

Green With Envy

Written by Russ Miller

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Heading into Thursday night's action, can anyone guess who the top goal scoring defenseman in the NHL is? Souray? Huh? He's just back from an injury! Gonchar? Close, but no cigar. How about a guy who only scored two goals in 70 NHL games last year?

The Capitals Mike Green is currently leading NHL defensemen in goal scoring with eight. Last season, only two defensemen had 20 or more goals; Sheldon Souray had 26 and Dan Boyle scored 20. This season Mr Green is on pace to score 21 goals, 37 points and 90 penalty minutes.

Before we gaze into the future, let's take a look back. In his last year of junior hockey, he scored 66 points, was plus-36 and had 105 penalty minutes in 67 games for Saskatoon. The Washington Capitals selected Green with their third pick (29th overall) in the 2004 entry draft.

In Green's first professional season, he had 43 points along with 79 penalty minutes in 56 games for the AHL's Hershey Bears. Then along comes the playoffs. Green scored 18 points in 21 games and was a sweet plus-16.

Last year, Green played 70 NHL games, scoring an underwhelming two goals and 12 points. He managed to play in the NHL Young Stars game. In addition, he played 12 games in the AHL, scoring eight points. In last year's AHL playoffs, Green led all defensemen in scoring with 16 points in 19 games.

That brings us to this year and his fantastic pre-season. Green scored six points in four games,

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only two points shy of the top pre-season scorers, which included Jason Spezza and Paul Stastny. Some people saw it as merely a product of playing against training camp opponents. Others hoped it was a sign of things to come.

Green is averaging 19:39 of ice time per game and over 23 minutes per game since Bruce Boudreau took over as interim coach. It's interesting to note that Boudreau coached Green during his stint in the AHL. That rapport with the coach is making Green more comfortable on the ice and is allowing him to play with increasing confidence.

Washington is 6-3-1 since the coaching change. Green has scored five goals, seven points and is plus-8 over that period. Wednesday night's game was very impressive for the 22-year-old. He logged a game high 30:05 of ice time, was plus-3 and had the game winner in OT to go along with two assists earlier in the game. He played almost six minutes more than the next Caps defenseman and a whopping 7:36 on the power play.

The Caps first brought in Pothier, then Poti to quarterback their power play. Now it appears that Mike Green is taking over on the blueline. Lately, Green has been getting significant power play time and with Ovechkin, his point totals will steadily rise for the Caps top scoring defenseman.

This kid is not a flash in the pan. He has serious skating ability and wants to be known as an all around defenseman, not only as an offensive defenseman.

This season Green will be in the 40-point, 90 penalty minute range. If he continues to gain confidence, he could see 50-55 points in the very near future. If you are in a keeper league, pick him up now and watch your competitors turn "Green" with envy.

Ghost Ryder

So much for former Steady Eddie, Michael Ryder has picked a fine year to have a power outage. Next season, Ryder is eligible to become an Unrestricted Free Agent. Last year, he was tied for fourth in the NHL in power play goals. The season before that, he was tied for 11th. This season, Ryder has one lousy power play goal and is on pace for 28 points. Over the last three seasons, he's scored 58, 55 and 63 points to go along with one 25 and two 30 goal seasons.

This season, three forwards, Kovalev, Koivu and Higgins, all have more power play time than Ryder. It's obvious that Ryder's loss of power play time is affecting his entire game. He was a healthy scratch Thursday night. Ryder will likely be traded before the deadline and that should give him the fresh start he needs to post better numbers.

Alexei Kovalev is taking advantage of the increased power play time. He is tied with Ovechkin and Holmstrom for the league lead in power play goals with nine. Kovalev is also tied for third in power play points with Briere, behind only Crosby, Gonchar and Pronger. After a disappointing 47-point season last year, Kovalev has bounced back and is on pace for 68 points this season.

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