Hardcore hockey fans probably didn't know who Matt Halischuk was in December of 2007. Halischuk was a 4th-round pick of the New Jersey Devils that summer after scoring 66 points in 67 games for the Kitchener Rangers the year before.

Good numbers for an 18-year-old player, especially considering he notched 33 goals, but Halischuk was small and not widely regarded in prospect circles as having much chance of making an impact at the NHL level. He was also drafted a year late, which has a way of putting you under the radar. Still, International Scouting Services had him ranked No. 120 in their final draft rankings that year (he went 117th), even though he was regarded as a long shot.

In the season after his draft year, Halischuk vaulted himself into limelight with some clutch performances. He scoring the game-winning overtime goal for Canada at the 2008 world junior championship, and lit up the OHL playoffs as he tallied 16 goals and 16 assists in 20 games. He continue his torrid pace at the Memorial Cup, where he scored five goals and four assists in just five games for the host Kitchener team.

The only puzzling thing about that season was how Halischuk – during the regular season at least – went from a balanced, two-way player to a play maker. His offensive totals of 13 goals and 46 assists in 40 games were unusually out of whack.

This year, his second full season as a pro, Halischuk is steadily climbing the Dobber Hockey prospect rankings. He is up to 37 in the most recent list and I'm not surprised, despite struggling to score in 20 games with New Jersey earlier this season.

Halischuk always seems to know where to be in the offensive zone and he credits that with playing minor hockey for Dan Cameron and Toronto Jr. Canadiens. Cameron gave Halischuk the freedom to develop offensive instincts, something more minor hockey coaches should do. That influence – which honed his skills and instincts rather than stifling them by forcing him to fit into a system – is a major reason for Halischuk's promise as a player.

He uses his good speed and great instincts to find space and get into excellent scoring position. That gives him more opportunities to use his quick release and good shot.

He has a habit of scoring in bunches, especially in junior hockey, so don't be surprised if he becomes one of those streaky players in the NHL. So far this year, that hasn't changed. He scored three goals and four assists in his first four games after being demoted to the AHL's Lowell Devils in early December. Overall, he has four goals and seven assists in 13 games.

He scores what hockey people would call goal scorers' goals, and his modest size 5-11, 185 pound frame should not be a concern. He'll never be a power forward, but with his speed and creativity, it isn't necessary. His small size doesn't stop him from going into high-traffic areas,either, and he certainly has enough jam to come out of a scrum with the puck. Like the old saying goes, it's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog.

Scouts have raved about his competitiveness and work ethic. He never takes a shift off, and that's something that scouts and coaches notice. It's a harbinger of lots of ice time in the pros too. Guys like Jacques Lemaire have all kinds of time for players like Halischuk.

Halischuk was well-versed in defensive hockey while playing for Peter DeBoer in Kitchener. DeBoer, who now coaches the Florida Panthers, demands players obey a system and Halischuk was able to adapt quickly to that.

Scouts describe Halischuk as unselfish and underrated and the heart-and-soul type of player whose value is not always measured by statistics. Still, that quality has a way of helping improve statistics.

The trade of Niclas Bergfors to Atlanta helps Halischuk's chances. Halischuk still has veterans Jamie Langenbrunner and Patrik Elias ahead of him, so he will have to be patient.

Halischuk can play a checking role, but has the skill to provide more. He'll get a chance to work on that part of his game with Lowell. Expect him back in the NHL next season, but give him a year or two before he'll get the opportunity to have fantasy impact.

Upside: 30-40-70+