

Featured Article

2008 prospects: Steven Stamkos

Written by: [Jason Menard](#) on 10/07/2007

The song's the same, but the stage is a little bigger. Sarnia Sting center [Steven Stamkos](#) is used to having all eyes on him, which will come in handy as the native of Unionville, ON, is the early money when betting on whose name will be called first at the NHL Entry Draft.

Of course, Stamkos has heard his name called first before - being selected first overall in the [OHL](#) draft in 2006 by the woeful Sting. In those two years, he's helped to build the team up, leading to a playoff appearance last year - and even greater things are expected from both him and the team.

"It's definitely a great honor when you're thought of so highly by those people, but I try not to worry too much about that. It's still early in the year and those rankings pretty much mean nothing right now," Stamkos explained. "Sometimes when players think too much about that it gets them off their game. I just try to put that in the back of my head and go out there and play my game every night."

So far Stamkos' game has looked pretty good. He led the team in preseason scoring with give goals and five assists. And in seven regular season games he has eight points.

Last year, Stamkos paced the Sting with 42 goals and 50 assists in 63 games. He netted 22 goals on the power play and ended the season with a +13 plus/minus rating. The Sting didn't have a great playoff performance last year, but the fault certainly didn't rest with Stamkos who scored three goals and an equal number of assists in the club's four-game postseason performance. But Stamkos feels it isn't the individual numbers that are going to make a difference - his commitment to team is what he's counting on to help him reach his goals.

"You just go out there and play a team game. The scouts don't want to see you go out there and not pass the puck and play like an individual. They want to see you play the team system because hockey is a team game," he said. "In that regard it's not that difficult. You just go out there and use your linemates and play the way you play every night."

"Especially this year with it being such a big year for me with the NHL draft, you know there's going to be scouts at every game and there's going to be that little added pressure -- maybe gripping your stick a little tighter because you know they're out there watching you. But you just can't worry about that because sometimes that can mess with your head. You just have to go out there, play your game, and hope everything takes care of itself."

On the ice, Stamkos has a clear sense of what he needs to do. Off the ice, the young center displays maturity beyond his years. He also has the support of a dedicated coaching staff ensuring that Stamkos isn't a victim of his own generosity.

"You know what, if you met him off the ice you wouldn't know he has all this pressure on him this year or that he was rated the top two or three pick in the NHL draft. He's a well-ground, well-rounded individual," Sting head coach Dave MacQueen explained. "I don't think you need to shield him too much. His parents have done a wonderful job with him. Obviously he's been a star wherever he's played. We'll try and monitor the extra-curricular activities he's going to have because he's going to be asked to do everything. We may have to shut him down a bit here and there."

"But you know what, everyone's cognizant of the fact that everyone wants to talk to him and well they should. He's just going to have to learn how to deal with it here and it's just going to make him a better player and a better person at the next level."

That's a sentiment shared by the club's main assistant Greg Walters. "Obviously he's going to have a lot of press around and a lot of scouts around, so he's just got to concentrate on hockey and not put too much pressure on himself and play," he explained. "He's a fantastic kid, he's very mature for his age, and obviously he's a very special player. He'll handle it fine and we, as an organization, have to monitor how much he's doing with the media, so that he doesn't get tired out. Make sure he's eating and getting his sleep."

"He's a mature kid, but he's still only 17 years old. His name's being thrown all over NHL games already. He's a very levelheaded kid and the cockiness thing doesn't come into play with Steve. He's a great man, a great kid, and he'll handle this just fine."

Stamkos has already shown that maturity and leadership leading Canada into the World Under-18 tournament in the [Czech Republic](#). He led the Canadian contingent to a 3-0 record, including one overtime win. However, their tournament ended on a sour note, losing the bronze medal game to [Sweden](#). Despite the less-than-stellar finish, Stamkos felt the tournament was a worthwhile experience, describing it as the best experience of his summer.

"The highlight? Definitely getting the chance to represent my country over there in the Czech Republic at the World Under-18 Championship. Whenever you get a chance to put that Canada jersey over your head it's like a dream come true and I've been fortunate enough to get that opportunity twice and I just learned a lot," Stamkos explained. "You're teamed with the best players across Canada. I'm a little disappointed with the way we finished, but it's still a great opportunity.

"You just really get to see the talent level out there from across Canada and you get to play against the best players from around the world, so sometimes that brings out your mistakes a little more because they are the best players. I just had a great time, it was a great experience and hopefully I'll get a chance to wear that Canada jersey again."

He added that the fact that the team was put on the ice with a limited amount of time to get to know each other was a challenge.

"It's tough. Here in Sarnia you're with the guys all the time and you can build that team chemistry over a time period and you have training camp," he said. "With Team Canada you're just get thrown in there and there's a bunch of new faces and new players from across Canada. You have to bond quickly."

Stamkos' modesty refuses to allow him to say what most people expect - that he'll be a key player in this winter's World Junior Championship team.

"I don't know if expecting is the right word, but it's one of my goals coming into this year," he said. "It would be a great honor to be on that team, but I'm just focused right now on the Sarnia Sting and having a great start to the season. Hopefully my play will get me an invite to that camp."

MacQueen has already seen an effect of Stamkos' overseas experience in this young OHL season.

"Yeah, he wants to kill penalties now (laughing). Oh yeah, he's capable of doing that. We've got 6, 7, 8 guys that are capable of killing penalties, but Stammer will be given the opportunity to do that," he said. "In saying all that, he's playing a regular shift, he's playing power plays and he could conceivably be on the World Junior team, so we don't want to burn him out before Christmas and have nothing left after Christmas."

One scout, on a team that's expected to be high enough in the draft to get a shot at Stamkos, said the Team Canada experience has been of benefit to the young center.

"He was the captain. I think playing with other talented players in his age group and playing against the best players in the world at his age, it's just another experience that helps him think the game a little better," he said. "Anything like that is just going to increase his confidence and his level of play."

However, despite the media and many other hockey watchers anointing Stamkos as one of the top picks, one scout is reluctant to make that statement.

"It is a little early," the scout said. "He's a pretty good player obviously and the fact that he's being talked about in that light tells you a little bit about him and his abilities. I find it a little bit early, but he is a very, very, very good player."

Stamkos has been through all this before. He was selected first overall in the 2006 OHL draft and he has had the opportunity to get a taste of the NHL version, both through his roommate [Mark Katic](#) (selected in the third round of the 2007 draft by the [New York Rangers](#)) and attending the 2007 draft in person.

"It was a great experience," Stamkos said. "I got to see guys that I played against in minor hockey get drafted and it's just a thrill to see the smile on their face when they get their name called. I was able to sit in on an interview there and see what type of questions the scouts ask. It was definitely a great experience. Hopefully I can use some of the things I learned for next year."

He's also leaning on players such as Katic and Carolina draft pick [Harrison Reed](#) for support and knowledge.

"They have that experience. Especially with Mark [Katic] - I actually lived with him during the year, so I got to see first-hand the whole process he went through last year with scouts at every game and the interview process," he said. "I think I'm getting all the positive feedback from him about how it's just a great experience and it's such an honor to be drafted into the National Hockey League. That's everyone's goal that's playing right now."

Reed, recently returned from an NHL camp, explained that Stamkos just has to be himself.

"Hopefully it will be a good experience for him, but he needs to just focus on his game and forget about all the political stuff," Reed explained. "Obviously it's something that's always in the back of your mind, but you have to do the best that you can to not think about it when you're on the ice. You just have to play your own game.

"He has enough skill and stuff like that, but basically it's just speed and determination I guess. Tenacity is what I noticed is a lot more in the pros than here."

That said, there's a difference between what Katic and Harrison went through and what Stamkos will be facing - a scenario of which the coaching staff is all too well aware.

"I don't think it's ever going to be to the extent to what Steve's going to have to deal with this year, but it is helpful to have the Reeds, Katic and those players to help him out," Walters said.

For his sake, Stamkos is using the lessons learned from the past to help guide him through this season. "I had a goal coming into the OHL [in 2006] that I wanted to be drafted as high as I could and with team success came personal success and I think that's the main goal here," he said. "When the team goes further in the playoffs, then the players are going to get looked at a lot more. So we're just going to try to go as far as we can and hopefully the guys on the team who are drafted this year will benefit from that.

"I want to get drafted as high as possible, but I wouldn't say I'd be disappointed [if not selected first overall]. Just getting drafted is a tremendous honor. Getting drafted is more like a bragging right - once you get to main camp, then everyone's on an even playing field and you're playing for a job. You can be a fourth-rounder but if you outplay the first-rounder, they're going to take you.

"Growing up in an NHL area, I've always cheered for the Leafs, so that would be a dream to play there, but it's the NHL -- you don't care where you play as long as you make the team.

Although it's early in the season, scouts have noticed an improvement in Stamkos' overall game. Of course, that improvement was hinted at through the young center's ability to improve over the course of the past season.

"For sure he's stronger than last year and that much more mature. Of course, his learning curve went pretty quick last year, but he obviously has developed the way you'd like him to - he's a very good player," the scout said. "It's just like any young player - they need to keep working on their strength and consistency and just being good more than not. From a young player that's what you want to see. You just want to see how they develop within their own team and how they can help their team win hockey games. The character thing is very important too."

That work and willingness to improve is something that the coaching staff feels is a strength in Stamkos' personality.

"The kid's something very special. His work ethic is outstanding, he's very grounded, and very mature," Walters explained. "We go through video with him, just like everyone else, and he makes mistakes. But with Steve he only makes them once, and once we say something to him he fixes it and doesn't do it again. And that's part of the reason he is the player he is.

"You won't ever hear Steve talk about Steve - it's always about the Sarnia Sting and that's one of the reasons why he's going to be such a great NHL player. He goes about his own business, he's a leader in the dressing room already, and he's a team-first guy."

Stamkos has worked on his strength this season, in addition to improving his skating. Alluding to the NHL's new rules changes that put a premium on speed and skating, Stamkos has worked diligently to improve those aspects of his game. His coach also feels there are some other aspects that can help his overall draft positioning.

"I think just overall strength, winning one-on-one battles, separating guys from the puck in the defensive zone, because he's offensive instincts are going to take care of themselves," MacQueen said. "Just rounding out his game to be able to play the next level."

Those sentiments are echoed by a scout who feels that there is already very much to like about the young player.

"Obviously he can skate, he's got skill, he's got a good hockey sense," the scout explained. "His effort from shift to shift is very consistent. There are a lot of facets to his game and he's a well-rounded player, besides the fact that he's a very good offensive player."

Growing up in the Toronto area, Stamkos has always been in the center of the hockey consciousness. He said he feels that the constant glare he's been under will help him weather this season's storm.

"It's similar to the OHL, NHL. It's a crazy hockey place to play in and you get to see both ends - there's a lot of politics that goes into the hockey in the Toronto area, but it's definitely a great place to play," he said. "They love their minor hockey and they love their junior hockey and there's no better place to play than in Toronto."

He also feels he's going to have to deal with opponents who are going to try to take advantage of the pressure's he's under - getting under his skin to see if he'll burst.

"On some players it takes a toll, but I just go out there and play my game,' he said. "You can't really do anything about it. You can control your game, you can't control what other people think or say - you just go out there and do your thing. I think I've learned last year that this year I might get a little more special attention on the ice and you just have to stay clear of that.

"Guys are going to try to get you off your game and get you to take stupid penalties and I just can't worry about that."

With all kinds of people around him offering him advice, Stamkos credits his father as being the biggest influence on him. And to this date his father, who attended around 45 games last season in Sarnia, still offers some words of wisdom.

"He got up at 6 a.m. to take me to practice, he took me to a lot of hockey schools when I was young. He pushed me to be a better player and without him I don't think I'd be in the position I am right now," Stamkos said. "I'm not that far in Sarnia - about two and a half hours. It's nice to see him. He always gives me a couple of pointers after each game too.

"He'll say, 'just keep your head straight on - just don't worry about the things other people are saying about you, whether it's good or negative.' You can't worry about that. Don't let your head get too big and just go out there and stay focused and work hard."

In the end, Stamkos brings it back to the team. When asked about his personal expectations, he deflects the question deftly, instead responding about how his team's success will reflect positively on him.

"I'm expecting nothing but the best. [Sarnia has] been a little disappointed with the way they've finished over the past few years, but we've got a great group of core guys coming back this year. Mr. [Alan] Millar [Sarnia's general manager] and Coach MacQueen have done a great job getting us some players through trades during the summer - we're looking really good right now," Stamkos explained. "We definitely want to improve on our first-round loss from last year and make it far into the playoffs. I can see us being pretty active at the trade deadline if we need some pieces to the puzzle that will take us to the Promised Land.

"I just want to improve on last year. And obviously the team goal is to make it far in the playoffs this year and hopefully by doing that my personal success will gain too."