

The Future of Shea Weber

Written by Jeff Angus

Wednesday, 09 November 2011 18:48 - Last Updated Thursday, 10 November 2011 09:25



This article was originally published at the [Canucks Army](#). It also was submitted to the Province newspaper for their writing contest this month - please go to [this link and give it a thumbs up](#).

How many franchise defensemen are there in the league right now? I count five (Zdeno Chara, Nick Lidstrom, Duncan Keith, Shea Weber, and Chris Pronger). There are a few more right on the cusp, like Drew Doughty, Keith Yandle, and Kris Letang. Each of the 30 NHL clubs carries anywhere from six to eight defensemen, meaning there are approximately 200-220 defensemen in the NHL at any given time. Less than three percent of the total defensemen are by my definition franchise material at this moment in time.

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How I would define these players in the top talent bracket:

- Able to contribute offensively at even strength and on the power play
- Steady defensively, consistently playing tough minutes in different situations
- Often make those around them much more successful
- Physicality is a plus, but not a requirement

In recent years, teams have been rewarded for paying a premium to land one of the above franchise defensemen. Boston paid handsomely for free agent Zdeno Chara back in 2007, and they were Stanley Cup champs four years later. Edmonton, Anaheim, and Philadelphia all went to the Cup Final soon after acquiring Pronger. Keith was the best player on Chicago during their Cup winning season. Lidstrom's track record speaks for itself. Weber has been a rock on every team he has played on – Kelowna, internationally for Canada, and now in Nashville.

He is going to be the focus of this discussion, and for good reason. At 26, Weber is already one of the most accomplished defensemen in the league. He is a two-time All-Star, a one-time First Team All-Star, an Olympic Gold Medalist, a World Junior Gold Medalist, a World Championships Gold Medalist, and a Norris Trophy runner up (last season he finished with 727 voting points, trailing Lidstrom's 736). Weber has four seasons of at least 16 goals and 40 points. He's one of the most physically intimidating players in the league, and he possesses a heavy and accurate point shot. Don't believe me? Check this out:

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{youtube}Xic10OJOD6I{/youtube}

In their 41 year history, the Canucks have never had a true franchise defenseman. Mattias Ohlund at his peak (2001-2004) probably was the closest. Unfortunately his play declined after the lockout, as he struggled to adapt his game from the clutch-and-grab era. Ohlund would have undoubtedly been more of an offensive force if it wasn't for the serious eye injury he suffered earlier in his career (one that rendered him essentially blind in his right eye).

The Weber-to-Vancouver story has been tossed around the blogosphere more than a few times over the past few years. It picked up steam this past summer, when Weber and the Predators were forced to go to arbitration (a good move for Weber, who was awarded a massive one-year contract worth \$7.5 million). Weber is a BC boy (from Sicamous), and as with the likes of Joe Sakic, Paul Kariya, and any other local star, rumours that he would like to return home have come out. None of them have been substantiated, but on paper it reads a little like the Dan Hamhuis situation last year (Hamhuis spurned the Predators, Flyers, and Penguins to eventually sign with the Canucks). To say the Canucks could use Weber would be a severe understatement. As we saw this past spring with Chara against the Sedin twins, a dominant defensive force can change the complexion of an entire playoff series (almost as much as an incompetent refereeing crew).

Looking back at the previous 10 Stanley Cup winners, it is easy to see the importance of a true franchise defenseman. Names like Chara, Keith, Lidstrom, Pronger, Scott Niedermayer, and Rob Blake have all played key roles on successful clubs. A few teams did win without a true stud on the back end, including Pittsburgh and Carolina (although Pittsburgh won when Sergei Gonchar used to be good).

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Assuming Weber is actually interested in returning to BC – where does that leave things? It would be a bit presumptuous to believe that the Canucks avoided breaking the bank for Christian Ehrhoff last summer in hopes that Weber may become available in the future, but I think that Weber's uncertain future in Nashville factored into their decision-making in some way. The Canucks have Alex Edler blossoming into an elite defenseman with each passing game, but he is still prone to stretches of inconsistency (as most players are). Edler checks in at a reasonable \$3.25 million, but that number will surely increase to \$5.5 or \$6 million after next season. He unquestionably has the most trade value among Canuck defensemen, but would packaging Edler up for Weber be worth it? Weber's new deal will likely carry a cap hit of \$8 million – at least \$2 or 3 million more than Edler will likely receive. Finding a way to have at least one game-changing defenseman has a significant trickle-down effect – easier minutes for the rest of the defensive group, more stability for the goaltenders, and so on.

Let's take a look at the options for Vancouver:

1) Build a package around Edler

Edler is a home grown talent who will likely continue the trend of hometown discounts set by Henrik, Daniel, and Kesler. He may not have Weber's brute force or his all-around defensive game, but his offensive upside is higher, and he's just as good at moving the puck. The downside to avoiding this option is that it really limits the value Vancouver can put together to get Nashville interested.

2) Build a package without Edler

Some names to toss around – Mason Raymond, Cody Hodgson, Jordan Schroder, Kevin Connauton, and Chris Tanev. Keith Ballard would likely be involved in some capacity in order to make the deal work from a cap perspective. There probably isn't enough value to put something together, unless Weber forces Nashville's hand. The quality over quantity rule usually proves to be true – take a look back at previous deals in all four of the major sports in North America. The team getting the best player wins the trade a lot more often than not.

3) Get value for Cory Schneider

Schneider is a very valuable asset, but not to Nashville. The Predators have Rinne signed for seven years, and behind him is the very capable Anders Lindback. However, there are at least five or six teams seeking long-term solutions in net (New Jersey, Tampa Bay, Phoenix, Columbus, Calgary, and Edmonton, just to name a few). In exchange for Schneider, the Canucks could acquire an asset Nashville would covet. Speculating about a straight-across trade is difficult enough, but trying to piece together a realistic three-team trade is nearly impossible.

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4) Pursue another defenseman

Shea Weber isn't one-of-a-kind, but he's pretty close to it. There aren't many defensemen of his quality that will be available in the next few years. Looking at the teams above who are seeking long-term goaltending stability, the Canucks could potentially make a play for Victor Hedman or Yandle. The Lightning have been patient with Hedman and will continue to do so, and Yandle is one of the best defensemen in the game. Both are unlikely to be available, even for a quality young goaltender like Schneider.

Now let's take a look at Nashville's options...

1) Sign one of Suter/Weber, trade the other

The Rinne signing is a Catch-22 situation for the Predators. They want to prove to Suter and Weber they are serious about winning, and locking up one of the best goaltenders in the world does just that. However, it also takes away a lot of the available money. Both Suter and Weber will command at least \$7 million on their next contracts. The difference with Suter is that he is unrestricted next summer, while the club still owns Weber's rights for another year.

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Suter is arguably as important to Nashville as Weber, but he could likely be had for cheaper. He currently makes \$3.5 million, while Weber is already at \$7.5 million. He is an unrestricted free agent next summer, giving him more leverage than the restricted Weber. Nashville can match any offer another team makes on Weber, while Suter is free to sign with any team he chooses on July 1st. If Suter wants to test the market, the team can focus on Weber. If Suter wants to talk extension, the team can worry about Weber after the season ends.

2) Sign both

At this point, this option is very unlikely unless both take significant discounts. The Predators have let some significant money leave in the past few years, obviously looking forward to this potential problem. I just can't see the team committing upwards of \$15 million for the two defensemen combined.

Assuming Nashville does make Weber available, when do they do it? If they are in playoff contention, there is zero chance he is available at the deadline. Weber would likely be made available at the NHL Entry Draft next summer, leading up to free agency. What do the Predators need? They are set in goal. Up front, they have some decent two-way forwards, as well as a few really good prospects (Colin Wilson and Craig Smith, most notably). On the back end, their depth is well-known. Jon Blum is already a top-four defenseman, and Ryan Ellis should be there in a few years. Roman Josi isn't a household name yet, but he plays a smart two-way game that has garnered some Kimmo Timonen comparisons.

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They would likely want a veteran defenseman to replace Weber, as well as a few young forwards to build around. I think maximizing value would be the most important consideration. It would be a tough sell to the fan base, but with the right moves, the Predators could minimize the loss on the back end and really improve their forward group for the near future. The wild card in all of this is Alex Radulov, who is still under contract with Nashville (he fled back to Russia with time still left on his deal). He's the best player in the world not currently in the NHL, and would immediately become the club's best forward.

There would be no shortage of teams interested in Weber. A team like Philadelphia could dangle James van Riemsdyk. Edmonton could potentially include Magnus Paajarvi or Jordan Eberle. The Canucks don't have a forward in that class, although Cody Hodgson's start to the season has to be encouraging.

I sent a few questions out to a few Canucks fans and fellow bloggers (Bobby Atwall from the [F anzoo](#), Cam Davie, Wyatt, and Thom Drance from the [Canucks Army](#), and Harrison Mooney from [Pass it to Bulis](#) and [Puck Daddy](#)). Here are their answers.

Do the Canucks have a realistic shot at landing Shea Weber? What would it take?

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Angus: I think they do, but the price would be steep. I am of the opinion that a trade involving Edler is a non-starter. I think a package involving Hodgson, Tanev, Raymond, and a draft pick would be a good starting point. Is that enough, though?

Harrison: I think the price to get Weber is going to be high, especially since 29 teams will pay through the teeth to get him if he goes on the block.

Bobby: If the Canucks were to get him they may have to part with Edler, Raymond or Hodgson, and a 1st round pick. If that was the package I would do it.

Cam: Yes, I think the Canucks have a realistic chance at landing Weber. Absolutely they do. But it won't come cheap. My guess is that the Canucks would have to send: One of Edler or Biekša (likely Edler), one of Tanev or Connauton (probably Tanev) Cody Hodgson, and a 1st or 2nd round pick.

Wyatt: Historically we don't often see a straight up trade of talent for talent, like the Hossa or Heatley trade from back in the day. Most Nashville fans would probably claim that we would

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have to offer up Kesler, or Edler + Hodgson + something to land Weber, which on paper makes sense value wise. But most of the time these big trades do end up looking worse than what the fans expect, so I could see it being less than that value. I don't believe the Canucks have the right pieces to make this move at a value they are comfortable with. Our biggest piece, Schneider, is not needed by Nashville, and Hodgson has too many question marks to be the main center point of a deal.

Do the Canucks need a true franchise defenseman, or can Edler develop into that guy?

Angus: As I alluded to above, having a game-changing, minute-eating defenseman is so important in the postseason. Edler could definitely develop into that guy. At his best, he is a two-way force. The consistency is improving, and he seems to add a new layer to his game each season. Having two game-changing, minute-eating defensemen worked out pretty well for the Anaheim Ducks.

Bobby: Regarding Edler, I would love to see what he does next season. Analyzing is so easy, but making the actual decision isn't.

Harrison: I do think the Canucks need a franchise defenseman, and I think that Edler can be that guy. But here's the issue: he could be great, but he won't reach his potential unless the Canucks can find him a complementary right-side defenseman.

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Cam: I'm trying to think if the Canucks have ever really had a franchise defenseman. Can't think of one. And they need one, if they want to hoist the Cup. To me, the Canucks need to seriously consider acquiring that defenceman and will probably have to overpay to do to. But now is there is window. As for Edler - I like Edler. I think he's a really good defenceman, but he's not a Norris candidate and never will be. I just don't see the Canucks as an organization that develops defencemen to be in the top 3-5 in the league.

Wyatt: I truly believe the Canucks need a franchise defenseman. I know it's odd to say that after being one game away from a Stanley Cup, but I think that a franchise defenseman would put this team over the top in the playoffs. A guy who can eat up minutes, a guy you can rely on in both ends of the rink, and a guy you can ride all the way through the playoffs. Edler shows flashes of this, but he is one of the most maddening defenseman to watch because he is so inconsistent. He can look like a Norris trophy winner one week, and then the next week he looks like a bumbling sophomore. I think Edler can be a great defenseman for this team, I just don't think he can be a franchise defenseman for this team. I hope I am wrong, but the inconsistency has been here for so many years now, he just hasn't made that next step yet.

Conversely, I asked a few questions to some noted Nashville bloggers (Dirk from [On the Forecheck](#), Ryan from [RLD Hockey](#), and Buddy from [Preds on the Glass](#)). The responses:

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Who do the Predators keep, Suter or Weber?

Ryan: If one has to go, I think Suter would because he can test the free agency waters after this season and may be able to make \$7.5 million-plus on the open market. He's a smart guy and he knows that teams dish out big money for defensemen. I see Weber staying. He truly likes Nashville, and now that they have Rinne signed long-term and lots of good young defensemen, he knows they'll still be competitive. Blum could potentially fit into the Suter mold in time.

Dirk: If I had to guess, I'd say Suter is the one to go, because he has the opportunity for unrestricted free agency this summer, and David Poile's hand may be forced towards a trade if Suter indicates that he prefers to hit the market (letting him walk away for nothing would be a true disaster). Weber still has one more year of restricted free agency, allowing the Predators and their captain a bit more time to figure out the long-term direction.

Buddy: I actually think they will keep both. They bought a year with Weber last summer and basically have from now until the trade deadline to wrap up Suter. They can't really do anything with Weber until after the first of the year (that is what I've been told about the way the CBA is laid out but I can't guarantee that is a fact).

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The windows to trade would be near the trade deadline this year for Suter and then this summer up to next year's trade deadline for Weber. If the Preds were to trade either, they would probably want a minimum of a top 4 D-man and a top six forward and a variety of picks.

The other possibility could be for someone to give Weber an offer sheet next summer which would give the Preds a host of first round picks. We can "what if" forever but I really do think they will eventually sign both unless someone makes them a deal they can't refuse.

If one of the above defensemen is traded, what type of return would the team be interested in?

Ryan: Assuming the Predators are in the playoff picture come February, I would be shocked to see either one get traded. Both are so important to the locker room. Poile would of course be inclined to get something for Suter if he knows he can't re-sign him. I don't see him dumping Suter for picks & prospects, but maybe a blockbuster that brings the Preds bonafide offense -- someone along the lines of Parise. He is the only one I can remotely see them dealing since they still have Weber under control next year. I think they'd hold onto Weber & Suter to take another crack at a long playoff run, which could convince both to stay long-term.

[Ryan goes into much greater detail on the issue over at [Smashville 24/7](#).]

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Dirk: A top six forward up front is always in demand for Nashville, but let's not forget that if either Suter or Weber are traded, that opens up a large hole on the blue line, as well. While there are a number of exciting prospects working their way up through the developmental pipeline, not much of it is ready for prime-time duty at the NHL level, so I would have to say that a combination of a steady hand on defense along with a game-breaking winger would be involved. Oh, and draft picks. David Poile loooooooves draft picks.

It appears that the Predators have set themselves up nicely to give Weber a large, long-term contract this summer (or beyond). They control his rights, but there are two ways he can put pressure on the club to move him. One is to hold out. Unlike Kyle Turris in Phoenix, Weber has a lot of leverage. However, I don't see him going that route. The other, and more likely route, is to refuse to sign a long term deal, like he did this past summer. Weber wanted to see a financial commitment from the Predators owners, and the Rinne deal definitely gives him that. If that was the only reason he had to be hesitant to put pen to paper on a long extension, the club should have no problem locking him up. However, if he wanted out for other reasons, it is anybody's guess as to what happens.

The Canucks acquiring Weber is far from a sure thing, but I wouldn't classify it as a pipe dream, either. The Canucks have set themselves up with several cap-friendly contracts to make a significant splash on the right player. A big, homegrown, franchise defenseman would set the

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team up to contend year in and year out for the foreseeable future.