

Nikolai Kulemin

Written by Tim Lucarelli

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Last season, the Sedin-Sedin-Burrows line was the most productive in the NHL with 120 points. Even fans in Toronto might not have realized that the next most productive line in the NHL was Kulemin-Grabovski-MacArthur with 110. This Toronto trio beat out some of the more famous trios such as Lucic-Krejci-Horton (107), Ryan-Getzlaf-Perry, and (105) Hartnell-Briere-Leino (91). The leading goal scorer from this Toronto line was none other than the number 44 overall selection in the 2006 entry draft, Nikolai Kulemin.

The year Kulemin was drafted was just after his rookie season in Metallurg of the Russian Super League. Evgeni Malkin led the team in scoring that year and Kulemin managed only 13 points in 31 games. After Malkin's departure, Kulemin broke out and scored 27 goals, which tied him for third most in the RSL. Kulemin was still only 20 years old, but was establishing himself as a goal scorer in one of the toughest Russian leagues. In 13 playoff games that year, he'd score nine goals.

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After one more season for Metallurg, Kulemin was ready to cross the pond. He skated only five games with the Toronto Marlies before sticking with the Leafs. In the 73 NHL games he saw, Kulemin scored 31 points, good enough for ninth best on his team.

In Russia, Kulemin played a one-dimensional game which was all about goal scoring. That year he scored nine goals in 13 playoff games? He was only able to manage one assist. In North America, that style of play wouldn't get him very far, so he worked on adjusting, and in 2009-10 Kulemin strung together a 16-20-36 season in 78 games played.

This is significant for two reasons. The first is that Kulemin shows for the second year in a row that he can play the majority of the NHL season without missing major time to injury. For fantasy owners, this information is quite valuable. Second, this marked the first time in Kulemin's career since his rookie campaign with Metallurg that he tallied more assists than goals.

In 2010-11, Kulemin broke out, scoring 30 goals and 57 points. Nikolai was showing significant progress and his line's production was a major reason why the Maple Leafs were pushing for a postseason berth toward the end of the year. Mikhail Grabovski is signed for next season, but a major catalyst on this line, Clarke MacArthur, is looking for his extension. If Toronto can keep this line intact for next season, fantasy owners and Leafs fans should certainly be rejoicing.

Kulemin fills out a 6'1" 220 lb. frame quite nicely and as a result is very strong in front of the net. Nikolai is great at picking up scraps and finding creative ways of scoring down low, but also carries a very accurate shot from the perimeter. If Kulemin has a clear look, more often than not he'll find a way to hit the twine. With that being said, MacArthur is a key component to this line. MacArthur had truckloads of confidence this past season and displayed great hands on a number of occasions. MacArthur is often the one creating the space for Grabovski or Kulemin,

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so his contract for the coming season will have a major impact on the output for the other two members of his line.

With JS Giguere's contract expiring and the team likely moving in another direction, the Maple Leafs will have \$6 million to re-allocate. How much of this money will be available for current players like MacArthur will likely depend on which direction they decide to take in goal. Will it be James Reimer (also a free agent) or Jonas Gustavsson or will they look for outside help? Whichever direction they go, I believe the odds are strong that the Leafs will re-sign MacArthur, who scored the second most points on the team.

With Kulemin's line intact for the coming season, we should see a slight increase from his production last season. Don't expect 70 points out of him, but 30-35 goals and 65 points is right about where he should be. If your league counts hits, you might want to know that Kulemin also had 101 hits last year, which put him in company with Jarome Iginla and Mike Richards. In most leagues, left wing is the toughest position to acquire, so Kulemin may be a perfect depth addition in 2011-12.