Following the lead of my western counterpart, I'll take a look at players heading into their fourth NHL season and analyze whether or not it is more likely to be magical or mysterious.

The indicators for a breakout season pretty much boil down to an opportunity to play in the top six, combined with a prominent role on the team's power play. In the salary cap era, players are often given the opportunity to have a breakout season earlier than the traditional fourth year. That said, here are 16 players entering their fourth NHL seasons and my projection on how they'll fare in 2009-10:

Phil Kessel Bos

70-36-24-60 (2008-09)
82-19-18-37 (2007-08)
70-11-18-29 (2006-07)

Kessel appears to have had his breakout season this past year after jumping from 19 goals and 37 points to 36 goals and 60 points. There is room for improvement though as Kessel recorded only eight goals and seven assists on the power play. With Kessel recovering from surgery to repair a torn rotator cuff, he may not be ready for the start of the season.

Expect the restricted free agent to remain a Bruin while taking four to six months recovering from serious shoulder surgery. If he matches last year's numbers, consider it a successful season. He only gets better from here on in.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Treading water

Drew Stafford Buf

79-20-25-45 (2008-09)
64-16-22-38 (2007-08)
41-13-14-27 (2006-07)

The thirteenth overall pick in the 2004 entry draft, Stafford's numbers have gotten successively better in each of his three NHL seasons. He is clearly too good for the AHL as evidenced by his 44 points in 34 games in his only AHL stint back in 2006-07.

In his most recent season, Stafford increased his shots on goal while maintaining the same points per game pace as the previous season. The restricted free agent recorded 17 power play points and is very likely to stay with the Sabres.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Marginal breakout

Anton Babchuk Car

72-16-19-35 (2008-09)
57-9-17-26 (2007-08 - Russia)
52-2-12-14 (2006-07)
39-5-5-10 (2005-06)

Perhaps an odd candidate as a fourth year player, but his five games back in 2003-04 don't count as a season, nor does the year spent in Russia (2007-08). That season in Omsk only helped gain Babchuk much needed confidence to play at a high level. The mid-season coaching change in Carolina also seemed to spur the big defender. From the middle of February to the end of the regular season, Babchuk scored 24 points in 26 games. Of those 24 points, 11 came via the man advantage, including seven power play goals.

Babchuk struggled during the playoffs, where he was scratched for six playoff games. Hmmm, I seem to remember a guy named Kessel who was scratched during Boston's playoff run in 2008 and went on to post a breakout season the following year.

Babchuk will be a restricted free agent this off-season. He'll likely end up back with Carolina, but what can we expect his point total to look like next season? I see a reasonably safe 40-45 points.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Decent uptick

David Booth Fla

72-31-29-60 (2008-09)
73-22-18-40 (2007-08)
48-3-7-10 (2006-07)

David Booth is a restricted free agent this off-season. He may have had his breakout season already. I don't see his upside as being significantly more than 60 points. If he equals his 2008-09 output, I'd be quite happy. He had 16 power play points last season, a jump of 20 points from the year before. If he signs with another team, then maybe an increase of ten points is in order, depending on the team.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Slight decrease in points

Andrei Kostitsyn Mtl

74-23-18-41 (2008-09)
78-26-27-53 (2007-08)
22-1-10-11 (2006-07)

The elder Kostitsyn had 52 points in 50 AHL games in his last AHL season and is looking like he might be in line for a breakout season. Last season was a huge disappointment for the tenth overall pick from the 2003 entry draft. There were just too many distractions last year in Montreal. Maybe this season, the Canadiens can focus on playing hockey instead of trying to impress century old ghosts? Andrei only needs another opportunity in order to post a 20 point increase.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Poised for a breakout

Guillaume Lantendresse Mtl

56-14-12-26 (2008-09)
73-16-11-27 (2007-08)
80-16-13-29 (2006-07)

Had Latendresse played all 82 games, he would have had 20 goals and 38 points. The question is can he hit 40 points next season? Tough call as it all depends on if the 22-year-old restricted free agent can earn the trust of Coach Martin and ends up on a scoring line for an extended period. At the outset that seems unlikely, but with so much turnover forecasted in Montreal, who knows?

If the Lecavalier trade rumour materializes, then Montreal may look a little like Pittsburgh where the guys who may not otherwise get a shot at a top six role get a chance to play with the big dogs. In his last year of junior hockey, Latendresse scored 43 goals and 83 points in only 51 games.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Marginal breakout

Travis Zajac NJ

82-20-42-62 (2008-09)
82-14-20-34 (2007-08)
80-17-25-42 (2006-07)

If there is a case for removing the plus/minus as a useful stat, this guy's statistics are exhibit A. Zajac was a plus-33 this season after going minus-11 the previous year. In my opinion, Zajac does not have much more room to grow points-wise. He could hit 70 points next season, but with a new coach, who knows? The pending restricted free agent had 15 power play points last season.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Stable, with the possibly of a slight decrease

Johnny Oduya NJ

82-7-22-29 (2008-09)
75-6-20-26 (2007-08)
76-2-9-11 (2006-07)

When the Devils name their new coach, it will be hit or miss on how it will affect Oduya and that's assuming the unrestricted free agent re-signs with the Devils. With Sutter at the helm, Oduya scored 26 and 29 points and was a roto-useful player if your pool counted plus/minus. He was plus-27 and plus-21 over the last two seasons. He's not likely to top 30 points, so I would only take him very late in a deep pool and hope he can maintain his positive plus/minus numbers.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Treading water at best

Andy Greene NJ

49-2-7-9 (2008-09)
59-2-8-10 (2007-08)
23-1-5-6 (2006-07)

Change is in the air in New Jersey. Niclas Havelid and Johnny Oduya are unrestricted free agents. If Greene can manage to make this team as a number five or six defenseman, then he will likely get some second unit power play time. If he can do this, then he may have some fantasy value. In his last two years of college hockey, Greene recorded seasons of 31 points in 39 games and 34 points in 38 games. Greene will likely be easier (cheaper) to sign than either Oduya or Havelid, plus he has more upside offensively.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Potential to breakout is here

Dan Girardi NYR

82-4-18-22 (2008-09)
82-10-18-28 (2007-08)
34-0-6-6 (2006-07)

The numbers are a little misleading. Girardi got off to a fantastic start with 14 points in his first 19 games, then somehow finished the season with only eight points over his remaining 63 games. Under Coach Tortorella, Girardi had 6 points in 21 games, which is only around 23 points over the course of a full season. What will next year hold for the undrafted defenseman from Welland, Ontario? While he may be capable of putting up 40 points, he's more likely to hit 25 to 30 points in his current situation. There's nothing here screaming breakout.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Stable

Alexandre Picard Ott

47-6-8-14 (2008-09)
24-3-3-6 (2007-08)
62-3-19-22 (2006-07)

The good news? Picard had six goals and ten power play points this season. The bad news is that he only had a total of 14 points in 47 games this season. Without significant power play time, he is virtually useless as a fantasy player. He was injured for all but effectively one game under Coach Clouston. Picard's future in Ottawa all depends on what the Sens end up with on the blueline after dealing disgruntled winger Dany Heatley. Odds are that they will pick up an offensive defender in any Heatley deal and that will likely negate Picard's fantasy value.

Prognosis for 2009-10: No breakout this year

Matt Carle Phi

76-5-21-26 (2008-09)
62-2-13-15 (2007-08)
77-11-31-42 (2006-07)

In Matt Carle's final year of collegiate hockey, he recorded 53 points in 39 games. For comparison purposes, Brian Leetch had 47 points in 37 games in his last year of college hockey. Carle will be 25-years-old at the start of the upcoming season. This guy led the Flyers in even strength time on ice and was fourth overall in ice time.

Ignore any Flyer fans who think that Philadelphia will be able to sign any big free agents named Bouwmeester. They are so tight up against the cap that twice during the season; Philly had to bring in college kids on 24-hour emergency contracts. Unless the Flyers are able to shed some high priced contracts, they will have to rely on what they've already got.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Primed for a big breakout

Evgeni Malkin Pit

82-35-78-113 (2008-09)
82-47-59-106 (2007-08)
78-33-52-85 (2006-07)

Gee, will Geno have a breakout year in his fourth season? Considering that he's gone from 85 points to 106 to 113, odds are pretty good that he'll eclipse 120 points, but is that really considered a "breakout" season? Nah, just call it natural progression.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Marginal increase

Jordan Staal Pit

82-22-27-49 (2008-09)
82-12-16-28 (2007-08)
81-29-13-42 (2006-07)

Not yet 21-years-old and Jordan Staal has three full NHL seasons under his belt. A 60 point season would be considered a breakout for the most recent Staal to have his name inscribed on the Stanley Cup. Will he breakout in year four? I think that with both Crosby and Malkin in the middle, Staal's breakout season may be delayed a year or two from next season. Here is an example of a much more valuable player in real life than fantasy. His time will come, but not likely next season.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Marginal breakout

Mike Smith TB

41 Games Played 14 Wins 2.62 GAA 2 Shutouts 0.916 Save Percentage (2008-09)
34 Games Played 15 Wins 2.59 GAA 3 Shutouts 0.901 Save Percentage (2007-08)
23 Games Played 12 Wins 2.23 GAA 3 Shutouts 0.912 Save Percentage (2006-07)

The only question that needs to be answered is can Karri Ramo carry the load next season? If the answer is no, then Smith will likely play 60-65 games on a bad to fair team. I would argue that Smith had a successful campaign in 2008-09, considering how poorly the team played this past season. Karri Ramo, who is a restricted free agent, played 24 games and won a measly four games, while recording an inflated 3.66 goals-against-average and 0.894 save percentage. That pales in comparison to Smith's numbers. Ramo is four years younger than the 27-year-old Smith and may not be ready for prime time. Even if Ramo makes the big club, he likely won't play more than 25 games.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Marginal breakout

Tomas Fleischmann Wsh

73-19-18-37 (2008-09)
75-10-20-30 (2007-08)
29-4-4-8 (2006-07)

In his last two seasons in the AHL, Fleischmann recorded some very impressive numbers; 51 points in 45 games and 63 points in 57 games. Fleischmann was seventh on the Caps in time on ice, but with Sergei Fedorov and Viktor Kozlov likely departing via unrestricted free agency, he is set to move into the top six of a very talented lineup. Fleischmann has one more season to go before restricted free agency, so he will be motivated to produce a big season to use in his next salary negotiation.

Prognosis for 2009-10: Primed for a big breakout

My criteria for making this list was that you had to play at least 20 games (a quarter) for it to count as a season. Guys who didn't make the list:

Mike Green – 22 games in 2005-06 count as a season
David Krejci, Brandon Dubinsky – Six games in 2006-07 don't count as a season
Kris Letang, David Clarkson – Seven games in 2006-07
Rich Peverley – 13 games in 2006-07
Ryan Callahan – 14 games in 2006-07

Of the abovementioned players that didn't make my fourth year criteria, I think Letang (with 13 points in 23 playoff games), Dubinsky (Coach Tortorella leaned on him for almost 20 minutes a game in the playoffs), Callahan (one of the Rangers more noticeable players under Tortorella, pure energy) and Peverley (35 points in 39 games in Atlanta) all have a chance to improve on last season's numbers.