Many would consider the New Jersey Devils a contender going into the NHL post-season, and the rental addition of super-sniper, Ilya Kovulchuk, was a clear sign that Lou Lamoriello and crew felt the same. But with 14 games remaining the Devils seem to have taken a step backwards of late. Did the Devils peak too early, and is the new kid in town the problem?

Something Wicked This Way Comes

The Devils brought Hall-of-Famer Jacques Lemaire back as head coach this season after Brent Sutter allegedly developed a severe case of homesickness. Some thought that this might erode their offense, but stars like Parise continued to produce , and by the beginning of February the Devils certainly looked dominant. On February 3rd, Allan Muir of SI.com even ranked them as the number one team in the NHL, despite the fact that four other teams owned better records. He argued, "they're simply playing better than any team after eight straight wins and an 11-3 mark in January."

2009-10

GP

Points Earned

Point%

GF

GA

GF-GA

Pre-5 Feb

55

72

0.655

2.55

2.24

0.21

The addition of an impact player like Kovalchuk looked to many as the proverbial icing on the (devil food?) cake. Yet, since Kovalchuk played his first game on February 5th, the Devils' record has been less than delectable, and they've slipped considerably in the standings.

2009-10

GP

Points Earned

Point%

GF

GA

GF-GA

Post-5 Feb

13 (with 14 remaining)

13

0.500

3.08

3.25

-0.17

If you're an optimist, you'll appreciate that the Devils have won three of their past four, but overall, the Kovalchuk-era in Jersey hasn't been good so far. Not only has their point percentage fallen significantly, but their healthy Goals For/Goals Against ratio has inverted.

Is Kovalchuk to Blame?

Interestingly, the recent Devils' teams have been unable to translate regular season success into playoff performance. They've easily made the post-season in each of the past three campaigns, but have won only one series in that time, defeating the seventh-seeded Tampa Bay Lightning way back in the spring of 2007.

Backing up the bus for a moment, let's take a look at the Jersey Boys' last two months of the season over the past few years (broken down around the same date that Kovalchuk arrived this year for sake of comparison).

New Jersey	**Devils**

GP

Points

Point%

GF

GA

GF-GA

2008-09

Pre-

5 Feb

51

67

0.644

3.04

2.51

0.53

Post-

5 Feb

31

39

0.629

2.68

2.55

0.13

2007-08

Pre-

5 Feb

53

63

0.594

2.53

2.40

0.13

Post-

5 Feb

29

36

0.621

2.21

2.28

-0.07

2006-07

Pre-

5 Feb

53

70

0.660

2.60

2.28

0.32

Post-

5 Feb

29

37

0.638

2.34

2.48

-0.14

In each year, the Devils have either let their point percentage, their GF/GA ratio, or both slip in the final two months of the season. These are hardly numbers that would have intimidated their playoff competition.

For whatever reason, the recent Devils' teams do not enter the post-season at their best.

So let's compare Kovalchuk's final two months of play against the rest of his season over the past few years (again February 5th was used as a dividing point for consistency).

Ilya Kovalchuk

GP

Points

Point Pace

Plus/Minus

2009-10

Pre-

5 Feb

49

58

1.18

+1

Post-

5 Feb

13

12

0.92

+2

2008-09

Pre-

5 Feb

55

50

0.91

-15

Post-

5 Feb

27

41

1.52

+3

2007-08

Pre-

5 Feb

55

64

1.16

-15

Post-

5 Feb

27

23

0.85

+3

2006-07

Pre-

5 Feb

55

56

1.02

-2

Post-

5 Feb

27

20

0.74

0

While Kovalchuk's scoring has dipped slightly after his trade to the Devils, he's hardly in a slump. And looking back, it turns out that Kovie is a pretty decent player in the final two months of the season, particularly when it comes to defensive play – he has put up some fantastic plus/minus in those late months.

There are too many variables (like dressing room chemistry, etc.) that can't be measured to rule absolutely, but is certainly doesn't look like the current Jersey woes are Kovalchuk's fault. Instead, there may be something else at work in New Jersey.

There is some truth to the theory that strong teams don't always do as well down the final stretch; the resting of star players and a slight reduction in motivation are often cited as reasons. Unfortunately, it would take a Nicholas Chabotian-sized statistical effort to determine the exact significance of the Devil's numbers through comparison against the rest of the league, but it would be interesting. But what isn't debatable is the fact that the recent iterations of the Devils tend to play soft in the final two months of the season, and ultimately they haven't done well in the playoffs. It might be happening all over again.

This is a disturbing trend for the Devils' fans and perhaps a warning for those poolies who are thinking of selecting their players in playoff pools.

Watch the results of the remaining 14 games closely – maybe the Devils will turn it around – but if not, be wary in your pools.

In Two Week's Time in Lemon Aid…

What you absolutely, positively must do with your fantasy team before the regular fantasy season shuts down.