What the hot start of San Jose Sharks' players means to fantasy hockey

We all knew there would be many bizarre occurrences and funny statistics throughout this shortened season. The different variables that a 48-game campaign brings into play would certainly affect every team differently. Some weaker squads may have been excited to see if they could sneak into the playoffs given the fact that they wouldn't have to perform well over 82 games. Other teams with many veteran players will be hoping to be a lot fresher come playoff time.

One such team that will be looking to avoid the grind of a long season is the San Jose Sharks. The Sharks have easily been one of the most dominant teams in the last decade during the regular season, but have yet to find playoff success. San Jose is the eighth oldest team in the National Hockey League right now with an average age of 28.8 years, so a shortened campaign is something they could really benefit from come the post-season.

The Sharks exploded out of the gate 7-0-1. That shouldn't be a surprise to many considering San Jose's dominance in recent years, but on the other hand, their play last year didn't give you an impression that this was something they would be capable of. The Sharks had a bit of a down season for their standards in 2011-12 when they finished seventh in the Western Conference and almost missed the playoffs. Then they were promptly disposed of in the first round by the St. Louis Blues in five games. So many may have been thinking that with a down year and an aging roster, the Sharks window may be starting to close.

Not only was it a down year for the team in the standings in 2011-12, but some of their top guns struggled with production as well. Joe Thornton has not reached the 80-point mark since 2009-10 and Patrick Marleau produced just 64 points, his lowest total since the 2007-08 season. That's what makes their offensive outburst to start 2013 even more shocking. Marleau and Thornton sit tied for third in the NHL scoring race with 14 points each, after just eight games. Marleau became only the second player in league history to start a season with four straight multigoal games, and Thornton has already recorded 11 assists.

Marleau has already tallied nine times and some have even started rumblings that he could hit 50 goals. Considering he has only achieved 40 once in his career, and no one has scored 50 in less than 50 games in over 20 years, that may be a little ambitious. Of course the 144 point pace both Thornton and Marleau are on is also about as unrealistic as finding a reasonably priced beverage at a Maple Leafs game, but fun to look at nonetheless.

So what is the reason for the spike in both Thornton and Marleau's production? Well look no further than San Jose's lethal power play. The Sharks lead the league in power play goals and are fourth in percentage (29.6%), but only sit 10th in the NHL when it comes to minutes played with the man advantage. This means their power play is operating with a tremendous amount of efficiency. Both Thornton and Marleau have already cashed in with nine points each on the power play, accounting for over 50% of their production. In fact, five of Marleau's nine goals have come with the man advantage.

(See the latest San Jose line combos here)

Thornton and Marleau have also been making the most of their time on the ice. When looking at some of the league's other top forwards, the San Jose duo is averaging significantly less ice-time per game so far this season. The two are right around 18 minutes a night, while players like Martin St. Louis, Steven Stamkos , Zach Parise , Pavel Datsyuk , John Tavares , and Sidney Crosby are getting about 21 minutes.

Although both Thornton and Marleau have been superb, the Sharks have had the luxury of not having a drop off with the rest of their roster. A quick scan of the league's top 20 scoring leaders would also find the presence of Joe Pavelski and Logan Couture , with 12 and 10 points respectively. Pavelski has become one of the NHL's emerging two-way players over the last few seasons and has the luxury of playing alongside Marleau and Thornton. Couture is a rising star and it shouldn't be long before he is being looked at in the first round or two in future fantasy hockey drafts.

A couple of other Sharks have had impressive starts as well. Martin Havlat has three goals, five points and 21 shots, yet is still only owned in 21% of standard Yahoo leagues. Most likely because there is probably a good chance he will suffer a herniated disc in his back reaching down to pick up the morning paper sometime in the next couple of weeks. Defenseman Brad Stuart is just 4% owned despite having two points and leading the Sharks with a plus-8 rating.

While the Sharks' skaters have been doing a great job putting the puck in their opponent's net, the team has also been excelling at keeping pucks out. The Sharks are first in the league in goals against two weeks into the season, and a big reason for that is improved goaltending. Antti Niemi is on pace to set career highs in both goals against average and save percentage, with 1.80 and .936 marks in the respective categories. Even backup Thomas Greiss is doing his part, as he posted a shutout in his only start so far in 2013.

It's hard to think of such consistent perennial performers like Thornton and Marleau as being

sleepers this year in fantasy hockey. However, individuals who drafted either of them definitely did get a pleasant surprise. Yahoo is showing that both were taken on average in the middle of the fifth round in standard drafts. When you consider the amount of players that were taken over them in most drafts this year, their production is staggering.

The chances of Thornton, Marleau, and the rest of the Sharks keeping up their torrid pace is doubtful. Although, keep in mind we are already quickly approaching 20% of the 2013 season being in the books. As long as they don't start to slow down significantly, there is a good chance that they will be responsible for helping plenty of teams achieve a championship in the fantasy hockey world. Now if only the Sharks could finally translate that to an actual Stanley Cup title, that would really be something.

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