

Late Blooming Brian Boyle

Written by Tim Lucarelli

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Eight years ago, NHL GMs consulted with their scouts and chose from a talent in pool in what is now considered one of the deepest drafts of all time. One player chosen in that 2003 draft (26th overall) is often overlooked.

Brian Boyle

is taking longer than expected, but many forget that he was drafted just two spots behind Philadelphia's Mike Richards and three spots behind Vancouver's Ryan Kesler.

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The 6'7" Boyle's slow development isn't all that surprising though, considering the team that drafted him (Los Angeles) attempted to convert him into a defenseman before shifting him back to full time duty at center. In addition to the positional switch, Boyle found himself flying back and forth between Manchester and Los Angeles slightly more frequently than desired. In the summer of 2009, Los Angeles had given up and traded the former first round selection to the New York Rangers for a third round choice in 2010.

After Boyle was drafted, he chose to play four years of college hockey in his hometown of Boston. By his senior year he was named captain of Boston College and led the squad with 53 points and 104 penalty minutes in only 42 games. To put that in perspective, Boyle not only led his team in scoring, but finished sixth in the NCAA in penalty minutes and was the only player to have over 90 penalty minutes and score more than 35 points.

Boyle finally joined the AHL's Monarchs in 2007-08 and he impressed right away, scoring 62 points in 70 games and getting an NHL call up due to his strong play. In those eight games, Boyle turned even more heads, scoring 4 goals and 1 assist. Hopes were high in 2008-09, but one bad season and an expiring contract had Boyle on the trade block over the offseason.

Upon arrival in New York, Brian promptly signed a two year contract and began the transition. Boyle knew he would have a hard time earning key minutes, but it ended up being even tougher than he thought as he fought Prospal, Dubinsky, Drury, Christensen, Higgins, and Lisin for minutes at center. For most of the year, Boyle would find himself skating with Aaron Voros and any of Brashear, Avery, or Lisin. No wonder he scored only six points in 71 games.

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Over the most recent offseason, Boyle had enough. He wanted to get better and used the offseason to address one of his biggest weaknesses. His skating. Boyle spent the summer taking lessons from a figure skater and his confidence heading into 2010-11 was higher than ever before. Said Boyle after a preseason game, "I worked on my skating this summer...I felt like I could move, and the explosiveness on the goal, and using my core, that was one thing that helped me get around that guy and bring it to the net. It did help, obviously. It's going to help me a lot."

In a separate interview, Boyle spoke about his career progression. "Every level I've gone to, it's taken me a little while to adjust. It's just taken a little bit longer in the NHL, which makes sense." Had Los Angeles realized that Boyle wasn't fully developed in his first professional season, they may not have moved on so quickly. Besides adjusting to the game, Boyle, like many other promising NHL players, has had difficulty finding opportunity. Rob Luker of blueshirtbanter.com wrote on [Boyle](#) back in December and does a great job of showing how big of an impact opportunity has been on Boyle's career.

So far Boyle has shown he can be a great third line center, but if he's ever given more opportunity, he will likely surprise even his own coaches when he proves to them that he can be a second line center capable of scoring 45-50 points and using his body like a freight train. In the right situation (and with the right talent around him), Boyle is capable of scoring 60 points. With Stepan, Dubinsky, and Drury already in his way, Boyle is going to have a tough time reaching this level in New York though.

Boyle will finish this season as a RFA with the New York Rangers and will likely sign a one or two year extension. The things to look for surrounding Boyle's fantasy relevance are (1) if there are injuries to any New York centers in the offseason or preseason, (2) if Stepan falls victim of

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the sophomore slump and Boyle finds himself ever skating on the first or second line on a consistent basis, and (3) if Boyle gets traded. I find scenario three the most likely of all, but if any of the three happen, it might be time to roll the dice on Brian.

These consideration points of course refer to Boyle's point production, but if your league counts hits, Boyle's 222 hits put him ninth among forwards in the NHL. Add in his 21 goals and he could already be valuable in your league. Although he's taken much longer than his 2003 draft counterparts, Boyle is still developing now and in the right situation, could turn quite a few heads.