Detroit Red Wings

Are we nearing the end of an era, or at least the end of a dynasty? Two years without a Stanley Cup appearance may not seem like long enough to ask such a question, but given the huge gap between their declining core of older stars and their exceptional system of prospects, even this brief absence could signal a change in the fortunes of the Detroit Red Wings. They clearly remain a great team with an enviable team model…but can they still be considered among the very best? And for how much longer? The answer lies more in the close examination of three key players than in the supporting cast surrounding them, a task particularly well-suited to objective statistical analysis.

Great and old

There are two things everybody knows about the Red Wings: they're great and they're old. How great? Well, they have 20 straight postseason appearances to their credit, including six Stanley Cup Finals appearances and four championships. In this span, they've topped 100 points a whopping 15 times, including 11 straight, winning the Central Division title 14 times. The last time they finished third was back in 1991. And how old? By Core Age (see "Core Age and the Strategic Direction of NHL Teams"), they averaged a league-high 31.5 years old (Calgary was second-oldest, at a comparatively young 30.0 years old). Even without elder statesmen like Mike Modano, Kris Draper, and Chris Osgood, they still had ten players aged 31 or over, including 65% of their combined cap hit, 67% of their GVT production and nine of their top ten scorers.

The Red Wings do have the talent to replenish the veteran stars, but they're still years away. In fact, Corey Pronman ranked their wealth of prospects tops in the league at www.hockeyprospectus.com:

Their system is so stocked with top-end talent like Gustav Nyquist, Calle Jarnkrok, Tomas Tatar, Brendan Smith, Teemu Pulkkinen, Adam Almqvist and Tomas Jurco that even if some of these players flat out miss, the remaining players that truly hit will become the core players to help Detroit continue their winning ways well through the end of this decade and beyond.

Detroit's still a great team and their organizational talent is second to none, but at the moment, they're getting worse, not better. They need to find a middle generation of superstars to bridge the gap between their young and old elite talent, but until then, their fate is in the hands of aging veterans, and three well-known grey-beards in particular…

Lidstrom, Pasha, and Curly Fries

The secret to Detroit's past and current success has been the play of three elite players with whom they've been blessed: Nicklas Lidstrom, Pavel Datsyuk, and Henrik Zetterberg. Over the eight seasons they've all played together, they've amassed an amazing 1653 points and 457.4 goals of value above replacement-level. Given that a competitive team will earn about

RED WINGS IN A BOX

Last Season

Goals For	261	2nd
Goals Against	241	23rd
GVT	20	11th
Points	104	6th
Playoffs	Lost Conference Semi-Final	

The Red Wings were quietly excellent yet again, but age showed and they are now "just another good team".

Three-Year Record

GVT	90	7th
Points	318	4th
Playoffs	3 Appearances, 27 Wins	4th

VUKOTA Projections

Goals For	241	4th
Goals Against	230	18th
GVT	11	9th
Points	95	9th

The Wings are still good, but can no longer be considered among the Cup favorites. It will get worse when Lidstrom retires after this year.

120 GVT as a team, you could literally add these three players to any NHL team and make them a contender. Heck, at their peak in 2007-08 you probably could have added them to an AHL team, thrown in a few spare parts, and made the NHL playoffs!

Lidstrom, Datsyuk, and Zetterberg, 2002-03 to 2010-11			
Season	G	PTS	Combined GVT
2002-03	22	15	45.5
2003-04	21	14	41.0
2005-06	23	25	65.6
2006-07	22	21	63.0
2007-08	23	25	80.7
2008-09	23	22	64.1
2009-10	23	18	50.0
2010-11	21	20	47.5
TOTAL	1819	1653	457.4

Detroit's season is currently in their capable but elderly hands, and unfortunately the trend is clear: down, and perhaps heading for even lower than their pre-Lockout level. This could very well be Lidstrom's final campaign, and while Datsyuk still has three years left on his contract, he'll be entering his age-33 season. It could be several years before their system produces players capable of supporting that weight—and their secondary stars are just as old—so we must continue to base our expectations of the entire team on these elite three.

Norris Lidstrom

Very few people would dispute that Nicklas Lidstrom is one of history's greatest defensemen, and those that do are probably just trying to be annoying. In 2010-11, his career GVT passed Bobby Orr and Paul Coffey to move into third all-time, and this season he'll doubtlessly pass Al MacInnis to place second behind the uncatchable Ray Bourque. (See table, this page.)

If he plays all 82 games this year, he'll be only 75 games short of Chris Chelios—what amazing longevity as well. Offensively, he takes a back seat to only a handful of players and even fewer can call themselves his defensive superior.

While it's well-established that Lidstrom is the greatest defenseman of all-time among active players, is he still the best today? Looking at his minus-2 in 2010-11, some people have questioned whether his Norris Trophy was more a recognition of his great

Best 10 defensemen of all-time				
Rank	Name	GP	P	+/-	GVT
1	Raymond Bourque	1612	1579	+528	465.9
2	Al MacInnis	1416	1274	+373	346.7
3	Nicklas Lidstrom	1494	1108	+429	343.2
4	Bobby Orr	657	915	+597	330.2
5	Paul Coffey	1409	1531	+294	330.2
6	Scott Stevens	1635	908	+393	285.6
7	Larry Murphy	1615	1216	+200	285.3
8	Larry Robinson	1384	958	+730	280.8
9	Denis Potvin	1060	1052	+460	276.3
10	Chris Chelios	1651	948	+350	274.3

career than this past season, but the numbers defend his selection well. In a feat reminiscent of 2009-10's Chris Pronger succeeding alongside Matt Carle, Nicklas Lidstrom made the switch from Brian Rafalski to Brad Stuart, and yet only one defenseman enjoyed a higher GVT than Lidstom's 16.1: Anaheim's Lubomir Visnovsky, with 19.4 GVT, and nobody else was even within two goals.

While it's true that Visnovsky was one of few blueliners to outproduce Lidstrom at even strength (1.4 points per 60 minutes to Lidstrom's 1.0), he understandably fell short of Lidstrom's outstanding power play scoring rate of 7.0 points per 60 minutes. For an offense-only defenseman like Visnovsky (or Keith Yandle) to rank higher than a top shutdown player like Lidstrom, he would have to exceed the future Hall of Famer's scoring by a more substantial margin that that.

Of course, there were a few two-way defensemen who matched Lidstrom's scoring at even strength and whose teams fared far better in terms of puck possession (as measured by Corsi) than Lidstrom's. For example, Zdeno Chara (12.0), Kris Letang (9.3), Drew Doughty (9.1), and Shea Weber (7.2) all enjoyed better territorial advantage than Lidstrom (-6.9). However, Letang and Doughty played in much more advantageous situations with more offensive zone starts and softer competition. As for Chara and Weber, their power play scoring rate was less than half of Lidstrom's, so it's not completely out of line to judge Lidstrom as the first among equals.

Even at his advanced age, Lidstrom is on par with the best in the business and even if his offensive production tails off a little, it is still likely to be exceeded only by those players whose sole focus is getting the puck on net.

Detroit's dynamic duo

You can split up Thornton/Heatley and keep the Sedins, because until Crosby and Ovechkin play together, the most dynamic duo in the NHL is Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg. Just don't ask which one is Batman and which one is Robin. Since the Lockout, only 10 forwards have produced at least 100 goals above replacement level, and both Datsyuk and Zetterberg rank in the top seven.

Best 50 forwards (post-Lockout, regular season)							
Rank	Name	GP	G	A	P	+/-	GVT
1	Alexander Ovechkin	475	301	313	614	+88	146.4
2	Sidney Crosby	412	215	357	572	+65	124.3
3	Pavel Datsyuk	453	168	329	497	+165	120.0
4	Joe Thornton	486	146	434	580	+110	114.6
5	Dany Heatley	479	245	263	508	+104	110.8
6	Jarome Iginla	480	234	269	503	+40	104.9
7	Henrik Zetterberg	446	193	275	468	+109	104.2
8	Daniel Sedin	472	188	312	500	+122	103.0
9	Marian Hossa	430	200	237	437	+81	102.6
10	Ilya Kovalchuk	475	261	236	497	-48	101.6

With the obvious exceptions of Alexander the Great and The Kid, nobody has been as valuable to their teams as Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg. Offensively, Datsyuk is ninth in post-Lockout points, and Zetterberg is 12th, just behind Eric Staal (not listed), and they rank sixth and ninth respectively in offensive GVT.

Defensively, they shine even brighter, ranking first and fifth respectively in plus-minus—with only the soft-minute Sedins and Joe Thornton in between—and finish first and sixth in defensive GVT. Many of these players have achieved their success by focusing only on the offensive aspects of their games, starting primarily in the offensive zone and against more average competition—most notably Henrik and Daniel Sedin, who start over 70% of their shifts in the shadow of the opposing goalie, leaving teammates like Ryan Kesler to handle the tough opponents. Conversely, Datsyuk and Zetterberg led all these great players in Corsi-based Quality of Competition last season, and only Crosby started in his own end as often. Datsyuk and Zetterberg don't just put up the big numbers, they also shut down the league's best.

As for this season, we have more tools at our disposal than the VUKOTA projection system to estimate how well Datsyuk and Zetterberg will do offensively. We can use the Snepsts system (created by yours truly, in 2010) to search NHL's vast history for players with comparable era-adjusted statistics and make a prediction based on that information. Snepsts looks for players within two years of age with similar current season, previous season, and career totals, with greater weighting on the more recent data.

Pavel Datsyuk winds up with 51 matches, including all sorts of stars like Toe Blake, Marian Stastny, John McKenzie, Steve Yzerman, and Jean Ratelle. Together, their average would project 27 goals, 47 assists, and 74 points for Datsyuk over an 82-game schedule. As for Henrik Zetterberg, he has 68 different matches, but comes out with an almost identical projection, averaging 25 goals and 48 assists for 73 points over an 82-game schedule—almost bang-on with VUKOTA. Zetterberg's closest matches include Ray Whitney, Jeremy Roenick, Doug Bentley, Pit Martin, and Bernie Federko.

Players start to decline as they advance through their thirties, making it unlikely that Datsyuk and Zetterberg will remain top 10 forwards for much longer. Even if they can no longer carry the team on their backs, at the very least these two underrated stars can shut down the league's top opponents and score over 70 points apiece.

The blue line

One area of uncharacteristic change for Detroit is on the blue line. With this summer's retirement of Brian Rafalski and the potential retirement of Nicklas Lidstrom next season, an area of historically great strength could potentially become a weakness. To address this issue, the Wings brought in Ian White and Mike Commodore along with signing Jonathan Ericsson to a huge deal. Together with Brad Stuart, Nicklas Kronwall, and youngsters Jakub Kindl and Brendan Smith, they need to address the absence of Rafalski this season, with hopefully another piece or two to address Lidstrom the next.

Since Lidstrom already proved last season that he can remain dominant playing alongside Stuart, filling Rafalski's skates is more a matter of replacing the lost offense. Over the past three seasons, Rafalski's even strength scoring rate has been among the best in the league, generally finishing between 0.9 and 1.8 points per 60 minutes, and between 3.9 and 5.7 points per 60 minutes on the power play. It's fair to say that without Rafalski, Detroit's offense will take a fallski.

The real problem begins next season when the LidstromBot 2000 is expected to be decommissioned. While a Rafalski-sized hole can arguably be spackled over with secondary players, a Lidstrom-sized chasm is going to require some serious concrete and mortar. By then, Brad Stuart and Mike Commodore will be 33 and Niklas Kronwall 31, so expect GM Ken Holland to dangle a veteran and some of their exceptional young talent to land the most suitable available replacement (like Shea Weber, for example) by year's end.

Forwards

While some teams will be making lineup changes right through preseason, Detroit's 2011-12 forward lines were set in 2002-03. That's only a slight exaggeration, because Red Wing forwards tend to stay for the long term. Even on July 1st, they had 13 forwards signed to one-way contracts, with a fourth (Cory Emmerton) who would have to clear waivers to be sent down.

Even the roles for the players are well established. Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg are the big stars, facing the top opponents every night, while secondary players like Tomas Holmstrom, Johan Franzen, Todd Bertuzzi, Valtteri Filppula, Jiri Hudler, and Danny Cleary all either try to win the linemate lottery to skate alongside—Holmstrom usually wins—or enjoy playing on a two-way line against the softer opponents they left behind. Picking up the slack are the likes of Patrick Eaves, Darren Helm, Drew Miller, and Justin Abdelkader, who kill penalties and spell the top players at even strength by taking the depth minutes.

Detroit's supporting cast

Forward	Age	GVT	ESP/60
Danny Cleary	33	10.1	2.42
Johan Franzen	32	10.1	2.03
Darren Helm	25	8.7	1.91
Valtteri Filppula	27	6.4	1.87
Todd Bertuzzi	35	5.3	1.90
Patrick Eaves	27	4.7	1.58
Jiri Hudler	28	4.4	1.73
Justin Abdelkader	24	4.4	1.42
Tomas Holmstrom	39	3.8	1.19
Drew Miller	27	3.5	1.62

Danny Cleary and Johan Franzen are probably the two biggest stars in their supporting cast, but they're well into their thirties themselves. Among those in their prime, Darren Helm, Valtteri Filppula, and Jiri Hudler are the only ones scoring at a top-six level, but Helm is doing so against soft competition and Filppula has likely already topped out, and is not the type of player that can carry a top line. Hudler was once the most promising of the bunch, scoring at a point-per-game pace in the KHL, but disappointed everyone with a career-low 10 goals, just 37 points and a minus-7 upon his return last season; he's likely a second-line player at best.

Somehow, they have to get more out of these players to compensate for any drop-off among their stars, and that will be the challenge of Mike Babcock's new assistants, Jeff Blashill and Bill Peters. If Blashill and Peters can coax another strong season out of veterans Cleary, Franzen, Bertuzzi, and Holmstrom, they may be able to get more offense out of Helm, Filppula, and Hudler while Eaves, Abdelkader, and Miller continue to develop into shutdown players.

Goaltending

Recent statistical studies have suggested that the difference between average and top-level goaltending doesn't have enough of an impact on the standings to justify breaking the bank for it. While high-priced talent like Roberto Luongo and Tim Thomas are an upgrade over the league-average goalies, spending the extra five or six million somewhere else instead will generally provide greater value overall.

The Detroit Red Wings must have stumbled on that long ago, as they have chosen to consistently remain near the bottom of the league when it comes to goalie cap hit. Content to put the pads on the discount likes of Jimmy Howard, Chris Osgood, Ty Conklin, and Joey MacDonald, the Red Wings have the extra money to invest on the superstar talent behind which they play.

Accepting that Detroit's spending in nets is going to be light, can they do better than Jimmy Howard with that same $2.25 million per year? When ignoring rookie deals like James Reimer and Michal Neuvirth, there are 19 NHL goalies currently signed for less, but according to GVT, only five of them were significantly better than Howard last season: Ondrej Pavelec, Tuukka Rask, and Brian Boucher by a small margin, and Tomas Vokoun and Jonathan Quick by a large one. Even including those five, Howard was several goals above the group average. Even when looking at other metrics such as even strength save percentage and Quality Start percentage, Howard is basically what you can expect to get for the money. In fact, if you take the six goalies with even strength save percentages most closely matching Howard's, their average cap hit comes to $2.9 million per season, and

includes the likes of the far pricier Craig Anderson, Jaroslav Halak, and Miikka Kiprusoff.

Even if last year's version of Jimmy Howard and his .916 even strength save percentage is the real one, and not the Calder Trophy runner-up who stopped .925, the return on investment is reasonable and more importantly, the strategy is sound.

The horror that awaits

They're great, but they're old. Brian Rafalski is gone, Nicklas Lidstrom's probably playing his final season, while superstars Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg, along with the supporting cast of Tomas Holmstrom, Todd Bertuzzi, Johan Franzen, Danny Cleary, Niklas Kronwall, and Brad Stuart are getting older. With their vaunted prospects still years away, the Detroit Red Wings will need to find some stars to bridge the gap. Otherwise, instead of being the dominant team we've come to know, they'll (gasp!) merely be good for the next few years.

Robert Vollman