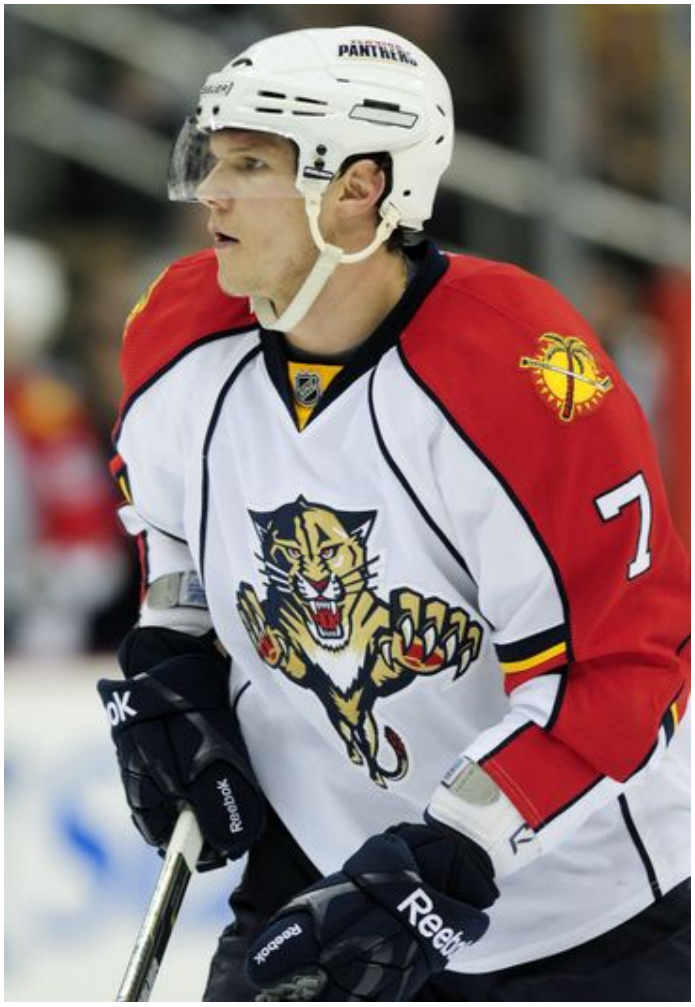

On Monday forum member mvp0207 asked the question: Myers or Kulikov? As I was diving in to answer his question I realized that this would make for the perfect *Cage Match*. His league has the standard 6x4 H2H rotisserie format and while it is a one year league I will answer his question for both the one year and keeper scope. You ready? Let's do this.

At only 21 years old both Tyler Myers and Dmitri Kulikov are already NHL veterans playing in their third NHL season. This is common place in the salary cap era as youngsters, even young defensemen, are pressed into action sooner. This trend has forced us to change the way we view the development of defensemen.

Traditionally defensemen have taken years to develop into stars. A classic model is Chris Pronger, who was selected second overall in 1993 . Pronger made the leap straight from the draft to the NHL, which was itself a minor miracle for that day and age, but it took until Pronger's sixth season, when he was 24 years old, before he scored even 40 points. Today it is no longer unusual for a defenseman to jump straight from the draft to the NHL and the expectations among teams, fans and poolies alike is to see production right away because if your young defenseman isn't producing chances are someone else's is. Myers and Kulikov offer us two different perspectives on how poolies need to approach these young defensemen.

Myers is the obvious answer to mvp0207's question. One need only compare their stats from the last two years and see that Myers has absolutely been the better own so far but it never is quite that simple. When players are so young one must be patient when considering their future and allow time for all the development and circumstantial opportunities to sort themselves out.

So far Myers has had an extreme advantage both developmentally and circumstantially. While both Kulikov and Myers were born in 1990, Myers was born in early February and Kulikov in late October. This means Kulikov has more in common, developmentally, with a player born in 1991 and this is reflected in the fact that Kulikov was drafted a year later than Myers. Essentially Myers has had an extra year of growth and development and that is compounded by the fact that Kulikov is an import and only got one year of play in the CHL before making the leap to the NHL. Myers, on the other hand, played three full seasons of major junior hockey before making his NHL debut. So while they both debuted in 2009-10, Myers was already light years ahead of Kulikov.

What's more, Myers received pro style coaching for each of his three years of major junior, playing for the NHL defenseman factory known as the Kelowna Rockets. The Rockets franchise is only 16 years old but it has developed quite the reputation for preparing its players for the rigors of the NHL. Their alumni include Shea Weber, Duncan Keith, Luke Schenn and many more NHL defensemen. Myers could not have picked a better junior team if he'd had a choice.

Then we have to factor in their pro teams. Myers was not only drafted to a quality franchise that made the playoffs in both of his first two years he was also given every opportunity to succeed. While Myers' combination of size, skating and puck moving ability was out of this world no matter which team he played for, it certainly helped that the Sabres were lacking all three. Not since Brian Campbell left had the Sabres had a defenseman with Myers elite skating and puck moving skills and the only time they'd ever glimpsed someone taller than six foot was when they looked at their opponents, or the crowd, or walked down the street. Myers' size was a more than welcome addition to the team but it was really his puck moving and skating skills that allowed Myers to become a major fantasy asset so quickly.

Devoid of any other real options the Sabres handed the keys to their power play over to Myers right from the get go. Myers led all Sabres in ice time with over 23 minutes a night and all defensemen in power play ice time, with just under three minutes a night, during his rookie season, often as the lone defenseman on the top power play unit. The Sabres power play was only middle of the pack (17th in the league) but their overall team scoring was among the top 10 (exactly 10th actually). Big minutes and top unit power play time go a long way, no matter what team you play for but Myers' team was above average and so was his opportunity.

It was more of the same for Myers in his sophomore season. The Sabres power play was improved (ninth in the league) and their overall scoring remained top 10 (ninth as well) putting Myers in a great position to succeed. He was second on the team in ice time with over 22 minutes per game and once again led all Sabres defensemen in power play time. It is worth noting that free agent acquisition Jordan Leopold is the player who took over Myers' ice time lead and also nearly tied Myers for power play ice time. This, along with the fact that Myers may have been a little bit lucky during his rookie season can help account for Myers' decline to his disappointing sophomore year. (Disappointing is of course a relative term)

Kulikov, as is becoming the trend, had it much harder once he arrived. The Panthers have been a horrific franchise, having not made the playoffs in over a decade. In Kulikov's rookie season they had the league's third worst offense and second worst power play. His sophomore season was no better. Their offense improved one spot to 27th but their power play fell one spot to dead last.

Even if Kulikov received the type of minutes Myers had, he still would have been in tough to match Myers' production. Kulikov, of course, did not receive Myers-like minutes and so it was almost inevitable that Myers would out-produce him. Kulikov averaged just shy of 18 minutes a game for the Panthers in his rookie season, 2:47 of those came on the power play. In his sophomore season Kulikov's ice time was up to just shy of 20 minutes a game while his power play time dropped to 2:36 per game.

By his sophomore season Kulikov's ice time was almost comparable but still short of Myers' but there is more. Kulikov never got much of an opportunity to skate with the top power play unit in Florida. He was always second on the depth chart to veteran defenseman Bryan McCabe. It's tough enough to produce on a talent and scoring deprived team as it is, but when you are in

turn deprived of playing with the limited number of skilled players on the team you are fighting a losing battle. Kulikov's 16-point rookie season and 26-point sophomore season are remarkable when you consider he was just 19 and 20 years old when he recorded those respective totals. And while they show healthy improvement from year to year, they are still drastically low in comparison to Myers and that's all that really counts for poolies.

To put this all another way, to this point Myers has essentially been the trust fund baby whose parents put him into private school, paid for his college, bought him a car and scored him a job. He's had literally every advantage over Kulikov who, in this example, is the stereotypical poor kid who has had scrape his way from the bottom. It truly can be a cruel world but time is the great equalizer for prospects. Time gives the smaller, the weaker and the younger a chance to grow.

That is exactly what has happened to the Myers-Kulikov *Cage Match*. Time hasn't just thinned out the margins here – it has flipped them entirely on their heads. Time has allowed for the development of new opportunities. Some doors have opened and other doors have closed. Over the summer a lot of doors were opened and shut in Florida and Buffalo.

The Sabres got themselves a new owner, Terry Pegula, who spent the summer making it rain like he was Pacman Jones. His spending spree scored Myers a fat new contract but it also cost him his peachy spot as top dog on the Sabres blueline. Frozenpool's line combinations tool shows us that Myers is no longer the golden child in Buffalo.

Frequency	Strength	Line Combination
46.83%	PP	10 EHRHOFF,CHRISTIAN - 17 GRAGNANI,MARC-ANDRE
29.76%	PP	3 LEOPOLD,JORDAN - 57 MYERS,TYLER
6.83%	PP	57 MYERS,TYLER - 24 REGEHR,ROBYN
4.88%	PP	17 GRAGNANI,MARC-ANDRE - 44 SEKERA,ANDREJ
2.93%	PP	10 EHRHOFF,CHRISTIAN - 3 LEOPOLD,JORDAN
1.95%	PP	10 EHRHOFF,CHRISTIAN

EVEN STRENGTH LINE COMBINATIONS

Freq	Line Combination
83.7%	MYERS,T - REGEHR,R
5.4%	LEOPOLD,J - MYERS,T
4.7%	MYERS,T - SEKERA,A
4.2%	EHRHOFF,C - MYERS,T
2%	GRAGNANI,M - MYERS,T

Frequency	Strength	Line Combination
53.85%	PP	51 CAMPBELL,BRIAN - 7 KULIKOV,DMITRI
17.69%	PP	52 GARRISON,JASON - 55 JOVANOVSKI,ED
10%	PP	51 CAMPBELL,BRIAN - 52 GARRISON,JASON
5%	PP	44 GUDBRANSON,ERIK - 55 JOVANOVSKI,ED
3.46%	PP	52 GARRISON,JASON - 43 WEAVER,MIKE
1.92%	PP	51 CAMPBELL,BRIAN - 55 JOVANOVSKI,ED
1.92%	PP	52 GARRISON,JASON - 44 GUDBRANSON,ERIK
1.15%	PP	52 GARRISON,JASON - 7 KULIKOV,DMITRI