A couple of weeks ago in my Projections column, I mentioned something which was commonly known as the “magical fourth year”. This week I plan on de-bunking or confirming the myth with stats to see if there really is such a thing as the “magical fourth year”.

Let’s take a look at the top 10 scorers from this past season and how they have fared in their first four years in the NHL.

Malkin	85	106	113	
Ovechkin	106	92	112	113
Crosby	102	120	72	102
Datsyuk	35	51	68	87
Parise	32	62	65	94
Kovalchuk	51	67	87	98
Getzlaf	39	58	82	91
Iginla	50	32	51	63
Savard	6	45	53	65
Backstrom	69	88		

Looking at the table, all eight of the eligible players had an increase from their third to their fourth year. Some had small increases like Ovechkin's one point, while others had huge increases like Parise's 29 points. So you would have to chalk one point up for supporting the myth side.

One thing that I notice is that the players with the biggest jumps seem to have one thing in common, which is their importance to their respective line ups. Datsyuk, Parise, Kovalchuk, and Getzlaf all pretty much secured top-line roster spots with their respective teams in their fourth years, which generally speaking increased their opportunity to integrate themselves into an important part of their team's offense. Following a bit more research, I also found a similar trend with a few other players.

Carter	42	37	54	84
Cammalleri	8	15	55	80
M. Richards	34	32	75	80
Semin	22	73	42	79
Havlat	42	50	59	68
Roy	19	46	63	81
Heatley	67	89	25	103
Frolov	31	48	54	71
Hossa	1	30	56	75
Savard	6	45	53	65
Thornton	7	41	60	71

A lot of the names above are recognizable house-hold names because like the players mention in the table at the top, they too have integrated themselves to play a major role in their respective team's offenses. With so many players having such a big boost in production in their fourth years it's truly hard to ignore that there is strong evidence supporting the "magical fourth year myth".

I decided to go about things backwards and look for some evidence that would de-bunk the myth by looking at players that took a drop in points or stayed stagnant in their fourth years and found only a handful of results.

Gagne	48	59	66	27*
Alfredsson	61	71	45	33
Ribeiro	2	0	18	17
Zetterberg	44	43	85	68*
S. Kozlov	2	5	73	33*
St. Louis	2	18	40	35*
Whitney	3	10	40	25

Out of the 35 players that I researched, only seven players had a drop in production from their third year to their fourth. A few could have been classified as exceptions, like Zetterberg actually had 68 points in 63 games, Kozlov had 33 points in 43 games, while Gagne had 27 points in 46 games, and St. Louis had 35 in 53, so realistically there were only a three players that really provided evidence to argue against the "magical fourth year" myth.

With so much evidence in support of the "magical fourth year", it would be hard to argue that the myth doesn't exist. Moving on, now that we've established that there is a strong possibility that there is a "magical fourth year" let's put it into practical use.

Below is the list of players who are entering their fourth NHL season this year along with my opinion and reasonable projection as to whether they are going to be poised to have a huge breakout year or are they going to be a blip on the radar.

Poised for a huge breakout year

Anze Kopitar – Kopitar has one thing in common with Getzlaf, Datsyuk, Carter, and Roy, which is that they are all top-line centers that love to shoot the puck. Kops has improved his shot on goal totals for the past three seasons and should be in line for over 250 SOG this season. If he hits at the current 12.6 percent that he has tallied in his young career, he should be in line for 31 goals. Throw in a fairly reasonable 45-50 assists and he'll be in line for a "magical fourth year" production of 80 points. Kopitar should be one of the players who should rank very high on people's draft list entering this season.

Paul Stastny – Stastny's argument is along the same lines as Kopitar's as both are going to be the top-line centers for their respective clubs. Stastny has a historical average of firing 2.28 SOG per contest, while picking up two consecutive 70 point seasons to start his NHL career. The only problem that may be stepping in his way from a huge breakout season may be an injury. He's missed 53 games due to injury in the past two seasons, but if he can stay healthy he should be in line for a very solid breakout year of 80-85 points.

Poised for a marginal breakout year

Joe Pavelski – Pavelski increased his point totals by 19 points this past season, in which it was key for him to establish himself as a top-six forward for the Sharks. Now that he's done that, it's past the development phase and all about offensive production from here on out. The only negative factor that separates Stastny and Kopitar from Pavelski is that he won't be the top-line center in San Jose. Thornton and Patrick Marleau occupy that spot, which means that he won't get as many breakout opportunities as Kopitar and Stastny would with their respective teams. Due to that fact, you'd be smart to pencil him in for a small marginal increase to around the mid-70 point mark for next season, but hope for a tad more.

Loui Eriksson – Eriksson's fantasy value for next season will be greatly determined by his surroundings. Eriksson had a huge season last season due largely in part to Brendan Morrow's knee injury. One of two scenarios could happen in Dallas, the Stars could load up the top-line and ice a line of Mike Ribeiro, Morrow and Eriksson, or they could decide to spread the offense and move Eriksson down to the second line to play alongside Brad Richards. Either way, Eriksson should still see 18 minutes of ice-time per game, while having an upside of at least 75 points.

David Moss – Moss finally really found his niche in the NHL this season while playing in 81 contests for the Flames this season. What really impressed me was that he was tied with Iginla in goals scored for the Flames in their opening round loss to the Blackhawks these playoffs, despite averaging only 12:50 in ice-time each contest. With the likelihood of Cammalleri jumping ship to greener pastures, and the Flames passing on re-signing veteran Todd Bertuzzi, Moss probably has cemented himself a top-six role in Calgary for next season. Look for his minutes to sky rocket which will be a sign that his points will follow suit as well. I'm being conservative when pencilling him for 50 points next season, but if things go well I wouldn't be surprised if he was up in the 70+ range.

Dave Bolland – Bolland had himself quite a post-season while tallying 12 points in 17 playoff contests. With his solid post-season, Bolland pretty much secured a top-six spot along with number two center status, behind Jonathan Toews, with the Blackhawks heading into next season. He averaged 16:27 in ice-time during the regular season, but improved to 18:43 during the playoffs, which means that if he maintains that type of ice-time next season, he should be in line for 60 points. Because the Hawks are so deep in forwards, I wouldn't mind throwing in a few extra points and projecting 65 for him.

Patrick O'Sullivan – O'Sully has bounced around a few teams early in his NHL career. He was initially drafted by the Wild and then subsequently traded to the Kings in a three way deal with the Wild for Pavol Demitra. This past season O'Sullivan was shockingly moved to the Oilers at the trade deadline, which rings a few alarm bells in my head of what could be the possible reasons why he has changed addresses so many times. Is it his work ethic? size? or perhaps

clashes with the GMs? Looking at his past history, O'Sullivan has won a Jack Ferguson award for being the top OHL draft pick, along with a the OHL and CHL rookie of the year awards on top of being named as the AHL rookie of the year in 2005-06. Those accolades could be mentioned beside the names of such fellow NHLers named Steve Stamkos, John Tavares, Spezza, Eric Lindros, Nash, Thornton, Crosby, Lecavalier and Daniel Briere, which makes me really deliberate whether or not O'Sullivan has super star potential buried deep within him. Edmonton has a few interchangeable parts up front, which means that O'Sullivan could go anywhere from top-line left winger, alongside Alex Hemsky and Shawn Horcoff, to third line center, alongside Fernado Pisani and Ethan Moreau, depending on how he performs during the season. I'd pencil him in for a 60 point season, but if all the pieces fall in the right place, he could be in for a homerun of 80+ next year.

Sitting on the fence

David Backes – Backes had a great season as he was one of the most across-the-board producers in fantasy hockey last year. His upside for next season remains unknown as his production will be largely affected by his surroundings, similar to Eriksson's case in Dallas. If the Blues decide to re-sign Keith Tkachuk, there won't be a top-six role in store for Backes next season, which will greatly hamper his production, on the other hand if the Blues choose not to re-sign Tkachuk, Backes could step into a top-line role playing alongside Andy McDonald and Brad Boyes, which will make him a huge fantasy asset. I'm going to have to sit on the fence about his production on this one.

Rob Schremp – Schremp and O'Sullivan have a few things in common, one of which is that Schremp also won the Jack Ferguson award for being the top OHL draft pick. He too followed O'Sullivan's suit by winning the OHL rookie of the year award in 2002-03, which begs the question why does he only have a grand total of seven games of NHL experience under his belt heading into his fourth NHL season, compared to O'Sullivan who has 207? He's done well playing in the AHL while tallying 171 points in 216 career games, so offense doesn't appear to be the problem, so I tried to delve a little bit deeper to see what truly the real problem is. After a

bit of research I've narrowed it down to his one-dimensional game that is really hampering is ability to play in the NHL. In the past three years in the AHL, Schremp is a combined minus 41 rating, which is more than enough reason to keep him down in the minors and not give him a fair shake of the ketchup bottle (some term I picked up here in Australia...) Looking at the Oiler's roster, I just don't see where he would be able to fit in. He might be able to convince new coach Pat Quinn otherwise, which is why I'm leaving him on a fence as opposed to considering him done and dusted.

Troy Brouwer – Like Moss, Brouwer really asserted himself into the Blackhawks line up this season while playing in 69 games. He spent a lot of his time in third/fourth line duties alongside Adam Burish and Ben Eager, which will be the best case scenario for Brouwer this season. He briefly hit the jackpot in the middle of the season when Patrick Sharp went down with an injury where he spent some time playing alongside Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane, but he probably won't be as lucky this time around. With youngsters, Igor Makarov, Jack Skille, and Kyle Beach nipping at Brouwer's feet for a roster spot in the Chicago line up, I wouldn't expect Brouwer to get the optimal ice-time needed for a breakout season next year.

Other Notables

Joel Lundqvist, Dustin Boyd, Enver Lisin, Adam Burish, Colin Fraser and Nigel Dawes.

Defense

Most of us have heard of the phrase “It takes defenseman longer to develop in the NHL than forwards.”, so I decided to look into it a bit further and see if there is such a thing as the “magical fourth year” for defenseman and found these results.

- Out of the 30 defenseman I looked at, only five had a point production increase of more than 10 points into the 45 point or above range. They were Mike Green, Rob Blake, Shea Weber, Ryan Suter and Duncan Keith.

- Of the 30 defenseman, 13 actually had a drop in production from their third season to their fourth.

So I think it’s safe to say that although a “magical fourth year is in store for many forwards in the NHL, it’s not the same case for NHL defenseman. Of course that shouldn’t prevent you from ignoring them completely, so here are three Western Conference D-men who are entering their fourth year this season.

Tom Gilbert – Gilbert is an interesting case because he is entering his fourth season after having a very successful third year in the NHL. He tallied a whooping 45 points in 82 contests for the Oil this past season, 13 points came from lining up alongside Denis Grebeshkov, and 17 came from playing alongside Sheldon Souray on the power-play and even strength. You would have to acknowledge the fact that a lot of his production was inflated due to the extra playing time that he received from the injury to Lubomir Visnovksy. With the return of Vizzy, it would be hard to make a case for him to repeat let alone improve upon the numbers that he put up this past season. Gilbert should be a sell-high candidate in the minds of many keeper league managers heading into next season.

Alex Edler – Edler is in a very intriguing position, as he doesn't face very much competition for ice-time on the Vancouver blue line. He picked up eight points in 10 playoff contests, while averaging over 22 minutes of ice-time per contest. He pretty much sits second on the depth chart behind Kevin Bieska, with a very good chance of surpassing him for top-dog this season, so all the signs are point up for Edler to have a very productive season along the same lines that Suter(44) and Keith(45) had this past season.

Keith Yandle – Yandle is in a similar situation as Edler after finishing last season with 30 points in 69 games with the Coyotes. Looking at the Phoenix depth chart, Yandle is really only behind Ed Jovanovski on the Coyotes' blue line, and like Edler above has a very good chance of obtaining the number one gig on his team this season. Pencil him in for a similar season like Edler where he'll be right around the 45 point range.

Other Notables

Peter Harrold, Jack Johnson, and Mark Giordano.

Check back Thursday for the second half of this article which will discuss the fourth year players from the Eastern Conference. It's certainly going to be a doozy! Questions or comments? Write them in the section below and like always I'll be more than happy to discuss them with you along with your fellow Dobberites.