This week I am going to look into the players that had the strongest finishes to the 2008-09 season, putting the most emphasis on guys who showed the most improvement in the final 20 games of last season.

PLAYER

TEAM

PPG (Oct - Feb)

PPG (Mar-Apr)

Alex Ponikarovsky

Toronto

.6

1.46

Sam Gagner

Edmonton

.39

1.13

Loui Eriksson

Dallas

.71

1.00

Ryan Kesler

Vancouver

.64

1.06

Alex Burrows

Vancouver

.54

1.00

Steve Stamkos

Tampa Bay

.48

1.00

David Booth

Florida

.73

1.10

Mikhail Grabovski

Toronto

.52

.89

Tobias Enstrom

Atlanta

.24

.89

David Backes

St Louis

.55

1.00

Matthew Lombardi

Phoenix

.57

.90

Ryan Shannon

Ottawa

.43

.67

Kyle Okposo

Islanders

.47

1.00

T.J. Oshie

St Louis

.57

.87

While the reasons for these improvements are different for each player, from increased ice time to being traded, the upswing in the point production cannot be ignored. Success in fantasy hockey is rarely realized with the first picks of a draft, but rather with what you do with your later round picks, and in turn, the unexpected production that these later picks provide. By studying a player's trends (or splits) throughout a full season, you can begin to predict future success. It must also be pointed out that some of these spikes will actually turn out to be fluke or well timed "hot streaks" and will not prove to be a telling sign of future production. Keep an eye on these players throughout training camp, including following their power-play time and line combinations, and you will develop a good feel for who has the best chance to continue to produce into the 2009-10 season.

A few things to consider for the upcoming fantasy season in regards to the Olympic year:

1) The Olympics have long been a touchy subject with the NHL, and the impact they have on fantasy production should not be ignored. However, with the games being held in North America this time, the overall negative fallout on the players involved should be minimal. Had the games been held on another continent, I may have been more than a little wary of fatigue factor, and

considering that most of the players involved are fantasy worthy, it may have led me to put a little more value on the second tier players. Basically, this whole paragraph was pointless ... we will visit this subject again in four years.

2) I would also keep an eye on the players that are cut from their respective Olympic squads. There is going to be some sort of reaction to being left off the National team and while some guys may use it as motivation and produce a career year, I guarantee some of the weaker (mentally) players will have a poor second half off due to the disappointment. I will follow this up with an article as the cuts are made.

3) I predict we will see some sort of effect on the players of Team Canada this season. The incredible pressure that will be on these guys from about January on thru the games will be immense and I believe that this could negatively impact their production, especially of some of the younger players. I'm not saying to avoid Mike Richards or Ryan Getzlaf come draft time, but I would definitely listen to trade offers come Christmas, and be more than willing to part ways at that time.

My next column will contain less stats ... all that figuring out stuff makes my brain hurt

As always, sugar-coat my donuts baby, but not my fantasy hockey news

Burnsy out