

A revival of the classic Crosby vs. Ovechkin debate - Miller takes a look at the Capitals' turnaround and the Penguins' surge

Over the Capitals last five games, they have four wins and a respectable 2-1 loss to the surging Penguins. In those four victories, Washington has scored 18 goals. So have they turned an imaginary corner or is this just a brief illusion of past scoring success?

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This team has always had the talent to score, it's just they had what some would call a period of adjustment (sadly measured in years) to a more responsible style. Let's take a gander at how some of their key players have done over the last little while:

Alexander Ovechkin has a five game goal streak on the go, including six goals and nine points over that stretch. His 16 goals on the season have him sixth in league goal scoring and his 136 shots on goal are tied with Evander Kane for the most taken in the NHL. More than that, he looks like he's regained some of his swagger over the last half dozen games or so. His switch to the right side seems to be paying off, although three of those six goals have come via the power play. He was named NHL First Star of the Week.

<u>Nicklas Backstrom</u> has seven points in his last five matches. He will be a key player to Ovechkin's return to prominence. Backstrom is one of the best set up men in the league, twice finishing in the top three in assists. The slick 25-year-old recorded 101 points back in 2009-10 and now has 29 points in 32 contests this season.

Mike Ribeiro is the team's leading point-getter with 34 points in 32 games. Heading into last night's games, he sat 10th in league scoring. Ribeiro recorded 71 points in 2010-11, 78 in 2008-09 and a career-high 83 points back in 2007-08. He has played well this year and by all accounts, has matured as a player and team mate and is playing for a contract.

<u>Troy Brouwer</u> is one of those players who doesn't have name value. His career high is only 40 points set back in 2009-10, then with Chicago, where he won a Cup. After Ovechkin and Backstrom, Brouwer averages the most minutes amongst forwards on the team and receives top unit power play time. He has five points in his last five games. Brouwer has been lining up with <u>Brooks Laich</u> and <u>Mike Ribeiro</u> of late, which bodes well for his point potential down the stretch.

Marcus Johansson has seven points over his last six contests. The 24th overall pick from 2009 has been playing mostly with Ovechkin and Backstrom, so that at least partially explains his

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recent surge in points. He logged a season high of over 19 minutes of ice time in his last game. As long as he remains primarily on that line, he's definitely fantasy-worthy.

<u>John Carlson</u> has a point in each of his last three games. He receives the second most amount of ice time on the team, but only second unit power play minutes, limiting his offensive upside. Better in real life than fantasy at the moment.

<u>Mike Green</u> has one point in his last six matches, yet continues to be given plenty of ice time. He leads the team in average time on ice with over 25 minutes per game and only Ovechkin plays more on the power play. His production down the stretch will determine his keeper status for those of you still holding out hope for a return to even a shadow of his former self.

<u>Dmitry Orlov</u> has only one point in four games since being recalled, but sports a very respectable plus-5. As a rookie last season, he finished with 19 points in 60 NHL games.

<u>Wojtek Wolski</u> has four points in his last five matches, but three of them came in one game. In his last two contests, he has no points and played less than a combined 17 minutes. Unless there is an injury, Wolski will not help your fantasy squad.

Eric Fehr has no points in his last 10 games.

The Caps have a favourable schedule down the stretch and play 10 of their final 16 games against teams with losing records or within the South East, where they own a division best 9-3-0 record. This team may be peaking at the right time.

Remember that little streak at the start of the season by Chicago? Well don't look now, but Pittsburgh is only one point behind the 'Hawks thanks to a 12 game win streak. The Pens are the only team in the NHL without an overtime loss. Chicago leads the NHL in goals for/goals

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against ratio with a plus-35, but Pittsburgh is right on their tail with a plus-32. Anaheim sits a distant third, back at plus-23. The Pens have been without <u>Evgeni Malkin</u> since 9 March and <u>Kris Letang</u>

since 17 March. Let's take a closer look at who is contributing:

Sidney Crosby . Duh. He's back on top of the NHL scoring race with 53 points in 33 games. He has 22 points over his last 10 games played.

Pascal Dupuis has seven points in his last six contests and in his last 10 games he has 12 points. In the previous seven games however, he was held off the scoresheet. In his most recent 10 game stretch, he has played the vast majority of his even-strength shifts with Crosby and Chris Kunitz. The addition of Brenden Morrow may disrupt the lines, but it looks like Morrow will slot into the third line initially. Dupuis' place on the top line is not secure and the situation bears watching very closely.

<u>Chris Kunitz</u> has been cold over the last five games, recording only two points. In his previous five games, he had 11 points. On the season, he has 41 points in 33 games and is about a safe a play as it gets in fantasy hockey this year.

<u>James Neal</u> has only one point in his last six contests, yet in his prior six, he had nine points. The lack of Malkin has definitely had a negative impact on Neal's production, but thankfully the big Russian is listed as day-to-day, so there is no need to panic just yet.

<u>Paul Martin</u> has been a pleasant surprise in the points department just about all year. He has 20 points in 31 games on the season. Despite missing two games, Martin leads all Pens in total ice time by nearly 35 minutes. He receives the sixth most power play time, but with Malkin and Letang both out, he's getting more opportunities with the man advantage. Martin has three points in his last five games.

Matt Cooke is universally reviled by most fans of the game, yet the Pens have stuck by him. To his credit, he has tried to alter his game from blatant attempts to injure to a more subtle version, right Sens fans? Of course I am kidding, Cooke has worked hard to contribute without being a distraction and has seen some results this season. He has three points in his last five games, but more interestingly, only four penalty minutes (all on one play) over his last 13 contests.

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Beau Bennett may be the odd man out with the addition of <u>Brenden Morrow</u>, but we'll have to watch this closely as Morrow can still contribute if he's not scoring. Morrow may bump someone, most likely Cooke, from the third line. Bennett has alternated between a single point and goose eggs in every other game for the last nine games, which means that if I do the math correctly, he has five points in those nine contests.

With the Pens trading for Morrow and now <u>Douglas Murray</u>, they appear to be gearing up for what I'm sure they hope is a long playoff run. The playoffs are really a war of attrition, so having the all important depth could be the difference maker. This team has the potential to be a juggernaut when all their pieces are back together and will be fun to watch unless you are a fan of another Eastern Conference team in the playoffs.

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