

March Mock

Written by Matt Bugg

Sunday, 13 March 2011 00:03 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 16:56



The stretch drive is on in both North American major junior and pro hockey. What- and who- will the NHL's playoffless teams have to look forward to in June should they fail to find that extra gear in time?

1. Edmonton Oilers- D Adam Larsson (Skelleftea, Elitserien)

With a three-game win streak to start the month, the Edmonton Oilers looked to be playing themselves out of the 30th spot and final spot. However, fans needn't have worried; fate once again intervened, knocking out de facto leading scorer Sam Gagner with a freak hand injury while he sat on the bench. While the Avs are 1-7-2 in their last ten, the Oilers have reached the point where their best offensive weapons are Jordan Eberle and Ryan Jones, and any more than three wins the rest of March would be a major surprise.

With that said, when Edmonton head scout Stu MacGregor was interviewed for March 8th piece on the Oilers website, he mentioned just one 2011-eligible player: Adam Larsson. Although

March Mock

Written by Matt Bugg

Sunday, 13 March 2011 00:03 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 16:56

“need” has once again dominated the conversation among Oilers fans when it comes to the Draft, MacGregor and crew opted to go with the BPA last summer. And, by golly, it worked.

Before his season ended prematurely with an ankle injury, Taylor Hall had- and still has- more goals than Boston Bruin rookie Tyler Seguin has points. And what of position? Well, it's been Hall who has thrived the most at center, while Seguin has needed to shift to the wing to see substantial minutes. BPA should once again be the order of the day, and Larsson- whose club is down 2 games to 1 in the opening round of the Elitserien playoffs- is that player.

2. Ottawa Senators- LW/RW Gabriel Landeskog (Kitchener, OHL)

It's the worst-kept secret in hockey right now. Second on their entire list for the 2011 NHL Entry Draft, the Ottawa Senators have kept a close eye on Kitchener Rangers star Gabriel Landeskog. In all, they have to encouraged. After finally returning from the ankle injury that knocked him out of the World Juniors, Landeskog has shown little rust. Although pointless in his last five games, the 6'2, 209 lbs Swedish winger has registered 17 points in a total 17 games to go along with 16 PIM. Although the Senators are another team that could desperately use a future top-six center in the pipeline, Landeskog is easily the most NHL-ready player in the class, and has the tools to be a premier complimentary power forward.

3. Colorado Avalanche- C/LW Sean Couturier (Drummondville, QMJHL)

What do you do when you trade away a big, skilled power forward in order to acquire a potential franchise defenceman? Well, if you're the lottery-bound Colorado Avalance, you just draft another one. Although Sean Couturier does not possess former Av Chris Stewart's intensity and level of physicality, few forwards of any size can match the Drummondville forward's vision and soft hands. Couturier is a long-shot to win the QMJHL scoring title once again despite netting 90+ points for the second consecutive season. However, after acquitting himself as a creative yet reliable two-way player at the World Juniors, the 6'4 center has likely done enough to secure a top-three spot in June.

4. Florida Panthers- C Ryan Nugent-Hopkins (Red Deer, WHL)

Although the Florida Panthers traded away several pieces on both offense and defense, one player was spared GM Dale Tallon's chopping block: 5'11, 195 lbs center Stephen Weiss.

March Mock

Written by Matt Bugg

Sunday, 13 March 2011 00:03 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 16:56

Florida's leading scorer for the third season in a row, Weiss' high-end skating ability and overall offensive package are attributes Tallon likes- just ask Patrick Kane. So who better to select at the 2011 Draft than a nearly identical player?

Although slightly shorter and a whole lot lighter right now, Red Deer pivot Ryan Nugent-Hopkins has a similar set of gifts can make him a premier player at the NHL level. That Tallon- who has done his best to add size on the wings while in Florida- has continued to role with Weiss and fellow average-sized centers Mike Santorelli and Marty Reasoner indicates he's comfortable with the prospect of building his top line around a smaller player. And if there's anything Hopkins- 4th in WHL scoring with 96 points- isn't short on, it's pure, unabridged talent.

5. New York Islanders- D Dougie Hamilton (Niagara, OHL)

Look out, Mark Streit. No, really, he should look out- maybe next time he'll see Matt Moulson coming. However, although the pairing of rookie Travis Hamonic and surprise break-out player Andrew MacDonald has managed to hold down the fort in Nassau, the Isles will nevertheless be a better team when Streit returns next year.

Speed and skill is a necessity on a blueline in the New NHL, and with an offense built around pure scorers like Moulson, John Tavares and Michael Grabner, getting them the puck should be the top priority. After all, if the Isles have the puck, the other team won't. However, equally as important is size. Milan Jurcina is New York's only regular defenceman who stands over 6'2, and having that reach and muscle will be important when competing with the likes of Evgeni Malkin and Alex Ovechkin in future playoffs.

That's why Dougie Hamilton should draw plenty of interest on the Island. Although a true two-way defenceman at heart, Niagara's 6'4 blueline cornerstone is perhaps the most underappreciated prospect with such a toolkit ever. After all, even Alex Pietrangelo and Erik Johnson were once tabbed with the franchise player label; Hamilton- who is closing in on 60 points- is better than either at the same age.

6. New Jersey Devils- D Ryan Murphy (Kitchener, OHL)

What does Ilya Kovalchuk think he's doing- playing with intensity or something? Although the point margins in the East are so razor-thin at this moment that the Devils have managed to climb into post-season contention with an historic run, the club has had to win every game lest they lose even a tiny bit of ground. Thus, while this could very be the last time we write about New Jersey as being in top-ten pick position, a poorly-timed major injury or two could just as

March Mock

Written by Matt Bugg

Sunday, 13 March 2011 00:03 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 16:56

easily send them back to the bingo balls.

Should the Devils hang around in the 6-8 range, Ryan Murphy is likely a player circled in pen. Kitchener's dynamic puck-mover has only recently dropped out of the OHL's top 20 scorers, and would be a boon to an NHL squad whose highest blueline scorer (Andy Greene) will be lucky to break 25 points by year's end.

7. Atlanta Thrashers- C Ryan Strome (Niagara, OHL)

Young talent has replaced the "old" guard throughout the roster, but are the Atlanta Thrashers better off for it? Over the past five years, the Thrashers under GM Don Waddell have traded away four consecutive former top ten picks, replacing them with younger, newer but never better talent. And now? Seemingly forever on the bubble, while Atlanta has embraced a lunch pail mentality that embraces size and heart over speed and skill, that very lack of a dynamic scorer has arguably cost them precious playoff revenue.

2010-11 has unfolded no differently. On pace to pick in the top again for a fourth consecutive season, Thrashers fans must hope this new wave has what it takes to replace by committee what Dany Heatley, Marian Hossa, Ilya Kovalchuk and Marc Savard all brought individually at one time or another.

Ryan Strome may very well be the next piece of the seemingly always-changing puzzle. Like Niagara teammate Dougie Hamilton, Strome's truly scary production has gone seemingly unnoticed by the hockey community as a whole. 100 points as a draft-eligible is rare- so rare that it's a virtual guarantee such players are picked in the top five.

8. Boston Bruins (from Toronto)- D Duncan Siemens (Saskatoon, WHL)

While Tyler Seguin has taken the slow, steady path to potential future NHL stardom, the fact that the Stanley Cup contending Boston Bruins have been blessed with two top ten picks by way of the Toronto Maple Leafs means they can afford to be a) slow b) greedy when it comes to how they develop the players they select. With that mind, it should be an almost virtual certainty that the Bruins will use Toronto's pick on a defenceman.

Which one it is remains to be seen, but should they end up in the 8th spot, Duncan Siemens is as good a bet as any to be on the board. An imposing 6'3 and 200 lbs, Siemens has set career highs in points (42) plus/minus (+40) and PIM (119) as the cornerstone of the Saskatoon Blades

blueline. While Siemens may never possess the two-way game of a Zdeno Chara, the hulking but nevertheless smooth-skating rearguard has the potential to be a top-three defender.

9. St. Louis Blues- C Jonathan Huberdeau (Saint John, QMJHL)

Although a shocking transaction overall, perhaps the most surprising thing about the Erik Johnson deal was that the St. Louis Blues did not use their greatest trade chip to fill their biggest hole: a bona fide first-line center. While power forward Chris Stewart and offensive defenceman Kevin Shattenkirk are valuable players, neither fit what was arguably the team's largest need. As such, the search will continue for a young player who has the potential to anchor a top line- and the ability to do it while the team is still in a window of cheap first and second contracts.

Saint John Sea Dogs pivot Jonathan Huberdeau is likely to be on head scout Bill Armstrong's list of candidates. A natural offensive player who has managed to maintain his torrid scoring pace despite a weak frame and even weaker skating, Huberdeau sits just one point away from the coveted century mark. While other scouts and other teams may be wary of the combination of a late bloomer with questionable but potentially fixable weaknesses, the Blues have invested a litany of picks on such players since 2005 and will eventually be rewarded in spades. Huberdeau has the talent and drive to be that player.

10. Columbus Blue Jackets- D Nathan Beaulieu (Saint John, QMJHL)

Although improvement is always good, the same results can sometimes be just as much of an accomplishment. For the Columbus Blue Jackets, that mantra couldn't ring more true. Four wins away from their 2009-10 season point total, Columbus nevertheless in much better position league-wide than this time last year when they finished fourth-last. While it may not be enough to save GM Scott Howson's job at year end, the Jackets can take satisfaction in the fact that they'll be waiting a little bit longer to pick in Minnesota.

Saint John's Nathan Beaulieu would be the perfect fit- especially since he, too, understands what the team is going through. One point off his year-end total of last season, Beaulieu has nevertheless jumped from being the Sea Dogs' second-best offensive weapon from the blueline to #1. Outpacing former first round pick Simon Despres by seven points- a lead that's widening every day- the 6'3 rearguard has blossomed into a true two-way dynamo. Having invested a number of picks in forwards the last several seasons, the Jackets should covet Beaulieu and

the multitude of gifts the lanky but cerebral defender would bring to a woeful defense.

11. Carolina Hurricanes- LW Matt Puempel (Peterborough, OHL)

First, it was skating. Now, the flaw standing between a natural scorer and a deserving draft position may very well be injury- and it may be the Carolina Hurricanes who once again benefit. Things seemed to be turning around for 6'0, 190 lbs winger Matt Puempel; initially scoring at a lesser pace than he did as an OHL rookie thanks to a poor supporting cast, Puempel had been in the midst of a run that had seen him record 40 points in a 30-game span. However, in late February, a chipped hip bone forced him into the operating room- and off the ice for the remainder of the year.

Like 2010 first round selection Jeff Skinner, Puempel's game is one of anticipation, delay and deceptive skating ability. Strong on his edges and capable of surviving- and initiating- collisions with bigger players, Puempel was beginning to flash the confidence that had been missing from his otherwise complete arsenal. Now, with his season done, he will need to hope that a team had seen enough of him prior to the injury.

Enter Carolina. Although relatively thin in numbers, the Hurricanes boast an impressive network of contacts across the league thanks to Peter Karmanos' ownership of the Plymouth Whalers. A balanced offensive threat who would mesh perfectly with Skinner, Puempel's best hope- and best home- could be in the Hurricanes organization.

12. New York Rangers- RW Ty Rattie (Portland, WHL)

While most clubs need first-round picks to guarantee success at the draft table, the New York Rangers seem to have somewhat answered questions concerning the center ice position for quite some time in the form of three second round selections. Brandon Dubinsky (60th, 2004) was already a known quantity on Broadway, but it's been Artem Anisimov (54th, 2006) and American phenom Derek Stepan (51st, 2008) who have helped turn a former weakness into an organizational strength.

So what's next for New York? Strong both down the middle and on defense, look for the Rags to seek out a quality winger prospect in Minneapolis. Ty Rattie could very well be that player. Although raw yet in his ability to play an all-around game, the Portland star's knack for scoring goals from anywhere will be a highly coveted asset with the emergence of Jeff Skinner. If Rattie

drops outside of the top ten, it could be a steal on a similar level.

13. Buffalo Sabres- LW Brandon Saad (Saginaw, OHL)

Brandon Saad has chosen the right time to heat up- and the Buffalo Sabres the right to cool down. In the midst of a four-game point streak that has seen him collected five points, Saad- a notoriously streaky player since joining Saginaw from the NTDP- is still nowhere near the monster eleven-game run (9-5-14) he enjoyed in November, but he'll likely take it. The speedy 6'2 winger is now three goals and three assists away from the 30-30-60 mark, an impressive season regardless of how it was achieved.

For the Sabres- who, by the by, could use a 6'2 scorer or two- the past few games have not been as encouraging. Unable to overcome both a depleted Pittsburgh Penguins squad and the wholly bad Toronto Maple Leafs in two of their last three games, the Sabres are at risk of entering the kind of late-season cold snap that kills playoff hopes. Should the team fail to reign in a defence that has averaged 3 GA a game since March 1st, a third year out of four starting spring on the golf course is a good possibility.

14. Minnesota Wild- LW Sven Bartschi (Portland, WHL)

The Minnesota Wild have continued to stick to the style of play that got them in their current rut, but one can't blame the front office for at least trying to inject some high-end skill into the lineup. Although Brent Burns has returned to form and both Martin Havlat and Mikko Koivu have been reliable producers when healthy, it's been players like Matt Cullen and Andrew Brunette that have made the difference most nights while acquisitions like Cam Barker and Patrick O'Sullivan have been duds.

So what's a consistent bubble franchise to do? Simple. Try to address team needs while also sticking as close to team philosophy as possible. Sven Bartschi may be that player. Although a gifted puckhandler and high-end skater who can back off defenses in a variety of ways, it's Bartschi hustle and willingness to play a gritty style of game that could endear him to the Minnesota scouting staff.

15. Ottawa Senators (from Nashville)- C Mika Zibanejad (Djurgarden, Elitserien)

Willing to move assets at the deadline for the first time since acquiring Peter Forsberg at the tail end of the 2006-07 season, the Nashville Predators eschewed flashy skill for a two-way center in the form of Mike Fisher. Although “Carrie Underwood’s husband” has just one goal since joining the Preds, the team values him for more what he can provide in the playoffs- veteran leadership, strong two-way play and timely offence.

Meanwhile, following their active deadline period, the Ottawa Senators now face the opposite problem- a lack of center depth. Combined with their high interest in Sweden, don’t be surprised to see the Sens take Mika Zibanejad should Nashville’s pick remain squarely in the middle of the first round- even if more dazzling options are still available. At 6’2, the Iranian-Swedish center has the size and compete level to be a versatile NHLer, and the deft hands and hockey IQ to play on either the first or second line. Sound like anyone Ottawa just traded away?