Spezza vs. Toews

What started as an innocent email from a reader has grown into a full-blown debate. In a keeper league that counted only points, who would you rather own? Jason Spezza of the Ottawa Senators or Jonathan Toews of the Chicago Blackhawks. It is my position that Spezza is the better player to own, but that is clearly the opinion of the minority, given the overwhelming response.

One of the dissenters was McKeen's contributor and old friend of DobberHockey Gus Katsaros. He suggested creating a piece on the subject, giving our different viewpoints. I thought it was a good idea, and so without further ado – Spezza vs. Toews…

Katsaros: Jonathan Toews

Take the natural goal scorer over playmakers; simple as that.

Without bona fide snipers, playmakers suffer dips in overall numbers and rely heavier on offense by committee. Playmakers don't make elite goal scorers – someone has to put the puck in the net – they do however have the ability to make a 15-goal scorer surpass the 20 mark, a small consolation.

Look no further than Dany Heatley (53-30-26-56) and struggles of former linemate Jason Spezza (31-6-14-20), while his new playmaker pivot, Joe Thornton (53-13-54-67) is rejuvenated enough to top the 100 point plateau (and named to the Canadian Olympic team) once again after a steady decline over three season (coincidentally following the decline of Jonathan Cheechoo and his scoring prowess from a 56-goal campaign in 2005-06).

Playmakers need goal scorers to succeed with elite numbers; they don't improve on elite scorer's ability and point totals. (See Kessel vs. Savard analysis)

Chicago Blackhawks pivot, Jonathan Toews, while not considered a bona fide sniper, translates quick hands, elite stick handling and a decent shot into potential 30-goal seasons, while surrounded by a cast of gifted shooters, almost three lines deep.

The end results are a supplement to assist totals, giving him a 70-80 point potential most seasons, at the tender age of 21, he still has a little more upside if he continues to drive the net, while bringing the same work ethic game-in/game-out. There are peripheral characteristics in winning one-on-one battles and retrieving pucks from corners that is superior to that of Spezza's ethic, a clear indication his helpers are accredited to his work, rather than playmaking ability and being surrounded by the likes of snipers in Marian Hossa, Patrick Kane, Patrick Sharp and lesser lights like Kris Versteeg and the injured Dave Bolland (he's a center, too, though so time is limited to PP.)

Despite the lack of production from Spezza in an injury-plagued 2009-10, not having Heatley riding shotgun is having an effect. The Ottawa pivot has to redefine himself, and prove his worth than just a puck caddy to a sniper. Daniel Alfredsson, Milan Michalek and Alex Kovalev exhibit individual puck skills that don't mirror the scoring ability of a natural sniper and in turn bring down his assist totals.

While he does have a 30-goal potential each season, the lack of an elite sniper reduces his totals to a similar potential to that of Toews in the 70-80 point range. In the past three seasons, Spezza's shot totals have gone from 162 to 210 to 246 last season. He's shooting more, and seemingly using less playmaking ability .. a direct hit to his helpers totals.

In the end, from a pure points standpoint, either player is a decent enough choice in a similar points range. The guiding difference may be in other categories such as plus/minus, PIM's and shots-on-goal that determines which player contains higher value in individual leagues.

But goals are hard to come by in reality, and that make Toews a natural choice over Spezza in fantasy.

Dobber: Jason Spezza

A common trap that poolies fall into is the “what have you done for me lately” one. That’s the same trap that caused us to underrate Brad Richards last summer and is causing us to overrate Henrik Sedin (for his production) and Marian Gaborik (for his durability) today. What we see is Jonathan Toews on pace for 69 points one year after finishing with the same number. We see a 21-year-old on a powerhouse team that pushes offense. We also see Jason Spezza on pace for 38 points one year after finishing with 73. We see a 26-year-old on an overachieving (your words, not mine) team that stresses two-way play over the run-and-gun.

Don’t fall into this trap.

I’ll tackle the main arguments one by one.

Toews is on the way up, whereas Spezza has peaked.

This was an actual point brought up to me by a reader. Again I am reminded of “what have you done for me lately”. It’s not often that a player reaches 92 points at the age of 24 and then never gets close to that number again. In fact, has it ever happened? Well, Brad Richards had 91 points at the age of 25 and hasn’t been back there since, but – wait a minute – he’s looking like

a lock to get there this year. I guess you could use Eric Staal as an example – but do we really believe he won't get back up there at some point? A player's peak years are between the ages of 26 to 32, so while Toews is indeed on the way up – so is Spezza. He's learning to play a more complete game, much like Vincent Lecavalier did the year before exploding for his career high.

Spezza gets injured a lot.

So does Toews. While Spezza averages just over 10 games missed per season, Toews averages eight.

Spezza loses Heatley, while Toews plays with three lines of awesomeness in Chicago

I'm not interested in linemates here. When it comes to players of elite caliber, as these two are, then the linemates won't make more of a difference than five or maybe 10 points. When they're already up around 70 or 80 points or more, another five is a pretty small amount percentage-wise. So what are these players capable of without considering linemates? That is to say – what can they do on their own?

Toews has always been billed as an elite all-around center. A guy who can put up big points, but was also very responsible defensively and a natural leader. His work ethic is impeccable. Players like that rarely get to 90 points, and that's what we're discussing here. Henrik Zetterberg is an example of a player who fits that description – but Toews hardly has the razzle-dazzle of a Zetterberg. I cap him at 90 points and as he hits his stride he should be a lock for 70.

Spezza has always been billed as Mr. Offense. He wasn't drafted to be a future captain. He wasn't drafted for his penalty-killing acumen. He was drafted because he is an offensive force. Players like that do not get capped at 90 points. In fact, he's already topped 90 points. So while he'll put up some stinkers, such as this year – he'll also have some monster campaigns. As a fantasy owner, I'll suffer through one out of every three years of 60 or 65 points just to get that occasional 90 or 95. And I'll have visions of a 110-point career year, too. That's where I cap him. Maybe it's just my gut talking, but if you say to someone that Jason Spezza will get 110 points one season, you may not get laughed at. However, if you say to someone that Jonathan Toews will get 110 points one year, the laughter won't stop.

I had the same upside penciled in for Spezza before Heatley as I did during Heatley and now after Heatley. A star linemate certainly helps, no question, but Spezza can get there on his own. Remember that Joe Thornton went to a San Jose team with no big guns on it, and his arrival actually created a big gun in Jonathan Cheechoo. Spezza has that same ability. He could step onto the ice with a bunch of clowns and if one of them was the right fit, then 'boom' you have yourself a Rocket Richard winner. Toews can't do that.

So while Toews is the better "real" option, Spezza is the better "fantasy" one. Simply for the potential. Players with Toews' offense are a dime a dozen. Nice and steady, but limited – just like 40 other NHL players. Spezza, while a bit of a wildcard, has the upside that can win a fantasy league – just like…maybe seven or eight other players.

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