Laidlaw tackles Jaromir Jagr vs. Ray Whitney, Cory Conacher vs. Teddy Purcell, Brayden Schenn vs. Jakub Voracek - and more!

As we've seen time and time again absence makes the heart grow fonder but does it also make the brain go dumber? I feel compelled to ask that because after just four days (FOUR DAYS!!!) of NHL action there are Chicken Littles popping up all over the place to announce that the sky is falling for some particular player or particular team. I get the sense of urgency – the season is only 48 games long, not 82 – but at most teams have played three games, which is enough of a sample size to prove yourself a fool and probably not much more. Still there are some

interesting battles early this season that I would like to take a look at – *Cage Match* style.

Paul Martin vs. Matt Niskanen

This matchup may not be for all of you but in even moderately deep leagues this might be a decision for you. If the Pittsburgh Penguins are going to be the juggernaut we all expect them to be this season then these two stand to benefit. Which one is in the best position? Right now that would be Niskanen.

Martin and Niskanen have formed the defense pairing on the Penguins' second power play unit so far and have averaged very similar amounts of ice time with Martin skating 23:48 per game with 1:29 on the power play, while Niskanen has averaged 21:07 per game with 1:13 on the power play. The major difference in ice time comes from Martin's immense penalty kill responsibilities – only Brooks Orpik, Martin's partner at even strength and on the penalty kill, averages more short-handed minutes per game for the Penguins.

We also know that Martin isn't seeing any more minutes than he did last season when his production was a middling two goals and 28 points in 73 games. There's a greater chance for luck to boost Martin's totals in this shortened season and thus far he has an intriguing three assists through two games but odds are this is more of an aberration than a trend.

For Niskanen however the minutes are coming more abundantly than ever before. Last season he averaged just 17:57 per game albeit with more power play time than this season at 2:13 per game but a big reason for the power play time difference is that Niskanen was Kris Letang's replacement on the top power play unit while Letang was out with injury. This is important because it shows us that overall Niskanen should still be looking at a greater opportunity this season and that if Letang is injured once again that he will be the Penguins first option to be the lone defenseman on their top power play unit.

The most intriguing aspect of Niskanen as a possible fantasy pickup is that he is currently being

paired with Letang at even strength. If this pairing sticks together it could lead to Niskanen picking up a lot of cheap points by association. This doesn't always work out for defensemen paired with top producers, of course, as they are often placed alongside these offensive geniuses to give them space to operate and help cover up defensively for any chances they take but Niskanen is interesting because he has long possessed some intriguing fantasy upside.

If I was betting on one of these two producing an above average fantasy season my money would be on Niskanen.

Jaromir Jagr vs. Ray Whitney

This offseason the answer may have been fairly obviously Whitney as he is coming off of a season in which he scored 77 points in 82 games but after Jagr's four-point outburst on the weekend there is a lot of talk about how he still has game. I'm not here to argue that Jagr no longer has game but I think it's highly questionable to favour him over Whitney.

Remember, last season Jagr got off to a great start before things came unravelled around the 30-game mark as injuries came into play. Jagr has already skated in 34 games this season in the KHL and now has to play a 48-game NHL season. I don't see how he avoids the same health issues that caused him to stumble down the stretch last season.

Still, it's worth considering if Dallas has a preference. As of now Jagr and Whitney are skating very similar amounts with Whitney averaging 17:20 minutes per game (3:36 on the power play) and Jagr averaging 17:17 per game (3:19 on the power play). In fact, the two have been brought together to form a very intriguing top power play unit with Brenden Morrow and no true centerman on the ice.

Where things differ is at even strength. Jagr is skating on the de facto top line with Derek Roy and Loui Eriksson whereas Whitney has skated alongside Tom Wandell and Daniel Ryder.

If/when Jamie Benn is re-signed by the Stars he will most certainly replace Tom Wandell in the top six and may even take Morrow's spot on that curious top power play unit but who knows when that will be or how the lines will shake out when he returns. Too much remains in play to speculate whether there will be a winner of the lineup lottery in Dallas but what we can say with some certainty is that Whitney has a better recent track record with sustaining production. Stick with Whitney.

Mark Giordano vs. Dennis Wideman

As with all these matchups it is still too early to declare a certain winner but so far Wideman is blowing Giordano out of the water. I'm not talking about production though, I'm talking about minutes. Right now Wideman has won the battle for minutes among Calgary defensemen. He is averaging 23:40 minutes per game with 3:23 on the power play, often as the lone defenseman on Calgary's four-forward top power play unit. This shouldn't be much of a surprise as Wideman was Calgary's prized off-season acquisition, brought in to help improve the Flames' defense group.

Whether Wideman has really improved them or not is next to irrelevant. The point is Wideman is seeing much more valuable ice time than Giordano (22:24 minutes per game, 1:21 on the power play), once the Flames' darling on defense. Now Giordano is being asked to fill more important roles on the penalty kill, while Wideman does what he does best playing the big power play minutes.

If you didn't know it already, Wideman is the go to guy for offense from defense in Calgary.

Cory Conacher vs. Teddy Purcell

Conacher is tied for the team lead in scoring with five points through three games so far this season. This makes him a particularly appealing player to pluck off the waiver wire but it isn't like Purcell is really that far behind with four points through three games. The reality is that since Conacher is the hot new thing you are going to be drawn to go pick him up, especially if you've been hearing all the hype he has received around the Dobber website since he picked up AHL MVP honors last season. I'm not here to deride Conacher's accomplishments though. He is most certainly a talent. What's in question is whether or not he is actually a better option than Purcell.

What that may come down to is the linemate lottery. So far Conacher has averaged 14:41 minutes per game with 3:20 on the power play. Frozenpool will show us his most common linemates:

Conacher has bounced around the Lightning lineup quite a bit, even partnering up with Purcell at times but for the most part he has been a "second line" guy meaning that he either isn't a great fit with the Lightning top guns or the coaching staff doesn't trust him there yet. That Conacher has produced so much with such little overall ice time is a great sign for his future but only if he keeps it up. That production is what will help prove to the coaching staff that he deserves a greater role.

Purcell, on the other hand, has earned that role over the past couple of seasons in Tampa Bay. Last season Purcell managed 66 points in 81 games while playing just 16:08 minutes per game with 2:33 on the power play. This season it appears to be more of the same for Purcell as he has average 16:00 minutes per game with 4:48 on the power play. That power play time is inflated because of how many man advantages the Lightning have received through three games so expect that to come down but the overall ice time should remain the same. As Frozenpool will show us Purcell is also a fixture in the top six and on the Lightning's top power play unit:

With Stamkos and St. Louis locked in on the top power play unit and Malone the only really option as a net presence that really only leaves one spot open for a mooch on that top power play. Purcell has the long term contract, the track record of production and the trust of the coaching staff. He is the mooch until further notice.

If an injury occurs or Purcell stumbles then there will be an opportunity for Conacher but until that time it's hard to take him ahead of Purcell.

Brayden Schenn vs. Jakub Voracek

This is a battle everyone is waiting to see play out. So far it would seem that Schenn has been the big winner getting to skate with Claude Giroux and Scott Hartnell on the top line but not so fast. Schenn has only averaged 14:27 minutes per game with 3:20 coming on the power play. Voracek, conversely, has averaged 16:37 per game with 5:01 on the power play.

It breaks down as such – Schenn is on the top line at even strength but on the second power play unit, while Voracek is on the second line at even strength but on the top power play unit. If given the choice, I'd take Voracek's situation if for no other reason than it means more minutes in general and all of those bonus minutes come with a man advantage. That's a serious edge.

What's more, Philadelphia's second line center Daniel Briere has been out of the lineup to start the season leaving the Flyers with a second line consisting of Voracek, Sean Couturier and Max Talbot. No offense to Couturier or Talbot but that sucks for Voracek and his fantasy owners. That line simply isn't going to produce much offense. That leaves Voracek's only real source for point production as the power play but the Flyers power play has been dreadful so far this year, which is strange considering they are starting their most frequent unit from last season's dominant power play, the Giroux-Hartnell-Simmonds-Voracek-Timonen unit. This group simply isn't connecting but it's probably just a result of the small sample size.

Clearly neither of these two have produced much in their respective situations (just one point each through three games) but Voracek has been given the better offensive opportunity. He is also older and has more of a history of production. Once Briere returns Voracek's production should increase although I remain a sceptic. Voracek won't produce like a star but he will produce more than Schenn.

Ken Hitchcock vs. Fantasy Owners

Why is Hitchcock such a twit?

Don’t get me wrong he’s a genius and one of the best coaches in any sport but he is an absolute nemesis of fantasy owners.

He flip flops his goalies every other game with only one rule:

Don’t allow a single goal or you're out!

Sure, it’s great when your goalie adheres to that rule but when your guy allows just one goal in a game and then gets ushered to the bench it’s pretty disheartening. I don’t care if Hitchcock is the same guy that made Pascal Leclaire and Steve Mason into big time puck stoppers his quest for goaltending perfection is getting in the way of my quest to reach my games played minimums.

Then there’s his utopian “three scoring lines” non-sense. Sure, he’s probably creating a great community in the locker room by showing everyone that no one else is better and that everyone is held to the same standard but what happens when someone actually is better than everyone else? Will you finally bend Hitchcock? Of course you won’t and so while the McDonald-Steen-Tarasenko line could potentially be one of the most dominant in the entire league he’s going to keep giving them the same minutes as everyone else, even on the power play because they are all just drones and he’s the queen bee.

The problem is that all this ridiculousness works. Hitchcock has one of the deepest most talented rosters in the entire league and he is milking that roster for every win he can squeeze from it. It’s working but for us fantasy owners it feels like a complete abuse of his privilege. Hitchcock wins… Damnit!