In the next edition of *The Dean's List*, the focus is turned to two potential first round picks that have been competing against each other for several years now. Previously,
TDL
examined a few defenders in "
2012 Defensemen Draft Class
" but now we turn our attention to two WHL defensemen impressing early on in the 2011-12 WHL season and are currently battling each other to earn the top draft position among WHL defenders. There is no shortage of franchise defensemen in the 2012 NHL draft class but it appears that the WHL is breeding some of the best of the 2012 crop and both Morgan Rielly and Derrick Pouliot are among the league's elite at the defenseman position.

Morgan Rielly – Moose Jaw Warriors (WHL)

Born: March 9th, 1994
Height: 5'11.5"
Weight: 190
Shoots: Left

2011-2012 Statistics: 10GP – 2G – 7A – 9P, 2PIM, +8

The Dean's List has Morgan Rielly as the third best defender of the 2012 draft class after the likes of Everett's Ryan Murray and Red Deer's Mathew Dumba but Rielly could challenge both players for the top defenseman of the 2012 draft if his strong play continues. The swift skating Rielly (not "Reilly") is quickly moving up many scouting departments' draft lists as he displays his strong two-way game.

Morgan has plenty of competition among blue liners for the upcoming draft but he has played near perfect hockey over the past six months and is establishing himself as a sure-fire first round (likely top ten) pick. Rielly has impressive speed and agility which helps him offensively and defensively to both create and prevent goals. The Vancouver native is a mobile defenseman capable of leading the rush and offensive play with his dynamic skating and puck handling abilities. Prior to the Western Hockey League, Morgan racked up 18 goals and 55 points (43 games) playing for the Notre Dame Hounds AAA Midget team. With the help of Rielly's strong play the Notre Dame hounds won both the Provincial and Telus Cup championships. The accomplishments would not go unnoticed as the Moose Jaw Warriors

would make Rielly the second overall pick of the 2009 WHL Bantam draft.

Rielly has remarkable hockey sense and elite vision making him dangerous both on the rush and while defending the opposition. The young seventeen year old is drawing early comparisons to Duncan Keith as scouts love the poise and confidence that Rielly displays on a nightly basis. This past spring, Morgan had an exceptional Ivan Hlinka Memorial Tournament appearance for Team Canada and was often the team's best player on the ice. Morgan is off to a strong start playing for Moose Jaw as he has registered nine points in 10 games and sits at an impressive plus-eight rating. Look for Morgan to challenge Murray and Dumba as he strives to become a top ten draft pick.

Derrick Pouliot – Portland Winterhawks (WHL)

Born: January 16th, 1994
Height: 5'11.25"
Weight: 186
Shoots: Left

Statistics: 11GP – 3G – 8A – 11P, 6PIM, -5

The Saskatchewan native came out of the gates flying to open the 2011-12 WHL season scoring 10 points over his first seven games including a four-assist night against Seattle in his second game. Derrick Pouliot was the first overall selection of the 2009 WHL Bantam Draft (ahead of aforementioned Morgan Rielly) and was a product of the Moose Jaw Warriors Midget AAA team where he managed to post a point-per-game pace with 43 points in 43 games (14 goals, 29 assists). Pouliot is an elite skater and some people have called him the best offensive defenseman of the WHL's top four (Murray, Dumba, Rielly and Pouliot). Pouliot brings a similar game as his 2009 Bantam draft counterpart, Morgan Rielly, as both provide their teams with some game-breaking skills but Pouliot has struggled to develop the defensive acumen that Rielly has.

With his strong skating skills, Derrick is as dangerous as any 2012 defenseman and flourishes when showcasing his strong transition game. Pouliot thrives as a puck-moving defenseman capable of jumping into the rush at any moment and with his good on-ice vision he becomes a dangerous fourth forward in those rushes. Scouts won't be questioning Derrick Pouliot's offensive abilities but they would like him to take the next step defensively to show that he can become a valuable top four defender at the NHL level. The undersized defenseman will certainly be taken in the first round but at the moment he likely trails his WHL defensive colleagues in most draft rankings.

Two years ago, the WHL held its annual Bantam draft and the first four picks were all highly touted defensemen. Fast forward several years later as the focus turns to the 2012 NHL Entry Draft and the same four defensemen are headlining the Western Hockey League. The Portland Winterhawks held the first overall selection of the 2009 WHL Bantam draft and selected defenseman Derrick Pouliot. Next up was the Moose Jaw Warriors who opted to pluck Morgan Rielly out of the Saskatchewan Minor Hockey League. Third on the docket was the Edmonton Oil Kings who chose Griffin Reinhart third overall. The fourth pick was owned by the Red Deer Rebels who decided that Mathew Dumba would be the ideal pick. These four defensemen join Ryan Murray (a first round selection in the 2008 Bantam draft) as some of the top defenders of the 2012 NHL Draft class and have their roots deeply buried in the Western Hockey League.

Derrick Pouliot may have had the upper hand in the 2009 WHL Bantam draft when he went first overall but *The Dean's List* has the second overall pick, Morgan Rielly, leading the way in their 2012 NHL Draft rankings. Look for Murray, Dumba, Rielly, Pouliot and Reinhart to represent the Western Hockey League when each of them becomes a first round selection next June.