The Anaheim Ducks and San Jose Sharks will play each other twice over the next week in what I assume will be a couple of the best hockey games we will see this early in the season. I am mildly annoyed that more has not been made about the Ducks-Sharks rivalry. I mean, these are two teams that have largely been competitive in the past few seasons, and are both division and state rivals. If the California coast was somehow located in Canada then this rivalry would be a bigger deal than Ron Burgundy. Sadly that is not the case.

Geography is not the only thing keeping this rivalry from taking off. The teams' comically bad name/logo/colour schemes have done them no favours. Sure the Sharks have a unique and ferocious mascot but the choice of teal in their jerseys is nearly as emasculating as the pink shoes and gloves in the NFL and more importantly nowhere near as excusable.

The Ducks are even worse esthetic offenders. I get that Disney was feeling the cross promotion they'd get by naming their team the *Mighty Ducks* but give me a break. Whatever ferocity a duck ever had went out the window with the use of the word "mighty" and when they went ahead and used the same logo and uniform design as they did in the movie, they annihilated any chance of us ever taking them seriously. It is unfathomable how many Emilio Esteves jokes I made during their run to the finals in '03 and the Giguere-Goldberg jokes were even worse.

So it's been an uphill battle even getting us to consider these teams as legitimate NHL franchises, let alone ones capable of having rivals but the biggest reason we've never heard much about it is the fact that these teams lack the head-to-head playoff history needed to generate buzz. They may play each other six times a season but having faced each other only once in the playoffs they do not have that iconic spring moment that every good hockey rivalry needs. With that in mind I'll be hoping and wishing that we get a Ducks-Sharks series next spring but just in case we don't I will use this space to start to generate some buzz of my own. This week's *Cage Match* will feature Bobby Ryan vs. Patrick Marleau. It's Duck vs. Shark, a matchup nature never intended for and only Bettman's expansion insanity could create. Let the bloodbath ensue!

Marleau and Ryan actually have a lot more in common than being the first line left wingers for two teams involved in a largely underappreciated hockey rivalry that I may or may not have just made up. Bobby Ryan is the answer to the trivia question: Who was taken second overall after

Sidney Crosby. Coincidentally enough it seemed for the longest time Marleau would be a similar footnote as the player selected directly after Joe Thornton in the ’97. Ironically, it took Thornton being dealt to the Sharks for Marleau to finally achieve star status. Bobby Ryan needed no similar trade to achieve his own breakout but he is still a player that poolies have had to be patient with.

Patience, it turns out is what these two can teach us more than anything. After all, are we not still waiting for Ryan to churn out that superstar fantasy season his draft pedigree has promised? He has performed remarkably well in a career that is only three years old but having waited three seasons for him to even reach the NHL fulltime we are yearning for more. Marleau, on the other hand, made the leap to the NHL right away but he struggled to break out. In fact, he did not break 30 goals until the 2005-06 season; his eighth in the NHL.

The wait for Marleau was definitely longer, considering Ryan accomplished what Marleau struggled to in just his rookie season. That being said the length of wait is now irrelevant. These guys are productive now and we need to know who can provide the better rewards.

Here’s a breakdown of those rewards in the form of two year averages (because Ryan’s rookie season was only 64 games long):

GP

Goals

Assists

Plus/Minus

PPP

PIM

SOG

Ryan

81.5

34.5

33

Plus-12

15.5

71

264

Marleau

82

40.5

37.5

Plus-9

25.5

19

276.5

The first thing you will note is how healthy these two have been over the past two seasons. There are few players in the league that have stayed as healthy as Marleau has over his career and Bobby Ryan appears to be following the same path. You really cannot go wrong with either of these players if you share my stigma towards Band-Aid Boys.

Marleau holds slight advantages in Goals, Assists and SOG with a healthy advantage in PPP. While expected growth for Ryan (and perhaps decline from Marleau) might have you predicting these margins to shrink there is a fair amount of evidence to the contrary, at least for this season anyhow.

It is not that Ryan finds himself in a bad situation; he just cannot seem to leap frog old man Selanne for time on the Ducks top power play unit. That leaves him picking up the scraps on the second unit with the likes of Jason Blake and Saku Koivu, which wouldn't be so bad if this were say 2006-07, but it is 2011-12 and those guys are washed up like a murder victim on TV's *Dexter*.
This season Ryan has seen an average of 2:47 on the power play but that was just a two game sample size. Expect that number to look more like last season's average of 2:24.

Marleau on the other hand receives prime time minutes at both even strength and on the power play. He has only played one game this season but saw nearly four minutes of power play time in that game. Last season he averaged 3:20 on the power play and I would expect more of the same. More importantly than just seeing those big time minutes is the fact that Marleau is always out there with the big guns. He spent almost 90% of his shifts at even strength and on the power play on the top line with Joe Thornton and Joe Pavelski.

What all that means is the status quo has remained the same. Marleau will continue to receive more offensive opportunities than Ryan and will thus maintain his advantages, particularly in PPP. SOG is a category where Ryan could make things interesting as his shooting has increased every season he's been in the league so one could argue for that category to be a wash.

Plus/Minus is a category where Ryan has a slight advantage based on the figure above but it is more likely that this category is a wash as well. Plus/Minus is always difficult to predict but last season was a particularly bad year for the Sharks and in particular their top line. With a much improved defense and a bounce back from Thornton, Marleau should see his Plus/Minus return to positive. We could also see some addition by subtraction here with Heatley and his lead feet exiled to the hockey gulag in Minnesota. Throwing a savvy player like Pavelski in his place will not hurt any either.

On top of the anticipated improvement from Marleau, Ryan could easily regress in this category. His Plus-15 last season was a career high. It was also third on the Ducks and the better than his linemates Perry and Getzlaf. While it is unlikely Ryan will be a minus player playing with those two there is a regression predicted for many in the Ducks lineup and this could cause a team wide decline in Plus/Minus.

Plus/Minus was a close one to begin with anyhow so let's call that one a wash too. That leaves Ryan holding the cards in just the PIM category. That leaves the score 3-1 for Marleau, at least in one year leagues.

Those of you in keeper leagues cannot just blindly concede that Marleau is the better choice. After all, he is 32 years old so he is bound to start declining. I'm not in a rush to write Marleau off though. Marleau has been like a fine wine, continually getting better with age. Hitting 30 did not slow Marleau down at all. Marleau remains a very good skater with a lethal shot. That means he has a lot of hockey left. He could easily maintain this high level of play for another three seasons. Until he shows signs of regression, it isn't time to jump ship. Marleau is certainly the better bet in one-year leagues and anyone who is considering competing in a keeper league must consider Marleau as an upgrade over Ryan.

Furthermore, we are still waiting on Ryan to push Selanne out of the way or for Selanne to kindly fade into from the picture. Until Ryan gets that top unit power play time, he will not be more valuable than Marleau. I would love to be able to say that's coming this season or even next season but we just do not know what kind of bionic appendages Selanne has been adding in his off-season surgeries.

One-year poolies, you know what to do. Get on Marleau and get on him fast. This is mildly optimistic but with the addition of Brent Burns and a rejuvenated Thornton this could be a career season for Marleau. Keeper leaguers, take a long hard look at how competitive your team is.

Could Marleau give you an advantage this season?

What kind of incentive could you receive for giving away Ryan's eight year advantage in age?

These are questions you should be asking because Marleau could put you over the top and maybe net you a nice prospect for your troubles. On the flip side, if you aren't competing I would be selling how much Marleau has left in the tank in trying to land Ryan. On the whole though, I'm calling this one advantage Marleau.

I want all you readers out there to tune in on Friday night and again on Tuesday as these guys go head-to-head. This Ducks-Sharks rivalry is fierce (probably) and is going to be a thing (hopefully) so you better get on board now. I guarantee you will see the sort of hard skating, tight checking, and after-the-whistle skirmishing normally saved for playoff hockey and if not you'll at least get to check out George Parros' dirty duster in some even dirtier dust ups.