*Miller takes a look at some fantasy surprises and decides whether they're for real...or just a mirage*

As usual, there are some unheralded players making some early season noise. Conversely, there are some seasoned veterans that have yet to make their usual impact on the scoreboard. Are the new guys for real and what about those old guys, do they have another season left in them?  This week, we'll take a look at ten Eastern Conference players and declare them either the Real Deal or Mirage.

Raphael Diaz - Montreal Canadiens

Diaz has five points, all assists, in four games. He's receiving an average of 17:31 minutes per game and has been handed the second most power play time on ice on the team. The 27-year-old Swiss dude was a fixture for Zug in the Swiss league, recording 12 goals and 39 points in 45 games in 2010-11. This season, Diaz has made the most of his opportunities by scoring three of his five points via the power play. His ice time on the power play is about to come crashing down (to the second unit) with the re-signing of P.K. Subban.

**VERDICT: Mirage**

Cory Conacher - Tampa Bay Lightning

The 23-year-old rookie is getting an opportunity to showcase his offensive talents within the Bolts top six and he's taking advantage of it big time. Conacher has seven points in five games. Still, he's only averaging 14:39 ice time per game, but his 3:09 on the power play ranks sixth amongst Tampa forwards. He was last year's AHL Rookie of the Year, Leading Scorer (39 goals, 80 points in 75 games) and Most Valuable Player. Lightning Head Coach Guy Boucher doesn't tolerate weak defensive play, so that is the only caveat when reading the verdict below. If the Martin St. Louis-sized Conacher fades and is overwhelmed defensively, his ice time will dwindle if not disappear this season.

**VERDICT: Real Deal**

Nazem Kadri - Toronto Maple Leafs

It seems like just yesterday that the Leafs drafted Kadri seventh overall (2009). Oh how quickly they grow. The now 22-year-old has five points in five games this season and has looked pretty good overall. Kadri has a history of being a point producer. In his last season of junior hockey, he scored 35 goals and 93 points in 56 games and he has recorded 81 points in 92 career AHL

games. Is it possible that he is done with the AHL for good? He's not out of woods yet, but he can see it from here.

**VERDICT: Real Deal**

Andrei Markov - Montreal Canadiens

Early this season and Markov looks like the Markov of old. He has racked up four goals and one assist in the Habs first four contests. In his last full NHL season, Markov ripped 64 points. In 2009-10, he recorded 34 points in 45 games. IF he can stay healthy, the talent is still there to duplicate that feat. Over the last three seasons, Markov has played in a combined 65 games. Caveat emptor.

**VERDICT: Real Deal until injury-bug bites**

Sami Salo - Tampa Bay Lightning

Salo is getting the second most time on ice next to Matt Carle and receives the sixth most power play time. He has five assists in five games so far this season. Awesome right? Salo is 38-years-old and last played more than 70 NHL games in a season in 2003-04. His career NHL high is 37 points. Look elsewhere unless you enjoy being disappointed.

**VERDICT: A Magnificent Mirage of epic proportions**

Michael Grabner - New York Islanders

Which Grabner are we going to see this year; the one who scored 34 goals and 52 points two years ago or the one who scored 20 goals and only 32 points last season with primarily the

same linemates? What's changed this season? Brad Boyes has effectively replaced Kyle Okposo
on a line with Grabner and Frans Nielson. Grabner averages a nice 19:05 minutes per game, thanks to his play on special teams. In addition to second unit power play time, he plays over three minutes per match on the penalty kill. From the Isles games I have seen this year, I'd lean closer to the 34 goal, 52 point Grabner (pro-rated of course).

**VERDICT: Real Deal**

Keith Aucoin / David Ullstrom - New York Islanders

Early season surprises, Aucoin has three goals and four points in five games and Ullstrom has four points in five games, playing with Colin McDonald. Aucoin is a 34-year-old career minor leaguer who has an incredible 779 points in 673 career AHL games, yet heading into this season, only had 37 points in 102 career NHL games. Ullstrom is 23-years-old and has recorded 71 points in 107 AHL games. Why am I so down on these two? They average the eighth and eleventh most average power play time on the team and that seriously limits their production. They are only worth a flyer in leagues where you don't have to drop anyone of significance.

**VERDICT: The elusive Double Desert Island Mirage**

Alexander Ovechkin - Washington Capitals

There is lots of chatter out there that Ovechkin has lost his touch as an elite scorer. I'll admit that the evidence isn't flattering. His point totals have been trending down over the last four seasons from a career high of 112 to 110, 109, 85 and last year's embarrassing 65 point "effort". The 27-year-old has been (pun intended) voted NHL Player of the Year by the players three times, won the Hart and Maurice Richard Trophies twice each, one Art Ross and was Rookie of the Year. What's really hurt him is all the coaching and style changes that the Caps have tried over the last few seasons. Ovechkin has started this season slowly with only one goal and two points in five games, but he's being given the most power play ice time in the league (6:41 per game) and averages 22:11 minutes per contest, fifth best amongst NHL forwards. I believe that he has hit bottom and that he'll turn it around starting this season.

**VERDICT: Real Deal**

Dougie Hamilton - Boston Bruins

Not many 19-year-old defenseman are able to step directly into the NHL and play an integral role on their team. Hamilton is on his way to doing just that with four points (all assists) in his first five NHL contests. Outside of his first NHL game where he played a pedestrian 13:40, he's averaged 19:30 minutes of ice time. His assist on David Krejci 's game winning goal with less than two minutes to go against Carolina last night was a very smart pass. In his final year of junior, Hamilton was voted the best defenseman in the entire Canadian Hockey League and recorded 72 points in 50 games.

**VERDICT: Real Deal**

Do you have an Eastern Conference player that you can't decide if he's the Real Deal or a Mirage, feel free to ask in the comments section below.

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