

Super Sophs

Written by Eric Maltais

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It's not easy to make it in the NHL, it's a big step up from junior hockey and the American Hockey League. So it's not unusual for players to struggle as rookies and then take a big step up during their second season once they know what to expect and have made the necessary adjustments to their play and approach to the game. Here are nine sophomore players who seem to have adjusted very well to the NHL since they are off to very nice starts this season.

Devon Setoguchi – Setoguchi could end up as the top undrafted player in most fantasy leagues by the end of the season. He was forgotten in many drafts after posting very average

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rookie numbers last season. However, he should have been a highly sought after commodity when considering he scored 11 goals in only 44 games in his first professional season and the fact that he was the 8th overall pick in 2005. He has settled nicely on a line with Joe Thornton and Patrick Marleau and while the Sharks were one of the teams to play around the most with their lines the past few years, there's a new coach in San Jose who could bring much more stability. Setoguchi played over 17 minutes in Tuesday's game and with that kind of playing time and the quality of his linemates it won't be a surprise if he scores 30 goals and 60 points this season.

Sergei Kostitsyn – The better Kostitsyn hasn't been the one we expected in the early part of the season as Sergei has outperformed older brother Andrei with five points in the first three games. Like Setoguchi, Sergei played fewer than 25 games in the AHL in his first professional season following a 131-point performance during his final season in junior hockey. Unlike Setoguchi however, he doesn't play on the top line and Robert Lang is definitely no Joe Thornton. So while his production will definitely drop off, he could realistically reach 60 points this season and his upside for the future is tremendous.

Aaron Voros – Voros currently leads all NHL scorers with seven points in his first five games and has become the hottest free-agent pickup in the early season. Of course I don't need to tell you that this won't last, but don't discount his fantasy value in leagues that take penalty minutes into account since Voros should rack up over 200 minutes while ending up with 12 to 15 goals.

Bryan Little – Little struggled a little as a rookie last season scoring a mere 6 goals and 16 points in 48 games. The 12th overall pick in 2006, Little was coming off two straight 40-goal and 100-point season in junior hockey. This season, he has become the number one center in Atlanta and that means centering one of the best players in the game in Ilya Kovalchuk. With five points in his first three games, this could be a huge breakout season much like we saw from Eric Staal as a sophomore.

Brandon Dubinsky – Dubinsky had a quiet but productive season as a rookie scoring 40 points while suiting up for each of the regular season's 82 games. He currently is the NHL's co point leader with linemate Voros and should have no trouble reaching 20 goals. With Nikolai Zherdev at his side his upside could be as high as 60 points although you should expect some deep slumps at times from these guys.

David Perron – Perron spent the entire 2007-08 season in the NHL after making the jump in his draft year, but it took a while before he received regular playing time. Still, he ended the season with 13 goals in 62 games. This season Perron is a regular playing alongside Paul Kariya and talented rookie Patrick Berglund so he'll have ample opportunity to reach 20 goals and 50 points.

Tyler Kennedy – Kennedy got off to a hot start scoring twice in the season opener and added an assist during his last game to give him three points in four games earning him a look see in many fantasy leagues. However, with Petr Sykora back Kennedy was relegated to the third line with Ruslan Fedotenko and Maxime Talbot. While he's not worth your time right now he's worth keeping an eye on since he could be back among the top six with an injury. As a top six guy

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he'd have the potential to score 20 goals.

David Krejci – I was extremely impressed with Krejci in last year's playoffs when he scored five points in seven games during the series with Montreal. With Patrice Bergeron's return he's struck as the third center in Boston, but with trade rumors surrounding Marc Savard, Krejci could get a promotion soon and if that happens he has the ability to score 60 points.

Carey Price – Price's performance in the first couple of games isn't surprising, we all know the guy has a huge upside and very bright future ahead of him. But what really has caught my attention is the way he has handled himself during those couple of games. He looks extremely confident and has handled hard shots with such ease that he seems cocky in doing it sometimes. If Price didn't have such a solid backup in Jaroslav Halak and the Habs weren't worried about overworking him, I'd peg him as a Vezina trophy finalist this season. And while it might not happen this year, there are a few Vezinas to come in the next decade for Price.

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