

## Aging Prospects

Written by Stu McDonald

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Okay, so these guys aren't exactly old, but they have to be at least 22 by the start of the 2011-12 season to be included. In most cases these players have proven themselves in the AHL and are due for a serious look at some NHL ice time. There are some hidden gems in this list and in some cases all these defencemen need is a break. Most of them are stuck in organizations with a lot of blue line depth. Because of their age, there is more pressure for the organization to play them sooner rather than later and that's good if you need to shore up your blue line next year in a keeper league. These are good defensive prospects that are very close.

**Jonathan Blum, Nashville, Turns 23 on Jan. 30th, 2012** - Unlike many on this list, Blum is going to get his chance to play next season. Last season he scored 34 points in 54 AHL games and played in 23 NHL games. When Nashville let Cody Franson go, it was to open a spot for Blum who they feel can play in their top six. Blum could put up as many as 35 points next season and should be a 50-point defenceman at some point.

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**Marc-Andre Gragnani, Buffalo, Turns 25 on March 11th, 2012** - The recently signed Gragnani is in an interesting position. The Sabres have signed eight defensemen and although Gragnani signed a two-way deal, he must play at least 58 NHL games for the Sabres or he'll become a Group six (unrestricted) free agent. Group six free agency occurs when skaters have reached age 25, have 3 accrued years of professional experience, and whose contracts have expired, but have played less than 80 NHL games. So if the Sabres don't play him in 58 games they'll lose him for nothing. Gragnani won the Eddie Shore Award as the AHL's best defenceman and he led the Sabres in playoff scoring with seven points in seven games. Expect him to get top-six even strength ice time and play on the second power play. He should score 30 points and like Blum is capable of scoring 50 points later in his career.

**Brendan Smith, Detroit, Turns 23 on Feb. 8th, 2012** - After a successful run with the WCHA (NCAA) Wisconsin Badgers, Smith turned pro last season. He scored 12 goals and 32 points in 63 AHL games for Grand Rapids. Smith would likely see a lot of NHL ice time on any other team. Unfortunately for him, he's playing in Detroit so he won't play much unless there are a lot of injuries at the back end. Smith is a future star and he'll likely get his chance in 2012-13. If you have room on your farm team, grab him.

**Jakub Kindl, Detroit, Turns 25 on Feb. 10th, 2012** - While he doesn't have the same upside as Gragnani, Kindl will also be a Group six free agent unless he plays 29 games for Detroit. Whether he does or not, Detroit has to make a decision on him soon. He played 48 games for the Red Wings last season so he might get a shot at a full season in 2011-2012. Don't expect big numbers from him this season, but he should be capable of putting up 30-35 points eventually. He's a good defenseman to have in deep keeper leagues because he can score and he'll likely put up some decent numbers in 2012-13.

**Maxim Goncharov, Phoenix, Turned 22 on June 15th, 2011** - Goncharov had a hard time adjusting to North American hockey after playing four years in Russia. He managed only six goals and 15 points in 61 AHL games last season. Unlike other prospects, Phoenix has some room on defence for Goncharov to move up but he needs another year in the AHL to get his game in order. Ed Jovanovski signed with Florida, Adrian Aucoin is 38 and Rostislav Klesla is a certified band-aid boy, so in two seasons expect Goncharov to get some decent power play time. At 6'4, 215 pounds, Goncharov can blast it from the point and has a decent offensive game. His upside is 50 points.

**Matt Taormina, New Jersey, Turns 25 on Oct. 20th, 2011** - Be wary of Taormina because he's only 5'10, 185 pounds and tore ankle ligaments after 17 NHL games last season. Despite the band-aid boy potential, Taormina has progressed nicely and is a proven AHL scorer. In 2009-10 he scored 50 points in 75 games for Lowell and has little to prove in the minors. With

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Andy Greene, Henrik Tallinder, Mark Fayne, Anton Volchenkov and Bryce Salvador on New Jersey's blue line, there is a dire need for an offensive defenceman on the Devils. The problem with Taormina is that he's not great without the puck so his even strength ice time will be somewhat limited. Expect him to get lots of power play time and along with it a decent chance at 30 points if he doesn't get hurt again. He has an upside of 40 points if he can stay healthy.

## Dark Horse

**Erik Gustafsson, Philadelphia, Turns 23 on Dec. 15th, 2011** - Because he's only 5'10, 185, Gustafsson will take a little longer than most to develop, however, he's already put up a 50 point season in the AHL and made the AHL's All-Rookie Team. Like many Swedish hockey players, Gustafsson has a lot of composure and rarely panics with the puck. He's not flashy but can play in all situations. Like most on this list he's stuck on a team with a lot of defensive depth, but like compatriot Tobias Enstrom he should be capable of putting up NHL points despite his size. He'll likely see some playing time in Philadelphia this season but won't produce decent (35+) points until 2012-13.