

Pittsburgh Penguins

Winston Churchill knew what he was talking about when he said, “History is written by the victors”. Heck, it’s not like we were thinking back to the 2008-09 Stanley Cup through the hazy lens of memory, twenty or thirty years down the road. Already that offseason and the following season, it was easy for all of us to fall into the mode of thinking that the 2008-09 Pittsburgh Penguins had been destined to win that championship, or that they’d even get the best of Detroit if they played that series ten times over. It’s revisionist history.

Honestly, even as the runner-up from 2007-08, it’s not like Pittsburgh was considered one of the favorites going into the 2008-09 postseason. Struggling on the periphery of the playoff hunt for much of the regular season, the Pens seemed to be happy just to have made the dance as a fourth seed (99 points). The upstart Boston Bruins (116 points) were first seed in the Eastern Conference, while many considered Alex Ovechkin’s high octane Washington Capitals (108 points) as the team to beat in the East.

In the powerhouse Western Conference, the San Jose Sharks (117 points) were President’s Trophy winners, but most observers looked to the super-talented and battle-hardened Detroit Red Wings (112 points) to repeat as champions.

In the Finals, the Red Wings took a two games to none lead, historically, a very tough hole to climb out of, but made an even more daunting task considering

that it needed to be accomplished against the well-oiled Detroit hockey machine. Remember, Pittsburgh even fell behind by three games to two after a 5-0 shellacking at Joe Louis Arena, requiring not just two wins in a row, but the Game 7 clincher on enemy ice, where the Wings had won all three games in the series. It wasn’t quite Bill Mazerowski’s 1960 Pittsburgh Pirates upsetting Mickey Mantle’s juggernaut New York

Yankees, but some of the same underdog elements were there, adding to the degree of difficulty.

This isn’t to say that the 2008-09 Penguins weren’t a very good team. In fact, they should have been considered one of the Eastern Conference favorites—perception again—because after flying under the radar for much of the season under Michel Therrien (27-25-5), Pittsburgh went on a blistering 18-3-4 end-of-season run under new coach Dan Bylsma, in what should have been a sure warning sign for any of their postseason opponents. Whether it was the uptempo style espoused by Bylsma that invigorated the lifeless team, or Bylsma’s player-friendly

nature that supplanted Therrien’s hypercritical demeanor, or simply number one defenseman Sergei Gonchar’s concurrent return to the ice after missing the first 56 games of the season, the Penguins had certainly transformed into a different team.

Remembering those subtleties of the 2008-09 season can help us recognize that the Penguins were a very dangerous team going into 2009-10, but by no means

PENGUINS IN A BOX		
Last Season		
Goals For	257	5th
Goals Against	237	18th
GVT	20	9th
Points	101	9th
Playoffs	Lost Conference Semi-Final	
Cup hangover? Only the elite play of Crosby kept this team in contention.		
Three-Year record		
Points	302	6th
GVT	82	5th
Playoffs	3 Appearances, 37 Wins, 1 Cups	
VUKOTA Projection		
Goals For	243	4th
Goals Against	234	16th
GVT	9	9th
Points	94	9th
A great blue line and centers, but weak wings. Where have we seen this Penguins team before?		

the favorite. Still, expectations ran high and would soon run high.

The offseason brought about the typical tinkering from general manager Ray Shero. Veteran free agent wingers Bill Guerin and Ruslan Fedotenko were re-signed to one year deals, while veteran free agent wingers Miroslav Satan and Petr Sykora were moved from Bylsma's postseason doghouse straight out to the curb. Ex-Devil Mike Rupp was added for depth, especially in light of Game 7 hero Max Talbot's shoulder surgery. But hopes of potentially adding an impact rookie to the mix fell by the wayside as Eric Tangradi suffered a serious wrist injury in the OHL playoffs.

Pittsburgh's biggest changes occurred on defense—the departures of shutdown defensemen Rob Scuderi and Hal Gill—which therefore became the biggest question mark as to whether this incarnation of the Penguins would be as successful as the last. Offensively-gifted Alex Goligoski, a healthy scratch throughout the bulk of the Stanley Cup run, would get a chance to prove himself, potentially as the heir to Sergei Gonchar as power play quarterback if Kris Letang didn't fit the bill. Veteran shutdown defenseman Jay McKee was also brought in to compensate for some of the defensive skills lost with the departure of Scuderi and Gill.

Many fans and pundits alike considered the Sidney Crosby- and Evgeni Malkin-led Penguins a favorite to repeat. But would there be a championship hangover?

The immediate answer seemed to be a resounding “No”. The Penguins started their 2009-10 regular season campaign on fire, just as they'd finished the previous season and postseason. Pittsburgh hit marks of 7-1-0 on October 17th, 11-2-0 on October 30th and 25-10-1 on December 19th in a blitz through the first two and a half months of their schedule, all but cementing their near-invincibility in our collective subconscious.

That start fooled many observers all the way through the regular season and all the way to Pittsburgh's eventual playoff exit. From December 19th onwards, the Penguins went 22-18-6—22 wins versus 24 losses—and 7-6 in the playoffs. Counting overtime losses as losses, that's a below “.500 record” of 29-30 over the course of nearly five months. Yes, they were defending Stanley Cup champions with two of the greatest talents in the sport, and yes, the standings at the end of the season showed 101 points, but if you kept your eye on the puck, this was clearly no juggernaut. The mediocre incarnation of the Penguins that reached the playoffs was a team of vastly different quality than the red hot team that entered the 2008-09

postseason though that fact wasn't commonly recognized. Incidentally, the Devils' concurrent decline in performance throughout the second half of the season helped keep up the smokescreen that the division co-leaders were both performing well, when in fact, both were underperforming significantly.

If the Penguins as a whole were not playing as well, it wasn't due to the play of captain Sidney Crosby. With a strong work ethic and a commitment towards improvement, Crosby transformed himself into an elite goal scorer, with his 51 goals good enough to capture a share of the Maurice Richard Trophy with Tampa Bay's Steven Stamkos. Crosby's previous high had been 39 goals. Further, Sid greatly improved his faceoff percentage and shootout percentage. Overall, his season ranked third in GVT, marginally behind Ryan Miller and Alex Ovechkin.

Then there was Evgeni Malkin, the previous season's Art Ross Trophy winner for most regular season points and Conn Smythe Trophy winner as playoff MVP. Though missing a handful of games to injury, his 77 point, -6 rating campaign was clearly a big step backwards compared to the 113 points and -16 rating of 2008-09. There's your Stanley Cup hangover, by the way. Among the multiple theories for Malkin's downturn in production were fatigue, poor work ethic and even the absence of his loveable parents, who seemed ever-present fixtures during the 2008-09 Stanley Cup run. Even a replay of the Mario Lemieux-Jaromir Jagr dynamic has been suggested. Going forward, it will be interesting to see what kind of NHL career Malkin makes for himself. Perhaps the worst Penguin defensively, one area where Geno needs to improve greatly is in his own end of the ice.

The early season breakout of note was that of Alex Goligoski. Briefly on a Norris Trophy caliber pace through October's 14 games with 12 points and a +12 rating, the sophomore's season got derailed by a leg injury in November. Yet even when physically fit, Goligoski seemed to have lost confidence to the point where he refrained from shooting the puck. In the postseason lineup, it might have been better for Bylsma to have made him a healthy scratch this time around.

The team deficiency of note in 2009-10 was the continued sub-par performance on the man advantage—not a characteristic of the early years of the Crosby and Malkin Penguins—which was puzzling given a team boasting the All-World talents of Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, along with the power play wizardry of Sergei Gonchar. At some point, coaching has

to take the hit for finishing at 17.2% (20th in NHL) in 2008-09 and 17.2% (19th in NHL) in 2009-10, but that criticism has rarely been leveled at Bylsma, either for scheme or choice of complementary personnel. With Gonchar and Crosby clearly as top notch performers, the deficiencies came from the supporting cast, particularly Chris Kunitz, Jordan Staal and Kris Letang.

The trade deadline saw the typically active Shero pick up winger Alex Ponikarovsky from Toronto as well as defenseman Jordan Leopold from Florida as rentals. While both were solid players, certainly neither addition could have been seen as a fix to the Penguins' power play.

Again cast as the fourth seed at the end of the regular season, many observers mistook Pittsburgh as the same team from last postseason, and considered them built for the playoffs with their mix of superstars and role players. A streaky and dinged up Senators' squad, featuring arguably the worst goaltending tandem in the playoffs—Brian Elliott (.909) and Pascal Leclaire (.887)—did not seem like a worthy foe for the defending champions, especially with the elite firepower that the Pens could bring to bear on the netminding duo.

After dispatching Ottawa in a hard fought six games, it looked like Pittsburgh had won the lottery by avoiding the President's Trophy winning Washington Capitals (121 points), who had puzzlingly fallen to a popgun Habs' squad. Regrettably, the Canadiens they faced were hot like the Penguins had been in 2008-09 and they were getting Conn Smythe Trophy caliber goaltending from Jaroslav Halak. And as we've seen, Pittsburgh wasn't as good as they everyone assumed they were.

The final issue for the Penguins—in what would be a painful seven game exit to old friend Hal Gill and the eighth-seeded Canadiens—is one that had been nicely whitewashed in the 2008-09 Stanley Cup run: the inconsistent and ultimately overrated play of goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury. The first overall pick in the 2003 NHL Entry Draft, the perception about Fleury, all along, has been that he's a superior netminder. Unfortunately, the cache of being first overall draft pick, the long term contract, the acrobatic saves, the 2007-08 Finals' appearance and the 2008-09 championship all contribute to MAF's cult of personality. But take a look at the numbers, and you'll see that only Fleury's 2007-08 can be considered exceptional. Though that regular season sample only included 35 games, his .921 regular season save percentage and his .933 postseason save percentage were clearly outstanding.

Place it against the body of work, though: his four other regular season save percentages have fluctuated between a terrible .898 and a mediocre .912 while his three other postseason save percentages have varied between a hideous .880 and a below average .908—and the latter was in the Stanley Cup winning campaign, mind you. In Pittsburgh's 13 postseason games in 2009-10, Fleury recorded a save percentage of below .904 in eight contests. But with five big years left on his contract, we're not sure if Shero could move MAF even if he wanted to.

That brings us to the doorstep of the 2010-11 campaign. In a housecleaning of aging and underachieving wingers, Shero chose not to resign the venerable Bill Guerin or the massively disappointing Ukrainian comedy duo of Ponikarovsky and Fedotenko. Several role playing forwards—Pascal Dupuis, Tyler Kennedy, Max Talbot, Craig Adams, Mike Rupp, Eric Godard—are in their contract year, making it likely that many of them are entering their last campaign in the black and gold. On the other hand, Shero extended edgy Matt Cooke through 2012-13, clearly appreciating the physicality and agitation that he brings to the lineup. On a tight budget for complementary forwards, it looks like top prospect Eric Tangradi will finally crack the opening lineup, and likely on opening night.

It's on the blue line where the purse strings were opened, both to offset last offseason's loss of lockdown defensemen Hal Gill and Rob Scuderi, and this offseason's decision not to resign top defenseman Sergei Gonchar, trade deadline acquisition Jordan Leopold and lesser lights Mark Eaton and Jay McKee. Shero's betting that in picking up New Jersey's top blueliner Paul Martin—a fine two-way defenseman—and Phoenix's Zbynek Michalek, that they'll be in better shape than last season. If Martin can both stay healthy and adequately quarterback the power play with the assistance of a refocused Alex Goligoski, it's possible. AHL standout Ben Lovejoy will likely fill in the role of sixth defenseman.

In goal, it's simple: the Penguins and their fans can only hope that the inconsistent Marc-Andre Fleury rediscovers what succeeded for him in 2007-08.

Clearly, Pittsburgh has the talent to improve upon their second half play from 2009-10 to become one of the handful of Stanley Cup contenders from the Eastern Conference in 2010-11. Much depends on Paul Martin's filling in for the offensive presence of Sergei Gonchar, and on bounceback performances from Ev-

geni Malkin, Marc-Andre Fleury and Alex Goligoski. The wild card is Tangradi: it will be interesting to see who is on what line by the time the playoffs begin. Penguins' fans can only hope that Tangradi finds a lasting chemistry with either Crosby or Malkin. If

Pittsburgh should falter in the first half of the season, Bylsma's continued tenure with the Pens may very well be in doubt.

Timo Seppa

FORWARDS

Adams,Craig			RW							PIT		
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	CAR, CHI	30	75	4	7	11	-16	5:13	-1.7	0.9	0.0	-0.8
2008-09	CHI, PIT	31	45	2	5	7	-3	6:58	-0.2	0.7	0.0	0.5
2009-10	PIT	32	82	0	10	10	-5	11:05	-2.6	4.3	0.0	1.8
2010-11	PIT	33	63.1	3.5	7.3	10.8			-1.2	2.6	0.0	1.4

Craig Adams is all about the intangibles. And when we say “all” about the intangibles, we really mean “all”... because you have to question where the “tangibles” are...like, any “tangibles” at all. Yes, there's the lunchbox mentality. Yes, there are the famous locker room speeches. Yes, there's the Harvard pedigree. Yes, he was a member of the Stanley Cup champion 2005-06 Hurricanes—albeit with zero points in 25 games—and a member of the Stanley Cup champion 2008-09 Penguins. But the Cult of Craig Adams—both among Pittsburgh fans and much of the hockey media—has really lost touch with reality. The guy has all of 100 points...in 589 career NHL games, a plus-minus rating of -53 and a whopping 1.5 GVT over the past three seasons. Go ahead—just try and find us a worse player with this much hype.

Conner,Chris			RW							PIT		
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	DAL	24	22	3	2	5	0	12:00	0.2	0.4	0.0	0.6
2008-09	DAL	25	38	3	10	13	-5	10:55	0.3	0.7	0.0	0.9
2009-10	PIT	26	8	2	1	3	-1	9:37	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.6
2010-11	PIT	27	32.2	5.1	7.1	12.2			0.8	0.6	0.0	1.4

Aside from catching Henrik Lundqvist and the New York Rangers in a charitable mood upon his callup on January 25th, Chris Conner managed a single assist in his 8 other games as a Penguin. Still, the Michigan native demonstrated decent enough production in three partial seasons with Dallas to prove that he could be a solid fourth line player, if teams are willing to look past his 5'8" stature.

Cooke,Matt			LW							PIT		
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	WSH, VAN	29	78	10	13	23	1	2:40	1.2	2.9	0.0	4.1
2008-09	PIT	30	76	13	18	31	0	14:12	3.2	2.7	0.0	5.9
2009-10	PIT	31	79	15	15	30	17	14:47	2.7	6.0	0.0	8.7
2010-11	PIT	32	67.9	11.8	15.2	27			1.7	3.0	0.0	4.7

Matt Cooke has done his best to work his way up the list of the NHL's most hated players, most prominently with the malicious hit that shelved Boston's Marc Savard for eight weeks with a concussion, the one that famously pressured the NHL into instituting mid-season rule changes regarding hits from behind. Cooke might do well to stick with agitating versus fighting, though: he got knocked out cold by a single punch from Atlanta's Evander Kane—the fourth overall pick in 2009 is not exactly the NHL's prototypical pugilist—after goading the rookie into the fight.

Crosby,Sidney			C									PIT
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	20	53	24	48	72	18	20:50	14.3	2.6	-0.3	16.6
2008-09	PIT	21	77	33	70	103	3	21:56	17.7	1.2	-0.3	18.6
2009-10	PIT	22	81	51	58	109	15	21:57	23.1	2.9	4.1	30.0
2010-11	PIT	23	81.5	45.5	67	112.5			19.5	2.5	0.1	22.1

Who's the best player in the NHL? Hint: It's not Henrik Sedin, not by a long shot. Whether the ultimate answer is Sidney Crosby or Alex Ovechkin, what you have to love about the Penguins' captain is that he doesn't rest on his laurels. As the face of the NHL and coming off a Stanley Cup championship, lesser men might have enjoyed the view from the mountaintop. All Crosby did on summer vacation was to remake himself into an elite faceoff man—55.9% in 2009-10 vs. his previous high of 51.4%—and an elite shootout performer—a jaw-dropping 8 for 10 in 2009-10, improving his career mark from a mediocre 31.7% to an elite 41.7%. Who knows? As his defensive shortfalls remain the biggest knock against him, maybe Sid the Kid will come to training camp remade as a superior defensive forward. Oh, and did we mention that he scored 51 goals?

Dupuis,Pascal			LW									PIT
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT,ATL	28	78	12	15	27	0	3:26	2.1	2.4	0.6	5.1
2008-09	PIT	29	71	12	16	28	1	14:13	2.8	3.6	0.0	6.4
2009-10	PIT	30	81	18	20	38	5	14:11	5.9	3.9	0.6	10.4
2010-11	PIT	31	68.7	14.1	19	33.1			3.1	2.8	0.0	5.9

Last season was a renaissance for Pascal Dupuis, who had his best season since tallying 20 goals and 48 points with the Minnesota Wild as a 23-year-old in his sophomore campaign. Since posting 10.7 GVT for Jacques Lemaire in that magical 2002-3, Dupuis' annual value has hovered between 2.1-6.4 GVT, nice numbers for a third line player. That recent history, coupled with Dupuis' career high 11.5% shooting percentage in 2009-10, indicates that it's very unlikely for the Quebecois to duplicate a 10.2 GVT performance next season.

Fedotenko,Ruslan			LW									Free Agent
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	NYI	29	67	16	17	33	-9	16:42	2.9	0.7	0.0	3.6
2008-09	PIT	30	65	16	23	39	18	14:06	7.1	2.4	0.0	9.4
2009-10	PIT	31	80	11	19	30	-17	14:39	0.9	-0.2	0.0	0.7
2010-11	Free Agent	32	64.5	12.5	17.8	30.3			2.4	1.0	0.0	3.5

Every once in a while, Ruslan Fedotenko will give you a gem of a year or a knockout postseason. For instance, in the 2003-04 playoffs for the Stanley Cup winning Tampa Bay Lightning, Fedotenko's 12 goals only fell one goal shy of Jarome Iginla's league-leading tally. Five years later, the Ukrainian winger posted a career best 0.60 points-per-game in the 2008-09 regular season, following it up with 14 points and an impressive +9 rating in another Cup-winning run; while Evgeni Malkin got the accolades, a big "spasiba" was in order for his wingman. But that's the good Ruslan. Unfortunately, way too many of Fedotenko's campaigns fall far short of those heights. Now coming off his worst campaign by far, don't be surprised to see Fedotenko playing in the KHL in the not too distant future.

Godard, Eric			RW							PIT		
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	CGY	27	74	1	1	2	-8	4:42	-2.8	0.0	0.0	-2.8
2008-09	PIT	28	71	2	2	4	-3	4:04	-1.3	0.3	0.0	-1.0
2009-10	PIT	29	45	1	2	3	2	4:10	-0.9	0.7	0.0	-0.2
2010-11	PIT	30	46.5	2.1	2.8	4.9			-0.9	0.7	0.0	-0.2

If you're a fringe NHL fan who tunes into hockey around late April for the Stanley Cup playoffs, you're probably not aware that the Penguins have a player named Eric Godard, who actually appears in more than half of Pittsburgh's regular season games, we'll have you know. Nothing to write home about offensively, Godard holds his own defensively about as well as you'd expect for an enforcer.

Guerin, Bill			RW							Free Agent		
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	NYI	37	81	23	21	44	-15	17:22	4.0	-0.1	0.6	4.5
2008-09	PIT, NYI	38	78	21	27	48	-12	3:12	4.3	0.3	0.2	4.8
2009-10	PIT	39	78	21	24	45	-9	17:31	2.8	-0.3	-0.8	1.7
2010-11	Free Agent	40	66.2	16.6	22.6	39.2			3.5	1.0	0.0	4.5

Among the better American-born hockey players ever, Bill Guerin's 429 goals puts him 66th on the NHL's all-time list, looking up at Dave Taylor (431 goals), Vincent Damphousse (432 goals) and Pavel Bure (437 goals). But is 429 the final tally, or does the Worcester, Massachusetts native answer the bell for a final season? An inspired pickup by Shero at the 2008-09 trading deadline, Guerin was a solid contributor in a postseason that would culminate with his name on the Stanley Cup for the second time. Like many great aging forwards, Guerin's primary value at this late stage of his career is as a power play specialist—for the first time, the journeyman winger scored more power play goals (11) than even strength goals (10).

Kennedy, Tyler			C							PIT		
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	21	55	10	9	19	2	12:13	2.2	0.9	0.0	3.2
2008-09	PIT	22	67	15	20	35	15	13:46	5.9	2.2	0.0	8.1
2009-10	PIT	23	64	13	12	25	10	12:34	3.7	2.0	0.0	5.7
2010-11	PIT	24	64.2	16.2	16.3	32.5			3.6	1.8	0.0	5.4

An underrated two-way forward, it's frankly shocking that neither Michel Therrien nor Dan Bylsma has given Tyler Kennedy a chance to play on the penalty kill—Kennedy has logged a grand total of six minutes of PK over his three NHL seasons. And while we're talking about playing time, throw the kid a bone, coach. Kennedy deserves a chance on the power play as well. Sure, he looks like he's got hands of stone sometimes, but it wouldn't take that much to improve upon what Chris Kunitz gives to one of the league's consistently worst power play units. Can it hurt to try?

Kunitz, Chris			LW							PIT		
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	ANA	28	82	21	29	50	8	16:54	3.4	2.8	0.3	6.5
2008-09	PIT, ANA	29	82	23	30	53	12	3:58	6.9	2.5	-0.5	8.8
2009-10	PIT	30	50	13	19	32	3	16:26	5.1	1.1	0.3	6.5
2010-11	PIT	31	58.9	14.6	23.9	38.5			4.4	1.7	0.0	6.1

When you look at Chris Kunitz's numbers at the end of the year, they always look...kind of decent. It's amazing that he can disappoint compared to expectations when you recall that he was an undrafted free agent out of Fer-

ris State, only getting his first cup of coffee in the NHL as a 24-year-old. Yes, expectations used to be very low for Chris Kunitz. So what to make of him? On one hand, he's never exceeded his 25 goal, 60 point campaign with the Ducks in 2006-07, but he hasn't dropped off that much either. He's a two time Stanley Cup champion, but he hasn't exactly taken advantage of tons of playing time with Sidney Crosby as well as a good share of power play time. And while his production has been inconsistent in the playoffs, he jacks up his physical game to make up for it. What you make of Chris Kunitz probably all depends on expectations.

Malkin, Evgeni			C								PIT	
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	21	82	47	59	106	16	21:19	21.5	2.7	-1.5	22.7
2008-09	PIT	22	82	35	78	113	17	22:30	20.1	2.6	-0.3	22.4
2009-10	PIT	23	67	28	49	77	-6	20:51	12.7	0.1	0.3	13.1
2010-11	PIT	24	74.4	36	57.9	93.9			15.3	1.7	0.0	17.1

The Art Ross Trophy winner in 2008-09 for the most regular season points (113), Evgeni Malkin's production slipped substantially, and not just because of 15 games missed due to injury. Sure, Geno's assists per game fell back down to the established levels from his rookie and sophomore seasons—that was to be expected—but disturbingly, Malkin's even strength scoring total has dropped from an impressive 30 goals in 2007-08 all the way down to 13 goals this past season. This isn't 40-year-old Bill Guerin we're talking about—When a supremely talented 23-year-old can't score more goals at even strength (13) than on the power play (13), you've got to wonder whether the mental aspect of his game is where it should be. The fix? It's entirely possible that Malkin and Staal end up on the second line together. Not only might the change of pace wake Geno up, but let's face it: Staal would give the Penguins a better restart option than the severely faceoff-challenged Malkin.

Ponikarovsky, Alexei			LW								LAK	
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	TOR	27	66	18	17	35	3	15:58	3.8	2.1	0.0	5.8
2008-09	TOR	28	82	23	38	61	6	15:46	9.2	3.5	0.0	12.6
2009-10	PIT, TOR	29	77	21	29	50	-1	3:07	5.6	2.6	0.0	8.1
2010-11	LAK	30	68.7	16.5	28.5	45			4.4	2.2	0.0	6.6

Alex Ponikarovsky was a bit of a curious pickup for GM Ray Shero, in that Pittsburgh desperately needed to upgrade their power play while Poni's forte for the lowly Maple Leafs had been 5-on-5 play, tallying 15 of his 19 goals at even strength as well as maintaining a second-best +5 rating on what was a lousy team. So it was a poor fit for sure as far as the Penguins' needs, but no one expected the Ukrainian winger to completely tank like he did. Ponikarovsky's lackadaisical stint in the black and gold—culminating in his benching for Games 5 and 6 against Montreal—no doubt cost him millions of dollars as a free agent this offseason, as the Kings cautiously signed him to a one year stint in Hollywood.

Rupp, Mike			RW								PIT	
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	NJD	28	64	3	6	9	-8	8:03	-1.1	0.5	0.0	-0.6
2008-09	NJD	29	72	3	6	9	-2	8:43	-1.8	1.0	0.0	-0.9
2009-10	PIT	30	81	13	6	19	5	9:02	1.8	1.7	0.0	3.5
2010-11	PIT	31	62.7	7.6	6	13.6			-0.3	1.4	0.0	1.1

Until 2009-10, the last time Mike Rupp gave his team an NHL-caliber season was before the lockout. So if you want to know the likelihood of his scoring 13 goals again—over double his previous high—just take note of his rather fortunate 14.9% shooting percentage compared to his previous high of 10.3%. A useful penalty killer at best, our money's on a return to replacement level for 2010-11.

Staal, Jordan			C									PIT
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	19	82	12	16	28	-5	18:16	0.8	2.4	0.0	3.2
2008-09	PIT	20	82	22	27	49	5	19:50	6.3	4.8	0.0	11.1
2009-10	PIT	21	82	21	28	49	19	19:23	6.9	7.6	0.0	14.5
2010-11	PIT	22	80.6	23.3	30.1	53.4			6.2	4.5	0.0	10.8

Jordan Staal lived up to his promise as a premier two-way forward in 2009-10, leading the Penguins in defensive GVT while producing nicely for a third line center often matched up against the opponent's best line. Here's a dirty little secret, though. Staal's a slightly above average penalty killer, at best. We know that everyone fell in love with the fact that he scored seven short-handed goals as an 18-year-old rookie, but the fact is that he's only averaged one short-handed goal over the past three seasons to go along with the merely satisfactory penalty killing.

Talbot, Maxime			C									PIT
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	23	63	12	14	26	8	15:27	3.8	2.7	0.0	6.5
2008-09	PIT	24	75	12	10	22	-9	14:08	0.9	2.8	0.0	3.7
2009-10	PIT	25	45	2	5	7	-9	12:13	-2.1	0.9	0.0	-1.3
2010-11	PIT	26	55.4	8	10.3	18.3			0.4	1.8	0.0	2.1

Four goals, two assists, six points, +4 and 31 hits in 7 games. And what the heck, throw in both of Pittsburgh's goals in Game 7—including the Stanley Cup winner—for good measure. If hockey awarded the Conn Smythe Trophy based on performance in the Finals as opposed to the whole playoffs—which is what they do for post-season MVP awards in baseball, football and basketball—we'd have been talking about "Conn Smythe winner Max Talbot". Wow. Now pause for a second and take that in before splashing some cold water on your face. Now, let's talk reality. Yes, he's versatile in a utility infielder kind of way, but Talbot really has no business getting regular playing time on the first or second line, as he often does. How bad was he last season? Coming off shoulder surgery, Talbot's play dropped well below replacement level. Positives? While not much of a faceoff man, Talbot at least holds his own on the penalty kill.

Tangradi, Eric			C									PIT
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2009-10	PIT	20	1	0	0	0	0	14:00	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
2010-11	PIT	21	25.1	4.5	5.6	10.1			0.7	0.5	0.0	1.2

Drafted by the Anaheim Ducks in 2007, Eric Tangradi came over to the Pens as a bonus in the February 2009 Ryan Whitney for Chris Kunitz trade, and quickly turned into Pittsburgh's top prospect. The truth of the matter is that Tangradi was much more than a bonus—he will likely prove to be the most valuable piece in that deal. Unfortunately, it has been a rough 18 months for the Philadelphia native since being dealt. Slow to develop in the first place, he has suffered serious injury setbacks, including severed wrist tendons in a 2009 OHL playoff game. But there's light at the end of the tunnel. Tangradi will likely crack the starting lineup on opening night for the cap-strapped Penguins, and that's not all—Looking like a man amongst boys in Penguins' prospect camp, Tangradi is showing all the signs of being an impact player from Game 1.

DEFENSEMEN

Eaton,Mark			D									NYI
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	30	36	0	3	3	6	19:40	-1.1	2.5	0.0	1.4
2008-09	PIT	31	68	4	5	9	3	17:45	0.0	3.6	0.0	3.6
2009-10	PIT	32	79	3	13	16	5	19:45	0.4	5.4	0.0	5.8
2010-11	NYI	33	63.5	2.6	10.9	13.5			0.2	3.6	0.0	3.8

Ten years from now, if you ask someone to name the members of the 2008-09 Stanley Cup champion Pittsburgh Penguins, Mark Eaton is bound to be a stumper. Does anyone remember his signature moment in that championship run? No, we didn't think so. And frankly, if there is one, we don't remember either. Signing on with the Islanders this offseason, Eaton's headed off to experience a new kind of anonymity.

Engelland,Deryk			D									Free Agent
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2009-10	PIT	27	9	0	2	2	-2	16:06	0.1	-0.1	0.0	0.0
2010-11	Free Agent	28	26.8	1.4	5.1	6.5			0.4	0.7	0.0	1.1

A three season veteran of the Penguins' Wilkes-Barre/Scranton farm team, Engelland was briefly pressed into service due to injuries on Pittsburgh's blue line. In his stint with the Baby Pens, Engelland has been good for 10-20 points and over 120 penalty minutes. Deryk's a big boy who's not afraid to drop his gloves, as he's already done on three occasions in his 9 games with Pittsburgh.

Goligoski,Alex			D									PIT
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	22	3	0	2	2	2	14:00	0.6	0.4	0.0	0.9
2008-09	PIT	23	45	6	14	20	5	18:18	2.5	0.9	0.2	3.7
2009-10	PIT	24	69	8	29	37	7	21:25	5.7	3.3	-0.3	8.7
2010-11	PIT	25	65.8	7.7	27	34.7			4.5	3.2	0.0	7.6

Contributing 20 points and 4.9 GVT in only half a season's worth of work in 2008-09, you wonder why the Penguins' brain trust didn't utilize Goligoski in the postseason, but then again, Pittsburgh had the indomitable Mark Eaton anchoring their blue line. Yeah, we know, the Penguins won the Stanley Cup anyway. In any case, we weren't the least bit surprised to see the former Minnesota Golden Gopher put up a fine season in 2009-10, though it consisted of a Norris Trophy-worthy October (5 G, 7 A, 12 P +12), and five less stellar months. Perhaps losing confidence by the end of the season, we'll see if the offseason reboot helps get Goligoski back on track. Now, for extra credit, say "Great goal, Golden Gopher Goligoski" five times fast.

Gonchar,Sergei			D									OTT
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	33	78	12	53	65	13	25:54	12.8	4.2	-0.3	16.7
2008-09	PIT	34	25	6	13	19	6	25:12	2.8	1.1	0.0	4.0
2009-10	PIT	35	62	11	39	50	-4	24:24	8.6	2.3	0.0	10.9
2010-11	OTT	36	57.1	8.8	31.9	40.7			6.2	2.7	0.0	8.9

He was the secret weapon. Yes, after Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, Sergei Gonchar was the seldom-acknowledged, third critical element to the Penguins' 2008-09 championship team. While the coaching change from Michel Therrien to Dan Bylsma on February 15, 2009 was widely accepted as the catalyst to turn around

the floundering 27-25-5 Penguins, the ensuing 18-3-4 run that catapulted Pittsburgh to a fourth seed, and eventually the championship, had a far simpler, on-ice explanation: their #1 defenseman and prime puck mover had returned to the lineup the night before, after missing 21 weeks with a dislocated shoulder. Sure, his \$16.5 million contract over three years with Ottawa is a good bit of change for an injury-prone 36-year-old blueliner whose defensive play has slipped, but Gonchar was this offseason's elite free agent option as a power play quarterback, good for 5.2 points per 60 minutes of 5-on-4 play. No doubt he'll help boost the Senators' inferior 16.9% power play (21st in NHL). Hopefully though, Ottawa head coach Cory Clouston will have the good sense to trim his minutes, including taking him off the penalty kill entirely, something Bylsma did not have the good sense to do.

Leopold, Jordan			D							BUF		
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	COL	27	43	5	8	13	5	15:58	2.4	2.2	0.0	4.6
2008-09	CGY, COL	28	83	7	17	24	-15	4:47	1.4	3.4	0.5	5.3
2009-10	PIT, FLA	29	81	11	15	26	-2	5:02	3.9	3.4	0.0	7.4
2010-11	BUF	30	66.1	3.9	14.2	18.1			1.0	2.8	0.0	3.9

With Mike Sillinger now retired from the NHL, 30-year-old Jordan Leopold seems to be vying for the "Suitcase" moniker—the past two seasons have seen the University of Minnesota product moved from Colorado to Calgary at one trading deadline and from Florida to Pittsburgh at the next. Now inking a three year deal with Buffalo, "Luggage" Leopold is tasked to help fill in the breach left by the departures of #2 and #3 Sabres' defensemen Henrik Tallinder and Toni Lydman. One of the heroes of Calgary's 2003-04 Finals run during his first tour of duty with the Flames, Leopold is a solid contributor at even strength and on the penalty kill, but unless Darcy Regier has gotten his hands on some cloning technology we don't know of, Buffalo will still be short one quality veteran blueliner when all is said and done. And no, Shaone Morrisson doesn't count.

Letang, Kris			D							PIT		
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	20	63	6	11	17	-1	18:09	1.5	1.1	2.2	4.8
2008-09	PIT	21	74	10	23	33	-7	21:08	4.2	0.9	-0.5	4.6
2009-10	PIT	22	73	3	24	27	1	21:33	3.0	2.9	0.7	6.6
2010-11	PIT	23	67.6	9	24.8	33.8			4.6	2.7	0.0	7.3

Anyone that was expecting Kris Letang to transform into the next great offensive defenseman must be very disappointed by now, because you'd never mistake the 23-year-old for even a super-economy version of Mike Green. Letang's colossal gaffes in the Montreal series only served to highlight the fact that he's frequently a defensive liability, often because of bad decision-making that he was able to cover up with speed and physical ability at lower levels. To make matters worse, Letang took a big step backwards on the man advantage, not even managing to pot a single power play goal in nearly three minutes of power play time per night. Now that's hard to do. It's a wonder that the Penguins' coaching staff hasn't taken note that Letang has consistently been Pittsburgh's poorest regular on their consistently disappointing power play.

Lovejoy, Ben			D							PIT		
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2008-09	PIT	24	2	0	0	0	0	12:00	-0.1	0.0	0.0	-0.1
2009-10	PIT	25	12	0	3	3	8	16:35	0.4	1.6	0.0	2.0
2010-11	PIT	26	30.6	1.7	6.2	7.9			0.6	1.7	0.0	2.2

What's poor Ben Lovejoy got to do? You would have thought that a heady +42 at Wilkes-Barre/Scranton in 2008-09 might have earned the 26-year-old New Hampshire native more than a cup of coffee with Pittsburgh last season. Nope. Or that an impressive +8 rating in 12 games with the big club would have forced Pittsburgh's hand, to let him stay up? Sorry. Now re-signed through 2012-13 at a bargain basement price, it looks like Lovejoy's finally in line to be the Pittsburgh's sixth defenseman. We think that his performance will soon have you asking, "What took so long?"

McKee, Jay			D					Free Agent				
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	STL	30	66	2	7	9	2	17:53	-0.4	6.1	0.0	5.7
2008-09	STL	31	69	1	7	8	11	17:19	-1.1	7.2	0.0	6.1
2009-10	PIT	32	62	1	9	10	6	15:26	-0.1	5.0	0.0	5.0
2010-11	<i>Free Agent</i>	33	58.1	1.4	7.8	9.2			-0.4	4.2	0.0	3.7

It seems like Jay McKee has been in the National Hockey League for a million years, but after an extensive records search, we can verify that the guy is only 33 years old—scout's honor. A veteran of 14 seasons, if you count the one game he played as an 18-year-old for the Sabres in 1995-6, McKee's still a slightly above average NHL defenseman even if you'd have a hard time convincing Joe Q. Public, or many NHL general managers, of that fact based on his conventional stats, as he's never posted more than 17 points in a season. Whoever signs him is going to get a poor man's Volchenkov for under a million bucks, a total steal.

Orpik, Brooks			D					PIT				
Season	Team	Age	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-	TOI	OGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	27	78	1	10	11	11	16:57	-0.6	3.6	0.0	3.1
2008-09	PIT	28	79	2	17	19	10	20:19	0.4	4.4	0.0	4.8
2009-10	PIT	29	73	2	23	25	6	20:05	3.5	5.0	0.0	8.5
2010-11	<i>PIT</i>	30	65	2.7	15.1	17.9			1.0	4.0	0.0	5.0

Sorry to break this to you all, but generally speaking, hitting is vastly overrated. The exception might be in the postseason, where players that take a beating over the course of a playoff series and especially over the course of several playoff series can start to wear down. Rewinding back to 2008-09, opponents knew that physically pounding the defending champion Red Wings might very well be the only means to defeating them, like body blows early in a title fight. It took a concerted application of that strategy to pay dividends, executed by each of the Anaheim Ducks, Chicago Blackhawks and Pittsburgh Penguins in succession, with only the Penguins reaping the fruit of those labors in the end. So with all those caveats in mind, it's true that Brooks Orpik's team-leading 112 postseason hits had great value in the Pens' championship campaign. Unfortunately, this one skill doesn't make a player with 14.8 career GVT worth \$3,750,000 per season for the next four seasons. Coming back from surgery to repair a torn abdominal muscle, it remains to be seen whether Orpik starts the season at 100% fitness.

GOALTENDERS

Fleury, Marc-Andre			G					PIT				
Season	Team	Age	GP	W	L	OT	GAA	Save %	GGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	PIT	23	35	19	10	2	2.33	0.921	12.8	-0.2	0.9	13.5
2008-09	PIT	24	62	35	18	7	2.67	0.912	13.7	-0.5	1.0	14.3
2009-10	PIT	25	67	37	21	6	2.65	0.905	0.3	1.1	1.2	2.6
2010-11	<i>PIT</i>	26	48.7					0.907	3.3	0.3	0.2	3.9

Don't let the homers tell you that he's got Stanley Cup pedigree, because the Penguins brought home the hardware as much despite Marc-Andre Fleury as because of him in 2009-10. If you're supposed to be a franchise goaltender—like the former first overall draft choice—you might want to post more than one measly shutout in 67 regular season games. Keep in mind that last season, nine other NHL netminders played as many or more games, and none of them tallied fewer than four clean sheets. Likewise, of the 20 NHL netminders who saw action in at least 50 regular season games, only sophomore train wreck Steve Mason had a worse save percentage (.901) than Fleury. On the hook for over \$5 million per annum through 2014-15 for MAF, both Shero and the Pittsburgh faithful are earnestly hoping that the goaltender with the .907 career save percentage will at least return to his form of 2006-07 through 2008-09.

Johnson, Brent			G									PIT
Season	Team	Age	GP	W	L	OT	GAA	Save %	GGVT	DGVT	SGVT	GVT
2007-08	WSH	30	19	7	8	2	2.67	0.908	1.7	0.0	0.0	1.6
2008-09	WSH	31	21	12	6	2	2.81	0.908	3.1	-0.3	-0.2	2.6
2009-10	PIT	32	23	10	6	1	2.76	0.906	0.2	0.1	1.6	1.9
2010-11	PIT	33	21.7					0.908	2.0	-0.1	0.1	2.1

33-year-old journeyman Brent Johnson has had a pretty good run of recent, modestly exceeding his .903 career save percentage in each of the past three seasons—not bad for a backup. But remember the one season when Johnson was actually a starter? That was way back in 2001-02 in St. Louis. As a 24-year-old, the Michigan native backstopped the Blues to the Conference Semifinals with a Michael Leighton-like .929 save percentage and three shutouts, before falling to the President's Trophy and Stanley Cup winning juggernaut known as the Detroit Red Wings.