Callahan vs. Heatley - I wish I could have gotten this week's Cage Match out before the start of the season. I feel like it could have saved you all some pain. Much like last week's
Filppula vs. Ribeiro
Cage Match
I will be comparing an in-decline veteran with an up-and-coming youngster. This week it is Dany Heatley vs. Ryan Callahan. Does the vet have anything left in the tank? Is the youngster ready to usurp him? Let's find out. Ring that bell!

Heatley is only 30, which seems too young for him to be washed up but he is looking that way. Since posting back-to-back 50-goal, 100+ point seasons in 2006-07 and 2007-08, Heatley has been on a downward spiral that briefly kicked up upon his move to San Jose. Now he is in Minnesota and things are just getting worse.

The big knock on Heatley has always been motivation but personally, I think that is inexact. He will never be accused of being the hardest worker on his team but I do think Heatley is motivated to win. That is how I explain his trade demands out of Ottawa and subsequent refusal to go to Edmonton. He wants to win. He would not have been picked to play for Canada at the 2010 Olympics if this was not a priority. Likewise, that is the only reason I believe we have yet to hear any whispers of dissention in Minnesota. The Wild are winning so Heatley is happy.

I have two knocks on Heatley that have nothing to do with motivation. First off, he is a terrible skater. It looks like he is perpetually skating in mud. Now that he is older, it is that much tougher for him to build up the power to get up to top speed and bulldoze his way to the good scoring areas. This skating issue is exacerbated by a lack of smarts. He is not as skilled of a playmaker and he is not crafty enough to slide into the good scoring spots. This is not to say that he is dumb, he just does not see the game at an elite level.

The other aspect of this lack of smarts is that I'm not sure Heatley knows how he needs to work out. With his skating mechanics and rapidly declining body he needs to be working on explosive power. Instead he looks like a guy who spent the off-season riding the bike. He works hard, but he doesn't work smart. So with a lack of skating technique or hockey IQ, his physical decline has him trapped on the perimeter.

Just look at Heatley's shooting in recent years. He is on pace for 234 SOG this season, which is a far cry from the 300 SOG he was firing during his peak seasons in Ottawa. What's more damning is his shooting percentage. This year Heatley is shooting a career worst 10.4%, which would normally make him a great buy low candidate if his shooting percentage wasn't in decline for the fourth year running.

Year

Shooting %

2007-08

18.3

2008-09

15.1

2009-10

13.9

2010-11

12

2011-12

10.4

Heatley really started to nose-dive last season and you can see that from the fact that he is now only hitting the net on 66.4% of shots he fires. Last season it was 68.7% but before that he was hitting the net on 72-73% of his shots. For a high volume shooter, this is significant. He just is not getting himself into prime scoring locations and is therefore having a tougher time getting the puck to the net.

Heatley still has tremendous potential as a power play specialist because of his elite shot. With the opponent a man down he has more room to manoeuvre and get off his wicked shot. The problem is that Minnesota is ill-equipped to get him that sort of room. The Wild power play ranks 22nd in the league at 14.7% success and they have no one with an elite offensive skill outside of Heatley. We don't need Frozenpool to tell us that Heatley is not skating with elite talent on the Wild but I will show you anyway to drive the point home.

Power Play Line Combinations

Freq	Line Combination
34.2%	BOUCHARD,P - CLUTTERBUCK,C - HEATLEY,D - KOIVU,M
30.5%	BOUCHARD,P - HEATLEY,D - KOIVU,M - SETOGUCHI,D
13.1%	HEATLEY,D - KOIVU,M - SETOGUCHI,D
12.4%	BOUCHARD,P - HEATLEY,D - KOIVU,M - LATENDRESSE,G
9.7%	CULLEN,M - HEATLEY,D - KOIVU,M - LATENDRESSE,G

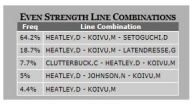
And don't think for a second that the Wild have elite defensemen quarterbacking that power play. The Wild defensemen are like no name cola. They are cheap and get the job done adequately but if you want smooth well-crafted flavour you have to splurge on Coke or Pepsi.

What's more, despite the fact that the Wild are giving Heatley all the PP ice time he can handle – 4:07 per game – he is basically maximizing what he can extract from the Wild power play. Heatley has seven power play points this season, good for 46.7% of the Wild's power play scores. Since Heatley has been on for 66.1% of the Wild's power play ice time this season and there are typically five players on the ice at any given time, of which only three can gain points, Heatley should be getting points on 39.7% of the Wild's power play scores. Even after you consider that the Wild power play is skewed towards Heatley and that there are times when there are only four players on the ice you also must consider that there are not always three points awarded for every goal. I would say that Heatley is still at his maximum pace for PPP. That means he'll finish with 21 this season, a far cry from his usual totals but remember he is not playing with the elite talent he has in the past.

Heatley is getting little help at even strength either. The Wild are an unabashed trap team. They may have the best record in the league this season but that has nothing to do with their ability to score goals. The Wild are constantly on their heels as a result of this trap game. No player on the team with more than five games played has offensive zone starts on the good side of 50%. They are constantly starting shifts in their own zone and having to push their way up ice. This

does not suit Heatley at all. He is a one zone player. Last season, in San Jose, he received 50% offensive zone starts and his last season in Ottawa he received 57%. Heatley thrives in the offensive zone and the Wild aren't getting him there enough.

The Wild simply are not going to score enough goals to push Heatley's scoring upward. They have the league's 23rd ranked offense, scoring 2.41 goals per game. This is simply not a scoring environment. No one that Heatley skates with is an elite scoring threat and in the Wild system Heatley's best linemates are reverting to safe defensive hockey. Frozenpool shows us that Heatley is skating with the best linemates that Minnesota has to offer but unfortunately this is not enough.



Even Strength Line Combinations

Even	Line Combinations
64.2%	HEATLEY,D - KOIVU,M - SETOGUCHI,D
18.7%	HEATLEY,D - KOIVU,M - LATENDRESSE,G
7.7%	CLUTTERBUCK,C - HEATLEY,D - KOIVU,M
5%	HEATLEY,D - JOHNSON,N - KOIVU,M
4.4%	HEATLEY,D - KOIVU,M

I like Mikko Koivu but in the Mike Yeo system he is reverting to perpetual safe mode, always making the smart choice at the cost of offense. This will not help push Heatley. Even if the Wild's system were more offensively skewed, in what universe is Koivu an improvement on Joe Thornton? Honestly, Koivu is probably the worst centerman Heatley has had since Atlanta.

Heatley is getting no help, and at this point in his career, he needs it.

Meanwhile, Ryan Callahan is quickly establishing himself as a legitimate scoring threat. You may disagree with my opinion that Heatley works hard, but there can be no disagreement that Callahan is the epitome of hard work. Now he is being rewarded for that hard work. He is receiving 21:12 minutes per game including 4:03 of which are on the top power play unit. Frozenpool tells us that Callahan is skating with the cream of the Rangers' crop.

Power Play Line Combinations

Freq	Line Combination
43.6%	CALLAHAN.R - GABORIK.M - RICHARDS.B - STEPAN.D
28%	CALLAHAN.R - DUBINSKY.B - GABORIK.M - RICHARDS.B
10.6%	CALLAHAN.R - GABORIK.M - RICHARDS.B
9.5%	CALLAHAN.R - DUBINSKY.B
8.3%	CALLAHAN.R - DUBINSKY.B - RICHARDS.B

The Rangers' power play is only slightly better than the Wild's at 15.3% but the weapons are no doubt better. The Rangers boast elite talents in both Gaborik and Richards that Callahan can feed off of. Callahan currently has just five PPP on the season, putting him on pace for 17 but there is upward potential here. Callahan's five points account for only 33.3% of the Rangers' power play scores. Since his power play time accounts for 66.3% of the Rangers' total power play time and assuming that Callahan should score on roughly 60% of the scores when he is on the ice we can calculate that Callahan should be in on 39.8% of the Rangers' power play scores. There is upward mobility here for Callahan, especially if you consider the Rangers' power play should improve as their multiple elite talents gel and that Callahan has vultured no power play assists.

At even strength, the party continues for Callahan. He skates on the second line, but as

Frozenpool will show us; this is not such a bad thing.

Even Strength Line Combinations

Freq	Line Combination
38.2%	CALLAHAN,R - DUBINSKY,B - RICHARDS,B
33.5%	CALLAHAN,R - FEDOTENKO,R - RICHARDS,B
15.9%	ANISIMOV,A - CALLAHAN,R - DUBINSKY,B
6.6%	ANISIMOV,A - CALLAHAN,R - FEDOTENKO,R
3.7%	CALLAHAN,R - DUBINSKY,B - STEPAN,D

Callahan is skating most of his shifts with star centerman Brad Richards. This is a somewhat new development so expect that percentage to climb as the season wears on. Skating with an elite playmaker in Richards bodes very well for the feisty Callahan. He can do the hard work banging in the corners and in front of the net, while Richards dictates the play. This is practically a match made in heaven. Nothing is elite about Callahan but it doesn't need to be. He just needs to play his role and he plays it to perfection.

With a top notch playmaker by his side, Callahan is now firing the puck more than ever. He is on pace to finish with a career high 263 and while he may fall short of that, it is certainly on par with what you can expect from Heatley. Callahan is scoring at a higher rate than his career 9.8% shooting but his 13.0% shooting this season is a carryover from last season's 12.8% shooting. In reality last season was the breakout season for Callahan but because he missed 22 games to injury he finished with only 48 points. That same pace over 82 games 66 points, quite similar to the 62 points that Callahan is on pace for this season. His offensive explosion is not new but it may be news to you.

Both Callahan and Heatley have similar potential for PIM and plus/minus is a crapshoot. Their power play production looks to be coming in pretty darn similar and Callahan is now shooting more. It really just comes down to points and Callahan looks to be as good, if not better than Heatley in this respect.

Heatley just strikes me as a bad habit that you need to kick. This whole idea of clinging to him because he has been so good for so long is infuriating. He is a dried out jellyfish and the seagulls are swarming.

How few points is Heatley going to have to score before you abandon ship? He's on pace for 53 this season but could easily go as low as 45. Do you really want a 45-55 point player with marginal peripherals on your team? Heatley is no longer a 30-goal scorer. Those days are done. There is bounce back potential but he needs a better system with better teammates.

Callahan is just coming into his own. We could be looking at a three to four season run of 55-65 points with some upward potential for 70. The only knock on Callahan is the fact that he is like a human pinball, bouncing off everything on the ice. This may lead to more injuries killing his fantasy potential. I am confident Callahan can stay healthy and start putting Heatley in his dust. Chalk this one up for Callahan and if you Heatley owners still don't buy it, at least use the Heatley name value to sell him off for Callahan and then some.