Many fantasy hockey expert's have differing theories of how a player develops. Those that were highly touted could end up being just as they were projected and become superstars in the league. While others seem to be completely the opposite and become big-time NHL busts. Generally speaking, we'll usually know by their "magical" fourth year whether they have true fantasy potential or not. This week we'll evaluate five players who are in or going into their fourth season with their clubs to see whether or not they truly have developed to their true potential or are they going to become a bust.

First, let's evaluate the top pick in the 2003 NHL entry draft, Marc-Andre Fleury. In 167 appearances in the NHL in his young career, Fleury has compiled a 72-66-2-16 record, while maintaining a 3.02 goals against average and a .903 save percentage. If you looked at Patrick Roy's first 142 appearances in the NHL, Roy had a 69-46-18 record, while displaying a 3.06 goals against average which is very comparable to Fleury's numbers in the first 167 games of his young career. In Roy's fourth full NHL season, he had a dazzling 33-5-6 record with the Canadiens, and with Fleury entering his fourth full season with the Penguins next year, can we

expect a similar “jump” in stats as Roy did in his fourth season especially when getting backed by the league’s seventh rated offense certainly won’t hurt either.

Next, let's look at the third overall pick in the 2003 NHL entry draft, Nathan Horton. In 284 games played so far in his young career, Horton has 98 goals and 91 assists for a total of 189 points in four season’s seasons with the Panthers. Horton has taken the typical development curve where he has slightly improved on his offensive production for each season as he developed.

He started off his rookie season with 22 points, then 47 in his sophomore season, 62 in his junior year, and projects to finish his graduation year with 63 point this season. His 6’2” and 229 pound frame, seems to be very comparable to Flames Captain, Jarome Iginla, who stands at 6’1” and 205 pounds. They both also play a very similar physical style of hockey, which would certainly assume a similar development curve for Horton as the one experienced by Iggy. Iginla had been a bit healthier than Horton when he starting his NHL career and managed to play in 311 contests, where he garnered 196 points, in the first four years of his NHL career. The fifth year for Iginla was his breakout year where he broke the 70 point plateau and he then managed to tally 96 the next year, the fifth year could very well be Horton’s breakout year as he now added another year of experience under his belt playing with Stephen Weiss and David Booth.

The third player we’ll analyze is the Ukrainian Nikolai Zherdev, who was selected fourth overall in the 2003 NHL entry draft. Zherdev has had a bit of a roller-coaster ride to start his young NHL career. Zherdev has played 276 games for the Blue Jackets so far in the past four years, and has registered 75 goals and 103 assists in those contests. Zherdev’s problem doesn’t seem to be a lack of skill, but seems to be a lack of work ethic or motivation.

This year coach Ken Hitchcock managed to light a fire under Zherdev as he set a new career high in points scored with 58, he should finish the season by breaking the 60 point plateau for the first time in his career this season. Zherdev's 6'2" and 197 pound frame seems very similar to Alex Mogilny's frame of 6'0" and 210 pounds. If Zherdev played with as much heart as Mogilny did to start his NHL career with the Sabres, Zherdev would probably be a lot closer to the 318 points that Mogilny put up by his fourth year than he is now.

The Blue Jackets should be revamped next season, as outstanding playmaking prospect Derick Brassard, number two on Dobber's prospect list, and talented young scoring sensation Jakub Voracek, number eight on Dobber's prospect list, should be joining the big league party next season. The Jackets also currently have the sixth overall pick in this season's NHL entry draft and could go with another Russian in Nikita Filatov, if he happens to fall lower in the draft, or Danish prospect Mikkel Boedker would both be great fits for the young up-and-coming Jackets. Zherdev should be in for a big season next year and definitely someone to keep in mind for next season's draft.

Another player to look at is Philly's Mike Richards, who was selected 24th overall in the 2003 NHL entry draft. Mike Richards had his coming out part this season while registering 70 points in 67 contests. In 205 games played with the Flyers, Richards has registered 47 goals and 89 assists, which aren't great offensive numbers, but Richards wasn't projected to be a big time NHL scorer. Many experts consider Richards to be the second coming of Steve Yzerman, because of their great two-way ability. His 5'11" and 195 pound frame is certainly comparable to Stevie Y's 5'11" and 185 physique. Yzerman's offensive numbers were bolstered by an era of highly offensive hockey, so drawing a comparison of numbers isn't fair on Richards. With young developing talent blossoming into talented offensive players in Philly, the future certainly looks bright for Richards next season.

The final player that we'll consider is another fellow Flyer, Jeff Carter, who was selected 13 slots ahead of fellow teammate Mike Richards in the 2003 NHL entry draft. Carter definitely has not yet blossomed into the highly touted offensive player that the Flyers were hoping for. In four seasons of junior hockey with the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds in the OHL, Carter registered 246 points in 236 contests, which does show that he has some offensive flare. In his first three years in the NHL, Carter has registered 65 goals and 62 assists in 219 contests for the Flyers. Carter would likely be most comparable to Jason Spezza of the Senators. Carter's 6'3" and 200 pounds is strikingly similar to Spezza's 6'3" 213 pounds. Spezza started the first three years of his NHL career with 166 points in 179 contests with the Senators, which is somewhat comparable to Carter's 127 in 219 considering Carter didn't have a two-time 50 goal scorer to

wing for him. Spezza had an expedited spike in his development curve in his third year out, and Carter's probably isn't that far behind. Be sure to keep him in mind for next season's fantasy hockey draft.

Next week, we'll take a look at potential fourth year players in next season who might has as much or more fantasy impact compared to the five mentioned in this week's article.