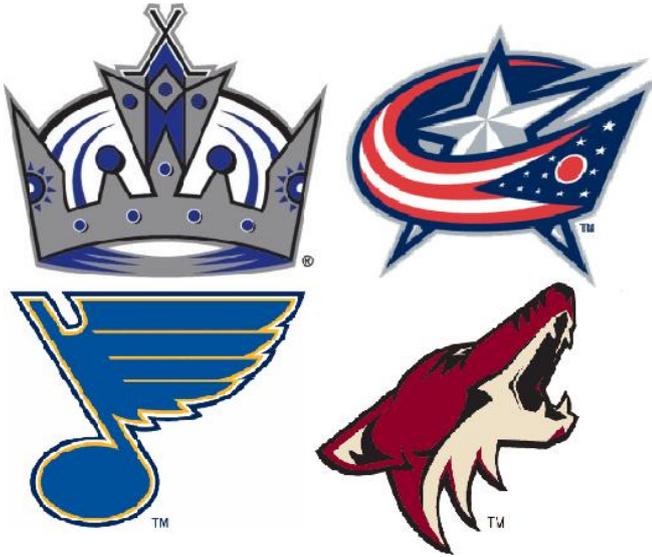


## Pittsburgh, Washington, Chicago...and?

Written by Dobber

Sunday, 19 July 2009 11:08 - Last Updated Monday, 20 July 2009 10:02

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At the end of 2005-06, the Pittsburgh Penguins finished with a dismal 58 points. However, with Sidney Crosby about to be joined by Evgeni Malkin it was easy to see that great things were about to happen. Astute poolies had already stocked their teams with Pens and have seen nothing but dividends ever since. In 2006-07, the team that made the biggest strides was Pittsburgh. While they jumped from 58 to 105 points, the Washington Capitals floundered to just 70.

Once again, astute poolies knew that Alex Ovechkin could only be held back for so long and stocked up on his teammates. In 2007-08 they jumped to 94. That same year, the Chicago Blackhawks showed signs of life with 88 points. In 2008-09 they made it 104. Three years, three talented teams, three giant steps. In every case, poolies who saw it coming stocked up on the players for that particular team had it made in the shade – especially if they are in keeper leagues with a postseason component. So who is the team to watch in 2009-10? Here are the nominees...

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

I really like this team for the future. Defensively they have two things going for them – coach Ken Hitchcock and goaltender Steve Mason. The latter's numbers would already be decent on his own merit, but adding in a stingy system by Hitchcock makes the goaltender one of the better ones to own. Offensively, Jakub Voracek, Derick Brassard and Rick Nash are potential superstars and a supporting cast that includes Antoine Vermette, R.J. Umberger and Kristian

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Huselius gives owners lots of options. There is also a wildcard in Nikita Filatov. The youngster should have a year not unlike Alexander Radulov had as a rookie – that is, he is the last cut from camp but gets called up only to make things impossible for him to be sent back down. Overall, the team will improve upon last year.

**Dobber's odds of becoming the next breakthrough team:** Disqualified. They already made the postseason so their breaking through has been too gradual for consideration.

### **Los Angeles Kings**

The components are all there. Lots of young offensive players with potential and depth up front and on defense that reaches deep into the minors, as well as junior. There are question marks in goal and the team lacked experience and a defensive presence. Enter Ryan Smyth, Justin Williams and Rob Scuderi. Combine that with Anze Kopitar, Alexander Frolov, Dustin Brown, Oscar Moller, Teddy Purcell, Drew Doughty and Jack Johnson all gaining a year of experience and strength and what do you have? I think you have the same thing that the Blackhawks had last summer. Or the Capitals the summer before. Goaltenders Jonathan Quick and Erik Ersberg are a capable enough duo to hold the fort until Jonathan Bernier is ready – which shouldn't be more than another year or so.

**Dobber's odds of becoming the next breakthrough team:** 75%

### **Phoenix Coyotes**

Another team with loads of depth up front similar to the Kings, the Coyotes have the added bonus of a more experienced goaltender in Ilya Bryzgalov. However, the Kings don't have to deal with off-ice turmoil and the youngsters on the Coyotes seem as though they will need another year yet to really get going. While Kyle Turris, Peter Mueller, Mikkel Boedker, Martin Hanzal et al could explode in 2009-10, I think the safer bet is to assume they will each take a step forward and save the big jump for 2010-11. That being said, a bounce-back season from Bryzgalov and solid support from either Al Montoya or Jason Labarbera could inch them into playoff contention.

**Dobber's odds of becoming the next breakthrough team:** 25%

### **St. Louis Blues**

A great mix of veterans and youngsters, the Blues are coming off a successful season that saw them in the postseason, much like the Jackets. With Erik Johnson returning to the fold after missing the entire year with a knee injury, as well as Paul Kariya (hip), how can the team not improve? David Backes has broken through as an elite power forward and a legitimate 60-150 (points-PIM) fantasy asset. T.J. Oshie, David Perron and Patrick Berglund will no doubt pad their numbers 20 percent and Andy McDonald and Brad Boyes are already proven point machines.

**Dobber's odds of becoming the next breakthrough team:** Also disqualified. Progression is - and will continue to be - gradual.

### **Other Thoughts...**

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- The Kings are primed for a big jump. Sure, Williams and Smyth could get injured, while Quick and Ersberg stumble, but that could happen to any team. As long as there are no catastrophes, Los Angeles should be fine. It's time to stock up.
- The Flyers made a big leap recently, but that was after one off year and didn't make the fans (or the fantasy owners of their players) suffer for long.
- Next summer – if I write a similar column about the Coyotes, there is little doubt that I will also be touting the potential of the Islanders. If you're rebuilding in your keeper league and you want to get a big head start, you could do worse than John Tavares, Kyle Okposo, Josh Bailey, Corey Trivino, Jesse Joensuu, and Kirill Petrov. Next summer they could land a Taylor Hall – and wouldn't that change their fortunes?