

2011-12 NHL PLAYER USAGE CHARTS

Player Usage charts show how players are used and how they performed at even-strength by mapping the percentage of shifts they started in the offensive zone (horizontal axis) against the average quality of their competition, as measured in attempted shots (vertical axis), with sized and coloured bubbles denoting how well the team performed with them on the ice relative to everyone else. Every chart includes supplementary thoughts from expert analysts.

*Don't Study Hockey
without Them*

June 2012

Rob Vollman and friends

Player Usage Charts

Don't Study Hockey without Them

In our quest to provide objective hockey analysis that acts a useful supplement to everybody's own experience-based understanding of the game, our aim is to develop statistics that are both understandable and relevant.

Almost one year ago on Arctic Ice Hockey we first introduced Player Usage Charts as the accessible graphical representation of existing statistical advances.

Throughout the 2011-12 season analysts across over half the league and one NHL front office joined me in its continued development, culminating in what we proudly present here to you, the media, the agent, the front office executive and most importantly the fan: Player Usage Charts for every team in the league, accompanied by brief and informal interpretation from the aforementioned expert analysts, including TSN's Scott Cullen.

Consult these Player Usage Charts regularly to help put last year's player production into context when evaluating trades, signings and contracts this off-season and again when considering line matching and production expectations in next year's training camp.

All the raw data is available at www.HockeyAbstract.com. Please feel free to distribute this freely and to contact me at vollman@hockeyabstract.com or any of my fellow analysts with any corrections, questions or suggestions (contact information in the appendix). Enjoy!

- Rob Vollman of www.HockeyAbstract.com, June 1, 2012

What are Player Usage Charts?

Player Usage Charts, formerly known as OZQoC charts, were first introduced on Arctic Ice Hockey by Rob Vollman in the 2011 off-season to study how players were being used in a simple graphical representation. The idea caught on quickly among both hockey analysts and front offices, sparking a number of improvements throughout the season. These particular player usage charts are all even-strength play only.

What are Offensive Zone Starts (Horizontal Axis)?

Offensive zone starts is the percentage of all non-neutral shifts started in the offensive zone. A common misconception is that it's the percentage of all shifts started in the offensive zone, but it ignores those in the neutral zone and is therefore perhaps poorly named (like most hockey statistics). Think of it more as a representation of whether a player is used primarily for his offensive talents, or defensive.

What is Quality of Competition (Vertical Axis)?

Quality of Competition is the average plus/minus of one's opponents over 60 minutes, except that it is based on attempted-shots (Corsi) instead of goals. In this particular variation we are using Relative Corsi (explained below). Players who face top lines will have high QoC's while those with the easier task of facing mostly depth lines will have negative QoCs.

What is Relative Corsi (The Bubbles)?

Corsi, another poorly named statistic, is simply a player's plus/minus, except that it's measured in attempted shots instead of goals. In this case it's calculated over 60 minutes, and Relative Corsi is calculated relative to how the team did without him. As explained by Corsi bubble innovator Eric Tulsky, a big blue bubble

represents someone whose team attempts a lot more shots than their opponents while he's on the ice, and a big white bubble is someone whose team is usually getting outshot badly. In Tom Awad's variation the bubble is sized according to a player's ice-time and shaded dark green or dark red based on their Relative Corsi.

What do the asterisks mean?

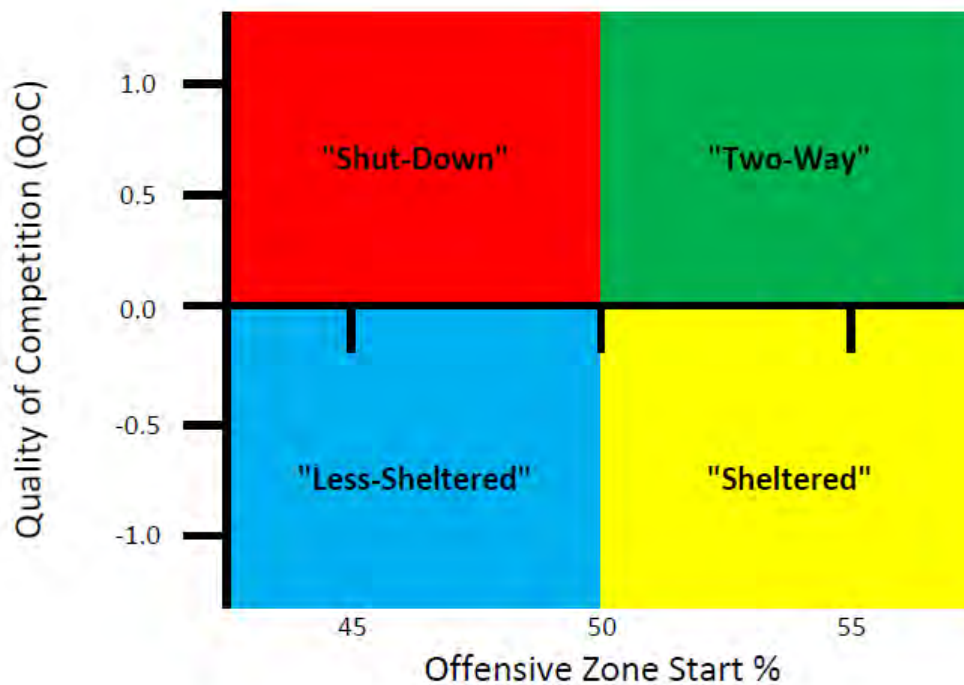
Since it's not generally appropriate to compare the raw usage data of a player on one team to another, which can often be like comparing apples to oranges, players who played part of the season elsewhere are marked with an asterisk. Those who started the season with the team but ended elsewhere have the asterisk as a prefix, and those that started elsewhere but ended with the club have an asterisk as a postfix. Stick tap to Timo Seppa for this one.

What does the purple writing mean?

Defensemen have their names in purple to differentiate them from forwards. This is one of the great suggestions we got from an NHL executive who swears by these player usage charts.

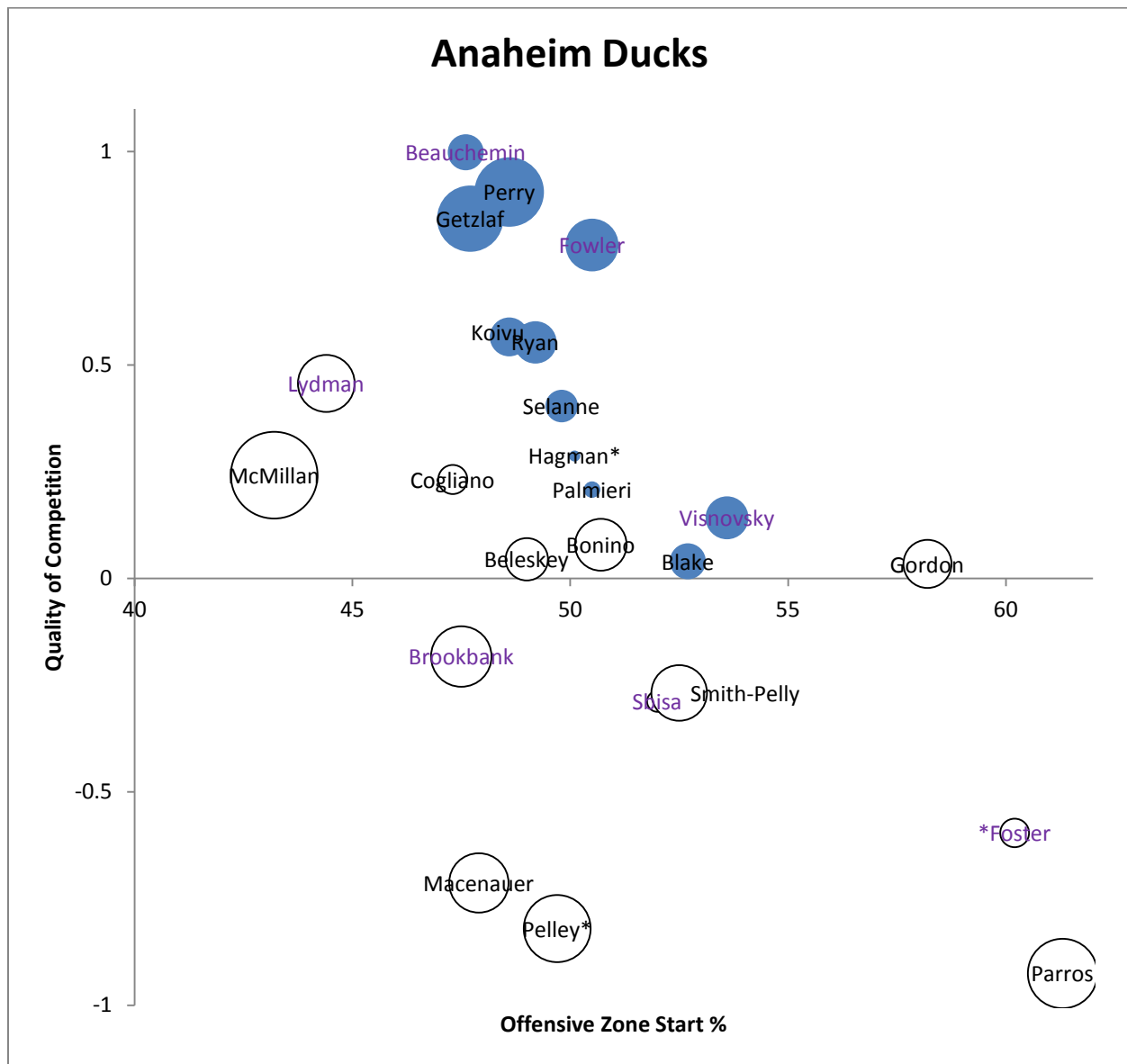
What does it all mean?

As shown in Aaron Nichols' chart below, those on the left are defensive-minded players, and on the right offensive-minded. Those up top play against top lines, those at the bottom play against depth lines. Therefore those in the top-left are playing tough minutes in their own zone against top opponents and it's impressive if they don't have big white bubbles, and those in the bottom-right are sheltered from defensive zone play or top opponents and are usually goons. Players with bubbles that seem out of place could be being misused.



Where do these stats come from?

Initially all the statistics come directly from the NHL's game files, which are processed by Vic Ferrari's time on ice site, and collected and presented at Behind the Net by Gabriel Desjardins. The idea for this graphical representation, and this package itself, comes from Rob Vollman, with the idea for the Corsi bubbles from Eric Tulsky of Broad Street Hockey, and other developments from several others including Corey Sznajder, Josh Lile, Derek Zona, John Fischer, Mike Rogers, Derek Jedamski, Aaron Nichols, and Gus Katsaros.



Rob Vollman's Take

The Anaheim Ducks, who practically invented post-lockout ice-tilting in their 2007 Stanley Cup run with the famous shut down line of Travis Moen, Sami Pahlsson and Rob Niedermayer opening up the ice for their offensive-minded kids Ryan Getzlaf and Corey Perry, stopped employing that system even before coach Randy Carlyle's departure.

Five years later it's Perry and Getzlaf carrying the team with effective play in tough minutes. Though they were complemented by a decent pack of veterans including Saku Koivu and Teemu Selanne, Anaheim's woes can be traced to their reliance on a legion of arguably unready or replacement-level talent like Andrew Gordon, Rod Pelley, Maxime Macenauer, Brandon McMillan, Matt Beleskey, Nick Bonino, Devante Smith-Pelly, and enforcer George Parros, who played 351 combined games. A Moen/Pahlsson/Niedermayer line could have made all the difference last year.

The blue line is led by workhorse Francois Beauchemin, but it's interesting to note that while offensive-minded Lubomir Visnovsky is sheltered, generally at the expense of Toni Lydman (whose scoring consequently

dropped in half), young Cam Fowler is not. The Ducks definitely have a six-man blue line as these four, plus depth options Sheldon Brookbank and Luca Sbisa, missed just a combined 26 games (played by Nate Guenin 15, now-Wild Kurtis Foster 9 and Mat Clark 2). /RV

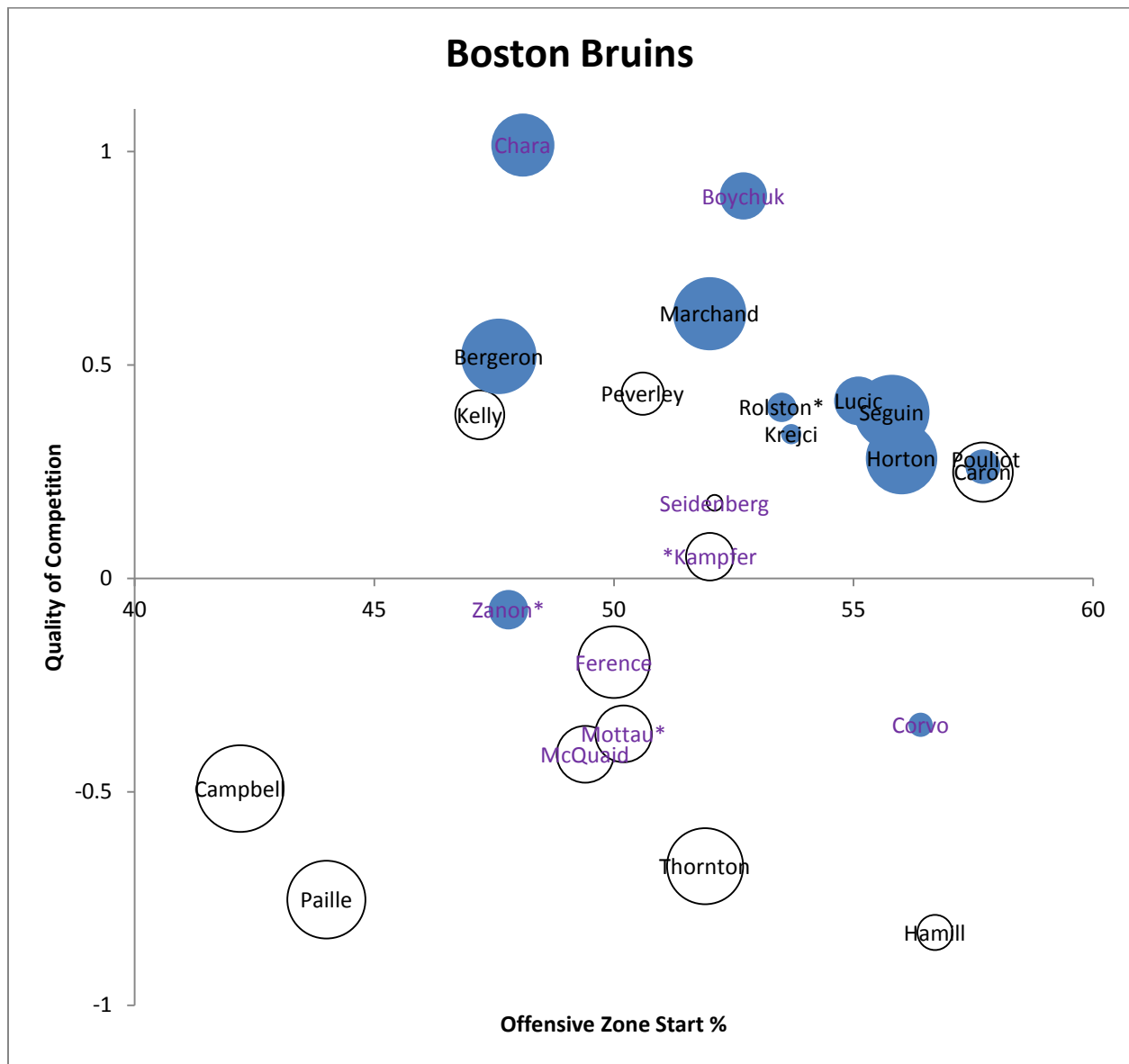
Josh Lile's
Take

The Ducks lack of depth forced Getzlaf/Perry to play against higher Quality of Competition.

They didn't shelter Cam Fowler enough. He had a positive Corsi, but I recall many times where he was a mess defensively. /JL

Corey
Sznajder's
Take

Both Carlyle and Boudreau used a power vs. power approach with their forwards as the Getzlaf and Koivu lines handled the bulk of tough minutes. This is mostly because the Ducks lack quality defensive forwards and don't have anyone who they can use in that role. /CS



Rob Vollman's Take

Patrice Bergeron had a truly impressive season, leading the team in possession numbers despite being assigned the toughest minutes. Brad Marchand also had a great year.

In fairness, apart from sheltering his younger players like Jordan Caron and Zach Hamill, his enforcer Shawn Thornton and defense-only depth players Gregory Campbell and Daniel Paille (all to no avail), Coach Claude Julien doesn't believe very much in line matching, which is perhaps why they managed six 20-goal scorers (almost seven if you extrapolate Nathan Horton's scoring rate).

Despite their high scoring totals Boston was at a shot-based disadvantage with Chris Kelly and Rich Peverley on the ice, which is partly due to having more defensive responsibilities than the highly successful scoring trio of Milan Lucic, Tyler Seguin and Nathan Horton, and the only slightly less effective secondary choices like Brian Rolston, David Krejci and Benoit Pouliot.

Zdeno Chara and his far less heralded linemate Johnny Boychuk successfully managed all the heavy lifting on defense, but Julien sent GM Peter Chiarelli out to pick up defensive-minded blueliners Greg Zanon and depth piece Mike Mottau at the deadline given that Dennis Seidenberg was the only one of the other four defensemen in whom Julien really had any confidence. Andrew Ference and tough guy Adam McQuaid struggled in their depth roles and Joe Corvo got by only by virtue of his highly-sheltered treatment. /RV

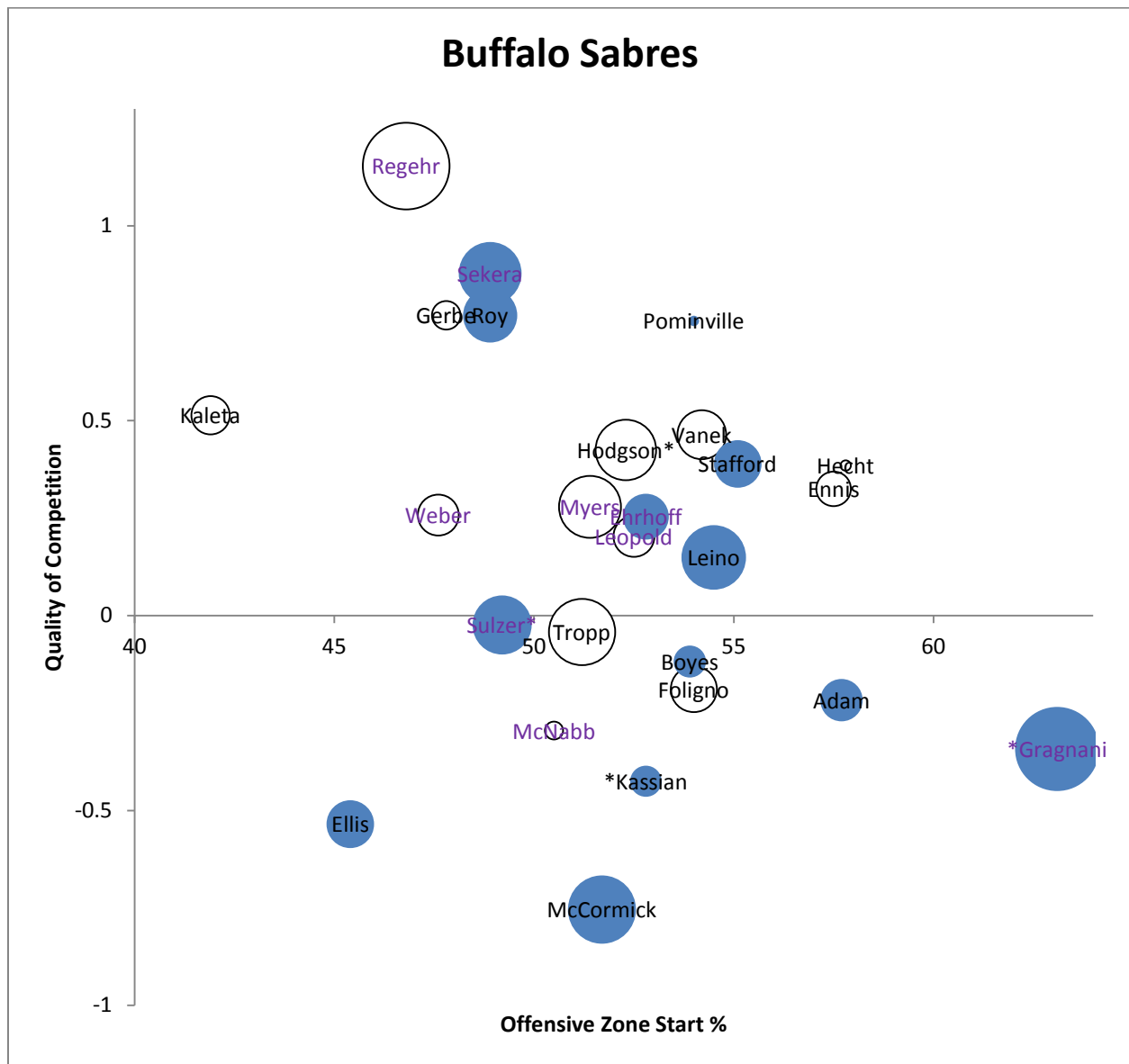
**Derek
Jedamski's
Take**

Some coaches pick match-ups based on zone starts, others do it based on quality of competition. Alain Vigneault is typically of the former group, Claude Julien is usually of the latter group. You can see that Julien simply matched his better players up with the best players on the other team, most guys with a positive CorsiRelQOC are some of Boston's best players while those that registered a negative CorsiRelQOC are mostly depth players.

All coaches do this to a certain extent but Julien's methods seem to be a bit more extreme in that regard. Zone starts comes secondary to getting the right player-for-player matchup (in this case, strong players against strong players, weak against weak) in this case. /DJ

**Corey
Sznajder's
Take**

Campbell and Paille's zone start data is a tad misleading because they aren't playing against tough competition, and there is no need for them to with Patrice Bergeron on the team. /CS



Derek Jedamski's Take

It is evident here that Lindy Ruff does not utilize zone starts to optimize players' talents as much as other coaches like Alain Vigneault or Joel Quenneville. Ruff likes to have well-rounded players that he can put on the ice in any situation; as such, he often does not tend to employ certain players almost exclusively in specific situations as Vigneault does with Malhotra in the defensive zone or the Sedins in the offensive zone. Granted, Buffalo does not have anybody of the Sedin's caliber but it would be interesting to see players like Hodgson, Vanek, and Ennis starting 60+% of their shifts in the offensive zone.

Ruff also tends to shelter rookies, which is not at all uncommon but Ruff may do so more consistently than most other coaches. We consider "sheltered" to be the bottom right quadrant; that is an offensive zone start percentage greater than 50% and CorsiQoC less than 0. There are five players on the Sabres who qualified as rookies this season: Adam, Foligno, McNabb, Tropp, and Hodgson. Hodgson is the only player of those five rookies who doesn't fall in the quadrant of the easiest minutes*. Also, of the six players in that "sheltered" quadrant, four of them happen to be rookies.

Despite Ruff's relatively conservative ways when it comes to zone starts, there are still some obvious trends on which players he tends to give the heavy lifting minutes in the defensive zone and which players he tends to shelter. You can see here than he actively shelters Luke Adam, Brad Boyes, and Marcus Foligno. All three of them start in the offensive zone ~55% of the time while facing relatively weak competition. On the other side, Nathan Gerbe and Patrick Kaleta comprised two-thirds of the Sabres very effective shutdown line (along with Paul Gaustad) and that is exhibited in this chart as Kaleta and Gerbe received the most difficult minutes among forwards. Joining those two in the defensive ranks are Robyn Regehr and Andrej Sekera. Each of these four players were trusted by Ruff to take care of business in their own zone while facing quite difficult competition.

There are a few players of particular interest from this chart: Luke Adam, Robyn Regehr, and Andrej Sekera. This chart gives rise to some very interesting numbers that tend to fly in the face of common perception of how these players were handled or how well they performed this season.

Many people are of the belief that Luke Adam was not put in a position to succeed and thus, was unfairly demoted by the organization. On the first point, Adam began the season between the team's two best forwards in Thomas Vanek and Jason Pominville. Over his 52 games in Buffalo only Jochen Hecht started in the offensive zone more often than Adam (by 0.1% despite just a 22 game sample size for Hecht) and only McCormick and Ellis faced easier competition among forwards. Despite the advantages he received, Adam only managed to produce 9 points in his final 41 games and 0 points in his final 20 games in Buffalo. Breaking his season down into 13 games sections, you can see the obvious decline:

Games 0-13: 4 G - 7 A - 11 P – 29 SOG

Games 14-26: 5 G - 2 A - 7 P – 21 SOG

Games 27-39: 1 G - 1 A - 2 P – 20 SOG

Games 40-52: 0 G - 0 A - 0 P – 19 SOG

Not only did his production go down after the first 13 games but also his shot rate decreased steadily. Despite being provided with these advantages (favorable ice-time), he simply failed to produce outside the first 20 games. He may of experienced a bit of bad luck with the Sabres as the team's shooting percentage with Adam on the ice was only 7.49%, despite his personal shooting percentage of 11.2%.

The common perception around the league is that Robyn Regehr had a very poor season in his first year in Buffalo. Who can blame them? Five points and a -12 in 76 games paints a pretty ugly picture. Only Mike Weber finished with a worse +/- and five points in 76 games is Regehr's worst total since his sophomore season over a decade ago. A casual glance at this player usage chart visualizes the kind of minutes Robyn Regehr faced this season. He was Lindy Ruff's workhorse, he handled the minutes that most of the other defensemen couldn't handle. Nobody started in the defensive zone more often that Regehr among defensemen and nobody on the team faced more difficult competition than Regehr. He was given a clearly defined role and his 2.01 goals against per 60 minutes of ES time (2nd best among defensemen) speaks to his success at the task he was given. One contributing factor to his brutal +/- is the fact that Regehr was put on the ice for one reason and one reason only, to defend the other teams top players and keep the puck out of his net. As a result, the team did not produce much offense with Regehr on the ice. Regehr's 23.3 shots for/60 min was 2nd worst on the team (behind only Hecht) and the team's shooting percentage of 6.03 with Regehr on the ice is one of the worst as well. He had a clearly defined role and he executed that role extremely well.

I think many fans recognize the high moments of Sekera's season but it was the maddening inconsistency that led many to miss just how impressive of a season Sekera had. The young Slovak experienced quite a role shift this season as Lindy Ruff leaned on him pretty heavily in the defensive zone. Last season Sekera started in the offensive zone 54.3% of the time last year (3rd highest among defensemen); that dropped to 48.9% this season (only Weber and Regehr were lower). Sekera's CorsiQoC also ballooned from 0.234 last season to 0.740 this season. He was relied on much more in the defensive zone, given more starts in the defensive zone

along with more difficult competition; yet, he still managed to allow 1.6 fewer shots per 60 minutes despite this shifted role. His 24.6 SA/60 was the best among defensemen this season. His drop in offensive production is likely a side effect of his focus on the defensive end of the rink.

* Keep in mind that Hodgson's numbers here are composed of his time in Buffalo and Vancouver, so it's not entirely indicative of how he was used by Ruff. /DJ

Aaron Nichols' Take

Lindy Ruff has been said to make his forwards responsible for two-way hockey (i.e. play offensive and defensive assignments) when they are on the ice. The chart above supports this, by showing how the majority of top six forwards (Ennis, Hodgson, Pominville, Roy, Stafford, and Vanek) were not sheltered and had to face positive QoC when on the ice.

Ruff tended to give sheltered minutes to either rookies (Foligno, Adam) or fourth line players (Boyes, Ellis, McCormick, Tropp). This is unlike teams such as Washington, who would shelter their better offensive talent in order to give them better scoring chances.

Nathan Gerbe and Pat Kaleta had the most defensive zone starts and the highest QoC among all forwards, which supports Ruff use of them as a "shut-down" forward line. This was most clearly seen before the trade deadline when Paul Gaustad centered this line before his trade to Nashville.

Robyn Regher and Andrej Sekera had the toughest competition and least offensive zone starts of all the defensemen. Looking at these two players when compared to the other defenseman, it can be deduced that Ruff used these two in a shut-down role, while Ehrhoff, Leopold and Myers saw more offensive zone starts and lower QoC. This should make sense, because more offensively skilled defenseman should get better scoring opportunities.

Mike Weber and Alexander Sulzer were not necessarily sheltered but saw the majority of their starts in the defensive zone with relative equal QoC, the only sheltered defenseman was the rookie on the blueline, Brayden McNabb.

The only peculiar point on the chart seem to be Jochen Hecht; while injured most of the season, Hecht is known to be a solid two-way forward who is very defensively responsible, yet he saw the majority of his starts in the offensive zone. While this may seem unusual, he actually has seen a greater amount of zone starts in the offensive zone in every year since 2007-2008. Even with this statistic, his Off. Zone starts were 4% than last season, which is the largest jump since the recording of this statistic. /AN

Matthew Coller's Take

On the Sabres, I think the clustering of the forwards, Vanek, Stafford, Pominville, Leino, it strikes me as being telling of Lindy Ruff's system, which asks pretty much all forwards to be two-way forwards. It's been a major criticism of mine toward him. Using players this way may have worked in 1999 with Stu Barnes and Michael Peca, but players like Ville Leino and Cody Hodgson belong in the offensive zone the majority of the time. And if you can't use them that way, your GM shouldn't acquire them. The chart may even suggest that the GM and coach aren't exactly on the same page.

Luke Adam is certainly an exception. Ruff tried his darnedest to keep Adam away from any difficult competition and to start in the O-zone as often as possible. After the season, he said Adam was eventually sent down to the minors because he was so bad defensively.

I think the Roy and Gerbe bubbles may make somewhat of a suggestion about why they both saw declines in production, especially Gerbe.

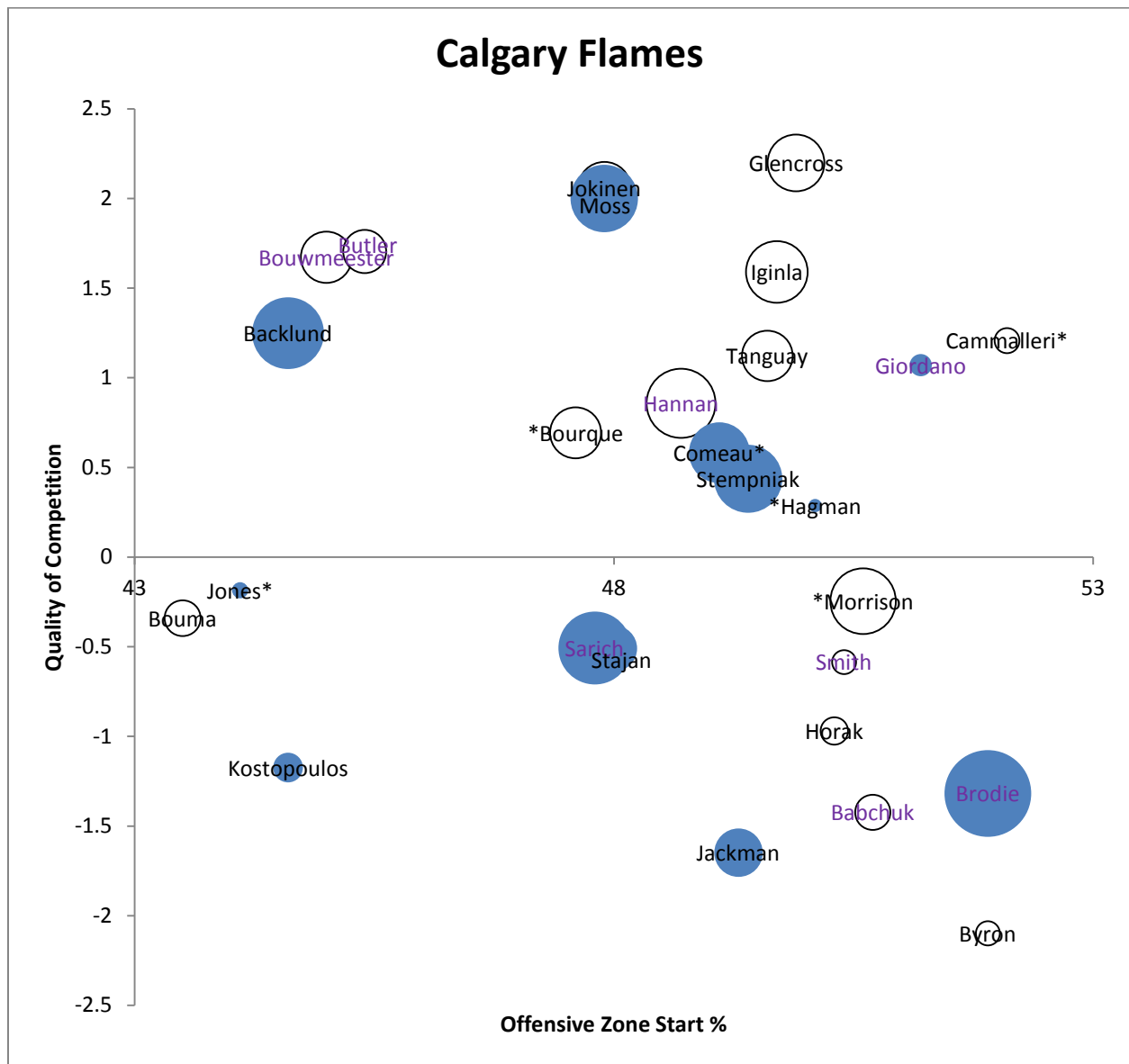
Robyn Regehr's bubble clearly stands way out. The Sabres used him constantly against the other team's top lines. And as I'm sure you know, he performed alright 5-on-5 in terms of on-ice save percentage, but not so much in Corsi. I don't think the original intention was to use him as much vs. great competition as this, but injuries to Tyler Myers and Christian Ehrhoff forced him into positions they would have rather he not be in. However, looking at this, I believe Myers is far far and away the best defensive defenseman. He's the guy I would like to have matched up with your Ovechkins and Crosbys.

Tyler Ennis became the team's No. 1 center during the last 15 or so games. Starting him in the offensive zone as much as possible is the right way to go. While holding down the No. 1 role, he was almost always paired with Foligno and Stafford. Both Foligno and McNabb stand out to me as guys who didn't play a ton and their usage may change a bit. McNabb is a lock-down type, so he may swap bubbles with someone like Weber, who really, really struggled at 5-on-5 when facing decent competition.

I think overall, the charts are very accurate as to how each player was used on the whole. From covering or watching every Sabres game, I can tell you that Ruff changes his lines like a mad man, so it can be tough to get a grab on a certain player. And injuries last year certainly would affect usage. But overall I think it paints a pretty clear picture on how guys were used. /MC

Corey
Sznajder's
Take

It's tough to figure out who replaced Paul Gaustad's role but that's something to look for next season. /CS



**Kent
Wilson's
Take**

Brent Sutter operated as a power vs power match-up coach. Meaning he usually tried to match the other team's big guns with the Flames own top-six players. Olli Jokinen Curtis Glencross and Jarome Iginla faced the toughest minutes in Calgary by far.

This was due in part to injuries that ravaged the lower part of the roster, leaving it filled with AHLers and rookies most of the time. On top of that, however, Sutter didn't work to get his best players more offensive zone draws. Pretty much every regular top-six skater on the team started more often in the defensive zone.

As a result, Calgary's top end was universally out-shot and out-chanced, with the exception of Mikael Backlund who only appeared in 47 games due to injury. Backlund's conversion from sheltered youngster to the center who saw the lowest ratio of zone starts in the o-zone was a big change, but the kid managed to keep his head above water possession-wise.

The most sheltered players on the ice were the kids and fringe guys. TJ Brodie and the fourth liners were sure

to only play against other bottom six players for example.

Next year Calgary has to find forwards who can drive the play more consistently. Their expensive scorers have trouble getting the puck into the offensive zone and keeping it there, so either the org has to find some capable checkers so Iginla and company can be given the high round, or they have to find big guns who can actually outchance other big guns. /KW

**Rob
Vollman's
Take**

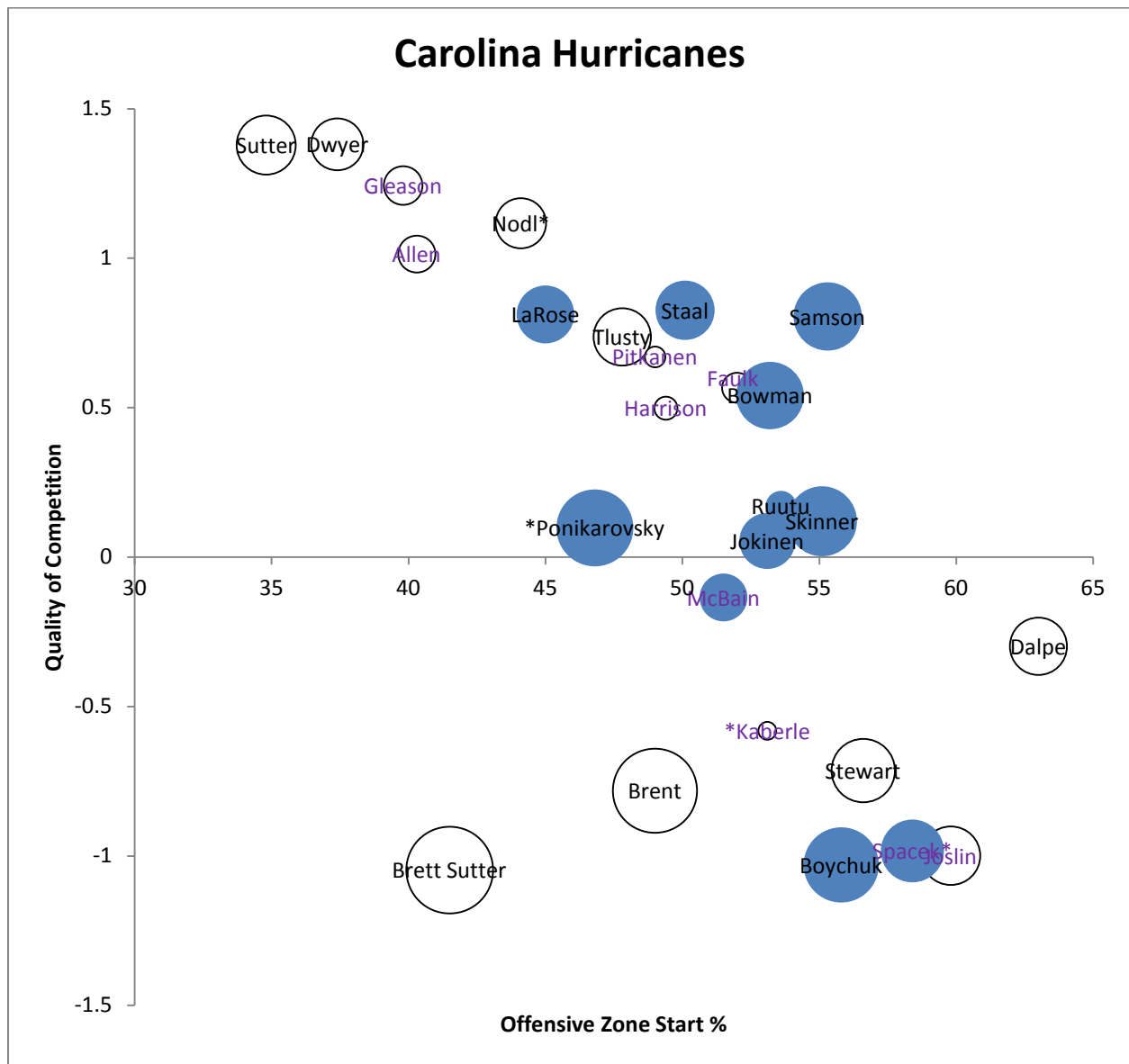
Calgary's struggles this year can be largely traced to the inability of those they played in the toughest situations to compete evenly with opponents. Curtis Glencross, Olli Jokinen, Jarome Iginla, and Alex Tanguay up front were all out-shot by at least 5.8 attempted shots per 60 minutes.

Their secondary forwards certainly did their jobs despite bad luck keeping their names off the scoresheet. David Moss, who played in almost the exact same situations as Olli Jokinen, enjoyed a 10.3 attempted shot advantage over opponents in his 32 games.

Mikael Backlund enjoyed a whopping 11.7 shot advantage despite the lowest offensive zone start percentage by far of any of their non-depth forwards. These two could be poised for big improvements next year.

Calgary's new coach would be wise to move their big names into slightly softer roles (like Mike Cammalleri), especially since secondary players like Blake Comeau, Lee Stempniak, and Matt Stajan consistently outplayed the third and fourth liners they faced and could probably handle tougher assignments. Replacement-level options like Blair Jones, Lance Bouma, Roman Horak, Tom Kostopoulos, Tim Jackman and Paul Byron, on the other hand, should probably be left on the depth lines (or replaced altogether).

On defense Chris Butler surprised everyone by playing on the top unit with Jay Bouwmeester, but the duo hardly set the world on fire. Mark Giordano was effective in a slightly softer top-four role, but Scott Hannan struggled and is perhaps better suited as a third-line penalty killing specialist at this point. Depth options Cory Sarich and the carefully sheltered T.J. Brodie did well and could potentially be occasionally challenged with a top-four assignment, but Derek Smith and Anton Babchuk should either be left on the depth lines or replaced altogether. /RV



Corey Sznajder's Take

For the Hurricanes, Brandon Sutter, Patrick Dwyer, Tim Gleason, Bryan Allen and Andreas Nodl handle most of the heavy lifting while the easier minutes go to Jussi Jokinen, Tuomo Ruutu & Jeff Skinner. You can see this strategy is working out as those three have been able to drive the play forward and have been one of the Canes best scoring lines for most of the year. This line hasn't been sheltered nearly as much as the team's fourth liners, though (most notably Tim Brent & Anthony Stewart) as they get easy minutes whenever they get a chance to play. Both of those two are under water territorially despite being sheltered.

Eric Staal's line also plays tough minutes but they are secondary compared to what the Sutter line had to deal with. LaRose & Flusty's usage are a product of playing with Staal, so it's not a huge surprise to see that Flusty wasn't sheltered despite being more known for his offense.

How Justin Faulk was used was pretty interesting. At only 19 years old, one would think that a young blue liner like him would need protection, but that wasn't the case. He got slightly easier zone starts but was regularly

used against other team's top-six's with Jay Harrison. Compare that to Jamie McBain's usage and you can see that Faulk is way ahead of the game at such a young age.

Some of Carolina's other rookies like Drayson Bowman & Jerome Samson also weren't protected in terms of quality of competition but that was mostly because of who they were playing with. Bowman spent a lot of time on the third line while Samson played with Staal. Neither of those lines was protected. /CS

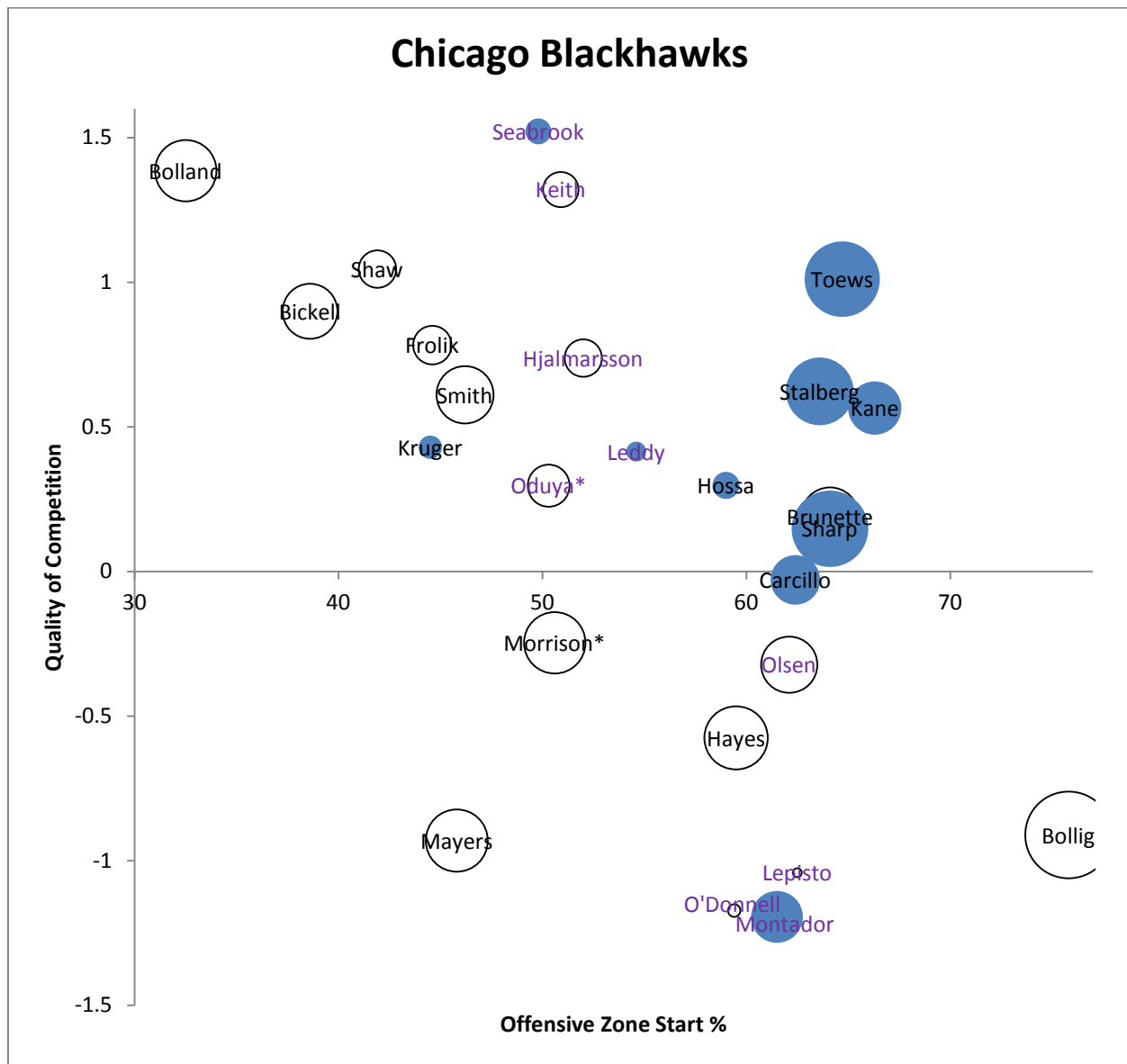
**Rob
Vollman's
Take**

Carolina has adopted the classic player usage model where certain players compete against top lines in the defensive zone so that others can have the advantage over depth lines in the offensive zone.

So what went wrong? The advantage their blessed players enjoyed, which is 1.8 attempted shots per minute for Tuomo Ruutu, 5.9 for Jussi Jokinen and 9.2 for Jeff Skinner, weren't much greater than the advantage the mules gave up to their opponents, which is 5.1 for Gordie Dwyer and 6.6 for Brandon Sutter. The puck simply wasn't going in for these three, which is why they averaged 41 points between them – barely more than Sutter's 32. The system may have worked better with players capable of taking greater advantage of these opportunities.

That's not to say the forwards were completely without success, as they enjoyed great possession when top-liners Chad LaRose and Eric Staal were on the ice (Jiri Tlustý not so much). As for their younger and less well-known players, though Zac Dalpe's highly-sheltered 16 games weren't much to get excited about, AHLers Jarome Samson and Drayson Bowman's offense-oriented stints with the club were promising, as was Zach Boychuk's 9 minutes of highly-sheltered ice-time, offering hope that there may be someone who will soon become an upgrade from replacement-level journeymen like Tim Brent and Anthony Stewart.

On defense the Canes relied on the unheralded defensive duo of Tim Gleason and Bryan Allen to protect the lead, but still had strong confidence in their two-way second line of Jay Harrison with either veteran Joni Pitkanen (30 games) or impressive 19-year-old Justin Faulk. Young Jamie McBain plays the third line role well enough to earn occasional stints in the top-four, and Jaroslav Spacek played the depth role well since coming over from Montreal in the Tomas Kaberle deal, which is far more than can be said for Derek Joslin. /RV



Rob Vollman's Take

Dave Bolland plays some of the ugliest minutes in the league, and pays for it. The same can be said of Bryan Bickell and Michael Frolik, but to an increasingly lesser extent.

Thanks to players like them, Jonathan Toews, Viktor Stalberg, Patrick Kane, Marian Hossa and Patrick Sharp can start mostly in the offensive zone and really dominate. While Toews sees top opponents, Sharp is matched up mostly against secondary lines - it's unclear what went wrong with Andrew Brunette, who enjoyed comparably favourable playing conditions but with very disappointing results.

Coach Joel Quenneville dished out difficult top-six ice-time to rookies Andrew Shaw and Marcus Kruger, and had no cause to regret it. However, Ben Smith and the giant Jimmy Hayes, the latter of which was quite sheltered, struggled in their stints last year.

Tough guy Daniel Carcillo effectively a regular shift of depth line duty, which should make Brandon Bollig, who is incapable of playing anywhere near the NHL level, completely unnecessary. Likewise, gritty defensive-

minded Jamal Mayers struggled all year despite playing almost exclusively against 4th liners.

On defense the celebrated top shut-down pairing of Brent Seabrook and Duncan Keith were effective enough but the struggles of defensive-minded #3 man Niklas Hjalmarsson prompted GM Stan Bowman to pick up a struggling Johnny Oduya from the Winnipeg Jets to shore up the top four.

While 20-year-old Nick Leddy impressively proved himself already capable of playing top-four duty, 21-year-old Dylan Olsen struggled even in a depth role. Of their three depth options Sami Lepisto, Sean O'Donnell and Steve Montador, only Montador gave the team any kind of edge. /RV

Sam
Fels'
Take

This chart has got it pretty well nailed. I think it's a bit harsh on Frolik and Bickell, two players who aren't going to recover from the hand they were dealt with their zone starts, but are defensively sound enough to not suffer from goals against.

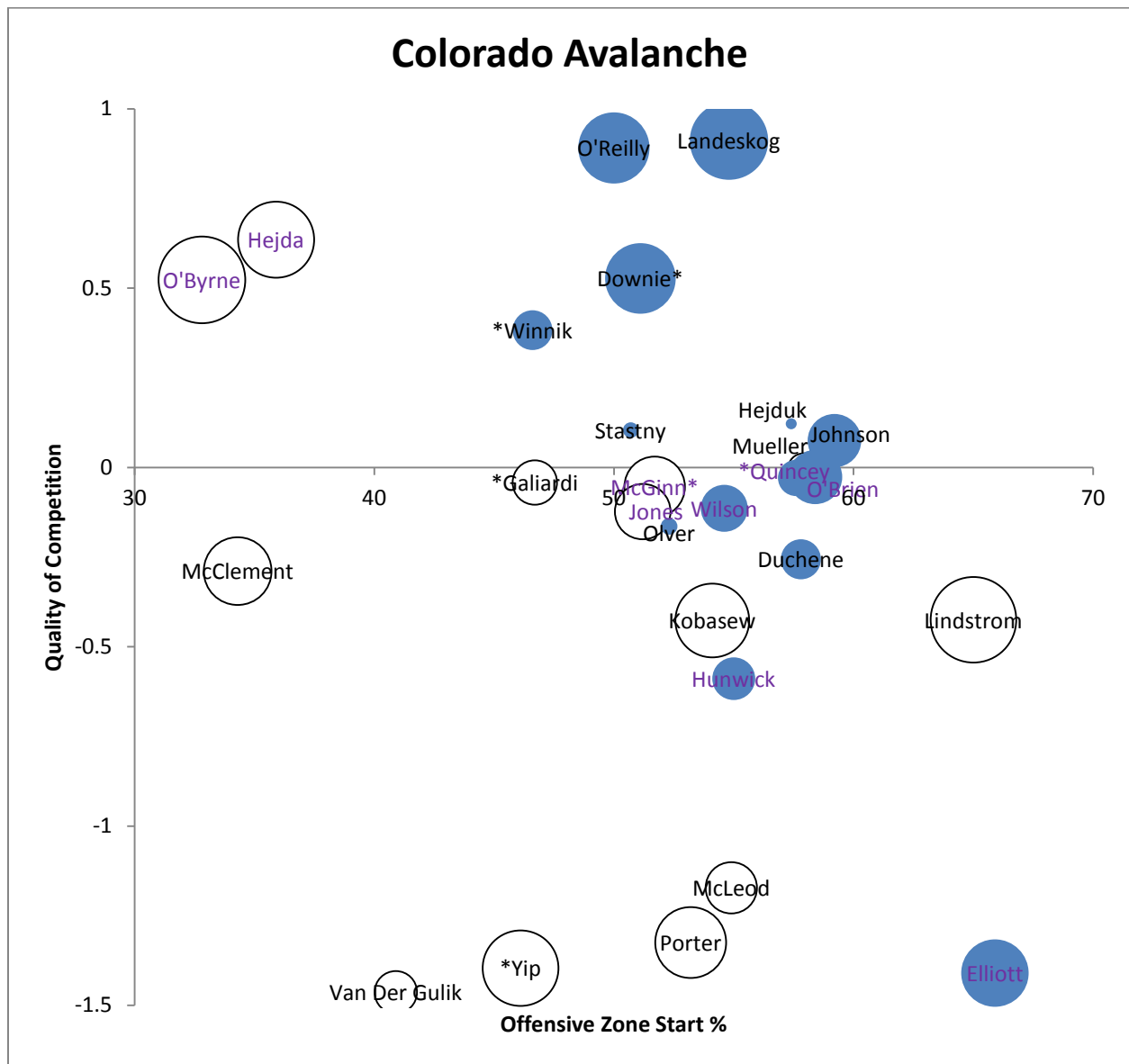
It's funny that Toews doesn't see more defensive draws, just considering how good a faceoff guy he is.

The problem with Brunette was that his leaden feet don't fit in to the way the Hawks want to play. He needed to play with at least one forward who could do the forechecking while he caught up, and that happened at the end of the year with Hossa (until Hossa was murdered in the playoffs). But other than that, this chart is pretty accurate. /SF

Derek
Jedamski's
Take

It's quite impressive to see Andrew Shaw shouldering such difficult minutes as a rookie. Bolland was undoubtedly Quenville's horse in the defensive zone, but Shaw did not trail him by all that much.

Despite not being on the ice to push possession or score goals, it appears Brandon Bollig may have been a bit overmatched at the NHL level. Despite being fed cupcake minutes (highest o-zone start rate at 75.8% and one of the lowest CorsiRelQOC), he still finished with by far the worst CorsiRel on the team. /DJ



Rob Vollman's Take

Unexpectedly fantastic seasons from their top-line youngsters Ryan O'Reilly and Gabriel Landeskog were unfortunately squandered in a season with too little talent up front to afford so many underachievers.

Chuck Kobasew, Kevin Porter, David Van Der Gulik, tough guy Cody McLeod and AHL/European league star Joakim Lindstrom were all among those who really struggled in their easy assignments, and despite his 20-goal season David Jones too was on the ice for far more attempted shots against than for despite facing average competition.

Even when you get past those disappointments, top players like Milan Hejduk, Paul Stastny, Matt Duchene and even Peter Mueller simply have to play better on such a thin team – especially when others are handling the tough assignments – like Jay McClement who was absolutely dominated even by secondary lines thanks to his constant starts in the defensive zone. Kudos to coach Joe Sacco for getting something out of Jamie McGinn down the stretch, who had struggled mightily with the Sharks.

Their key and uncelebrated top defensive pairing of Jan Hejda and Ryan O'Byrne were needlessly shelled when you consider how Erik Johnson, Shane O'Brien and Ryan Wilson all played well enough to warrant greater challenges. Even Matt Hunwick and rookie Stefan Elliott played their depth roles well. /RV

Derek
Jedamski's
Take

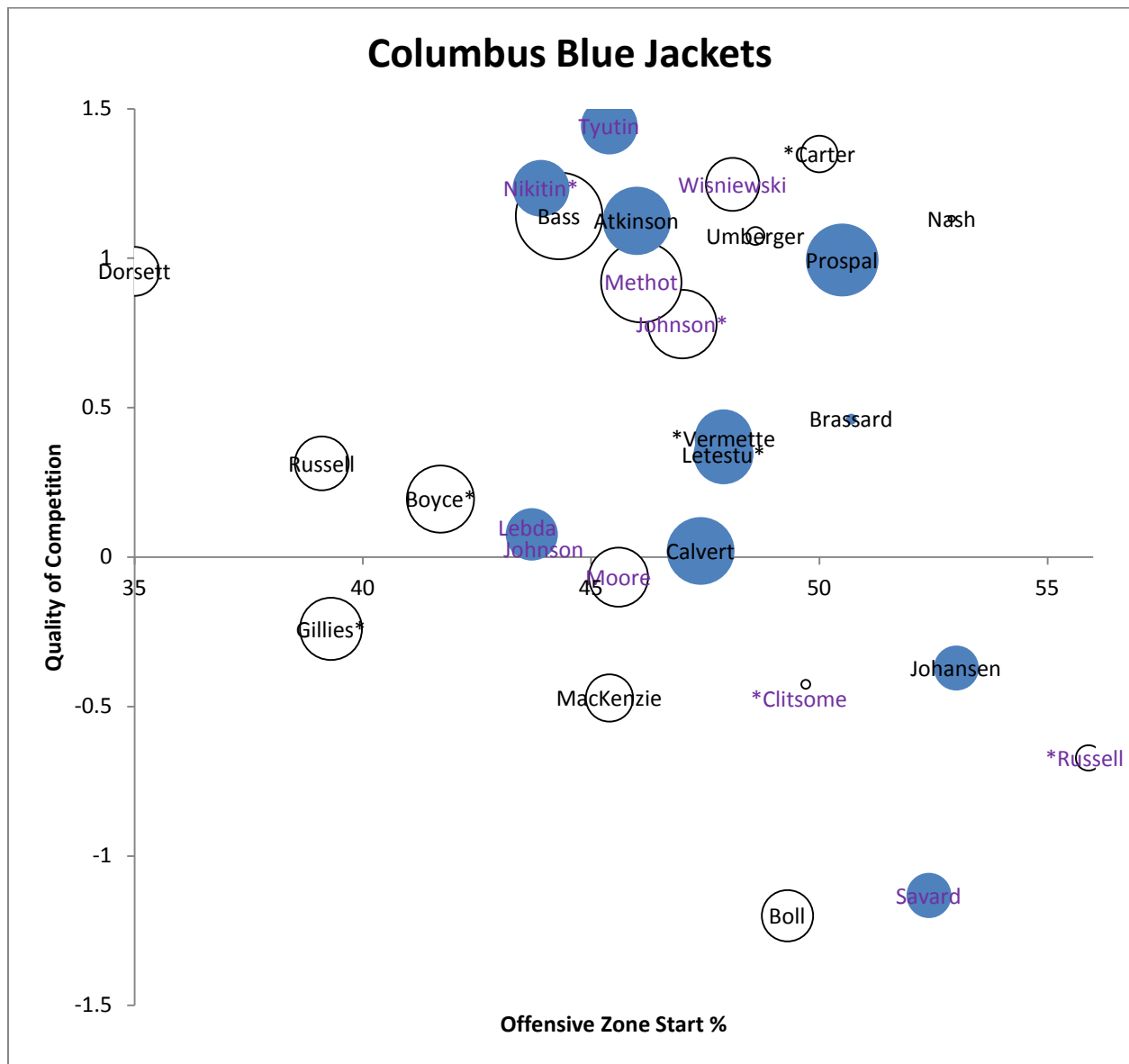
It is interesting to note how coach Joe Sacco so heavily relies on one defense pairing and one center in the defensive zone. McClement, Hejda, and O'Byrne's roles are very clearly defined; the difference between their offensive zone start rate and that of the rest of the team is quite stark. All three players unsurprisingly struggled in their roles, indicating that possibly they weren't the best fit for those roles.

This player usage chart gives us even more of an appreciation for what a fantastic season Gabriel Landeskog had. Landeskog faced the most difficult competition on the team and still registered the highest Relative Corsi rating. /DJ

Scott
Cullen's
Take

While Colorado benefitted from the excellent two-way seasons provided by Ryan O'Reilly and Gabriel Landeskog, the advantage was negated to some degree by Matt Duchene and Peter Mueller not producing despite starting the most shifts in the offensive zone and, especially in Duchene's case, facing a low quality of competition.

The Avalanche handed Jan Hejda and Ryan O'Byrne were sacrificial lambs on the blueline, allowing virtually all others to start more than 50% of their shifts in the offensive zone, while facing average to below-average quality of competition, with rookie Stefan Elliott getting the softest of soft minutes. /SC



**Matt
Wagner's
Take**

With the Blue Jackets in a period of upheaval, the good news for a lot of fans is that the defensive core assembled by GM Scott Howson appears set for the challenge of next season. With the rise of an unexpected pairing of Fedor Tyutin and Nikita Nikitin working to take the majority of their “hard minutes”, the club has also been able to assemble Jack Johnson and James Wisniewski into a second pairing that provides the expected levels of offense with a surprising level of strong defensive play.

A surprising silver lining to the dark cloud of their 2011-2012 season was the play of Derek Dorsett, who has raised his game from “overactive pest” to a trusted contributor, penalty killer, and defensively responsible third liner. The club rewarded the pending RFA's growth with a new three year deal that will keep him in the fold as he hopefully continues to mature and improve.

Offensively, the team is in a position where they seem positioned to trade their franchise cornerstone in Rick Nash, and facing the challenge of replacing not only his ~30 goal, 70 point average scoring, but a player who can contribute against all levels of competition and every situation. Players like Cam Atkinson, Vinny Prospal,

and R.J. Umberger can be trusted in both zones, particularly with the man advantage, but finding someone who can offer a genuine shorthanded threat against top level competition may be an even bigger problem than fixing their perennial goaltending problems. /MW

**Rob
Vollman's
Take**

Rookie Ryan Johansen is the Columbus Blue Jacket with the highest percentage of offensive zone starts at 53.0% even. By contrast the lowest offensive zone start on their division rivals in Detroit was Todd Bertuzzi at 53.5%. Suffice it to say that the entire team played tough minutes (except Johansen).

Derek Dorsett may not be the best tough minutes player in the league, but he was certainly the least expensive, and certainly confirms the annual case we make that tough guys like Jared Boll, who can't even play highly sheltered minutes against depth lines, are completely unnecessary. Nevertheless, despite Dorsett's best efforts it's not a good sign when he, Ryan Russell, and newcomers Darryl Boyce and Colton Gillies are the players to whom you turn when there's a defensive zone draw.

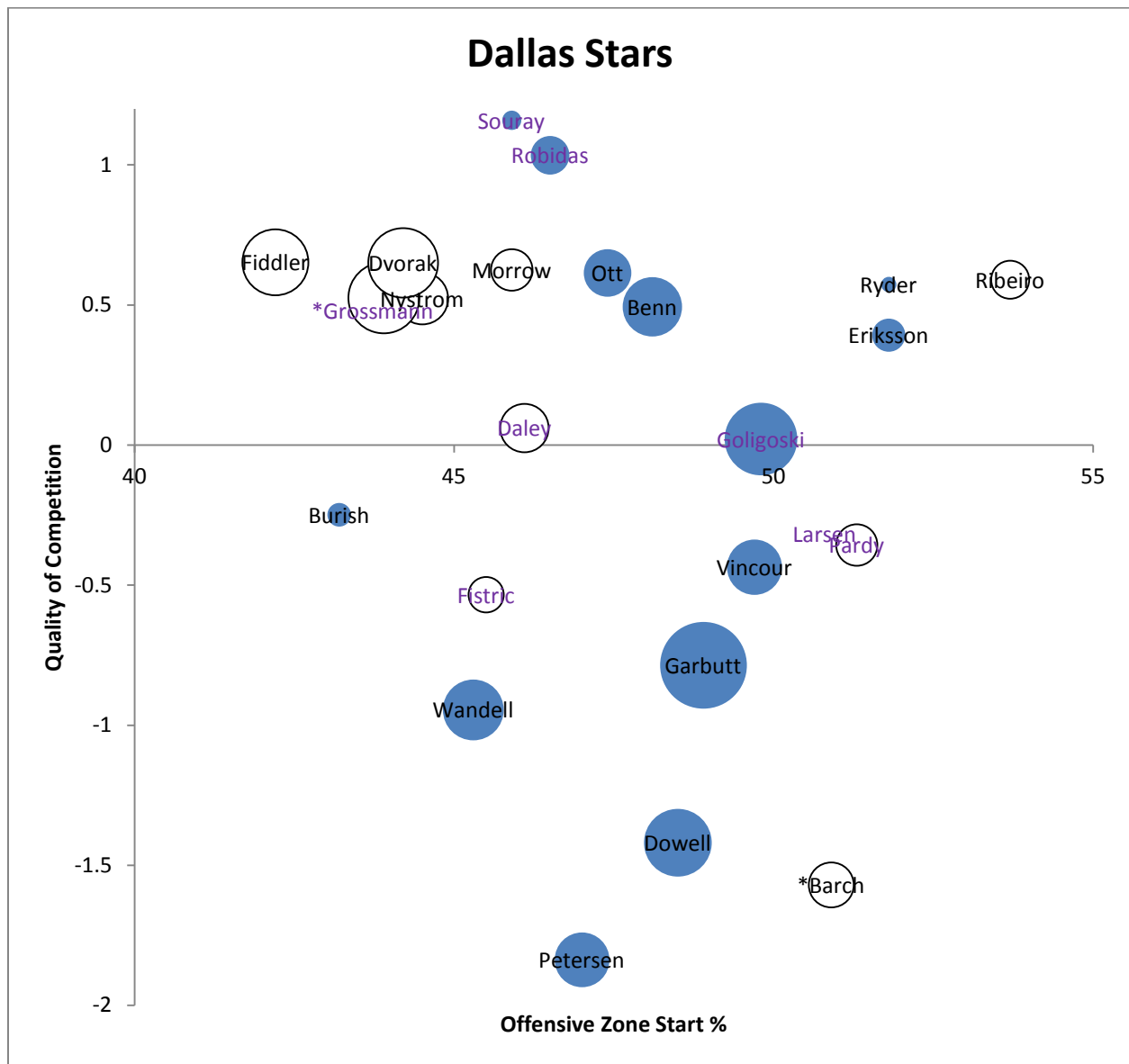
Instead the Jackets should lean more on tiny rookie Cam Atkinson, who was fantastic in his 27-game stint of top-six duty, last year's most effective Columbus forward Vaclav Prospal, and quietly effective secondary forwards like the newly acquired Mark Letestu.

Last year's pleasant surprise was on the blue line where Fedor Tyutin and the acquired Nikita Nikitin formed one of the most unexpectedly effective top pairings, which helped compensate for the struggles of their other top-four defensemen Marc Methot and the more offensive-minded James Wisniewski and Jack Johnson.

Among their depth defensemen Brett LeBda is the nice blue circle blocking out Aaron Johnson's little white one, and between the two primary rookies John Moore struggled with the tougher job while David Savard shined in his highly sheltered one. The real good news in Columbus could be with their sheer volume of strong young players at least a few of them are bound to really click next year. /RV

**Corey
Sznajder's
Take**

Derrick Dorsett is mostly known as a "tough guy" but that might have a new meaning now. /CS



**Josh Lile's
Take**

Fiddler/Dvorak/Nystrom were exceedingly poor as a checking line and routinely got run over

4th line of Wandell/Vincour/Dowell/Garbutt were consistently able to move the puck from the defensive end yet continued to get sheltered while the Fiddler trio got torched.

After the Grossmann trade Philip Larsen was playing big minutes.

For most of the season the Stars used Souray/Robidas as a shutdown pair to mixed results.

Through the All-Star Break they had very little tactical structure. I wrote about the significant changes after the All-Star Break on Defending Big D, but basically they “randomly” began protecting Ribeiro/Ryder

Burish progressively was given more checking responsibility as the year wore on and played well.

After Ribeiro was given offensive priority Benn see sawed between a Kesler-type role and a checking role. His offense slowed, but his play was still well above average.

Morrow dealt with nagging back injuries. He was poor all over the ice as a result until the final 2 weeks. /JL

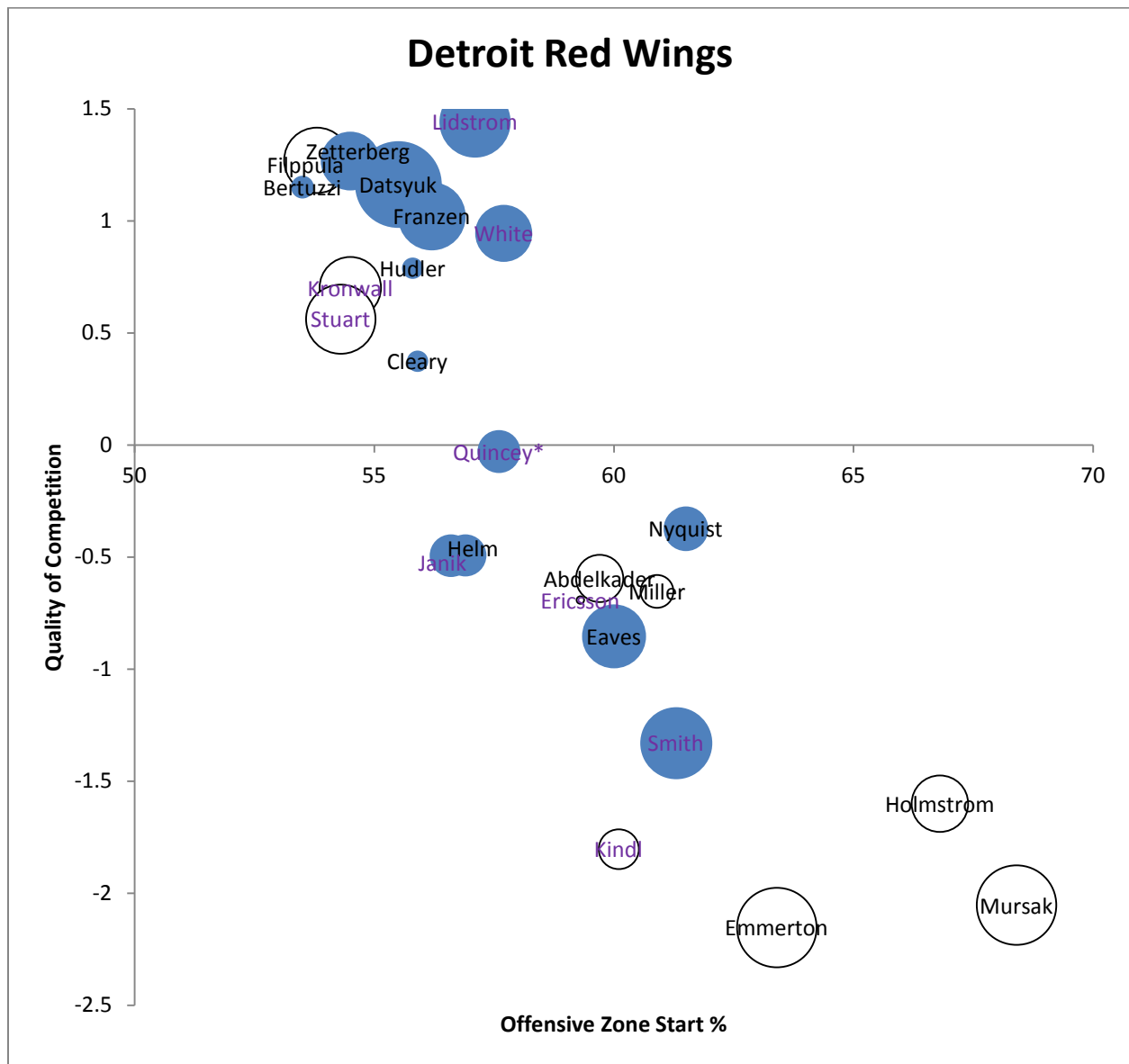
**Rob
Vollman's
Take**

The Dallas Stars were riding sky-high shooting percentages early in the season resulting in players like Michael Ryder and Eric Nystrom effectively doubling their goal-scoring rate, but it unfortunately wasn't enough to hang on for a post-season position.

Coach Glen Gulutzan didn't employ a strong focus on line-matching, as all top three lines faced roughly the same level of competition, with Mike Ribeiro, Michael Ryder and Loui Eriksson in the offensive zone, Vernon Fiddler, Radek Dvorak and Eric Nystrom in the defensive, and Brenden Morrow, Steve Ott and Jamie Benn getting balanced time. Ott and Benn were fantastic, Eriksson and Ryder were good, but the puck was mostly in their own end with the others – a notable surprise in the case of Ribeiro's advantageous playing conditions.

With the top three lines taking all the difficult assignments the depth forwards did understandably very well, including Jake Dowell, Toby Petersen, Tom Wandell, Adam Burish and rookies Tomas Vincour and Ryan Garbutt. Given this wealth of depth talent they could have eased the burden on their dominated defensive line.

Sheldon Souray was a pleasant surprise as a usable top-line pairing alongside consistent two-way veteran Stephane Robidas. Alex Goligoski was highly effective in a more sheltered top-four role, while Trevor Daley struggled in a more defensive assignment. Though Philip Larsen proved a usable depth option, Adam Parady and defensive-minded Mark Fistric were largely ineffective. /RV



Rob Vollman's Take

The Detroit Red Wings, the 3rd best possession team in the league, were surprisingly absent from the post-season's second round, having been knocked off by the league's 2nd worst possession team, rival Nashville Predators.

While there really was no difficult ice-time for a team that played most of their games in the offensive zone, Henrik Zetterberg, Pavel Datsyuk and Johan Franzen were absolutely dominant in the toughest match-ups Detroit could find. Jiri Hudler and Todd Bertuzzi were effective top-six forwards, but don't let Valterri Filppula's box score statistics fool you – the Wings were dominated when he was on the ice.

There were only three forwards dominated as badly or worse than Filppula but strangely they were the ones getting some of the most sheltered ice-time in the entire league, depth winger Jan Mursak, rookie Cory Emmerton and famed veteran Tomas Holmstrom. Justin Abdelkader and Drew Miller also underperformed in their secondary/depth roles, especially compared with Danny Cleary and Darren Helm, and very short stints by rookie Gustav Nyquist and pre-concussion Patrick Eaves.

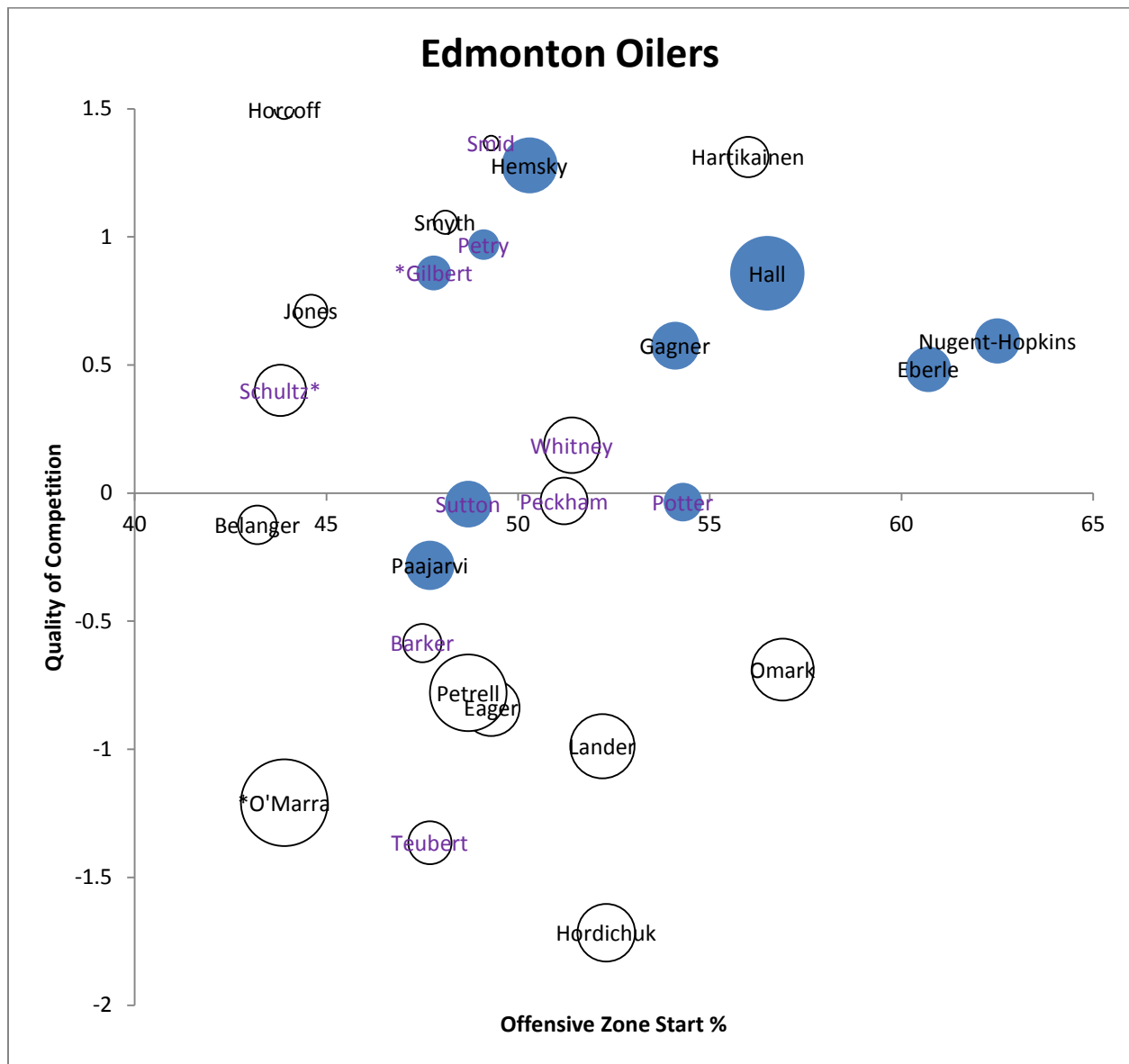
On defense the incomparable 41-year-old Nicklas Lidstrom was once again the player to whom Coach Mike Babcock turned in the toughest situations, and he was as stunningly dominant as always, with perhaps some credit going to having good chemistry with his amazingly effective linemate Ian White. White never effectively played on the top pairing before, and may become more of a 2nd pairing upon Lidstrom's departure.

Unfortunately their talented 2nd pairing of Niklas Kronwall and Brad Stuart was dominated, prompting GM Ken Holland to acquire Kyle Quincey late in the season to stretch into a top-four position. You would think they'd lean more on Jonathan Ericsson, but unfortunately \$3.25 million is a lot to pay for a depth defenseman, especially when they enjoyed more success in limited stints with rookie Brendan Smith and cheap veteran plug Doug Janik than they did with him and his young linemate Jakub Kindl. /RV

Scott
Cullen's
Take

The Wings really took it easy on Tomas Holmstrom. The only forwards to face lower quality of competition were rookies Cory Emmerton and Jan Mursak, but Holmstrom also started the highest percentage of shifts in the offensive zone; in fact, among forwards with at least 50 games played, only the Sedins and Alex Burrows in Vancouver started a higher percentage of their shifts in the offensive zone. This isn't necessarily surprising, but an indication of very specialized use for the 39-year-old crease crusher.

Detroit really eases their young players into positions of responsibility, letting them take their time to develop in the AHL and then, even when they are called up, players like Brendan Smith and Gustav Nyquist get a high percentage of offensive zone starts against easier competition. It's entirely understandable, with a veteran-laden team, but expect Nyquist and Smith to see more challenging assignments going forward. /SC



Jonathan Willis' Take

The Edmonton Oilers started 2011-12 with a true checking line up front – the trio of Shawn Horcoff, Ryan Smyth and Ryan Jones not only got the assignments against the toughest opposition, but also started most frequently in their own end of the rink. Smyth and Jones were moved around the lineup, while Shawn Horcoff remained the default option for the toughest minutes. Each player was a little bit under water by the possession metrics, but not badly given their usage.

On defense, those tough minutes went to the trio of Ladislav Smid, Jeff Petry and Tom Gilbert (as well as Nick Schultz after the latter was acquired for Gilbert), and once again all the players involved fared pretty well given the usage. Smid and Petry in particular excelled.

The four kids – Hall, Eberle, Nugent-Hopkins and Gagner – were all fed offensive zone minutes against relatively good competition and all fared well in their roles, something reflected in the chart above.

Unfortunately for the Oilers, the bottom half of their lineup on both forward and defense got killed, with few

exceptions. Magnus Paajarvi and Andy Sutton fared well by the possession metrics, though the former struggled to score and the latter missed time to suspension, but beyond those two it was a mess. Corey Potter played well early and then slid as the season went on, particularly after coming back from injury, while Ryan Whitney had a miserable season (again influenced by injury) and Cam Barker did everything he could make the Minnesota Wild's decision to buy him out look wholly justified. Theo Peckham, who crashed after a promising start in 2010-11, was a major disappointment in 2011-12.

Up front, Eric Belanger failed to stabilize the lineup as he had been expected to, and the crashers and bangers fringe NHL'ers were a wasteland, uniformly hammered by the opposition. /JW

**Rob
Vollman's
Take**

Combined with especially high on-ice shooting and save percentages, the favourable playing conditions enjoyed by Edmonton's skill youngsters Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Jordan Eberle, Taylor Hall, Sam Gagner and Teemu Hartikainen, and the great advantage they took of them (except Hartikainen), help explain why their box score statistics were better than those of Edmonton's highly-paid veterans Shawn Horcoff, Ryan Smyth, Ales Hemsky and Ryan Jones (ok one of those four isn't highly paid).

Give credit to those veterans for playing the tough minutes, starting shifts in their own zone far more frequently than the kids, and largely playing even hockey possession-wise with the league's best teams – or even giving the Oilers a big advantage in the case of

Ales Hemsky. Their play is what made the big years from their younger players possible.

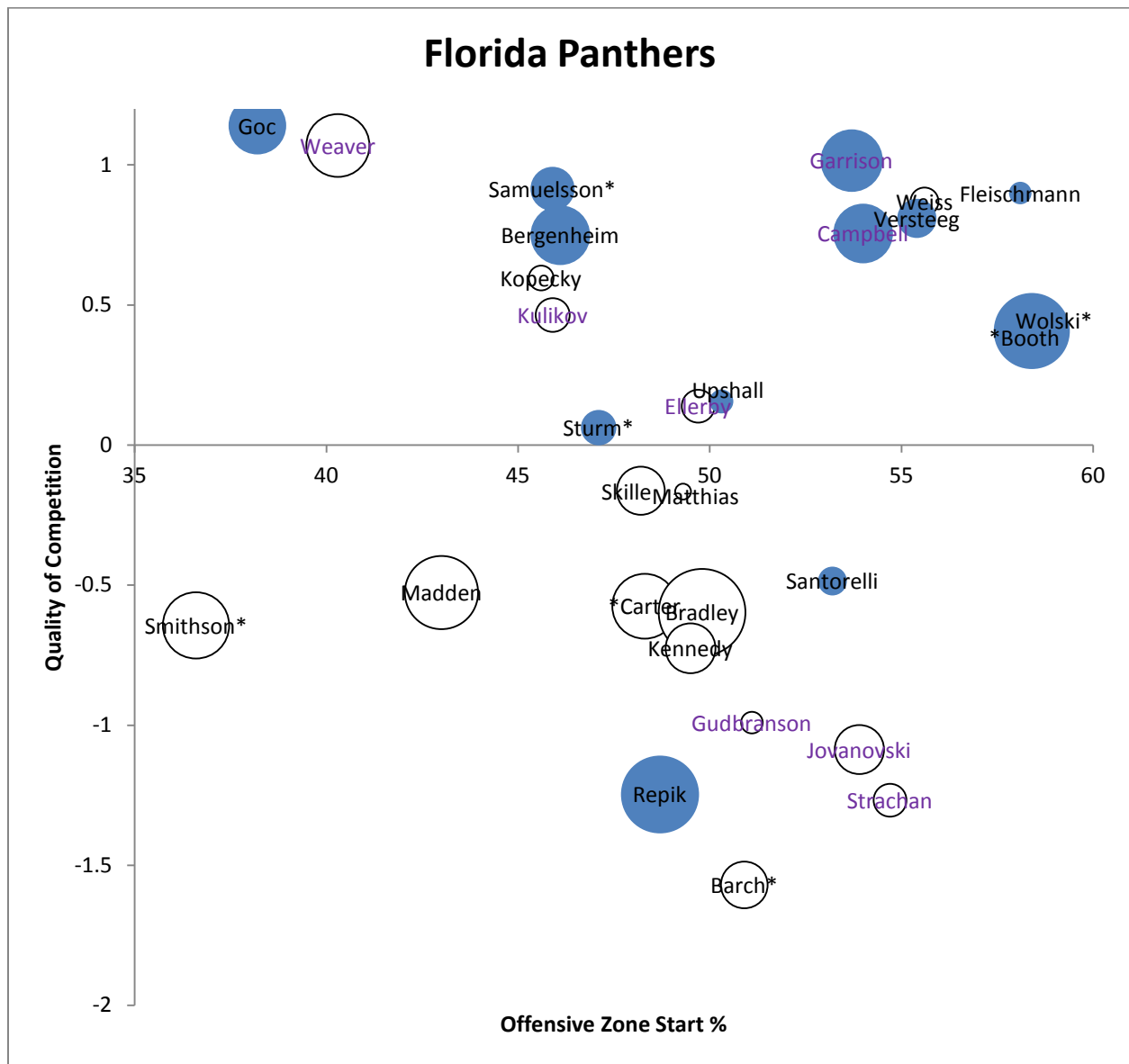
Among the depth forwards is where Edmonton's problems can partially be found, where they enjoyed a possession advantage only with young Magnus Paajarvi. While the Oilers struggled only slightly with defensive-minded depth veteran Eric Belanger, they were absolutely destroyed with Lennart Petrell, Anton Lander, Linus Omark and tough guys Ben Eager and Darcy Hordichuk. An upgraded depth line is an easy way to improve the team.

Speaking of improving the team, they could use some help on the blue line. While Jeff Petry and Ladislav Smid were an effective and unsung top pairing, GM Steve Tambellini was forced to go shopping for Minnesota's Nick Schultz to shore up the front four.

Among Edmonton's ample collection of glorified 3rd-line options, tough veteran Andy Sutton and career AHLer Corey Potter surprisingly filled that role best. The Oilers struggled with both injury-prone veteran Ryan Whitney and gritty Theo Peckham, and both failed experiment Cam Barker and not-yet-ready Colton Teubert were busts this year. Next year hopefully some usable options will emerge from this group, otherwise they ought to get busy looking for help on UFA day July 1st. /RV

**Scott
Cullen's
Take**

What sticks out most is that Shawn Horcoff and Ryan Jones are thrown into the meaty work, with defensive zone starts against top lines, allowing the Oilers to use their young scorers selectively. Taylor Hall wasn't protected quite as much as Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Jordan Eberle, but the Oilers' deployment of their assets at least played to the strengths of their young players and there is still a long way for the rest of the team to go to catch up. /SC



Alex Calloway's Take

Dale Tallon's crazy summer spending spree brought in nine new players, a new coach, and ended with a division title with a -24 goal differential. The differential would suggest a poor defense, it's actually because of a poor offense.

The first pairing of Brian Campbell and Jason Garrison took a majority of the Panthers minutes, providing a solid two-way game with Campbell's offense turning the Cats dead-last powerplay, into the top ten in the NHL. Coach Kevin Dineen did the same with the second pairing mixing Dmitry Kulikov's offense and Mike Weaver's defense which worked well, providing several scoring chances and solid penalty killing.

Hoping to mix old school with new school, Erik Gudbranson and The Four Million Dollar Man Ed Jovanovski, with Keaton Ellerby guest starring as the healthy scratch, were paired together, resulting in a complete mess with both players finishing with the worst Corsi numbers on the blueline.

Despite all the money Tallon spent, the Panthers only scored eight more goals than they did in 2010-11, with

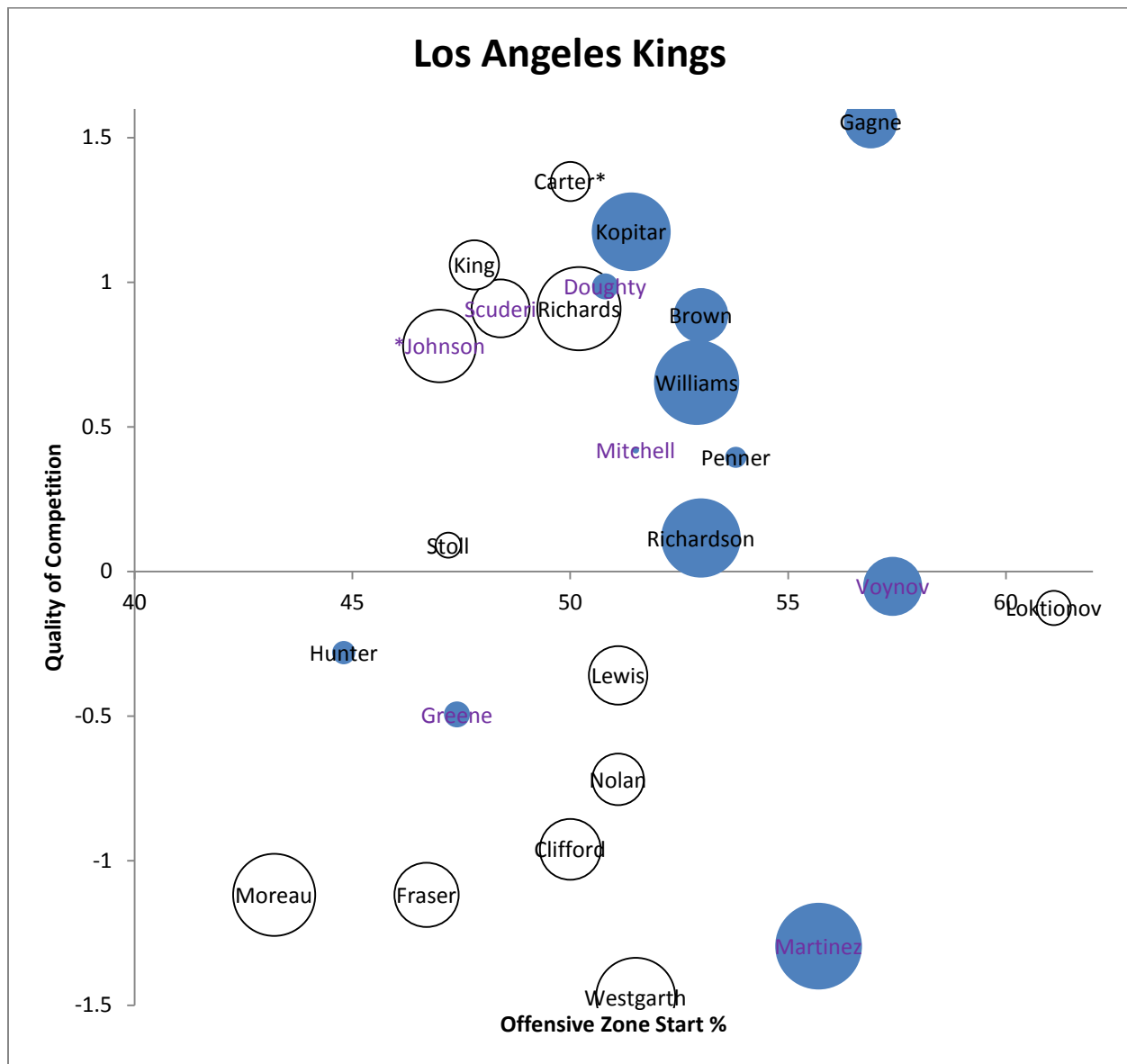
only eight of 26 forwards scoring ten or more goals (Sean Bergenheim, Tomas Fleischmann, Marcel Goc, Tomas Kopecky, Shawn Matthias, Mikael Samuelsson, Kris Versteeg, and Stephen Weiss). /AC

**Corey
Sznajder's
Take**

Kevin Dineen's deployment of the Panthers forwards is somewhat similar to how Alain Vingeault uses the Sedins, only much less extreme. Marcel Goc is their Manny Malhotra as he handles virtually all of the defensive zone draws which frees up more face-offs at the other end for Stephen Weiss' line. The most amazing thing about this is that Goc has managed to drive the play forward despite carrying a huge workload. Weiss' line with Versteeg and Fleischmann didn't kill it territorially but they put up a lot of points largely because of how Dineen utilized them. Sean Bergenheim, Mikeal Samuelsson and Tomas Kopecky were also used in defensive situations but not nearly as much as Goc.

Florida had a similar strategy going on with their defense as the underrated Mike Weaver did all of the heavy-lifting while dragging the more offensive-minded Dimitry Kulikov with him. It was odd to see Dineen break up Weaver & Jason Garrison after how good they were last year, but Dineen must have saw some offensive potential in Garrison and paired him with Brian Campbell instead. Uncoincidentally, both had huge seasons in both counting and underlying numbers.

Florida's big guns got more offensive zone draws but it is hard to say that they were "sheltered" because that term applies more to guys like Ed Jovanovski, Matt Bradley, Mike Santorelli, Wojtek Wolski, Krys Barch and Erik Gudbranson. It might seem odd that Gudbranson is in that group but he's still very young and Dineen must not think he's ready yet. /CS



Rob Vollman's Take

Notwithstanding their upset sweep over the powerful St. Louis Blues, the post-season success of the regular season's 4th best possession team should have surprised far fewer people.

Their primary top-six options included superstar Anze Kopitar, captain Dustin Brown, Mike Richards, and to a slight lesser extent Justin Williams, all of whom except Richards gave the Kings a possession-based advantage. Offensive-minded Simon Gagne, newly acquired Jeff Carter and rookie Dwight King combined for 77 games, but only with Gagne did they enjoy an advantage in shots.

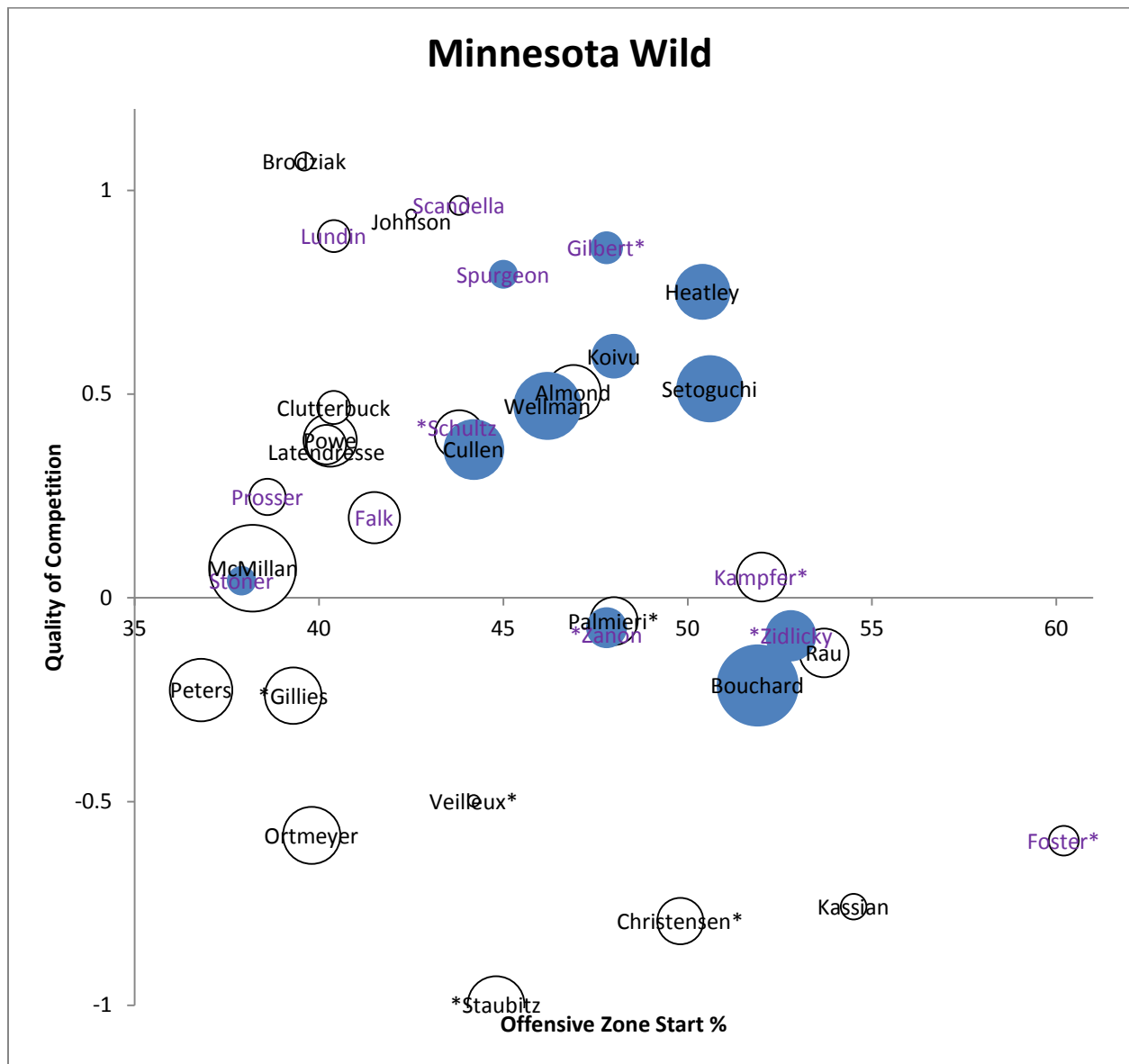
Their secondary forwards included defensive-minded Trent Hunter, along with sophomore Trevor Lewis, veteran Brad Richardson, highly-paid power forward Dustin Penner and offensive-minded rookie Andrei Loktionov. Of them they enjoyed the most success with Brad Richardson, and the least with either Lewis or Loktionov.

Their depth options were surely their main weakness. Defensive veterans Ethan Moreau and Colin Fraser struggled, tough guys Kevin Westgarth and Kyle Clifford were dominated and big rookie Jordan Nolan didn't appear ready.

Drew Doughty was their key defenseman, but Rob Scuderi occasionally struggled on that top pairing. Willie Mitchell was a solid defensive-minded top-four defenseman, and while rookie Viatcheslav Voynov was only assigned a partially-sheltered offensive role, he played it quite effectively - similar to Alec Martinez and his highly-sheltered assignment. Matt Greene was effective as a defensive-minded depth option. /RV

Scott
Cullen's
Take

No great surprises in their regular season deployment, though a name that stands out is Brad Richardson, who had success while playing above-average quality of competition. /SC



Rob Vollman's Take

While some people attribute their 13-29-10 finish after a first place 22-7-1 exclusively to injuries, advanced statistical analysts saw their poor finish foreshadowed by their league-worst 44.9% possession percentage. Still, there were some bright lights in an otherwise disappointing season.

For example, veteran Kyle Brodziak emerged as a legitimate top-line player, earning his first 20-goal season despite being assigned the very toughest ice-time the team could offer. Or Nick Johnson, who played effectively in an almost equally challenging assignment despite just 10 games of prior NHL experience.

And then there's the controversial case of Dany Heatley. While more might have been expected from someone who was 3rd in goals and 6th in points since the lock-out, he still led the team in goals and points while finishing 3rd in plus/minus and taking on slightly tougher opponents than Devin Setoguchi, Mikko Koivu and especially Pierre-Marc Bouchard, who primarily faced only the depth lines. Still, these four aren't to blame for their puck possession woes as the Wild enjoyed significant advantage with all four, and the combined 85

games they missed was certainly a big blow.

Another highlight was 35-year-old veteran Matt Cullen who was arguably one of the league's more effective defensive-minded secondary players, especially when you consider how the team struggled to gain possession with fellow defensive-minded third liners like hard-hitting Cal Clutterbuck and shot-blocking Darroll Powe.

This lack of usable depth talent was a bigger problem than they could have realized. Depth options like gritty Warren Peters, veteran AHLer Jared Ortmeyer and huge thug Matt Kassian put them in a hole almost every time they played, and the players they acquired like Kyle Palmieri, Stephane Veilleux and Erik Christensen could be classified as adequate temporary depth options at their best.

As for the others, Cody Almond and Casey Wellman were tried as top-six forwards in their short stints, and while they struggled with the former, they did well with the latter. Guillaume Latendresse was used largely like Powe and Clutterbuck, and while they got lucky with the puck luck early in the season (9 points and +6 in 16 games), Wild goalies were seeing most of the rubber when he was on the ice, and he would have regressed like everyone else. Speaking of which, Carson McMillan was used in largely the same capacity (defensive secondary option) and Minnesota was consequently shelled.

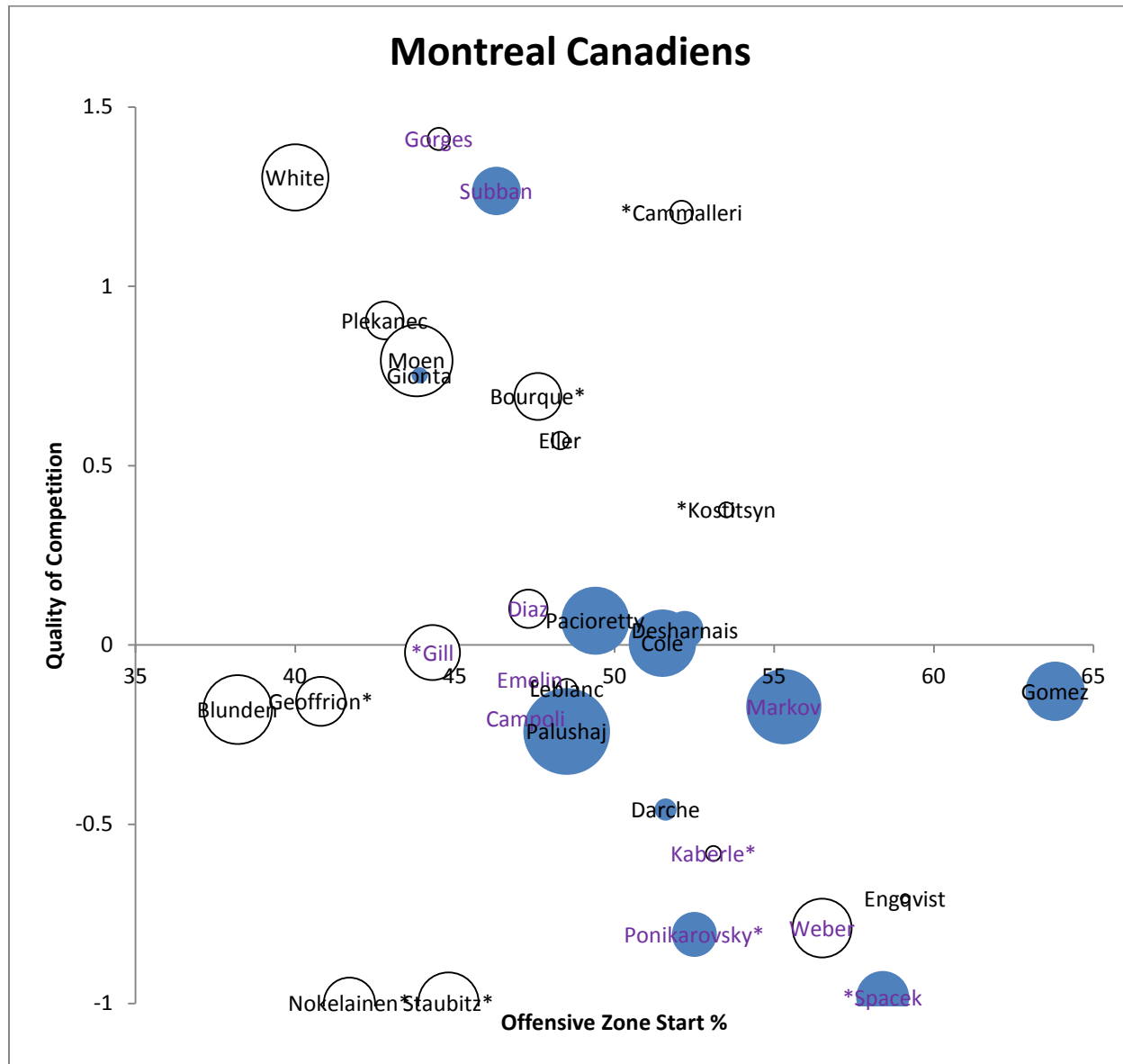
Injuries hit the blue line pretty hard too, resulting in 15 different defenseman and some late-season turnover where they parted way with mainstay Marek Zidlicky and defensive gems Nick Schultz and Greg Zanon in exchange for effective top line defender Tom Gilbert, young potential top-four defenseman Steve Kampfer and veteran depth journeyman Kurtis Foster.

When the dust cleared 21-year-old Marco Scandella and tiny 22-year-old Jared Spurgeon, with a combined 73 games of prior NHL experience between them, joined Gilbert in the top-four, and surprisingly held their own over-all. Minnesota's depth options were equally inexperienced with only 95 games of combined NHL experience between Nate Prosser, Justin Falk and Clayton Stoner. Mike Lundin, whose 224 games of prior NHL experience practically makes him the team's Chris Chelios, saw only 17 games, most of it in the front-four. /RV

**Corey
Sznajder's
Take**

Why did the Wild trade for Tom Gilbert? Because most of their younger defensemen were being thrown into the wolves (Scandella, Falk & Spurgeon especially) and they needed someone who could be an all-around defenseman and handle tough minutes. Schultz played tough minutes territorially but not in terms of quality of competition. Gilbert is capable of doing both. /CS

Rob Vollman's Take



Scott Cullen's Take

Seeing how the Canadiens used Scott Gomez only underscores how poorly he played last season. It's one thing to have a favourable Corsi, but it's absurd when it comes with so many offensive zone starts against a below-average quality of competition.

To a lesser extent Andrei Markov saw similar soft minutes but, in his case, it's understandable as he was just trying to get back to regular NHL action after a couple of injury-plagued seasons.

The Canadiens weren't as protective of young winger Ryan White, who apparently was thrown to the wolves, facing the highest quality of competition among Canadiens forwards, while starting predominantly in the defensive zone. Initial results indicate that White might not be up to that workload just yet, but reining in his quality of competition, especially, could yield more favourable results. /SC

The Montreal Canadiens parted ways with famed coach Jacques Martin, who was on pace for only 85 points, and finished with 78 points instead under Randy Cunneyworth, and missed the post-season for only the 2nd time since the lock-out.

In general the toughest ice-time went to young tough guy Ryan White (in just 20 games), Habs star Tomas Plekanec, veteran defensive specialist Travis Moen, tiny sniper Brian Gionta, and to a lesser extent the newly acquired Rene Bourque and 22-year-old sophomore Lars Eller. Of that gang the Habs only fared well possession-wise with Gionta, and were hammered with White, Moen and Bourque.

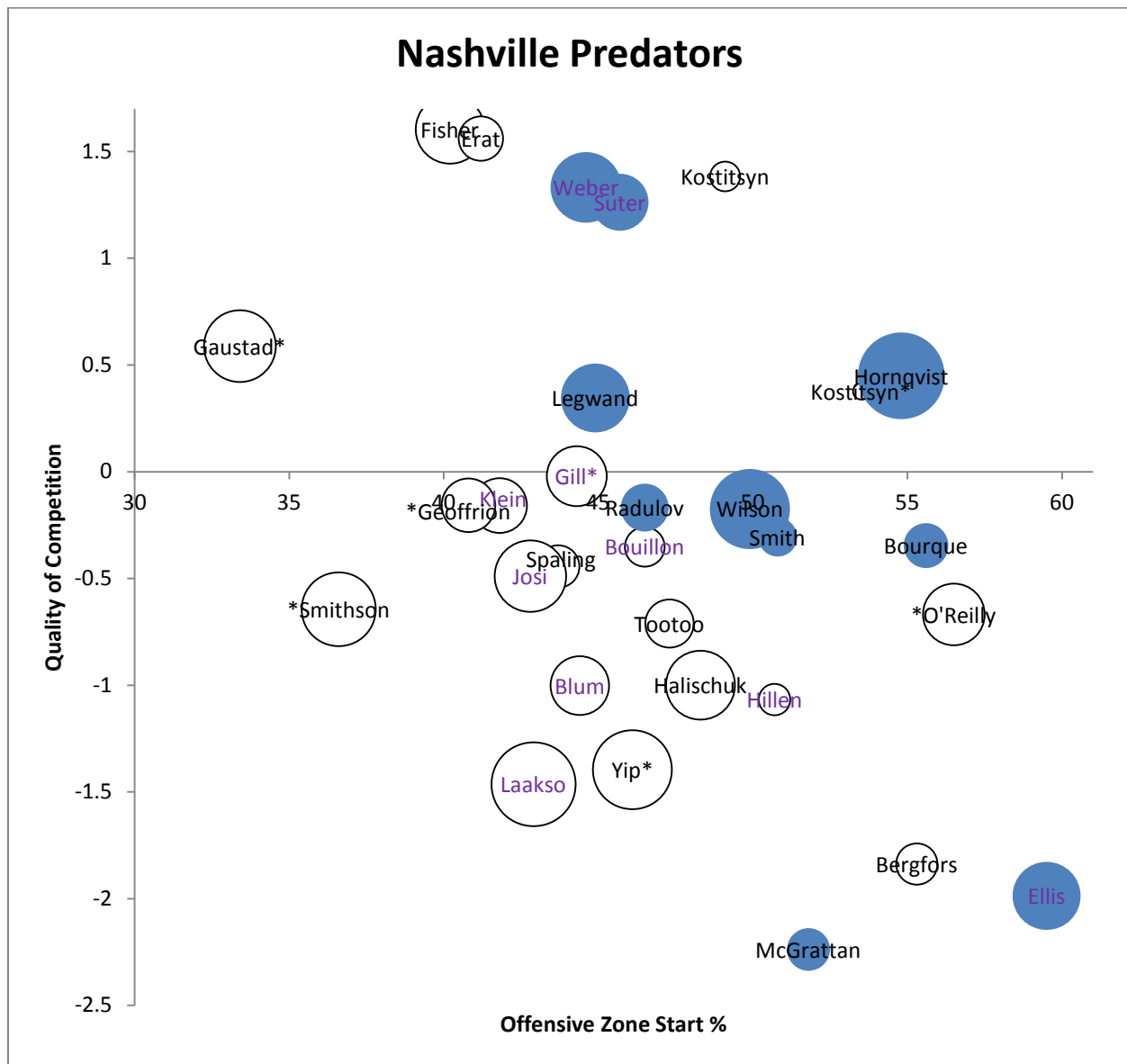
The best ice-time went instead to high-priced Scott Gomez, who started against middling competition and in the offensive zone over 10% more often than any other forward save rookie Andreas Engqvist in his 12 games, and though the team did significantly outshoot opponents, Gomez managed just 11 points in his 38 games.

Their three leading scorers break-out star Max Pacioretty, resurgent veteran Erik Cole and tiny accomplished AHL scorer David Desharnais all played more typical ice-time, similar to rookies Aaron Plushaj, with whom they enjoyed a tremendous shot advantage, and Louis Leblanc, with whom they did not.

As for their other depth options, Mike Blunden and the newly acquired Blake Geoffrion were used mostly in the defensive zone against fairly average competition, and were consequently dominated shot-wise. Fellow defensive zone dwellers Petteri Nokelainen and newly acquired tough guy Brad Staubitz were also dominated despite facing exclusively depth liners. The only adequate depth option (other than Plushaj) was 35-year-old long-time AHLer Mathieu Darche, who enjoyed a more balanced assignment against mostly 3rd and 4th lines.

Their top pairing on defense was defensive gem Josh Gorges and the highly impressive tough young star P.K. Subban and though it was Gorges who led the team with a +14, it was with Subban that the Habs enjoyed the biggest edge shot-wise.

Veteran star Andrei Markov has played just 20 games since his 2010 knee injury, generally as an offensive-minded top-four option, much like the newly acquired and high-priced Tomas Kaberle, who may be becoming more of a 3rd line power play specialist at age 34. Veteran Chris Campoli is a usable depth option, much like late blooming rookies Raphael Diaz and Alexei Emelin, who struggled to a team-worst -18 plus/minus, who struggled in occasional stints in the top-four. Fellow late-blooming rookie Frederic St-Denis' 17 games as a depth option was promising, but 23-year-old Yannick Weber's highly sheltered minutes still left the Habs in a big hole. /RV



Dirk Hoag's Take

Despite his local reputation for being an inveterate line-juggler, Barry Trotz typically places his greatest trust in a core group of skaters. The trio of Sergei Kostitsyn, Mike Fisher and Martin Erat were the only forward line to stick together through the bulk of the season, and typically drew top opponents. The real difference-makers, however, are Shea Weber and Ryan Suter, who have driven positive results while taking on a difficult workload for a few years now.

Probably the most interesting aspect to watch in the year ahead is how much responsibility Trotz doles out to Colin Wilson, Craig Smith, Gabriel Bourque and Ryan Ellis, young players who fared well offensively in relatively protected situations. On the opposite end of that spectrum, there is an opening for the defensive-zone faceoff expert - Jerred Smithson took a tremendous amount of d-zone draws over the last several seasons, and Paul Gaustad was brought in at the Trade Deadline to provide an upgrade over Smithson in that regard, but as an Unrestricted Free Agent, Gaustad might prove too costly for Nashville to retain in that limited role. /DH

**Rob
Vollman's
Take**

The Nashville Predators finished with 104 points, their highest total since 2006-07, despite the league's 2nd worst possession statistics. This was achieved with highly fortunate finishing percentages that resulted in seven players setting new scoring highs, five more finishing with their 2nd highest career totals and only three who didn't have career seasons. Wow.

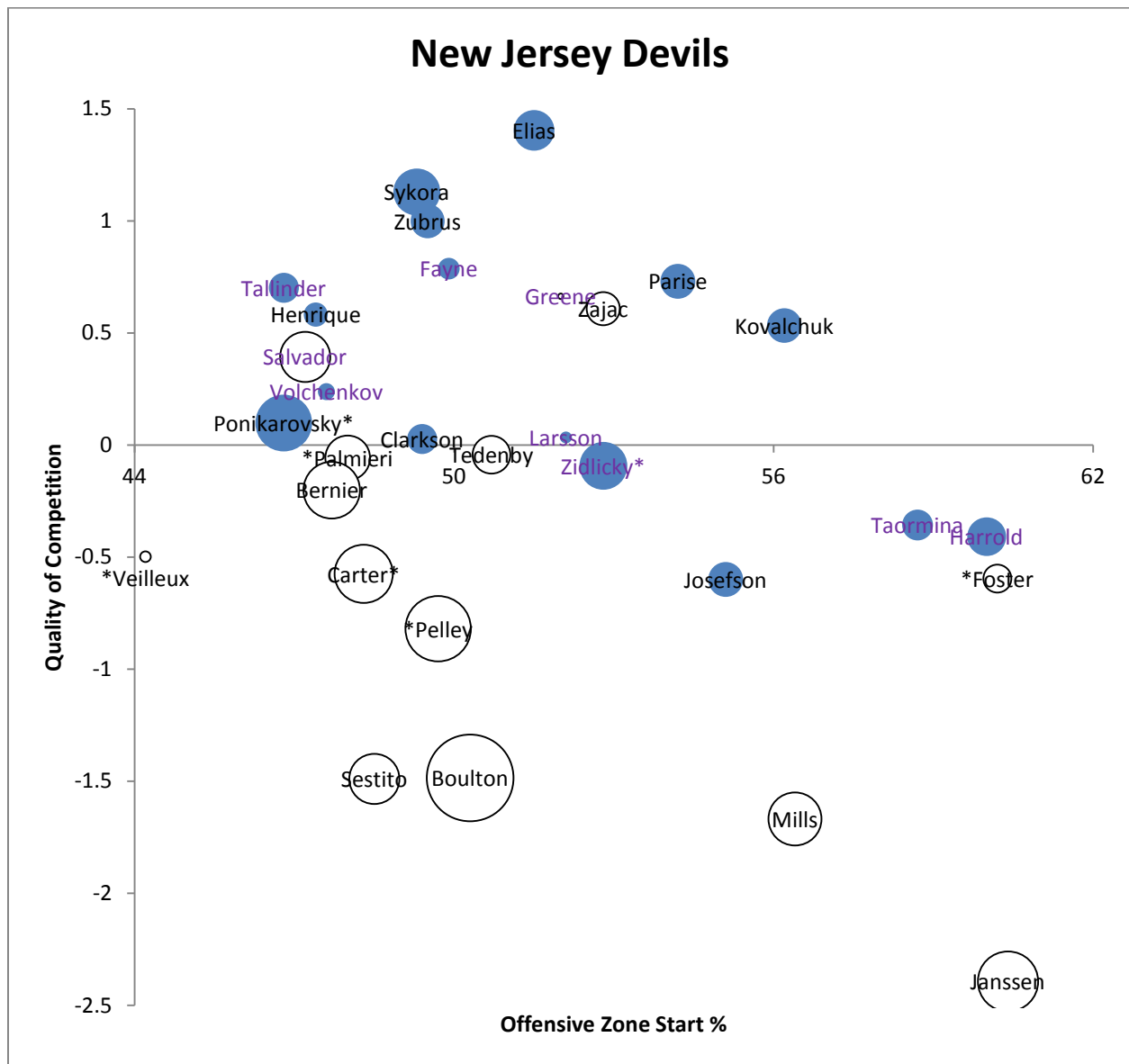
The key to this team is the league's arguably best top pairing Shea Weber and Ryan Suter (except rookie Ryan Ellis in 32 incredibly sheltered games), who were the only two defensemen with whom they enjoyed a possession advantage despite being the only ones who regularly faced top opponents.

GM David Poile picked up huge veteran Hal Gill to shore up the defense, but he isn't that dissimilar to defensive-minded Kevin Klein, 36-year-old Francis Bouillon or rookie Roman Josi – they all played fairly typical minutes and found themselves on the short end of the possession stick. Despite a promising 23-game stint last year young Jonathan Blum struggled in his depth role, and Jack Hillen is probably no more than a replacement-level 3rd liner anywhere outside of Long Island.

Up front veterans Mike Fisher and Martin Erat got the toughest assignments and yet managed to lead Nashville forwards in points (actually Legwand edged Fisher) and plus/minus – and despite the Preds being badly outshot. Giant Paul Gaustad, who handled the tough minutes in Buffalo, was acquired late in the season to share their burden.

You'd have expected the scoring leader to be someone like Patric Hornqvist who played primarily in the offensive zone against more average competition, and with whom they consequently enjoyed the largest shot advantage, but he finished 4th among forwards. Other forwards who enjoyed favourable conditions throughout the season include rookie Gabriel Bourque and newly acquired Andrei Kostitsyn - unlike brother Sergei Kostitsyn who faced top liners almost exclusively.

Nashville's remaining non-depth forwards, including David Legwand, KHL star Alexander Radulov, young Colin Wilson, rookie Craig Smith and defensive-minded Nick Spaling, all did well in more balanced secondary roles. Despite being massively outshot by opposing fourth lines the Preds even enjoyed surprisingly high production from depth forwards like agitator Jordin Tootoo, young Matt Halischuk, and the newly acquired Brandon Yip.
/RV



**John
Fischer's
Take**

In general, I'm not exactly sure what was the Devils' team percentage in Corsi in this season. I know in terms of Fenwick, they were a top ten team in Fenwick Close% (actually, tenth). Still, the overall chart reflects the general summation of the team: defense about average at moving the puck; top forwards were far better than the bottom six.

It's no accident that Patrik Elias, Petr Sykora, and Dainius Zubrus are so much higher in QoC. The threesome was utilized a lot together to go up against the other team's best lines and pairings whenever possible. Fans didn't take it as a checking line given that Elias put up so many points and very few people would call Sykora a defensive player. While Sykora has the larger adjusted Corsi value, Zubrus and Elias really drove the bus. Zubrus also stands out a little less since he was moved around a little more due to injuries and returning players. Nevertheless, DeBoer had zero issue using them at home and whenever he could on the road to get them against powerful opposition. He was right to do so.

I believe it's an open question whether Parise, Kovalchuk, and Adam Henrique could have done the same. Parise has been a possession monster for most of his career, Kovalchuk hasn't because he was in Atlanta, and Henrique was an unknown property. This raises another question: Did Parise suffer from either linemate (he was with Kovalchuk nearly all season, Henrique for most of it), or did he just not have a good year for whatever reason (e.g. a lack of Travis Zajac centering him)? I also want to note that Henrique is so different from Parise and Kovalchuk in offensive zone starts because when Zajac did eventually return, Henrique was moved down to the third line - a place usually appropriate for a rookie center.

Of the six players above 55% in offensive zone starts, Ilya Kovalchuk was the only one who wasn't protected or sheltered. His QoC should justify that, but it bears noting given that some people have misconceptions of the player. He's been put on the ice to kill off games and he was on the PK regularly. He also would be good for a few shifts on the fourth line, which got nothing but OZS if DeBoer could help it. It didn't actually lead to any offense and in retrospect, it was a wasted effort. Especially since the fourth liners would usually get stapled to the bench in the third period. Moreover, I think a coach should strive to give a top offensive player a high OZS%. The rest: sheltered. Matt Taormina and Peter Harrold are #6 defensemen, Jacob Josefson was on the bottom six whenever he was healthy, and Brad Mills and Cam Janssen are abjectly terrible hockey players.

It's worth noting that Ryan Carter and Steve Bernier got to enjoy playing with Eric Boulton and Janssen on the fourth line for most of the season. The enforcers-that-enforce-little duo ensured that the fourth line would be pinned back or do nothing on offense. They were horrible on the ice and these charts show it plainly. It's bizarre that they'll likely be in the NHL; Boulton even he has another year in NJ. Lou and DeBoer only put together a competent fourth line for the playoffs. If they go back to guys like them next season, then I don't think they pay much attention to stuff like this.

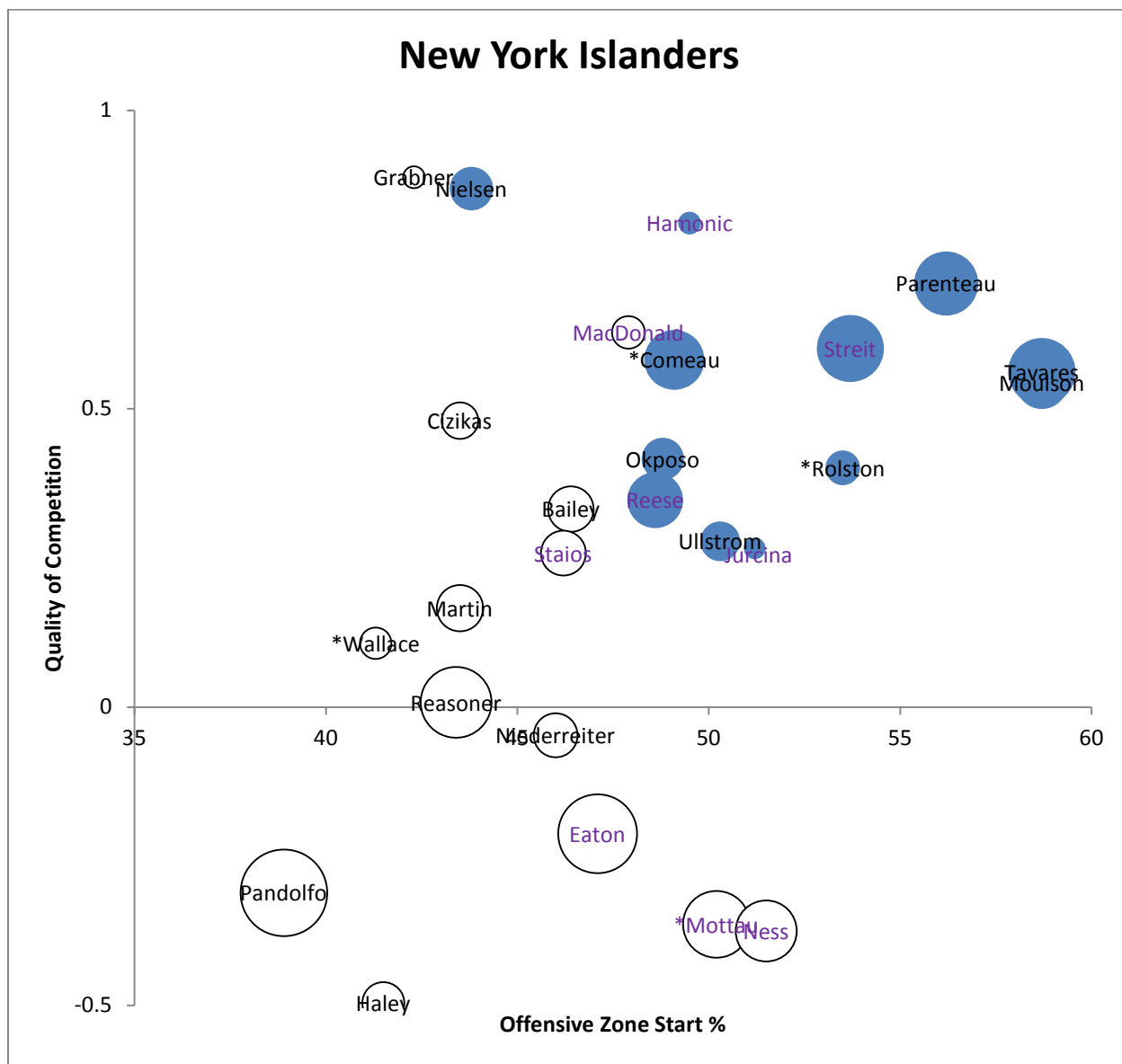
The most unusual usage on the team has to go to Adam Larsson. He didn't drive the play, but not getting beaten on is a good thing for a rookie. The strange thing is that he would be given 18-20 minute nights during the season. This was kept up until his injury and his subsequent poor play after returning from injury. Can we say a player who plays a third of a game was really sheltered, even if his QoC is lower than the other five defensemen? Then again, Harrold's performances near the end of the season resulted in him starting in the playoffs while Larsson was scratched for a month. He did more in less time - Harrold, like Taormina, had to be protected - and while Larsson struggled, so he got the nod.

Travis Zajac's bubble should get a footnote for the fact he only played in small stretches during the regular season. He played 8 games around the end of December before the doctors told him to he needed to stop playing for the injury to heal properly; and then came back to finish off the season in mid-March for 7 more games. Zajac started each stretch on a third line and then got bumped up to a top two line a few games later. Given the small population size of 15 games, some poor nights make him look worse than he was. I think the playoffs are currently showing what he can do when fully in form, though.

Bryce Salvador's the only regular defenseman who finished below zero in Corsi (I know Andy Greene came close). He's a defensive defenseman with very little offensive game. As indicated by his zone starts, he's utilized appropriately. How it's lower than Anton Volchenkov, another defense-first player with very little offensive skill, I couldn't really tell you.

The additions of Zidlicky and Ponikarovsky really show additional value here; especially Ponikarovsky's. Before his arrival, DeBoer first tried Mattias Tedenby, who played himself off the team with performances that feature one good shift and nothing more. Then there was a carousel of players ranging from Carter to Tim Sestito to AHL callup Steve Zalewski. Ponikarovsky essentially made the third line more than just David Clarkson Doing Things Pretty Well. As for Zidlicky, he had to take some time to acclimate himself to the team and for the coaches to warm up to what he could be responsible for. They saw him as a defender who can provide some offense and used him accordingly. Once Zidlicky got used to not being around Mike Yeo and in

New Jersey, his performances did improve and the utilization was appropriate. /JF



Andrew Rothstein's Take

New York Islanders coach Jack Capuano is very traditional in managing his team for the most part, employing his skaters on ice in a usual manner. Left winger Jay Pandolfo, who was trusted by Capuano to start more shifts in the defensive zone than any other player (38.9 Off. Zone Start %) and interestingly enough went against very poor quality of competition (-0.311) was an exception. With a Corsi rating of just -21.77, he was matched up against poor opposition. It's a rather curious decision that Capuano would use Pandolfo in the defensive zone so often. One reason for Pandolfo's usage in his own zone could be because he's a veteran, as veterans tend to start more shifts on average in their own zone while younger players tend to start in the offensive zone.

However, Capuano has been on record as saying that he likes Pandolfo's intensity and hard-working attitude. Unfortunately, despite his poor skills, his "grit" is heavily valued by the head coach and is probably a reason why the borderline fourth liner is seen starting so often in the defensive zone.

Marty Reasoner had a problematic season with hand problems that caused him to miss significant time in 2011-12. He only faced average opposition on the ice, posted a poor Corsi rating and his line posted a subpar

on-ice shooting percentage on the year. However, his PDO number which was third lowest on the team was low enough that he on luck alone he's bound to have a better 2012-13, assuming he can stay healthy. He'll probably face higher quality competition in 2012-13 as his numbers rise, though it's difficult to tell how he'll age.

The effective, young shooter Frans Nielsen, with great hands and a solid back-hand, has been utilized by Capuano on the ice consistently against other team's top lines. He's improved every season, and posted a phenomenal shooting percentage this past season, which is more likely the result of his actual skill than it is random luck. Capuano recognizes that Nielsen can hold his own against any skilled defensive players and should be able to put together 50 plus point seasons over the next four to five years.

Also, like Carolina, their defensive players were utilized traditionally, with the exception of Mark Eaton who started frequently in the Isles zone, yet faced off against poor skaters. /AR

Timo
Seppa's
Take

Capuano's use of Reasoner made no sense. The overall numbers you see here don't reflect the fact that he was mostly used in the offensive zone for the majority of the season. I guess he finally woke up to the fact that Reasoner isn't the lost Sedin brother in the second half of the season. These types of poor decisions made the Islanders lackluster bottom two thirds of the roster that much more poorly utilized. /TS

Rob
Vollman's
Take

Frans Nielsen, one of the league's truly unsung heroes, scored 47 points, enjoyed favourable possession statistics and was just -3 despite playing the toughest ice-time the Islanders had to offer. Linemate Michael Grabner was a 20-goal man despite equally difficult ice-time.

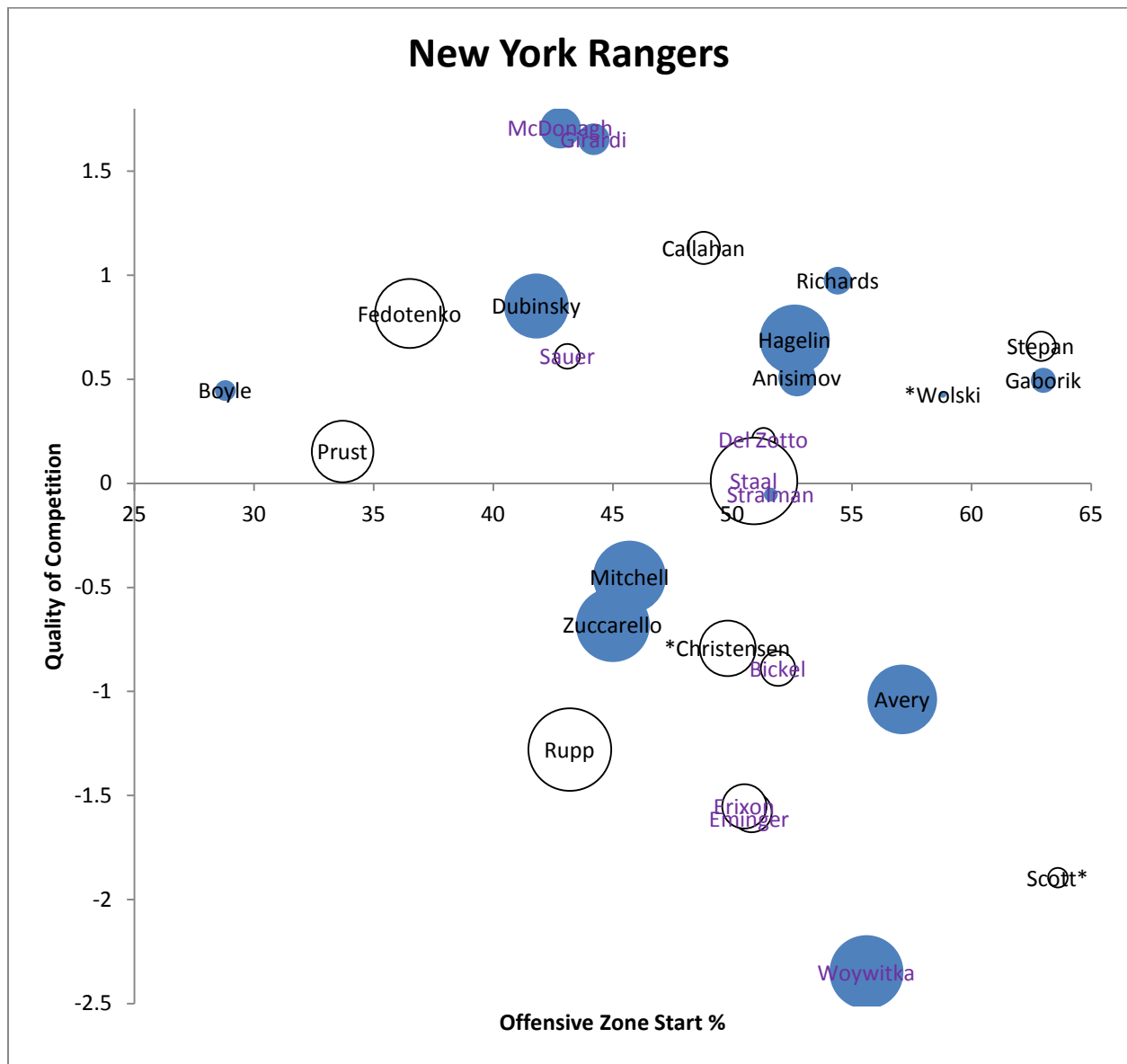
Of course, most of the scoring came from top-line forwards John Tavares, Matt Moulson and P.A. Parenteau, thanks to the team's highest offensive zone start percentage.

A lot of their future success could be in the hands of players like 23-year-old Kyle Okposo and his 24 goals leading a motley collection of very young secondary forwards like 22-year-old Josh Bailey, 22-year-old rookie David Ullstrom, and 20-year-old Casey Cizikas, the latter two of whom combined for just 44 games last season.

Things start getting stick with their depth forwards. Rookie Nino Niederreiter struggled, as did tough 22-year-old Matt Martin, and even in softer match-ups veteran defensive options like 34-year-old Marty Reasoner and especially 37-year-old Jay Pandolfo were absolutely murdered.

On the blue line is where things really fall apart. While veteran Mark Streit did his job, which was to help unleash the offensive potential of that top line, and while both Travis Hamonic and Andrew MacDonald should be commended for playing effectively in their potentially over-their-head assignment as a top pairing, the Islanders had huge holes on defense.

38-year-old Steven Staios and Milan Jurcina ought to be depth options (if that), and certainly not playing top-four minutes – even AHLer Dylan Reese was more effective in his 28 games. The fact that they used 34-year-old depth option Mark Eaton for 62 games really highlights the true extent of their weakness on defense. /RV



**Rob
Luker's
Take**

Ryan McDonagh's worth to this defensive core cannot be understated. In the last forty games of 2010-2011 he was sneaky good, but in 2011-2012 he was a legitimate number 1 pairing defenseman for 82 games. At the same time, his counterpart; Dan Girardi, had a bounce-back year in term of moving the puck forward. He plays the game the way a shutdown d-man should: you never notice him because he makes few mistakes.

Let's get into the thick of it: Carl Hagelin had a better rookie season than Derek Stepan did in 2010-2011. Hagelin posted a similar PPG rate in 20 fewer games, and did it against above-average competition and a relatively normal 10.7 Shooting percentage.

It's almost laughable how some Ranger fans believe that the team could be better off without Dubinsky, who in reality was one of the best NYR forwards despite his poor shooting luck.

I wonder if Sather will over-pay for Fedotenko even though he could be easily replaced.

On the flip side, I hope Sather does not let John Mitchell walk, who had a great under-the-radar type of season.

Although Mike Rupp does bring non-corsi positives to the team, it pains me to see that Tortorella doesn't trust Avery who has a career track record of moving the puck forward and actually drawing more penalties than he takes (along with a scoring touch). /RL

**Rob
Vollman's
Take**

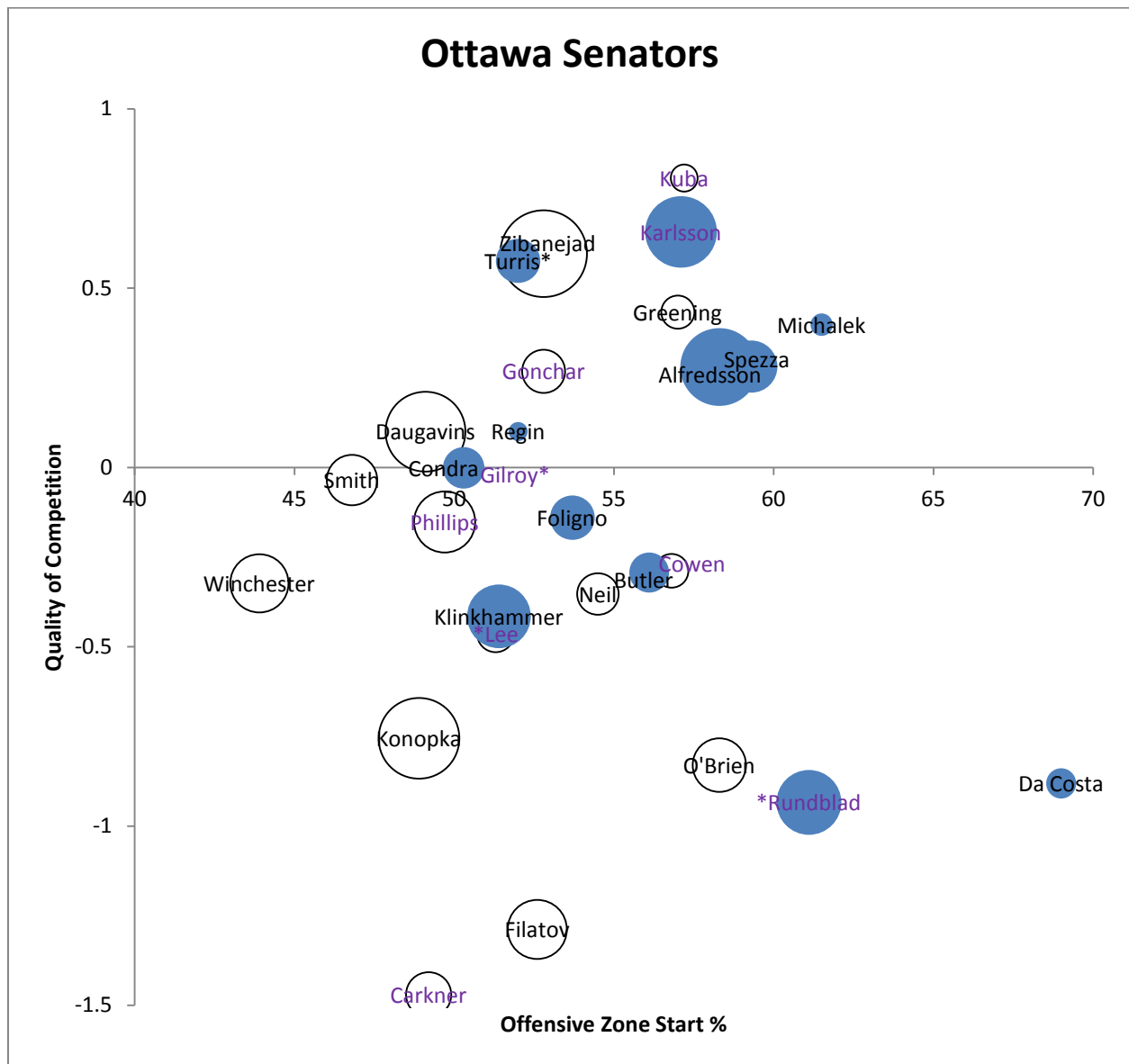
Rangers top defensive pairing Dan Girardi and Ryan McDonagh played the toughest minutes in the league, comparable to Jay Bouwmeester and Chris Butler in Calgary but with far, far better results and a case could be made for their standing shoulder to shoulder with the likes of Shea Weber and Ryan Suter as the league's best shutdown duo.

Unfortunately the rest of the Blue Shirt blue line is nothing to get exciting about, including the big negative possession circle from the celebrated Marc Staal. Fellow 2nd liners Michael Del Zotto and Michael Sauer (in 19 games) were in smaller holes and even their depth liners like tough guy Stu Bickel, rookie Tim Erixon, and Steve Eminger were in the

hole.

Up front the big story isn't the highly paid big names like Marian Gaborik and Brad Richards, but instead the do-it-all style players around whom the New York Rangers have always built their team, like Brandon Dubinsky. While Ruslan Fedotenko and tough guy Brandon Prust struggled in those defensive-minded roles, Dubinsky excelled in nearly every aspect of the game. The giant Brian Boyle also fared well, effectively starting in the offensive zone under 30% of the time so that players like Richard, Gaborik, and Derek Stepan could focus on more offensive-minded roles.

Rookie Carl Hagelin is another stand-out top-six forward, and Artem Anisimov had another quietly effective season in a secondary role. Among depth forwards John Mitchell was the most impressive, and tiny Norwegian Mats Zuccarello played his 10 games rather well and is ready to bust loose. /RV



Graeme Nichols' Take

Ottawa's second that consisted of Turriss+Alfie and whoever (it varied between Klinkhammer, Foligno and occasionally Condra) was relied upon to play against the opposition's best players. Given the relative size of their blue bubbles, one can understand why.

Surprised to see that Filip Kuba has a small white bubble. As a player who spent 88.2-percent of his 1,273.10 5v5 minutes partnered with Erik Karlsson, an elite offensive defenceman who tilted the ice towards the opposition's net and finished 2nd amongst Senators players in Relative Corsi.

Speaking of successful coaching strategies, it's important to reflect on the usage of Erik Karlsson by Paul MacLean. Last season under Cory Clouston, Karlsson's 5v5 minutes were played with a balanced usage of linemates.

In 2010/11:

Foligno: 29.2%
Michalek: 25.6%
Fisher: 23.0%
Alfie: 22.9 %
Spezza 22.6%

Now contrast that with 2011/12:

Spezza: 41.7%
Michalek: 36.8%
Greening: 35.0%
Alfie: 27.6%
Foligno: 22.4%

As you can see, he's playing with the team's best offensive players with a greater frequency.

Colin Greening (64.8% of 5v5 shifts) and Milan Michalek (80.3%) spent the bulk of the season playing alongside Jason Spezza. Interestingly, both forwards also spent more than half of their 5v5 minutes playing on the ice with Erik Karlsson, yet neither player had significant Relative Corsi metrics – despite having some of the team's highest offensive zone start rates.

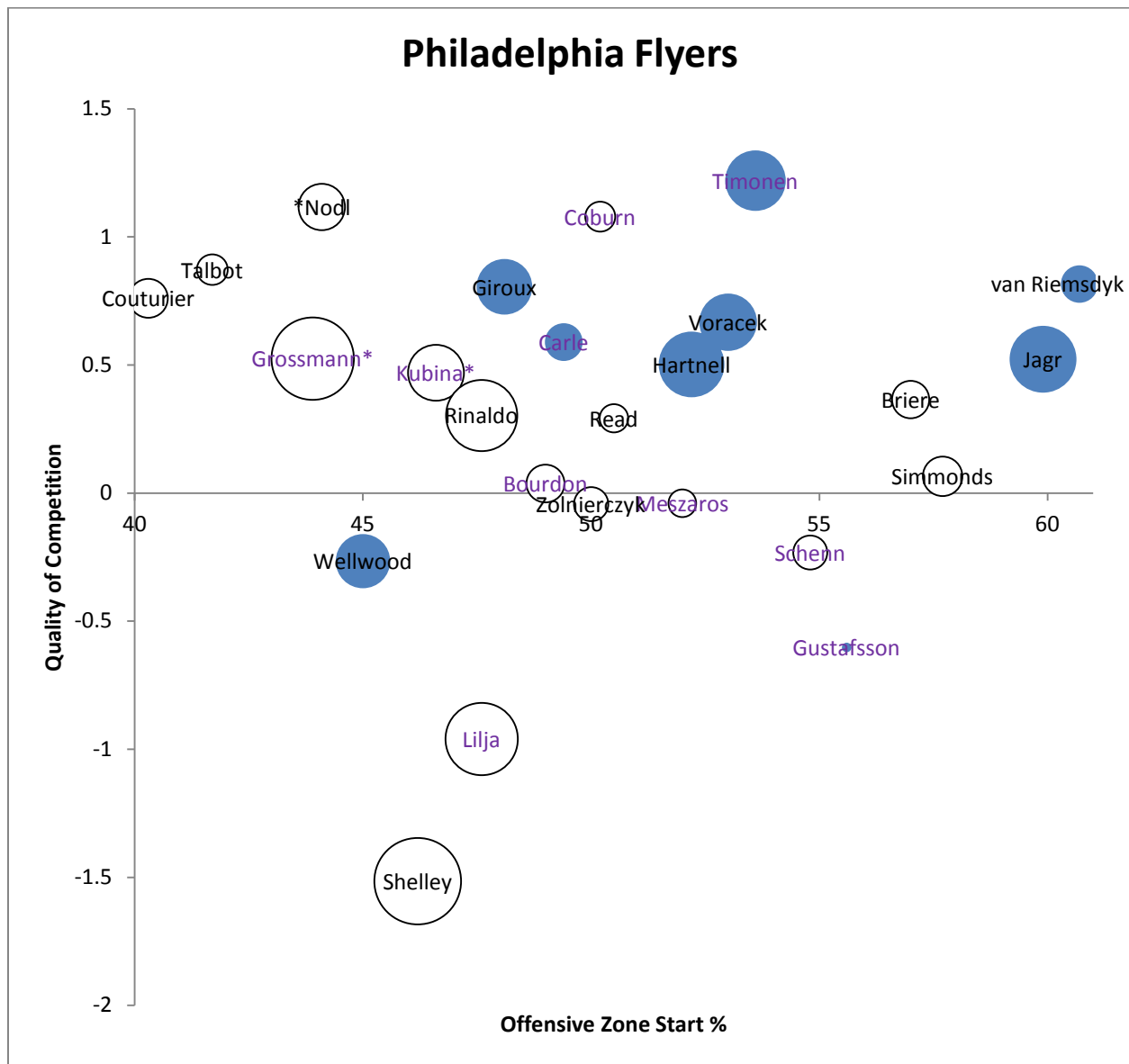
For me, the usage chart exemplifies exactly what went wrong for the Spezza line in the playoffs. With two wingers whose puck possession skills don't translate well once the Senators gain entry into the offensive zone, Spezza acts almost like a basketball point guard. The offence has to run through him because his two wingers can't create their own shots (scoring chances). Playing against a great defensive team like the Rangers that also has an elite goaltender, Spezza got caught up trying to force plays because his linemates could not generate enough chances. Further to this point, it's not surprising to see that whenever the Spezza line was struggling to create offence, Paul MacLean would put Alfredsson on that line to jumpstart it. With the highest relative Corsi rate amongst regulars on the team, putting Alfie on Spezza's line makes sense.

In the context of the regular season, it's important to note the role that players like Konopka and Winchester played in the faceoff circle and the residual effect that it had on Jason Spezza. In the 2010/11 season, Spezza's offensive zone start percentage was 47.5 percent. This year, that number is up to 59.3 percent. After being on the ice for 240 o-zone faceoffs during the 2010/11 season, that number leapt up to 499 for 2011/12. Unlike his predecessor, Paul MacLean relied upon Winchester and Konopka to take some important d-zone faceoffs and removed Spezza from that burden. The logic is pretty straightforward, as one of the league's best faceoff men and as one of Ottawa's best offensive talents, Spezza and his going to residually benefit from gaining possession of the puck in while in the offensive zone. I believe that this notion is reflected in the improved point totals of the players that he most often played with – Erik Karlsson and Milan Michalek. If I had a wish, it'd be for the organization to acquire a good puck possession winger for Spezza this offseason. (Not too sure if the option is there internally, although Peter Regin and Spezza had postseason success in their 2010 series vs Pittsburgh.)

Proportionate to his 5v5 ice-time, of NHL forwards who played in more than 40 games, Foligno had the 37th best points-per-60 minutes rate in the league at 2.40. Of the forwards who played in 80 or more games, Foligno had the 20th best mark in the league - finishing ahead of big name offensive talents like John Tavares (2.37), Anze Kopitar (2.25), Zach Parise (2.18) and Daniel Alfredsson (2.16). Albeit, he did most of his damage against soft competition but looking at the success that he had playing with Turriss and Alfie on the second line during the playoffs, he looks like a good internal option for top six duty next season.

As far as being sheltered, it looks like the coaching staff has finally acknowledged that Chris Phillips is no longer capable of playing against the opposition's best players. Last season, Phillips had the highest Corsi Rel

QoC amongst Senators blueliners by a large margin. This year, only Jared Cowen had a lower mark (amongst regulars). Not surprised to see that young players like Da Costa and Filatov were being sheltered by the coaching staff. Neither player is renowned for their defensive aptitude or their strength and conditioning. Further to that point, having had some lingering issues with his knee, I'm not surprised to see that Carkner was being sheltered as well. /GN



**Eric
Tulsky's
Take**

Nobody was surprised to see that Danny Briere and Jaromir Jagr were given relatively easy minutes, facing second-and-third-line competition in the offensive zone. The surprise was how Wayne Simmonds was deployed -- after he faced the toughest competition and third-toughest zone starts with the Kings last year, many thought that he was being brought in to help make up for the loss of two-way forwards Mike Richards and Jeff Carter. Instead, he ended up being one of the most offensively-deployed forwards, facing third-line competition primarily in the offensive zone. This allowed him to dramatically increase his offensive production, going from 14 goals and 30 points last year to 28 goals and 49 points this year.

However, it still left the team with some tough minutes to fill, and there was some surprise there as well. Many high draft picks are lauded for their two-way skill, but it is very unusual for one to face top competition from the outset and even more rare for them to succeed in that role. Yet Sean Couturier paired with Maxime Talbot -- who himself had faced middling competition in the offensive zone in Pittsburgh -- to form the core of a shutdown line that was deployed against the top offensive threats around the league.

For the defense, Chris Pronger and Kimmo Timonen are top-tier defensemen who have anchored the Flyers' blueline in recent years. They have continued to perform at a very high level as they advance in age, but Pronger has missed a lot of time over the last two years with injury and now a concussion leaves his return in doubt. Timonen carried the load in Pronger's absence in 2011-12, taking on premium competition and pushing the play forwards, but given his advancing age, it seems likely that increasingly difficult roles will be forced on the younger defensemen in the near future. /ET

**Brian
MacDonald's
Take**

The thing that impressed me the most about Jakub Voracek was his ability to carry the puck with speed. This was perhaps more evident on the power play, where he often played one of the point positions, but was also true at even strength. If he were to become a great defensive player, or if he played with other great defensive players, the combination of being able to gain possession of the puck and to carry the puck with speed could make him a very valuable player to start shifts in the defensive zone. He would likely have a high "zone shifts" statistics, even those that are adjusted with zone starts.

This year he wasn't used that way, probably because he has been much better offensively than defensively. He had a zone start percentage over 50%, but not as high as Briere or Simmonds, and he faced higher quality of competition than those two and still had a much better Corsi than those two. If Jagr doesn't return, I wouldn't mind seeing the Flyers give him an extended look on a line with Giroux.

Also, for what it's worth, Voracek has had pretty high even strength APM numbers. These numbers take into account teammates, opponents, and zone starts. Offensively, during 2007-2011 (sorry, don't have the numbers for 2011-12 yet), at even strength, he ranked

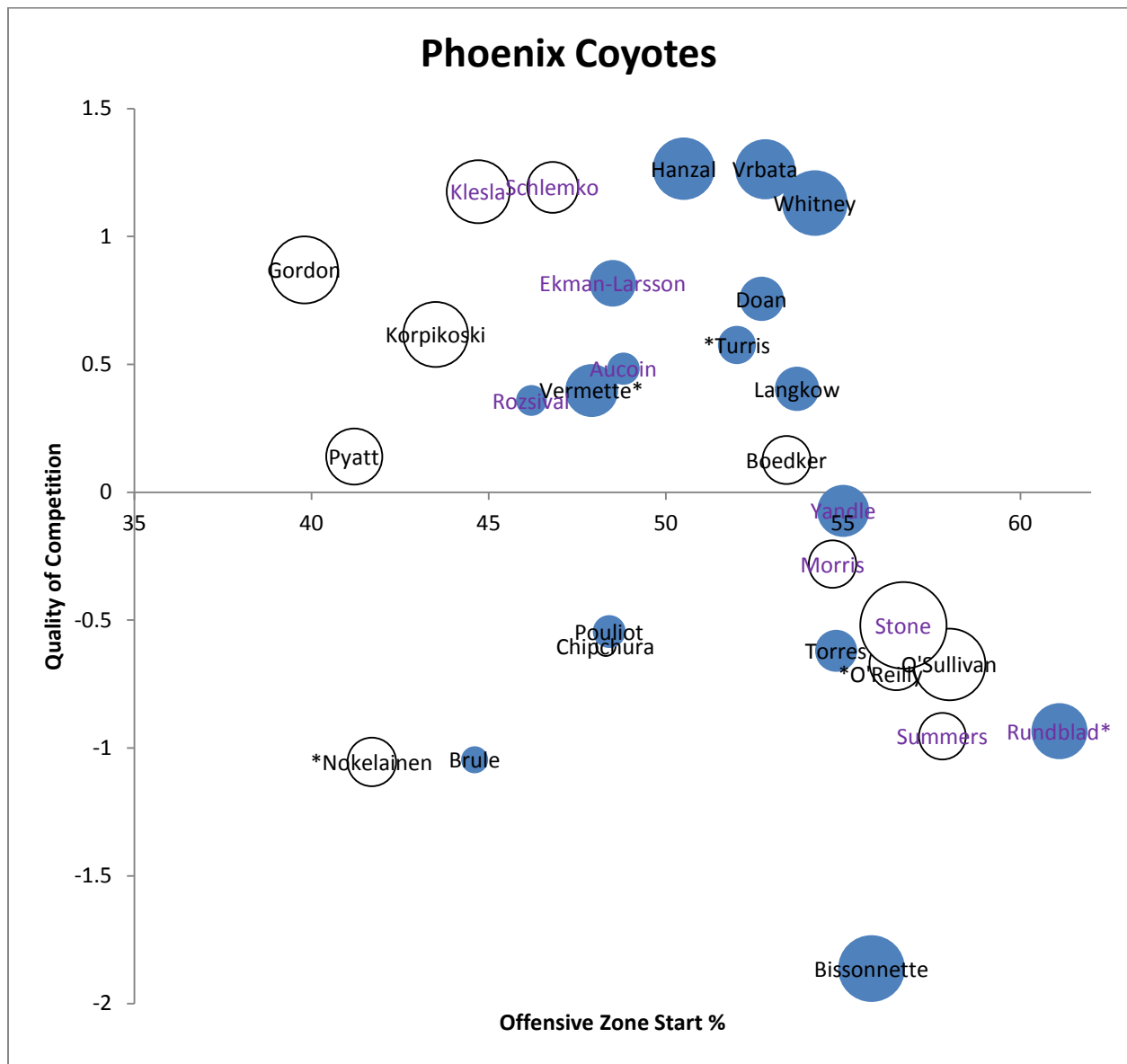
- top 10 in expected goals per 60 minutes
- top 15 in goals per 60
- top 10 in shots per 60
- top 20 in fenwick per 60, and
- top 50 in corsi per 60

His overall (off + def) numbers were a little lower in general because of average defense, but he was still ranked

- top 25 in expected goals per 60
- top 15 in shots per 60
- top 50 in fenwick and corsi per 60

Sean Couturier looked like he belonged in the NHL almost from day 1. His coach seemed to agree, and Couturier was trusted to play in high-leverage defensive situations despite the fact that he was "just" an 18 year old rookie. Couturier was often on the ice against the other team's first or second scoring line at even strength, and was often paired with fellow rookie Matt Read on the team's first or second PK unit. This kind of usage for an 18 year old rookie has to be pretty rare.

By comparison, Brayden Schenn's offensive zone start percentage was roughly 15% higher, his QualComp was roughly 1.0 higher, and Couturier and Schenn still had roughly the same Corsi. I never saw Couturier play in juniors, but given his scoring numbers at that level, it'd be reasonable to hope that Couturier develops into an elite two-way centerman. /BM



Rob Vollman's Take

Coyotes Coach Dave Tippett once again got the most out of a value-priced collection of the old and unknown.

Former Blue Jacket Rostislav Klesla and sophomore David Schlemko were an unusual choice to face opposing top lines, and the team paid the price possession-wise. Fortunately the top-four was rounded out by sensational 20-year-old Oliver Ekman-Larsson and reliable veterans Adrian Aucoin and Michal Rozsival.

Thanks to them, Keith Yandle enjoyed a third straight 40+ point season playing in the offensive zone against depth lines, a situation in which veteran Derek Morris somehow struggled. Rookies David Rundblad (30 games), Chris Summers (21 games) and Michael Stone (13 games) also got tastes of highly-sheltered NHL action, the first of which in a more promising fashion.

Up front top-liners 39-year-old Ray Whitney set a new personal best with 53 assists, alongside Martin Hanzal and Radim Vrbata, who set personal bests in goals with 35 and points with 62, thanks to a lot of offensive zone

starts. Give credit to Boyd Gordon and Lauri Korpikoski for struggling through a lot of tough defensive-zone minutes against the top lines, and Taylor Pyatt against depth lines, to create those opportunities for them.

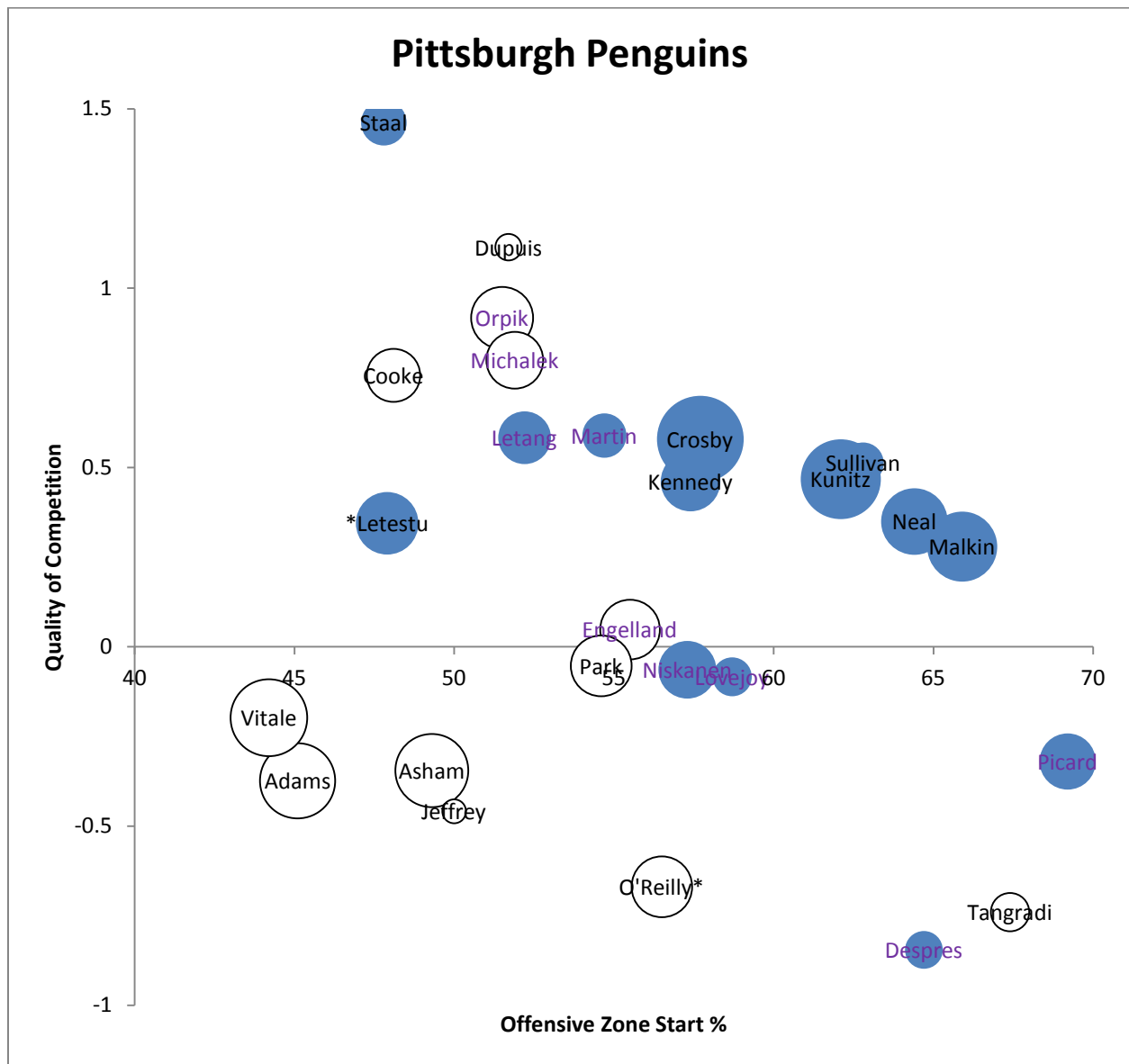
Veterans Shane Doan, Daymond Langkow and the newly acquired Antoine Vermette all played strong secondary roles this season. Among depth forwards Gilbert Brule, Kyle Chipchura, enforcer Paul Bissonnette and Raffi Torres all completed their 4th-line duty without incident, but Patrick O'Sullivan was a disaster once again. /RV

Josh
Lile's
Take

Tippett used Klesla in a shutdown defensive role often

Korpikoski looks bad here, but rarely did the Stars get a scoring chance when he was on the ice this season.

Tippett emphasizes transition. He uses a checking defender with an offensive when possible. /JL



Rob Vollman's Take

Even in the absence of the incomparable Sidney Crosby the Pittsburgh Penguins were still an amazing team, and surprising participants in the IIHF World Championships (or, for their North American players, the local golf course).

They were led once again by Evgeni Malkin's 50-goal, 109-point season, James Neal's 40-goal, 81-point affair and Chris Kunitz' career high 26 goal, 61-point fling, which were all thanks to a stunning 65% offensive zone start.

Along with 37-year-old Steve Sullivan these impressive totals were thanks to players like Jordan Staal, Pascal Dupuis and Matthew Cooke taking on opposing team's top lines, and often in their own zone. It's rather amazing how Jordan Staal in particular managed a career-high 50 points in 62 games, and a positive Corsi score, despite barely fitting on the toughest end of the Player Usage Chart.

Their Achilles heel, assuming they had one, was among their depth lines which were devoid of useful contributors. Rookie Joe Vitale played defensive-minded minutes against 3rd and 4th lines, much like veterans

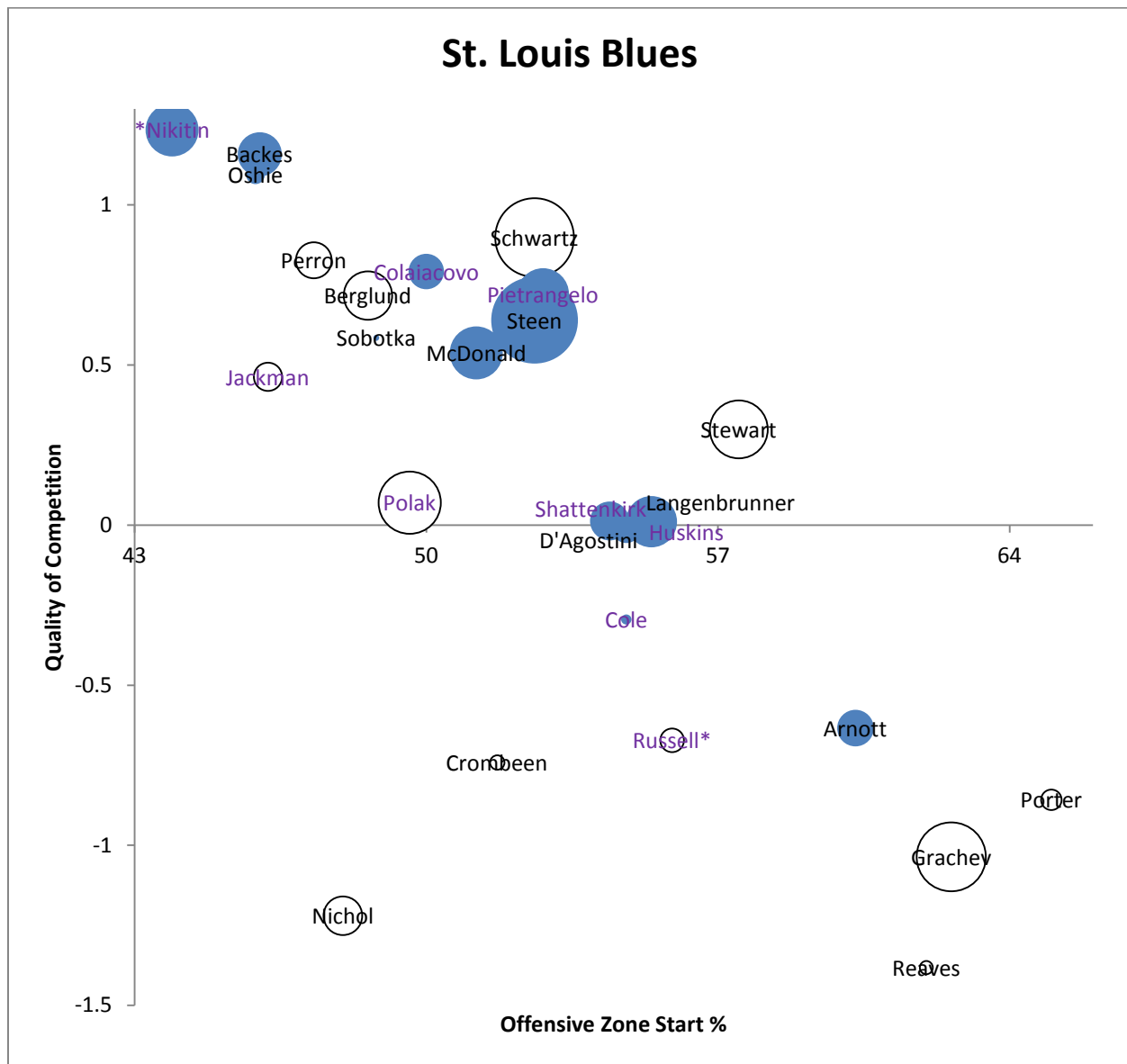
Craig Adams and Arron Asham, and struggled to a comparable extent. Young Dustin Jeffrey did slightly better in his 26 games in a similar role. Veteran Richard Park, sheltered youngster Eric Trancredi and the late-season acquisition Cal O'Reilly all had disappointing seasons on the 4th line as well.

As for Sid the Kid, when he was in the line-up he saw mostly balanced action, similar to someone like Tyler Kennedy, and was the most dominant of all Corsi-wise.

On defense the 2nd pairing of Kris Letang and Paul Martin were far more effective playing with Malkin and company than top shutdown unit Brooks Orpik and Zbynek Michalek were struggling against top opponents. While late-blooming AHLer Derek Engelland's improved discipline was encouraging, their most effective depth defensemen were Matt Niskanen and Ben Lovejoy in his 34-game stint. Fans also got an encouraging but highly-sheltered 18-game look at 20-year-old Simon Despres. /RV

Scott
Cullen's
Take

While there has been talk of the Penguins trading Jordan Staal, it's noteworthy just how much higher his QoC was compared to other Penguins forward, particularly a centre like Evgeni Malkin, who was freed to focus on scoring (obviously his strong suit) because Staal could play effectively with defensive zone starts against other team's best lines. While a healthy Sidney Crosby would offset some of Staal's loss, the Penguins would still need to account for the heavy lifting Staal does on a nightly basis. /SC



Rob Vollman's Take

The St. Louis Blues were the best possession team in the league this season, which is why statistical analysts predicted their strong finish even when they were struggling to a 6-7-0 start under coach Davis Payne. With only a handful of exceptions, including struggling power forward Chris Stewart, 21-year-old rookie Evgeny Grachev, Patrik Berglund and Roman Polak, the Blues enjoyed a shot-based advantage (or at least near-equality) over the opposing team.

New coach Ken Hitchcock adopted a classic player usage chart with gifted do-it-all players like Selke finalist David Backes and highly underrated T. J. Oshie getting the toughest minutes, followed by David Perron and Patrik Berglund, both of whom occasionally struggled in their more challenging two-way roles. Also on the upper end of forward duties were Vladimir Sobotka, perennially injured veteran Andy McDonald, and another do-it-all player in Alexander Steen.

The easier minutes went to secondary players like Chris Stewart, 36-year-old veteran Jamie Langenbrunner and former 20-goal scorer Matt D'Agostini, with the remaining depth minutes going 37-year-old defensive-

minded pest Scott Nichol, tough guys B.J. Crombeen and Ryan Reaves, and more offensive-minded players like 37-year-old veteran Jason Arnott, 21-year-old rookie Evgeny Grachev, and established AHLer Chris Porter.

Blue liners Alex Pietrangelo and Kevin Shattenkirk may have had similar box score statistics, but played in very different situations. While Pietrangelo toiled against the top lines alongside surprise top pairing Carlo Colaiacovo, with Barret Jackman assuming the more defensive-minded responsibilities (as was Roman Polak, but primarily against depth lines), Shattenkirk enjoyed more offensive ice-time against secondary lines only, very similar to how a depth veteran like Kent Huskins was used in his 25 games. Depth defensemen also included 22-year-old Ian Cole in 22 games, and newly acquired 24-year-old Kris Russell who played 43. /RV

**Derek
Jedamski's
Take**

It's clear who Hitchcock relies on to do his heavy lifting for the team. It is extremely impressive that David Backes and TJ Oshie performed so well against such difficult competition. Both players registered a positive Relative Corsi rating despite facing the most difficult competition on the team as well as the fewest offensive zone starts.

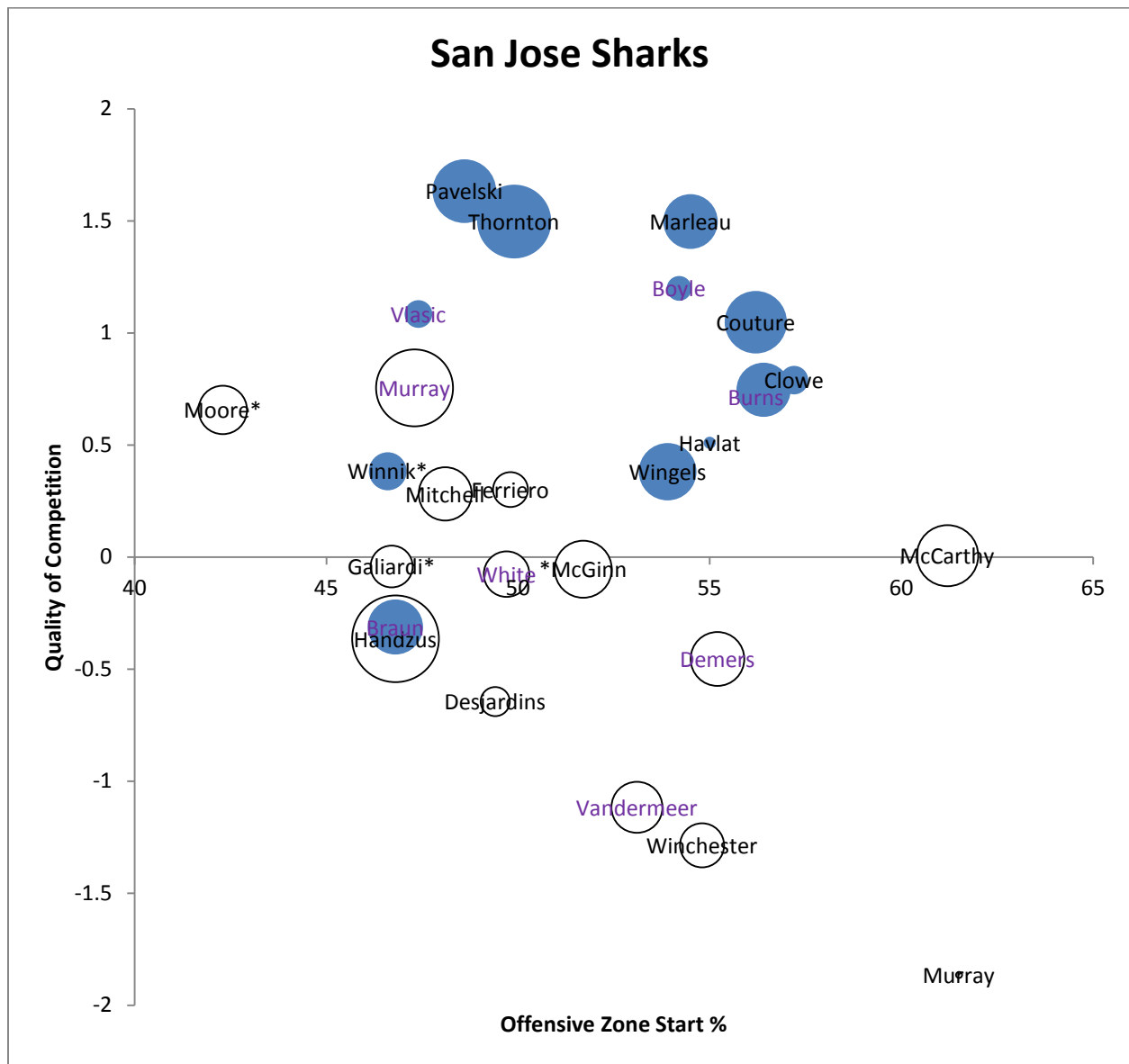
It's interesting to see that the player usage chart for the Blues takes on more of a linear shape than most of the others. This implies that Hitchcock likes to use his players either against tough competition in their own end or easy competition in the offensive end and there is very little in between (ie - high offensive zone start against difficult competition).

In theory, this means he trusts his best players to take care of defending their own net while he allows the bulk of the offensive action to go to players he trusts less against good competition. This follows pretty well with what is apparent when watching the team, Hitchcock's focus has always been in the defensive zone. He takes care of the defensive end first and then builds from there, and this is obvious in observing the player usage chart. /DJ

**Scott
Cullen's
Take**

David Backes is a beast.

Carlo Colaiacovo's usage is a little shocking and suggests that he might be a value pick-up on the free agent market. Certainly, playing with Pietrangelo helps, but it's encouraging to see Colaiacovo have success while facing assignments more difficult than he's been entrusted with to this point in his career. /SC



**Derek
Tanabe's
Take**

The evolution of Joe Thornton from a one-dimensional superstar into a legitimate two-way force isn't clearer anywhere than on this chart. Under former Sharks coach Ron Wilson, Thornton routinely received Sedin-esque sheltering as he was deployed heavily in the offensive zone against the worst possible opponents Wilson could get him out against and often even called back to the bench the moment the puck headed the other way. In the 2007-2008 season, Wilson's last behind the San Jose bench, only eight forwards in the entire league faced a lesser quality of competition at even-strength than Thornton. The results of that strategy were of course nothing to sneeze at; Thornton won the Art Ross and Hart Trophies after coming over from Boston in 2005-06 and went on to become just the third player in NHL history, after Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux, to record 90 or more assists in consecutive seasons. He also led the Sharks in scoring by a ridiculous 41-point margin in 07-08.

But when Todd McLellan arrived on the scene in 2008, he brought with him from Detroit a strong belief in power-versus-power line-matching, first thrusting Joe Pavelski into the limelight as the Sharks' top shutdown center before moving onto Thornton and finally attaching the two at the hip this year with phenomenal results.

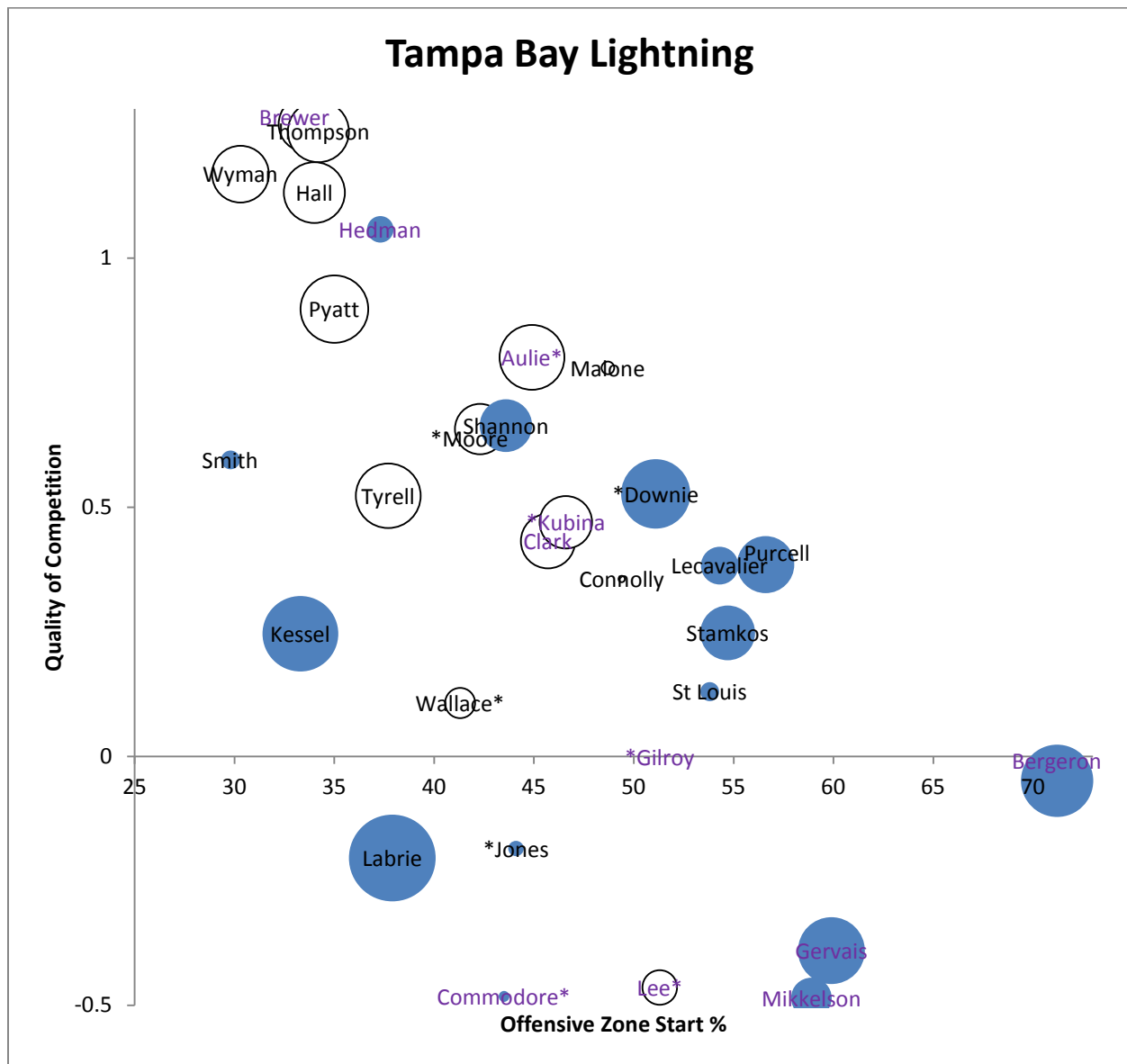
Despite playing the toughs and starting the majority of their shifts in the defensive zone virtually every night, Thornton and Pavelski dominated possession, finishing with the 22nd and 33rd best on-ice Corsi differences in the league, respectively. The issue with the Sharks was that the easier minutes Thornton and Pavelski's deployment opened up weren't going to good players. Where Pavelski, Torrey Mitchell and Kyle Wellwood had eaten the league alive from a possession standpoint with the softer minutes they were afforded as members of the Sharks' third line the year prior, Mitchell, Michal Handzus and Jamie McGinn struggled to drive the play forward for much of the year despite exclusively facing opposing bottom-six forwards and third-pairing defensemen. McGinn was dealt at the trade deadline but the resulting bottom six was only a tad more successful until rookies Tommy Wingels and Andrew Desjardins were put on a line with noted play-driver and deadline acquisition Daniel Winnik with the trio largely knocking it out of the park possession-wise in soft minutes.

On defense, the coaching staff often opted to use "situational" pairings, throwing out Marc-Edouard Vlasic with one of the team's other defense-oriented blueliners in Colin White or Douglas Murray for defensive-zone draws while Dan Boyle was often paired with Brent Burns for faceoffs in the offensive end of the rink. Primarily, though, Vlasic and Boyle were paired and took on the toughs for the majority of the year although the season opened with McLellan and company retaining the Murray/Boyle pairing they'd used for two years and deploying that duo against top competition. The real casualty of the staff's departure from that setup was Burns who enjoyed quite a bit of success when paired with Vlasic. It would be interesting to see what the two could do playing the toughest minutes on the blueline over the full season and with Murray potentially out the door after a poor season and Boyle really getting up there in years (and seeing his NTC become a limited one on July 1st--he can ask Dany Heatley about how that sometimes turns out), it's a possibility we witness that shift next year. /DT

Josh
Lile's
Take

Joe Pavelski was the Sharks best player every time I saw them.

McLellan tried to match Pavelski/Thornton against the Ribeiro line when possible to force him to play defense. It ended poorly for Dallas. /JL



Corey Sznajder's Take

Eric Brewer and Victor Hedman are the heavy-lifters on defense for the Lightning and Hedman actually outplayed Brewer when he was healthy. With Mattias Ohlund's career possibly being over, the Bolts needed someone to step in his place and it looks like Hedman is going to do that and more.

The Lightning's fall from grace this season is something that's left many people confused and part of the reason for it, in addition to horrendous goaltending, is lack of solid depth forwards. The loss of Sean Bergenheim played a huge role in this as he was one of their best tough-minute forwards last year and they tried to replace him with a committee of Tom Pyatt, Adam Hall, Nate Thompson and Ryan Shannon. Shannon actually performed well with somewhat tough minutes but the rest of the group fell flat on their faces.

The one positive thing this group gives Tampa Bay is that their top-line can start more of their draws in the offensive zone and that has paid dividends for Steven Stamkos and Teddy Purcell. Almost every Tampa Bay forward that was regularly deployed in the offensive zone drove the play well and had a solid year offensively.

Marc-Andre Bergeron was protected big time and that makes sense when you consider the type of player he is, a powerplay quarterback who is a liability in his own zone. Boucher knows that he has to protect him to be effective. Bruno Gervais, Brendan Mikkelsson and Brian Lee also played pretty easy minutes, all of whom are defensemen. I wonder if Boucher could have done that if he didn't have Brewer & Hedman. /CS

**Rob
Vollman's
Take**

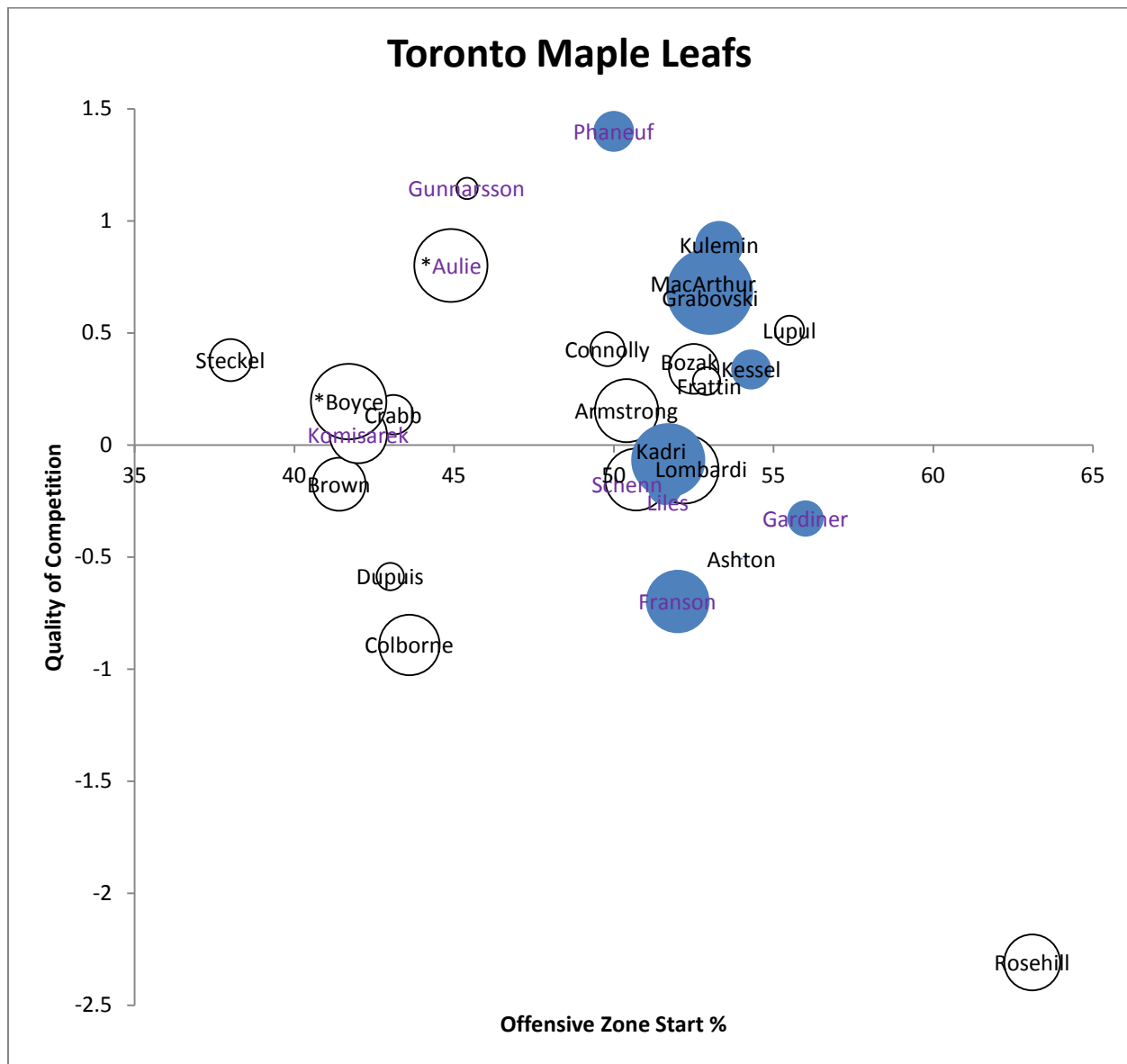
Tampa Bay's Player Usage Chart highlights how a 103-point Conference finalist with a 60-goal scorer can become an 84-point non-contender.

Tampa Bay has a classic player usage chart flowing from those playing the tough defensive minutes in the top lefthand corner to the sheltered offensive-minded players in the bottom right. Coach Guy Boucher used a handful of players to really tilt the ice to create more favourable playing circumstances for his more elite talent, which resulted in some huge offensive seasons, but also a lot of losses.

This configuration may have been an error due to the lack of quality talent to play those horrid minutes up front. While Steven Stamkos should buy steak dinners for forwards like Wyman, Thompson, Hall and Pyatt who played the tough minutes so that he could win the Maurice Richard trophy playing alongside Lecavalier, St. Louis and Purcell in the offensive zone against outclassed talent, it probably wasn't to the team's advantage because they got killed. Shannon is the one interesting statistical stand out here, enjoying a nice big blue bubble despite relatively unfavourable playing conditions.

On defense Victor Hedman stands out as having done particularly well despite the 2nd toughest job (after Eric Brewer). Brett Clark was the only other blueliner Boucher really trusted, and perhaps more than he should, but at least Bergeron, Gervais and Mikkelson all made the most of their plum assignments.

In short, Tampa Bay needs more trustworthy defensemen and either forwards that can shoulder the defensive burdens placed upon them, or a style more appropriate for a team with such narrowly concentrated skill. /RV



**Alan
Ryder's
Take**

Steckel was acquired preseason to help address the Leafs' shoddy penalty kill. He is one of the NHL's top faceoff men and was routinely trotted out for defensive zone faceoffs, whether or not short handed and more often than not against superior opposition.

Bozak, Kessel and Lupul were common linemates, until Lupul went down with an injury, and treated by the coaching staff as the 'first line'. Corsi ignores shooting results and is therefore rather tough on individuals with shooting talent – Bozak 16.5%, Lupul 13.1% and Kessel 12.5%.

A Corsi analysis suggests that the first line was really Grabovski, MacArthur and Kulemin. It certainly faced tougher opposition. But Corsi is rather apologetic to those without shooting talent. Kulemin had a brutal season, shooting 6.5%, while Grabovski (14.1%) and MacArthur (13.5%) shot well. Grabovski keeps showing up as a high relative Corsi player and has a new contract that might just be based on that data.

In spite of a strong 2010-11 season, it was not clear at the beginning of year that Gunnarsson would even make the team. He quickly settled in as Phaneuf's steady date as part of the go-to defensive pairing. Phaneuf was clearly the stronger of the two, but Gunnarsson's body of work was not shabby.

Komisarek has had difficulty living up to his big contract but, in 2011-12, he was given tougher work than Schenn, who is still trying to find his rookie season form, and did more with it.

Jake Gardiner put in a strong rookie performance. As an offensive defenseman and a rookie he was protected by coaching from tougher defensive situations. /AR

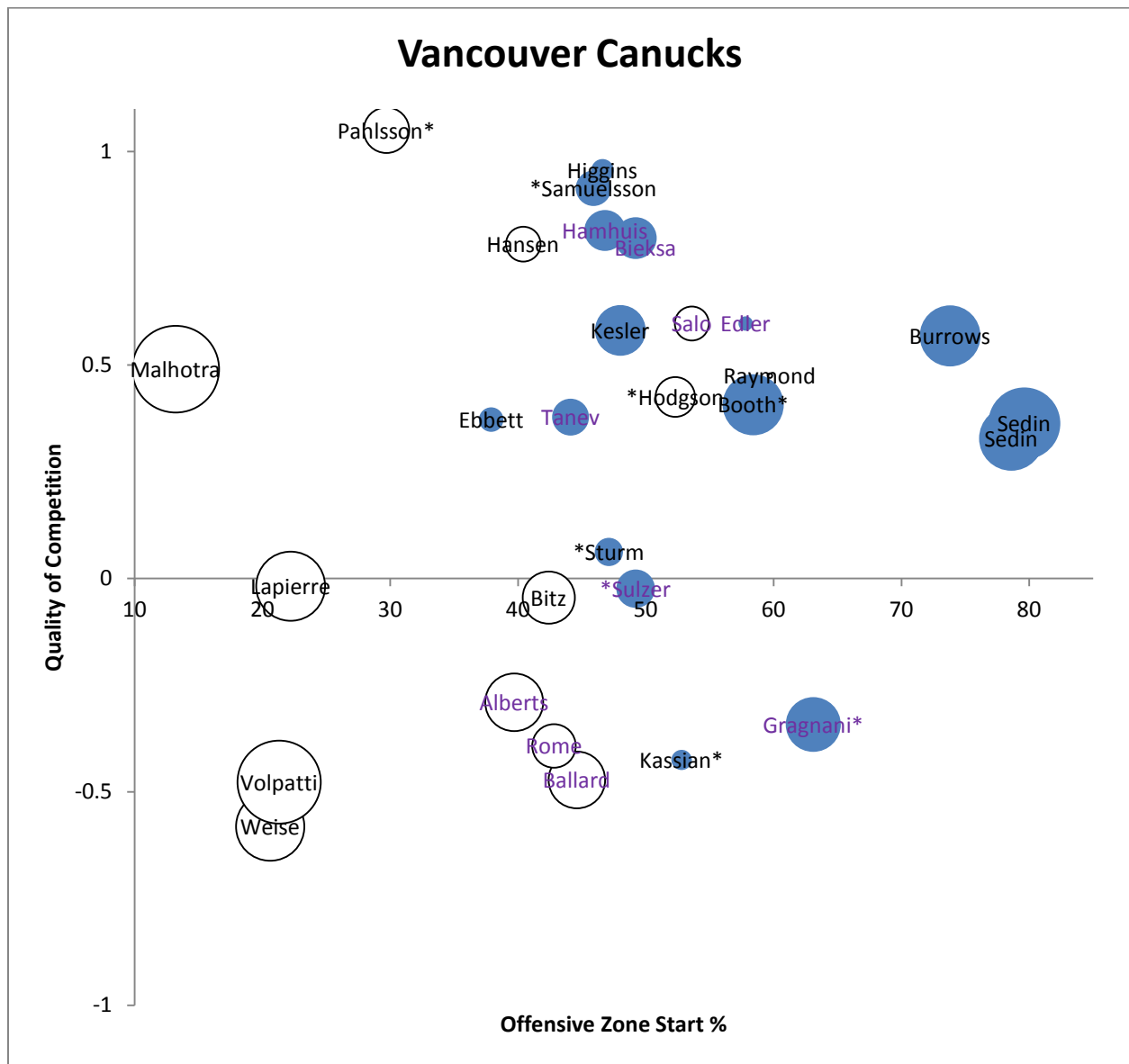
**Rob
Vollman's
Take**

Damn Jay Rosehill for stretching out the Player Usage chart even more than most strict enforcers! Yet another reason to get rid of these types of players who can't even skate a regular shift against NHL regulars in their own zone.

Forget Kessel, Lupul and gang (ok not Kessel) because the big circle you see above them is Grabovski's, with fellow top liner MacArthur in between him and Kulemin. Further down the impressive big blue circle is Kadri's with Lombardi's equally big and disappointing white circle sticking out of the side, both hiding Liles' modest Gardiner-sized blue circle.

When studying their forwards take it easy on Steckel, Crabb, Brown or Dupuis' stat sheets because while the Leafs aren't too rigid on line-matching, Wilson and/or Carlyle tilted the ice away from players like these.

Toronto certainly is a two-horse blue line (Phaneuf and Gunnarson), and Schenn is certainly the inexplicably weak link on defense - at least Komisarek's poor results can be partially explained by playing in his own zone far more often than he should have been allowed. /RV



Scott Cullen's Take

While there are accusations that the Sedins are given sheltered minutes because they get so many offensive zone starts, it's more about asset deployment. They could give Manny Malhotra more offensive zone starts, but what good would that do them? Malhotra is a defensive and face-off specialist, whose game may be even more limited since he suffered his eye injury, so the Canucks use him as much as possible in defensive situations and since the Canucks also have Ryan Kesler, Maxim Lapierre (and, after the trade deadline, Samuel Pahlsson) to handle defensive assignments, the Sedins get to focus on scoring.

That doesn't mean they are incapable of starting in the defensive zone or facing more difficult competition, but head coach Alain Vigneault is putting them in the best position to be successful and there is little evidence that it would be better for the Canucks to have the Sedins doing more heavy lifting while giving Malhotra, Lapierre or Pahlsson more offensive zone starts. /SC

**Rob
Vollman's
Take**

The league's widest zone start spread can be found in Vancouver, where coach Alain Vigneault plays certain players almost exclusively in the defensive zone so that others barely even know which cologne Roberto Luongo's wearing that night.

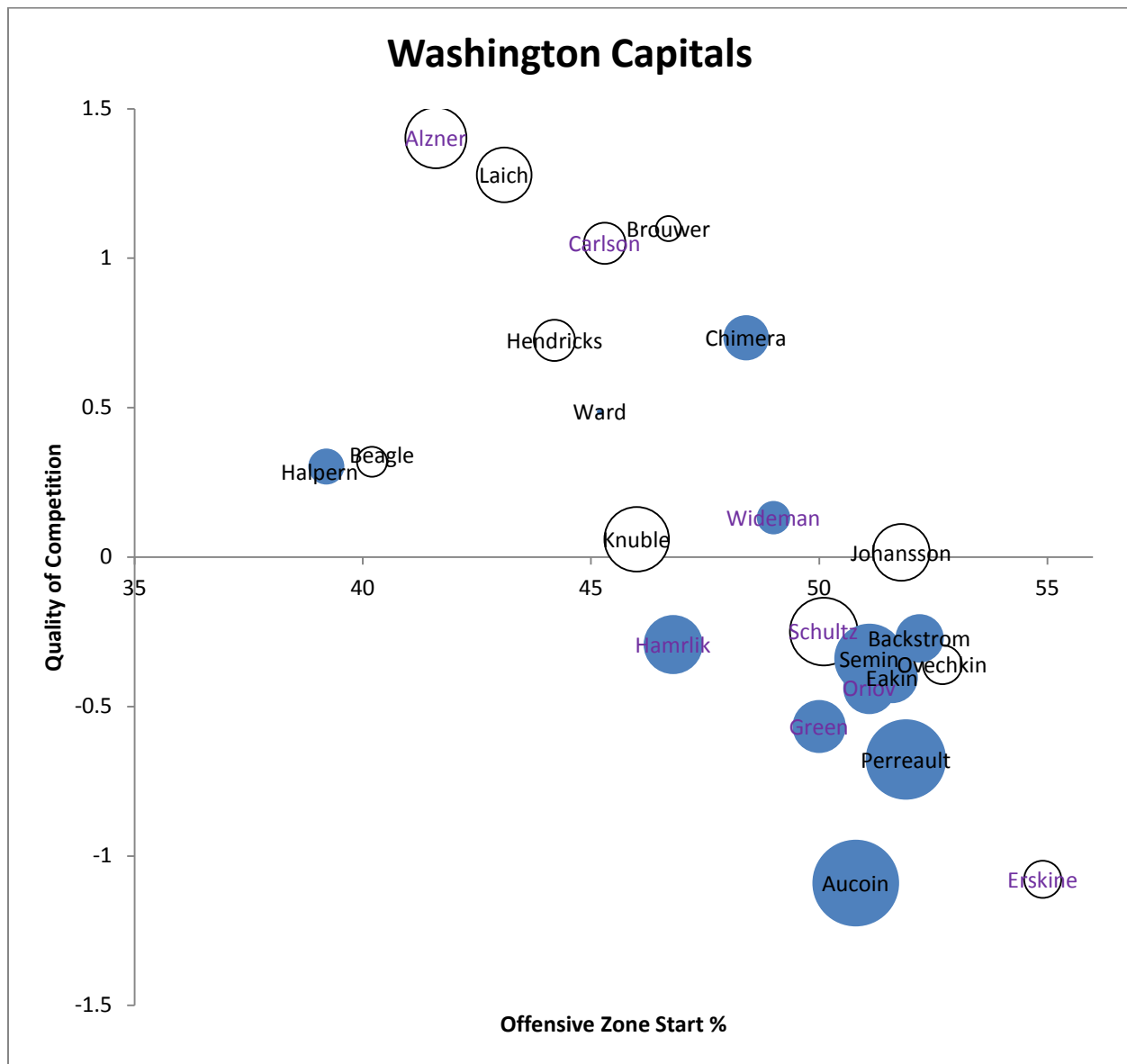
Up front players like Sami Pahlsson, Manny Malhotra, who face the top lines, secondary shutdown player Maxim Lapierre, and depth options Aaron Volpatti and Dale Weise play in their own zone almost all the time, and consequently combined for just 52 points in 270 games, which allows the top line of Alexandre Burrows and the Sedins to play almost exclusively in the offensive zone, thus earning 200 points in 233 games.

Of the remaining forwards Vancouver enjoyed the most success with two-way forward Ryan Kesler and the more offense-oriented David Booth, but you have to give credit to Chris Higgins and Jannik Hansen who improved their scoring by 15 and 10 points respectively while facing tougher competition than anyone but Pahlsson.

Beyond them they had former 25 goal scorer Mason Raymond playing offense-oriented Booth-style minutes, high scoring AHLer Andrew Ebbett filled in for 18 games in a balanced secondary role, and rookie Zack Kassian was a sheltered depth option in both Buffalo and Vancouver.

On defense Dan Hamhuis and Kevin Bieksa were a very effective two-way top pairing, with the top-four rounded out by offense-oriented Alexander Edler's bounce-back 49 point season and a tough year from 37-year-old Sami Salo, the only defensemen in the top four with whom the team was at a shot-based disadvantage. Perhaps 22-year-old Chris Tanev, who did well in occasional top-four situations in his 25-game stint, will take his place next season.

Though highly sheltered, newly acquired Marc-Andre Gagnani was the most promising of the depth defensemen given that every one of their arsenal of big, tough, defense-oriented veteran 3rd liners Andrew Alberts, Aaron Rome and Keith Ballard ended below water possession-wise, and contributed just 20 points in their 134 combined games. /RV



**Jon
Press'
Take**

First thing to note is that this represents the deployments of and performance under two different coaches, with roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the season coming under Dale Hunter after the last 22 games of Bruce Boudreau's tenure.

For Boudreau, it was Laich-Chimera-Ward getting the tough assignments and zone starts. Hunter put Beagle, Hendricks and Brouwer into the tough-minute mix, but part of that owes to the drastic change in possession numbers between the two coaches – the percentage of overall O-zone starts dropped dramatically under Hunter, and you can see it reflected in the fact that even the top O-zone start percentages here top out below

55%. For Boudreau, they were just under one more O-zone start than D-zone start per game at 5v5; under Hunter, they were around 4.5 more D-zone starts per game than O-zone.

Aucoin and Perreault did very well in sheltered minutes. Erskine did not. And Halpern did fantastically in tough minutes. Alzner and Laich, too, for that matter, despite the negative Corsi numbers. For those two guys, those numbers were amassed in awfully hard minutes while learning and implementing a system that was either

indifferent to puck possession or was simply unable to generate it particularly well. “Hunter Hockey” didn’t do a lot of guys’ zone starts or Corsi ratings any favors.

There are two significant disappointments here in terms of performance, and those would be Ovechkin and Johansson, who got favorable zone starts and not particularly tough competition and were still beaten up in possession. Ovechkin used to be a dominant player in terms of possession, but has fallen off the table; Johansson is weak on the puck and makes bad decisions with it, but is still quite young. The common thread? Johansson spent a huge chunk of the season centering Ovechkin while Nicklas Backstrom was sidelined with his concussion. Whether the anchor was Ovechkin, Johansson, Hunter’s system, or, more likely, a combination of the three, it’s safe to say that Backstrom’s injury was fairly devastating to the team.

Contrary to popular belief, Roman Hamrlik can still play. /JP

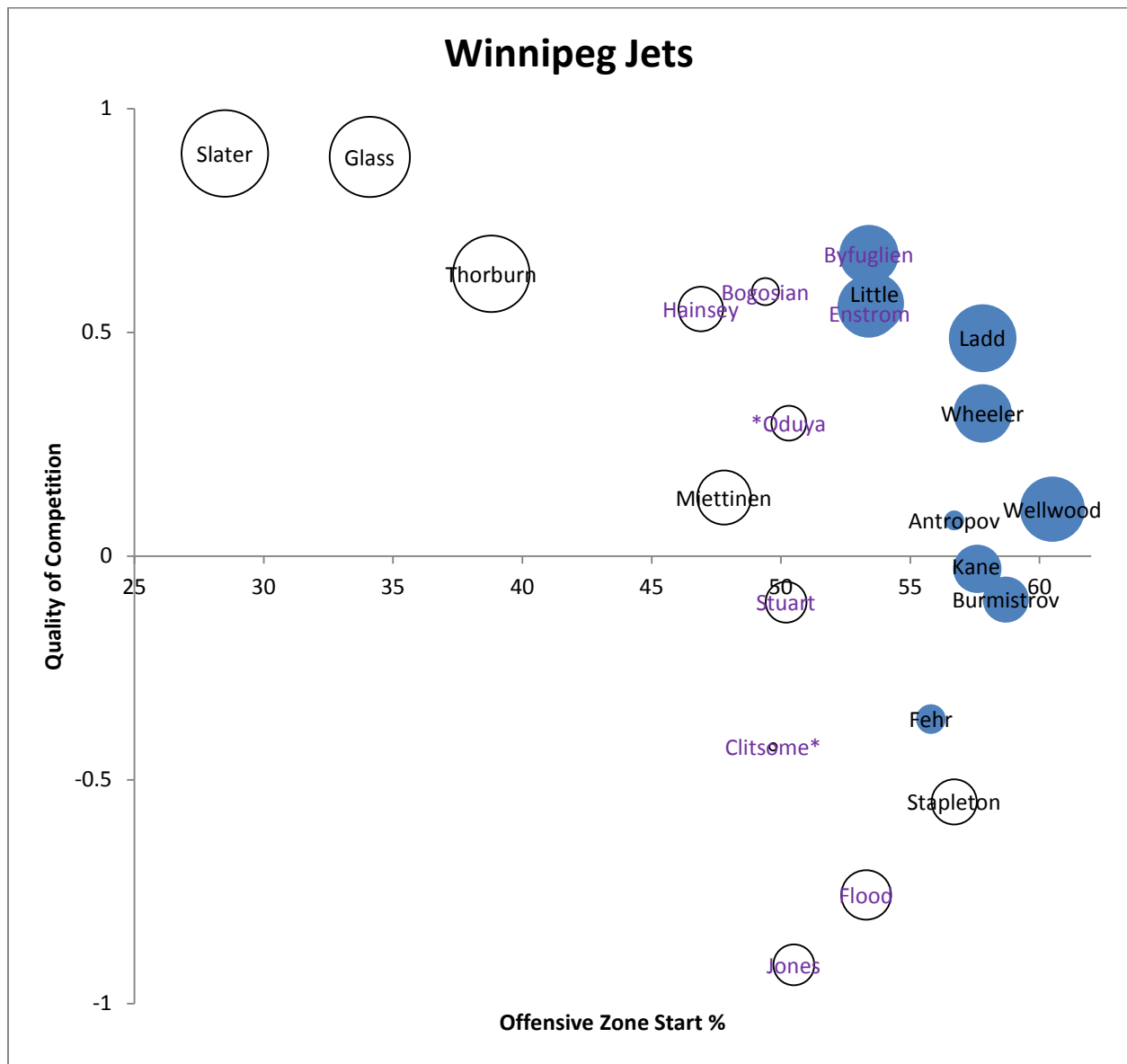
Corey
Sznajder’s
Take

It appears that both Hunter & Boudreau were protecting their star players to an extent instead of doing the whole power vs. power thing. The Caps, as a whole, struggled at driving the play forward this year but Backstrom, Ovechkin & Semin still managed to start the majority of their shifts in the offensive zone.

Something that interests me is that most of the players who were used in the offensive zone regularly faced below average competition while it was the complete opposite for guys who started more of their shifts in the defensive zone. The guys who appear to be doing the bulk of the heavy-lifting are John Carlson, Brooks Laich, Troy Brouwer, Jason

Chimera and...Matt Hendricks? Strange but that’s apparently what’s been going on. Just about every defenseman other than Alzner/Carlson were sheltered somewhat, too.

The most talked about thing in the stat-community was the misuse of Joel Ward by Dale Hunter because a player like him is best suited for a shutdown role, but he was regulated to fourth line duty in Washington. He didn’t get nearly as much defensive responsibility as the likes of Jeff Halpern or Jay Beagle. It also looks like those two handled just about all of the d-zone faceoffs. /CS



**Alex
Hemsky's
Take**

For the forwards Claude Noel tried to put a collection of 4th liners in Slater, Glass and Chris Thorburn (lovingly known as the GST line in Winnipeg) into an elite checking line with very tough competition and zone starts. The results were some of the worst Corsi numbers in the entire league. While this line was beloved by many fans in the city, most Jets fans who pay attention to the advanced numbers would sooner send the team back to Atlanta than watch another season of these 3.

Beyond that Noel seemed to use his veterans against the other teams better lines - the top line of Little, Ladd & Wheeler saw the toughest competition, with Antropov and Wellwood not far behind. Young players Kane & Burmistrov saw somewhat sheltered minutes.

For the defenseman the top 4 of Byfuglien, Enstrom, Bogosian & Hainsey all saw similarly tough competition. The 3rd pairing usually included an inept Randy Jones and was wisely sheltered with easier minutes and zone starts. Mark Stuart, although a fan favorite, fared similarly to Jones in Corsi. He was usually either put on the 3rd pairing, or bumped up higher in the lineup when injuries to the top 4 occurred.

Although Byfuglien does get a bad rap for his defensive play, he did see the toughest competition of all the Jets defensemen (by a very slight margin) and was 2nd in Corsi. Byfuglien and Enstrom were paired together when healthy, and were often deployed alongside Little, Ladd & Wheeler as a 5 man unit. /AH

**Corey
Sznajder's
Take**

Claude Noel is from the Vigneault coaching tree, so it isn't surprising to see him utilize the "Malhotra/Sedin" method with this third line & top-six respectively. Jim Slater, Chris Thorburn and Tanner Glass aren't expected to drive the play or gauge possession at all. They are just expected not to get killed in their own zone while their top-six gets to feast on the offensive zone draws. Although, the only forwards who are getting protected a large amount are Evander Kane, Alex Burmistrov, Kyle Wellwood and Tim Stapleton. It's been said that Wellwood's had a career revival this season but that's largely because of how he was used. Blake Wheeler has also enjoyed having more offensive zone starts, too but it's tough to say that he was protected.

On that subject, there has also been a lot of discussion about Dustin Byfuglien and his success with the Thrashers/Jets, but that is mainly because he's not being forced to play a shutdown role. That has been the duty of young Zach Bogosian. He and Tobias Enstrom aren't being protected nearly as much as guys like Randy Jones & Mark Flood, though. /CS

About Us

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Alex Calloway covers prospects and the Florida Panthers for Litter Box Cats and can be followed at @CrooklynBanks.

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Matthew Coller of WGR550 in Buffalo is host of Hockey Prospectus Radio, and can be followed at @MatthewColler.

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One of the foremost statistical hockey analysts in mainstream media, Scott Cullen is the numbers guy for TSN.ca providing NHL power rankings, player rankings, blogs and fantasy analysis, and can be followed at @tsnscottcullen.

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All three primary components of Player Usage Charts are taken directly from Gabriel Desjardins' invaluable Behind the Net web site. He also runs Arctic Ice Hockey, a Winnipeg Jets fan site, and can be followed at @BehindTheNet.

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Stand-up comedian Sam Fels, editor of Chicago's hilarious The Committed Indian paper and Second City Hockey web site, which can be followed at @2ndCityHockey.

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The raw data for the components of Player Usage Charts come from Vic Ferrari's indispensable timeonice.com web site, which parses NHL game data into usable aggregates.

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