

Late Blooming Forwards

Written by Stu McDonald

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In the last decade there have been a number of elite forwards who were slow developers. They either got stuck in deep organizations, suffered injuries or simply needed more time to produce. These late bloomers didn't emerge as potential stars until their early twenties. They are hard to distinguish from players who go on to have average careers or no careers at all. Some recent examples of late blooming forwards include Logan Couture, Michael Grabner and Bobby Ryan in 2009. In the last 10 seasons there has been roughly one late blooming prospect per season. These players emerge on average at age 22 and all have gone on to some variation of fantasy stardom. Who is going to be this season's Logan Couture or Bobby Ryan? Here is a list of candidates, their age this season, and their point predictions.

Cody Hodgson 21, Vancouver

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Hodgson has suffered a series of back injuries and then a broken orbital bone that has delayed his development. Many argued the leading scorer at the 2009 World Junior Championships should have won tournament MVP, however, it was given to John Tavares who signed a \$33 million contract this summer. Hodgson has the talent and the drive to produce like Tavares and is one of the favourites to break through this season. Vancouver's depth is the only thing in his way and he appears to be taking care of that in the pre-season. He's had an excellent camp so far. He's played in two pre-season games and was even against Calgary playing third line minutes (13:29) in a 5-1 loss. His solid performance earned him second line minutes (17:27) against Edmonton and he was named first star. Hodgson is too good at this point for Vancouver not to give him at least top nine minutes and time on the second power play.

Prediction: 47 points and a Calder nomination.

Zac Dalpe 21, Carolina

Although not the best player on this list, Dalpe has one of the best chances to break through this season. Originally thought to be a transition player a couple of months ago, Carolina appears to think he's ready. They will give him every opportunity to play at least in the top nine and possibly the top six. He scored almost a point per game in the AHL last season, has a hard, accurate shot and is a tireless worker. He should get some points. He played one exhibition game (against Buffalo) and scored a nice assist playing on the third line with Brandon Sutter. He's had a good camp.

Prediction: 37 points, but if he breaks the 45 point barrier (cracks the top six) he could get a Calder nomination.

Blake Geoffrion 23, Nashville

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He played 20 games for Nashville last season and acquitted himself nicely. He scored a hat trick and managed six goals. Geoffrion is more than ready and should play at least fourth line minutes but will have to fight Nick Spaling and Colin Wilson for third line ice time on the left wing. If a left winger or center gets injured, Geoffrion will be the beneficiary. He's been solid in the pre-season, scoring one goal and one assist in a 5-3 victory over Florida. He was the second star of that game. Nashville is a low scoring team and that will affect Geoffrion's point totals.

Prediction: 25-30 points.

Kyle Palmieri 21, Anaheim

Dobber really likes Palmieri so he's on this list. Palmieri can play centre but is going to be in a brawl with Dan Sexton for the third line right wing spot. There is a lot of fight in this dog so don't underestimate Palmieri. He's an excellent skater, an energetic player who can score goals. It would be more comforting if his AHL stats were better, but his 10 game call-up last season went well. Palmieri managed a goal and an assist in a 7-4 pre-season loss to Phoenix. Unfortunately, he was -1 despite scoring two points so he didn't play a defensive gem. He's going to need another season to produce decent numbers.

Prediction: 30 points.

Brett MacLean 23, Phoenix

MacLean could turn out to be an average player (or an AHL one) because he's not a great skater. He played 13 NHL games last season and although he's fine in the offensive zone, he's

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a defensive liability which could cut into his ice time. On the plus side, MacLean has improved his skating and has worked hard to become a decent prospect. There are still skating concerns which are always hard to shake for a prospect. Phoenix pasted Anaheim 7-4 recently and MacLean didn't register a point in almost 15 minutes of ice time. He got a second chance against LA, with 15 minutes of ice time and again came up empty. He even missed a penalty shot. Between his poor skating, poor defensive play, advancing age and a poor pre-season, MacLean has a lot of question marks.

Prediction: 22 points.