

## Clear Separation, Part II

Written by Tim Lucarelli

Wednesday, 20 July 2011 22:55 - Last Updated Friday, 22 July 2011 17:48

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( [Part One](#) )

Going stride for stride with my Western Conference counterpart, I am providing an Eastern Conference version of Ryan Ma's *Earmarked for Success*. As Ryan has cautioned, please do not fret over the line combinations. We are merely separating the top-six players from the bottom-six on each team, which can be applied to potential fantasy success for the upcoming season. Top-six players obviously get the lion's share of ice time, both at even strength and on the power play.

I decided not to use the same terminology Ryan uses, so here's a quick breakdown of mine if you couldn't figure it out. Keep in mind that this terminology should be applied for fantasy hockey purposes in the coming season only.

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- **Golden Boys** – Each team’s top six. The top-six role is theirs to lose.
- **Challengers** – These guys want to crack their way into the top six and depending on the situation, they just may.
- **Checkers** – these players are essentially fourth line players. Some may have very bright futures, but the path of the current team doesn’t seem to have top-nine minutes in store for them.
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I’ll look at three or four teams each week, going in alphabetical order. Here’s Part II:

### Florida – up for grabs

#### **Golden Boys**

David Booth – Stephen Weiss – Kris Versteeg

Tomas Fleischmann – Mike Santorelli – Scottie Upshall

#### **Challengers**

Sean Bergenheim, Shawn Matthias\*, and Tomas Kopecky

#### **Checkers**

Marcel Goc, Matt Bradley, Ryan Carter, **Evgeni Dadonov**, Michal Repik, and Jack Skille

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Florida is one of the toughest teams to predict. This offseason, former Blackhawks GM Dave Tallon has almost completely overhauled his entire offense. David Booth and Stephen Weiss are certainly locks for top-six minutes, but the rest of the team is a complete coin flip. Versteeg and Upshall will likely see top minutes on the RW side. Santorelli is highly praised in the Panther organization and his strong performance last season should give him the edge for second-line center duties. Fleischmann is capable of playing center, but he was much more effective on left wing last year. He scored 21 points in 22 games in Colorado while playing wing versus 10 points in 23 games in Washington where he played center. These six are most likely to start the season in the top rotations.

Bergenheim's strong postseason should be an indicator that he is hungry for a top role. Kopecky will also push hard for a top-six spot and if he is able to knock off one of Versteeg or Upshall, my money is on Upshall being the one to slide. Shawn Matthias is still an RFA, and assuming he signs, he will have to prove he deserves a top-six role before it is handed to him.

Bradley and Carter are both role players who should slot in on the fourth line and Goc is having a hard time proving he still has top-nine minutes in him. Evgeni Dadonov had a great stretch last season with 17 points in 36 games, but he'll have an uphill battle finding the same opportunity this year. He is a dark horse to step into the top-nine with his work cut out for him. Repik and Skille are both highly talented, but have not proven themselves as valuable offensive threats yet at the NHL level.

**Montreal – Top-six fairly secure with pressure from line three**

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### Golden Boys

Mike Cammalleri – Tomas Plekanec - Andrei Kostitsyn

Erik Cole – Scott Gomez – Brian Gionta

### Challengers

**Max Pacioretty**, David Desharnais , and Lars Eller

### Checkers

Travis Moen, Ryan White, Mathieu Darche, and Aaron Palushaj

Montreal is in a pretty good position. They have a clear, number-one line in Cammalleri, Plekanec, and Kostitsyn, all three of which have skated together for a while now. Next they have a solid second line composed of veterans Scott Gomez, Brian Gionta, and newcomer **Eric Cole**

. Cole has seen his share of injuries in the past, making a top-six spot within reach for the Challengers.

**Max Pacioretty** was really starting to prove his worth last season until Zdeno Chara cut his season short. It looks as though he will return to full health and although he will likely begin the year on the third line, he'll be knocking on the door with authority for a top-six role. David Desharnais is a player who just won't quit and he will be seeking more ice time as well. Lars Eller hasn't yet proven as much as the other two Challengers, but the third line is a perfect place for him to develop. All three of these players are emerging prospects hungry for more ice time and they're one injury away from receiving a bigger role. Fantasy owners take note that opportunity is certainly within reach.

Moen, White, and Darche are the likely checkers on this team, with Palushaj receiving the occasional cup of coffee. Leblanc will eventually work his way into the team, but nothing to get

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excited about from a fantasy perspective this year.

### **New Jersey – top three or four cemented, next spots available**

#### **Golden Boys**

Ilya Kovalchuk – Travis Zajac – Nick Palmieri

Zach Parise\* - Patrik Elias – Dainius Zubrus

#### **Challengers**

Vladimir Zharkov, Brian Rolston, and David Clarkson

#### **Checkers**

Eric Boulton, Rod Pelley, Dave Steckel, Tim Sestito, Stephen Gionta, and **Adam Henrique**.

New Jersey obviously has Kovalchuk, Zajac, and Elias slated somewhere in their top-six. Young **Nick Palmieri** skated the majority of his shifts on the top line with Kovalchuk and Zajac, so there's a strong possibility he will remain in that role. Zach Parise is still unsigned and there are rumors that the Devils will not be able to retain him. Assuming they are able to reach an agreement, Parise will likely play left wing, fighting for time with Kovalchuk. It's highly unlikely either play right wing. I have Zubrus slated in the top-six, but any of the Challengers below could easily capture this role.

Vladimir Zharkov has proven himself as a responsible Russian player, a fairly uncharacteristic

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term for a young Russian forward. Zharkov likely won't produce top offensive numbers, but is certainly a player who can fill in when called upon. Brian Rolston is a shadow of the player he was five years ago, but he's still capable of producing in spurts. He and Zubrus would be more effectively used on the third line (or in Albany), but the lack of depth should have one playing in the top-six. **David Clarkson** is the one guy who could push both of the old guys to the third line, but we're still waiting to see his offensive ability on a consistent basis.

Although they both have no-trade-clauses, expect the Devils to try to push Zubrus and/or Rolston to waive their NTC and accept a trade elsewhere. I'm not sure how he does it, but Lou Lamoriello has a habit of making moves like this when others would seem to think he's backed up against the wall.

**Adam Henrique** is a dark horse to see some offensive minutes this year after a strong pro rookie season in Albany. The 2008 third-round choice is a talented player who would benefit immediately if Zubrus and/or Rolston were to be traded. Sestito and Gionta have seen NHL time, but Henrique could prove to be the one who sticks.

***Next week – New York Islanders, New York Rangers, Ottawa Senators.***