Michael Amato takes a look at Sam Gagner's strong play in 2013.

One could make an argument that the Edmonton Oilers have been one of 2013's biggest disappointments so far. With a roster stocked full of young talent, the Oilers are still on the outside looking in at the playoff picture. This is a spot Edmonton fans know all too well as the team has been taking up real estate as one of the National Hockey League's cellar dwellers for the past several seasons.

Edmonton has put in substantial time developing a core of young talent, which is pretty easy to do when you picked first overall the last three years. But how much longer can they wait for a return on their investment without making a major change? Whether it's the wrong coaching, players just not gelling, or missing a piece or two of the puzzle, you would think the Oilers would have turned a corner by now.

What's even more troubling is that this shortened campaign could have been the perfect opportunity for the Oilers to breakout. With just 48 games to work with, this year was a great time for a young team to make some noise. With so few games you simply don't need to play well for as long as you normally would during an 82-game season to crack the playoffs. A talented team like the Oilers could have easily captured lightning in a bottle.

Despite the Oilers first half struggles, the organization and poolies will be very pleased with the play of Sam Gagner , who seems to be finally figuring things out. After a fairly pedestrian first five seasons where he failed to once crack 50 points in a campaign, Gagner is enjoying a career year in 2013 and got things started with a 10-game point streak. He has now tallied 11 goals and leads the Oilers with 27 points, which would equate to a 79 point pace if this season had 82-games.

In some ways Gagner's improved play is as puzzling as it is impressive. Some of the circumstances surrounding him remain unchanged, yet he has still found a way to better his numbers significantly. Gagner's line combinations over the last two years are a great example of this. In 2011-12 he played with Ales Hemsky and Taylor Hall most frequently, but this season it's been Hemsky and rookie
Nail Yakupov
. You could make a point that his new line-mate is actually a downgrade from Hall, as Yakupov has just 14 points in 2013 with a minus-10 rating.

Not only that, but Gagner's offensive zone start time has actually dropped a bit this season compared to last. He started shifts in the offensive zone 54.1% of the time in 2011-12, and this year his rate is at just 50.2%. Starting in the offensive zone more frequently gives you a better chance to increase your production, so it's interesting to see Gagner's numbers climb when his attacking start times have decreased.

Where Gagner has improved, however, is in a couple of areas that will certainly make poolies very happy. For starters, he is shooting the puck on net with a much better pace than he did in 2011-12. Gagner has 73 shots on goal in 2013 which works out to just under three a game. That's almost a full shot more per game than he was posting last year. Shooting the puck more naturally increases your odds for production.

I'm sure no Gagner owner would have drafted him for his hitting ability coming into 2013, and while he is certainly not a dominant physical force, the Oiler forward has already passed his hits total from last year. He threw just 21 hits in 2011-12 and has already delivered 23 in this campaign. By no means is he going to take over the hits category for you, but averaging just under a hit per game is a nice bonus for poolies.

With more consistent play comes more ice-time as well. Gagner is averaging over two minutes more of ice per game than he did in 2011-12, but it's his efforts with the man advantage that have made the major difference. He is averaging over three minutes of power play time per game in 2013, compared to just 2:27 last year. This has translated into 11 power play points and to put that into perspective, he had just 12 all of last year.

Looking at stats is a good way to analyze a player's game, but they often don't tell the entire story. Gagner's improvements could be due to something that can't be tangibly measured; confidence. Think back to last February when Gagner had that eight point performance against the Chicago Blackhawks. A game like that would give any young player a great sense of comfort knowing they have the ability to play at a high level and take over a contest against one of the league's top teams.

Those poolies that hung on to Gagner have been rewarded with a player that finally seems to be putting it all together. The challenge for Edmonton now is to get all their young talent on the same page. Gagner, along with Hall, Jordan Eberle , and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins have all showed they can play with the best this league has to offer during different stretches in their brief careers. Add rookies Yakupov and Justin Schultz into the mix, and the Oilers have an opportunity to become the Pittsburgh Penguins of the Western Conference. If Edmonton can exercise a little patience, Gagner is proof that good things come to those who wait.

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