(Michael St. Croix, the potential top pick in 2011)

Just as it's folly to try to hype a Bantam scoring star as the next Sidney Crosby or Wayne Gretzky, it's simply far too early to damn an entire class of players- half of whom won't even be on anyone's radar until next year. However, an article in the THN Draft Preview did just that. That said, the prairies are still producing some of the top talent in the country - and 2011 will be no different.

C Michael St. Croix
Ht/Wt: 5'11, 163 lbs

2008-09 Team: Winnipeg Wild (Manitoba Midget AAA)
2008-09 Stats: 41 GP, 56-47-103
2008-09 Stats (Playoffs): 9 GP, 8-12-20

Major Junior Rights: Edmonton Oil Kings (WHL)

Betting against Oil Kings general manager Bob Green is more often than not a losing proposition. The man responsible for finding the likes of Joffrey Lupul and Tyler Ennis outside of the WHL Draft is perhaps the greatest talent evaluator not earning an NHL paycheque. With that kind of an eye for smaller scoring forwards, then, the #4 pick of the 2008 WHL Bantam Draft was likely the easiest of Green's life.

After all, it's not every day you get to pick a player who scores at a 4 PPG pace. In 25 games for the Winnipeg Monarchs of the Manitoba AAA Bantam league, crafty center Michael St. Croix lead all comers by more than 20 points. All in all, the son of former NHL goaltender Rick St. Croix finished the 2007-08 season with 96 points in 25 games. Considered the headiest, fastest and most skilled player in the '08 Bantam Draft, St. Croix was a chellanger for first overall. Yet there he was at #4. So what caused him to slip outside the top spot, never mind top three? Well, the one thing that always causes second guessing in the heads of scouts: size. Weighing in at just 5'10 and 152 lbs come Draft Day, St. Croix went behind two players 6'0 or bigger.

Fast-forward a year, and it's clear more than one team may have erred. St. Croix out-performed any and all expectations in 2008-09, both on and off the ice. The Manitoba Midget AAA scoring champ as a rookie with 103 points in 41 games, St. Croix grew an inch and added ten pounds of muscle before turning 16. St. Croix even found time to make his WHL debut, adding a goal in his first game and an assist in the next for two points in two games. Incredibly, he could have had even more; yours truly was in attendance for both games, and St. Croix was easily the best player on the ice for Oil Kings. Visibly WHL-ready from day one- he scored a hat-trick in his first camp scrimmage- the only thing that held him back from a regular spot were the WHL's rules on age.

St. Croix has seemingly every gift. An explosive skater who can get to top gear in a couple of steps, the center's agility is unparalleled. Add in magical hands, a keen sense for the game, a wicked, accurate shot and a huge heart, and you have a player that may challenge for the top spot in the 2011 Draft. Comparisons have been made to Jonathan Toews, and they're pretty close- although St. Croix is a better playmaker at the same age.

Not bad for a fourth overall selection.

C Mark McNeill

Ht/Wt: 6'0, 178 lbs

2008-09 Team: Southside Athletic Club (Alberta Midget AAA)
2008-09 Stats: 33 GP, 21-18-39

Major Junior Rights: Prince Albert Raiders (WHL)

In the world of hockey prospect journalism, several superlatives are thrown around with abandon: players are rarely people, but a combination of cookie-cutter traits. Hockey sense is one of those abused words.

Hockey fans have been lucky over the past decade to watch the progression of several young players who possess a boatload of the trait- the best example being Sidney Crosby. After all, it's one thing to describe the ability to read the play, but quite another to see someone leave the opposition completely merciless as they ruthlessly dissect and predict every move. Having seen Ovechkin, Malkin, Toews, Kane- and of course Crosby- rise to prominence, I have a pretty good idea of what hockey sense is and who has it. 2008 fifth overall WHL Bantam selection Mark McNeill has it.

Just over a PPG in Midget may not look impressive, even if it did put McNeill soley in the top fifteen league-wide. However, as you drill down, the feat becomes more impressive. One of only a handful of 1993-born players to crack the top 15, McNeill lead SSAC in points by more than ten; no other teammate broke the 15-goal mark, let alone 20. League-wide, McNeill finished tied for 2nd in GWG with five.

As the team's go-to player, the big center naturally drew the most attention and defensive coverage. Rather than wilt under the pressure, it was in these situations that McNeill truly thrived. An extremely clean player despite the physical abuse piled upon him by opposing defenders, McNeill's ability to protect the puck was simply unmatched in the AMHL. It was not uncommon to watch him skate around and through the offensive zone or two or three times, evading two or three defenders in the process. While this description- combined with his statline- may give on the impression of a puck-hog, McNeill had little help; many passes into the slot were flubbed or fired into the crest of the opposing goalie.

And what of his 'hockey sense'? Well, instead of telling you it's good, let me show you: my very first look of Mark McNeill was when he fell down at the opposition's blueline during an attack by SSAC. Not glorious, and McNeill's reasons for being there weren't exactly clear. However, a couple of seconds later, the puck floated right to him due to an errant clear. Naturally, I figured it was a fluke. Several minutes later, it happened again, this time in another spot on the blueline- McNeill had hustled to an opening, only to get knocked over by an oppsing player going off on a line change. And again, before I could blink, the puck appeared at his side.

Now, obviously, falling down a bunch isn't all that endearing. But McNeill demonstrated his excellent hockey sense in other ways as the game progressed; on one shift, he anticipated a cross-ice pass, intercepted it, and took off on a breakaway. He then used his big frame as a screen, waiting until the last moment to slide the puck to a trailing forward. On another charge

up ice, McNeill broke in up the left side, swooped across the front of the net, and pulled the goalie with him laterally. Only the iron prevented a beautiful foal.

As a late-season call-up to the PA and the Dub showed that there is still a lot for McNeill to work on. Called by Prince Albert's head scout a 'really good skater', McNeill's lack of elite acceleration or explosiveness bogs him down in tight quarters. Like Phil Esposito, his big frame and soft hands allow him to play keep-away long enough to do something with the puck. While he has the skill to do it in major junior, it will take some adjustment.

D Dillon Simpson
Ht/Wt: 6'1, 185 lbs

2008-09 Team: Southside Athletic Club (Alberta Midget AAA)
Major Junior Rights: Kelowna Rockets (WHL)

One of the interesting things about being a scout in a small city like Edmonton is the type of people you run into at minor hockey games. Case-in-point: while watching the SSAC Boston Pizza Athletics one afternon, a rather familiar individual walked in at the start of the third period. While most everyone was respectful and let him watch the game, when the play stopped, Craig Simpson drew a crowd and was the picture of grace and charm that fans have come to know on HNIC.

Dillon Simpson is a carbon-copy of his father, from his build to his keen sense of the game to his staggering maturity for a young man. Drafted in the eighth round of the WHL Bantam Draft solely because of his commitment to play in the NCAA- like guess who?- Dillon Simpson will be a treat to watch as he finishes out high school in the city of Edmonton.

One of the top Bantam defencemen in the province last season, in 31 games for SSAC's AAA Bantam squad, the Edmonton native finished with 31 assists and 38 points. While 2008-09 did not see a lot of points for Simpson, he found other ways to contribute. A tremendous skater like his father, Dillon's stops, starts and agility were often eye-catching as he patrolled the blueline. While capable of man-handling opponents in the crease, the savvy rearguard instead used his smarts and long reach to guide opposing players out of danger in front. Used sparingly on the powerplay, when given the chance, Simpson showed off a hard, heavy point shot.

With additional muscle and some seasoning, Dillon Simpson has all the tools to be a top Junior A defenceman; an AMHL All-Star as a rookie, he should make the Spruce Grove Saints next season. The AJHL will have to suffice until graduation, at which time he'll pick his destination for the next four years- or less.