

Playoff Fairy Tales

Written by Russ Miller

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Do all fairy tales have happy endings? Can playoff dark horses turn into regular season thoroughbreds or do they turn into pumpkins at the stroke of midnight, like Cinderella's carriage? Post-season legends are created by exceptional playoff performances from unexpected sources.

But what happens to Cinderella after the magical playoff ball is over? Does Prince Charming (played by Kevin Lowe in 2006) make Cinderella (Fernando Pisani) an offer (four years, \$10M)

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she can't refuse? Pisani had a decent regular season in 2005-06, scoring 37 points in 80 games, but during the playoffs, he could do no wrong, potting an unbelievable 18 points in 24 games. How does Princess Pisani reward Prince Charming? Recording back to back seasons of 28 and 22 points is no way to say thank you for ten million dollars. The glass slipper fit, but in this case it was in the shape of a steel-toed work boot.

Sergei Samsonov was set to become an unrestricted free agent at the end of the 2005-06 season, so the Bruins traded him to the Edmonton Oilers at the deadline. Samsonov was having a decent season for Boston with 37 points in 55 games. He scored 16 points in 19 games with the Oilers to finish the regular season with 53 points in 74 games. It was Samsonov's spring that had people buzzing. The diminutive winger recorded 15 points in 24 playoff games as the over-achieving Oilers made it all the way to the Stanley Cup Finals that year.

Everything seemed to be turning to gold for the NHL's version of Rumpelstilzkin. Montreal signed the unrestricted Samsonov to a two year \$7.05 million contract, but Samsonov never seemed to find his groove in Montreal and scored a measly 26 points in 63 games in 2006-07.

In June 2007, Montreal was happy to trade him to Chicago in a move widely regarded as a salary dump. Samsonov scored only four points in 23 games as a Black Hawk. The 'Hawks had seen enough and waived the enigmatic Samsonov. Ironically it would be the team that beat Samsonov's Oilers back in the 2006 Cup Finals that would give the Russian another opportunity to weave some magic (gold?).

Carolina's injury woes gave the struggling winger an opportunity to prove himself. Head coach Peter Laviolette, who was an assistant coach with the Bruins during Samsonov's early NHL years, was able to coax 32 points in 38 games (a 69 point pace) the rest of the way. That performance earned Samsonov a three year, \$7.6 million contract from the Hurricanes. That's quite a journey. Will Samsonov continue to turn straw into gold in Carolina?

Sami Pahlsson (Sir Galahad) received consideration for the Conn Smythe trophy in the 2007 playoffs. That's high praise for a renowned checker. Pahlsson only scored 21 points in 82 regular season games in 2006-07. In the playoffs that followed, Pahlsson was a key member of the Ducks checking line (knights of the round table) that smothered the opposition's top players nightly. Somehow he managed to score 12 points in 21 games as the Ducks went on to win the Stanley Cup (the holy grail). So what does Pahlsson do the following season? He scores only 15 points in 56 games.

Travis Moen is the Ugly Duckling. He had an almost identical playoff to Pahlsson last year for the Ducks. Of course he signed a two year deal with the Ducks following his great playoff run. Unfortunately, his regular season totals declined from 21 points to only eight points. Now that's ugly.

My Snow White is Joffrey Lupul. He had 53 points in the 2005-06 season and then scored 11 points in 16 playoff games for the Ducks. The Oilers traded for the restricted free agent and signed him to a three year almost seven million dollar deal (the poisoned apple). Lupul must

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have stayed up late at night counting all that money because the following season he sleep-walked to a nightmarish 28 points with the Oilers. Edmonton decided to cut their losses and trade Lupul. Now with the Flyers, the mirror on the wall says Lupul has turned into a pretty fair player.

The majority of these players had one thing in common, they were free agents at the end of the year. Take great or unexpected playoff performances for what they are. Don't try and forecast how many points a player will get next season based entirely on one playoff year, no matter how great. A great playoff does not guarantee regular season success. Buyer beware.

Apparently I chose the wrong Red Wing dark horse in Cleary this year. Clearly, with another hat trick last night and 11 goals so far in these playoffs, Johan Franzen aka "the Mule" IS Sleeping Beauty. Franzen finished the regular season by scoring 15 goals and 20 points in 16 games in March and April and has continued his torrid pace into the playoffs. He might be the exception to the rule here.

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