After doing some reading in the forums about “magical” fourth year breakouts and potential breakout candidates for next season, I felt inspired to write this week’s Cage Match article on that subject. This week we will take a look at two potential breakout stars that are just destined to battle one another. We’re taking two Atlantic Division rivals, LW vs. LW, Power Forward vs. Power Forward, James vs. James, winner take all. I am excited, are you excited?

Let’s get ready to rumble!

In 2009-10 both James Neal and James van Riemsdyk (JVR) came bursting out of the gates and had poolies absolutely scrambling. Was Neal really breaking out as a sophomore? Was JVR really worth the hype and maybe the Calder?

Neal's 22 points in his first 18 game and JVR's 18 points in his first 17 games had people thinking they were both headed for 70-point seasons. Those early streaks proved to be nothing more than mere teases however. JVR saw his gravy train come to a screeching halt when Philadelphia fired head coach John Stevens and replaced him with Peter Laviolette, while Neal fizzled as the season wore on due to conditioning and general inconsistency, as many young players do.

This season was no different for Neal. He shot out of the gates like a cannon ball but was slowed when linemate Brad Richards got hurt and then stopped dead upon being traded to Pittsburgh. JVR, on the other hand, really had his ups and downs this season continuing to fail to earn the trust of Laviolette. He bounced around the lineup leading to many hot and cold streaks. This is not uncommon for young players but is absolute torture for us poolies.

As you will see in the table below Neal has been the better fantasy player since 2009-10, but he also has two years of development on JVR, including one NHL season and two pro seasons total.

GP

Goals

Assists

Plus/Minus

PPP

PIM

SOG

Neal (2009-10)

78

27

28

-5

10

64

200

Neal (2010-11)

79

22

23

7

10

66

212

JVR (2009-10)

78

15

20

-1

7

30

173

JVR (2010-11)

75

21

19

15

4

35

173

Both players have been fairly durable over this time, playing in the mid to upper 70's both years. Neal holds a relatively secure edge over JVR in every category but Plus/Minus and much of this comes from opportunity and the two extra years of development Neal has had.

JVR saw just 14:31 minutes of ice time per game this season, with only 1:19 on the powerplay. Neal conversely received an average of 17:29 minutes on ice per game, along with 2:34 on the powerplay.

The one category JVR must concede is PIM, because Neal has and should always remain the better option here, otherwise everything is open for picking.

While it is a small sample size, JVR may in fact be breaking out right now. The proof is in the pudding, as they say, and it just so happens JVR has lodged seven pucks into his Snack Pack, tying him for the playoff lead in goal scoring. JVR seems to have found himself a prominent place on the Flyers powerplay. He is averaging 3:51 minutes of powerplay time and 19:20 overall, per game in the playoffs. He also leads the Flyers (and NHL) in SOG these playoffs, with 59 overall. That's an average of 6.6 per game, which is not maintainable over an 82 game season but is well over his career pace of 2.3 SOG per game. His shooting percentages these playoffs also fall well in line with his career numbers so whether the ice time is creating more shooting chances or vice versa it is clear that he is on the right track.

JVR really reminds you of a pot on a stove. Right now we are seeing the steam slipping out the cracks, if we keep applying heat (ice time) he'll most certainly boil over. Skating on what was the third best offensive team in the league this past season JVR's odds of breaking out are very high, Laviolette just needs to keep him on the stove.

Neal is more of a wildcard. There is a lot of evidence pointing towards a breakout season. He is heading into his "magical fourth season" and should be riding shotgun to one of Sidney Crosby or Evgeni Malkin (or both, my God or both).

Quick tangent: skating on a line with those two has got to be like drumming for The Beatles. That's not a shot at Ringo but rather an acknowledgement of how bloody good Crosby and Malkin are. Think about it, you get to play with these two savants and all you have to do is bang on a few things and you're a star. Sign me up for that gig.

So Neal seems to be due for his own breakout season but I really wonder how much better his situation in Pittsburgh is than it was in Dallas. First of all, Neal has seen no real change in his ice time since landing in Pittsburgh and there is little reason to suspect he would. Furthermore, while Pittsburgh has been a slightly more offensive team than Dallas over the past couple of seasons but the Stars powerplay has been more efficient.

It is also worth noting that the Penguins never use both Crosby and Malkin on a line all the time so I contend that Neal isn't any better off skating with Crosby or Malkin and some scrub than he is skating on the line he was on with Brad Richards and Loui Eriksson. You may have a differing opinion on that matter but also consider that both Crosby and Malkin will have question marks regarding their health into next season. I am supremely sceptical. Don't get me wrong, Neal should improve but it will hardly be because of his situation.

I also believe that Neal's strides to mastering his conditioning will be hindered by his move out of Dallas. Renowned conditioning coach Gary Roberts worked with Neal last summer and would have done so again this summer had Neal remained in Dallas because Roberts is now signed on with the Stars. That move could cause some hiccups in Neal's off-season conditioning.

All in all I feel confident that both Neal and JVR can make breakout strides next season. If you are thinking strictly about one year leagues I'd call it a crapshoot (unless you count PIM, in which case take Neal) because I feel good about both breaking the 60 point barrier with an outside shot at 70. In keeper leagues you have to like JVR though. He has youth (two years younger than Neal) and pedigree (first round pick, second overall, versus second round pick for Neal). Both find themselves in highly positive situations and should be receiving quality ice time. JVR has done more with less though and now that the ice time is coming he is showing that he can be better than Neal, that he can be a real star. Let's give this bout to JVR.