Biggest Draft Steals by Team

In the middle of August while up at the cottage I was looking at reddit.com/r/hockey, as one does. A post caught my eye: Each team's biggest draft steal since 2010. The graphic displaying the teams and player names looked very nice.

I looked at Ottawa and saw that whoever produced the list had Mark Stone as Ottawa's draft steal, which is the expected answer if you are a fan of the Senators. While he was a Senator (the golden days) much was made by Ottawa's broadcasters of how much they had gotten from Stone, who was selected with the 178th pick in the draft. Stone seemed like a reasonable answer, so there was hope for the list.

The hope didn't last long. Two players on the list have yet to play a minute in the NHL, and others have played a season or two.

In this article, I will explain how drafted players should be evaluated and then will use that process to identify the biggest draft steals by each team.

How Stapled To The Bench (STTB) Evaluates Drafted Players

To evaluate a drafted player, I compare where he was picked to what he has done. A metric is needed that can assign value to both the draft slot and the player's statistics: I use money.

In *The Value of a Draft Pick* I explained how a player's season statistics can be converted to a dollar value: that statistic is called Return From Play (RFP). RFP works for any player in any season, whether he was drafted or signed as a free agent.

As the vast majority of drafted players do not play immediately, a lengthy time frame is needed to determine what sort of player he has become. STTB uses six years, which is about the time frame a team has total control over a player they have drafted.

Also in that article, I explained how each draft slot is converted to a dollar value, which represents a team's investment in a draftee. I usually refer to this as a team's cost or their investment, but perhaps a better would be "expectation." The cost/investment/expectation for a pick is based on the average return of all players drafted between 2007 and 2016, in that part of the draft, over their first six post-draft seasons.

In the 2011 draft, Jonathan Huberdeau was drafted by Florida with the third overall pick. Florida's investment in Huberdeau was $15,768,000 (the investment figure for picks three through five in the first round). He played with the Saint John Sea Dogs in 2011-12 and started 2012-13 with the Sea Dogs. Midway through the season he broke in with Florida and stayed with Florida for the rest of his first six post-draft seasons. In his four-and-a-half seasons of NHL play, his statistics generated a return of $15,810,000. He produced ever so slightly more than should have been expected in his first six seasons.

A Few More Details

Since a six-seasons-since-drafted time frame is used to evaluate a drafted player, only players drafted between 2007 and 2017 can be evaluated for this article. This eliminates Seattle from consideration and also means that seven other players selected by the Reddit poster will not be considered.

Since the data necessary to calculate RFP goes back to 2007, I will start with the 2007 draftees rather than start at 2010 as the article did. I have no idea why the poster started in 2010. Maybe that is when the poster started watching hockey.

One further limitation is needed for this article: a player must have played NHL games only for his drafting team in his first six post-draft seasons. Looking at Calgary, Adam Fox cannot be considered a steal for them because he never played a game for them. Matthew Tkachuk can be considered a steal, as he was a Flame in his first six post-draft seasons.

Goalies will not be considered. RFP does not work for goalies, and I don't have an RFStP formula yet (Return From Stopping the Puck).

Profit or Return on Investment?

Mark Stone could be the best player Ottawa has drafted, could be Ottawa's best draft profit, or could be their biggest draft steal. Let me break things down.

Below you will see a list of the best players drafted from 2007 through 2017. No consideration is given to where in the draft they were selected.

Top Ten Players Drafted From 2007 Through 2017							
Rank	Player	Draft Team	Draft Year	Draft Slot	Team Cost	Player Return	Draft Profit	6 Yrs With Team?
1	Connor McDavid	EDM	2015	1	27.9	54.0	26.1	Yes
2	Auston Matthews	TOR	2016	1	27.9	48.0	20.1	Yes
3	Steven Stamkos	T.B	2008	1	27.9	42.2	14.3	Yes
4	Drew Doughty	L.A	2008	2	27.9	39.3	11.4	Yes
5	John Tavares	NYI	2009	1	27.9	38.8	10.9	Yes
6	Leon Draisaitl	EDM	2014	3	15.8	38.7	22.9	Yes
7	Seth Jones	NSH	2013	4	15.8	37.0	21.2	No
8	Nathan MacKinnon	COL	2013	1	27.9	36.2	8.3	Yes
9	Patrick Kane	CHI	2007	1	27.9	35.0	7.1	Yes
10	Aleksander Barkov	FLA	2013	2	27.9	34.6	6.7	Yes

TEAM COST, PLAYER RETURN AND PROFIT ARE ALL IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS

Tangentially, this table shows that the people who draft players know what they are doing. Six of the ten best players were drafted with the first pick, with two-second picks, a third and a fourth finishing the list. With high draft picks, much is expected. These guys are not steals.

In the next table, we will see the top players based on profit, which is determined by subtracting the team's cost from the player's return (RFP).

Biggest Draft Steals by Team

Top Ten Players, Draft Profit, From 2007 Through 2017							
Rank	Player	Draft Team	Draft Year	Draft Slot	Team Cost	Player Return	Draft Profit	6 Yrs With Team?
1	Sebastian Aho	CAR	2015	35	2.8	32.4	29.6	Yes
2	Ryan O'Reilly	COL	2009	33	2.8	31.1	28.2	Yes
3	Connor McDavid	EDM	2015	1	27.9	54.0	26.1	Yes
4	David Pastrnak	BOS	2014	25	4.8	29.8	25.1	Yes
5	Alex DeBrincat	CHI	2016	39	2.8	27.8	25.0	Yes
6	Justin Faulk	CAR	2010	37	2.8	27.5	24.7	Yes
7	Adam Fox	CGY	2016	66	1.4	24.6	23.2	No
8	Brayden Point	T.B	2014	79	1.4	24.4	23.1	Yes
9	Leon Draisaitl	EDM	2014	3	15.8	38.7	22.9	Yes
10	John Carlson	WSH	2008	27	4.8	27.0	22.2	Yes

TEAM COST, PLAYER RETURN AND PROFIT ARE ALL IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS

It is amazing that both McDavid and Draisaitl are in this table: much was expected from them, but much more was delivered by them. The table has four first-rounders, four second-rounders, and two third-rounders. We are getting closer to the idea of a draft steal but need to take one more step.

Let's look at players based on return on investment, which is a player's RFP divided by the team's cost. Connor McDavid's ROI is 93%, meaning he delivered almost twice as much as would be expected by a normal number-one draft pick.

Top Ten Players, Return on Investment, From 2007 Through 2017							
Rank	Player	Draft Team	Draft Year	Draft Slot	Team Cost	Player Return	Return On Invest.	6 Yrs With Team?
1	Ondrej Palat	T.B	2011	208	0.6	19.2	3350%	Yes
2	Jesper Bratt	N.J	2016	162	0.6	15.4	2673%	Yes
3	Jared Spurgeon	NYI	2008	156	0.6	14.2	2442%	Yes
4	Carl Gunnarsson	TOR	2007	194	0.6	13.6	2343%	Yes
5	Jason Demers	S.J	2008	186	0.6	13.4	2304%	Yes
6	Mark Stone	OTT	2010	178	0.6	12.7	2177%	Yes
7	Jamie Benn	DAL	2007	129	0.9	19.2	2012%	Yes
8	Viktor Arvidsson	NSH	2014	112	0.9	19.2	2009%	Yes
9	Kevin Labanc	S.J	2014	171	0.6	11.3	1933%	Yes
10	Jaccob Slavin	CAR	2012	120	0.9	17.8	1858%	Yes

RETURN ON INVESTMENT IS PLAYER RETURN DIVIDED BY TEAM COST

This approach clearly produces a list of the biggest steals ever drafted: players who were selected late in the draft and played extremely well. At number six we see Mark Stone, who we can now say with certainty was Ottawa's biggest draft steal. The best player Ottawa ever drafted was also the most profitable player they have drafted Erik Karlsson.

This work has set the stage for the table that matters: each team's biggest draft steal.

Biggest Draft Steals by Team

Each Team's Biggest Draft Steal, 2007 to 2017

Draft Team	Draft Year	Draft Pick	Player	Draft Team	Draft Year	Draft Pick	Player
			Each Team's Best Draft Steal, From 2007 Through 2017				
ANA	2011	160	Josh Manson	N.J	2016	162	Jesper Bratt
ARI	2008	69	Michael Stone	NSH	2014	112	Viktor Arvidsson
BOS	2014	25	David Pastrnak	NYI	2008	156	Jared Spurgeon
BUF	2009	104	Marcus Foligno	NYR	2007	168	Carl Hagelin
CAR	2012	120	Jaccob Slavin	OTT	2010	178	Mark Stone
CBJ	2010	154	Dalton Prout	PHI	2012	78	Shayne Gostisbehere
CGY	2015	166	Andrew Mangiapane	PIT	2013	77	Jake Guentzel
CHI	2009	149	Marcus Kruger	S.J	2008	186	Jason Demers
COL	2009	33	Ryan O'Reilly	SEA			Ineligible
DAL	2007	129	Jamie Benn	STL	2012	86	Colton Parayko
DET	2016	53	Filip Hronek	T.B	2011	208	Ondrej Palat
EDM	2015	124	Ethan Bear	TOR	2007	194	Carl Gunnarsson
FLA	2011	64	Vincent Trocheck	VAN	2012	147	Ben Hutton
L.A	2015	194	Matt Roy	VGK	2017	34	Nicolas Hague
MIN	2015	135	Kirill Kaprizov	WPG	2013	104	Andrew Copp
MTL	2010	147	Brendan Gallagher	WSH	2008	27	John Carlson

Only six players appear on my list and the redditor's list. I'll hazard a guess as to why so few players appear on both lists in the summary.

Summary

I assume the article on Reddit was based strictly on a person's opinions. How else can two teams have their biggest draft steals be somebody who has yet to play in the NHL? How else can the list have nine first-round picks and only two late-round picks identified as <u>steals</u>?

How can the list have players who didn't have a good season in their first six seasons, such as MacKenzie Weegar (FLA)? None of his great seasons were in his first six post-draft seasons. Consider his Career Productivity Rating chart:
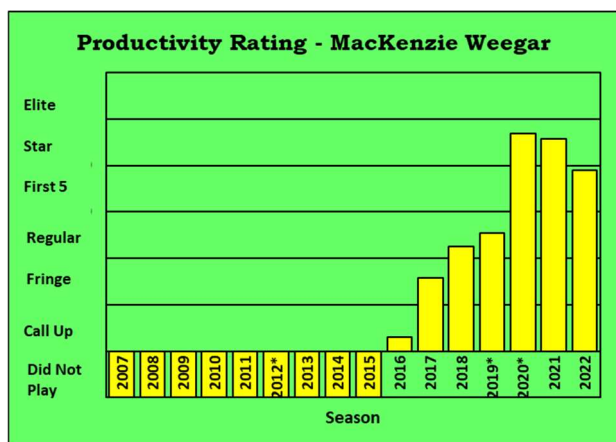
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2020-21 was obviously his breakout season, his fifth season in the NHL. The problem is that Weegar was drafted in 2013 and he was evaluated on his first six post-draft seasons (2013 through 2018), not his first six NHL seasons (2016 through 2021).

I do not want to be seen as criticizing the Redditor. He (assuming the poster was male) is entitled to his opinion and can use whatever methodology he desires.

I, too, am entitled to my opinion and my methodology. I chose to use a mathematical approach when answering hockey questions. I choose to evaluate all players with one process. My opinion is that my process will identify players fairly and accurately.

For this article, I asked the data who the best draft steals were, and the data and I had a conversation where we confirmed what "steal" means, and then the data provided the answer. Every player who was drafted was evaluated, so it wasn't possible for me to overlook players I didn't remember (like Josh Manson, ANA).

I will concede that my table is not as nice looking as the Redditor's table.

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