

Top 10 Centers in the NHL

Written by Jeff Angus

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[Sidney Crosby](#) has separated himself from the pack once again, but who is right behind him at number two? Does [Henrik Sedin](#) crack the top 10 for the fourth consecutive season? How about [Eric Staal](#) ?

Read on to find out...

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

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building a real NHL club, and too often I see poolies place too much emphasis on youth and prospects instead of trying to add players who could help 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 that window in mind, I have compiled a list of the top 10 keeper league centers 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.

- [The 2012 List](#)
- [The 2011 List](#)
- [The 2010 List](#)

This list is in order, which means that I wouldn't trade the fourth player straight across for the fifth player, and so on. I was asked to clarify by what "standard categories" means, so here is the league format that I am basing my selections on:

- 12 to 15 teams
- Start 4 C, 4 LW, 4 RW, 6 D, 2 G (5 Bench)

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- G, A, +/-, PIM, PPP, GWG, HITS, SOG

I put an emphasis on offensive categories. They are harder to find in the draft – it is much easier to scoop up a PIM/HITS type of player on the waiver wire ([Matt Martin](#) , [Derek Dorsett](#)) than it is to get a player who fills the G/A/PPP categories nicely. The center ice position remains full of talented players relative to both left and right wing. Arguably the three best players in the league are all centers, and there is a fourth center on his way to joining that elite group. After the top five, this list was really tough to rank, and I am sure there will be some disagreement among the final few players who made the top 10 for 2013.

And because of the impressive crop of good centers, the honourable mentions list is perhaps a bit longer than I would have liked. I didn't want to leave any deserving players out (although an argument could be made for the inclusion of at least another half-dozen centers).

1. [Sidney Crosby](#)

- **Rank in 2012: 1**
- **Rank in 2011: 1**
- **Rank in 2010: 1**

Let's look at some numbers, shall we? From Elliotte Friedman's recent [30 Thoughts column](#):

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Since October 2010, Crosby has 148 points in 89 games. He has more multi-point games (49) than scoreless ones (20). He's never gone three straight games without a point. When he's been on the ice this season at even strength, the Penguins have outshot the opposition (including blocks and misses) 456-336.

Crosby is the best hockey player on the planet. You can get lost for a few hours in his Youtube highlights, but what hockey aficionados really appreciate about his game is how good he is at the subtle plays – catching passes off of his skates. Finding his teammates with perfect passes, always on the tape. Driving defensemen wide or taking them to the net. Roofing backhanders harder and more accurately than most players do with their forehand. Crosby is the total package, and his head/neck injuries appear to be a thing past.

Interviewed his trainer Andy O'Brien last summer, [and he shared a lot of interesting stuff on Crosby:](#)

His vision is very special, specifically his ability to track moving objects, but I think the characteristic that stands out the most is his lack of complacency. In 12 year of working with him, he's never missed a workout, and he's never given anything less than his best effort. He has a remarkable way of bringing his "A" game on a daily basis, which requires tremendous focus, determination, and mental toughness.

He's extremely bright and very serious about his performance. He's also a fierce competitor, and takes advantage of his ability to intimidate his competition.

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2. [Steven Stamkos](#)

- **Rank in 2012: 3**
- **Rank in 2011: 3**
- **Rank in 2010: 3**

Even though Stamkos moves only one spot up on this list, it is a major one. The Malkin or Stamkos debates have been raging at DobberHockey for the past three or four years, and I have found myself in camp Malkin for the past few years. However, I am changing my tune this year (ever so slightly). If I had to draft a fantasy team from scratch, I'd take Stamkos over Malkin. I think Malkin is more talented (in terms of pure talent and ability to dominate, no other hockey player can match Malkin), but Stamkos is more consistent and more durable. And with top fantasy picks, durability is very important.

Stamkos can score goals from everywhere, and he continues to get faster, bigger, and stronger. And that is bad news for the rest of the NHL. [Penguins coach Dan Bylsma provides a great scouting report on Stamkos:](#)

"Certainly he can fire the puck and he can shoot the puck, and I think the year he won the

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goal-scoring race, a majority of his goals were in a certain area of the ice. But he's tough around net, he can skate real well and has got speed and explosive power in his skating, and he's good down low -- and a lot of those areas I'd say the same thing about [Sidney Crosby](#)."

{youtube}em6QiE2CgMY{/youtube}

3. [Evgeni Malkin](#)

- **Rank in 2012: 2**
- **Rank in 2011: 2**
- **Rank in 2010: 2**

Malkin was the Hart and Art Ross winner last season, yet he slides one spot on my list. Hopefully when he hears the news, someone breaks it to him gently. As mentioned above, he is the most purely talented and dominant player in hockey. But he isn't as durable as Stamkos (his lanky frame helps him make plays with the puck, but it also opens up to injury). It's pretty much neck-and-neck with these two – poolies should be counting their lucky stars if they own either of them.

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James Neal is a fantastic winger and he will be Malkin's right-hand man for the foreseeable future. It's about time Pittsburgh went out and got a winger for Crosby to play with, too.

4. [John Tavares](#)

- **Rank in 2012: 4**
- **Rank in 2011: 7**
- **Rank in 2010: 10**

After consecutive years of jumping three spots on this list, Tavares holds firm at number four. I can't see him overtaking Crosby for the top spot, but it wouldn't completely shock me to see Tavares leapfrog past both Malkin and Stamkos sooner rather than later. A lot of it depends on where he plays in the future, though. Tavares has a good thing going on with [Matt Moulson](#), but the Islanders are not and have not been a very good team at all during his tenure there. Does that lead to more or less offense? The argument could be made either way (more ice time on a bad team, but worse linemates and teammates), but I could foresee a situation where Tavares really flourishes playing for a team with Stanley Cup aspirations (be it Long Island or elsewhere).

He has improved year-to-year more than any other superstar in the sport. He was able to be productive as a rookie and a sophomore because of his shot and incredible hands, but his skating and strength both held him back a bit. He is almost unrecognizable now compared to earlier in his career – Tavares has worked really hard to get stronger, faster, and more agile, and those improvements have taken his game to another level.

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5. [Claude Giroux](#)

- **Rank in 2012: 5**
- **Rank in 2011: Considered a RW**
- **Rank in 2010: Considered a RW**

Giroux has rounded into form after a slow start to the 2013 season. His struggles highlighted why he isn't in the same class as Crosby or Malkin – Giroux, like most NHL players, relies a lot on those around him for his production. The Flyers had several injuries (on the back end, and also Giroux's linemate [Scott Hartnell](#)), and they also lost [Jaromir Jagr](#) to free agency in the summer. Giroux seems to have found that chemistry with [Jakub Voracek](#), who plays a similar puck-possession game to Jagr.

Giroux isn't big or fast, but his skill level and hockey sense are both elite. He is the best of the "second tier" centers, and it isn't really close.

6. [Jonathan Toews](#)

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- **Rank in 2012: 8**
- **Rank in 2011: 8**
- **Rank in 2010: Honourable Mention**

'Captain Serious' has taken a back seat in Chicago to [Patrick Kane](#) and [Marian Hossa](#) in 2013, but he is still just as important as either of them to the success of the team. Toews missed over 20 games in 2011-12 because of an injury, but he still produced at a point-a-game clip. At the very least, he has proven himself to be capable of that level of production. He shoots the puck a lot, but he doesn't take many penalties. He is also great on the power play.

Toews may not take a step forward towards the 90 or 100-point mark, but that isn't because he lacks the ability to contend for an Art Ross. He plays a very responsible defensive game, and that often means that he is deep in his own zone providing help to his goaltender and defensemen instead of cheating out of the zone to create offense.

7. [Eric Staal](#)

- **Rank in 2012: 10**
- **Rank in 2011: 6**

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- **Rank in 2010: Honourable Mention**

Staal moves up three spots from last season, due in large part to the chemistry he has found with linemate [Alexander Semin](#). Staal won't have a season better than his 2005-06 campaign (dominant regular season with 100 points, and an equally-dominant postseason with 28 more, including a Stanley Cup), but Semin is bringing out the best in his game. It isn't a prototypical winger-center relationship, either. Semin is the playmaker and Staal is the scorer, whereas usually the center is the guy passing the puck to the winger.

Staal currently has 31 points in 25 games (as of March 13th). He also puts up respectable PIM totals for an offensive forward (outside of last season's 48 PIM, he generally finds himself in the 60-70 PIM range). Staal doesn't turn 30 until next October, and early indications are that the Hurricanes and Semin will try to find a way to sign a longer term contract. Staal would benefit tremendously from that successful relationship continuing into the future.

8. [Anze Kopitar](#)

- **Rank in 2012: 9**
- **Rank in 2011: 9**
- **Rank in 2010: 7**

Kopitar remains in the bottom five on this list, as he has established himself as one of the best

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centers in the game. He was fantastic during LA's Cup run last spring, besting the likes of [Henrik Sedin](#)

,
[Ryan Kesler](#)

, and

[David Backes](#)

en route to the final. Kopitar is money in the bank for 70-80 points each season. He doesn't take a lot of penalties, but his consistent production more than makes up for that.

He is one of the most physically dominant skill players in the league. Not in the way that linemate [Dustin Brown](#) is physically dominant (by wrecking people, mostly), but Kopitar uses his size to overpower defensemen and to maintain control of the puck.

He also has ridiculous hands:

{youtube}OjRJNHMkZSk{/youtube}

9. [Ryan Getzlaf](#)

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- **Rank in 2012: Honourable Mention**
- **Rank in 2011: Honourable Mention**
- **Rank in 2010: 5**

What a difference a year makes. At this time in 2012, Getzlaf was in the middle of his worst season as an NHLer (by far). He scored only 11 goals in 82 games (he currently has 10 in 25 games in 2013), and he was called out for his inconsistent and lazy effort on the ice.

He has been a completely different player in 2013, just as many Duck fans hoped/expected. He has once again emerged as the team's best player and leader, and the team rewarded him with a massive contract extension (eight years and an annual cap hit of \$8.25 million). Is Getzlaf one of the top five players in the game? Probably not, although the Ducks are paying him like he is. The team had to step up and secure their top center, as there would have been a handful of teams offering similar contracts this summer.

Getzlaf's game has matured in terms of taking bad penalties, too. The less time he spends in the box the better for the Ducks, and it was an important step for him to take after being named captain. He won't be putting up 121 PIM in a season any time soon (his total from 2008-09).

10. [Jamie Benn](#)

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- **Rank in 2012: Honourable Mention**
- **Rank in 2011: Considered a LW**
- **Rank in 2010: Considered a LW**

[Jamie Benn](#) is a special player, and he is finally starting to get the league wide recognition that he deserves. Benn transitioned seamlessly from wing to center, no easy feat for a young player on a team without much depth at the center position. The Stars like him at center for two reasons – one, it fills a huge team need (especially relative to wing), and two, it gives him more time to handle the puck.

Benn's long term future may be on the wing, and he probably has more fantasy value there. However, for the time being, he will remain at center (even if the Stars find a way to re-sign [Derek Roy](#)). Benn controls the puck as well as Kopitar or Getzlaf, and he plays with a bit of a snarl, too. There are no holes in his game – he is a bit undisciplined at times, but that is due more to the physical style of hockey he plays. He'll benefit a lot from playing with [Jaromir Jagr](#), just as [Claude Giroux](#) did last season in Philadelphia.

Honourable Mentions:

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Henrik Sedin – the first year Henrik doesn't crack the top 10. He still racks up assists like few others, but he doesn't fill enough categories to bump any of the 10 centers off of the list.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins – another two years and the Nuge will definitely be a mainstay on this list. His lack of production in 2013 is worrying, but could potentially be explained by a wonky shoulder (and a horrible team around him). He isn't ready to be a top line center just yet.

David Backes – Backes fills a lot of categories and is a fun hockey player to watch.

Jason Spezza – injury issues are the only thing preventing Spezza from making the top 10. He has taken his game to another level over the past two years, as he has really embraced the role of team leader in Ottawa.

Ryan Kesler – like Spezza, injury issues have hurt his fantasy stock. When he is at his best, there aren't many players as dominant all over the ice as Kesler is. He really drives the Vancouver power play, too.

Nicklas Backstrom – too much skill to be an honourable mention. He hasn't been immune to the offensive struggles experienced by Washington's top offensive talent.

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[Patrice Bergeron](#) – the most underrated elite player in hockey, Bergeron does it all for the Bruins. Sure, he has a great team around him, but he does the heavy lifting for a perennial Cup contender.

[Matt Duchene](#) – what a difference a year makes. Duchene's combination of speed and skill is unmatched in the Western Conference. He's ready to take his game to the next level.

[Pavel Datsyuk](#) / [Henrik Zetterberg](#) – two phenomenal hockey players who are arguably both top 10 centers, just not in fantasy hockey. Age and a lack of multi-category production hurt both of them.

Previous Top 10 Lists from 2013:

- [Top 10 Left Wingers](#)
- [Top 10 Right Wingers](#)