

Paul Stastny vs. Travis Zajac

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 30 January 2013 13:33 - Last Updated Thursday, 31 January 2013 00:44



Who has more fantasy value - Paul Stastny or Travis Zajac?

In every single fantasy league there exists a group of players - some of whom sit at the end of someone's bench and others that are at the top of the waiver wire – that are all so tightly congested in terms of value that they are virtually interchangeable. I call this group the middle class and they can be frustrating to deal with because you never know when the production is going to come. I find that most often this group consists of centermen that are either first line players on bad teams or second line players on good teams – I'm sure you can think of a bunch off the top of your head, without breaking a sweat. Today's Cage Match features two players from that middle class who are giving me problems. That's right, I've got middle class problems. It's [Paul Stastny](#) vs. [Travis Zajac](#) .

Paul Stastny vs. Travis Zajac

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 30 January 2013 13:33 - Last Updated Thursday, 31 January 2013 00:44

It should come as no surprise that these two are also prominent members of the *Overpaid and Underwhelming First Line Center Club*

, which might be a dis but the compensation that comes with membership in this exclusive club ensures that there are no hard feelings.

Let's start with Stastny who comes into this matchup with the highest billing, built on his past production. Stastny has broken the 70-point barrier three times in his career, notably doing it in both of his first two seasons and then again in 2009-10, when he scored a career high 79 points. This past scoring makes him something of " [Rick Nash](#) " in that we give him credit for being essentially an 80-point player even though he technically never accomplished the feat. Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades, right?

More recently Stastny has recorded underwhelming seasons of 57 and 53 points, which is what's driven him into the middle class. This production (or lack thereof) has continued into this season where he has scored just one point in five games. It's too early to classify him as a bust but there are some trends developing that are not in his favour.

So far it seems that Stastny is really suffering for the absence of Ryan O'Reilly, who is the Avalanche's best defensive centerman. This has left Stastny to do the yeoman's work in his own zone. As we can see from [BehindTheNet](#) 's fantastic tracking of offensive zone starts Stastny is starting his shifts in the offensive zone less than a third of the time so far this season.

There are a few caveats to note regarding this trend of defensive zone starts. The first is that Colorado has done a terrible job of pushing the play forward into the opponent's end this season with only four players actually boasting offensive zone start percentages of 50% or higher. The other thing to consider is the small sample size. Colorado has only played five games so far this season so there's a chance this percentage regresses towards 50% as the season goes on but keep in mind that Stastny's percentage of offensive zone starts is the second lowest on the team behind only [Tyson Barrie](#) (who has only suited up for two games) so even if the team improves there's a good chance Stastny will continue to get the short end of the stick, at least until O'Reilly returns.

Stastny has also lost the lineup lottery – not that there are necessarily any great prizes to be had in Colorado. As FrozenPool will show us, Stastny's most frequent linemates this season have been the perennially underwhelming duo of [David Jones](#) and [Jamie McGinn](#) :

Paul Stastny vs. Travis Zajac

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 30 January 2013 13:33 - Last Updated Thursday, 31 January 2013 00:44

Are you even the least bit surprised that Stastny has yet to record an even strength point? He might go the whole year without recording one – the season is already 10% over. Okay, that is hyperbole, Jones and McGinn aren't terrible but they are terribly streaky and they make for some incredibly mediocre linemates.

There are some positives to take away for Stastny. He is averaging the second most ice time among Avalanche forwards at 19:50 per game behind just [Matt Duchene](#) and is in fact averaging the most power play ice time of anyone on the team at 2:54 per game. As FrozenPool will show us Stastny's linemates on the power play are sometimes more appealing than his linemates at even strength:

Still, the mediocre linemates still occupy the majority of his time and [Milan Hejduk](#)'s presence as a fourth forward does absolutely nothing to help matters. Hejduk is so over the hill he's found another hill to try to climb and he's completely stalled out in between. He has more in common with a washed up corpse than a hockey player at this point and if you think I'm being harsh on Hejduk just remember that he's old and doesn't know how to use the Internet so this won't be getting back to him.

Stastny does average the most power play time of anyone on the team at 2:54 per game but with linemates like those it's almost irrelevant. Also, you'll note that that power play ice time figure is rather low to be leading a team but that's because for the past few seasons the Avalanche have been among the absolute worst teams at drawing penalties, so while they actually had a top ten power play last season in terms of percentage (18.4% success rate) they still scored low in terms of total power play goals because of how few opportunities they had.

For Stastny to resume any semblance of production he will need some sort of shake up by head coach Joe Sacco or the front office. The return of O'Reilly would help remove some of Stastny's defensive burden but it won't help his linemate situation as O'Reilly figures to be glued to the hip of [Gabriel Landeskog](#).

O'Reilly's return could mean reuniting some of the Avalanche's more productive power play units from last season, most of which, as FrozenPool will demonstrate, included some assortment of Stastny, Landeskog and O'Reilly:

Paul Stastny vs. Travis Zajac

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 30 January 2013 13:33 - Last Updated Thursday, 31 January 2013 00:44

Of course, Sacco was also a demon in terms of mixing up his power play formations and I'd expect much of the same this season given how well it worked so it's hard to say for certain if Stastny will benefit from O'Reilly's return. Just know that it really can't hurt.

Stastny is too talented a player to be receiving the short end of the stick like he has but unfortunately that is the way things have worked out for him in Colorado. [Matt Duchene](#) is the golden boy and must be coddled. Meanwhile O'Reilly won the job beside Landeskog so profoundly that they won't even try Stastny out on his line while O'Reilly holds out. It's a troubling situation because in general the minutes are there but it's more smoke and mirrors because Stastny's linemates have been so bad and his role has been so defensively oriented.

[Travis Zajac](#) doesn't come with the same history of production that Stastny has. No one is going to confuse him with a point per game player. He was designed to be a permanent member of the middle class and he's done well posting a couple of 60-point seasons while playing on the Devils' first line. After signing a fat new contract this month Zajac can expect to be given every opportunity to retain that position even after an injury-riddled 2011-12 campaign, in which he played just 15 games and his job filled by [Adam Henrique](#).

Henrique is injured now and Zajac is healthy and flying. Zajac is second in ice time on the Devils at 22:36 minutes per game behind only [Ilya Kovalchuk](#). New Jersey is one of the few teams that will actually play their top forwards more than any of their defensemen but it's the sort of stars and scrubs approach they have to take with a shallow group of forwards and it's hard to knock it since that strategy carried them to the Stanley Cup Final last spring. Zajac stands to benefit a ton from this approach since seeing more ice time is almost never a bad thing especially when it comes to power play time, where Zajac is averaging 4:12 minutes per game.

Zajac is also playing with the best New Jersey has to offer.

As FrozenPool has demonstrated, Zajac is basically living beside [Ilya Kovalchuk](#). This hasn't led to much in the way of scoring (Zajac has but two points in five games) but it stands to reason that the scoring will come, especially when you realize Zajac has yet to record a power play point this season. Unlike Stastny, Zajac has the sort of linemates he can really benefit from. Playing on the Devils' top power play unit will surely lead to some production.

Paul Stastny vs. Travis Zajac

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 30 January 2013 13:33 - Last Updated Thursday, 31 January 2013 00:44

Of course, Zajac has never been a major producer of power play points – his career high was 21 scored in 2009-10 – despite consistently being among the leaders in power play time on the Devils. Still, Zajac's share of power play time this season is more than ever before so don't be surprised if he shows an improvement in this regard.

Zajac's traditionally low power play production does offer optimism elsewhere. It means he has a strong history of even strength production, which could be of further benefit to his scoring this season given his overall ice time boost. The flip side is that this strong even strength production did also come while skating beside [Zach Parise](#), one of the league's most fearsome even strength producers and someone who is no longer a member of the Devils. More damning still is the 2010-11 season, where Zajac stumbled to a 44-point season, when Parise missing pretty well the entire season with a knee injury. If this is any proof of how Zajac will perform without Parise then maybe he is headed for another down year.

Still, Kovalchuk really stunk that season too but he seems to be playing just fine with Parise gone this year. It's hard to tell at this point whether 2010-11 was the aberration or if what we are seeing now is the aberration but considering Kovalchuk's lengthy history as one of the league's top scorers I am giving him the benefit of the doubt, which certainly helps Zajac's cause.

Ultimately, Zajac's top notch linemates and premium ice time are too much to ignore. I don't think he's as talented as Stastny overall but he isn't so far off that we should ignore the vast difference between their respective situations. Zajac is being given every opportunity to succeed, Stastny is not and when it comes to the middle class, it's these subtle differences that sway the match. Give me Zajac, at least for this season.

Recent Cage Matches

[Rick Nash vs. James Neal](#)

Paul Stastny vs. Travis Zajac

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 30 January 2013 13:33 - Last Updated Thursday, 31 January 2013 00:44

[Ekman-Larsson vs. Faulk](#)

[Atkinson vs. Foligno](#)

[Hedman vs. Larsson](#)

[J. Johnson vs. Carle](#)

[Lundqvist vs. Rinne vs. Quick](#)