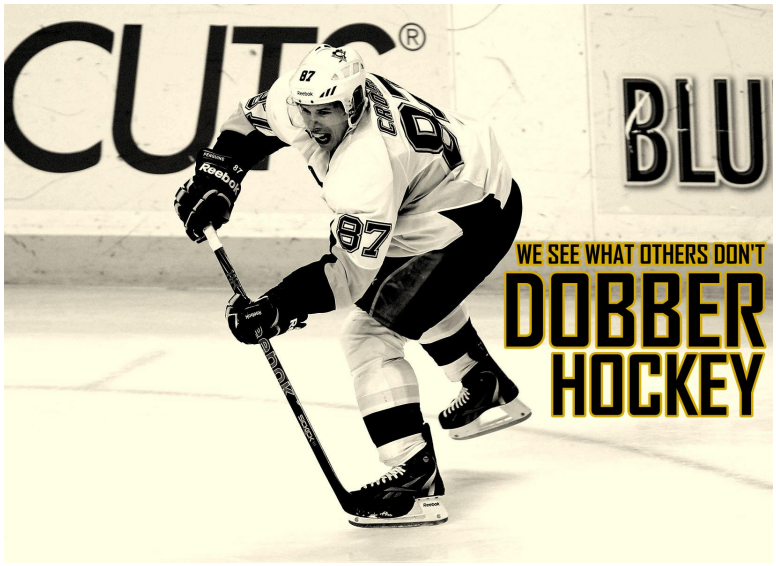

Editors note: Jeff Angus has made many more DobberHockey-themed wallapers - check them out here.

This week we tackle something that's always a good debate among fantasy hockey enthusiasts – predicting who will win the Art Ross Trophy as the regular season NHL points scoring leader. Looking at the winners for recent years, something jumped out to me – when both Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin have played 70 or more games in the same regular season, one of them has won the points title (in 2008-09, Malkin played 82 games and Crosby played 79, and Malkin won the Art Ross; in

2006-07 Malkin played 78 games and Crosby played 79 and Crosby won the Art Ross).

With this in mind, the debate for this week becomes will anyone other than Crosby or Malkin wi n a scoring title for any of the next three times when Crosby
and Malkin
both play 70 regular games in the same season?

Yes, someone else will – Other players will catch up to them, and health concerns have to be considered

Crosby has been in the NHL since the 2005-06 season, and Malkin since the 2006-07 season. This means Crosby and Malkin have played together for six seasons. But in only two of those seasons have both managed to stay healthy enough to play 70 regular season games, and the

most recent of those two seasons was way back in 2008-09. So if you go by past results (two out of six seasons, for an average of one out of three), it would take *nine* more seasons for the two of them to actually add another three seasons where both play 70+ games. By then they would be in their mid-thirties, and if you look at the list of Art Ross winners since 1996-97, you'll see that the oldest was Daniel Sedin (then age 30) in 2010-11. In all other years since 1996-97, the regular season points leader was younger (often much younger) than 30.

What's more, even with the very best players of all time there is a limit to how long they can stay better than everyone else. In fact, in the last 40 years, no one other than Wayne Gretzky had a gap of more than 10 years between his first scoring title (in his case, 1980-81) and last (in his case, 1993-94). Not Mario Lemieux (first title - 1987-88, last - 1996-97), not Jaromir Jagr (first title - 1994-95, last – 2000-01), not anyone else in the past 40 years. This is significant, since Crosby won his first Art Ross in 2006-07 and Malkin won his first in 2008-09, so if we fast forward to nine years from now, it would have been almost 15 years since Crosby won his first Art Ross, and almost that long for Malkin. The reality is waiting so long for tthem to manage to both be healthy for three seasons will take us well past when either one has a realistic shot of actually being able to win the Art Ross trophy.

The other thing to consider is contract status. Although Crosby is signed for the next 6,831 years (actually only through 2024-25), Malkin's five year deal was inked back in the summer of 2008. Yes, conventional wisdom suggests that part of the reason the Pens traded Jordan Staal (more on him below) this past summer was to ensure they had the money to keep Geno with the team, but you never know for sure whether Malkin will want to go elsewhere in the NHL, or, as crazy as it might sound, to the KHL. The important point is that it's no guarantee that Crosby or Malkin will be playing together beyond next season. So why exactly does that matter so much? Because their league leading success seems to depend a lot on both of them actually playing 70+ games, as evidenced by someone else winning the Art Ross in two of the three seasons where only one of them managed to play 70+ games:

In 2011-12, Malkin played 75 games and Crosby plays 22 games (Malkin wins Art Ross)

In 2009-10, Malkin plays 67 games and Crosby plays 81 (Henrik Sedin wins Art Ross)

In 2007-08, Malkin plays 82 games and Crosby plays 53 (Alexander Ovechkin wins Art Ross)

There's also the reality that no matter how great some hockey players might seem, others will inevitably emerge and pass them by. Look back at when Tiger Woods was dominating the PGA tour – would anyone have predicted that he wouldn't win a single golf major in 2003 and 2004 after having won seven of them from 1999-2002? Of course not! The key is no one can stay that far ahead of other professionals for too long; the playing field always finds a way to catch up. It's no different in the NHL, and as great as Crosby and Malkin are right now and as dominant as they've been, it is inevitable that even if they manage to stay healthy others will rise past their level in future seasons.

Lastly, one cannot overlook the departure of Staal. It was the steadying presence of Staal that allowed Crosby and Malkin to be able to play prime minutes and not have to get their hands dirty. And while Pittsburgh is confident that Brandon Sutter will give them much of what Staal brought to the table in the past, I think most everyone will agree that Staal was a truly special player, and that the jury is still out as to whether there will be a ripple effect from his departure that hurts the offensive stats of Crosby and Malkin.

No, someone else won't – Their health concerns look like they're in the past, and they're just now getting more talent around them

Reading the above, you'd think that Crosby and Malkin are aging players whose bodies are being held together by stick tape. But the reality is that Crosby is only 25 and Malkin only 26, and with the extended break they've received due to the lockout both are entering a season fully healthy for the first time in several years. It's quite possible that both will end up playing 70+ games for each of the next three seasons, or perhaps three out of the next four or five, in which case would you bet against one of them leading the league in scoring each of those three seasons? If so, then not only should you ask yourself why, but you should also really consider who you think would end up ahead of them. And while you're at it, be sure to remember that Crosby and Malkin are 1st and 2nd among active NHL players in terms of points per game, so do the math – if they play the games, the league leading points will come.

Another thing to keep in mind is that Crosby and Malkin's past achievements have occurred with almost no supporting talent around them. The 81 points scored by James Neal in 2011-12 was the first time since Crosby or Malkin arrived in the league that any other Pens forward scored more than 68 points, and the first time that another Pens forward even managed to score more than
53 points
since way back in 2008-09. Plus, Kristopher Letang had 42 points in 51 games for the Pens in 2011-12, giving them a real offensive defenseman threat for the first time since Sergei Gonchar several years back. Not surprisingly, the outputs of Neal and Letang helped Malkin and Crosby post the highest points per game numbers of their entire careers in 2011-12. With Neal and Letang both hitting their prime at age 25, the Pens finally have other legitimate offensive talent beyond their two superstars. If anything, the stage is set for Crosby and Malkin to increase their league leading point totals in the coming years.

In terms of Staal no longer being around, yes, having him there was helpful to the Pens – *as a team* ; but will it hurt Crosby and Malkin's point totals? Definitely not. According to the handy dandy Frozen Pool tool, Staal was on the ice for only one of Crosby's 35 points and only five of Malkin's 109, so his presence was basically irrelevant to their scoring output. Plus, it's not like Staal prevented other teams from still lining up their best defensive forwards against Crosby and Malkin. And although not having Staal there might hurt the Pens - as a team - defensively, that net effect might actually make it so the Pens have to score more to win, and who do you think those points will come from?? In the end, Crosby and Malkin's point totals might actually be better without Staal there!

Also, there should be no concern about Malkin signing elsewhere once his 2008 deal ends. He wants to stay with the Pens, the Pens want him to stay, and the money will be there for him to stay. With him and Crosby together for the primes of their careers, you'll have the best "one-two punch" the NHL has seen in quite a while, certainly since Jaromir Jagr and Mario Lemieux. And let's keep in mind that from 1991-92 to 2000-01, Jagr and Lemieux had a stretch of seven consecutive Art Ross trophies and nine out of ten overall. We certainly seem poised for Crosby and Malkin to achieve league leading success for the next several seasons, so all we as fans and fantasy GMs have to do is sit back, watch, and enjoy (once they get back to playing hockey of course……)

The Final Verdict

MALKIN
71
CROSBY
87

[illegible]