

David Backes vs. David Clarkson

Written by Steve Laidlaw

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Cage Match: David Backes vs. David Clarkson

It happens every year, a new “power forward” emerges from the pool of intriguing rotisserie options and becomes a full-fledged force even in points-only leagues. If his early season run is any indication, this year’s emergent power forward is [David Clarkson](#). What better way to vet Clarkson as a candidate to join the elite “power forwards” than to compare him to someone who only recently made the leap,

[David Backes](#)

. It’s an all David battle – keep your Goliaths at home.

Clarkson has scored seven goals and 12 points through nine games, which has him tied for 10th in league scoring. Surely this sort of scoring is unsustainable for Clarkson considering he has a career high of 46 points and he is now on pace to eclipse that mark with just half a season. Still,

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it's not impossible that he is on his way to a breakout season, even at age 28. After all, [Pascal Dupuis](#) had himself a career season at age 32. Late bloomers exist.

Among the power forward elite Alex Burrows represents another example. Burrows didn't even make it into the NHL until he was 24 years old and didn't become fantasy relevant until he was 27. Of course, Burrows is also a cautionary tale. No sooner had Burrows broke into the power forward elite than was he losing traction. It's really hard to be a great PIM option and still put up a lot of points. The two are at odds with each other. So keep Burrows in mind keeper leaguers, regardless of whether we determine if Clarkson is for real or not.

The most obvious thing to look at with Clarkson's hot start is his shooting percentage. Clarkson is now shooting 18.4% on the season, which nearly doubles his career mark of 10.0%. Still, Clarkson managed to score on 13.2% of his shots last season, while also posting a career high 228 SOG. It would seem Clarkson is developing a deft touch. 18.4% is almost certainly unsustainable but over a 48 game stretch could Clarkson sustain a shooting percentage above 15%? It is certainly possible. Clarkson is the garbage man for the Devils, getting to the tough areas and scoring from in tight. Players of his ilk have always carried high shooting percentages.

[Scott Hartnell](#) represents another great precedent for what Clarkson might accomplish. Last season, Hartnell, a career 11.3% shooter carried a shooting percentage of 15.9% while shooting a career high 232 SOG – and this was in an 82-game season. Clarkson need only maintain his torrid pace for 48 games, a seemingly easier task.

Clarkson does not have the benefit of a [Claude Giroux](#) feeding him all season but he does have some very talented linemates as FrozenPool will show us:

The even strength line combos are nothing to write home about, although Patrick Elias is one of the league's more underrated playmakers – a player with high hockey IQ capable of making others look good. Elias finished 7th in the league in assists last season with 52 so yes he is a high quality linemate for Clarkson. What's most important though is Clarkson's company on the power play.

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Clarkson is living on that New Jersey top power play unit. The Devils don't have anywhere near the league's most fearsome power play (currently they rank 19th in the league at 15.8%) but they are lethal enough for Clarkson to produce.

Clarkson is currently skating 17:31 per game with 4:02 per game coming on the power play. This is an increase of one minute per game for Clarkson over last season where he skated 16:21 per game with 3:03 on the power play, the difference being an added minute of power play time. That extra minute may be a bit of a red herring. Per FrozenPool, Clarkson skated 56.8% of New Jersey's power play time last season and is up to only 62.8% this season. This is a marginal increase that doesn't make up the full extra minute Clarkson is receiving. The Devils may philosophically have increased the amount of time dedicated to their top power play unit this season but that doesn't completely explain the increase in Clarkson's ice time. Instead, the biggest factor in increasing Clarkson's ice time is that the Devils are simply drawing more penalties overall this season. This could easily regress given we are only nine games in.

Any regression in power play opportunities for Clarkson and the Devils could be seriously damaging. Clarkson already has four power play goals this season, which is half his production from last year. It's possible that Clarkson has improved to the point where he will be scoring power play goals more frequently but it seems more likely that this is the biggest aberration in all of Clarkson's numbers.

But we've already decided that there is an unsustainability to Clarkson's current pace. Is there any evidence that points towards sustainability?

Clarkson's linemates this season do appear to be a drastic improvement from last season. As FrozenPool will demonstrate, Clarkson found himself on a line with Elias but 30% of the time as compared with nearly 100% this season:

Clarkson's most frequent linemates last season were instead uninspiring players like [Petr Sykora](#) and [Mattias Tedenby](#)

. Moreover, Clarkson never stuck with one line long enough to develop any really chemistry for the full length of the season. If Clarkson can stick with Elias for this whole season then we are looking at a potential breakthrough in terms of even strength production.

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Clarkson registered 30 even strength points last season and could potentially come close to that mark in just this half season based on how much of a benefit it is to be playing with Elias full time.

Clarkson is also shooting the puck on net more than ever. His 38 SOG so far would put him on pace for 346 in a full 82-game season, which is well over a 100 more shots than he took in last season's career season. It's possible that Clarkson regresses but according to FrozenPool Clarkson isn't necessarily demonstrating a huge improvement in terms of shots actually reaching the net:

Year

Hitting Net %

2012-13

82.6

2011-12

76

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2010-11

75.9

2009-10

72.1

The hitting net percentage differs from shooting percentage in that it is a percentage of the number of attempts that make it to the net as either saves or goals, versus those that miss the net entirely or are blocked. As you can see Clarkson is getting more pucks on net than usual but that difference doesn't totally make up the entirety of his improved shooting pace. Were Clarkson only hitting the net on 76% of his shots he'd still have 35 SOG this year. So Clarkson is just flat out taking more shots. Even if his hitting net % regresses, Clarkson will still put on a record pace for SOG, which is great news for his production.

Clarkson will almost certainly regress from his current pace but there is enough working in his favour to consider him a breakout candidate nonetheless.

How about Backes then? Backes isn't necessarily off to a slow start this season, although compared to Clarkson you may disagree. Backes has one goal and six points through nine games so far, which is pretty well par for the course, although you could debate that he could have more goals.

One thing holding Backes back is Blues head coach Ken Hitchcock and his communist approach to ice time. Among Blues forwards Backes is second in time on ice at 18:46 per game, of which 3:00 comes on the power play but he could easily be seeing more. You could of course argue the other side of that. There are plenty of Blues forwards more offensively gifted than Backes. Backes could potentially get pigeonholed on another team. Instead, in St. Louis he

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sees as much power play time as seven other forwards and nine other teammates in total.

Overall, Backes doesn't see any more important ice time than Clarkson because he spends 1:57 per game killing penalties, while Clarkson doesn't kill any. In fact, you could technically argue that right now Clarkson is seeing more important ice time but we will see if that advantage holds for the remainder of the season.

It will be truly interesting to see if Hitchcock sticks with his equal opportunity power play. So far it is working miracles as the Blues have scored on a ridiculous 33.3% of power play chances a figure that leads the league. Backes has really benefitted from that power play success as four of his six points have come on the power play. Still, if one unit goes cold, would Hitchcock switch it up and favour one group more?

As FrozenPool will show us Backes is doing just fine in terms of linemates:

This shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone though. For one thing, Backes had great linemates last season as well, which leads us to point two; St. Louis is so deep that unless you are playing on the fourth line you are going to have good linemates. So basically, unless Backes falls off the map we know what we are getting from him at this point. That's something around a 55-point pace, with about 100 PIM and a little over 200 SOG – prorated for this shortened season that's 32 points, 60 PIM and 125 SOG. Backes is pretty well on pace for all those milestones, except the SOG.

Backes isn't shooting much this season, which is disconcerting considering that like Clarkson he too is hitting the net with much more frequency than in the past according to FrozenPool:

Year

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Hitting Net %

2012-13

83.3

2011-12

71.6

2010-11

69.2

2009-10

67.6

What's disconcerting is that Backes has only fired 20 SOG so far this season, which would pace him for 182 over an 82-game season. Backes can easily bring this up with a few more shot attempts, but he's already hitting the net more than normal. Given the small deviation from his usual pace I'm inclined not to get worried here. I'm similarly not worried that Backes has scored on just 5.0% of his SOG this season. This is much too small a sample size and Backes, a

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career 12.1% shooter, will surely regress towards the mean.

The point being, Backes is well established and he should easily come within striking distance of all of those prorated projections quoted above. The issue at hand is seemingly not whether Backes has regressed to the point where Clarkson might catch him, but rather whether Clarkson has just completely surpassed him entirely. I'd have a tough time making that argument. Nine games is simply too small a sample size. In many leagues I'm sure that Backes was drafted, while Clarkson remained on the waiver wire. There has likely been a temptation to make the swap. I myself was tempted but we ultimately need more information.

I am comfortable saying that Clarkson is ready to join that elite group of power forwards, even after just nine games. The reality is that nine games is basically 20% of this season so Clarkson would have to go completely cold over the final 39 games not to post a very similar stat line to Backes this season. And Clarkson is playing too many minutes with too good of linemates to regress so immediately. I wouldn't take Clarkson over Backes but the point is he's in the conversation.

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