

## Western Super (Physical) Powers

Written by Matt Bugg

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Year in and year out, the WHL has produced some of the show's biggest and baddest skaters- many outside the first round. Shea Weber, Milan Lucic, Dustin Byfuglien... the list goes on and on. Who in the 2010 class is a possible second-day surprise?

D Alex Petrovic (Red Deer Rebels)

Ht/Wt: 6'4, 193 lbs

2009-10: 26 GP, 4-10-14, -1, 39 PIM

Alex Petrovic isn't the nastiest player on this list, or the best skater, or the best with the puck. But his mix of size, sound defensive awareness and steadfast dedication to team play scream safe pick.

The best evidence of this is comes from the month of October, which Petrovic missed the entirety of thanks to a bad back. During that time the Rebels went 6-6-0 and had a goal differential of -16 (38 GF/54 GA). In total, they allowed 4.5 goals per game. With him in the lineup, Red Deer has an average GF per game of 2.5!

Petrovic is also an important dressing room presence, and as such is as close to a franchise defender as it gets in the WHL. While he might not reach those lofty heights in the best league in the world, he has the will- if not the ability- to be another Matt Greene or Jason Smith.

Statistically, Petrovic actually compares quite nicely with Smith:

Smith 17/18- 0.61 PPG, 2.7 PIMPG

Petrovic 17/18- 0.54 PPG, 1.5 PIMPG

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D Dylan McIlrath (Moose Jaw Warriors)

Ht/Wt: 6'5, 215 lbs

2009-10: 38 GP, 2-9-11, +18, 118 PIM

The exact kind of player you wish the WHL would produce every year, Dylan McIlrath is a ton of fun to watch. Remember Milan Lucic's dominant Memorial Cup performance? McIlrath can do that from the blueline. Watching the 6'4 rearguard run down two or three forecheckers by himself is like a kung fu movie- you expect that the others will jump in help, but before they can, the nasty rearguard has put them on their rear-end and cleared the puck.

McIlrath is a wild stallion at this point. His base hockey skills- surprisingly agile, quick feet and hard, crisp passes that almost always find their way north- get overshadowed by his style, but he wouldn't be a +18 if he ran around recklessly. Oh, did we mention he's also a great fighter?

Nevertheless, he doesn't get to touch the puck as much as one would like in the offensive zone. If McIlrath can find a balance between playing his position and moving the puck, he could be the most feared defender in the league since Dion Phaneuf.

D Joey Leach (Kootenay Ice)

Ht/Wt: 6'4, 184 lbs

2009-10: 40 GP, 2-11-13, +16, 42 PIM

Typically, larger players earn the 'project' tag due to substantial skating issues. That's not a problem for Kootenay stud Joey Leach- and as few other areas are, either, it's simply criminal he hasn't earned more discussion.

Perhaps even a little bigger than his listed size, Leach's legs are so long that he moves a country mile with every stride. He's also a formidable backwards skater with fluid stops and starts; during one game, the puck was turned over in the offensive zone while the Ice were set up. By the time the opposing forward had settled it down, Leach was already twelve feet back and in prime position to defend what could have been an odd-man rush.

Leach also handles the puck well, and his size helps here too; he is able to use his long reach and excellent hand-eye to whack down clearing attempts during man advantages. During the 2009 Mac's Midget Tournament he earned a First All-Star Team berth thanks to his excellent two-way play.

Despite what his penalty totals suggest Leach isn't much of a fighter. Red Deer's Landon Ferraro gave up four inches in a bout and easily brought the giant down. However, the mammoth rearguard isn't shy about physical contact; the fight came about because Leach had absolutely rag-dolled Ferraro into the boards seconds before.

D Corbin Baldwin (Spokane Chiefs)

Ht/Wt: 6'5, 210 lbs

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2009-10: 35 GP, 1-5-6, +13, 26 PIM

When the Spokane Chiefs lost Jared Cowen to the WJC for two weeks, they knew they would have little problem replacing his size on the blueline. However, what they didn't count on was for sophomore Corbin Baldwin to chip in other areas as well.

Although in his second season of play, it was hard to get a good read on Baldwin during his first year with the Chiefs. In 42 appearances, the mammoth rearguard registered just four points- all assists- and went undrafted.

2009-10 was looking to be a similar year. Pointless in October and without a career goal right up to when Cowen departed for Saskatoon, the major hole on the Spokane blueline couldn't have come at a better time and might have even saved Baldwin's WHL job.

With three points- including a goal on December 27th- and 26 PIM in eight games, Baldwin still isn't out of the woods yet but he's showing signs that the best might still be to come.

Already, there's been one major improvement in his game. Still quite rough at transitioning from forwards to backwards skating, Baldwin's straight line speed and agility have improved exponentially. He'll never be confused with Tyler Myers but he might just be faster than Cowen at this point. As long as he can keep forwards ahead of him he's an extremely difficult player to beat one-on-one due to his long reach and new-found quickness side to side.

As with most big blueliners, Baldwin regularly drops the gloves. He tends to land a lot of punches but few do any real damage; he was almost jersey'd by 6'1 Lance Bouma. However, he certainly doesn't have a glass jaw and is in fact all but immovable once he plants his blades.

LW Spencer Asuchak (Prince George Cougars)

Ht/Wt: 6'4, 210 lbs

2009-10: 28 GP, 6-7-13, 0, 40 PIM

Having already reached his 2008-09 totals of four goals and three assists by Game 16, burgeoning power winger Spencer Asuchak was developing quickly for Tri-City when the Americans shipped him to Prince George for a conditional draft pick. While it was the perfect scenario for Asuchak on paper- he spent several years of his childhood there and the Cougars were seeking a big body to somewhat replace injured Brett Connolly- the transition proved to be difficult. In twelve games from November 27th to the end of the year, he had just two goals and five points.

However, 2010 has seen Asuchak start to break out. He had four points in the first three games of January, including the first multi-point game of his career.

Asuchak is not all size. Like Joe Colborne and Dustin Penner, a surprise growth spurt actually hurt him temporarily as he had to essentially learn the game all over again. However, since joining the Cougars, Asuchak has become a fixture in front of the net on the powerplay. A soft

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pair of hands and excellent skating ability survived the transition from puberty and all three gifts are starting to come together.

While he doesn't have Carter Ashton's crackling wristshot, their games at the same age are virtually identical. Asuchak has compensated by becoming something of a garbage goal specialist. The phrase 'stickhandle in a telephone booth' is overused, but there are few players that can deke in the tight space that is the crease like Asuchak. A highlight-reel goal in December where he fluidly made two or three moves to sneak the puck between the goalie and the post is a prime example.

C Ryan Johansen (Portland Winterhawks)

Ht/Wt: 6'3, 188 lbs

2009-10: 43 GP, 16-29-45, +9, 25 PIM

The Portland Winterhawks are the WHL's next dynasty- well, for three years anyway, about as long as Major Junior dynasties last- and while most of the press has focused on 'El Nino' Neiderreiter and nasty winger Brad Ross, Ryan Johansen is the pivot all the offense runs through.

A center from the Ryan O'Reilly school of slow feet, quick brain and great hustle, Johansen is a textbook case of late(r) development. After scoring just 17 points in 43 games at an inferior level- the BCHL- in 2008-09, the former seventh round Bantam Draft pick worked hard for every goal and assist and the rest eventually caught up.

Johansen's knack for creating for room for his linemates has been mentioned several times in the media and his ability to curl and keep the puck out of danger while waiting for a lane to open up is NHL-caliber. However, his quick shot has garnered little mention. He has the ability to get full torque and accuracy on a rolling puck and he owns a wicked one-time blast perfect for powerplay situations.

RW Mark Stone (Brandon Wheat Kings)

Ht/Wt: 6'3, 190 lbs

2009-10: 16 GP, 7-10-17, +7, 10 PIM

Coming off a two-month layoff because of an injury and being forced into a top-six role because of World Junior departures is a tough situation, but Mark Stone overcame both to quickly recoup his draft stock.

After a strong rookie season in which he potted 39 points in 56 games as a 16-year-old, 2009-10 was expected to be a break-out year like last season was for teammate Scott Glennie. However, a broken thumb in September sidelined him until the very first week of December.

Most expected Stone to need time to shake off the rust and it was bad timing- eleven days after his return, Brayden Schenn and Scott Glennie left for Team Canada's evaluation camp. While

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Glennie was sent back, Schenn and Finnish import Toni Rajala ended up representing their respective countries in Saskatoon.

However, Stone came back as strong as before- perhaps even better. In the thirteen games since his return on December 2nd he has fifteen points, including his first career hat-trick.

Stone is a sturdy, driven forward who has proven to be tough to stop once he gets a full head of steam. While his acceleration is somewhat lacking, his top-end gear is as good as anyone's and he can seamlessly change gears while carrying the puck. Terrific hockey sense and a quick, accurate release completes an extremely intriguing package of size and skill. Scouts were doubtless concerned about his hand injury- they're his most important tool, after all- but that he's shown no ill effects will cause his stock to recover.

The Wheaties were reticent to trade him despite their efforts to load up for the Memorial Cup as he can energize the team with a well-timed hit, pass or goal, a critical trait that every winning team needs.

Because of his pro size and compete level, it's not out of the question that Stone breaks camp with an NHL team next year.