Let me start off this week by saying that I have never been a fan of the Montreal Canadiens. I now have a healthy respect for the Canadiens scouting staff and management for stocking what is a pretty good-looking mix of experience and youth. There are many fantasy worthy players that are just starting to scratch the surface of their prodigious talents.

Everyone knows what Saku Koivu brings to the table and Alexei Kovalev is playing more like the old Kovalev than the version we saw last season. Roman Hamrlik is providing a veteran presence on the blue line as expected and has contributed offensively as well. Cristobal Huet is giving the team steady, if not spectacular, goaltending game in and game out.

Montreal has only had three top ten picks since 1996, but they are all important pieces in the team's immediate future:

In 2001, Montreal made defenseman Mike Komisarek the seventh overall pick. He managed to score 30 points in 56 AHL games in 2002-03, but if you're seeking offence, look in another direction. Komisarek is gold though if you need blocked shots, hits and a helping of penalty minutes. He leads the league in blocked shots and is in the top five in hits.

Left Winger Andrei Kostitsyn was taken tenth overall in 2003. He's averaged a point per game over his last 16 games. In those 16 games, Kostitsyn was held pointless in only three contests and had point streaks of five, four and three games. Only 22 years of age, this guy is only going to get better. He is on pace for 50 points, but all signs point to a great second half and a shot at breaking 60 points.

Montreal surprised many pundits by taking goalie Carey Price fifth overall in the 2005 entry draft. His rise has been phenomenal, from CHL's Goaltender of the Year to World Junior MVP and Top Goalie to winning the AHL's Calder Cup and Playoff MVP as a rookie. This season, the 20 year old rookie has performed very well in the NHL, but he's still learning his way around. There isn't a better fantasy goalie prospect to own.

The 1998 entry draft was a very good one for Montreal's scouting staff. It yielded Mike Ribeiro (Dal), Francois Beauchemin (Ana), Michael Ryder and a sixth round gem from Russia.

It's hard to believe that 161 names were called before Andrei Markov's. He is sixth in defenseman scoring and tied for tops in goals with eleven. Not only does Markov lead the team in overall ice time and power play time, he also logs the second most short-handed time behind only Mike Komisarek. Keeping Markov over Souray has proven to be another wise decision by management.

In addition to Komisarek, Montreal selected Tomas Plekanec in the third round of 2001. He was very good at the last World Championships, where he led the Czech Republic in scoring. Plekanec is building on that success in his third NHL season and is heating up with nine points in his last five games. He also has 12 multi-point games to his credit already this season and is on pace for 70 points.

Christopher Higgins was Montreal's first selection (14th overall) in 2002. He has skating ability, determination and doesn't need a map to find his own zone. Higgins is on pace for nearly 60 points this season. The 24 year old has been spending more time on the power play lately, which is a good thing considering how potent Montreal's power play is.

Mark Streit was drafted as a 26 year old in 2004 and is turning into a decent fantasy player. He qualifies as a defenseman, but occasionally skates on a forward line. Many observers thought Roman Hamrlik would get the bulk of Souray's power play time, but Streit has played very well and is second only to Andrei Markov in ice time with the man advantage. He has 17 power play points, which is three more than he had all of last season.

Following Price in the 2005 draft were Guillaume Latendresse and Sergei Kostitsyn. They have shown flashes of their potential, but need another year to develop. Their future looks bright.

A lot of people thought the loss of Souray's booming shot would doom last year's top ranked power play. Last season, Montreal's power play was all about setting up Souray's big shot. This season, Markov runs the power play in an unpredictable fashion, making it more difficult to defend. Thanks in large part to Markov, the Habs are once again the NHL's best with the man advantage.

Being the NHL's most storied franchise is a matter of history for Montreal, but having a talented group of youngsters starting to breakout at the same time is well, priceless.

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