

Andrei Kostitsyn vs. Max Pacioretty

Written by Steve Laidlaw

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Over the past several weeks I have used this space to explore my imagination, concocting dream scenarios in which real hockey players do battle in the fantasy realm. The experience has been both wonderful and enlightening but there is potential for so much more. The fact is that NHL players actually do go to battle against each other all the time. Maybe not in a cage, but the conflict is real. I'm not talking about the battle that teams go through each time they square off against one another. I'm talking about the battle that players go through each and every day all season long, fighting for ice time against their own teammates. This week we take Cage Match on the road (figuratively) to preview a battle that will take place this fall (literally) between Andrei Kostitsyn and Max Pacioretty for the final top six spot on the Montreal Canadiens. Now the results of this battle won't have major ramifications on your pool but since only one of these two can have fantasy relevance the ramifications must be seriously considered.

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This battle is not a fight for a roster spot like many training camp battles can be. Both Kostitsyn and Pacioretty are bonafide NHL talents with nothing left to prove in the minor leagues. This battle is instead a battle for placement on the team's depth chart. With the signing of Erik Cole the Habs are left with only one open roster spot in the top six as Cole, Tomas Plekanec, Scott Gomez, Mike Cammalleri and Brian Gionta are all paid far too much to be bumped down in the lineup.

With those players already set to play in the top six, chemistry could easily become the deciding factor in this Cage Match. Forget who the better player is for now. Consider instead the possible line combinations in Montreal. There are two main pairings etched in stone right now. Cammalleri-Plekanec and Gionta-Gomez. That means the key to scoring the last top six spot will come down to etching out chemistry with whichever pairing Cole doesn't line up with.

My assumption is that Cole will likely skate with Cammalleri and Plekanec. The Habs have yet to find a proper line-mate for those two so trying out the new guy in that spot makes the most sense. That would leave the door wide open for Pacioretty to score the last top six spot having shown tremendous chemistry with Gionta and Gomez during his time with the Habs last season.

Kostitsyn, on the other hand, made his way through the Habs lineup like a kid in a bouncy castle. (Yes there was vomit.) Kostitsyn needs Cole to struggle fitting in with Cammalleri-Plekanec to have any hope of surviving. Kostitsyn has shown, in brief stints, that he has some chemistry with Cammalleri and Plekanec so he would no doubt have an inside track if Cole was placed on the Gomez line.

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Pacioretty's prior chemistry with Gionta and Gomez will surely give him a leg up going into training camp and he may need it. You cannot talk Max Pacioretty without first discussing his horrific injury at the hands of Zdeno Chara. Forget all the controversy, that's old news. Just consider the injury itself. Pacioretty suffered a broken neck and a severe concussion. These are both injuries with severe long term ramifications. Pacioretty's life, let alone his career, was in jeopardy as a result of his injuries. It sounds as though he will be good to go to for the start of training camp but you cannot help but be sceptical. It is crucial that Pacioretty not only be up to full strength physically, but he must also be ready to compete mentally. It would be easy for Pacioretty to develop a fear on the ice. He cannot afford to play timidly as his size and physicality are essential to his place on the Canadiens vertically challenged roster. What sets Pacioretty apart from Kostitsyn the most is his willingness to go to the dirty areas. If he loses that edge he will lose the battle outright as he cannot match Kostitsyn on skill alone.

Chemistry will not be the only factor deciding this Cage Match. It is entirely possible that neither Kostitsyn or Pacioretty distinguishes themselves from the other. That would create a Harry Potter/Voldemort type scenario where neither can live while the other one survives. In this scenario Habs coach Jacques Martin would likely juggle the lineup such that that they end up splitting minutes. This is not unthinkable as both players averaged nearly the identical minutes on the power play and overall last season.

It is also possible that Cole winds up getting hurt resulting in both players playing in the top six. This would be more of a Potter/Malfoy type scenario where both live despite and irrespective of each other. In either of these latter scenarios we must look at the actual talents of each player to decide the winner.

Both Pacioretty and Kostitsyn are former first rounders so there is no real advantage regarding

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draft pedigree. Pacioretty is, however, three years younger than Kostitsyn so he has time on his side, especially when one considers that Pacioretty has yet to complete a full NHL season while Kostitsyn now has four full seasons under his belt. Pacioretty and Kostitsyn share very similar upsides but given the difference in their age and experience levels you have to prefer Pacioretty's odds of reaching that upside.

In an ideal scenario either Pacioretty or Kostitsyn could score 30 goals and 70 points with similar Plus/Minus, SOG and PPP totals. I would however favour Pacioretty in the PIM department. He has proven, throughout his career, at every level that he can produce PIM at a rate of more than one per game. Kostitsyn, on the other hand, has toned down his PIM production at the NHL level. Once again Pacioretty has an advantage but that is on PIM upside alone.

Upside is not everything though. It is all well and good to appreciate the power and potential of youth but Kostitsyn is a proven commodity at the NHL level and has puck skills that Pacioretty cannot match. Kostitsyn is a three time 20-goal-scorer with a career average of over half a point per game. This will not cause anyone's jaw to drop but it is consistent production that you simply cannot count on Pacioretty providing.

Ultimately, Pacioretty provides more risk because of his injuries and lack of NHL experience but he is the better bet both short term and long term. This is because he has better odds of securing a top six spot in the short term and of reaching his upside in the long term. I am not confident giving Pacioretty the knockout win in this one because he could literally knock himself out of the match but consider the victory a very decisive one none the less. I hope you are as excited as I am to see this one play out.