

Rick Nash vs. James Neal

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 16 January 2013 15:05 -



I've heard it said that *Cage Match* doesn't tackle any "high profile" matchups, settling instead for matchups between lesser players or just plain creampuffs. While I disagree with that sentiment – for instance my take on the epic [Malkin vs. Stamkos](#) debate – I nevertheless take it as a challenge. As such, this week will feature

[Rick Nash](#)

vs.

[James Neal](#)

in an absolute brain-wrinkler of a matchup.

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Seriously, it's completely wrinkling my brain. On one hand, you want to take [Rick Nash](#) ; he's a star who finally has the platform to match his abilities. On the other hand, look at the company Neal keeps, my goodness. It's a brain-wrinkler, a noodle-scratcher, a conundrum that can only be solved with

Cage Match

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Let's start with this; I think Nash is the better overall player but this being fantasy hockey that only takes you so far as there are many more factors to consider. For instance, in my discussion of [Desharnais vs. Stepan](#) , I took a crack at what the Rangers' line combinations might look like this season with Nash in the lineup. My theory was that since the Gaborik-Richards combination failed last season that it was unlikely they would try that again leaving a potential Nash-Richards combo on the top line as real possibility. Both players are best with the puck on their stick but Nash can play a puck-possession style that might fit with Richards. His size also makes him attractive target capable of creating space for himself for passes from Richards or to corral rebounds.

Bringing Nash and Richards together on the top line would allow the Rangers to keep their highly productive second line with Gaborik and Stepan together. The Rangers would need to find a third linemate for each of these two units but it's hard to imagine those pieces being anything but interchangeable depending on who has it going that given evening.

There are two alternatives to this strategy; the first being to simply stack the top line with Nash, Gaborik and Richards all out there together and there's a good chance that will be in play when the Rangers are desperate for offense but not as a regular line. The second alternative lineup scenario involves having none of Gaborik, Richards or Nash on a line together and instead running out three "equal" scoring units. This wouldn't be without precedent but strikes me as a ludicrous strategy nonetheless because it limits how much you can get these big time players on the ice.

There is little we can derive from Rangers training camp since Richards has been out with the flu so I will stick with my prediction of a Nash-Richards-Callahan top line. I suspect this would be the line put out there predominantly against the opponent's top line, which isn't entirely advantageous for Nash but there's so much two-way ability on that line that they wouldn't find a way to create offense.

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The more important issue is with regard to power play time. The Rangers will almost certainly play with four forwards on the power play with Richards playing the point and quarterbacking. This leaves three openings up front. I suspect Nash will be out there because of his ability as a puck possession beast but also as a sniper and if he shows any chemistry with Richards on that top line then he will most certainly be out there.

You have to think that one of the big reasons the Rangers brought him in was to help their dismal power play, which ranked 23rd in the league last season at just 15.7% efficiency. I do wonder if their power play woes have less to do with the talent and more to do with the system though. For instance, last season Chicago boasted one of the worst power plays in the league while Nashville had the best. The only way to explain that is coaching.

Coaching is certainly important and so it isn't necessarily great news for fantasy players that the Rangers are returning their coaching staff from the past few seasons. Look at John Tortorella's track record when it comes to the power play (only full seasons included):

Year

PP%

Rank

2001-02

14.7

T19

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2002-03

17.9

10

2003-04

16.2

16

2005-06

16.7

23

2006-07

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18.4

9

2007-08

19.3

5

2009-10

18.3

13

2010-11

16.8

18

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2011-12

15.7

23

There are some pretty quality seasons in there but on the whole Tortorella appears to coach a pretty mediocre power play. Of course, many head coaches aren't much involved with special teams play, leaving that to their assistants. The Rangers assistant coach is Mike Sullivan and has been for the entirety of Tortorella's tenure in New York so you can pin the past three middling seasons on this coaching staff but Sullivan was also with Tortorella in Tampa Bay in 2007-08 when the Lightning had the league's fifth most potent power play. What do we make of all this?

This coaching staff is certainly capable of putting together a cohesive power play unit and they have more than enough talent, the problem is they may not have enough time to integrate all the pieces in such a small amount of time. As optimistic as I am about the chemistry Nash and Richards might have together, I don't have a ton of faith in the Rangers' coaching staff to put together a good power play.

Nash also has to shake the "overrated" label. It's hard not to see why he carries that with him but he's also never had this much talent around him except for in international competition. The sample size for each tournament Nash has competed in is fairly small unless you add it all together. In Nash's international career (Olympic Games and World Championships) he has scored 25 goals and 50 points in 47 games, a pretty solid performance.

There are also concerns about how Nash will adapt to the spotlight in New York. It's hard to say if there will really be more pressure than there was in Columbus. Sure, Columbus is a much smaller market with less ornery fans and media but Nash had the weight of an entire city and franchise to bear, whereas in New York he will be just another one of the guys. I think this move does more to remove shackles than to put them on.

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Neal will have much less of an adjustment to make this season but it isn't as though there won't be hurdles. The Penguins are bringing back [Sidney Crosby](#) and while that's a great thing it will also force some lineup changes. Last season Neal teamed up with

[Evgeni Malkin](#)

and

[Chris Kunitz](#)

to form one of the most dominant lines in the league. Will the Penguins really risk breaking this up to help balance their lines with Crosby in the lineup?

My guess is yes. Kunitz has been a mainstay alongside Crosby since his arrival in Pittsburgh and it is tough to imagine the Penguins not keeping a familiar face alongside their captain. Whatever the changes might be for the Penguins up front however there is little doubt that Neal will be playing alongside at least one superstar and continue to play big minutes. In all, the impacts of breaking up that top line will probably be neutralized by the value of having two well balanced scoring lines. Teams will be faced with a no-win decision of whether or not to focus their attentions on Crosby's line or Malkin's. In the past teams have had success locking one up but the Penguins also haven't had a weapon as good as Neal to go along with one of their superstars. This complicates things for the opponents. Also, just like Nash-Richards-Gaborik is a potential desperation line for New York, Neal-Crosby-Malkin has even more devastating implications.

More importantly, Neal will continue to be a vital performer on the power play. The Penguins should run a four-forward top unit with Malkin quarterbacking on the right half-wall and Letang setting up on the point. This does raise some issues about where to place the other forwards as they are all lefty-shooters but this wasn't a problem for Pittsburgh last season so it won't likely be one this season.

In general the assumption seems to be that returning Crosby as well as Letang will give the Penguins so many weapons that their power play will be unstoppable but that may not be the case. Having Crosby out there may serve to ultimately take away some shooting opportunities for Neal but you can't take away the fact that Neal is a legitimate sniper and will be a constant threat no matter who you put out there with him. Also, more Crosby goals could simply mean more Neal assists, although not necessarily at a 1:1 ratio. Don't forget Crosby's magnificent hands and willingness to do battle make him an ideal candidate to put in work on the goal mouth, which would leave Neal to continue his role as a sniper and potentially create MORE shooting lanes. It will ultimately be up to the Penguins coaching staff to figure out how to make this work.

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The Penguins power play ranked fifth in the league at 19.7% efficiency last year so improvement will be difficult. Somewhat surprisingly though this was the best the Penguins power play has performed since 2007-08. Of course, if you look back at the Penguins injury history you'll see a ton of injuries to vital players in each season since then but that sounds like an excuse rather than a real reason. So what about head coach Dan Bylsma who took over halfway through the 2008-09 season. The Penguins did go on to win the Stanley Cup that year but the power play simply hasn't performed at the same level since the change was made. But if Bylsma a bad special teams coach or has he simply had poor assistants?

Currently the assistants in Pittsburgh are Tony Granato and Todd Reirden with Reirden focusing on special teams. Reirden replaced Mike Yeo in 2010 after Yeo left to become coach of the Houston Aeros. Since Yeo's time with the Penguins overlaps the time when they were among the league's best in power play efficiency (2005-2008) to when they fell off (2008-10) it would seem there isn't much to go on with regard to the poor coaching theory so maybe it was the injuries. In any case, the Penguins reversed their declining power play fortunes last season and there is no question that regardless of coaching, health will be of vital importance particularly when you consider that the Penguins' top three players – Crosby, Malkin and Letang – have all missed far too much time these past few seasons.

The great news is that because the Penguins are so deep with superstar talent it is highly unlikely that Neal will be without a security blanket and that's without even considering that perhaps Neal doesn't even need one to produce at a high level – he is 25 years old after all, and heading into his fifth NHL season.

In the end, Neal's teammates are just too overwhelmingly talented to ignore in this matchup. The Penguins are back at full strength for the first time in a long time and they will be going all-out this season, determined to avoid that dreadful 4-5 playoff matchup that has been their curse for the past four seasons. Sure, the Rangers will be similarly motivated to take the top spot and they are the incumbent top seed in the East but they don't have the talent that the Penguins do offensively so they may not produce the same big numbers in their quest for home ice advantage.

Ultimately Neal probably doesn't benefit a ton from the Penguins bringing back a healthy Crosby and a healthy Letang because there is only so much puck to go around but he also doesn't lose anything. I suspect he'll be right back among the league leaders in goals and right around a point per game pace. Nash has performed at that level once in his career (to be fair

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the same can be said for Neal and that was last season so there's certainly the recency bias to consider). It's true he has more talent around him than ever but his hurdles regarding chemistry are directly on him and he doesn't have anywhere near the teammates that Neal has to rely on.

I suspect Nash could play with just about anyone and he will have a great opportunity to return to the point per game level but his hurdles are bigger than Neal's. In the end, it's all about downside for me. If both Neal and Nash play to the level they are capable of then this matchup is even but if Neal struggles a bit he's got too much surrounding him to feed off of. If Nash disappoints, well he was supposed to be the guy driving the Rangers' offensive renaissance so while Richards and Gaborik are talented teammates, they may not necessarily carry his point totals.