

Do You Believe in Magic? (West 2010)

Written by Ryan Ma

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If you are an avid reader of the DobberHockey website you probably are familiar with the popular mantra the “magical fourth year”. Just as [Russ](#) and [I](#) have done last year, we’ll take a deeper look at the numbers to de-bunk or confirm the myth once again.

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.

Name

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1st

2nd

3rd

4th

Henrik Sedin

29

36

39

42

Sidney Crosby

102

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120

72

102

Alex Ovechkin

106

92

112

113

Nicklas Backstrom

69

88

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101

Steven Stamkos

46

95

Martin St. Louis

2

18

40

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35

Brad Richards

62

62

74

79

Joe Thornton

7

41

60

71

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Patrick Kane

72

70

88

Marian Gaborik

36

67

65

40

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Looking at the table, six of the eight eligible players had an increase from their third to their fourth year. In the case with St. Louis and Gaborik, both players dealt with injuries during their fourth year which might explain the drop in production. They both would have both pro-rated to 54 and 50 points respectively under a full 82-game schedule. I would certainly chalk a point up to support the “magical fourth year” theory.

One common point that I noticed with players that had huge jumps in production during their “magical fourth years” is their importance to their respective line ups. The following table illustrates ten examples of gigantic increases in production from players that receive optimal ice-time from their teams during their fourth years.

Name

1st

2 **nd**

3 **rd**

4 **th**

Ryan Getzlaf

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39

58

82

91

Pavel Datsyuk

35

51

68

87

Zach Parise

32

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62

65

94

Ilya Kovalchuk

51

67

87

98

Dany Heatley

67

89

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25

103

Mike Cammalleri

8

15

55

80

Jeff Carter

42

37

54

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84

Marian Hossa

1

30

56

75

Mike Richards

34

32

75

80

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Anze Kopitar

61

77

66

81

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".

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.

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Below is the list of players who are entering their fourth NHL season this year along with my opinion and 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.

Note: I counted every season played as a year of experience whether they played one or a full 82 games. I just couldn't come up with a fair comparison on where to draw the line.

Poised for a huge breakout year

Patrick Kane – If winning the Stanley Cup isn't enough of an Everest-esque feat for a 21-year old then perhaps a century-point campaign will do the trick. That's probably the only feat that's left for the Buffalo-native to accomplish in order to be mentioned in the same ballpark as Sidney Crosby, Alex Ovechkin and Evgeni Malkin in terms of impact in fantasy hockey pools. If there is anyone, in this year's "magical fourth year" class, who has 100-point potential, it certainly has to lie on the young shoulders of Kane. I'm leaning more towards a Getzlaf, Kovalchuk or Parise 91 to 98-point season, but 100 certainly isn't out of the question.

Jonathan Toews – 191 points in his first 222 NHL contests is the stat line for the reigning Conn Smythe winner and if you compare that to the 218 in 211 that new TB GM Steve Yzerman had

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in his first three seasons it's not hard to draw a similar comparison between the two. If you delve a little deeper into the stats Toew's recent 29 points in 22 contests this past post-season compares very favourably to Yzerman's 18 in 16 back in 1986-87. Granted it was a much more offensively-focussed league back then, but Yzerman cracked the 90-point plateau in his fourth season, so why can't we expect the same from Toews?

Poised for a marginal breakout year

Peter Mueller – Last year I mentioned a fellow Avalanche, Paul Stastny to be poised with a breakout year and he finished up with 79 points in 81 contests. This year I'll follow suit and toss the former eighth overall pick, Mueller, into the mix. He was traded to the Avs from the desert at the deadline last campaign and racked up 20 points in the final 15 contests of the regular season. During his time with the Avs, he averaged 17:50 along with a SOG average of 2.33 per contest. If you read my [projections article](#) earlier this off-season, those numbers pretty much fix the mould of a top-15 or a 60-point RWer, so expect just that from Mueller.

Bobby Ryan – The young phenom is headed for RFA status this off-season, but the Ducks have plenty of cap room to match any offers that come their way, so he should remain Anaheim property for the upcoming season. I had a bit of a debate on whether or not I should have slotted him into the same category as Toews and Kane but decided to play it a little safer by pencilling him for just a marginal increase due to the fact that Corey Perry and Ryan Getzlaf are

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ahead of him on the scoring depth charts. Ryan potted 39 points in 40 home contests at the Honda Center, while potting 25 points in 41 away from Anaheim. Now with over 150 games under his belt, those numbers should begin to start to even out this campaign. Look for a 70-75 point season from the Cherry Hill-native.

Sam Gagner – If there was anything to be happy about for the Oilers last season it probably was the development of Gagner in the second half of the lackluster campaign. He finished with 19 points and 87 SOG in the final 28 contests, before being shut down due to injury. If you pro-rate those numbers into a full 82-game campaign it would equate to a 55 points and a 254 SOG season. With Ales Hemsky healthy and the new arrival of Taylor Hall, the trio might form a formidable top-line for Edmonton that is if the Oilers finally stop deciding to give Shawn (minus 29) Horcoff 19 minutes a game. I'd pencil Gagner in for a 55-60 point season, but I wouldn't be surprised if he ended up with 75-plus.

Kris Versteeg – Versteeg had himself a decent post-season with 14 points in 22 contests during their Stanley Cup winning run. He'll be the main beneficiary of the Dustin Byfuglien trade as it pretty much guarantees him a spot on the Hawks' top-six as well as being a top candidate to fill the void of the 2:40 minutes of power-play ice-time that Buffy left behind. He'll probably see an ice-time average closer to his 2008-09 numbers of 17:02 than the 15:43 he had last season which will help the offensive production. Playing alongside Toews, Kane or Hossa won't hurt either. 60-65 isn't a bad projection for the former 134th overall pick.

Sitting on the fence

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Devin Setoguchi – I'm completely on the fence on this one. Setoguchi had a great sophomore season with 65 points in 81 contests, but completely burned out by following that with a 36-point injury-plagued season. If you consider the Sharks' offense of Thornton, Heatley, and the newly signed duo of Patrick Marleau and Joe Pavelski, I just don't see enough points to be spread around for Seto to be a fantasy gem this campaign. For comparison's sake the most offensive team in the league last season were the Caps who put up 833 points, while the Sharks put up 700. Brooks Laich was fifth in scoring for the Caps with 59 points. Granted Setoguchi is a bit more offensively gifted than Laich, but with Dan Boyle also in the point mix it would be hard to project anything more than 55 points for the Albertan.

T.J. Hensick – Hensick was tied for 14th overall in scoring in the AHL last season with 70 points in 58 contests which makes it mind-boggling why the Avs would move such an asset to the Blues for such a low price in career AHLer Julian Talbot. There have also been a few rumours floating around about Hensick's work ethic which is never a good thing for a youngster. I currently have the Blues top-six listed as Andy McDonald, Brad Boyes, David Backes, T.J. Oshie, Patrik Berglund, and possibly RFA David Perron, which might hamper the quality ice-time allotted to Hensick this upcoming season. But if an injury were to befall amongst the Blues' top-six, Hensick's production could certainly be fantasy-worthy.

David Perron – As mentioned above, motivation seems to be a key factor in the production for players but in terms of skill there is definitely nothing to scoff about with Perron as he tallied 111 points in 87 contests in 2006-07 with the Lewiston Maineiacs (28 in 17 during the playoffs). As mentioned above players who generally have the big breakout seasons tend to be the ones that garner top-line/top PP ice-time and I don't know if Perron will get that opportunity in St. Louis. I'd give a maximum upside of 55.

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Mason Raymond – Raymond had a bit of a breakout year last season by potting 53 points in 82 contests but it's the four points in 12 playoff contests that scares me. If Raymond can land some ice-time alongside the Sedin twins during the season it might boost his fantasy value, but with Mikael Samuelsson and Alex Burrows in the mix for that highly-coveted spot, I wouldn't expect anything more than a repeat of last campaign or possibly even a small dip.

Derick Brassard – Offense is definitely not something that Brassard lacks as demonstrated by his 218 points in 151 contests from his QMJHL career. The problem is translating those skills into the NHL level. But then again the wicked "Hitch" of the west is dead in Columbus and Scotty Arniel is poised to be the saviour of the offense so that might just be the solution to solve Brassard's offensive woes. There are also a couple of other factors that could help Brassard this season. One, he spent only 3.52 percent of his total ice-time alongside superstar Rick Nash last season, so if he can up that to say 15-20 percent, his point totals could skyrocket for a comfortable breakout season. Two, he lined up alongside 25 percent of the NHL shifts that Nikita Filatov appeared in last season. So if the "fleet-footed" Russian returns that would be another boost in terms of talented line mates for Brassard. Of course there are also a couple of factors that could hinder Brassard one of which is the depth chart. The Jackets are chock-full of centers with R.J. Umberger, Antoine Vermette, and Sami Pahlsson, which might hinder Brassard's potential for a "break out" this season.

Other Notables

Andrew Cogliano, Martin Hanzal, David Winnik, James Sheppard, Kyle Chipchura, Andrew Murray, Jared Boll, Cody McLeod, Ryan Carter, David Jones

Defense

Most of us have heard of the phrase “It takes defenseman longer to develop in the NHL than forwards.” Last season I took a look at a small sample of d-men and there wasn’t a lot of empirical evidence to back the theory of the “magical fourth year” for blue liners. Of course that shouldn’t prevent you from ignoring them completely, so here are a few Western Conference D-men who are entering their fourth year this season.

Matt Niskanen – The Stars are in desperate need of some offense from the blue line, and if they aren’t going to go shopping come July 1st, Niskanen could be a good candidate to take on a more offensive role this campaign. Last season he also averaged 2:54 on the power-play per contest which should have definitely equated to more than the 15 points that he tallied. I know a lot of people have given up on him, but if you are in a deep league or looking for a fourth sleeper defenseman, Niskanen makes a great option.

Kris Russell – Russell is in a similar boat to Niskanen mentioned above. He’s young and talented while possessing the historical pedigree to be very successful at the NHL level. It’s just a matter of when it all comes together. Russell held back a bit due to the coaching of Hitchcock, but now with Arniel behind the bench it might just be the trigger that opens up the offensive game for Russell. A 35-point season isn’t out of the question for the former Medicine Hat Tiger.

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Anton Stralman – Following along the same lines as Russell, Stralman could also be in for a mini-breakout season this year under the new regime in Columbus. He was tops amongst the Jackets blue-liners in terms of power-play ice-time, so if he can maintain that gig he should be in for a solid 40+ point campaign.

Sami Lepisto – Lepisto is a bit of a stretch pick, but still possesses some intrigue for the Coyotes this year. In his brief AHL career the Finn has recorded 87 points in 125 contests with the Hersey Bears, which is certainly an impressive feat. The problem is that he sits behind Ed Jovanovski, Adrian Aucoin, and Keith Yandle on the depth charts and that could be a lethal thing for a defenseman, but if JovoCop takes the usual 10-15 games off for injury, it might just be enough of a crack for Lepisto to gain some fantasy value.

Check back Thursday for the second half of this article which will discuss the fourth year players from the Eastern Conference. It's 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.