The art of drafting and developing offensive-minded defensemen into responsible players capable of being trusted with NHL ice-time has not been perfected yet. National Hockey League teams continue to juggle and tweak their approach with these potential offensive catalysts in hopes of finding the next Erik Karlsson or Kris Letang. Fantasy leagues that permit drafting of young defenseman often make decisions tough come draft time. Should you draft the defenseman with good odds of become a regular thirty-to-forty NHL rearguard? Or, is the better approach to identify those defensemen with high offensive upside and disregard the risk of them not becoming an NHLer? The answers will depend solely on your team's draft tendency and comfort level with taking risks but *The Dean's List* would chose the latter.

Like the last edition of *The Dean's List* where we took a look at the Top 10+ Fantasy-Based Forward Rankings, the following list does not reflect actual NHL value. The list was created to rank potential

defensemen in the 2012 that possess fantasy worthy offensive abilities. The Dean's List has adjusted the following rankings to factor in NHL likelihood
and
offensive potential to ensure that the rankings remain realistic and not a total crapshoot.

1. **Morgan Rielly** (Moose Jaw Warriors, WHL)

Currently sidelined for the remainder of the WHL season with a knee injury, Rielly is the most offensive defender in this draft class. A tremendous skater with great footwork, Rielly is able to generate an offensive assault on his opposition through elite vision and slick passing skills. The offence runs through Morgan Rielly and he projects to be a valuable commodity in points only fantasy leagues. Rielly is the number one choice for fantasy defensemen in the 2012 draft class and should be drafted accordingly.

2. Mathew Dumba (Red Deer Rebels, WHL)

The feisty, hard hitting, heavy shooting Dumba is an intriguing prospect that does come with some risk but as a late 94-born defenseman, time is on his side to improve even more. The concern with Dumba is whether he can play his physical game at the next level given his below average physical size (6-0, 173). Often compared to former WHL defender Dion Phaneuf with his style of play, Dumba will draw interest with any team holding a top ten pick given his potential to become a “franchise defensemen”. In fantasy leagues rewarding penalty minutes

and hits Dumba will carry extra value. The energetic rearguard is a good gamble when drafting a defenseman simply based on his potential.

3. **Derrick Pouliot** (Portland Winterhawks, WHL)

The former first overall pick of the WHL Bantam Draft, Pouliot is just another Portland Winterhawk looking to become a first round NHL pick following in the footsteps of Ryan Johansen, Nino Niederreiter, Sven Bartschi, and Joe Morrow. Pouliot currently sits fourth in WHL defensive scoring in just his second full WHL season. The Weyburn, Saskatchewan native covers the ice efficiently with his effortless stride and his meticulous positioning. In a way, Derrick Pouliot resembles a younger Duncan Keith but with less refinement at this point in time. Pouliot has the potential to become a powerplay quarterback at the NHL level and that should be an enticing quality for your fantasy squad.

4. **Jacob Trouba** (USNTDP, USHL)

The big Trouba ranks high on both draft ranking and fantasy lists because of how well his game projects to the NHL level. Jacob Trouba plays a very well rounded game involving himself physically, offensively and defensively. If you are seeking points from Trouba, his near point-per-game pace in the USHL is promising although many scouts feel he has yet to tap his offensive potential. Trouba is not the sexiest name on this list offensively however he does project to be one of the safer defenseman picks with decent offensive upside. Draft

accordingly.

5. **Cody Ceci** (Ottawa 67's, OHL)

People knock Ceci for being one of the older defensemen in this draft class (as a December-born 93) but it is hard to discount his offensive numbers despite being a little ahead of the development curve. Offensively, Ceci is clipping along at a point-per-game pace trailing only Boston Bruins' prospect Dougie Hamilton in the OHL scoring race for defensemen. Defensively, Cody does have a tendency to wander a bit and loses focus easily but his eagerness to contribute offensively comes with rewards as well. Ceci can often be found jumping into the rush at unexpected times and while it often leads to offensive chances it is a habit that he might not be able to get away with at the next level. Ceci is a good puck-moving defenseman with a hard accurate shot likely placing him as a future top four defender.

6. **Ryan Murray** (Everett Silvertips, WHL)

There is a very good chance that Ryan Murray is the first defenseman drafted at the 2012 NHL Draft but he may not be the best gamble for your fantasy squad. The Everett captain certainly has the skills to become a contributor offensively – good agile skater with a lively-shot. However, Murray has already become known for his well-rounded game that might pigeon-holed him into tough defensive minutes. Ryan Murray is a player that should certainly be drafted high in fantasy leagues based simply on his NHL likelihood but the above players

may bring just a bit more of an offensive element.

7. Jordan Schmaltz (Green Bay Gamblers, USHL)

Scouts have been fairly critical of Jordan Schmaltz given how he has not been as offensive as he was last year. However, Schmaltz is a defenseman that has likely played in a league too long and he has shifted his focus on becoming better defensively to counteract his boredom. Of course, Schmaltz' long term game will certainly benefit from his increased commitment to defense but many were eager to see how high his offensive ceiling really is. Schmaltz is a defenseman that could become a huge success in fantasy leagues if he regains his former offensive flare so beforewarned that his NHL draft position may not be an accurate representation of his fantasy value.

8. Dalton Thrower (Saskatoon Blades, WHL)

The name “Thrower” applies perfectly to this rugged defenseman who is not afraid to drop the mitts and earn penalty minutes for your fantasy team. Dalton Thrower is a prototypical two-way defenseman with strong defensive abilities and good puck-moving skills. In the future, it is unlikely that the name “Thrower” appears atop the defensive scoring ranks but he should become a top four defender capable of chipping in forty-plus points and he can fill up the PIM category as well.

9. **Ludvig Bystrom** (Modo, Elitserien)

The nation “Sweden” and position “defenseman” have become one of the better marriages in hockey. Bystrom is best described as a two-way defenseman who relies heavily on his natural hockey instincts. Knowing that the smarts are there, NHL teams will certainly be attracted to this well-built defenseman with good skating and puck-moving skills. Bystrom has been honing his game in the Elitserien league meaning his ice-time is limited (not uncommon among young players) but the patience and experience usually results in a well-developed prospect. Look for Bystrom to make a lasting impression at the upcoming IIHF World Under-18 Championship in April.

10. **Matt Finn** (Guelph Storm, OHL)

The Guelph Storm have enjoyed the progression of Matt Finn as he molds himself into a solid defenseman. Finn’s best asset is his hockey intelligence that rivals all other defensemen in this

draft class. Coming into his draft year, Finn was never considered a first round pick but his powerplay quarterback abilities and defensive game have improved dramatically. Matt Finn currently sits second in draft-eligible OHL defenseman scoring.

Honourable Mentions:

Slater Koekkoek (Peterborough Petes, OHL)

Plenty of scouts would have loved to see more of Koekkoek's play this season but he is one player, of many, that has fallen victim to the injury curse. Before a shoulder injury cost him his season, Koekkoek was scoring a point-per-game pace for a underwhelming Petes team.

Hampus Lindholm (Rögle, Allsvenskan)

The big Swede is garnering interest for some teams in the first round although the majority of ranks have him projected as a second round pick. Lindholm is an offensive defenseman that is a “project” at this point in time. His offensive game is derived from his elite skating skills making him extremely mobile but his intelligence and decision making has been called into question at times. Lindholm is the type of player with the raw skills that *could* turn out to be a steal past the top twenty.

Dillon Fournier (Rouyn-Noranda, QMJHL)

The first overall selection in the 2010 QMJHL draft, Fornier is a smooth skating defenseman who sees the ice extremely well. The lanky rearguard has stong puck-moving skills and has been coming on strong as of late so keep an eye on him as the season wraps up.

Jesse Graham (Niagara Ice Dogs, OHL)

The undersized Ice Dog defenseman is an exciting player to watch as he possesses elite

skating skills and has great offensive creativity. Graham is a defenseman who may not get selected until the second or third round but his offensive upside is certainly intriguing.

Esa Lindell (Jokerit U20, Jr.A SM-liiga)

Lindell is ripping the junior league apart in Finland notching over a point-per-game (48 in 43 games) to lead his team in scoring. He's a player that has a natural gift offensively but needs to refine his defensive side (as most young defensemen do). Lindell is currently ranked 11th among European Skaters by NHL Central Scouting and he could end up being a good homerun swing for your fantasy squad.

Drafting blueliners from a fantasy perspective is a drastically different process than drafting forwards. Analyze a few of the past entry drafts and you will notice that today's current "offensive defensemen" are rarely selected in the top ten. There are exceptions but normally NHL teams seek reliable well-rounded defensemen with high NHL likelihood if they choose to use a top pick on a defenseman.

Today's most valuable fantasy defensemen do not always come with high draft pedigree. For

example, Kris Letang was drafted 62nd overall behind names like Jack Johnson (3rd overall), Brian Lee (9th overall), Marc Staal (12th overall) and several other lesser fantasy names. Keith Yandle was a fourth round selection the same season when the Coyotes drafted him in the 105th spot (4th round). Erik Karlsson was the 15th overall selection in the 2008 draft giving him decent draft pedigree but in no way was he the most highly coveted defenseman by fantasy managers that draft year when he posted 10 points in 45 games for Frolunda. Karlsson is a good example of how draft year statistics can be deceiving especially when considering prospects come from different leagues of play.

The NHL is full of fantastic fantasy options as Brian Campbell (156th, 1997), Duncan Keith (54th overall, 2002), Shea Weber (49th overall, 2003), Dustin Byfuglien (245th overall, 2003) and Alexander Edler (91st overall, 2004) have all shown that draft pedigree means jack-squat in fantasy hockey land. In fact, for every Drew Doughty (2nd overall, 2008), Alex Pietrangelo (4th overall, 2008), and Kevin Shattenkirk (14th overall, 2007) that hold first round tickets to the NHL there are likely more defenseman contributing to your fantasy leagues that were drafted outside of the top 30. Remember that being selected high in the draft does not guarantee success in the offensive department as many of those rearguards are passed over and selected in the later rounds. Do your homework and do not let this selective ranking be the only guide used as *The Dean's List* could have added another 10 names easily to consider.

Keep following *The Dean's List* as the 2012 NHL Entry Draft continues to draw closer.