

## Stretch-Drive Sizzlers and Sinkers

Written by Matt Bugg

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Statistically speaking, the second half of the hockey season at every level represents a changing of the guard. As the stakes rise, hot prospects falter, faltering prospects become hot and the immediate fortunes of several future NHLers fluctuate wildly. Here then are a few names to watch- and scratch off- as the 2006/07 campaign heats up.

### AHL

#### Headed for the Show...

Martin St. Pierre: Forgive the hockey gods if they felt 5'9 Martin St. Pierre was acting ungrateful.



Within a single off-season, all the clutching and grabbing that had held back the diminutive pivot from pro success was eliminated. And as a thank-you, the 23 year-old Chicago Blackhawks prospect tallied a slim 9 points in 7 games during the month of October. However, a second gift- that of several injuries to the big club that forced call-ups and thus more ice-time for the centre- wasn't taken for granted. St. Pierre exploded for 23 points in November, and has yet to score under 1.6 PPG each month since. Second in both points and assists in the American League, the Guelph Storm single-season assist record holder sits at the top of the Chicago call-up order.

Kris Versteeg: The perfect foil to Martin St. Pierre, Kris Versteeg was expected to be little more than a top-notch grinder and leader. A surprising start to the year that saw the 5'10, 179 lbs energy forward score 30 points in his first 29 game of the year was blown away by a 17-point January. With 22 goals and 27 assists

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through 49 games, Versteeg has shown that hard work can pay dividends- both on the boards and around the net. With the Bs braintrust gutting the roster of underperforming scorers, Versteeg's mix of leadership and lethal hands will earn him a call up within the next week.

Headed for a Milk Carton...

Benoit Pouliot: It was put up or shut up time for the fourth overall pick in 2005. Fresh off a verbal lashing courtesy of Wild head coach Jacques Lemaire following a mediocre camp, the enigmatic forward entered this season with bust status looming over his head. The 6'3 project quickly put his detractors in their place, posting 16 points in his first 16 games for the Baby Wild. However, in an unfortunate set of circumstances, Pouliot discovered the season isn't just two months long. A 10-point November was followed up by a 2-point December. The Alfred, Ontario native has added but 8 points since and has little to no hope of reaching the NHL this season.

Vojtech Polak: The 21 year-old Stars property may not look anything like Brad Pitt, but he's a regular Legend of the Fall. After a scorching October/November that saw the pre-season standout collect 14 points in 18 games, Polak has notched just four in his last ten contests. The Czech native has also been a plus player only twice in January. Criticized for his lack of size and muscle, Polak's hot start had some fooled into thinking the New NHL made those complaints obsolete. However, the effects of a 70-game season have clearly begun to take their toll. This phenomenon isn't new- Vojtech struggled in the second half of the 2005/06 regular season, notching six points in 23 games from January 1st to February 28th.

CHL

Headed for the Show...

John Tavares: He's not eligible until 2009, but 16 year-old Oshawa Generals forward John Tavares has emerged as the premier player in the CHL. Already an exceptional producer through October and November with 40 points in 21 contests, the Oakville, Ontario native burst to the front of the OHL scoring race with 22 goals and 17 goals and in January. The young phenom sits tied for first in points (100) and leads the league in scores (53).

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**Steven Stamkos:** Another non-eligible, at least for this year, 17 year-old Steve Stamkos sat somewhere in 40th place in the OHL scoring race through most of the fall. With a strong pre-draft year essential to securing a high selection in the 2008 Entry Draft, the 6'0, 170 lbs centreman shook off his rookie nerves to post a stellar 27 points in 13 January games. Now the forerunner for '08 thanks to his late production and emerging clutch scoring ability, the undersized centre can look forward to a less pressure-filled 2008/09 campaign.

Header for a Milk Carton...

**Colton Gillies:** Safe. Dependable. Low-risk. All that is well and good when it comes to drafting a prospect. But it's never going to help you win a pool. That's way 2007-eligible Colton Gillies has become or should have become a non-option for your keeper league team. While the 18 year-old centreman has shown an aptitude for attitude and grinding it out, 23 points in 44 games for the WHL's Saskatoon Blades does not bode well for a high-scoring NHL career. Through one game in February, Gillies has tallied one goal- exactly half as many as he scored in all of January.

**Brett Sonne:** Want proof that junior scoring accolades aren't the be-all and end-all? Look no further than '07 eligible forward Brett Sonne. As a BCHLer last season, the then-16 year-old outscored most all his peers, including none other than projected top-ten pick Kyle Turris. A year later and the tables couldn't be any more further turned. Turris has an outstanding 50 goals through 38 BCHL games; Sonne, 13- in 52 games. While the argument can be made that the transition from Junior A to the CHL is a tough go for any player, one has to think Turris would have accumulated more than 3 goals in 13 games during the month of January.