

The Young D-Man Mentality

Written by Dobber

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You see it happen time and again. An 18-year-old defenseman is hyped in NHL circles and, subsequently, the media and as a result their stature rises in the eyes of fantasy owners. Erik Johnson? Oh, he is going to be a superstar. Ed Jovanovski? Gotta have him. Chris Pronger? I'm taking him first overall!

This is the wrong approach and this statement becomes even more important in fantasy drafts this year, given the high-end defensemen selected at the 2008 NHL draft.

Unlike a forward, the best defensemen do not bust loose right away. In fact, most defensemen are not even fantasy-worthy as teenagers. While Steven Stamkos will likely clear 60 points this season, and you just saw the likes of Patrick Kane, Peter Mueller and Nicklas Backstrom all post strong totals in 2007-08, the odds are that you will not see the same kind of explosiveness from 2008 draftees Drew Doughty, Zach Bogosian and Alex Pietrangelo.

You might, but history is against it.

Was there a rearguard more hyped than Chris Pronger in 1993? The guy was well over six feet tall, put up giant numbers (both points and penalty minutes) in junior and was drafted second overall (by Hartford). Poolies were all over this guy – even in leagues where only points mattered. What did they get for their trouble? Thirty points. Followed by 14, 25, 35 and 36.

So in a points-only pool, he would have been sitting on the bench for five seasons.

Ed Jovanovski – first overall in 1994. He got onto the fantasy radar with similar size and skill as Pronger, but once again, rewarded poolies with seasons of 21, 23, 23, 27 and 26 points, in that order.

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Let's keep going.

Wade Redden, Aki Berg, Chris Phillips, Andrei Zyuzin, Eric Brewer, Paul Mara, Brad Stuart, Rostislav Klesla and Mike Komisarek were all recent Top 8 picks who failed to reach 40 points in their first four NHL seasons. Some eventually got there and some never did hit the mark. Jay Bouwmeester took three seasons to get to 40 points, but we're still waiting on him really busting out and hitting the heights that most poolies project.

There are, of course, exceptions. Dion Phaneuf is a good one. Bryan Berard is another. But it seems to take 10 or 12 Prongers before you see a Phaneuf. Yet poolies continue to fall for the hype, overpaying for promising players that they will need to sit on for three to six years before seeing dividends. In actuality, you should be steering clear of the players and then making a pitch for them in three years when their owner gets tired of waiting.

In the meantime, there are the less-hyped players who are late bloomers that enter the league in their 20s. Examples include Brian Rafalski (26), Tobias Enstrom (23) and Mark Streit (28). There are also players who were drafted a little further down the list and receive little hype, and the club brings along slowly. The players, such as Washington's Mike Green, enter the league at age 20 or 21 and by their second year they pop.

Bottom line: don't get caught in the scramble to draft an 18-year-old defenseman. There are cheaper gems out there who will give you more immediate return.

For this season, look at the Kings' Peter Harrold, or Anaheim's Brian Salcido. Toronto's Anton Stralman is another good one, and one of Tampa Bay's Andrew Hutchinson or Janne Niskala should give good return. New Jersey has an intriguing Finn who should make the team by the name of Anssi Salmela. Jack Hillen over on the Island bears watching.

There are lots of options and I would probably prefer to take a boom or bust guy who will give immediate return (or nothing at all), rather than a surefire stud that sits on my bench for four years.