

Sifting through the players in the Western Conference, Ryan Ma comes up with some suggestions for hidden gems.

Anaheim Ducks

Written by Ryan Ma Tuesday, 13 December 2011 16:30 - Last Updated Wednesday, 14 December 2011 11:10

The Ducks have struggled to register any sort of sustained offense this campaign, as their current 2.28 goals scored per game (29 th ranked), indicates. A lot of that could singlehandedly be attributed to the lack of a puck-moving defenseman, with Lubomir Visnovsky being sidelined with a hand injury for the last 13 contests. Cam Fowler has done a decent job, but he isn't experienced enough to be a true number one blue-liner at the moment. Keep an eye on Kyle Palmieri, as he led the AHL in goals scored, with 17 before his recall to the big club. Palmieri spent 71.1 percent of his overall ice-time last contest alongside the dynamic duo of Corey Perry and Ryan Getzlaf. If he can keep that roster spot, he could be a great sleeper pick to snag for the second half.

Calgary Flames

Calgary is about to embark on a huge stretch of road games (11 of the next 13), for the next 24 days. The bright side is that they'll take their fourth-ranked road PP efficiency (23.8 percent), with them. For those poolies who forgot, this was the time, last season, where they began their ridiculous 27-11-9 run to finish 2010-11. Now might be a great time to make a push for the Flames' PP staples like Jarome Iginla, Olli Jokinen, Alex Tanguay or Rene Bourque.

Chicago Blackhawks

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Is there a goalie controversy brewing in the Windy City? Ray Emery has posted a 3-0-1 record along with a dazzling 1.57 GAA and .943 SP during his last four appearances, while Corey Crawford has posted a 2-1-0 record along with a not so great 3.77 GAA and .886 during the same span. The Blackhawks are the only team in the league that currently possesses four point-per-game players (Jonathan Toews, Patrick Kane, Marian Hossa, and Patrick Sharp). Given the amount of TOI that each of them are receiving, I wouldn't be surprised to see all four finish on this pace. Brent Seabrook is on pace for less than 30 points. I don't understand why he's still 66 percent Yahoo! owned in standard setting leagues.

Colorado Avalanche

The Avs essentially live and die by the play of Semyon Varlamov. In the nine victories this season, Varly has posted a 2.15 GAA along with a .932 SP and in 13 losses he has posted a 3.77 GAA along with a dismal .869 SP. It appears that the magic number is three. If he allows less than three goals, the chances of the Avs winning are quite high. If he allows more than three goals, the chances of them losing are even higher. Ryan O'Reilly continues to impress, but the team is certainly in trouble when a two-way player is leading the team in scoring. Stefan Elliott has had a great start to his NHL career. The way he manages to get the pucks on net is remarkable.

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Columbus Blue Jackets

Despite all of the struggles this season, the Jackets actually are a decent offense at Nationwide Arena where they average 2.6 goals per game. It's the dreadful road woes that are really hurting the team (2.14 goals per game). Eight of the next 10 are away from Columbus, so it'll be interesting if the numbers normalize. Recently acquired Nikita Nikitin has had a very under-the-radar introduction to the Jacket line up. He's picked up 10 points and 35 SOG while averaging 23:28 (3:00 of which is on the PP), in 14 contests with his new home. At three percent Yahoo! owned, he's a bargain bin pick up for the second half.

Dallas Stars

The Stars have pretty interesting splits. During their first 14 contests of the season, the offense was on fire while averaging 3.21 goals per game. The last 14 has been a complete 180, as they've averaged just two goals per game. Subsequently, Jamie Benn and Loui Eriksson have mirrored a similar pattern with 18 and 16 points respectively in the first 14 contests, but both with just six and in the last 14. Hopefully poolies were able to follow my advice two weeks ago regarding "selling high" on them. Sheldon Souray's 88 SOG is ranked fourth amongst all blue-liners. His current plus 20 pace would also be a career-high, which is returning him to fantasy-monster status.

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Detroit Red Wings

The offense has been booming in Detroit, as they're averaging four goals per game during their last 11 contests. Much of that could be attributed to Pavel Datsyuk who, interestingly enough, has 17 points but only 21 SOG during that span. Ian White currently has a plus 17 rating. If you're looking for a "cheapish" option to help boost that department, he could be a great candidate to target. Jimmy Howard continues to impress as he ranks first, second, and eighth in terms of wins, GAA and SP respectively. Will he finish as the most valuable fantasy goalie this campaign?

Edmonton Oilers

I'm still sitting on the fence regarding Ryan Nugent-Hopkins status for the rest of the season. Part of me thinks that it's just a matter of time before he hits the perennial "rookie wall", the other half thinks that he can definitely keep up his pace given that he's leading the team in PP TOI. What do you think? Sam Gagner has 10 points in his last 10 games. If he can ever stay

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healthy he could be a real force in the second half. Ryan Whitney has never been a big shot taker, but registering goose eggs in nine of 13 contests is a bit over the top.

Los Angeles Kings

The biggest news coming out of LA is the firing of Terry Murray. I didn't even think it was that bad until I looked up the stats and was shocked to notice the Kings were dead last in terms of goals scored per game (2.21). Now might be a great time "buy low" on underachievers like Dustin Brown, Simon Gagne and possibly Drew Doughty. A player that might be hurt by the firing is Jon Quick. Thanks to Murray's defensive system, Quick was ranked 10th and eighth respectively in terms of GAA and SP. John Stevens won't be as heavily defensive-minded as Murray, so expect the peripherals stats to take a bit of a dive.

I always love a good bet. This one by "Craig Bernes" from last week's comments should be a doozy. "If any of those 3 guys have better all-around stats than Doughty at the end of the year I will eat dobber's shorts. With lots of mustard, but still."

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We'll make sure we keep track of this one throughout the year.
Minnesota Wild
The Wild continue to surprise, as they now have seven consecutive victories in which they
have averaged a whopping 3.57 goals per game. After starting the season with just 10 points in the first 18 contests, Mikko Koivu has tallied 16 in the last 12. Can he get to the point-per-game

pace us poolies have been waiting so long for? Dany Heatley has started the season in slow fashion, but has a six game-point scoring streak heading into Tuesday night's contest against

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the Jets. Keep an eye on Kyle Brodziak. He's never been a huge offensive threat, but he did register 93 points in 70 contests with Moose Jaw in his final year of juniors. His play/confidence right now reminds me of a lot of Blake Wheeler.

Nashville Predators

I was pleasantly surprised to see the Preds tied with the Flyers for third in the league in terms of PP efficiency. The first question that popped into the head was who the heck is scoring for them? The answer is Shea Weber and Ryan Suter. The dynamic duo has accounted for 20 of the 61 PPP (33 percent), that the Preds have acquired this campaign. Imagine what would happen if the offense (Sergei Kostitsyn, Mike Fisher, or Patric Hornqvist), started to contribute as well. Speaking of Hornqvist, if you read my column last week, now might be a great time to "buy low". He has a fairly noticeable improvement upon his first-half vs. second-half stats.

Phoenix Coyotes

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After starting the season with a 12-4-3 record along with a 2.13 GAA and .935 SP, Mike Smith has returned back to Earth with a hideous 1-4 record, a 4.38 GAA and atrocious .860 SP in the month of December. He has never played more than 40 contests in a season, so as an owner I'm a bit wary about his current heavy workload. Martin Hanzal's current 86 HITs ranks tied for ninth overall. He could very well finish with a line of 50 points, a plus 20 rating, 60 PIMs, 250 HITs, 50 BS, 750 FW and 200 SOG for those playing in peripheral-heavy leagues. Radim Vrbata is currently connecting on nearly twice his career shooting average, so look for that to adjust itself in the second half.

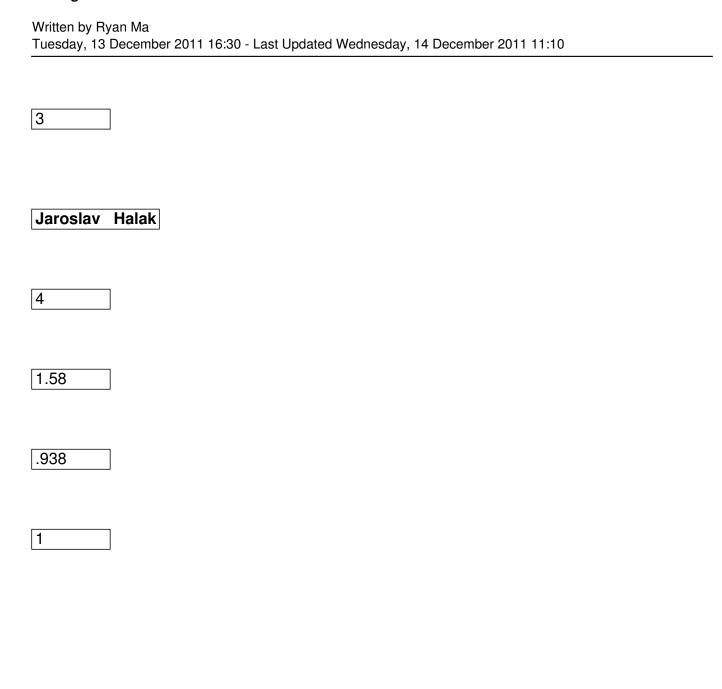
San Jose Sharks

The biggest problem with the Sharks current slump is their inability to connect on the power-play. They've scored just once in their last 28 chances. If you can remember back to last year, they had a similar slump in early January where they lost six consecutive contests, and then followed that up with nine victories in their next 10. The Sharks are just that type of team, when they click things can happen in a hurry. Dan Boyle's current shooting percentage is six percent lower than his career average and is a massive "second half" buy-low candidate.

St. Louis Blues

Written by Ryan Ma

Tuesday, 13 December 2011 16:30 - Last Updated Wednesday, 14 December 2011 11:10 The goalie battle in St. Louis is probably exactly what Ken Hitchcock ordered, both goalies trying to outplay each other to earn their playing time. Here's the breakdown of the stats since Hitch has taken over. Wins **GAA** SP SO Brian Elliott 1.24 .952



I can picture this situation becoming more 50/50 as the season rolls along. There's no point in me beating a dead horse. The Blues offense is shaping up to be "offense by committee", where I don't really see any one player standing out from the rest, but if you were to ask me who'd I choose to come out on top of the pile, I'd have to go with T.J. Oshie. He's playing with a bit more oomph and is a tad more noticeable than the rest.

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Vancouver Canucks

The Nucks are now streaking with nine wins out of their last 10 contests. After starting 2011-12 in nightmare-ish fashion, Roberto Luongo is rounding the corner with an 8-3 record along with a respectable 2.16 GAA and .922 SP in his last 11 appearances. Luongo-owners can now breathe a sigh of relief. Alex Edler's 13 PPP ranks second behind only Brian Campbell amongst all blue-liners. Christian Ehrhoff who? With David Booth's injury a top-six spot opens back up for Mason Raymond. He has three points and six SOG in four contests since his return. If you're looking for a roster replacement, give Raymond a go.

Questions or comments? As always I'll discuss them in the section below.