

Which 2011 Prospects Make The Jump?

Written by Brendan Ross

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The 2011 prospect tournaments are all wrapped up and several key recent draft picks certainly made their marks on management and their fan base. The NHL pre-season schedule is underway and now is the time for the prospects to prove their readiness in hopes of earning an extended stay. *The Dean's List* takes the opportunity to address those 2011 NHL Draftees who have performed well at their team's prospect events and are showing signs of life in exhibition play as well. There are plenty of draftees who enter camp full of piss and vinegar but cracking the opening day rosters takes more than a few good shifts.

** Point Projections are based on a full season if TDL lists their chances of staying as >70%*

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Gabriel Landeskog, LW (2nd Overall, Colorado Avalanche)

The smooth talking Swede has as good a chance at making the Colorado Avalanche's roster as any 2011 NHL draftee. The Kitchener Rangers were so certain that Gabriel Landeskog would make the leap to the NHL that they released his rights this past summer to make room for another import pick. Colorado's left side is anything but stable as Peter Mueller and David Jones both come with above average injury risks providing Landeskog with an opportunity to snag a place on one of the Avalanche's scoring lines. *The Dean's List* feels that playing alongside a former OHL star in Duchene could serve the gritty hard working winger well.

2011-12 Roster Chance: 99%

2011 Point Projection: 80GP- 19G-24A-43P

Adam Larsson, D (4th Overall, New Jersey Devils)

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Larsson was a true gift to the Devils organization when he fell to the number four slot in this year's past draft as it addressed a serious organizational need. New Jersey is searching for a defenseman that can log big minutes and contribute both offensively and defensively. While the Devils may prefer to ease the big rookie Swede into the NHL slowly, Larsson's good play might force them to play him more. Larsson is a good bet to crack the Devils opening night roster and see some valuable ice time right out of the gates. Look for New Jersey to play the technically sound defender from Skellefteå a lot this season and provide him with plenty of opportunity to succeed. The Devils have a good chunk of Swedish players in their lineup that should help the transition for the young star. Larsson will be mentored by veteran defenseman Henrik Tallinder as he gets his feet wet in the NHL. Larsson notched an assist in his pre-season debut on a beautiful feed to teammate Petr Sykora.

2011-12 Roster Chance: 90%

2011 Point Projection: 80GP- 5G-26A-31P

Mika Zibanejad, C (6th Overall, Ottawa Senators)

The sixth overall selection has been arguably the best 2011 draftee over the past few weeks of rookie tournaments, training camps and pre-season games. Zibanejad has re-energized an Ottawa Senators fan base with hope and enthusiasm after a dominating prospects tournament last week in Oshawa scoring several highlight reel goals. *The Dean's List* was certainly in agreement with Dobber Hockey's own prospect guru Stu McDonald in his observations of Zibanejad.

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McDonald spoke highly of Mika's skill set, "He hits hard and is incredibly fast and a good stickhandler for someone his size. I immediately thought power forward and NOT two-way forward as he's been billed."

The praise would not end there as McDonald explained to *TDL*, "Zibanejad's fore-checking in the three games I saw was his best asset. He took pucks off people using both strength and surprisingly good anticipation."

Mika Zibanejad's situation is interesting as Ottawa has several different options for their top draft pick. With one season remaining on his contract with Djurgarden, Zibanejad could be sent back to Sweden but it is starting to look like Zibanejad could end up competing for a top nine role in the NHL immediately. Opportunity exists in the Senators lineup and with Zibanejad capable of playing a strong two-way game his chances of staying in the Nation's Capital increases with every successful shift he completes. The Senators will unquestionably be keeping Zibanejad around for nine games as they require extended look.

2011-12 Roster Chance: 60%

2011-12 Point Projection: 9GP – 2G- 2A – 4P (76GP – 14G – 16A – 30 P)

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Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, C (1st Overall, Edmonton Oilers)

As Darryl Dobbs mentions often, the last time the first overall pick that was a forward did not play in the NHL following his draft year was in 1989-90 with Mats Sundin (not including Alex Ovechkin in the lockout year). The trend of playing the top pick directly out of the draft could certainly end this season as many people believe that Nugent-Hopkins needs to develop more physically. The young creative elite playmaking center certainly has the skills to compete in the NHL this season but another year of dominating in the WHL and returning home to Red Deer for the Under-20 World Junior Championships certainly would not hurt Ryan's progress.

At the moment, Nugent-Hopkin's physical traits are the biggest concern as the premiere center has the offensive skill set and defensive acumen to succeed but the Oilers' immediate need for RNH is not a pressing concern this season. Look for the Oilers to evaluate his game throughout exhibition play and the first nine NHL games before deciding his ultimate destination for the upcoming season.

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2011-12 Roster Chance: 45%

2011 Point Projection: 9GP-2G- 4A-6P (80GP – 16G – 55P)

Mark Scheifele, C (7th Overall, Winnipeg Jets)

There was no shortage of critics of Kevin Cheveldayoff's Mark Scheifele pick at the 2011 NHL Entry Draft. The Barrie Colt rookie put up impressive numbers last season playing on a poor Colts team but Scheifele displayed all sorts of potential to Colts' Head Coach and former Jets' fan favourite Dale Hawerchuk. Scheifele has carried momentum into the 2011-12 pre-season after a strong showing (7GP-6G-2A-8P) at the Ivan Hlinka Memorial Tournament for Team Canada. Earlier this week, Scheifele was a one-man wrecking ball in his debut game for the Winnipeg Jets scoring two goals and four points en route to a 6-1 win impressing Coach Claude Noel, the Winnipeg fan base and even those draft day critics.

The Kitchener-native has shown that he owns the size, hockey IQ and drive to seriously compete for a roster spot. Scheifele was expected to eventually return to his OHL Colts team prior to the start of the season but if the lanky pivot maintains this high level of play he could just "Jeff-Skinner" his way onto the opening day roster. At the very least, it appears that Mark Scheifele could stay for a few regular season games as management determines whether he deserves a place among the Jets' top nine forwards.

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2011-12 Roster Chance: 20%

2011 Point Projection: 9GP-1G- 2A-3P

Ryan Strome, C (5th Overall, New York Islanders)

The Islanders loved Strome so much that they opted to take another forward prospect over a defenseman that could have filled a bigger need in the organization. With Tavares, Nielsen and Bailey as the teams three centers the Islanders are not in need of another pivotr which will likely send Ryan Strome back to Niagara of the OHL to join a strong Ice Dogs team. Strome exploded last season to record 33 goals and 106 points, a remarkable 93 point improvement from his previous season

Strome is a player capable of producing highlight reel plays with his outstanding vision, spectacular creativity and deft playmaking abilities. The Islanders' top prospect has the potential to become a top two center at the NHL level over the next few seasons but it is more likely that Strome returns to the OHL this season to challenge for the league scoring lead and compete for Team Canada at the Under-20 World Junior Championships later this year in Alberta. Strome should not be written off completely from making this team as there are a few who peg him as this years' Skinner but it is more reasonable to assume that his NHL games played this season is limited to nine.

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2011-12 Roster Chance: 20%

2011-12 Point Projection: 9GP – 1G – 4A – 5P (more likely to become final cut)

Jonathon Huberdeau, LW/C (3rd Overall, Florida Panthers)

Florida's GM Dale Tallon is likely responsible for limiting Huberdeau's chances of making the NHL this season after signing what seemed to be all the available free agents in the NHL this past summer. Florida's forward depth up front is full of second and third liners and while Huberdeau offers the potential of a top line forward it's more likely that the Panthers send him back to junior to join the defending Memorial Cup Champions Saint John Sea Dogs.

Huberdeau is the future top line winger for the Panthers and even though his offensive skill set is ready now, the Q scoring star would be better served heading back to junior to round out his defensive game and bulk up his lanky frame. The Toronto-born Huberdeau has an outside chance at cracking the lineup but the Panthers should be in no hurry for him to play right out of the gates. Jonathon recorded two points on the powerplay (1G, 1A) in his pre-season debut in a 4-3 Florida win over the Nashville Predators.

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2011-12 Roster Chance: 15%

2011-12 Point Projection: 9GP-3G-3A-6P (more likely to become final cut)

Sean Couturier, C (8th Overall, Philadelphia Flyers)

Earlier in the week the Philadelphia Flyers announced the entry level signing of first round pick Sean Couturier but that does not necessarily give him a roster spot. The more likely scenario is that Sean Couturier returns to Drummondville this season and joins several others on this list on Team Canada at the World Junior Championships in December.

Early in preseason action, the big pivot has impressed the Flyers' brass by playing his game as advertised - a smart responsible two-way game. Couturier is one of the few 2011 prospects (add Landeskog and Zibanejad too) that have the ability to contribute to their team's success in other ways than just scoring points. The Flyers *could* place Couturier in a third or fourth line role and his development would likely remain unharmed. However, the depth of the Flyers' roster and the lack of top end prospects in their system will result in Couturier returning to the QMJHL to hone his skills. Couturier would need to pass several established NHL veterans to earn that elusive rookie gig. The youngster from New Brunswick has performed well in exhibition play notching a goal and an assist versus Toronto. Keep a close eye on Couturier's

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play as well as other Flyers to gauge his chances of claiming a roster spot. At this point in time, Couturier is on the outside looking in.

2011-2012 Roster Chance: 15%

2011-2012 Projections: 9GP-1G-1A-2P (more likely to become final cut)

Honourable Mentions:

If I were a betting man (and I am) I wouldn't expect any of these players to last past the nine game mark of the regular season but they are worth mentioning.

Dougie Hamilton (9th; 9 games), Ryan Murphy (12th; final cut), Sven Baertschi (13th; 9 games), Nathan Beaulieu (17th; final cut) Joe Morrow (23rd; 9 games), Brandon Saad (43rd; final cut)

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There are several other 2011 draftees who remain with their NHL clubs in the early stages of pre-season action. As the next few weeks unfold, these young players will slowly be returned to their junior clubs to further their development. Of the 210 players drafted in 2010, the NHL had only six players see regular season action last year and a mere five of them remained with their team past the nine-game trial period (Hall, Seguin, Burmistrov, Fowler and Calder Trophy winner Jeff Skinner). The Islanders' Nino Niederreiter received his taste of NHL play as he appeared in nine games (2 points) before returning to the WHL.

Fantasy owners must realize that the chances of these top picks playing a regular shift in the NHL remain relatively rare and should draft accordingly. *The Dean's List* is fairly confident that Gabriel Landeskog and Adam Larsson are two rookies that will earn a regular shift but we also have a few favourites that could "Jeff-Skinner" their way onto a roster. Who are our favourites? Ottawa's Mika Zibanejad. Winnipeg's Mark Scheifele (longer shot).