The St. Louis Blues annoy me. Nay, they downright piss me of. This franchise has received more hype than Avatar. The next big thing? Hardly. Avatar was alien Pocahontas and the Blues are hockey's Kansas City Royals.

The Blues are the most glaring example of the cheerleader effect in fantasy hockey. They are loaded with *good* young talent. The problem is that there is not a superstar in the bunch. Looking at all their former first round picks will have you drooling but start picking each individual apart and it's much less impressive.

The Blues need a superstar to take over as the proverbial cheer captain – a legitimate looker who empowers the rest of the gang. The good news is the Blues have finally found a superstar.

The bad news is he's their coach: Ken Hitchcock.

Hitchcock is the most infamous fantasy hockey vampire out there. He literally sucks the life right out of perfectly good hockey players and breathes it into his goalies, no matter how mediocre or just plain dreadful they are. I don't think that this label is perfectly accurate because Hitchcock did have some high scoring teams in Dallas and Philadelphia AND this was back during the "Dead Puck Era" but Hitchcock has proven that when you throw him a team devoid of star talent he will make it into a winner, it just won't be pretty.

The Blues, despite their drastically improved record, are actually scoring less – by the slightest of margins – with Hitchcock as coach, than they were under Davis Payne. The Blues power play is improved under Hitchcock – 13.1% with Hitch vs. 7.1% with Payne – but that can be rationalized by the "it couldn't possibly be any worse" argument.

So what do you do if you are a fantasy owner of any Blues players? The immediate advice is to abandon ship. As Dobberhockey's Ryan Ma has been preaching for months now; the St. Louis Blues are an offense by committee team. They just don't have the roster to roll otherwise.

In this week's *Cage Match* I will get down to the root of all this Blues hype and resolve a battle that has been raging for several years now. It's TJ Oshie vs. Patrick Berglund. Let's resolve this

once and for all.

When Oshie and Berglund made their NHL debuts in 2008-09 they arrived with a bang, helping the Blues to their first – and only – playoff berth since the lockout. Berglund finished fourth in rookie scoring, while Oshie finished ninth despite playing only 57 games. It was absolute bedlam. Unfortunately, it has been mostly downhill from there.

Oshie has been remarkably consistent. His scoring pace since landing in the NHL has hardly deviated. In the table below you will see Oshie's per game point production over his career.

Career	0.664
2008-09	0.684
2009-10	0.632
2010-11	0.694
2011-12 Payne	0.615
2011-12 Hitch	0.688

That 0.664 points per game pace equates to 54 points over an 82-game season. The problem is Oshie has yet to play an 82-game season. So he is a 55(ish)-point player with injury problems. Considering that Oshie was a relatively mature 22 years old when he made his NHL debut and has shown very little in the way of progress as an offensive player, it is hard to envision Oshie having any more upside. He turns 25 next week and is in his fourth year as a pro. If he had something else for us, we would have seen it by now.

Oshie's style of play should lend itself to favouritism from Hitchcock but thus far he is yet to receive any dividends. He is averaging just over 19 minutes per game with just over two of those minutes coming on the power play. This is no different than what he received last season.

It does seem, however, that Oshie has struck the linemate lottery in St. Louis and this is where Oshie stands to benefit the most from Hitchcock's presence. Since his arrival in St. Louis, Hitchcock has made a point of solidifying the line combinations as much as possible, which is in stark contrast to Payne, who applied the poo-flinging approach to line combos.

Hitchcock has combined the Blues three leading scorers to form what is easily the Blues most productive line. As Frozenpool will show us, this is a combination that needs to stick.

Str	On Ice Line Combination	Points
EV	BACKES.DAVID - OSHIE.T.J. - STEEN.ALEXANDER	19
EV	ARNOTT.JASON - D'AGOSTINI.MATT - STEEN.ALEXANDER	9
EV	ARNOTT.JASON - LANGENBRUNNER.JAMIE - STEEN.ALEXANDER	9
EV	BACKES.DAVID - OSHIE.T.J. - SOBOTKA.VLADIMIR	8
EV	BERGLUND.PATRIK - OSHIE.T.J. - STEWART.CHRIS	6

Frozenpool will also demonstrate that Hitchcock now has that line playing together over 50% of the time for the season but strangely enough they have yet to be used as a power play line.

Even Strength Line Combinations

Freq	Line Combination
55.2%	BACKES.D - OSHIE.T - STEEN.A
13.8%	BACKES.D - OSHIE.T - SOBOTKA.V
12.6%	BERGLUND.P - D'AGOSTINI.M - OSHIE.T
12.3%	BERGLUND.P - OSHIE.T - STEWART.C
6%	BACKES.D - LANGENBRUNNER.J - OSHIE.T

Power Play Line Combinations

Freq	Line Combination
36.3%	ARNOTT.J - BACKES.D - OSHIE.T - STEEN.A
23.7%	BERGLUND.P - OSHIE.T - STEWART.C
17%	BACKES.D - D'AGOSTINI.M - OSHIE.T - STEEN.A
13.3%	ARNOTT.J - LANGENBRUNNER.J - OSHIE.T
9.6%	ARNOTT.J - OSHIE.T - STEWART.C

You will note that Steen has been out there with both Backes and Oshie on the power play, but never as a forward. Both Payne and now Hitchcock have opted to use Steen as a defenseman on the power play. The power play has improved under Hitchcock but I think this strategy needs to be abandoned.

If I may deviate for a moment; I think Hitchcock needs to get the Shattenkirk-Pietrangelo combo going on the power play together as much as possible and let his forwards play forward. If there is a star in this Blues lineup it is definitely one of Shattenkirk or Pietrangelo so they need to be maximized. Meanwhile, Steen could be pushed back to forward on the power play where he could put that chemistry with Oshie and Backes to work.

Barring any changes, expect Oshie to remain on course.

What about Berglund then? Berglund has the higher upside of the two. His physical tools are simply better. The problem is that Berglund is too reliant on others for his production. He is a classic tools without the toolbox guy. Physically, it's all there. The size, the skating, the hands – it's a dream. The problem is upstairs. The light just has not clicked on. Berglund is now 23 years old and in his fourth NHL season. He's running out of time. Big guys do take longer but when it takes this long you have to ask questions.

With Berglund's physical skills and lack of elite hockey IQ I wonder if he isn't miscast as a centerman. This of course does not solve St. Louis's glaring lack of quality at the center position but forcing Berglund into a position he is ill-suited for is the classic square peg in a round hole. The Blues should really get this guy on the wing before he becomes some kind of super-cliché.

Berglund's best stretches of production have come while paired up with a playmaking winger. Most often he has been played with the now injured Andy McDonald but Berglund has also had stretches with Alex Steen. It is telling that they are both former centers converted to the wing. When paired with either of them, Berglund is responsible for taking the draws and then switches to a wingers role allowing McDonald/Steen to be the primary puck carrier.

With McDonald out, Berglund has been totally lost. His minutes are still up where they were last season, as he is receiving well over 17 minutes per game, over two of which come on the power play but he has just eight points in the 26 games since McDonald went down vs. three points in the three games with McDonald.

As Frozenpool will show us, the Blues are trying out Berglund with David Perron now that Perron has made his return.

Frequency	Strength	Line Combination
62.18%	EV	21 BERGLUND.PATRIK - 57 PERRON.DAVID - 25 STEWART.CHRIS
11.76%	EV	21 BERGLUND.PATRIK - 15 LANGENBRUNNER.JAMIE - 57 PERRON.DAVID
6.72%	EV	21 BERGLUND.PATRIK - 36 D'AGOSTINI.MATT - 57 PERRON.DAVID
4.2%	EV	21 BERGLUND.PATRIK - 15 LANGENBRUNNER.JAMIE - 17 SOBOTKA.VLADIMIR

I am not a huge Perron fan. I know he likes to have the puck on his stick but I'm not sure he is a playmaker the same way that McDonald and Steen are. This is far from a perfect match. So far Perron's return has done little to shake Berglund's slumber. That gives Oshie the edge in any one-year points only leagues.

Now what about your standard 6x4 rotisserie setup? Let us look at the old three year average chart to see how Oshie and Berglund stack up.

GP

Goals

Assists

Plus/Minus

PIM

PPP

SOG

Oshie

60.7

14.7

25.7

Plus-8.3

27

12.3

120.7

Berglund

76

18.7

23

Plus-3.7

19.3

16

149

It becomes all the more clear that Oshie's ability to win this *Cage Match* is dependent on his health. Even without prorating his numbers Oshie stands a chance and considering Berglund's

dismal performance to start the year we can hand Oshie both the goals and assists categories.

Oshie has a slight advantage in Plus/Minus but his defensive game is definitely stronger than Berglund's so I am giving him an emphatic advantage here.

PIM is tight but Oshie's totals prorate higher and his style is simply more abrasive than Berglund's so advantage Oshie.

Oshie's PPP prorate him as equal to Berglund but both see similar power play time. I have little confidence that this will swing one way or the other.

SOG favours Berglund but prorated it is again close. This season Oshie is narrowly shooting more than Berglund – 65 to 58 – and this stands to remain a crapshoot.

This is highly dependent on the assumption of health but Oshie does appear the better choice in all one-year leagues. His RW eligibility in many pools gives him and even greater positional

advantage.

Long term this remains up in the air. I prefer Oshie's hockey sense to Berglund's but physically Oshie cannot stack up. The best guess at what the future holds for these two is to guess at the Blues future lineup with the cavalry – Vladimir Tarasenko and Jaden Schwartz, two potential stars – on its way. This is where I see the Blues lineup in a couple of years:

Schwartz – Tarasenko – Stewart

Steen – Backes – Oshie

Perron – Berglund – D'Agostini

Forget the line combinations for a bit. That stuff will sort itself out. The bigger question to ask is – who will be around by the time Schwartz and Tarasenko arrive? Only Backes and Steen are signed beyond next season so the Blues lineup could be altered drastically before the cavalry ever arrives.

Let's assume the Blues keep everyone. I think the above hierarchy holds true at least for power play time. Schwartz and Tarasenko are too good to be kept from playing huge minutes with the man advantage and Stewart is still the most physically gifted forward on the Blues roster. He has shown he can produce at elite levels with supreme talent and should be given every opportunity to mesh with the young studs. That leaves everyone else to pick up scraps so there is little advantage for either Berglund or Oshie here. They'll need to find chemistry with Schwartz or Tarasenko to get a leg up but that's too far away to accurately project.

The best I can offer is that Berglund could just as easily fill the big man role I have projected for Stewart right now. Watch this situation as it unfolds. Berglund still has more upside than Oshie which makes him the better bet long term. I'm not advocating selling the farm for Berglund but versus Oshie I'll take Berglund in a keeper. If nothing else his body should hold up much better over time.