Cage Match: Jamie Benn vs. Evander Kane

The single toughest aspect of fantasy hockey is analyzing breakouts. Obviously you want to get ahead of the game but pre-season estimates are hit and miss. You just can't know for sure until you see the product on the ice. Once you see a breakout in action you need to quickly decipher its validity and the future implications. In this week's *Cage Match* we look at to players in the midst of breakout seasons and analyze what these breakouts mean going forward. It's Jamie Benn vs. Evander Kane – and no, it is not a boxing match.

What makes breakout candidates so difficult to read is the fact that their brief NHL track record can only tell us so much about the future. Both Benn and Kane are in their third NHL season and have grown leaps and bounds since their rookie season. Looking at their rookie seasons

won't tell us much if they are breaking out right now. That's why the patented *Cage Match* three year averages table will do us no good. Instead, let's look at a breakdown of their current statistics this season.

GP

Goals

Assists

Plus/Minus

PPP

PIM

SOG

Kane

32

15

10

Plus-6

5

27

124

Benn

32

8

20

Plus-6

8

39

97

A quick analysis scores this a tight 3-2 victory for Benn. Kane shoots more and gets more goals so that wins him two categories but they split plus/minus and the rest belong to Benn. Benn is much more of a playmaker and thus has assists. Benn's playmaking also lends itself to creating more on the power play so he has the edge there too.

What's puzzling is Benn's advantage in the PIM category. The PIM are close enough to draw this up to random chance but it is worth mentioning that Benn does not have any huge aberrations on his game log with regard to PIM. Both Benn and Kane play a hard brand of abrasive hockey and will get their fair share of PIM. I just hate to give away a cheap win based on PIM when it can be so variable. Tentatively let's call the numbers game a draw. With that in mind let's look a little deeper.

Kane plays the game with all the subtlety of a wrecking ball. Whether he is playing the body, flinging rubber or taking out the trash , Kane is looking to put an absolute pounding on you. This is what makes him an absolute rotisserie-monster but it may also be the reason Kane has yet to play an 82 game season. Kane is still young and has all the makings of a big time power forward but at just 190 lbs. he needs to fill out if he wants to play complete seasons.

Kane is also too reliant on his physical skills. Speed and strength are great assets but that's only part of the game. Kane still has some things to learn with regard to seeing the ice and positioning. It's not that he thinks the game poorly he just is not on that elite level. Right now he is using his speed and strength to bulldoze his way to the net. It is working pretty darn well but imagine when if/when he learns to find those soft spots in the defense and if he put on even more weight. He would be unstoppable. He would be Batman!

Still, let's not take too much away from what Kane is doing. He is firing almost four SOG per game and is on pace for over 300 SOG this season. Getting that many pucks on net is an absolute skill. Only six players took that many shots last season. That places him among the elite. Better still, Kane is on pace to eclipse his career high in goals by mid-season and score nearly 40 for the whole year and his shooting percentage is not so high that it's unsustainable. The biggest improvement in Kane's game has definitely been in finding ways to get the puck to the net because he is most effective as a shooter.

Kane is also getting it done without receiving the primo ice time that some players receive. Kane is only averaging 17:15 minutes per game with 2:20 coming on the power play. While he is definitely a top line guy, these minutes are still below what he could be receiving.

What's more, as Frozenpool will show us, Kane has not exactly been playing with the most primo linemates either.

Even Strength Line Combinations	
Freq	Line Combination
45.7%	KANE.E - LITTLE.B - WHEELER.B
27%	ANTROPOV.N - BURMISTROV.A - KANE.E
15.9%	BURMISTROV.A - KANE.E - WHEELER.B
7%	BURMISTROV.A - KANE.E - LITTLE.B
4.4%	KANE.E - SLATER.J - THORBURN.C

Power Play Line Combinations	
Freq	Line Combination
53%	KANE.E - LITTLE.B - WHEELER.B
18.4%	ANTROPOV.N - BURMISTROV.A - KANE.E - STAPLETON.T
11.9%	BURMISTROV.A - KANE.E - WHEELER.B
9.2%	KANE.E - LITTLE.B - STAPLETON.T - WHEELER.B
7.6%	ANTROPOV.N - BURMISTROV.A - KANE.E

Kane began the season on a line with Burmistrov and Antropov but has played the bulk of the season alongside Little and Wheeler. These line combinations seem strangely formulaic. The recipe is simple, take Kane and sprinkle in a little underrated centerman (Burmistrov/Little) and complete with a dash of physical specimen with sawdust for brains (Antropov/Wheeler). Mmmmm, delicious!

What's clear however is that Evander Kane is driving the offense for these lines. Of Little's 20 points this season, 12 have come with Kane on the ice. Likewise, seven of Burmistrov's 15 points this season came with Kane.

Working with crafty playmaking centermen makes sense for Kane as they can set him up where he likes. Similarly, meatplugs like the Antrosloth and Banana-Peeler work wonders in front of the net banging in rebounds off Kane's bombardment of shots.

It is entirely possible that while I say Burmistrov and Little are underrated I am still underrating them but I can't help but imagine how Kane would look playing with an elite playmaking

centerman. The sky really is the limit for Kane but I can't help but feel this year he is headed for a letdown. Power forwards take time to marinade. They rarely make that huge leap in one shot. Kane's career high is 43 points with 234 SOG. His body and hockey sense are not where they need to be. As the year drags on there will be more wear and tear. Let's see if he can sustain this high level of play.

The reduced ice time should help. As will the way that Winnipeg is matching lines. 57% of Kane's shifts start in the offensive zone and the coaching staff makes sure to try to get his line out there against favourable matchups. This is why we see such a disparity in Kane's home/road splits. At home Kane has 16 points in 16 games and is a plus-14 over that span. On the road he has just nine points in 16 games and is a minus-eight in those games. These road struggles are not just indicative of the difficulties in line-matching on the road but also of the ups and downs young players face.

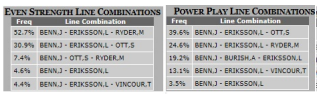
The sky remains the limit for Kane but keep expectations low for the near future. 30 goals and 55 points would be a significant improvement for Kane and hints at a true breakout in the future.

Benn, on the other hand, looks like he is legit. He is a full two years older than Kane and at 207 lbs. is better built to withstand the grind of an NHL season. What's more, while Kane's game is reminiscent of a mallet, Benn's approach is more like Andy Dufresne's rock hammer; equally capable of bludgeoning and carving opponents like a prison wall.

Benn has that IT factor. The puck follows him around the ice and he has that uncanny ability to sneak into the soft spots of the defense. His hockey sense is extremely high. So he doesn't just play the game hard but he plays it smart. This is why he was moved to center. You want guys like Benn with the puck on their stick at all times because they make their teammates look good.

What is scary is that like Kane, Benn may still be just scratching the surface. His ice time is very comparable to Kane's. He is receiving 17:50 minutes per game with 2:30 on the power play. Give Benn a minute or two more on the power play like most elite players and let's see what he can really do. It's only a matter of time.

Frozenpool shows us that Benn could also benefit from improved linemates.



Even Strength Line Combinations

Freq	Line Combination
52.7%	BENN.J - ERIKSSON.L - RYDER.M
30.9%	BENN.J - ERIKSSON.L - OTT.S
7.4%	BENN.J - OTT.S - RYDER.M
4.6%	BENN.J - ERIKSSON.L
4.4%	BENN.J - ERIKSSON.L - VINCOUR.T

Power Play Line Combinations

Freq	Line Combination
39.6%	BENN.J - ERIKSSON.L - OTT.S
24.6%	BENN.J - ERIKSSON.L - RYDER.M
19.2%	BENN.J - BURISH.A - ERIKSSON.L
13.1%	BENN.J - ERIKSSON.L - VINCOUR.T
3.5%	BENN.J - ERIKSSON.L

Playing with Loui Eriksson is awesome. That's a top notch linemate for Benn to skate with, but he is not a huge goal scorer. The other wing position is really where they need some help. The whole Ott-Ryder-Burish experiment is ludicrous. Those guys would be better off skating around with a plywood board in their hands than a hockey stick, at least that way Benn would have a bigger target to try to bounce his passes off of.

Get that line a third guy and just watch the fireworks.

Benn is also not a benefactor of line matching or offensive zone starts. The Stars struggle with pushing the puck into the offensive zone and as a result Benn is starting just 45% of his shifts in the offensive zone and is producing equally on home ice as he is on the road.

The only lull you can find in Benn's stats is his slump when Goligoski was out. As Dobber mentioned in the ramblings Benn scored just five points in the 12 games Goligoski was out but otherwise has 23 points in 20 games. You can't criticize Benn for struggling without Goligoski. The Stars blueline is pretty thin and without a top notch playmaker out there they struggle getting the puck up to the forwards. Goligoski's presence is an absolute game-changer. With Goligoski back, let the good times roll.

Benn's start to this season looks to be more sustainable than Kane's. Because he is older, stronger and thinks the game better Benn puts himself in a better position to succeed over a long stretch. He also has more pedigree in the form of his 56 point sophomore season. That makes 65 points a reasonable expectation for this season. It is also entirely possible that he reaches even loftier heights. He is already on pace for 71 points but factoring in the lull with Goligoski out and the fact that Benn is actually shooting well below his career average at 8.2% we could reasonably expect Benn to score as many as 80 points this season.

In one year leagues poolies absolutely need to take advantage of Kane's recent roto-studliness and cash him in for Benn. You obviously want to take into account team strengths with regard to goals and SOG but in terms of pure point scoring Benn has a serious advantage.

In keeper pools there is a little more at stake. Evander Kane can become an absolute roto-beast a la Corey Perry. He will also hold a positional advantage over Benn in the future as Benn has made the move to center full time. The question with Kane is whether he will figure it all out. It's a tough gamble to make. Pure upside has to favour Kane because of the scarcity of goals and his SOG prowess but it isn't enough to sway me off Benn. Benn just gets it and he plays the game just as hard as Kane. He also is no slouch with regard to the PIM and SOG. He can more than make up for any goal differential Kane creates because of his added assists. Give me Benn, because things like hockey sense just cannot be taught.