

Top 10 Keeper League Defensemen

Written by Jeff Angus

Friday, 25 March 2011 16:58 - Last Updated Monday, 28 March 2011 12:22



Is there a new number one this year? Read on to find out more...

The [first edition](#) of this list was put together last April, and it is something I am going to update at least once each season. I have a few general rules when it comes to building a team in a fantasy hockey keeper league. One of the more important ones is to not plan beyond a two or three year window. You are not building a real NHL club, and too often I see poolies place too much of an emphasis on youth and prospects instead of trying to add players who could help them win now. Using this rule, take a look at your team(s). Can you realistically say you will have a shot at winning the league at some point within the next two or three seasons? If not, time to scrap the rebuild and start adding proven NHL talent.

Keeping the two-to-three-year window in mind, I have compiled a list of the top 10 keeper league defenseman to own (assuming standard keeper league rules and scoring categories). Using the scope, the long-term upside of these players is balanced with their NHL readiness. I found this list particularly tough to balance using my three-year scope. There have been a number of talented young defensemen who have made immediate impacts at the NHL level, but there are also a number of veterans with at least two or three elite seasons of hockey left in them.

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This list is in order, which means that I wouldn't trade the fourth player straight across for the fifth player, and so on. The one year upside is for 2011-12, and the three year upside is for any time between next season and 2013-14.

1. Mike Green – Washington Capitals

I toyed with the idea moving Green down from the top spot on this list for about... five seconds. This season has been a disaster for him, and his value hasn't been lower at any point since he broke out offensively three seasons ago. In addition to a multitude of injuries, Green looked neutered to start the season playing in Washington's more balanced (less offensive) system. If he was a Ferrari (I love car analogies), the Caps took out the V12 in Green and put in a V6.

Green has earned the right to stay at number one (for now). He is too dynamic, too skilled, and possesses too much upside to warrant putting *any* defenseman above him. If you own him, don't even think about moving him (violating the golden rule of never selling low). If you don't own him, toss out a few feelers.

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John Carlson's presence shouldn't impact Green as much as initially expected. The more I have seen Carlson play, the more I believe his true value to Washington will come from his two-way play. He's better defensively than expected (as a rookie no less). Relatively speaking, Green's value to Washington will still be maximized by using him in every offensive situation imaginable.

The injury issues are a bit of a concern. He won't return this regular season and there is no word if he will be back for the playoffs, either. He plays a reckless game and this often leads to bumps and bruises. As I said above, though, it will take more than one injury-plagued season to drop Green down on this list.

One Year Upside: 20 goals, 65 points

Three Year Upside: 30 goals, 75 points

2. Keith Yandle – Phoenix Coyotes

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Yandle unsurprisingly slides up five spots from last April's list. I have been a huge fan of his ever since his days in the QMJHL with the Moncton Wildcats. Unlike many other young and flashy offensive defensemen, Yandle has always been pretty reliable in his own zone. This was huge for his development as the Coyotes didn't have to shelter his minutes or scratch him if he wasn't producing. He was still able to contribute and develop and improve in all areas of his game even if he wasn't finding the score sheet.

Playing in Phoenix and not being a 1st round draft pick, Yandle had to earn his reputation as one of the league's best defensemen the hard way – through actual play. Before the season, he was arguably the best kept secret in the NHL. He's big, physical, aggressive, mobile, and he passes and shoots the puck as good as any defenseman in the league. He's young, but mature. He'll likely eclipse the 190 shots-on-goal mark, and that number will climb closer to 220 or 250 as he grows more confident in his role as Phoenix's go to guy.

The Coyotes have a very good team now, and they have a great young core of talented players at forward and defense as well. Yandle's numbers will only improve as their offensive players develop and improve (the Phoenix power play ranks 22nd in the league).

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If you have read the site at all over the past few years, you have probably read me praising Yandle on numerous occasions. I can't really write any more here – he is simply a fantastic defenseman and one of the best NHL players at any position to own in standard keeper league formats. If you own him in your pool, don't sell high. If you don't own him, take the guy who does out for a beer (or 10) and try and pull a fast one.

One Year Upside: 20 goals, 65 points

Three Year Upside: 20 goals, 70 points

3. Drew Doughty – Los Angeles Kings

Doughty's coming out party was at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver. He was arguably Canada's best defenseman. Like Yandle, Doughty is very well-rounded for a young offensive defenseman. He loves to engage physically and is unafraid of making mistakes on the ice (a key for young defensemen). He had a slow start to the season with only seven points through his first 17 games, but he is on pace to finish the season with about 45 points.

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The Kings are on the verge of becoming an elite team in the league, and Doughty will obviously play an integral part in their next step forward. He'll always see a ton of ice time even when he isn't producing because he is so strong in his own zone. Ice time is so important for production (especially among defensemen), and it makes it difficult to rely on one-dimensional offensive defensemen. Coaches often shorten the bench late in games or take away ice time if an offensive defenseman is slumping, but Doughty (again, like Yandle) contributes in so many ways that ice time will never be an issue.

Due to his physical nature, he fills the PIM category nicely (should hit 70 this season).

One Year Upside: 15 goals, 60 points

Three Year Upside: 22 goals, 70 points

4. Dustin Byfuglien – Atlanta Thrashers

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Who knew that putting a player back at the position he enjoyed playing and was most comfortable playing would result in success? Byfuglien (aside from two effective playoff rounds against Vancouver and San Jose last spring) had a very inconsistent few seasons as a winger in Chicago. He played defenseman at the WHL level and was ecstatic when the Thrashers let him know they were planning on moving him back there.

Byfuglien is massive and incredibly mobile. It takes only one viewing to see why he is so effective as a defenseman – who can stop a 260 pound mass with a full head of steam flying through the neutral zone? He is also a pretty decent in player in his own zone and has formed a very solid and reliable duo with Tobias Enstrom. The Thrashers may have overpaid to keep him around (\$5 million per season for the next five), but the money shouldn't matter to you (unless you play in a salary cap league).

It is a bit of a risk ranking him ahead of proven commodities, but his upside as a category filler is tantalizing. He shoots the puck a TON (second only to Alex Ovechkin in the league, and nearly 100 more than the next defenseman, Zdeno Chara), and he hits the net quite often. He was able to play forward because of his hands, shot, and playmaking abilities. Translate that back to defense and he gets even more opportunities (more ice time, especially on the power play) to show his skills off.

One Year Upside: 25 goals, 40 assists, 65 points

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Three Year Upside: 25 goals, 40 assists, 65 points

5. Erik Karlsson – Ottawa Senators

Unlike most of his teammates, Karlsson has had a pretty good 2010-11 season. He is currently 10th in the league among defensemen in point production, and he has a great shot at hitting the 50-point mark. Even more impressive is the fact that Ottawa's top line for the past month or two has consisted of Colin Greening and Bobby Butler flanking Jason Spezza.

Karlsson's minus-30 rating absolutely kills his fantasy value in leagues that count the statistic, but it is largely a team-based one. That isn't to say he is without fault, as many times this season he took stupid risks and tried to do too much to create offense. Karlsson was a brutal minus-25 in January and February, but he has 11 points in 11 March games (as of March 25th) and is a solid plus-1. Look for him to stay much closer to zero in 2011-12.

He does this on a nightly basis that can't be taught, and the development of Ottawa prospect

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and fellow Swede David Rundblad only increases Karlsson's offensive upside. Don't be surprised to see the duo putting fear into opposing penalty kills as early as next season.

One Year Upside: 18 goals, 55 points

Three Year Upside: 20 goals, 65 points

6. Kris Letang – Pittsburgh Penguins

The skilled and scrappy defenseman has been absolutely huge for the injury-riddled Penguins this season. Letang's offensive production unsurprisingly hit the skids when Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin went down with their respective injuries. Letang had 41 points through the first 50 games of the season, but has only seven in his last 24. With Crosby and Malkin (hopefully) back next season, he should pick up right where he left off.

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Pittsburgh was so comfortable with his development offensively that they parted ways with Alex Goligoski. I often advise against drafting and trading for players who depend on others for much of their production, but Letang is a special case. He is also going to break the 100 PIM mark (currently at 97), which is a nice bonus. He has more than double the point total (48) of Pittsburgh's next highest scoring defenseman (Paul Martin), and he is also more than doubling the SOG number (210) from the next highest defenseman (Martin, again, with 95) .

One Year Upside: 13 goals, 55 points

Three Year Upside: 15 goals, 62 points

7. Shea Weber – Nashville Predators

Weber doesn't move the puck well enough to ever become a 60 point defenseman, but he'll always be within the 15-25 goal mark because of his rocket of a shot from the point. Count on at

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least 45-55 points each season, in addition to solid plus-minus numbers, 225+ shots on goal, decent PIM numbers, and a ton of hits. Weber may see a slight reduction in his offensive role with the Predators (if he re-signs...) as the likes of Jon Blum, Roman Josi, and Ryan Ellis make their way up to the big club, but he is one of the best defensemen to own for the foreseeable future.

His impending restricted free agent status is interesting – I'd say the odds of him re-signing are better than 80%, but imagine if he were on a team like Vancouver or Philadelphia?

One Year Upside: 20 goals, 30 assists, 50 points

Three Year Upside: 25 goals, 30 assists, 55 points

8. Duncan Keith – Chicago Blackhawks

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Keith's slow start to the season shouldn't have come as a surprise. He played a ton of hockey last year (a full regular season schedule plus the playoff run and the Olympic games), and looked tired and burnt out. He also was being forced to shoulder an inordinate amount of tough minutes with the lack of depth on Chicago's back end.

The emergence of Nick Leddy has helped Chicago's coaching staff better manage defensive as the season has gone along. Keith will be lucky to hit half of his goal total from last season (14). He is on pace to shoot 40-50 less pucks on net than last season, as well. The only number Keith has surpassed from last season is power play assists – everything else across the board is down.

The Blackhawks were hammered by the salary cap over the summer, but they are now better prepared to deal with their budget. Look for Keith to settle in to a more defined role with a much more reasonable workload next season.

One Year Upside: 12 goals, 55 points

Three Year Upside: 15 goals, 65 points

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9. PK Subban – Montreal Canadiens

Love him or hate him (there is no in between), PK Subban has probably been the most impactful rookie this season, in every sense of the word. He skates like Ovechkin – massive legs that pump out a ton of speed. He is physical, creative, annoying, skilled, and confident. Montreal fans and his teammates love him. He has a great shot and instincts that cannot be taught.

As he gets more and more comfortable in the NHL, look for his SOG number to consistently be near the top among NHL defensemen. Some of his short term upside depends on James Wisniewski, who is a free agent this summer. Andrei Markov is also slated to return next season, but he has to be considered a huge question mark after undergoing a series of very serious knee procedures over the past few seasons. There are other players below Subban on this list who are better defensemen right now, and may be better defensemen next season, as well. But with my three year scope, I'd take him over all of them.

One Year Upside: 15 goals, 55 points

Three Year Upside: 18 goals, 62 points

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10. Alex Edler – Vancouver Canucks

The Big Swede has all the tools to become a dominant two-way defenseman in the NHL. He wouldn't crack the top 10 if he were on many other clubs in the league, but Vancouver is a perfect fit for him. He plays a ton on the power play, as the team has capable defensemen to handle the penalty kill. He has a hard, accurate shot, and he is learning when to pinch and how to play with the Sedin twins on the league's deadliest power play.

Edler won't be back until game one of the playoffs, as he sustained a back injury a few months ago after hammering Jamie Benn at center ice. His physical play is probably the most improved aspect of his game over the past year, but he won't ever put up PIM numbers worth noting.

One Year Upside: 12 goals, 55 points

Three Year Upside: 15 goals, 60 points

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Honorable Mentions:

Lubomir Visnovsky – Great defenseman in a great situation in his prime... injury concerns dropped him down off the top 10.

Cam Fowler – extremely impressive rookie season. Still a bit raw, but immense offensive upside.

Tobias Enstrom – major reason why Byfuglien is ranked so high. Sound in all areas of the game, plays way bigger than his size.

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Zdeno Chara – has been terrific in 2011, brings a lot to the table in terms of SOG/PIM/offensive production.

Mark Giordano - doesn't have the name factor as others on this list, but just as good.

Jamie McBain – tons of upside, not ready yet.

Erik Johnson – A lot depends on development of Elliott and the future of Liles in Colorado.

Alex Goligoski – very close to making the list, Dallas is a great fit for him. So much of Dallas' offensive attack depends on Richards, who is far from a sure thing to return.

Nick Lidstrom – the ageless wonder has at least one more elite season left, no?

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Brian Rafalski – don't get more consistent than Rafalski – still a beast on the PP.

Ryan Whitney – was having a huge season in Edmonton before the ankle injury. Oilers don't have an offensive guy (Petry isn't ready, Gilbert isn't very good, and neither is Foster) aside from him right now.

Dmitri Kulikov – Sergei Gonchar 2.0 – big shot, good skater, great vision. Needs better teammates to increase production, though.

Jack Johnson – has improved overall game a lot in past year – no longer a defensive liability.

Brent Burns – personal favorite of mine, would get a lot more attention if he played in a bigger market.

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Andrei Markov – huge injury risk at this point.

James Wisniewski – a multi-category stud. He fights, hits, and shoots the puck a ton.

Mark Streit – Tavares, Grabner, Okposo, Bailey, Niederreiter, need I say more? Isles PP in great hands.

Chris Pronger – age catching up, but still has a few good years left.

Oliver Ekman-Larsson – skilled with and without the puck – expect a huge increase in role next season.

Dan Boyle – great defenseman on great team – should be a sure thing for 50+ points over next few years.

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Alex Pietrangelo – the reason why the Blues felt they could move EJ. 60 Point upside.

Christian Ehrhoff – Perfect fit in Vancouver – free agent this summer. Could move into top 10 if he re-signs.

Dion Phaneuf – finally looks comfortable in TO without Kaberle and Beauchemin there. A return to fantasy relevance looks to be in the cards.

Tyler Myers - rangy defenseman has upside to full multiple categories for next decade.

Tomas Kaberle - still in his prime, now on a very good team.

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Brian Campbell - fantastic skater, great fit on Chicago. Has the upside to put up 55 in any given season. Seems to get forgotten about a bit behind Keith and Seabrook.

John Carlson – Like Pietrangelo, lots of upside. His role is evolving into more of a two-way one with Capitals. Still lots of offensive upside, though.

This list is far from complete. If I skipped over an obvious omission, let me know in the comments section below.