

## Rick Nash vs. Ilya Kovalchuk

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 26 October 2011 10:14 - Last Updated Thursday, 27 October 2011 12:42

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In my mind Ilya Kovalchuk and Rick Nash will always be connected as two of the wasted talents of this generation. Their careers are far from over but having used up their youth as the faces of two of the league's most moribund franchises I feel confident making that claim.

You could argue that a bigger problem is at the root of this. Without Gary Bettman's ridiculous overexpansion Nash doesn't end up on a talent deprived Columbus team and Kovalchuk doesn't have to waste away playing in Atlanta's ghost-town (err... downtown) arena. How can the NHL even market these players when no one knows what the crap a Thrasher or a Blue Jacket even is? They could have been called the Dirty Birds and the Windbreakers for all any fan cared.

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Now the Dirty Birds have been moved to Winnipeg in a move so sensible it is astounding that Bettman actually allowed it to happen. My inside sources indicate that the hockey hotbeds of Las Vegas, Nevada and Topeka, Kansas were higher up on Bettman's list. Thankfully, logic prevailed, the Dirty Birds are no more and we have the Jets back somewhere that they appreciate hockey.

(I actually have a theory that the Columbus franchise and their dwindling fan base should be moved to Quebec City where they, like the Jets of Winnipeg, could take up their old franchise name the Nordiques. This would work for many reasons up to and including the fact that Nordiques probably means Windbreakers in French so they could just take the current jerseys and slap some fleur-de-lis on them to save money.)

Would Kovalchuk have been a less wasted talent had he spent his first eight seasons in Winnipeg rather than Atlanta? It's hard to say that he wouldn't have been wasted any less but the he could have gained hero status for his goal scoring prowess much the way Selanne did in Winnipeg so many years ago.

The truth is there are probably four too many teams in this league. How Kovalchuk and Nash could have been saved was for there to be no millennium expansion at all. If we avoid that there are fewer NHL teams and thus the talent becomes more concentrated, the quality of play becomes better and maybe we even avoid the lockout. But I digress.

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As it stands now, Kovalchuk is no longer a member of the Jets (ne-Thrashers) franchise. However his new franchise is really no better than his old one. A lack of foresight by both Kovalchuk and the Devils (his new team) has led to that team being crippled by his salary and failing to meet their collective goal of contending for the Stanley Cup. In New Jersey Kovalchuk has done no better than he did in Atlanta. To date Kovalchuk and Nash have played in a total of three playoff series, totalling 13 games, with Kovalchuk claiming the lone playoff win between the two of them and that came with the Devils. So in conclusion their talents have easily been wasted, at least by NHL standards.

This is a shame because as the top picks in back-to-back drafts (Kovalchuk in 2001, Nash in 2002) much was expected of them. As individuals they have certainly achieved plenty. They've made All-Rookie teams and All-Star games. They even shared the 2003-04 Maurice Richard Trophy for leading the league in goal scoring. The problem is that every spring their teams have been eliminated.

Having had the misfortune of missing the playoffs so often in their careers both Nash and Kovalchuk have become mainstays on their respective national teams at the world championships. There they have truly dominated. They've both worn the "C" for their country, won gold medals and have even each taken home the MVP of this annual tournament of mediocrity.

There may in fact be no better sign of a player's failure to achieve NHL success than his finding success at the world championships. Edmonton's Ryan Smyth wasn't known as Captain Canada for nothing. He earned that nickname because of the Oilers constant failures. Does that make Kovalchuk the *Relegated Russian* or Nash the *Capsized Canuck*? Don't rule it out. While those make for some terrible nicknames the alternate might be being forgotten altogether. The nicknames are clearly the lesser of two evils.

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Of course, their careers are far from over. Nash is only 27 years old and Kovalchuk is only a year older. They have plenty of hockey left to play. BUT they are also locked in for what must look like eternity with their current and most definitely awful franchises. Nash is signed through 2018 and judging by his [team photo](#) he cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. Kovalchuk, meanwhile, is signed in Hell until New Jersey freezes over... wait... err... yah.

Since we know they are not going anywhere any time soon let us take a look at what we can expect from these two with a classic *Cage Match* breakdown. The following is a table of their averages over the last three seasons in your standard 6x4 rotisserie league.

**GP**

**Goals**

**Assists**

**Plus/Minus**

**PPP**

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**PIM**

**SOG**

**Nash**

76.3

35

35.7

Plus-3.7

18.3

48

274

**Kovalchuk**

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78.7

38.3

40.3

Minus-9.3

28

43.7

270

The first take away here is that both players have been quite healthy. That both are on the right side of 30, with little to no history of injury is music to poolies' ears. While they may be the poster boys (and by "poster boys" I of course mean guys who will never appear on a poster because no one in the general public really knows who they are) of the diluted NHL, they are still young and talented enough to be major assets in fantasy leagues.

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Next we can see that this is a very close matchup across the board. Kovalchuk has traditionally been the stronger producer in both goals and assists (though not by too great a margin) and holds a major PPP advantage. A great deal of that can be chalked up to Kovalchuk's offensive freedom in Atlanta, while Nash was stuck under the thumb of Ken Hitchcock for most of his time in Columbus.

Hitchcock is arguably the most hated man in fantasy hockey. His system is utterly boring and makes superstars out of garbage goalies. There is no doubt Hitchcock stifled the development of more than a few offensively talented youngsters unlucky enough to pass through Columbus during his tenure. While Nash is certainly a better and more complete player for having played under Hitchcock, there is also little doubt that Hitchcock is the main reason Nash has yet to develop into the scoring star and roto-monster poolies have long projected him to be.

To say that Nash has been a disappointment is putting things lightly and that has been a source of frustration for many poolies. What point is there in being a complete player when everyone else on your team is a complete tool? While Nash is certainly well compensated despite his mediocre numbers one could still argue he'd have been better off going all out on offense and putting up superstar numbers. Now that Hitchcock and most of the old guard are now gone from Columbus they have assembled arguably the most talented roster that they have ever had so things are looking up.

The argument for years has been that if only Nash had a decent centerman to play with he would produce. There is some logic behind that argument but I just think he's needed talent of any kind to play with. Using the Frozenpool tool we can see that in Nash's best season (2008-09 when he scored 79 points in 78 games) he spent most of his time skating with Kristian Huselius and Manny Malhotra. I know you are thinking that cannot be right but check it out:

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| EVEN STRENGTH LINE COMBINATIONS |                                   |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Line                            | Line Combination                  |
| 10.2%                           | HUSELIUS,K - MALHOTRA,M - NASH,R  |
| 10.6%                           | HUSELIUS,K - NASH,R - LIMBERGER,R |
| 8.2%                            | BRASSARD,D - HUSELIUS,K - NASH,R  |
| 6.3%                            | MALHOTRA,M - NASH,R - LIMBERGER,R |
| 4.5%                            | CHIHRAJ,J - NASH,R - LIMBERGER,R  |

Kristian freaking Huselius has been the best player Nash has ever lined up with. Poor Nash.

Fortunately the Windbreakers went on a spending spree this summer bringing in Jeff Carter and veteran Vinny Prospal to the fold. Carter is now hurt and the Windbreakers still suck (they just notched their first win of the season last night) but those two are easily the best players Nash will ever have played with. A lot has been made about the fact that both Nash and Carter are shoot-first players and that because of that they may not mesh. Bull-poop! Would you rather Nash lined up with Malhotra again?

The way I see it, when Carter returns Nash will become more of a playmaker and thus increase his production that way. Carter is a shoot-first player and will continue to play that way because he doesn't know any better. He is pound for pound one of the softest players in the league so rather than change his game he'll continue his perimeter oriented puck flinging brigade. He has played this way long enough there is little reason to expect anything less so he will rely on Nash to do the dirty work. This is right up Nash's alley. He is the dream player for cycling the puck as he has the size, speed, skills and tenacity to run teams ragged single-handedly.

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More importantly, Nash is a malleable player. We may hate Hitchcock for what he did to Nash's early career production but how he molded him back then will help Nash mold around Carter now. All these guys need is time to develop some chemistry. Even if they wind up separated at even strength, they will still play together on the power play and that's where Nash needs the most help anyway. I could see Nash's goals going up simply through Carter's uncanny ability to fling the puck at the net. Rebound goals still count the same don't they? Consider me an uber-optimist regarding this situation. Even with Carter out Nash has eight points through the first nine games, putting him on pace to clear 70 for just the second time in his career. Things are looking up.

Beyond Carter and Prospal the Windbreakers also brought in defenseman James Wisniewski via free agency. I'm not exactly a fan of Wisniewski's having watched him play his way off of like 16 teams over the last three seasons (probably an exaggeration) but there's no questioning his pedigree as a puck moving defenseman. That has probably been the Windbreakers biggest deficiency all along. I mean, the Windbreakers have only ever had a defenseman clear 34 points once in their franchise history and that was Jaroslav Spacek with 45 back in Nash's rookie season (2002-03). Wisniewski scored 51 points last season, 29 of which came on the power play. While I have Wisniewski due for a decline his presence will no doubt help the Windbreakers. In first game back from suspension, last night, he played over eight minutes on the power play so it is clear what his role will be. He cannot help but improve the Windbreakers horrendous power play (currently 26<sup>th</sup> in the league at 11.1% after going 1/7 last night and actually improving their success rate).

Kovalchuk on the other hand faces a tougher chemistry battle than Nash. While he has always been the more successful performer of the two, he has historically seen much better linemates. Now in New Jersey he is really at a crossroads. Is he even a top line player anymore? New Jersey already has a star player, who like Kovalchuk is a shoot-first player, and also like Kovalchuk he plays on the left side. Unlike the dynamic in Columbus where Nash and Carter

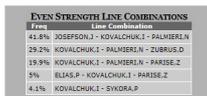
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can at least coexist positionally, Kovalchuk and Parise cannot even play together without one of them playing out of position. Parise was injured last season so we really did not get much of a glimpse of the dynamics of them playing together but it's worth noting that much of this season they have been split apart. We'll allow Frozenpool to tell the tale of the tape once again.



| EVEN STRENGTH LINE COMBINATIONS |                                      |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Line Combination                |                                      |
| 42.8%                           | JOSEFSON,J - KOVALCHUK,I - PALMERLIN |
| 25.2%                           | KOVALCHUK,I - PALMERLIN - ZUBRUSSE,D |
| 19.9%                           | KOVALCHUK,I - PALMERLIN - PARISE,Z   |
| 5%                              | ELIAS,P - KOVALCHUK,I - PARISE,Z     |
| 4.1%                            | KOVALCHUK,I - SYKORA,P               |

Parise and Kovalchuk have skated on a line together just 25% of the time, though it is interesting to note that much of this came last night against the Los Angeles Kings. Parise played center (a position he has played before) and was successful at least as far as faceoffs are concerned going 9/14 on the draw. They did go pointless this match but it is perhaps the spark needed to get both players going offensively.

Of course they both see plenty of power play time together particularly because Kovalchuk plays the point rather effectively (and because the Devils have no other options on the blue line) but this has yet to be very productive as the Devils boast the league's 24<sup>th</sup> ranked power play at 12%.

Much like Nash and Carter I think that what Kovalchuk and Parise need is time to develop

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chemistry. Kovalchuk is one of the most dynamic offensive players in the league and Parise is one of the hardest working and savviest players in the league. Logic dictates chemistry will come. It may not be enough however. New Jersey has really become Columbus of the East with their complete lack of puck moving defensemen. Stud rookie Adam Larsson has been better than expected but he should not be the team's best defenseman at 18 years old and simply isn't dynamic enough at this point to power the Devils from the backend. Until help arrives the Devils offense will struggle.

All of this has me believing Nash and Kovalchuk are on an even keel offensively. For more proof look at how diminished Kovalchuk's power play production has been since arriving in New Jersey. Through 114 games he has 32 points. That's 23 PPP over an 82 game season and 22 PPP over the 79 games Kovalchuk has averaged over the last three years. With the additions of Carter, Prospal and Wisniewski Nash should boost his power play production the four PPP he needs to match Kovalchuk. Hell he should do better than that but so should Kovalchuk with a full season playing with Parise. All of that together leads me to believe that Kovalchuk and Nash are equals in the goal, assist and PPP categories. For more evidence just look at how much Kovalchuk has derived from power play scoring in his career (38.8% of his points) vs. how little Nash has (33.3%). Change is clearly afoot.

Moving on to the peripheral categories, Nash has a firm advantage in plus/minus and that should not change. I would not count on Nash to dominate plus/minus but the fact that he has been a plus player since the lockout leaves me confident in his abilities compared to Kovalchuk who has been a plus player only one season in his entire career. Even just seven games into the season Kovalchuk is already minus-2. It is inevitable that Nash will build a nice buffer here. Thanks for that (but nothing else) Hitchcock.

PIM should be a split. Both Nash and Kovalchuk are not great PIM options. Nash was once a great provider but he is suffering from some severe Captaintitis. When Nash was named Captain

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of the Windbreakers in 2008 his PIM dropped from 95 to 54. He is no longer the PIM-per-game option he once was. Kovalchuk, meanwhile, has never been a great option but still registers enough stick infractions to not qualify for the Lady Bing.

Finally, we look at SOG which is already a tight category and there is little reason to believe it won't remain tight. Nash and Kovalchuk are both great options in this category with both perennially clearing 200 SOG. That they both now play alongside shoot-first players does stand to be a detriment to their production but it is reasonable to assume the effect will be similar for both players. Since the lockout only three pairs of teammates have ever both shot over 300 SOG in a season. Each time involved Marian Hossa so you could credit him for being particularly malleable but twice he was paired with Ilya Kovalchuk so give Kovalchuk some credit too. I also think that of the Kovalchuk-Parise duo Kovalchuk is the least likely one to give up shooting the puck (although his pace through seven games is to hit only 257 SOG this season) while Nash is the more likely one in the Nash-Carter duo to give up shots (his pace this season through nine games is for 246 SOG).

I'll give Kovalchuk the SOG category but that leaves this *Cage Match* as a 1-1 tie. Choosing the correct one will probably not make or break your season but every little bit helps. I really think this is a tie but I still favour Kovalchuk. His history indicates a much higher ceiling than Nash's. The gap has definitely closed though so it is time to start viewing these two as equals both in one year and in keeper leagues.

If you are looking for something to persuade you one way or the other, consider the fact that Parise is a UFA at the end of the season. Does the inevitable trade or at the very least opening up of \$6 million in cap space help or hurt Kovalchuk? I think it helps. Rather than worry about how he and Parise will develop chemistry, that money could be spent upgrading their horrendous blue line or directed towards bringing in a playmaker to help get Kovalchuk back to his 50 goal ways. Of course, I do not advocate making decisions based on assumed trades but

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maybe you are more flexible than I am.