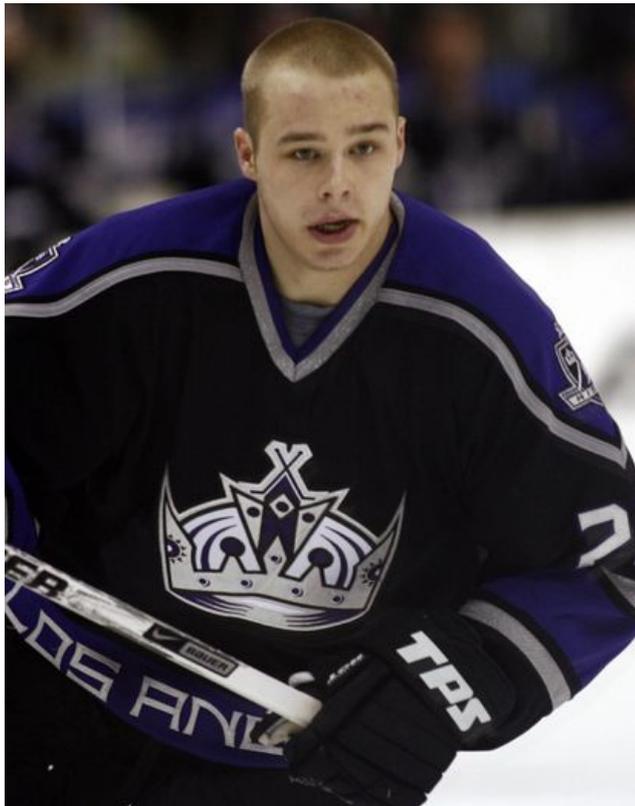


The Wild West

Written by Ryan Ma

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The first week of the 2008-09 NHL season has come and gone. Let's take a look at what has occurred during the opening week in the Western Conference and perhaps a little foresight into what could happen down the road.

Maasquito Buzzings...

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- 20 of the leagues top 52 point getters were from the Western Conference, which shows which conference is the more offensive one.
- Three of the top five players that garnered the most time on ice were defensemen from the Western Conference.
- R.J. Umberger led the Western Conference in faceoff wins with 28.
- Dustin Penner, Shawn Horcoff, Rick Rypien, and Antti Miettinen all shot 100% this week.
- Dustin Brown led the Western Conference with 11 hits.
- Matt Greene led the Western Conference with seven blocked shots.
- Dan Boyle needs to buy himself a shooter tutor, missing seven shots.
- Rob Blake leads the Western Conference with 15 shots on goal.
- Evgeni Nabokov and Ilya Bryzgalov are the only two goalies with 40 or more saves, and with a goals against average of sub 1.51 along with a save percentage of higher than .952.

Around the West

Now let's look at a team-by-team analysis starting with the Central Division. Brian Campbell and Duncan Keith averaged 28:02 and 29:00 in ice-time respectively for the Blackhawks. Campbell only took two shots this past week, look for that total to increase big time once he gets into gear. Brent Sopel was a horrible minus four.

Jason Chimera is surprisingly leading the Blue Jackets with three points in two contests. Rick Nash is averaging just over 23 and a half minutes of ice-time per game and picked up the game-winner against Dallas on Friday night. Jared Boll has 11 penalty minutes in two contests, look for him to unseat Daniel Carcillo for the penalty minutes crown this year. Mike Peca is suspended indefinitely.

Detroit opened the season with a surprising loss to the lowly Maple Leafs. Most of the playing time was evenly distributed between three lines. Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg averaged five shots on goal per game, while Johan Franzen won nearly 90% of this faceoffs (7). If your league counts faceoff wins as a stat, Franzen could be quite useful because of his winger eligibility.

In Predators territory, Jason Arnott and J.P. Dumont are clicking very effectively together on even-strength and the power play as they have picked up four points each while averaging less than 18 minutes per game. The blue line of the Predators has not been very productive at all as they have only accounted for 10 of the 54 shots that the Preds have fired on the opposing

goalies so far this season.

St. Louis players had many fantasy owners singing the Blues this week for bypassing them in their drafts. The big four of Keith Tkachuk, Paul Kariya, Andy McDonald and Brad Boyes tallied 13 points in two contests between them. Too bad they forgot to play defense as they were a combined minus ten in the two contests. Keith Tkachuk looks rejuvenated while tallying three power-play goals. I still think the Blues could be a big sleeper team this year with a solid mix of veterans and young budding stars.

Now let's head up to the Northwest Division where we saw Vancouver defeat the Flames twice. Miikka Kiprusoff started the 2008-09 season with an abysmal 5.33 goals against average and a .807 save percentage after two games. Kipper started last season with a 2.97 goals against average and a .891 save percentage in October while finishing last season with respectable numbers. I'm not sold on Kipper's abilities without the air-tight defensive scheme of Darryl Sutter behind the Flames bench. Flames' superstar Jarome Iginla was held scoreless in the two contests against the Canucks and combined with Todd Bertuzzi was minus seven in the two games. Dion Phaneuf averaged the fourth most time on ice in the NHL with 28:11 per contest. He could very well top 30 minutes per contest this season.

In Avalanche country, Milan Hedjuk averaged a Western Conference-high seven shots per contest in the first week of the season. He was on the decline, so many fantasy players passed on him in their drafts. You might want to pick him up if he is still sitting on the waiver wire of your leagues. Joe Sakic is averaging over 21 minutes of ice-time per contest after contemplating retirement in the off-season. John-Michael Liles picked up two points in two contests after tallying just 32 in 81 contests last season. Now that Tony Granato is back behind the bench for the Avs, Liles should be back towards the 40-45 point mark. Peter Budaj has a 4.03 goals against average and a .795 save percentage, without a Jose Theodore to bail them out, their goalies could be their Achilles heel this season.

Edmonton had only one game this week, but started the season on the right foot with a victory over the Avs on Sunday night. Dustin Penner looked a lot more relaxed playing on the third line with Ethan Moreau and Fernando Pisani than a pressure filled top-line situation with Ales Hemsky and Shawn Horcoff. last year. Buried behind two "big named" defensemen is Denis Grebeshkov who could be in for a surprise year. Zack Stortini has seven penalty minutes in 6:48 of ice-time.

Marian Gaborik was held point-less in their season-opener against Boston, but did manage to garner 18:25 of ice-time. Eric Belanger picked up two goals, his career-high was 37 points in which he set last year, so don't expect a miracle season from him. Marek Zidlicky missed the season opener because of a sprained ankle. He should man the opposite side of Brent Burns on the power play when he returns.

The Canucks were probably the biggest surprise of the first week. They tallied 11 goals in two contests against the Flames this week. Daniel and Henrik Sedin along with Steve Bernier accounted for most of the Canucks offense by picking up 11 points, surprisingly none of them where on the power play. Alex Burrows is known more for his agitator skills than his scoring

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ability which is why it was such a big surprise when he tallied twice for the Canucks this week, don't expect him to be anywhere near this pace. His career-high was 12 goals which was accomplished last season and he'll be very lucky if he can get close to the 20 goals mark this season.

Now let's head down south towards the Pacific Division where we could possibly see four teams make the playoffs this season. The Ducks struggled on offense this week as they only tallied three goals in two contests. The Ducks finished last season ranked 28th amongst the NHL for goals scored and doesn't look like they will improve upon that this season. Scott Niedermayer led the Ducks in average ice-time with 25:17. With Schenider now in Atlanta, Niedermayer and Chris Pronger should be back to being workhorses for the Ducks this season and should return towards the 50 point mark at the end of the season. Teemu Selanne took a team-high eight shots on goal, but had no points to show for it.

Stephane Robidas is the main beneficiary from Sergei Zubov's injury. Robidas picked up three assists against the Blue Jackets on Saturday night. He looks to be only behind Phillippe Boucher in the depth charts for the Stars. Sean Avery was once again back to his old self as he picked up 27 penalty minutes in two contests this week. Fabian Brunnstrom was a healthy scratch for the first two games of the season for the Stars, he should suit up Wednesday night against the Preds.

The Kings seems to have tightened up their defense this season, but it appears that scoring goals might be the problem this year. They tallied only one goal in two contests so far this season. Patrick O'Sullivan was scratched in the season-opener on Saturday night, but made his debut on Sunday. He should be a solid fantasy option once he regains his top-line duties alongside Anze Kopitar and Dustin Brown. The ice-time was pretty much evenly distributed amongst the three lines in both contests against the Sharks. Jason LaBarbera seems to be number one goalie for the Kings this season. He might be a good option if you are in desperate need of a goalie.

The rookies seem to be stealing the show in Phoenix. Kyle Turris, Mikkel Boedker and Kevin Porter have picked up a total of seven points in two contests for the Coyotes, who are undefeated after two contests. Boedker is still my favorite to edge out Steven Stamkos for the Calder trophy at the end of this season. Olli Jokinen picked up three points while averaging just under 20 minutes of ice-time in two contests. Ilya Bryzgalov started to justify why last season was not a fluke with a 1.50 goals against average and a .953 save percentage after the first week of the NHL season.

Last but not least we have the Sharks, where Jonathan Cheechoo tried to prove that his 56 goal 2005-06 season was not an aberration. Devin Setoguchi seems to have settled in well on a line with Patrick Marleau and Joe Thornton. He is well worth a gamble if you have a roster spot free on your squad. Rob Blake is leading all defensemen in shots on goal with 15 in three contests while averaging just over 23 minutes of ice-time per game. Many owners bypassed Blake in their fantasy drafts, so if he's still sitting on the waiver wire, you should have picked him up yesterday. Thornton and Marleau won a combined 67.1% (49 for 73) of their faceoffs taken in the three contests, which could mean a few extra points from offensive zone faceoffs for the pair

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