Anyone want to hazard a guess who was the number one Yahoo skater over the past month?

Ryan Getzlaf certainly has experienced a nice turnaround in November, and Phil Kessel has made his arrival in Leaf Nation known, but the number one ranked skater for the past 30 days was Mikko Koivu. He is now ranked 18th overall, and is the 9th best centre this season.

That's not bad for a guy who was given an O-rank of 111 this year, and who, in one out of every four Yahoo leagues, still sits on waivers.

Koivu's Numbers

The 25-year-old Fin was selected by the Minnesota Wild 6th overall in 2001, and has played with the big club since the end of the lockout in 2005.

More recently, Koivu-the-Younger earned a Yahoo rank of 153rd in 2007-08, then improved to 45th last year, but only earned an O-rank of 111 coming into this season. That's pretty much a death sentence for a centre in fantasy hockey. With so many quality centres out there, the best Koivu could have hoped for, based on that O-rank alone, was to be stashed on fantasy team benches. Maybe you were smarter/luckier to know better, but I think even the savviest experts didn't expect Koivu in the top-50.

The table below shows some of Koivu's key numbers during his career in the NHL. Statistics for the 2009/10 campaign include actual numbers as of December 8th, as well as forecasted numbers for the end of the season based on his current pace (these are indicated with an asterisk).

GP

Goals

Points

Shots on Goal

PIM

2005-06

64

6

21

96

40

2006-07

82

20

54

162

58

2007-08

57

1 1

42

144

42

2008-09

79

20

67

236

66

2009-10

29 / 79*

9 / 24.52*

30 / 81.79*

100 / 272.41*

16 / 43.59

Koivu's still getting better. And at his current pace, he will top 80 points this year for the first time, and as a bonus he'll finish up with 270-plus shots.

Writing over a month ago, CBC columnist John F. Molinaro, may have accurately predicted Koivu's season. In that article, *The Quiet Leader* , Molinaro wrote , "Mikko Koivu is flying under the radar, and that's just the way he likes it…[but] the critics all agree — Koivu is having a breakout season."

Whether Molinaro's sourced critics prove to be correct may ultimately hinge on Koivu's health. While not a player in the same category of injury risk as teammate, Martin Havlat, Koivu has repeatedly had issues with his knee. In 2005-06 he missed 15 games, and then missed 24 games in 2007-08 due to knee injuries. And no, Koivu owners needn't worry about Alexander Ovechkin…the Wild don't play the Capitals again until next season at the earliest. Ouch.

The Tao of Mikko

Koivu's performance this year is a good reminder of a basic but important fantasy hockey strategy – *use your bench.*

Normally, for a player to be a useful fantasy asset he must be great; someone who is merely good just isn't good enough. And at no position is that harsh reality truer than at centre. But don't let this blind you to the ebb and flow of the season. Your bench players don't sit behind glass marked, "break in case of injury".

Hindsight is 20/20 as they say, but it's interesting to note that while Koivu has been tearing it up over the past 30 days, Anze Kopitar has cooled and was ranked at an unimpressive 141st over the past month. Few would suggest trading the two, but an astute GM may have noticed that Koivu was suddenly on fire and put him in for a few games while waiting for Kopitar to come around.

Fantasy hockey is total war, and that means you have to involve all of your resources to have a hope of winning. Sitting back because you've been smart enough (or lucky enough) to draft some leading talent often isn't good enough to take a league championship. It pays to think of your bench as your farm team, a game within a game. Good GMs understand the value of building a quality bench.

But merely collecting quality assets wisely isn't enough. You have to muster the courage to use them. Often this is easier said than done because never will we have perfect information, and no one wants to be the guy with Kopitar on the bench when everyone's favourite Slovenian registers a five point night. However, having the courage to go with the hot player from our bench is perhaps something we should all strive to do more often.

If You Remember Nothing Else, Remember This

1. Mikko Koivu is already a very useful 3rd line fantasy centre and is getting better…he likely

won't be O-ranked 111th next year; and

2. Aggressively manage your bench, run it like your personal farm team, and then have the courage to use it.

Echoing Molinaro's sentiments, DobberHockey columnist Ryan Ma recently nicknamed Koivu the "silent assassin". Very apt. Players like Koivu can sneak up on you, and become decisive in your pool before you notice them.

And they can also dance back out of fantasy relevance just as quickly if you fall asleep at the wheel or let your expectations get the better of you.

As they sometimes say about life in Finland, *"helposti saatu on helposti menetetty"*.

Easy come, easy go.