

Love it or hate it, penalty minutes are one of the most common fantasy hockey statistics these days. If your offense is strong enough, you have the option of streaming whichever hothead is racking up misconducts and providing little to no offensive assistance throughout the year. The much more attractive option however, is to find a player who can contribute offensively, while still posting 150 or more penalty minutes. With each passing year, more and more fantasy GM's are coming to the realization that they need a player like Hartnell, Lucic, Downie, etc. One player who fits this category is Los Angeles forward Kyle Clifford.

## **A Fighting Chance**

Written by Tim Lucarelli Sunday, 08 May 2011 11:18 - Last Updated Tuesday, 10 May 2011 17:46

The 20-year-old Clifford broke into the OHL in 2007-08 and after his second season with the Barrie Colts, the Los Angeles Kings selected him in the second round, number 35 overall. For a player who had scored only 28 points with 133 penalty minutes in 60 games, Clifford had to have been shocked to hear his name called so early. Los Angeles would be rewarded though as he would take that confidence and adrenaline into the following season, scoring 28 goals and 57 points in 58 games. Clifford also added 111 penalty minutes that year, showing he can score and still be relied upon as one of the team's enforcers.

Upon conclusion of his final OHL season, Clifford would join the Manchester Monarchs, playing seven of their 16 playoff games, and finishing with two assists and 12 penalty minutes. Kyle would work hard over the offseason and make the Kings right out of training camp. For the majority of the season he was used on a line with Wayne Simmonds, as the two have similar playing styles. Handzus and Richardson alternated center duties between the two wingers with Handzus getting the heavier share.

As the season came to a close, Clifford led his team in penalty minutes with 141 and managed a respectable 14 points for a rookie enforcer. The only other Los Angeles player to reach 100 was Kevin Westgarth. For Clifford to be most effective, the Kings will need to add one, if not two, additional enforcers. From Manchester, Rich Clune would do a great job as a fourth-line enforcer, alleviating the need for Clifford to fight as much.

Kyle Clifford has tenacity very similar to Dan Carcillo at times, though Clifford is taller, stronger, and more talented and his 6'1", 201 lb. frame is much more similar to that of Scott Hartnell (6'2", 209 lbs.). Although Clifford has shown he has offensive ability, most of his goals are scored on rebounds and odd-man breaks. For that reason (and when contrasting the two's pre-NHL statistics), Clifford's ceiling is slightly lower than Hartnell's.

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This offseason, the Kings have quite a few free agents to re-sign, with the biggest being Drew Doughty. Assuming Los Angeles walks away from Handzus and Ponikarovsky, the Kings will have an additional \$7.2 million at their disposal. With Handzus' absence, Clifford and Simmonds will almost certainly be skating with a more talented center, which should give them the opportunity to raise their stats. Internally, the Kings have Schenn, Loktionov, Moller, and Toffoli all looking for a spot on the team. Schenn is the most likely to make the cut, but it will be interesting to see if they bring in another center through free agency or trade.

Once he has fully adjusted to the NHL, Clifford should average 10-15 goals and 35-45 points, with at least 120 penalty minutes each year. If he ends up getting top-six minutes next to a player of Danny Briere's skill level, he has the potential to score even more. To put my Clifford averages into perspective, this past season only three players in the league had at least 120 penalty minutes and scored 35 or more points (Subban, Hartnell, Lucic). With that being said, Kyle Clifford will not post those numbers next season. Instead, something more along the lines of 9 goals, 25 points, and 160 penalty minutes is more realistic.

He is signed for two additional seasons though, so expect a bigger role in 2012-13 as Clifford looks to perform well in his contract year. It will likely take a year or two after that before he is posting consistent, fantasy-relevant stats, but by that point, he'll only be 23 years old. As with all players, opportunity is a huge part of a player's development and if the Kings bring in another enforcer (or enforcers), Clifford will be allowed to focus on offense a bit more. The result would likely have Clifford skating with one of the more talented LA centers and fantasy owners would naturally see an increase in point production, while still seeing a penalty output similar to that of Lucic or Hartnell. If the Kings bring in extra enforcers this offseason, either keep Kyle Clifford's name as a sleeper on your draft list or open up trade talks with your fellow GM's.