Team's Best Players – Central Division

Being a fan of Ottawa, I was wondering the other day about who were best players to ever play for the Senators. Being a sports data wonk, I wanted to use numbers, rather than opinions, to answer the question (PR-Score, GxPts: see the first two related articles).

There are four Best Player articles, one for each NHL division. The first part of each article, from here to the divisional Best Players tables, will be identical in each article. The Best Players tables will be presented without extra commentary, but the Summary section may have a little something extra.

Methodology

What did I mean by best player? I was interested in individual seasons rather than a span of seasons. At the start, I wanted to know which player had the best single season for Ottawa. I could do this very easily using PR-Score: the answer for the Senators is Erik Karlsson in his 2015 season, and it isn't close.

I immediately wanted to complicate my life. What about best forward? Wait, how about the three best forwards, two best defensemen and a goalie?

For Edmonton, the top three seasons for forwards come from the legal team of McDavid, McDavid and McDavid. I wanted to see three different forwards. This made the data structure a little more complicated, but it was nothing I couldn't handle.

By the way, any player who was traded mid-season had absolutely no chance of qualifying as one of the best three players for either of the teams he played for.

As I'm using PR-Score for skaters, and GxPts for Goalies, I can only go as far back as the 2007-08 season (with apologies to Wayne Gretzky and Guy LaFleur).

In the next section I will explain the "Best Players table".

Description of the Best Players Table

The example Best Players table shown below is Pittsburgh's "second team": their fourth to sixth best forwards, their third and four best defensemen and their second-best goalie.

PIT Season	Name	POS	TOI/ GP	G	A	Pts	Lg Rank	Unit Score	Unit Rank
2018	Jake Guentzel	F	19.4	40	36	76	248		
2012	Pascal Dupuis	F	17.5	34	31	65	270	26.4	45
2008	Jordan Staal	F	19.8	22	27	49	369		
2023	Erik Karlsson	D	24.1	11	45	56	170	17.4	50
2023	Marcus Pettersson	D	22.5	4	26	30	323		

Season	Name	POS	TOI	GA	xGA	SvAA 60	Lg Rank	GxPts	Unit Rank
2021	Tristan Jarry	G	3415	138	144	0.10	146	59.3	51

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The top five data lines are show forwards (yellow shading) and defensemen (green shading). The sixth data line is for a goalie (blue shading). While goalies have the same number of data columns as forwards, the data in those columns are different.

For the skaters I show four NHL statistics: time on ice (minutes) per game played, goals, assists and points. For seasons that played fewer than 82 games (2012, 2019 and 2020) I show extrapolated data, as that puts all player data on the same scale.

"Lg Rank" is league rank: if the players were sorted by Productivity Rating from best to worst, Jake Guentzel's 2018 season would be the 248th best season amongst the forwards.

Unit Score is the total Productivity Score of the three forwards or two defensemen, while Unit Rank is the rank (1 would be best) of those productivity scores. Pittsburgh's second-best set of forwards had a total PR-Score of 26.4, which would place them 45th, while the defensemen have a total PR-Score of 17.4 placing them 50th. In the actual tables the Unit Ranks will range from 1 to 32. I'm showing the second-best group from Pittsburgh, and there are 64 best and second-best groups in the league.

Goalie data shows games played, total time on ice, goals against (GA) and expected goals against (xGA). SvAA60 is the amount of saves a goalie made above average per 60 minutes of play. Jarry gave up 6 goals fewer than an average goalie would have (138 GA, 144 xGA), and that worked out to 0.10 saves above average per 60 minutes.

GxPts is the rating system for goalies, representing the number of standing points a team should expect with a goalie in nets, playing the amount of time a goalie played. Unit Rank shows how a goalie ranks among the other best goalies. It will range from 1 to 32 when considering the best goalies for each team – Jarry ranks 51st among the top 64 goalies.

Teams will be presented from least impressive to most impressive, based on a formula I cannot describe well as I barely understand it myself.

One thing I noticed on compiling the data for this article is the lopsided seasonal distribution of the best players. An unexpectedly large number of them come from either the first four seasons (2007 through 2010) and the last four seasons (2020 to 2023).

	2007 to 2010 2020 to 2023	2011 to 2019
Seasons	8	9
Forwards	65	31
Defensemen	60	36
Skaters	125	67

The 2011 to 2019 group should have had 100 skaters instead of 67 skaters. I can think of no statistical or methodological reason for this to have happened.

Central Division – Best Players Tables

STL / Season	Name	POS	TOI/ GP	G	A	Pts	Lg Rank	Unit Score	Unit Rank
2020	Ryan O'Reilly	F	20.8	35	44	79	49		
2023	Robert Thomas	F	21.0	26	60	86	74	29.5	18
2010	David Backes	F	19.7	31	31	62	314		
2013	Alex Pietrangelo	D	25.4	8	43	51	39	19.2	24
2020	Justin Faulk	D	24.3	10	26	36	207		

Season	Name	POS	TOI	GA	xGA	SvAA 60	Lg Rank	GxPts	Unit Rank
2023	Jordan Binnington	G	3292	156	179	0.41	91	63.7	6

CHI / Season	Name	POS	TOI/ GP	G	A	Pts	Lg Rank	Unit Score	Unit Rank
2010	Jonathan Toews	F	20.8	32	44	76	74		
2018	Patrick Kane	F	22.5	44	66	110	124	29.1	21
2021	Alex DeBrincat	F	20.9	41	37	78	228		
2009	Duncan Keith	D	26.6	14	55	69	11	20.6	10
2010	Brent Seabrook	D	24.4	9	39	48	117		

Season	Name	POS	TOI	GA	xGA	SvAA 60	Lg Rank	GxPts	Unit Rank
2015	Corey Crawford	G	3323	131	149	0.32	115	62.1	17

MIN / Season	Name	POS	TOI/ GP	G	A	Pts	Lg Rank	Unit Score	Unit Rank
2021	Kirill Kaprizov	F	19.1	47	61	108	100		
2009	Mikko Koivu	F	20.8	22	49	71	162	28.7	23
2017	Eric Staal	F	17.8	42	34	76	209		
2015	Ryan Suter	D	28.6	8	43	51	29	20.0	16
2010	Brent Burns	D	25.1	17	29	46	107		

Season	Name	POS	TOI	GA	xGA	SvAA 60	Lg Rank	GxPts	Unit Rank
2008	Niklas Backstrom	G	4084	159	153	-0.09	84	65.4	29

ARI / Season	Name	POS	TOI/ GP	G	A	Pts	Lg Rank	Unit Score	Unit Rank
2022	Clayton Keller	F	20.8	37	49	86	162		
2007	Shane Doan	F	20.8	28	50	78	228	26.4	31
2011	Ray Whitney	F	18.6	24	53	77	643		
2014	Oliver Ekman-Larsson	D	25.2	23	20	43	81	19.1	26
2020	Jakob Chychrun	D	23.4	26	34	60	132		

Season	Name	POS	TOI	GA	xGA	SvAA 60	Lg Rank	GxPts	Unit Rank
2011	Mike Smith	G	3903	144	178	0.52	11	78.2	28

WPG Season	Name	POS	TOI/GP	G	A	Pts	Lg Rank	Unit Score	Unit Rank
2018	Mark Scheifele	F	21.9	38	46	84	113		
2021	Kyle Connor	F	21.8	47	46	93	136	28.8	22
2016	Blake Wheeler	F	20.1	26	48	74	209		
2016	Dustin Byfuglien	D	27.5	13	39	52	58	19.6	22
2023	Josh Morrissey	D	24.2	10	59	69	99		

Season	Name	POS	TOI	GA	xGA	SvAA 60	Lg Rank	GxPts	Unit Rank
2022	Connor Hellebuyck	G	3778	157	190	0.52	20	75.6	13

DAL Season	Name	POS	TOI/GP	G	A	Pts	Lg Rank	Unit Score	Unit Rank
2022	Jason Robertson	F	18.8	46	63	109	51		
2014	Jamie Benn	F	20.0	35	52	87	100	30.2	16
2017	Tyler Seguin	F	20.9	40	38	78	136		
2022	Miro Heiskanen	D	25.5	11	62	73	39	19.9	17
2009	Stephane Robidas	D	24.5	10	31	41	99		

Season	Name	POS	TOI	GA	xGA	SvAA 60	Lg Rank	GxPts	Unit Rank
2013	Kari Lehtonen	G	3804	153	175	0.35	27	72.4	24

NSH Season	Name	POS	TOI/GP	G	A	Pts	Lg Rank	Unit Score	Unit Rank
2023	Filip Forsberg	F	18.9	48	46	94	162		
2023	Ryan O'Reilly	F	19.8	26	43	69	248	26.8	30
2021	Matt Duchene	F	19.0	43	43	86	432		
2021	Roman Josi	D	25.5	23	73	96	7	22.0	2
2013	Shea Weber	D	26.9	23	33	56	23		

Season	Name	POS	TOI	GA	xGA	SvAA 60	Lg Rank	GxPts	Unit Rank
2022	Juuse Saros	G	3811	171	206	0.56	14	77.6	10

COL Season	Name	POS	TOI/GP	G	A	Pts	Lg Rank	Unit Score	Unit Rank
2023	Nathan MacKinnon	F	22.8	51	89	140	3		
2022	Mikko Rantanen	F	22.2	55	50	105	24	34.2	2
2009	Paul Stastny	F	21.4	20	59	79	136		
2021	Cale Makar	D	25.7	28	58	86	4	21.7	4
2022	Devon Toews	D	25.1	7	43	50	52		

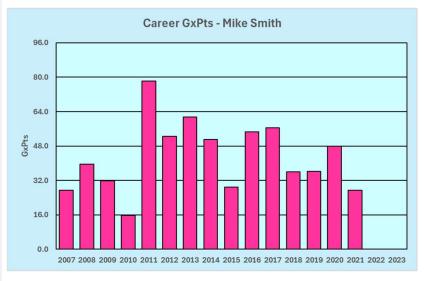| Season	Name	POS	TOI	GA	xGA	SvAA 60	Lg Rank	GxPts	Unit Rank
2009	Craig Anderson	G	4235	186	185	-0.02	45	70.7	20

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Summary

Since 2007-08, Chicago has won three Stanley Cups (2009-10, 2012-13 and 2014-15) St. Louis (2018-19) and Colorado (2021-22) have won one each. The best players for those teams didn't necessarily play in their cup-winning seasons.

Arizona ranks ahead of St. Louis, Minnesota and Chicago due to the goalie data of these four teams. Mike Smith's 2011 season was atypical for him: it was his best season by a kilometre.

Career GxPts - Mike Smith

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