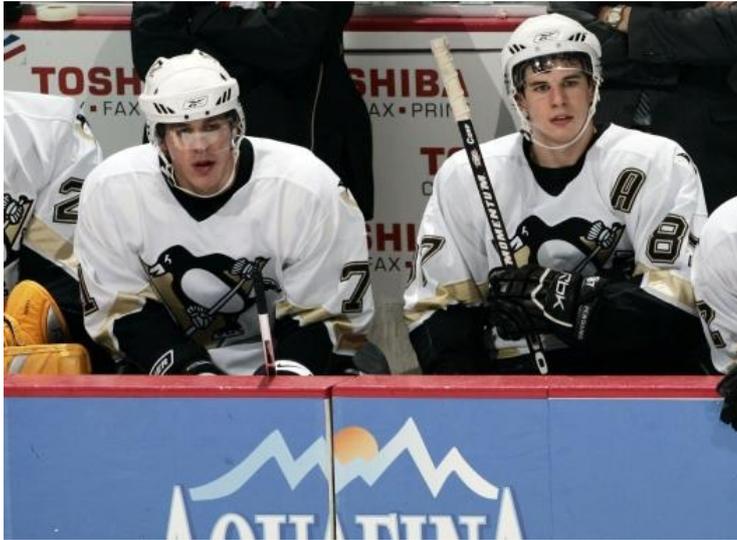


A New Fantasy Hockey Tradition

Written by Dobber

Sunday, 16 September 2007 04:59 - Last Updated Thursday, 20 September 2007 19:44



For the second straight September, poolies are asking the same questions and having the same conversations. Guess what? In September of 2008, it will be déjà vu all over again.

Who will play with Sidney Crosby? Who will play with Evgeni Malkin?

Knowing the answers to the two questions would result in the selection of players who will put up very lucrative points in a fantasy league. The problem is – there is no answer.

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Coach Michel Therrien likes to juggle his lines. Not just game-to-game, but often shift-to-shift. The only constant last season was putting Malkin on the same line as Crosby in the third period when the team was down by one to three goals. Other than that, the forwards may as well have drawn straws.

There were several runs of consistent linemates last season with varying degrees of success. For the first 15 games (or so), Colby Armstrong lined up on the wing with Sid the Kid. His play seemed to supplement Crosby's – one would hustle and hit while the other finessed and dazzled. However, after hitting more than his share of posts, Armstrong was taken off the line – he had zero goals, which was inexcusable when playing with a talent such as Crosby.

Ryan Malone was put on the line with Crosby and veteran Mark Recchi in mid-December and made a huge impression with eight points in three games. However, he had just one in his next four and he, too was removed from the line. Erik Christensen, Gary Roberts, Michel Ouellet, Nils Ekman and Chris Thorburn all had trials on both Crosby and Malkin's line.

Ouellet, Ekman and Thorburn are gone now. Petr Sykora has been added. One of Ryan Stone, Jonathan Filewich and camp invitee Adam Hall will soon be in the mix. The questions remain.

We do know this much: Mark Recchi will play on a line with one of the two superstar pivots. Unless he is pushed back to the third line with Jordan Staal. Okay, so we don't know very much. But Petr Sykora definitely has a spot on that top line with Crosby. Or Malkin. I think.

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The result of all this uncertainty could be a mosh-posh of line combinations that will end up distributing the points that Crosby and Malkin dish rather evenly. Translate that as: any Penguins winger you select will get his time on a big line and as such will produce somewhat higher than normal. The good news is that both Crosby and Malkin will increase their production by a good 20 per cent, while Staal will take the next step in his development and possibly increase his production by as much as 50 per cent. The points that the increased offense will give to teammates will be noticeable, so you really can't go wrong. However, I will attempt to give the percentage of shifts that I feel each winger will skate on a line with one of the two phenoms:

Petr Sykora: 85%

Mark Recchi: 70%

Erik Christensen: 65%

Ryan Malone: 60%

Gary Roberts: 40%

Colby Armstrong: 35%

Jordan Staal (as a left winger): 35%

One of Jonathan Filewich/Ryan Stone/Adam Hall: 10%

Long shots include Tyler Kennedy, Jeff Taffe, Georges Laraque and Angelo Esposito.