

Looking Down The Road At Two Potential Stars

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While the main purpose of this blog is to highlight both drafted prospects and those who will be drafted in the near term, it is intriguing to look down the road for players who may be the cream of their respective age group.

Two of these prospects currently are competing in the OHL, and, despite their youth, are at times dominating play in that league. One, Steven Stamkos, is a top prospect for the 2008 NHL Draft, while the other, John Tavares, won't be draft-eligible until 2009.

The fact that Stamkos is a top prospect isn't that much of a surprise, given the fact that he was the first player chosen in the 2006 OHL Priority Selection. Stamkos earned his status as the top OHL prospect during his final season of Minor Midget AAA Hockey, where he starred for the Markham Waxers. The Unionville, Ontario native put up eye-popping numbers for the Waxers in 2005-06, netting 105 goals and adding 92 assists in 67 regular season games. In the OHL Cup tournament, Stamkos added 11 more points (4 goals, 7 assists) in five games in helping the Waxers complete an undefeated season that culminated with the OHL Cup championship.

Of course, previous heralded minor midget players have struggled once ascending to the OHL, so it was not a sure thing that Stamkos would continue his strong play at the next level. But Stamkos has been everything that the OHL's Sarnia Sting could have hoped for, helping to lead that club to a winning record so far in 2006-07 after a dismal 2005-06 season.

In 49 games this season, Stamkos has scored 34 goals and added 42 assists, placing him sixth overall in the OHL scoring race. He is the Sting's leading scorer, and a top candidate for OHL Rookie of the Year.

Stamkos, who turns 17 on February 7, is described by International Scouting Services as a player with "good size, great feet and tremendous offensive sense." At 6-0, 170, Stamkos has good size for his age, but he'll need to add some bulk to stand up to the rigors of a pro career. Given his age, however, there is plenty of time for him to fill in his skinny frame.

As impressive as Stamkos has been this season, center John Tavares of the Oshawa Generals has been even more impressive despite being seven months younger than Stamkos. And Tavares already has one strong OHL season under his belt, having won the OHL's 2006 Rookie of the Year trophy at the age of 15.

Like Stamkos, Tavares has been a player on the radar of most scouts from an early age. Tavares' talent was so obvious that the OHL elected to grant him entry to that league's 2005 OHL Priority Selection when Tavares was just 14. The young star proved the league's officials to be very wise, turning in a rookie season that saw the Generals' star tally 77 points (45 goals, 32 assists) in 65 games.

As it turned out, Tavares' 2005-06 campaign was just a prelude to greater things. The Oakville, Ontario native this season has cemented his reputation as the best player in his age group, as he has at times dominated the OHL. Tavares has been named OHL Player of the Week three times this season, including twice in the month of January, and also has earned the CHL's Player of the Week honor on three occasions.

Tavares is currently the leading scorer in the OHL, having earned 98 points (52 goals, 46 assists) in 46 games. He reached the 50-goal mark in just 44 games and is on pace for an 80-goal season. Tavares' play has lifted the Generals from league also-ran to playoff contender, helping to lift that club from the Eastern Division basement they have resided in for the past two seasons.

While Tavares' skating ability is not up to the level of some elite level players, he more than makes up for this minor shortcoming with his great hockey sense, vision and skill. He has good size for his age, and is sure to fill out his frame by the time his draft year comes around.

So the sky appears to be the limit for these two OHL stars. Both of these players have the ability to eventually be household names along the lines of current young NHL stars Sidney Crosby and Alex Ovechkin, which can only bode well for the future of the game.

For more hockey prospect information, go to Hockey's Future.com, a site devoted to the coverage of hockey prospects worldwide.