For the past couple of seasons, I've written a few columns breaking down each of the Western Conference team's top-six from the bottom-six. I'll go back to the well once again and give you better insight of each of the Western Conference teams for the upcoming campaign.

At the end of the day, point production can easily be attributed to one thing; **opportunity**. A top-line player, who is the focal point of his team's offense, will generally receive every possible chance to succeed and put up big points. A top-six player will receive decent even strength/second unit power-play ice-time, but may not put up dazzling fantasy numbers. A cavalry candidate is a player who may find themselves in line for a top-six role if things fail to remain status quo (injury or poor inconsistent play, etc.) Finally, a bottom feeder will most likely receive checking line time and probably won't receive ample optimal scoring time to put up fantasy roster worthy numbers. Their big break will only come if there are injuries or sudden collapses of young players from their team's top-six. We all like to be optimistic with our projections, but there really isn't a point in projection 80 points for a player who won't even crack a team's top-line let alone top-six.

If you haven't read my **projections** article from earlier this summer, definitely go back and take a gander. I know I had an eye-opening experience when digging up all the stats.
Note:
Take the line combos with a grain of salt. They are just arbitrary and are used primarily to separate a team's top-six from the bottom-six
. I really don't want to get into arguments about player X had chemistry with player Y therefore they'll be on a line together during the season.

Now onto the good stuff:

Detroit – Top-six fairly locked faces decent competition from bottom-six

Top Six
Tomas Holmstrom – Pavel Datsyuk – Johan Franzen
Dan Cleary – Henrik Zetterberg – Jiri Hudler

Cavalry

Todd Bertuzzi, Valtteri Filppula and **Tomas Tatar**

Bottom Feeders

Jan Mursak, Drew Miller, Patrick Eaves, **Justin Abdelkader** and Darren Helm.

The big three of Datsyuk, Zetterberg and Franzen should produce the bulk of the Red Wings' offense this campaign. They will, essentially, have top-six spots locked, and should garner plenty of PP ice-time on the top unit. Look for similar point-per-game totals as last season, Zetterberg (1.00), Datsyuk (1.05) and Franzen (0.72).

After the first wave, Holmstrom, Filppula, Hudler, Bertuzzi and Cleary form a fearsome second wave. All players have history of missing time due to injury, so expect the same from the quintuple in 2011-12. Look for a roulette type situation where all of these "tweeners" will interchange between the second/third lines and level out their production. A player to keep an eye on might be youngster Tatar. Since crossing the pond in 2009, he's posted a very respectable 89 points in 128 career AHL contests. The depth charts are pretty jam packed, but if a few big injuries were to occur, Tatar could be ready to post big numbers in the NHL.

Despite missing eight contests, Abdelkader still managed to punish opponents 188 times last

campaign. If you’re in a league that counts HITs as a category, definitely keep him on your radar.

Last year’s pre-season top-six:

Holmstrom, Datsyuk, Franzen, Filppula, Zetterberg, Hudler.

End of year finish:

Zetterberg

80

Datsyuk

59

Franzen

55

Cleary

46

Bertuzzi

45

Filppula

39

Edmonton – Potential gong show.

Top Six

Ryan Smyth – Shawn Horcoff – Ales Hemsky

Taylor Hall – **Sam Gagner** – Jordan Eberle

Cavalry

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins*, **Magnus Paajarvi** and Linus Omark

Bottom Feeders

Gilbert Brule, Eric Belanger, Ryan Jones, Ben Eager, Darcy Hordichuk

During the last season where Smyth, Horcoff and Hemsky all suited up in the same uniform, the trio registered 1.00, 0.64 and 0.83 points-per-game respectively. They're a bit older now, so it'd be a bit silly to expect such lofty numbers, but the chemistry could certainly be there for the cagy veterans to put up some "surprise" numbers. With his contract nearly up around the corner, this could be a make-or-break season for Gagner. His future with the Oilers could very well come down to his performance this season, so expect him to play with a chip on his shoulder in 2011-12.

Paajarvi has been widely and favourably compared to Marian Hossa. Hossa had a bit of an adjustment period during his rookie season in the NHL while posting 30 points in 60 contests, then busted out with 56 in 78 during his sophomore campaign. If Paajarvi can manage to secure a top-six spot, Hossa v2 could certainly be possible. RNH is a very interesting case filled with plenty of polarizing opinions. Whether or not he stays in the NHL will depend on the battle between Gagner and him. If Gagner has a great camp and a grand start to the season, it'd be pretty pointless to shaft RNH by giving him just third line minutes and toiling in a checking role.

In a very under-rated signing during this off-season, the Oilers signed Belanger, who was the 13th highest faceoff-winning percentage centerman that won more than 1000 faceoffs, last campaign. With Horcoff and Belanger at the helm, the Oilers should play a much better puck possession game this campaign.

Last year's pre-season top-six:

Penner, Horcoff, Hemsky, Hall, Gagner, and Jordan Eberle

End of year finish:

Eberle

43

Hall

42

Gagner

42

Hemsky

42

Cogliano

35

Paajarvi

34

Los Angeles- Top-six set in stone, but does contain a couple of band-aid boys

Top Six
Dustin Penner – Anze Kopitar – Justin Williams

Simon Gagne – Mike Richards – Dustin Brown

Cavalry

Jarret Stoll, Andrei Loktionov and Scott Parse

Bottom Feeders
Brad Richardson, Kyle Clifford, Colin Fraser, Trevor Lewis, and Kevin Westgarth

I don't know if there is a more competitive top-six in the NHL than the Kings. They sold a large chunk of their farm in Brayden Schenn, but you could argue that the result might be worth it since they are arguably amongst the top of the pile in terms of contending for the Stanley Cup. Their top-six is pretty much set in stone, so expect the bulk of the offense to come from there.

Since the lockout, Williams and Gagne have averaged 40.6 and 60.2 games player per season respectively. So if you are the cavalry you should be pretty comfortable knowing that you'll receive some sort of top-six ice-time during the campaign. With Michal Handzus out of the way, look for Stoll to garner plenty of opportunities from the faceoff dot. He has a pretty respectable 56.9 faceoff winning percentage since joining the Kings in 2007. He's also averaged 2:55 on the PP per contest since donning a Kings' uniform, which should make him a great trigger man on the point for the second unit. Another favourite of mine is Parse. He notched four points in five contests prior to falling to a torn labrum which, essentially, ended his 2010-11 season prematurely. From what I can recall he did have some pretty good chemistry lining up alongside Kopitar, so if he can manage to get back into that role, there still might be some residual output remaining. Loktionov had a brief cup of coffee with the Kings last campaign registering seven points in 19 contests. The top-seven seems pretty air-tight, but if you're a gambling man, Loktionov could be a potential huge payday at season's end.

Clifford finished last season as the league's 18th highest PIM-receiver (141). Keep him in mind if you're after a relatively unknown goon.

Last year's pre-season top-six:

Smyth, Kopitar, Williams, Loktionov, Stoll and Brown

End of year finish:

Kopitar

73

Brown

57

Williams

57

Smyth

47

Stoll

43

Simmonds

30

Next week: the Wild, Predators, and Coyotes.

Questions or comments? Like always I'll be ready and willing to discuss them in the comments section below.