It boils down to optimal playing time. A top-line player will get the best of everything, while a top-six player will receive decent even strength/second unit power-play ice-time. A bottom feeder will most likely receive checking line ice-time and less optimal scoring ice-time, which will hamper their scoring ability during the season. Their big break will only come if there are injuries or big sophomore slumps from their team's top-six. There really isn't a sense in projection 80 points for a player who isn't even on a team's top-line let alone top-six.

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 how Bobby Ryan is going to line up alongside Ryan Getzlaf and Corey Perry instead of Joffrey Lupul.

Nashville – Weak top six, lots of room for competition
Steve Sullivan – Jason Arnott – J.P. Dumont
Martin Erat – David Legwand – Joel Ward

Bottom Feeders
Jordan Tootoo, Wade Belak, Cal O'Reilly, Patric Hornqvist, Mike Santorelli, Colin Wilson, Ryan Jones (RFA) and Jerred Smithson.
Nashville has one of the weaker top-sixes heading into the season, they don't have a lot of skilled forwards and not much depth for competition. The top-line seems pretty set with Arnott, Sullivan and Dumont, who were on fire late in the season when they were making their late playoff push. Erat and Legwand seem pretty secure, so it's that sixth spot where the main competition will be. I have Ward temporarily slated in that spot, you can have a more in-depth analysis about him if you buy the Dobber pre-season guide, while O'Reilly and Hornqvist should provide Ward with some stiff competition. Wilson has a good shot at making the club, but don't expect the Preds to rush his development this season.

Phoenix– Complete gong-show - Top Six
Peter Mueller – Matthew Lombardi – Shane Doan
Mikkel Boedker – Kyle Turris –Peter Prucha

Bottom Feeders
Scottie Upshall(RFA), Vernon Fiddler, Viktor Tikhonov, Martin Hanzal, Lauri Korpikoski, Radim Vrbata, Kevin Porter and Todd Fedoruk.
I've been harping about the Coyotes since last season's trade deadline and they continue to frustrate the hell out of me by making poor decisions one after another. At last year's trade deadline they brought in a whole platoon of new kids like Matthew Lombardi, Petr Prucha, Nigel Dawes, Scottie Upshall, which in the end really only took vital developmental ice-time away from youngsters, Mikkel Boedker, Peter Mueller, Martin Hanzal, Kyle Turris and Viktor Tikhonov. I'll grant them a reprieve since most of them were scheduled to become RFAs at the end of the season and that they were really trying to spray and pray to see if they could strike gold. Well the off-season comes around and they get rid of some excess weight, but then decide to make a few more brilliant boneheaded moves by adding more excess weight on top of an already loaded pile by re-acquiring Vrbata, trading for Lauri Korpikoski and then signing free agent Fiddler. What gives? I tried my best to kind of hand-pick a top-six based on merit, but at

the end of the day, someone who's currently slotted in the top-six could easily slide to the fourth line or even worst become a regular everyday healthy scratch. Basically what I'm trying to say is that your guess is as good as mine as to who rises to the top and who flounders.

San Jose- Top-six fairly certain, faces shallow competition
Milan Michalek – Joe Thornton – Jonathan Cheechoo
Patrick Marleau – Joe Pavelski – Ryan Clowe

Bottom Feeders
Devin Setoguchi, Torrey Mitchell, Scott Nichol, Jody Shelley, Logan Couture, and Jamie McGinn.
The Sharks will pretty much ice the same team as they did last season. What's interesting is that the Sharks' front office depth charts has Setoguchi listed on the third line with McGinn and Torrey Mitchell. You can read all about it here.
http://blogs.mercurynews.com/sharks/2009/07/25/you-want-a-new-posting-well-heres-a-look-at-the-likely-line-combos-at-this-point/ Huge boost for Cheechoo owners heading into this season. He would make a great surprise pick or better yet you should probably try to sneakily acquire him from an unsuspecting owner while his value is rock bottom. The article also re-affirms youngsters Logan Couture and Jamie McGinn should get a really good shot at making the big club this season.

St. Louis – Top-six uncertain faces stiff competition
Paul Kariya – Andy McDonald – Brad Boyes
Keith Tkachuk – Patrik Berglund – T.J. Oshie

Bottom Feeders
David Perron, David Backes, Jay McClement, Alex Steen, B.J. Crombeen, Brad Winchester, Cam Janssen, and D.J. King.
Similar to San Jose St. Louis will pretty much ice a similar team as last season. The Blues get some additional veteran locker room presence with the return of Kariya. The youngsters, Berglund, Oshie and Perron experienced plenty of success playing alongside one another, so there is potential for them to be re-united once again during the season. I slotted Tkachuk as a top-six player because I think poolies should treat him more like a top-six player than a bottom six. Backes had a solid across-the-board season last year, but he'll be a victim of point scarcity this year. Poolies should head into the season expecting him to put up plenty of PIMs.

Vancouver – Top-six locked, faces shallow competition
Daniel Sedin – Henrik Sedin – Alex Burrows
Pavol Demitra – Ryan Kesler – Mikael Samuelsson

Bottom Feeders
Mason Raymond, Steve Bernier, Ryan Johnson, Darcy Hordichuk, Rick Rypien, Jannik Hansen (RFA), Kyle Wellwood (RFA), Michael Grabner and Cody Hodgson.
There's not much depth in the bottom six of the Canuck's line up to steal thunder away from the top-six. Hodgson could possibly step up to the second line center position if Kesler has a bad year, but I wouldn't count that as a guarantee. Wellwood, Bernier and Raymond formed a pretty solid third-line for the Canucks, so look for them to be re-united once again for checking line duties.

Questions or comments? Like always I'll be ready and willing to discuss them in the comments section below. Stay tuned on Thursday where Russ Miller will finish off this series with the final five teams of the Eastern Conference. Also check out the 2009-10 Dobber guide as I have a column involving 20 plus sleepers from the Western Conference that you should pay attention to heading into next season.