

## The Best First-Year Player Won't Win the Calder

Written by Stuart McDonald

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The Calder trophy, like so many NHL awards will be awarded to the player with the best statistics and not necessarily to the best player.

Steve Mason probably deserves to win the Calder Trophy for best rookie this season. His .920 save percentage, league-leading nine shutouts and 28 wins so far, will probably hold off 25-year old Pekka Rinne and win the Calder. Neither Mason, nor Rinne however, will have a better career than the best player in this year's Calder class.

To understand who the best player is you have to go back to the 2005 draft. Likely Calder nominee Bobby Ryan was picked second behind Sidney Crosby that year. It has taken Ryan three years since his draft year to hone his game to the Calder-caliber level where he now sits. Much like Mason and Rinne, Ryan has shiny, happy numbers that most fans can easily digest.

The player picked after Ryan in 2005 provides the greatest insight as to who the current first-year gem might be. Jack Johnson, widely considered the number two pick behind Crosby in 2005, went third to the Carolina Hurricanes. Like Ryan, it has taken Johnson three years since his draft year to make his name in the NHL. Still considered an elite defensive prospect, Johnson struggled out of the gate with a serious shoulder injury, but has logged the third most minutes per game on an LA team ranked among the top 10 NHL teams defensively.

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The third youngest team in the NHL (average age 26.3) is backstopped by "household names" Jon Quick and Erik Ersberg who sit 28th and 37th in NHL save percentage respectively. Okay, so the Kings are incredibly young, have mediocre goaltending and yet are among the ten best NHL teams defensively. How is that possible?

Drew Doughty, who turned 19 three months ago, is the leader of the LA Kings. Doughty, perhaps the most underappreciated player in the last decade is a victim of his position, his offensive numbers and especially his west coast city which lends itself more to sand and surf than slap shots and skating.

Very few of the esteemed Professional Hockey Writers Association members have likely seen more than a handful of Kings games this season. Given that they'll be doing the Calder voting, those members as usual, are going to be more inclined to look at numbers - easy numbers. The kind you get for forwards and goalies. To truly appreciate a defenceman's contribution, some research is required. In the internet age there really should be no excuses for a lack of research. The information is out there, and yet once again a defenceman without gaudy offensive numbers will be overlooked.

Okay, why all the fuss over Doughty? He sees by far the most ice time on a very young team with weak goaltending that happens to be among the top 10 defensive teams in the NHL. Doughty plays 24 minutes per game, an average of three minutes per game more than Kyle Quincey who is second on the Kings. Doughty is 32nd in NHL ice time, amazing for someone who was 18 for most of this season. Doughty is miles ahead of Calder candidate Ryan in his "relative" development, has not struggled with injuries like Johnson and fellow American defenceman Erik Johnson, and will score 30 points on a team among the 10 worst offensive NHL teams.

The 2008 draft class was supposed to be one of the best to come along in years, especially for defencemen. Toronto fans are drooling over defensive stalwart Luke Schenn and rightfully so. Other than Schenn however, nobody from that great draft is even remotely close to Doughty. If you factor in Doughty's age, the huge impact on his team, and his potential at his current developmental pace, then Doughty projects to be one of the most impactful NHL players to come along in years. Sadly he may not even receive a Calder nomination. If he's not already taken in your keeper pool then grab him. Anyone as dominant defensively as Doughty at 19, will have no problem developing the rest of his game. He could be a 40-point defenceman as early as next year. He could be the next Raymond Bourque.