Nikolai Kulemin made himself a household name in Russia in 2006-07 when he captured the Russian Super League (now known as the KHL) MVP title. The Maple Leafs used their second-round draft pick in 2006 on Kulemin, and he made their scouts look very smart with his title-winning campaign. He notched 27 regular season goals in 2006-07 (10 more than anyone else on his team, Metallurg Magnitogorsk), and added 10 more in 15 playoff contests. That Magnitogorsk team had only three players hit double digits in goals, making Kulemin's 27 goals all the more impressive. He finished his career in Magnitogorsk with a 21 goal season in 2007-08, deciding after that to make the move across the water to the NHL. Kulemin has yet to display the offensive skills that made him a star in Russia on a consistent basis for the Leafs, but the flashes of brilliance have been there.

Kulemin made his debut in Russia skating on the third line for Magnitogorsk. Young players having to earn their ice time is one commonality between the NHL and the KHL. He skated on a line with another young talent – Evgeni Malkin. Kulemin only scored five goals in his first full season, but he obviously showed the Maple Leaf scouts enough for them to use such a high draft pick on him. He didn't disappoint with his following two seasons in Russia, but he was still largely an unknown when he arrived in Toronto to begin the 2008-09 campaign. He immediately impressed with his work ethic, determination, and strong two-way play, the same qualities that made him such an effective player back in Russia. And, like many other young forwards in the NHL, he struggled to produce on a consistent basis. He was tentative with the puck, and often looked uncomfortable when placed in an offensive role. Many were wondering how he was able to score 27 goals and win the MVP in the KHL, which is widely regarded as a tougher league to score in than the NHL (not higher quality, just more defensive).

Kulemin finished last season with 15 goals and 31 points in 73 games. By comparison, Pavel Datsyuk had 11 goals and 35 points in 70 games at the same age. It is obvious to see that Kulemin does not possess the skill set of Datsyuk by watching him play, but the comparison effectively highlights that Kulemin's rookie numbers are nothing to sneeze at. 13 of his 15 goals were scored at even strength, with the other two coming on the power play. He averaged just less than 14 minutes of ice time per game, with 1:38 of that coming with the man advantage. Kulemin's numbers in 2009-10 are eerily similar to last season. He is on pace for 15 goals and 29 points in 78 games. He fired 129 shots on goal in 2008-09, and is on pace for 139 this season. His ice time has shot up to over 15 minutes per game, thanks to over a minute more per game on the penalty kill. He played the majority of the season on a checking unit with Wayne Primeau and the now departed Lee Stempniak, but has seen most of his shifts come with Tyler Bozak and Phil Kessel on Toronto's top unit recently.

Looking beyond the numbers is required to see why Kulemin has value in most keeper league formats. In addition to his relentless work ethic and superb two-way game, he is starting to show confidence with the puck and in the offensive zone. He has even developed a go-to move where he shoots after quickly moving the puck from backhand to forehand to get the goalie moving. He put on nearly 30 pounds of muscle last summer, which is both encouraging and alarming. He is a very solid 225 pounds, and is using it on a more consistent basis to both separate defenders from and to hold on to the puck. His offensive game in open ice is still very raw, but he is strong along the boards and is starting to use his speed and size more effectively to get to open areas around the net. Obviously his improved play has not transferred over to offensive production yet, but it will.

Among their current top six forwards, Toronto only has Phil Kessel, Mikhail Grabovski, and Tyler Bozak signed through next season. There have been a few whispers of Kulemin returning home to Russia, as that threat seems to be apparent with any Russian in the NHL (aside from Alex Ovechkin). Don't count on a homecoming for Kulemin – expect the Leafs to lock him up. The fact that he put on so much weight so quickly is impressive enough, but not allowing it to affect his speed or agility makes it extremely remarkable. There are numerous examples of players bulking up only to lose a step or two (Peter Mueller is a recent example of this). Look for Kulemin to hit the 25 goal mark next season, a number he should hover around for the rest of

his career. Depending on linemates, he may even become a 30 goal player. His overall skill level and hockey awareness are both very good, but it is his strong work ethic and determination that will play the most significant role in his path to stardom in the NHL.