

## Profile: Mike Santorelli

Written by Tim "Duballstar" Lucarelli

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How easy is it to give up on a player anywhere from 21-26 years old? Pretty damn easy. From a fantasy standpoint, if someone doesn't produce quickly enough, they're not welcome on your roster. And once you cut a guy like that, the breakup is for real. You don't ever want him again. At least that's how most of us think.

Two years ago the kind folks at Dobberhockey.com were prepping for their infamous Guide

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release and one name that kept popping up was **Mike Santorelli** of the Nashville Predators. Santorelli, whose brother Mark was and still is also a Nashville product, had a pretty solid collegiate career at Northern Michigan University, posting 110 points in 121 total games (3 years). He then followed that up with 21 goals and 21 assists in his rookie AHL campaign and right around this time was generating a decent amount of buzz. Many thought he'd make the Predators, which he didn't, but he did put together one hell of a season in the A. In 70 games played, he posted 70 points. Finishing one point behind him was Mr. Cal O'Reilly. Eventually, he'd wear out his welcome on most people's fantasy rosters and if you were an owner, his trade value was basically nothing.

In 2009-10, everyone is just waiting for Santorelli to do some magic at the NHL level. He makes the team out of camp and quickly disappoints, scoring only three points in 25 games. Now here's the thing about Santorelli. He can play all three forward positions, but he's best used at center. Nashville was an organization that had a lot of players who were familiar with playing center and they were hoping they could use Santorelli on the wing. They tried him out for the majority of the season on the wing with Legwand and Erat. Then they lined him up with Erat and Hornqvist. They tried Smithson and Ward. Take a [look](#) at all the different lines he was used in that year. Pretty shocking for only playing 25 games right? Things just weren't working and Mike Santorelli found himself frustrated and back in the American League.

At this point, there's a very fine line between becoming a career AHLer (see Brett Sterling) and adjusting to the game pace of the NHL. In his time back in Milwaukee, Mike showed he has mastered the AHL game, scoring 59 points in 57 games to lead the team in scoring. With his contract expiring, Santorelli was hopeful for an NHL roster spot, but Cal O'Reilly's upcoming contract was a one-way deal and Colin Wilson was also in the way. Not to mention that in the little time that Santorelli spent in the NHL, he failed to gain confidence from his coach or chemistry with his linemates. Things didn't look too promising.

Surprisingly, that's when things turned for the better. Florida saw Santorelli as a bargain investment and expressed extreme confidence in the kid, giving him the 2nd line center role right out of training camp. For a guy who had three points in a total of 33 career NHL games, he had to have been shocked to get the job right behind Stephen Weiss, with Reinprecht, Reasoner, Matthias, Olesz, and Higgins all on the roster with experience at center.

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Santorelli has been seeing most of his ice time with Booth and Bernier and he is taking full advantage. He's even getting PP and PK time. As 2010 closed, Santorelli found himself tied for 2nd on the Panthers in goals with 10. His 24 points in 44 games puts him on pace for 45 which is exactly where I'd expect him to finish. With that said, don't be surprised to see him push to become a member of the 60-plus club as early as next season. He isn't shooting nearly as much as he should be, so once he gets comfortable, look for him to be a solid 25-30 goal scorer. Santo is two for four on shootout attempts this year and eight of his 12 goals have been scored when his team is either trailing or tied. His confidence is increasing and he's being used in critical situations.

A lot of people don't want you to believe that Santorelli will become a worthwhile fantasy hockey player. They will say he hasn't shown that he can keep up the pace he's on. Well, I respectfully disagree. Santorelli is only getting his second real gig in the NHL and while he's playing well now, he's still developing into the player he can be. Santo is at his best when he is averaging around 2.8+ shots per game. Right now he is averaging 2.2 in Florida, but with confidence he will shoot the puck more. Just as a comparison, last year Santorelli averaged 3.26 SOG/gm in the AHL where he had success and only 1.44 SOG/gm in the NHL where he struggled. At both the collegiate and AHL levels, Santo needed a season or 2 of adjustment before he hit his stride. The fact that he's already hitting his stride in the NHL is a great sign.

He's got "blue line syndrome" right now (the blue line Yahoo gives for a lengthy streak, coined by my younger brother), but he will definitely hit a cold streak when other teams begin to zero in on him and shut him down. Throughout his career he's shown consistency though, so you should expect the same at the NHL level. A year from now he'll definitely have a better grasp of how to stay consistent in this league. How can you tell if Santorelli has it or doesn't have it? Check his SOG totals. In the month of January, he has 2.88 SOG/gm. Use 2.5 as the measure and see if he's above or below. If he's above, he's on his game, he has his confidence, and if he's not on the scoresheet, he will be soon.

Santorelli isn't likely to be a No. 1 center, but there are Panther fans who might be quick to tell

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you that Mike Santorelli is a major part of the Panthers' success this season and that at times he has looked like their best player, even better than Stephen Weiss. Now don't get too excited...Weiss isn't going anywhere, but for the remainder of this season and next season, Santorelli will be Florida's second line center and he'll be used extensively. Don't forget either that Florida management has been chaotic and have shown that they want to win. If someone is producing, they'll be more than happy to give that guy more and more ice time, no matter whose place they're taking. Although he isn't a No. 1 center, he can play the role, much similarly to how Daymond Langkow was used as a No. 1 center, first with Philadelphia, then with Phoenix, and eventually Calgary.

Below are what I believe are realistic expectations, with my 2011-12 prediction still a bit high. He may eventually surpass 60 points, but expect the following and anything in addition will be a bonus.

2010-11: 20-25-45

2011-12: 26-30-56

2012-13: 27-33-60