for peanuts as well – he is a huge asset on the power play and will be a great mentor to the young talent on the back end.

Why not? Kari Lehtonen has yet to prove he can remain healthy. He is one of the most naturally skilled goalies in the world, but his conditioning has left much to be desired up to this point.

Fantasy X-Factor – This one obvious. Kari Lehtonen HAS to stay healthy if Atlanta has any hopes of making the playoffs. They will have a killer power play unit, and have enough scoring. However, Lehtonen needs to play close to 60 games in order for this team to be in the playoffs. If Lehtonen does see 50 or 60 games, expect him to have stellar numbers (especially with Atlanta's strongest defensive core ever in front of him).

Tampa Bay

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Why? A healthy and rejuvenated Vincent Lecavalier, a blossoming Steve Stamkos, and an underrated Alex Tanguay all have something to prove this season. Tampa Bay also will get a lot stronger on the back end. The signing of Mattias Ohlund will allow the offensive defensemen to focus on the power play, and don't underrate the arrival of Viktor Hedman, who is NHL ready. Mike Smith has apparently beaten all of the post-concussion syndrome issues he faced last season, and is ready to prove he can be an every day goalie.

Why not? Smith is still relatively unproven as a starting goalie. There still are question marks at both forward and defense with lots of new faces and guys coming back from various injuries.

Fantasy X-Factor – There are lots of potential choices here. Does Stamkos approach 40 goals? Does Lecavalier return to 100 points? Does Hedman challenge for the Calder? Like I mentioned with Ottawa, the Lightning NEED their puck moving defensemen to break the puck out effectively. An effective first pass is far and away the most important (and overlooked) aspect of hockey. Andrej Meszaros and Paul Ranger both need to return to the 30-40 point mark, and Kurtis Foster needs to pound in 10 or more goals on the power play. Tampa Bay has elite talent up front, but they need those forwards to get the puck. Having skill up front and defensemen who chip the puck off the glass or lack the skill to fire a crisp pass is like filling a Ferrari up with the cheap stuff.