

A Sound Thrashing

Written by Russ Miller

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Outside of Ilya Kovalchuk, is there any Atlanta Thrasher worth owning in a hockey pool? Some people are sold on Kari Lehtonen's talent. Unfortunately, because the team is suspect both offensively and defensively, Lehtonen's wins and goals-against-average numbers will suffer.

Forget trying to predict who will play on a line with Kovalchuk. It's hard to hit a moving target. One bad game and some coach's will tinker with the lines. The default or fallback is Todd White, as Kovalchuk seems to like playing with him. I just wouldn't draft White based on this.

Instead of line combinations, it's better to focus on who's going to get the bulk of power play minutes. After the obvious in Kovalchuk, newcomer Jason Williams and old-timer Slava Kozlov are the best bets to play on the first power play unit.

How many of you knew that Slava Kozlov had off-season surgery on his shoulder and knee? Apparently, Kozlov played the last three months of the season without being able to lift his arm above his shoulder. When you combine that with a knee that required surgery, it helps explain

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the drastic plunge from 80 to 41 points. Kozlov has looked good this pre-season and a rebound to 60 points should be on tap for the 36-year-old.

The signing of Jason Williams will prove to be a good one for the Thrashers. He can play both Centre and Right Wing. The fact he is on a one-year deal is also something to take notice of, as it may serve as motivation for the player. Williams is currently sitting out with an undisclosed injury, but is practicing and will play in the opener. The other thing Williams has done in the past is power play point man. Which leads me to my next subject.

With the acquisitions of Mathieu Schneider and Ron Hainsey, where does that leave Tobias Enstrom? Hainsey wasn't signed for his defensive prowess and Schneider is established as a very good offensive defenseman. The fact they have a new coach who may decide not use Enstrom the same fashion as the old coach could be problematic. When you combine all that, it may mean less offensive opportunities for Enstrom.

In Atlanta's last pre-season game, both Schneider and Hainsey received the vast majority of power play minutes over Enstrom. That doesn't mean that Enstrom is off the top power play unit, but I just can't see him leading the league in power play ice time again this season. There are just too many options for the coach to go with. If Enstrom slumps or isn't getting it done, he will quickly be replaced. A repeat of his 38-point rookie season is unlikely. Look for a slight decrease to the 30-35 point range for the Swedish sophomore.

Zach Bogosian, the third overall selection in last year's entry draft, has not looked out of place during pre-season play. Taking an 18-year-old defenseman in a one-year league is pretty risky. The team still has the option of sending him back to junior after nine games. Defensemen typically take longer to adjust to the pro game when compared to forwards. The Thrashers don't need his offence as they already have three capable offensive defensemen. I would only take Bogosian in a keeper pool and preferably one that doesn't include plus/minus.

It looks like Brett Sterling has made the team out of training camp. He has had a strong camp and was the team's leading scorer. He will likely start on the third line, but once injuries and slumps hit, Sterling could end up playing a much larger role than a typical third liner. The pint-sized 24-year-old winger has scored 93 goals and 168 points in 147 AHL games over the last two seasons.

I'm still not convinced that Bryan Little will pay dividends this season. Last year, he split the season between the AHL and NHL with only average results. I don't see any of the signs that are usually present when a player is ready for prime time. Little definitely has offensive ability, but has yet to show it at the pro level. Until he shows me something, I'm inclined to take a pass on him and let someone else suffer the growing pains.

After coming over from the Penguins in the Hossa deal last season, Colby Armstrong scored at a 50 point pace for the Thrashers. Over his career, Armstrong has averaged 45 points a season, although some of that can be attributed to some kid named Crosby. I'd put Armstrong in the 40-point group and hope for a breakout season.

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Did you know that Mathieu Schneider's brother lives in Atlanta? After the Anaheim situation last year, you have to figure that the veteran defenseman is happy to be in Atlanta. Look for another productive season from the ageless wonder (39).