

Peter Mueller vs. Tomas Fleischmann

Written by Steve Laidlaw

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Looking for the perfect sleeper pick? Me too, and I think I have it. I just need to narrow it down. Yahoo! has Peter Mueller and Tomas Fleischmann ranked excruciatingly low at 321 and 403 respectively. But here's the question, which one do you pick? It is entirely possible that you just hold out until the last possible moment and grab whichever one happens to drop to you but if you are fortunate (or unfortunate enough) to have to make a choice you will have to narrow it down. That is why this week's *Cage Match* is Mueller vs. Fleischmann for the Golden Pillow Award. Oh and please excuse the EMTs, our lawyers (yeah we have lawyers) told us we couldn't do this *Cage Match* without them.

The first thing I do when reviewing a sleeper is ask myself why this player is so under the radar. I know it is rather tempting to analyze that player's upside but really in identifying that player as a sleeper you have acknowledged his upside and before falling in love with it you should first give yourself perspective by analyzing the risks. It is like doing work before play but, you know, valuable. So with that in mind why are Mueller and Fleischmann so grotesquely underrated coming into this season. The answer is pretty easy. Mueller missed the entirety of last season

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with a concussion while Fleischmann went down for the season at the midway point when he was diagnosed with multiple clots in his lungs. On top of their respective injuries both Mueller and Fleischmann also have yet to break out so they are essentially double sleepers. They need to both stay healthy and break out. So the downside is obvious; if you draft one of these guys you could be picking a lemon. And don't pretend like you can just make lemonade. No one likes lemonade. Give me a break.

The first aspect of their sleeper-ness is injuries, which means I'm going to have to throw on lab coat and play doctor. To be honest, I do not like the injury situation with either of these guys. It is basically like choosing whether you would rather lose a hand or a foot. There is no right answer but everyone can probably come up with one. My answer is that the only thing scarier than multiple concussions is congenital diseases. My rationale is that a clotting issue like Fleischmann's (may not be congenital but suffice to say he is stuck with it) is that it can take him out of commission without him ever having stepped on the ice. That is like 21 hours more, every single day, that he is at risk of hurting himself. Meanwhile, Mueller's concussions are essentially only a problem if he gets bonked on the head.

Fleischmann himself actually has a different opinion. He believes that his condition is one that he not only has under control but is also a much better injury to have than a concussion. In making this statement he referenced Crosby but he could have just as easily have said Mueller. In essence Fleischmann is telling you to pick him but of course Fleischmann would also probably tell you to take him because he is going to be a star. You taking his word on this? Me neither.

The most troubling thing that I found regarding Fleischmann's injury is in fact something that I could not find at all, a diagnosis. I am, of course, not talking about his clots. It is not like I completely forgot everything I typed in the last two paragraphs. No, what I cannot pin down is the actual cause of his clots. It could be any number of congenital or acquired problems. It could

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be acute or chronic. We, and more importantly his doctors, just do not know. That means he is going to be receiving blanket treatments and general preventative measures. They have no clue if he is going to continue to be healthy or not.

What I know is that NHL teams play 41 road games a season meaning over 50 plane trips every year, some of which will be quite lengthy. For anyone with clotting disorders flying is a serious risk. I also know that hockey is a physical sport and players get injured to the point of needing surgery, which I am sure you guessed is another risk factor for clotters.

I am very concerned about Fleischmann's future as an NHL player but I guess the bright side is that there is nothing about his condition that will prevent him from playing at 100%, well that is until he gets another clot. Mueller on the other hand has likely been altered by his injuries. Concussions change the brain both physically and chemically. He could end up being a completely different player. We just do not know. Worse than that still, he may develop the fear, which would prevent him from going all out. So like I said, there is a perfectly reasonable rationale for preferring blood clots to concussions but I am still wagering on the man with the concussions and it is probably because if/when he receives that devastating blow, I will know it when I see it and so will everyone else. That means that Mueller and doctors can take direct preventative steps to avoiding another concussion. This is not to say I think we can prevent all concussions but I still feel more comfortable with the enemy I know than the enemy I don't.

Mueller is also young enough that I do not believe, even after multiple concussions, he has been severely damaged for the long term. It is not like he has an NFL lineman's concussion record. He has had a few but has since taken enough time off to be confident of a full recovery. Maybe in 20 years I will find out differently but from what I understand right now the biggest issue with concussions is not taking the proper time to rehab them. After a year off I am confident in Mueller.

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Did I sway you? I hope not. That's where this next part comes in.

Now that we have done the work of assessing the injury concerns we now get to have some fun with optimism. Just how high could your sleeper go if everything goes as planned?

Neither Mueller nor Fleischmann are reliable NHL scorers. They both have a single 50+ point year in their past and have shown brief flashes of so much more (ironically both with Colorado) but none has proven themselves that you could lean on that historical production so instead we need to make a huge leap and start discussing potential.

Considering pure talent and potential I like Mueller. First of all he is younger so there is more growth potential available. Secondly, he has better pedigree as a former top 10 pick (2006). Finally he simply has more tools. Mueller had real star potential, whereas Fleischmann has always been a skilled complimentary piece that you would play with stars. Mueller has a size and strength advantage as well as possessing better hands, vision and creativity. Fleischmann is a solid enough player but you do not see him creating offense for himself or for teammates the way Mueller can. So on potential alone Mueller is the way to go but there is one further wrinkle: opportunity.

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Napoleon once said that, "Ability is of little account without opportunity," and of course it is so. How often have we poolies seen talent fall by the wayside due to lack of opportunity? Too often, but the good news is both Mueller and Fleischmann have so much opportunity it is smacking them in the face (metaphorically of course, fear not Mueller owners).

Once again of course I prefer Mueller's opportunity. His Avalanche are simply a much better squad than Fleischmann's Panthers. Consider potential linemates. Mueller has the luxury of lining up beside either Paul Stastny or Matt Duchene at even strength while likely playing alongside both (and Milan Hejduk) on the top power play unit. Fleischmann's best case scenario lands him on the Panthers top line with Stephen Weiss and David Booth, which is not even a likely scenario. Personally, I have Fleischmann pegged for second line center duties, although he will more than likely bounce around and see many different linemates. The point being, Fleischmann doesn't have anyone near the talents of a Matt Duchene or Paul Stastny to play with, let alone both.

Taking it one step further, look at the success of both teams last season. Last season the Avalanche scored 30 more goals than the Panthers did and had a much more successful power play. The Avalanche had the 11th best power play in the league last season, while the Panthers had the league's worst power play. While Fleischmann and all the other overpaid mediocre talents signed by Florida this summer should help improve their standing, there is still no way the Panthers can match the Avalanche's firepower.

So what can you expect this season and moving into the future? I do expect Mueller to start slow this season. After a year away from hockey, rust will be an abundant factor. However, I think by the end of the season you will be glad to have taken Mueller. I have Mueller pegged for a 20 goal, 55 point season with sleeper upside of 30 goals and 70 points. I see Fleischmann

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coming in with 20 goals and 45 points with a sleeper upside of 30 goals and 60 points. The opportunity to play with better players just seals the point difference.

Looking beyond the simple point projections Mueller also looks like the smarter bet. PIM is a wash as neither one produces much in that category. Mueller playing on the better team and with better Assist totals should post better +/- and PPP numbers as well. SOG should favour Mueller also. He has a career average of 2.09 SOG per game, while Fleischmann has a career average of 1.70 SOG per game. In light of those SOG figures goals should surprisingly be a wash. This can be explained by Fleischmann's remarkably high career shooting percentage (13.1%) and Mueller's tendency towards playmaking.

Long term, the incentive for taking Mueller is even greater. In the perfect situation Mueller could hit 80 points, whereas Fleischmann is limited to more like 70. Plus there is an age difference to consider as well. Mueller is 23 and will not only get a few more chances if he falters in Colorado but also offers a longer service record. Fleischmann is 27 years old and runs the risk of flopping and playing out the remainder of his contract in the minors and then disappearing forever. The point is Mueller has more potential and beyond injury is probably safe of being run out of the league in the next three years.

All of this adds up to a resounding victory for Mueller. I am more than willing to point out that a lot of assumptions needed to be made in order to get to this answer. It is a gamble. Mueller may be hoisting the Golden Pillow in my eyes but let me make one final suggestion: If you were unmoved or unconvinced by this article, towards whom did you lean towards when you first read the title? That should tell you all you need to know about which one to take.