

Dan Boyle vs. Lubomir Visnovsky

Written by Steve Laidlaw

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Did you take my advice and watch the Ducks-Sharks games this past week? Admittedly Friday's game was a snoozer. I felt dumb for having hyped up that game so much. It was as

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though I was a producer of *The Playboy Club* or something. I let you down and the game let us all down. Monday's game more than made up for it though. Anaheim's stars finally turned it on and brought some excitement to this rivalry. There were scrums, there were fights and most of all there were plenty of scoring chances. That's all you can really ask for at this stage of the season.

To continue my efforts of informing the public of what a great rivalry this is, Cage Match will feature Part Two in the Ducks-Sharks saga. This time we look to the blue line. It is Dan Boyle vs. Lubomir Visnovsky. Let's get it on!

Boyle and Visnovsky have so much in common it is frightening. They are both 35 years old, undersized defensemen who broke into the league full time in the 2000-01 season. On top of that Boyle and Visnovsky both quarterback two of the top offensive teams in the league, who actually tied for second best power play in the league at 23.5% last season. Furthermore, the two defensemen are off to mediocre starts this season, which makes them ripe for the picking. (Visnovsky has one point through his first five games, while Boyle has two points through his first four.)

So just which one should you go after? You might be inclined to go after Visnovsky. After all, he did lead all NHL defensemen in points last season with 68. Boyle did not do so bad himself, scoring 50 points to finish among the top 10 defensemen in scoring. As the figure below will show Boyle, is in fact the more consistent option. He (along with Nik Lidstrom) is one of only two defensemen to finish in the top 10 in defensemen scoring in the last three seasons and is the only defenseman in the NHL to score at least 50 all three of those years. Here the three year averages for Boyle and Visnovsky:

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GP

Goals

Assists

Plus/Minus

PPP

PIM

SOG

Boyle

76.3

13.3

41.7

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Plus-4.7

29.3

63

197.3

Visnovsky

68

13.7

34.3

Plus-4.7

23.7

24.7

123

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The first thing worth noting is that Boyle is the more durable of the two. Were it not for that freak incident where Boyle was cut by a skate, he would have played over 60 games in every season since he's been in the NHL full time. Visnovsky on the other hand has had three seasons where he has failed to reach that mark. Boyle has that stalky build that helps him through the rigors of an NHL season despite being undersized. You could call him a pitbull. By comparison Visnovsky is the penkingese that keeps getting run over by the vacuum cleaner. He is a definite risk to miss 10+ games in every season and comes with the inherent risk that he could go down for an extended stretch. His early season struggles are almost even more damning because of his injury risk. We all know he will turn it around and put up points, but can he produce enough before he gets hurt to be worth acquiring?

Goals, as you can see are a wash, which is remarkably surprising given Boyle's tremendous SOG advantage. In fact, you could make the argument that Visnovsky is the more prolific goal scorer since he's scored marginally more goals in significantly fewer games. Of course, you cannot write off Visnovsky's reduced games because they are the result of injury but my guess is there are more than a few mavericks out there looking to go against the grain.

Assists are Boyle's category but Visnovsky's total of 50 in this category last season give us something to think about. This is in fact the second time in Visnosky's career he has notched 50 assists in a single season. Boyle has never accomplished this feat but he does score over 40 on a perennial basis. This is once again an opportunity for the maverick to go for big payout.

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Plus/Minus is surely the most interesting of the categories because it is one where they are tied exactly. Unfortunately, Plus/Minus is also the one of the most maddeningly difficult to predict categories in fantasy. I mean, you could consider the fact that Visnovsky spent a season and a half on a miserable Oilers squad and that has caused his Plus/Minus average to be lower. On the other hand you have to concede that Visnovsky was quite lucky to have been so far into the black for the Ducks last season, considering the Ducks finished with a lowly plus-two in goals for/against differential. Can he be so lucky again? This season has not started well for him as he is minus-four through the first five games.

Boyle also finds himself in the red to begin this season, albeit only at minus-one. As is the theme of this Cage Match, Boyle offers the more consistent of numbers. Since donning a Sharks uniform, Boyle has always finished as a plus-player but has never finished higher than plus-six in any season. One could however make the argument Boyle will do much better in this category (and perhaps in all categories) this coming season. The Sharks blue line was desperately thin last season, and that forced them to stretch him thinner than Getzlaf's head of hair. Boyle was second in the league in average time on ice last season, playing over 26 minutes a game in all situations. With reinforcements on the blue line, the Sharks will be able to save Boyle for what he does best; offense. That could mean not only improved plus/minus numbers but perhaps career highs in scoring as well.

PPP is a close category but this once again goes to Boyle because he plays more. And with San Jose boasting a similarly lethal power play as Anaheim's you cannot even give Visnovsky a gamblers edge in this category.

Finally we come to PIM and SOG. This is where Boyle goes all Bruce Banner and Hulks up, taking this from a competitive battle to an outright bloodbath. While you could concede

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Visnovsky provides some intriguing upside in Goals, Assists and Plus/Minus, the riverboat gamblers out there have no answer for Boyle's sheer dominance of the PIM and SOG categories.

I have Boyle marked down for a 4-0-2 beat down of Visnovsky. While Visnovsky's upside will always make this intriguing and certainly allow him to be the best option, like he was last year, the smart money is on Boyle. In many ways he is a reflection of the Sharks franchise as a whole. Boyle may not win any defensemen scoring titles, but he will be in the mix every year. I fully endorse going after Boyle. Let someone else suffer through Visnovsky's impending injury.

I also endorse continuing to follow the Ducks-Sharks rivalry. Circle Boxing Day on your calendar because that's when these two teams play next. While there will no doubt be good deals in the stores, I encourage you to stay home and watch some hockey instead. The Ducks-Sharks game will be the best deal of the day!