

The Anatomy of a Slump - Little, O'Sullivan, Berglund, and Giroux

Written by Jeff Angus

Wednesday, 03 February 2010 22:35 - Last Updated Monday, 08 February 2010 14:15



In sports, numbers rarely tell the entire story. In hockey, this is especially true. It is hard to quantify some aspects of such a fast-paced, fluid game. In fantasy sports, numbers ARE the story. Unless a formula to quantify things like heart and determination is developed, don't expect this to change. In fantasy hockey, a 50-point player is superior to a 40-point player by exactly 10 points. In real hockey, the 50-point player may be lazy, overpaid, short, tall, fat, thin, weak, and strong... I think you get the picture.

However, there are often reasons why that player is scoring 50 points as opposed to 40. How much ice time is he getting? Who are his linemates? What kind of role is he playing on his team? These are some of the questions I will hopefully answer with regards to four players performing below expectations (some more than others): Patrick O'Sullivan, Patrik Berglund, Claude Giroux, and Bryan Little.

Webster's dictionary defines "slump" as "to fall or sink suddenly." Many Dobber Hockey readers

The Anatomy of a Slump - Little, O'Sullivan, Berglund, and Giroux

Written by Jeff Angus

Wednesday, 03 February 2010 22:35 - Last Updated Monday, 08 February 2010 14:15

would define it as “**Patrick O’Sullivan.**”

After scoring 22 goals and recording 52 points in 2007-08 with the Los Angeles Kings, big things were expected from O’Sullivan going forward. He fired 220 shots on goal that season, and had 26 points in 31 games down the stretch, looking like he was well on his way to becoming an offensive star in Los Angeles. He overcame great obstacles throughout his early hockey years, dealing with an abusive father. He showed flashes of elite offensive skills in the OHL, AHL, and was starting to do the same with the Kings. However, his development has been stuck in neutral for the past two and a half seasons. Why? Let’s take a look.

Since coming to Edmonton at the trade deadline last season, O’Sullivan has yet to establish himself with regular linemates. The acquisition itself was a bit puzzling – even though Edmonton was able to dump Erik Cole, O’Sullivan was a carbon copy of many players already playing for the Oilers at the time (and currently as well) – small, skilled, and nonphysical. Using the Frozen Pool line combinations tool (very handy if you haven’t already checked it out – click on Fantasy Tools above the banner on the home page), O’Sullivan’s most common linemates this season have been the sublimely talented Jean-Francois Jacques and Shawn Horcoff, whom he has skated with 10.5% of the time. Edmonton’s forward lines have been a revolving door since O’Sullivan has arrived, so this isn’t a huge surprise, and the loss of Ales Hemsky earlier in the season has made it even more difficult for the Oilers to find any sort of offensive balance.

Sticking with the numbers, O’Sullivan seems to enjoy home cooking. Of his 30 points, 21 have been recorded at Rexall Place. He is playing about a minute less per game (17:44) than he did during his breakout campaign with the Kings back in 2007-08 (18:42). On the power play, he is

The Anatomy of a Slump - Little, O'Sullivan, Berglund, and Giroux

Written by Jeff Angus

Wednesday, 03 February 2010 22:35 - Last Updated Monday, 08 February 2010 14:15

playing 2:39 per game this season, compared to 2:25 during his career year. In addition, he is playing 1:35 on the penalty kill for the Oilers. He logged a massive 2:38 per game in penalty kill situations for the Kings – quite a surprising stat, as he isn't regarded as much of a defensive presence. Looking at the numbers, nothing appears to be substantially contributing towards his offensive decline.

O'Sullivan has earned heavy criticism this season for playing soft. CBC's Kelly Hrudey absolutely ripped him earlier this year for bailing out of a hit, one of the worst possible sins an NHL player can commit. O'Sullivan does have seven points in his last 10 games, and is playing a bit better of late. However, he won't reach his full potential as a 70-80 point playmaking winger until he learns to play harder every night. It seems like a simple enough thing to do but it is often the deciding factor that separates 45-55 point skilled journeymen from the stars. This doesn't mean O'Sullivan has to morph into a Zach Parise type who absolutely hounds the puck all over the ice, but he has to start playing like he gives a damn. He turned 25 on Monday, so he isn't exactly a rookie any more.

Patrik Berglund entered the 2009-10 season with high expectations. His team, the St. Louis Blues, completed an improbable stretch run to finish off the 2008-09 NHL season, earning a berth in the playoffs as the 6th seed in the tough Western Conference. Berglund was clicking on a line with fellow rookie TJ Oshie, as well as the slick David Perron. Big things were expected from all three offensively this season. To date, Berglund has been a major flop offensively in 2009-10. He has only 14 points through the Blues first 48 games – a measly 21-point pace. If that isn't bad enough, he has only two goals and four points on home ice all season. He is playing under 13 minutes per night on average, and his time on the power play has dropped from 3:14 per game last season to 1:59 per game this season.

The Anatomy of a Slump - Little, O'Sullivan, Berglund, and Giroux

Written by Jeff Angus

Wednesday, 03 February 2010 22:35 - Last Updated Monday, 08 February 2010 14:15

Berglund's production in December of 2008 – 13 points in 15 games – almost matches his totals from the entire 2009-10 season. He isn't shooting the puck at a substantially lower rate (on pace for 126 shots, and he had 143 last year). He is still playing the majority of his shifts (over 20%) with Oshie and Perron, but he has been put on the wing at times this season as well. His offensive woes make him a fantastic buy low candidate in keeper leagues. He doesn't even turn 22 until June, and he possesses unbelievable upside. He is big, fast, and has the ability to shield the puck like a few past Swedish greats – Peter Forsberg and Mats Sundin. Expect a big bounce back season from Berglund in 2010-11.

It may be a stretch to call **Claude Giroux's** season a disappointment, but a few in the fantasy hockey world (especially me) were expecting great things from the slick Flyer this season. Giroux had an impressive 27 points in 42 games last year after a midseason AHL call up. His numbers in the QMJHL are dizzyingly good – in his final season with Gatineau, he had 106 points in only 55 regular season games, and followed that up with 17 goals and 34 assists in only 19 playoff contests. With the abundance of goal scoring talent that the Flyers possess, a big season from an elite playmaker like Giroux seemed likely. His numbers aren't awful by any stretch of the imagination, as he is on pace for close to 20 goals and 50 points, but both of those totals should be higher.

Giroux's ice time is up this year in all situations. Overall, he is playing 1:30 more per game than he did last season. He is seeing 1:20 more per game on the power play, and an extra shift every game or two on the penalty kill. With the Flyers looking to shed some salary for next season in order to add premier offensive talent, look for Giroux's numbers to rise. He is the most naturally skilled player on a roster that includes the likes of Mike Richards, Jeff Carter, and Danny Briere.

The Anatomy of a Slump - Little, O'Sullivan, Berglund, and Giroux

Written by Jeff Angus

Wednesday, 03 February 2010 22:35 - Last Updated Monday, 08 February 2010 14:15

Bryan Little's offensive nosedive this season was not one predicted by many in fantasy hockey circles. He was coming off an impressive 31-goal campaign in 2008-09, and along with the rest of the Atlanta roster was expected to benefit from a positive off-season, which saw the Thrashers acquire Pavel Kubina and Nikolai Antropov. However, Little has struggled offensively, and currently is on pace for only 12 goals and 33 points. Almost 23% of the time he has skated on the top unit with Ilya Kovalchuk and Nik Antropov. His second most common linemates are Slava Kozlov and Todd White, both of whom are struggling mightily as well.

Looking closer at Little's 2008-09 campaign, an alarming trend was identified. Only 10 of his 31 goals came after the All-Star break. Sticking with the numbers, 10 of his 31 goals came on Friday nights. On the surface that stat may seem meaningless, but it highlights a bit of Little's offensive streakiness and inconsistencies (common traits among most young offensive players).

Little is one of the few players who benefits from the inevitable Kovalchuk trade. Like Kovalchuk, he plays wing. Also like Kovalchuk, he is a shoot first player. Little has great hands, a quick release, and a nose for the net. When Kovalchuk leaves town, he becomes Atlanta's best sniper. Antropov, Afinogenov, White, Kozlov, and Peverley are all primarily playmaking forwards. Little currently sees about three minutes of powerplay time per game, compared to approximately four last season. Expect his offensive game to return either down the stretch this season or in 2010-11.

The Anatomy of a Slump - Little, O'Sullivan, Berglund, and Giroux

Written by Jeff Angus

Wednesday, 03 February 2010 22:35 - Last Updated Monday, 08 February 2010 14:15
