

Dion Phaneuf vs. Dustin Byfuglien

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 28 December 2011 11:06 - Last Updated Wednesday, 28 December 2011 16:49



Happy Festivus everyone! It truly is a Festivus miracle that every year the NHL shuts down for two days around the holidays. It is the perfect time to gather your fantasy squad around the aluminum pole and take part in the airing of grievances. Here is an excerpt from my Festivus dinner this past Friday evening:

Welcome new acquisitions, the tradition of Festivus begins with the airing of grievances. I've got a lot of problems with you players. Now you're gonna hear about them!

You, Carter, my dad tells me your team stinks!

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Quiet, Cam Ward, you'll get yours in a minute.

Mike Green, either play the damn games or get your butt on the IR!

Semin! You couldn't smooth a silk sheet if you had a hot date with a babe... I lost my train of thought.

Now it is time for the feats of strength.

There are numerous reasons why the Chicago Blackhawks franchise has been better than the Calgary Flames' over the past few years but probably the biggest one has been drafting/development. The Flames have a deplorable draft record over the last ten years. I mean, they have really pooped the bed in that regard. You have to go all the way back to 2003 when the Flames took Dion Phaneuf in the first round of what was perhaps the most loaded draft ever to find a quality player drafted and developed in house. Meanwhile, the Chicago Blackhawks have become the class of the league in terms of drafting and development.

Take that same draft for example. The Blackhawks would take stalwart defenseman Brent Seabrook five picks after the Flames selected Phaneuf but they also landed current starter Corey Crawford in the second round. What's really amazing though, is that the Blackhawks somehow managed to draft a player who is (at least on paper) the exact same guy as Phaneuf all the way down in the eighth round.

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Some may call that luck. I call it guile. The Blackhawks are able to snake out good picks in late rounds because they take chances and develop well. The irony of course is that the Blackhawks would ultimately miscast Byfuglien as a forward. Byfuglien certainly played the role to perfection and helped them win a Cup in the process but it was not until he left Chicago that he reach his full potential as one of the most dynamic offensive defensemen in the game. Without his move out of Chicago we would not have this week's *Cage Match*. It's Phaneuf vs. Byfuglien, let's rumble!

I know what you are thinking – wouldn't a Cage Match between Byfuglien's gut and Phaneuf's forehead be way more compelling? And yes, yes it would but I'll just let you guys imagine how that one would play out.

A patented three-year average comparison will not do much good in this comparison. Before last season Byfuglien spent a good amount of time playing forward so that skews his stats. Similarly Phaneuf was hurt by the move out of Calgary and the subsequent *let's make Kaberle look as appealing as possible for a trade that we are "not trying to make"* campaign by the Leafs front office. It really was not until after the trade deadline last season that we really saw who Phaneuf really is. Instead of a three-year average comparison let us instead look at what Phaneuf and Byfuglien have done in the first half of this season.

GP

Goals

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Assists

Plus/Minus

PPP

PIM

SOG

Phaneuf

35

4

17

Even

10

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43

88

Byfuglien

35

6

18

Minus-8

9

46

123

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This matchup is fairly even on paper. The point scoring is pretty well on par, as are the PPP. PIM are too close to call as well. Phaneuf is stronger in the Plus/Minus category, while Byfuglien is giving you way more SOG.

Byfuglien has never been a historically strong Plus/Minus player but he has never drifted too far from even. It is worth noting that the Jets are winning a lot more recently and Byfuglien is plus-two in the month of December. What's more, the return of Tobias Enstrom should further solidify Byfuglien's Plus/Minus.

Phaneuf has never been a huge performer in Plus/Minus either. While his appointment as Leaf's Captain seems to indicate that Phaneuf is a complete player that is not entirely true. I count him a good shade better than Byfuglien defensively but he is not a stalwart in his own end. It is worth noting however that Phaneuf has never played on a particularly dominant team but has maintained reasonable Plus/Minus figures. Consider that a good advantage long term.

Byfuglien is just rocking Phaneuf in SOG though. Byfuglien is on pace for 288 SOG this season, while Phaneuf is on pace for just 206. Both Byfuglien and Phaneuf have potential for more but Phaneuf has really toned down his shooting since landing in Toronto. Byfuglien on the other hand dropped nearly 350 SOG last season. An astounding 78% of Byfuglien's attempts hit the net last season but he is only hitting the net on 69% of attempts this year. If Byfuglien does some regressing towards the mean we could see his SOG spike even further.

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Both Phaneuf and Byfuglien are integral parts of their team's offense. Phaneuf skates for over 25 minutes a night of which almost four come on the power play. Byfuglien conversely skates for almost 24 minutes a night of which almost four come on the power play. Phaneuf's added minutes may actually be a curse not a blessing. Phaneuf skates three minutes per game on the penalty kill. Byfuglien kills penalties for less than a minute every game. That means for over two minutes every night Phaneuf is busting his but with almost no chance of scoring. That takes its toll. You could score their respective opportunities to be maximized and pretty even but I prefer the way Byfuglien is used for almost pure offense.

What is scary about Byfuglien is how drastic his drop off was in the second half last season. I mean, he really pulled the old contract year trick in a big way. As soon as he got paid at mid-season his numbers took a dive but what is intriguing is that his SOG totals stayed up. I think a good deal of his regression was luck. He just was not getting the bounces he got in the first half and opponents made a point of keying on him and he just did not adapt. With the Jets forwards now pulling more weight offensively Byfuglien is not the main focus of defenses so that we are seeing more balanced production this season just makes sense. Byfuglien is producing at a very sustainable pace.

What's more, I really like the move to Winnipeg for Byfuglien. He really feeds off the crowd and the crowd in Winnipeg is just awesome. Byfuglien was born in Minnesota, played junior in the WHL and played for a few years in Chicago so he is no stranger to the weather in the mid-west. Winnipeg is just about the best place for Byfuglien because it is devoid of distractions but provides him with an atmosphere where he is truly embraced.

Ultimately, I like Byfuglien in this *Cage Match*. He shoots way more and takes way more chances offensively. He does not have a complete repertoire of skills but what he does do is fantastic. His shot is heavy and he can light it up on both the rush and from a standstill. He is a one-man trap-buster the way he can rush the puck up ice. The only defenseman who can match

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him in terms of pure physical dominance is PK Subban. They both rush the puck up ice in a similar manner. Even more than Byfuglien's shot advantage is that I really like that he simply is what he is. He is a big time risk taker and he sticks with it. Be it going for hits or for goals he is all-in and at 26 years old he is not changing his game. The Jets franchise signed him knowing what he was and they will continue paying him to do so.

The Leafs, on the other hand, slapped the "C" on Phaneuf, in essence thrusting him into a more responsible role, whether he liked it or not. You could argue all day about whether or not the pressure of the captaincy is hurting Phaneuf's game. Personally, I think he has grown to fill the role just fine but it limits his fantasy potential. Phaneuf is still capable of putting up big numbers because the physical skills are still there but he no longer has the freedom to take chances offensively. Phaneuf does not have elite vision, nor is he an elite puck mover. That means the offense is coming at its best when he is jumping into the rush and gambling to get goals like Byfuglien does but you cannot do that when you are the captain. Phaneuf's 60-point days are behind him and so are the dreams of massive PIM totals. I suspect we see that number dropping year by year much the way it has recently for Chara.

I would be mildly concerned that Byfuglien missed Tuesday's game resting some injuries but it does not sound like it is serious. Grab Byfuglien be it a one-year or dynasty league. He is big, he is fat and he is one of the single most all-around dominant guys in fantasy hockey.