

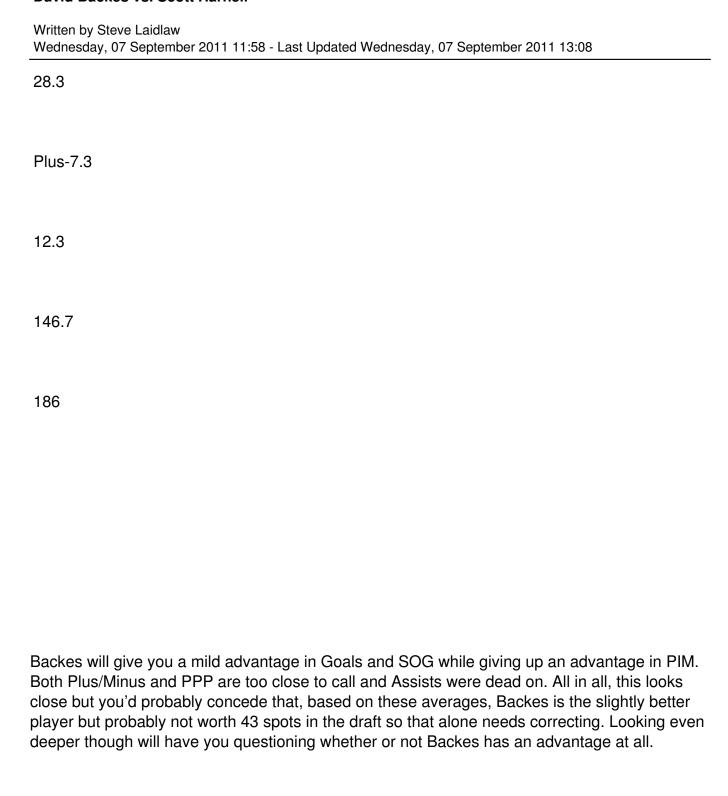
David Backes has become an absolute darling in the world of fantasy hockey and I will not lie I hopped on board that train three seasons ago and nearly rode it to a championship. I have been on that train ever since and I really have not been disappointed. Here is the problem I am having though. The hype machine may be swirling to unsustainable levels. Right now you'll find Backes as the 46th ranked skater in Yahoo! Leagues and is being drafted on average as the 50th skater so you are seeing some course correction being made by poolies but even 50th overall is a little high, at least when you consider where some other players are dropping. Consider, for instance, Scott Hartnell, who is the 68th ranked skater and is being drafted (on average) even later as the 93rd best skater. When I see numbers like this I see poolies who are in need of guidance because there is very little reason to take Backes so much higher than

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 07 September 2011 11:58 - Last Updated Wednesday, 07 September 2011 13:08 Hartnell. In fact, there is a case that Hartnell should go higher. Don't believe me? Well then come along for the ride because this week's Cage Match is Backes vs. Hartnell in a battle of the roto-studs. So just why on earth would one consider taking Hartnell over Backes? Well the simple answer is that LW is the scarcer of the two positions so being able to fill that LW spot sooner is an advantage. To really grasp the value of this would require more specifics about your given league and with all the variations of even simply league size it just doesn't seem proper to delve any deeper. So maybe your team has tremendous balance already, is there still merit in snagging Hartnell before Backes? That is what I intend to prove. Taking a look at the averages for each player over the last three seasons: Goals **Assists** Plus/Minus PPP

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PIM
SOG
Backes
26.3
28.3
Plus-8.3
11.3
121.3
194
Hartnell
22.7



First of all, let us look at PIM. Over the past three seasons Hartnell has posted 143, 155, and 142 PIM respectively. Backes' PIM, on the other hand, show a steady decline dropping from his career high of 165 in 2008-09 all the way down to last season's 93. Backes' responsibility is on the rise, especially with the trade of Team Captain Eric Brewer at last year's trade deadline. Backes will most certainly wear a letter and is a prime candidate to sport the "C". As has

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happened to other multi-cat studs like Brenden Morrow, being named captain will cause an even larger drop in PIM production. Hartnell has no such worries. I swear he has sawdust between his ears. That is awesome for poolies though, it means his PIM numbers are not going anywhere. That stands as a small advantage now but should grow as time goes along.

The next category that deserves further analysis is Plus/Minus, This is quite possibly the most fickle of all skater categories, so much so that I have considered abolishing it from my pools. Backes Plus-32 last season was a complete aberration. He is a fine defensive player on a solid team but Plus-32 is not normal. The Blues as a team were a mere Plus-6 in Goals-For/Goals-Against differential so it is almost inconceivable a player would pull off Backes' Plus/Minus total. Without last year's total Backes would be a career minus player. Hartnell, on the other hand, plays for a perennial contender. His modest Plus/Minus totals are much more reasonable and sustainable than what Backes just pulled off. Even giving Backes the benefit of the doubt as a strong two-way player on an up and coming team does not make up for the disparity between last year's production and what you would expect. I am much more confident about Hartnell's Plus/Minus production going forward.

I also have my doubts about Backes' point production. The first issue I have is goals and it is a minor one. It seems that Backes is one of those strange players who are more accurate when they increase their shot volume. In both 2008-09 and 2010-11 Backes fired over 200 SOG and registered shooting percentages of 14.9% and 14.7% respectively leading to two 31-goal seasons. Meanwhile, in 2007-08 and 2009-10 Backes fired less than 200 SOG and registered shooting percentages of 10.1% and 10.7% respectively leading to two seasons worth of Goal totals in the teens. It truly is feast or famine with Backes when it comes to his goal scoring. He is either overly accurate, thus ever more so productive, or he is overly inaccurate, proceeding to shoot even less compounding his lack of productivity. The real question here is will the real David Backes please stand up?

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Assuming that his propensity for shots and therefore goals coincides with his offensive opportunities, it is then important to look at whether or not Backes is being used optimally. The answer is an unfortunate no. After the arrival of Chris Stewart at the trade deadline last season, Backes' power play minutes fell as he was to the second unit. With all the young talent on the way Backes will have an even tougher time contending for prime offensive minutes and even just the return of many of the Blues' injured players should continue to impact Backes ability to produce points. It is worth noting that Backes' fourth quarter last season was his second most productive netting 17 points over the final 23 games but typically a reduction in powerplay ice time leads to a reduction in productivity. If nothing else I would become very skeptical of Backes' ability to produce in the PPP category.

Now we have spent plenty of time knocking Backes down a peg or two, and really that is all one would need to accomplish if they were seeking to prove that Backes is grossly overrated but we are looking at this with specific regard to how Hartnell fits into that state of overration. So is Backes actually overrated and can we prove that Hartnell is simultaneously underrated or are their chinks in Hartnell's armor as well such that in the end both players are properly rated in relation to each other?

I happen to believe Hartnell's stats should hold up over time. Just as with Backes, age is not a factor for the 29-year-old Hartnell (Backes is 27 for what it's worth), so there should be no worries of a steep decline in that regard. We have already discussed that Hartnell's PIM totals are holding steady and a quick look at his recent history will show his SOG totals are very consistent as well.

Unlike Backes, Hartnell is not in danger of losing any of his ice time. In four seasons with Philadelphia he has never averaged fewer than 15:43 minutes per game or 2:21 powerplay minutes per game. Furthermore, in spite of the vast changes made in Philly this offseason, Hartnell has maintained his spot on the depth chart as LW2. His chemistry with Flyers

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centerman Danny Briere will ensure that Hartnell's minutes stay up. He played over 80% of his shifts with Briere last season so it is a combination they should not break up.

Finally, to completely scrutinize Hartnell we should examine his shooting percentage numbers. Hartnell has a career shooting percentage of 10.7% but since the lockout his shooting has been much more efficient at 12.7%. In fact, only one season stands out as a true aberration to Hartnell's shooting efficiency and that was in 2009-10 when Hartnell's shooting was drastically below average at 8.2%. Naturally, that season he recorded his fewest goals since the lockout (14) and it was the only season he failed to record over 20 in that same span.

Hartnell is as you see him. His numbers speak for themselves. He should produce no more and no less than his recent averages suggest and that is something you can take to the bank. It seems strange that Hartnell would be underrated for this but that is in fact the case. At his age there really is not much upside or room for improvement so he lacks the sexiness of a more youthful pick but his production is quite solid across the board and more importantly it is reliable, which is more than can be said for Backes'. This really is the classic Tortoise vs. the Hare storyline all over again. Poolies have latched onto the fresh new thing (Backes) and he has rewarded them with quick gains. The problem is that Backes has outran his coverage (to turn this into a metaphor within a metaphor) and has nowhere to go but down. Hartnell meanwhile is doing the same thing he's always done; plod along providing poolies with very reasonable production at a reliable rate of return.

One final thought, and this is something that drives me insane. Last season Backes took 1138 faceoff draws, ranking him 41st in the league. This is not characteristic of a RW. The people at Yahoo! may disagree with that fact for now but it is absolutely asinine that Backes continues to maintain RW eligibility and is even more absurd that he does not, at the very least, have center eligibility as well (*Dobber's note*: Yahoo! policy is to wait for the official NHL designation. It frustrates Yahoo! as well, that the NHL takes so long to fix their designations - Major League

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Baseball is much faster (i.e. 10 games in MLB at a position and they add the designation - hockey doesn't have that))

The point of this rant is this; do not count on Backes continuing to be a RW in keeper leagues. He should be moved exclusively to the center position in the future and that will only serve to lower his relative value further. All the more reason to take Hartnell, whether in a one-year league or a keeper I prefer what Hartnell has to offer. Go Tortoise!