It's one of the tightest divsions in hockey year in and year out. Not only is this true on the ice, but the same can be said for the pipelines that fuel the Vancouver Canucks, Calgary Flames, Edmonton Oilers and Colorado Avalanche. Who is the division champ when it comes to prospects?

The Contenders

Vancouver Canucks (1st Northwest)

Currently atop the Northwest in points even without all-world goalie Roberto Luongo, the Canucks have continually found good talent through sharp trades- acquiring Todd Bertuzzi and Markus Naslund for nothing, then trading a washed-up Bert for Luongo, etc. But strong scouting has also kept the team competitive, especially in Sweden. Daniel and Henrik Sedin and Matthias Ohlund have been big pieces for the Canucks over the past several years. More recently, Alex Edler has quietly supplanted himself as one of the best young defenders in the

league.

Minnesota Wild (2nd Northwest)

While Minnesota has proved to be almost faultless in the first round- Marian Gaborik, Mikko Koivu, Pierre-Marc Bouchard, and Brent Burns were taken in consecutive drafts- it's been the Wild's failure to find gems outside of the top thirty that has kept them from reaching the next level. A big part of this has been due to their track record of taking defense-first players that they fell will fit into their system.

Calgary Flames (3rd Northwest)

Like Vancouver, Calgary has made their biggest impact through shrewd deals. Miikka Kiprusoff, Robyn Regehr and Jarome Iginla joined the team this way. However, Dion Phaneuf and Matt Lombardi are two success stories that have emerged from good drafting. Once derided for their continual draft duds thanks to a philosophy of taking low-risk players, the Flames have begun to branch out. The result has been a well-stocked pipeline for a team that once had very little.

Edmonton Oilers (4th Northwest)

While it's not quite the Barry Fraser era in Oiltown, the Edmonton Oilers have been up-and-down at the draft table. Ales Hemsky was followed up Jesse Niinimaki, Marc Pouliot, Devan Dubnyk and Rob Schremp. Things have been improved in the last few years, with Andrew Cogliano, Sam Gagner and Jordan Eberle demonstrating more promise than any of the above taken after 'Hemmer'. However, Edmonton has made their bread and butter through solid second-day selections. Jussi Markkanen, Jarret Stoll and Matt Greene all joined the team this way in the early part of the decade, while Taylor Chorney, Jeff Petry and Theo Peckham all being taken in 2005 and 2006.

Up Front

RW Jordan Eberle **3.6**
RW Riley Nash **3.4**
RW Rob Schremp **3.4**
LW Linus Omark **3.4**
LW Philippe Cornet **3.2**
RW Chris Vande Velde **3.0**
LW Slava Trukhno **3.0**

vs.

RW Greg Nemisz **3.4**

C Mitch Wahl **3.4**
C Mikael Backlund **3.4**
C John Armstrong **3.2**
LW Juuso Puustinen **3.2**
C Dan Ryder **3.2**
C Lance Bouma **3.0**

vs.

C Cody Hodgson **4.0**
C Prab Rai **3.4**
RW Michael Grabner **3.4**
RW Sergei Shirokov **3.2**
RW Dan Gendur **3.2**
RW Juraj Simek **3.0**

vs.

Cody Almond **3.2**
Ondrej Fiala **3.0**
Carson McMillan **3.0**
Morten Madsen **2.8**
Matt Kassian **2.8**

vs.

Kelsey Tessier **3.4**
T.J. Galiardi **3.4**
Paul Carey **3.4**
Chris Stewart **3.2**
Ryan Stoa **3.2**

Commentary: All but Minnesota have three prospects in the second tier of players, a sign of good drafting. Vancouver leads the pack with the single highest-rated prospect in Cody Hodgson, who is currently demolishing the OHL. Calgary and Edmonton, however, co-lead the pack in number of forward prospects who meet the 3.0 grade minumum.

Weighted Averages

Minnesota: **2.92**
Colorado: **3.32**
Calgary: **3.35**
Vancouver: **3.47**
Edmonton: **3.49**

Commentary: Edmonton scrapes out the lead; good depth (seven forwards) plus three

prospects with at least a 3.4 grade help buoy them over Vancouver, who keep it close thanks to Hodgson's NHL-quality grade. Calgary and Colorado are not far behind, and Minnesota trails by a good distance; they don't even have four prospects with a 3.0 grade or higher.

On Defense

Kevin Shattenkirk 3 3 3 4 4 = 3.6
Colby Cohen 3 4 3 3 4 = 3.6
Nigel Williams 3.4
Kevin Montgomery 3.2
Cameron Gaunce 3 4 3 3 = 3.25
Ray Macias = 3.0

vs.

Tyler Cuma 3 3 3 4 = 3.4
Marco Scandella 3 2 3 3 = 3.25
Justin Falk 4 2 3 3 4 = 3.0

vs.

Yann Sauve 3 4 3 3 = 3.25
Taylor Ellington 3 3 3 3 4 = 3.2
Daniel Rahimi 4 2 3 3 2 = 2.8

vs.

John Negrin 3 3 3 4 4 = 3.4
T.J Brodie 3 4 3 3 = 3.25
Keith Aulie 3 3 3 3 4 = 3.2
Matt Pelech 4 2 3 4 2 = 3.0

vs.

Jeff Petry 3 4 4 4 3 = 3.6
Theo Peckham 4, 4, 3, 4, 3 = 3.4
Taylor Chorney 4, 3, 3, 4, 2 = 3.4

Commentary: The Colorado Avalanche are easy to pick out here. Colby Cohen has been the most statistically impressive of the group; his 12 points in 12 games for Boston University leads all Hockey East defenders in scoring, and he sits fourth in the entire conference in assists.

Second in HE defenseman scoring belongs to fellow Avs prospect Kevin Shattenkirk. While Cohen is known for his tremendous skating ability and rushing style of play, Shattenkirk boasts a more well-rounded- yet still potent- game. Coming in behind them is Nigel Williams, who has endured a tough transition to the AHL with just two points. Cameron Gaunce- Colorado's first pick in 2008- has immediately cashed in on the potential that made him a hot topic on the draft floor.

No other team comes close to challenging for number, although quality persists elsewhere; the Wild have a future do-it-all D in Tyler Cuma and U18 standout Marco Scandella. Yann Sauve has seen his pre-draft worries fade with a strong NHL camp and an even better QMJHL season, where he's been perhaps the best defender in the league. T.J. Brodie is a candidate for breakout player of the year in the entire CHL; his 22 points in 19 games and Scott Niedermayer-esque skating ability being big reasons. Last but not least, Edmonton boasts a strong trio in Petry, Peckham and Chorney. Petry is the only one of the three with top-pairing upside, as he owns both mouth-watering size, skating ability, skill and now meanness. Theo Peckham could be a poor man's Sheldon Souray (12-15 goals, 100 PIM) and Taylor Chorney is an understated although quality two-way defender who could pot 40 points during his career.

Weighted Averages

Colorado: **3.64**
Edmonton: **3.5**
Calgary: **3.31**
Minnesota: **3.22**
Vancouver: **3.08**

And the winner is: As one might expect, the Avs take this category easily. Depth and great top-end talent should make them the first choice on any keeper pool GM's draft list. Coming in close behind are the Oilers, whose second-day picks should be taken in that range in a draft. Calgary has an interesting mix that puts them in the middle; Negrin and Brodie are offensive types, while Aulie- a 6'6 tower of power- and Pelech promise many PIMs. Finally, Vancouver has an interesting project in Sauve, but little else behind him.

In Goal

Devan Dubnyk **3.4**
Jeff Deslauriers **3.4**
Andrew Perugini **3.0**

vs.

Leland Irving **3.4**
Matt Keetley **3.2**

vs.

Cory Schneider **4.0**
Morgan Clark **3.0**

vs.

Niko Hovinen **2.8**

vs.

Trevor Cann **3.6**
Billy Sauer **3.2**
Peter Delmas **3.0**

Commentary: In a division boasting some of the league's best goalies, almost every Northwest team has a goalie worth pondering in your keeper league. The biggest exception is Minnesota; with Nik Backstrom and Josh Harding already too many goalies, the Wild have only drafted two in the last four years- and one of them isn't even playing hockey anymore! That leaves far-off Niko Hovinen. At 6'6, he's one of the biggest goalies anywhere, but his development will be a long and difficult one. Vancouver once again leads the back with the single-best prospect, with Colorado coming in second thanks to OHL star Trevor Cann- a future WJC starter. In Calgary, Leland Irving has failed to bring his tremendous WHL play and numbers to the AHL ranks, but 2005 pick Matt Keetley has stepped up. Besides being lights-out in a pre-season rookie tournament, Keetley has been Quad Cities' best keeper.

Weighted Averages

Minnesota: **2.8**
Calgary: **3.3**
Edmonton: **3.36**
Colorado: **3.36**
Vancouver: **3.5**

And the winner is: Vancouver. Schneider really shouldn't be here- he's a regular backup cum apprentice starter on any other team- but he's easily one of the best goalie prospects in hockey. Colorado and Edmonton tie; Billy Sauer is a bit of a mental softie, but his talent is undeniable, while Peter Delmas is a long-term project who also boasts starter-quality skills. Edmonton's towers of power, 6'4 Jeff Deslauriers, and 6'6 Devan Dubnyk, have resurrected what looked to be fading careers, and free agent signee Andrew Perugini has been stellar in the ECHL with a 0.925 Sv%.

The Whole Shebang

Forward:

Edmonton- 3.49

Vancouver- 3.47
Calgary- 3.35
Colorado- 3.32
Minnesota- 2.92

Defense:

Colorado- 3.64
Edmonton- 3.5
Calgary- 3.31
Minnesota- 3.22
Vancouver- 3.08

Goal:

Vancouver- 3.5
Colorado- 3.36
Edmonton- 3.36
Calgary- 3.3
Minnesota- 2.8

Average of F/D/G

Minnesota- **2.98**
Calgary- **3.32**
Vancouver- **3.35**
Colorado- **3.44**
Edmonton- **3.45**

And the winner is: In the closest race yet, the Edmonton Oilers edge out Colorado; in reality, it doesn't make a lot of difference. Both teams offer the best in the Northwest, Colorado's strength being G and D and Edmonton's forward. Vancouver has the two best single talents in Cody Hodgson and Cory Schneider, and neither will remain prospects for much longer. Behind them, Calgary has nothing to be worried about. They're a long way from the days of Kris Chucko and Eric Nystrom. Minnesota comes in last despite good recent drafting. They're hurt in these rankings by having three consecutive first rounders- Benoit Pouliot, James Sheppard and Colton Gillies- graduate so fast.