If you didn't know about Sean Couturier before the playoffs started, you sure do now. While Couturier has been praised for his offensive abilities in juniors, his defensive maturity is well beyond his years. So much so that now Jaromir Jagr is comparing Couturier to two-time Stanley Cup champion and Hockey Hall of Fame inductee Ron Francis.

Whether the Francis comparison is valid or not, I'll leave up to you, but there are a couple things to consider. When Francis entered the league, he began scoring much quicker than Couturier did. However, Francis' first year in the league was also the same season that Wayne Gretzky scored 212 points in a time where goal scoring was up just slightly from today's standards (this year's leading scorer – Malkin – scored 109). Additionally, Francis carried a minus-71 rating through his first four seasons before finally fine tuning the defensive aspect of his game. Today's young players are forced to fine tune that defensive aspect much sooner or they will end up "fine tuning" in the AHL.

But let's get back to Couturier.

About a year before Couturier's draft year, he was in the discussions to be a potential number-one overall choice. This of course had a lot to do with Couturier winning the QMJHL title and then winning the QMJHL scoring title the following season. The season right before his draft year though, was one where Sean missed time due to mononucleosis and slowly but surely his name began to slip ever so slightly on the draft rankings. While the Flyers were thrilled to get what they perceived to be a steal with the eighth overall selection, just about every Flyers fan or beat writer – including myself – said there was almost zero chance Couturier would stick around longer than the first nine games.

This was largely due to the fact that Couturier was regarded as an offensive player who would need to play in the top six. What Peter Laviolette saw in Couturier though, was a young player with acute defensive awareness, and he decided to keep Couturier around as a versatile shutdown center who could also double as a top-six replacement if needed. The fear, at least from fans or fantasy owners, was that if Couturier was shaped into a defensive player, he might never achieve the lofty offensive expectations shared by most of the hockey community.

Looking back at the Flyers' first round victory over the favored Pittsburgh Penguins, Couturier has proven that he most certainly can continue to be a defensive presence and still chip in some offense. Let's take a look at some of the impressions from the coaches and the players:

“Don’t forget – he had to play against the best player in the league in Malkin. If he wouldn’t score any goals, I would say he had a great game. But he also played great defense and also scored three goals,” & “I don’t think I saw in my hockey career somebody that good defensively at a young age.” – Jaromir Jagr

“He’s a teenager and he’s our best defensive player. He’s gaining confidence after each game. He wants to be on the ice. He wants to get the job done and it’s impressive that a 19-year-old plays like he’s 28. He’s really mature on the ice.” – Claude Giroux

“He continues to play solid hockey at both ends of the ice. Defensively, penalty kill, he does the right things. Offensively, he got some opportunities and cashed them in. He’s been really strong.” – Peter Laviolette

“He succeeds because of his maturity. He has always had this willingness to accept any role.” – Shawn Wood (Couturier’s Midget AAA coach)

The underlying concept shared by the community surrounding Couturier is that he is mature beyond his years. What that really means is that he is constantly learning and improving his game. While he is excellent defensively, his offensive abilities are also improving, evidenced by a hat trick in Game Two in Pittsburgh.

While many emerging stars or potential superstars are typically groomed into top-six minutes right away, Couturier does not have that luxury in Philadelphia. Because of this it will likely take a little bit longer to achieve star or superstar status, but he is certainly on the right path, showing the right attitude, and accepting his role knowing full well that his future in Philadelphia will grow beyond that of a third- or fourth-line shutdown center.

While Ron Francis may or may not be the right comparison, could we look to possibly the best two-way player in the league in Pavel Datsyuk? Couturier will certainly not be a Datsyuk clone – can anyone really pull off the moves that Datsyuk does? – but the comparison might still be valid to a lesser degree. Datsyuk joined Detroit in a third/fourth line role while superstars such as Shanahan, Fedorov, Hull, Robitaille, Yzerman, and Larionov occupied the scoring roles. Datsyuk scored 35 points in 70 games that year (and won a Stanley Cup), followed by seasons of 51 and 68 points respectively. The lockout occurred the following season and Datsyuk has been above a point-per-game pace since.

Couturier had a similar rookie season, sitting in the shadows while Giroux, Hartnell, Jagr, Briere, Simmonds, Voracek, and Read took the scoring minutes and Couturier finished with 27 points in 77 games. If Couturier's offense follows the same path as Datsyuk, we could see two-three seasons of improving point totals, followed by a breakout in the fourth of fifth season. However, with the lockout giving players a bigger salary spike on their second NHL contract, Couturier could speed this development up at least one year (assuming bigger salaries are moved to make room for Couturier's increase in pay), which would have him "breaking out" in his fourth season, 2014-15.

As good as Couturier has been, he will be better. While he has raised more than a few eyebrows by shutting down the best player in the league, it will only be a matter of time before his offensive contributions are just as impressive.