After spending a year in the Kontinental Hockey League, Jiri Hudler is returning to the Detroit Red Wings' dressing room for the 2010-11 season. In the summer of 2009, Hudler took the Wings to salary arbitration and was awarded $5.75 million over two years, but the (now defunct) Moscow Dynamo organization dangled a $10 million offer over the same period and the 26-year-old Czech took the money and ran. But Hudler is now doubling back to the NHL…so what does this mean to you?

Hudler's Numbers

Hudler did some great things for the Red Wings prior to departing for Moscow.

In particular, he had a talent for efficiently racking up points despite his relatively limited ice-time and this year's Wings would certainly benefit from increased secondary scoring. Wings' head coach, Mike Babcock, has already stated that he expects 70 points from the small, but skilled winger in 2010-11.

Will there be any hard feelings over Hudler's Russian flirtation? Since announcing the winger's return, Red Wings' general manager, Ken Holland, remarked that the Czech is "a popular guy in the locker room, a bit of a clubhouse clown. His teammates like him." Potting a Stanley Cup final game-winning goal for an organization probably goes a long way in the dressing room too.

Despite the snub on Rotowire's 2010's player rankings (ie. he doesn't appear…anywhere), Hudler's finest is yet to come and the Wings will be a better team for having him back. Poetically, his last name even translates to 'dry kindling tossed upon smoldering logs'. Eerie, huh?

Okay, I may have been kidding about his name, but here's a rundown of Hudler's recent scoring numbers.

	GP	Goals	Points
2006-07	(Red Wings)		
	76	15	25
2007-08	(Red Wings)		
	81	13	

42

2008-09 (Red Wings)

82

23

57

2009-10 (Moscow Dynamo)

54

19

54

While Babcock's 70 points might be a stretch (Dobber has him at 67 in the Fantasy Guide), clearly Hudler's scoring is moving in the right direction. But how will his season in the KHL affect his development?

Even casual fans know that the KHL, while a nice collection of hockey talent, isn't the NHL. As far as the skill level goes, the fledgling Russian league has been compared to the AHL by more than one seasoned hockey observer. So all things being equal, we should expect to see a jump in a proven NHLer's stats if he moves to the KHL.

But nothing is so simple as that. While the NHL clearly ices the best hockey players, every hockey league has its own distinct characteristics (and I'm not just talking about having to sleep in army-style barracks the night before a game). Some of these characteristics can be meaningfully measured.

For example, is the KHL a higher or lower scoring league than the NHL? By this I mean are there more or fewer goals scored in the average KHL game compared to an NHL tilt? I think this is an important question to ask if we're looking to predict the abilities of a player, like Hudler, who is moving between leagues.

Consider the NHL back in the firewagon hockey days of the 1980s. There was a lot more

scoring going on in that era (with about eight goals scored per game), than there is in today's NHL (with the red lamp lit fewer than six times per game).

With all due respect to the luminaries of the period, this change in scoring prevalence is partly why certain scoring records (like Wayne Grezkzy's 92 goals in the 1981-82 season) have been touted as currently unassailable.

But let's get back to the KHL. It turns out that the KHL has been a lower scoring league than the NHL. For the last two seasons, fewer goals have been scored in an average KHL game then in an average NHL game.

Some relevant average goals per game touchstones are listed below (NHL numbers provided by www.dropyourgloves.com).

NHL's Average Goals/Game

KHL's Average Goals/Game

1981/82

8.03 (highest modern day NHL figure)

n/a

2002/03

5.14 (lowest modern day NHL figure)

n/a

2008/09

5.83 (Hudler's last year in NHL)

5.47

2009/10

5.68

5.56

So while the KHL remains an inferior league to the NHL, we could perhaps mitigate players results considering that they played in a scoring environment that allowed for fewer goals, thus making each player's goals that much scarcer and thus requiring more skill and effort to obtain. Such abilities could perhaps facilitate a player's transition back into a tougher league with fewer hiccups.

Perhaps.

Hudler the Harbinger

Hudler is not the first NHLer to play in the KHL before returning to North America and the world's premier hockey league – but, with apologies to Ray Emery (and his Hummer), the Czech is likely the most important player yet to make the return trip.

And he won't be the last.

With the polarized economics of the NHL now squeezing out many fine journeymen, we will likely see an increase in the flow between the two leagues as players seek out their best opportunities. This increased flow means that it will become increasing useful to predict a returning NHLer's production after spending a season or two in the KHL.

For that reason alone, we should all pay attention to Jiri Hudler's return to the NHL.