There were a ton of surprises this past NHL season. Between the absurd number of injuries and the general lack of scoring, many players who were normally excellent options for streaming became mainstays on fantasy rosters. This week's Cage Match will focus on two such surprise players; Michael Ryder and Radim Vrbata . The veteran wingers each scored 35 goals and 62 points this season, making them a near perfect match for one another.

Don't be surprised if both Ryder and Vrbata decline next season. They are both over 30 years old and both set career highs in goals and points (okay, Ryder's actual career high was set in 2003-04 but that was almost a decade ago and his final tally this season was just one shy). It is only logical that they would fail to repeat their respective feats. Which one of the two is more likely to repeat (or at the very least decline less)?

My money is on Ryder. The first and most obvious reason is that he has produced like this before. As mentioned in an earlier caveat, Ryder‘s career high is in fact 63 points, set in 2003-04. This was also his third 30-goal season. He has produced like this before which makes it less likely that this past season was an aberration.

Vrbata’s previous career highs were 27 goals and 56 points, which are not reasonably far off from what he produced this season but no other season of his really compares to the one he just had. It really seems as if for Vrbata it is about catching lightning in a bottle, whereas for Ryder it is simply about getting the opportunity to succeed.

Consider the ice time each player has received over the years. This season Vrbata skated 18:38 per game, including 3:13 on the power play and 1:16 on the penalty kill. Beyond the penalty kill time not much has changed over the past two seasons for Vrbata in Phoenix. His ice time in 2010-11 was 16:22 minutes per with 3:13 on the power play and 0:06 on the penalty kill while his 2009-10 numbers were 16:00 minutes per with 2:23 on the power play and 0:26 on the penalty kill. His opportunities and responsibilities have increased, just not drastically.

Ryder, on the other hand, was underutilized in Boston, where he spent the past three years. He received 14:29 minutes per game and 15:17 minutes per game in 2010-11 and 2009-10 respectively, while spending 2:05 and 2:25 minutes per game on the power play with negligible penalty kill time. In Dallas this past season Ryder’s ice time jumped to 17:22 per game with 2:40 on the power play. Clearly Ryder’s boost in production was the result of increased ice time but he also benefitted from improved linemates.

It is impossible to argue that Ryder was skating alongside scrubs in Boston – his most common linemates included David Krejci , Tyler Seguin and Blake Wheeler – it is just that he never did build great chemistry with those players. As Frozenpool will demonstrate, Ryder skated with much more favourable linemates in Dallas this season.

Even Strength Line Combinations

| Freq | Line Combination |
|---|---|
| 34.2% | ERIKSSON,L - RIBEIRO,M - RYDER,M |
| 29.5% | BENN,J - ERIKSSON,L - RYDER,M |
| 16.8% | BENN,J - OTT,S - RYDER,M |
| 15.7% | MORROW,B - RIBEIRO,M - RYDER,M |
| 3.8% | FIDDLER,V - NYSTROM,E - RYDER,M |

Power Play Line Combinations

| Freq | Line Combination |
|---|---|
| 38.3% | ERIKSSON,L - RIBEIRO,M - RYDER,M |
| 26.9% | BENN,J - ERIKSSON,L - RYDER,M |
| 24.6% | MORROW,B - RIBEIRO,M - RYDER,M |
| 5.3% | MORROW,B - PETERSEN,T - RIBEIRO,M - RYDER,M |
| 5% | OTT,S - PETERSEN,T - RIBEIRO,M - RYDER,M |

Ryder was reunited with his old running-mate from Montreal, Mike Ribeiro , but also benefitted from spending a lot of time with
Loui Eriksson
and
Jamie Benn
who are among the best playmakers in the league and are fantastically easy to play with.

Vrbata, meanwhile, may have simply benefitted from having skated with Ray Whitney , who experienced a renaissance this season however it is more than likely that Whitney was also the beneficiary of Vrbata's career season. As Frozenpool will show us Vrbata and Whitney were almost inseparable this season.

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It is worth mentioning that Vrbata has been skating predominantly with Whitney (and third linemate Martin Hanzal ) for the past two seasons and that they may have developed a formidable chemistry over time. Still, I am not so sure that improved chemistry really leads to a 15-point bump for Vrbata and a 20-point bump for Whitney. Instead, I am looking at the drastic increase in shooting percentage for Vrbata this season.

Vrbata scored on 15.1% of his shots this season, which is a near two-thirds hike on his career average of 9.4%. That's like switching from a handgun to a grenade launcher (shout out to the COD nerds).

Interestingly enough, Vrbata only hit the net on 73.3% of his shot attempts this season. In his previous three seasons with Phoenix Vrbata hit the net on 79.1%, 81.2% and 76.4% of his shot attempts. It is entirely possible that Vrbata was simply trying much harder to pick corners this season and thus hit the net fewer times but actually scored more goals. I wouldn't hang my hat on this theory but it is worth considering none-the-less.

This isn't to say that Ryder didn't experience his own luck with shooting percentage. Ryder scored on 16.6% of his shots this season, which is a one-third hike on his career average of 12.6%. He was still lucky this season but nowhere near as lucky as Vrbata. Ryder's jump was more likely the result of improved linemates, ice time and opportunity in general. Ryder's shooting percentage did jump but so did his SOG. Ryder scored more because he shot more, plain and simple.

One must also consider the overall perspective of each player's individual team. There can be little argument that both Dallas and Phoenix overachieved this season despite mediocre offenses that averaged 2.49 and 2.56 goals per game respectively. Dallas however, had the third lowest payroll in the league and just resolved their ownership issues. The forward market is thin so Ryder is unlikely to be replaced as a key cog and none of Ribeiro, Benn or Eriksson is likely to be going anywhere for next season so expect the status quo up front. Dallas could be greatly improved by some spending on the blueline however. If Dallas adds a defenseman or two that could mitigate any expected decline in performance from the forward group.

Phoenix is another story entirely. Their ownership situation is still in flux. The team may not even be in Phoenix next season. Vrbata will still be with the franchise, as will Hanzal, but Whitney is a UFA and turns 40 soon. He may not be back for whatever reason. Team captain, Shane Doan, may not return either. A great deal of Vrbata's offensive support could be on the way out the door and with the aforementioned thin forward market this summer, replacements may be difficult to find. Vrbata may find himself a one-man show next season.

I would not bank on either one of these two for a repeat next season but I think the smart money is on Ryder. Best case scenario for Vrbata has to be both Doan and Whitney returning but even then we don't know how much either of those veterans will have in the tank and even if they do have a ton in the tank Vrbata will simply not shoot 15.1% again. Eriksson, Ribeiro and Benn are

a much more foolproof support structure. Bet on Ryder.