I recently realized that I have not done a defensemen-centric *Cage Match* since May. It is not that I hate defensemen. I think it is just because defensemen are just so doggone hard to draft. They are far too fickle for my liking. One year they look like gold and the next the magic is gone. (Kinda like Lindsay Lohan, am I right?) Sure that can happen to any player but with defensemen the swings are so much more significant because they score fewer points in general. They also score much fewer goals so instead of relying on their talents to produce points like forwards can they rely more heavily on teammates and other situational factors. This is problematic for us poolies. I mean, how many questionable secondary assists did your defensemen snake last season? And can they be counted on to be as lucky? The answers are almost impossible.

Consider for instance the case of Drew Doughty. After the 2009-10 season Doughty was the darling of the fantasy hockey world. In just his second season he had blown all expectations out of the water scoring 16 goals and 59 points, good for third in the league. Then 2010-11 comes around and he gets bonked on the head (which could happen to anyone) but also sees him team slip drastically offensively.

In 2009-10 the Los Angeles Kings were 9th in the league in scoring. In 2010-11 they were 25th. Worse yet the Kings power play slipped from 7th to 21st. Clearly more than just a bump on the noggin was hurting Doughty last season and in turn that hurt fantasy owners. We cannot say anyone was all that wrong to take Doughty as high as they probably did but we can say for certain that it lead to quite a bit of drafter's remorse, which like it's ugly cousin, buyer's remorse, simply will not go away.

Conceding that Doughty likely underachieved last season and that (if only to piss off those of us who bailed on him) he will bounce back big, just where can we draft him?

I will hopefully help to answer that with this week's *Cage Match* in a matchup that has been in high demand. It's Weber vs. Doughty because that's what the people want.

As mentioned earlier defensemen are fickle beasts in the fantasy world. One minute they're up the next they are down. If you went off last year's totals alone you would have to concede Weber's dominance over Doughty but it is nowhere near that simple. I mean, based on last year's totals you would also think that Seabrook is just as good as Weber, which is so laughable that I won't even go into it but suffice to say there will never be a Seabrook/Weber *Cage Match*. But I digress.

The major problem when comparing these two is the simple fact that Doughty has very little in the way of a baseline. He has only three NHL seasons under his belt and it runs a lot like *The Good the Bad and the Ugly*
. The Ugly, of course being his rookie season which is hardly an accurate representation of his fantasy capabilities. To work around this issue we will first look at a crude two-year comparison between Doughty and Weber and then we will bust out a comparison based on every poolies favourite word: upside.

The key to allowing this comparison of two-year averages is that we will cover upside later but also that Weber's 2009-10 season was similarly disappointing as Doughty's 2010-11 season. These averages do not represent the outright best of either of these two but that is probably a good thing. Here are the figures:

Goals

Assists

Plus/Minus

PPP

PIM

SOG

Doughty

13.5

36

Plus-16.5

23

61

140.5

Weber

16

29.5

Plus-3.5

18.5

46

238

The substantial difference in SOG probably jumped right off the page at you like it was in freaking 3D. But it is not in 3D and more importantly it completely hides Doughty's overall dominance.

Weber has a small advantage in Goals and you could concede to him a larger advantage based on his outright dominance of SOG. I mean, you have to shoot to score right? So that's two categories for Weber, but the rest are Doughty's, which makes him the steadier choice. One need only acquire some stronger SOG options to counter Weber's near 100 SOG advantage.

It is also important to note that Doughty could just catch up to Weber. After all, he is only 21 years old, compared to Weber's 26. In fact, Doughty is younger than Weber was before Weber broke the 200 SOG mark in a season. Doughty has a good shot and it is in both his and his team's best interests that he utilizes it more often. Until he does so, his fantasy value will be hindered but when he does he could blow Weber out of the water.

We know what Doughty can do when put into a strong situation and there is good reason to be optimistic this season. The Kings finally went out and made a big name splash acquiring Mike Richards from the Flyers and added Richards' old drinking buddy linemate, Simon Gagne, via free agency. This should bolster the Kings' power play and scoring in general, which should be music to your ears.

There is of course a flip side to that coin. What if the Kings recent acquisitions don't work out? Gagne is quite injury prone and Richards, as I alluded to early, is well known for his partying lifestyle. Will Richards succumb to the bright lights of Los Angeles and will he take the young and impressionable Doughty down with him? Uh… Puh-lease. That sounds like the plot of a bad movie or an even worse afterschool special. These guys are pros. While I'm mildly concerned at what the partying might do to the Kings hopes for this season it is not enough of a threat to take down Doughty's career. His future is too bright.

An increase in offense will bolster Doughty's advantages in Assists, Plus/Minus and PPP. And if he grows into his role as a dominating defenseman he will close the gap between he and Weber in Goals and SOG. That leaves PIM where he has a sizable advantage but it is one we should expect to shrink. Once again Doughty's age and limited experience is a factor. Using Weber's career trajectory as an example we can note that as a defenseman gets older and receives more responsibility his PIM totals tend to decrease. You can't help your team from the penalty box and as Doughty learns that his PIM will decline to a negligible level.

But what of Weber's potential? A few years back we caught a glimpse of it when he threw up that monster 23 goal, 53 point season. But even that was just the tip of the iceberg. Like Doughty last season, Weber has suffered from playing for an offensively inept team. Unlike Doughty however, he has had to deal with that for his entire career and there is no end in sight so long as he remains in Nashville.

For Weber to achieve his upside, a move out of Nashville is necessary. The Predators have not finished outside the bottom 10 in power play percentage since the lockout and are perennially near the bottom of the league in team scoring. That drastically limits Weber's scoring potential as it squashes his opportunities to snake out those ever important secondary assists. The good news is that all that offensive ineptitude exists for a reason: Nashville cannot afford superstar players. Therefore, Nashville cannot afford Weber.

If this off-season was any indication Weber is on his way out of Nashville. I rarely encourage making fantasy decisions based on trade rumours but this one feels inevitable. Weber wants to win, and he knows it will not happen in Nashville. The best case scenario for Weber and his fantasy owners would be the highly speculated about move to Detroit. There, Weber would presumably step into Nik Lidstrom's role (although God help us if he instead pairs with him). Simply by playing on a better team, with forwards more talented than he could dream of in Nashville, Weber should be good for a 10 point increase.

Running the numbers, Weber was in on 22.5% of Nashville's goals last season. If that holds up following the move Weber would be in for 58 points or exactly a 10-point increase so the math holds up but does the assumption?

Well it is easy to see that Weber would benefit from playing on a better team by the added assists he would receive but I also believe that playing on a stronger team would increase his goal potential as more talented players could open up better shooting lanes for him.

You also have to consider the fact that Nashville has rode Weber harder than Jenna Jameson these past few seasons which could mean he would not receive the same ice time somewhere else. This is, however, a faulty assumption. Sticking with the idea of Weber replacing Lidstrom we can compare their average ice time from last season. Weber averaged nearly identical minutes per game as Lidstrom. He also played less minutes per game on the power play by 45 seconds per game and even more importantly played a much lesser percentage of his team's power play minutes than Lidstrom. That means there could be even greater growth potential here.

Then there is the assumption that playing on defensive-minded Nashville helps Weber's Plus/Minus. It doesn't. Playing for Nashville and their perennially weak goals for/against differential wreaks havoc on Weber's Plus/Minus. Playing on a superior team like Detroit would pump up Weber's Plus/Minus to Doughty-like levels.

It is of course dangerous to assume that Weber goes anywhere (and if he does that it will be Detroit) but in the interests of examining upside one must consider this a very real possibility. Playing in Detroit, or on another contender for that matter, would work wonders for Weber across the board. As mentioned previously, a move would almost automatically boost his production by 10 points. That turns him from a 40-50 point defenseman to a 50-60 point defenseman. That is a fairly significant swing and would have him hanging with Doughty if not for Doughty's own upside.

For Doughty to improve his numbers and reach his upside we must assume that Richards and Gagne help to improve the Kings offense. This assumption is situational and not unlike the assumption we must make for Weber to hit his upside; for him to sign in Detroit. While both assumptions have greater likelihood than me hooking up with Scarlett Johansson I cannot help but favour the Doughty assumption. It just seems more likely because the players are already there.

These assumptions also fail to factor in the fact that Doughty's personal growth potential. Doughty's career high 59 points has him achieving Weber's upside but was only scratching the surface his own. After all, he was only 19 when that season (his sophomore) began. As he shoots more and gains more experience his fantasy value will improve which should lead him to produce above Weber's 50-60 point potential.

Because of that growth potential I favour Doughty by a healthy margin. Last season's totals and Weber's healthy SOG advantage could steer you otherwise but the smart money is on Doughty. He offers you more balanced production as it stands now and his growth is not only more likely but potentially much more lucrative. So there's that and the fact that owning Weber does not mean you get to scratch his fuzzy beard. No one ever seems to realize that until it's too late.