

Shuffle Off to Buffalo

Written by Russ Miller

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Buffalo's newest Sabre, Steve Bernier, had himself quite a debut scoring two goals and adding an assist. Maybe you are asking yourself is this guy legit or was he just poaching off Joe Thornton for a while? The soon to be 23 year old is in his third NHL season and has scored 84 points in 161 career NHL games. I would think that Bernier would enjoy getting away from coach Wilson's penchant for playing What's My Line?

Over his four years in the QMJHL, Bernier scored 151 goals and 313 points along with 335 penalty minutes in 271 games. He was taken in the first round, 16th overall by the Sharks in 2003. I generally like players taken in the first round because it means that someone who gets paid to assess a player's talent and likelihood of success in the NHL thought enough of that player to warrant a first round selection.

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Bernier has earned a bit of a reputation as a streaky player. Hmm, put him on a line with the streaky Derek Roy (26 points in last 20 games) and surging Thomas Vanek (17 points last 11 games). Bernier is a big winger with a scoring touch who is getting a golden opportunity on the Sabres top line and second power play unit.

After this season, Bernier will be a restricted free agent. What does that mean to you? Plenty. A contract year means that apart from the player's personal drive to succeed, they are fuelled by something extra. Money – the chance for a bigger payday. The more success they have in a contract year, the more cash they earn. Opportunity plus motivation often equals production.

While Bernier looks to be a good short term fill-in, the only question that needs to be addressed is what happens when Afinogenov returns?

A word about Thomas Vanek. Smoking. Over the first four months of the season, he scored 14 goals in 50 games. With one more game remaining in February, Vanek has 12 goals in 14 games. He's now looking at a 35 goal season, not too bad considering how poorly the first four months of the season went.

Devil's Hot

Prior to their nine game winning streak in November, New Jersey was 7-10-2. From game 20 until now, they are 30-11-4. Over their last ten games, they've gone 7-1-2 despite having the league's 20th ranked power play and 21st in offensive output. Their strength lies in keeping pucks out of their net. New Jersey allows the second least goals against in the league, behind only Detroit and now sit atop the Eastern Conference standings.

Brent Sutter has the Devils playing inspired, smart hockey. What the heck has the coach got these guys drinking? Paul Martin is a plus-20 and Johnny Oduya is plus-19. Are you kidding me?

After losing their top forward and defenseman, the Devil's looked to be in for a long season. Ironically, now it looks like New Jersey is in for a long season this year, if you include the playoffs.

Does anyone else find it interesting that over the summer, Calgary's GM Darryl Sutter hired Mike Keenan on June 12th and on July 13th, Brent Sutter signed on to become the Devils head coach? I guess working for your big brother isn't an ideal situation. What happens when it is time to fire the coach? All NHL coaches have a best before date, even if they are your brother.

Brotherly Love

Heading into last night's contest against the Sens, Philadelphia was in the midst of an ugly 1-7-2 run. Things aren't too good on the injury front with Gagne, Richards and Lupul all out of the line-up. In the Flyers last two games, Jeff Carter has played an incredible 26:18 and 26:08, recording a goal and an assist. Interestingly, over those same two games, Briere was given 18:20 and 16:59 of ice time. Watch for Carter's production to increase with his ice time.

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Oh Carolina

Prior to last night's game, Carolina was 7-2-1 over their last ten games. Even more incredible is that since Brind'Amour went down with a knee injury, the 'Canes are 5-1-1. Eric Staal has scored ten points, Ray Whitney nine and even Sergei Samsonov has contributed with six points in those seven games. Since arriving in Carolina, Samsonov has scored 18 points in 22 games.

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