There are eight or nine situations around the league that have a pair of established star forwards on the first line and a spot up for grabs. Needless to say, if a player with any skill can grab a hold of that spot, he's in for a huge jump in production. Let's take a look.

First, let me preface this by making it clear that I do not draft or trade based on linemates under any circumstances. Linemates come and go – I may draft or trade a player because I know he'll see *some* time on a big line, but I will never do it assuming the spot is permanent. Line combinations rarely last, which is why it is so surprising to see the amount of emails/comments I get correcting me on preseason line combos. I use line combinations for two things – either a temporary pickup, or as I stated above just because the player will *sometimes* be there.

Now let's get to it.

Calgary – Jarome Iginla, Olli Jokinen and ???

Candidates: Nigel Dawes, Curtis Glencross, Dustin Boyd, Rene Bourque, David Moss, Fredrik Sjostrom

So Far: Mikael Backlund was tried there, but he has since been cut. Sjostrom and Dawes have also been there. Dawes has had the most success so far.

In the long run: Players will come and players will go, with all of the above seeing time there. By the second half, the team will probably settle on Bourque or Dawes. In the end, none of the candidates will top 55 points. Poolies wish that these decisions get settled early and that the coach sticks with them for 82 games, but more often than not, that just isn't reality.

Edmonton – Shawn Horcoff, Ales Hemsky and ???

Candidates: Patrick O'Sullivan, Robert Nilsson, Dustin Penner, Andrew Cogliano, Rob Schremp, J-F Jacques, Gilbert Brule

So Far: Horcoff and Hemsky haven't even been together. It's been Sam Gagner playing with Hemsky, while Horcoff mans the second line. Regardless – the player who plays with Hemsky

and Horcoff/Gagner will flourish. So far we have seen Nilsson there the most, followed by Jacques and Brule.

In the long run: Nilsson will probably hang around there for the first month or two, before O'Sullivan eventually secures the spot. Penner will spot him whenever the team wants more size there.

New York – Marian Gaborik, Brandon Dubinsky and ???

Candidates: Sean Avery, Chris Higgins, Vaclav Prospal, Ales Kotalik, Enver Lisin, Chris Drury, Evgeni Grachev

So Far: I'm assuming Dubinsky hangs onto that center spot. I think it's a fairly safe call. Higgins has been the winner on the other wing.

In the long run: John Tortorella really likes Prospal at center, so I don't think we'll see him on the wing on the top line. That would mean that Drury will be a winger. I think the coach is pretty comfortable with Higgins on the big line. This is another situation where players will come and go, but I think Higgins will be there for 50 percent of games.

Pittsburgh – Sidney Crosby, Chris Kunitz and ???; also Evgeni Malkin, Ruslan Fedotenko and ???

Candidates: Bill Guerin, Pascal Dupuis, Chris Conner, Eric Tangradi, Luca Caputi, Ruslan

Fedotenko, Tyler Kennedy, Max Talbot, Jordan Staal

So Far: Crosby and Kunitz have seen Caputi, Tangradi and Guerin so far. Tangradi had the most success, but he was a cut from camp. The coaches were just looking to get a preview of him and Caputi to see where they are at, as it is clear that they are being groomed for a top six spot. Malkin and Fedotenko have also played with those two kids, as well as Kennedy.

In the long run: Talbot is currently injured, but when he is back in six weeks or so he will line up on one of the big lines. He is a Band-Aid Boy, so don't expect a whole lot. In the meantime, Kennedy will get the job with Malkin. The team seems set on Staal playing on the third line. He could be the best third-liner in the NHL. Perhaps by midseason you will see one Caputi or Tangradi get called up for another audition.

San Jose – Dany Heatley, Joe Thornton and ???

Candidates: Devin Setoguchi, Patrick Marleau, Jamie McGinn, Ryane Clowe

So Far: It's not even close. Setoguchi has been exclusively on that line and he has looked good there.

In the long run: This is the one line that will actually stay together the entire season. Sure, a losing streak could disrupt things, but that's the case no matter what troika you look at throughout history. You can't avoid blips like that. For the purposes of fantasy hockey – this line is as locked as it will get.

Tampa Bay – Vincent Lecavalier, Alex Tanguay and ???

Candidates: Steve Downie, Martins Karsums, Martin St. Louis, Drew Miller, Carter Ashton, Stephane Veilleux

So Far: Ashton and Veilleux were tried there, but Downie seems to have won the job. Ashton and Karsums have since been cut.

In the long run: Sure, Downie will get his chance. But in the end his upside of the mid-sixties is something that he has a shot at hitting in, say, six years. Not now. If his temper doesn't blow the spot for him, his inexperience and "lesser" skills will see to it that he won't be full time there. And by "lesser" I mean "lesser than Lecavalier and Tanguay". He's not in their class. The team will try player after player there, but in the end – even though they don't want to break up the Steven Stamkos line – it will be St. Louis on the right wing.

Vancouver – Daniel Sedin, Henrik Sedin and ???

Candidates: Mason Raymond, Ryan Kesler, Alex Burrows, Sergei Shirokov, Mikael Samuelsson, Pavol Demitra, Steve Bernier, Jannik Hansen

So Far: Samuelsson, Shirokov and Burrows have had almost equal time there. Burrows had success in the second half last season on that line, while Samuelsson is a fellow Swede and it's always romantic (?) to envision an entire line on an NHL hockey team to come from the same European country.

In the long run: Shirokov had the most success there and if he continues to perform strongly on the second or third line, he will eventually work his way up to that big line on a full-time basis. For now, count on a split between four or five of the above candidates.

Washington – Alex Ovechkin, Nicklas Backstrom and ???

Candidates: Mike Knuble, Tomas Fleischmann, Alexander Semin, Brooks Laich, Chris Bourque, Oskar Osala, Chris Clark

So Far: Looking at the Fantasy Tools section of DobberHockey, and Ovechkin's linemates have been Semin (35%), Knuble (16%) and Laich (9%).

In the long run: Semin will always see his share on that line, but the team will go with Knuble and try to spread out the offense. Especially when Fleischmann returns from injury and gives them the final piece of a decent second line.