Let's kick off Stu's Slant with the basic fantasy hockey strategy - the title says it all...

BUY

The sure thing

Cody Hodgson, Brampton Battalion (Vancouver Canucks) – Dobber Rank – 2nd

Cody Hodgson is the kind of player that wins hockey pools. Like Ron Francis before him, Hodgson does everything quietly. Only seven months older than John Tavares, Hodgson's 1.71 OHL points-per-game is second only to Tavares' 1.79 points-per-game. Are you still dying to grab Tavares in next year's draft? It's a better idea to wait a couple of rounds and grab Hodgson if he wasn't picked up this year. He's a more efficient pick than the much-hyped Tavares.

Moving from prospect status to consistent NHL producer is a pressure producing endeavour. Cody Hodgson has repeatedly proven himself in pressure situations, ranging from the 2008 Canada-Russia ADT Challenge to the 2009 World Junior Championships. The Russians had a good team at the ADT Challenge this season. They split their series against both the QMJHL and the WHL. They could easily have split against the OHL if it wasn't for Hodgson's play in game three in Guelph. After two periods in a tight 3-3 game, Hodgson scored twice in the third period to lead the OHL to victory.

Hodgson displayed that same clutch ability in the World Junior Championships a month later, leading the tournament in scoring with 16 points. Hodgson's production, leadership and winning attitude have helped the Battalion immensely this season. They are ranked eighth in the entire CHL after finishing just sixth in the OHL last season.

By constantly proving himself a winner, Hodgson is as likely as anyone to carry his junior success to the next level. And he'll be a lot cheaper than Tavares.

Off the radar

Justin Azevedo, Manchester Monarchs (LA Kings) – Dobber Rank - unranked.

Despite winning 2008 CHL Player of the Year, Azevedo isn't on many people's fantasy radar. There is no question he's a classic boom or bust pick. At 5'8, 185 pounds, Azevedo is small, and skates with an odd, knock-kneed style that makes him look awkward on the ice. What Azevedo does have is quickness, aggressiveness and elite hand-eye co-ordination. A serious type off the ice, Azevedo is all business as he proved in spades last season. He missed six weeks with a lower body injury in November, but has scored a point-per-game on an offensively weak Monarchs team as an AHL rookie. He has a surprising amount of bulk for someone so small. Couple that with a fierce playing style, and it gives him a big advantage over other smaller, skilled players.

Forget comparisons to big-time bust Peter Sarno. Sarno ripped up the OHL from day one, and tipped everyone off in 1997-98 with a horrendous -41, despite scoring 121 points. Azevedo has always had as many PIMs as games played, and never had a minus OHL season. Unlike Sarno, who was taken in his first draft eligible year, Azevedo had to work for everything. Finally drafted at age 20 after being passed over in two drafts, Azevedo was picked up by L.A. Kings General Manager, Dean Lombardi who has an excellent post-first round draft record. Evgeni Nabokov, Jonathan Cheechoo, Vesa Toskala, Mark Smith, Ryan Clowe and Christian Ehrhoff were all late Lombardi picks. Look for Azevedo to be another succesful, late round, Lombardi pick-up.

SELL

Future band-aid boy

Nathan Gerbe, Buffalo Sabres - Dobber rank - 17th.

If you like Nik Antropov, Jason Spezza or Derick Brassard (just wait folks), you're going to love Gerbe. As good as Gerbe was in college, the lighter schedule and the smaller players really shielded the tiny talent from anything approaching the pro game. Had Gerbe flourished in the Western Hockey league with its grittier game and grueling schedule, then perhaps some excitement would be warranted. But at 5'5, 160 pounds, he’s an injury waiting to happen.

Gerbe is currently two inches shorter and 15 pounds lighter than Brian Gionta, and will likely have an inconsistent, Gionta-like career. Another pint-sized wonder, Gionta has had only one big season. Now 30, Gionta has only two seasons over 50 points under his belt. He's also two inches and 15 pounds heavier than Gerbe is right now. Gerbe will likely max out around 170 pounds, not a weight that lends itself to the consistent rigours of the NHL. Buyer beware.

Not Skille'd enough

Jack Skille, Rockford Ice Hogs (Chicago Black Hawks) – Dobber rank – 26th

The good news for Skille is that he’s a good enough skater to become a valuable NHL player someday. Skille’s good news is a fantasy poolie’s nightmare because Skille's value will come on the third line. Taken 7th overall in 2005, Skille was drafted ahead of proven NHL forwards Devin Setoguchi, Anze Kopitar, T.J. Oshie and Andrew Cogliano. That doesn’t mean he’s a bust for the Hawks because Skille’s skating ability is above average even at the NHL level. Skille’s shot is also a weapon, but his hockey sense and hands are not NHL caliber. As his defensive game matures, his skating will make him invaluable to an NHL team, but not to fantasy poolies.

Sell immediately

Benoit Pouliot, Houston Aeros (Minnesota Wild) - Dobber rank - 21st

Poolies might be surprised to know that in his best offensive year, Pouliot scored only 65 points in 51 games. That was three years ago in his third year of junior. It's amazing what an aggressive, 6'3 winger will do to skew a scout's judgement. They must have had visions of Bertuzzi dancing in their heads. Unfortunately for everyone involved, Pouliot has proven to be nothing more than an aggressive, 6'3 winger. He's a decent skater but has no hockey sense; no hands, and an attitude that may see him leave the Wild sooner than you can say 'Jacques Lemaire.' In most cases, leaving the Wild would be a relief for a stifled offensive player; however, in this case, Pouliot has yet to produce anywhere. Pouliot leaving Minnesota won't accomplish much other than to ease Lemaire's nerves.