

Off the Grid: Brendan Smith

Written by Michael Amato

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Brendan Smith is a rare prospect these days because he has had so much time to develop. Many young players are rushed to the NHL before they are ready and it permanently damages their skill and potential. A 2007 Detroit first round pick, Smith was afforded the luxury of playing three years of college hockey at the University of Wisconsin and last season with the AHL's Grand Rapids Griffins.

While at Wisconsin, his production steadily improved over three seasons. During his first campaign in 2007-08 his numbers indicated he was becoming more of a defensive defenseman as he only tallied two goals and 12 points. The next season however, he nearly doubled his total by potting nine goals and 23 points. His final season showed what kind of production he is capable of as he delivered 15 goals and 52 points in just 42 games, while receiving the WCHA Defensive Player of the Year award, and being named a finalist for the Hobey Baker Award.

This past season marked his first pro experience with Grand Rapids of the AHL. It was a solid year with 32 points in 63 games but his 124 PIM showed he has an all-around repertoire for fantasy owners. If he can put up 40-plus point seasons in the NHL and add over 100 PIM, he is going to be very valuable.

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Speaking of the NHL, Smith has a great opportunity to make it there full-time next season. As Detroit's top-rated prospect on defense, he finds himself in the best possible position to make the leap. The recent signing of Nicklas Lidstrom notwithstanding, the Wings have some holes on 'D' right now. Brian Rafalski has retired, Jonathan Ericsson and Ruslan Salei are UFA's, leaving just Lidstrom, Niklas Kronwall, Brad Stuart, and the inexperienced Jakub Kindl under contract. It gets better if you are in a keeper league, as only Kindl is signed past next season.

Of course Detroit, with a little extra money to spend this off-season, will make a pitch to add some defensive depth. But with the current holes for 2012-13 Smith should not only get a roster spot but an increased role rather quickly.

So how will his talent translate to the NHL game, you ask? Well at 6-2 and 195lbs, the 22-year-old already has the size to handle the grind of an NHL season. Scouts also state that his skating ability and his overall mobility are his strengths. Combine that with good vision and puck moving ability, and Smith seems poised to make a solid transition.

Now Smith has had some off-ice issues in the past that have some questioning his maturity level. The Red Wings would seem to be the perfect organization for him to keep on the straight and narrow. The team's veteran presence and the organization's high standard for excellence on and off the ice should be enough to keep him in check.

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While Smith may have a great opportunity to make the Wings next season, his highest value is probably still two or three years away. With that being said, in keeper leagues those who stay ahead of the curve have the most success. The price to get Smith should be reasonably affordable for poolies, so get him now while you still can.