

Up and Coming

Evaluating Central Scouting

by Iain Fyffe

The Central Scouting Bureau has been around since 1975, and serves to rank draft prospects to give NHL teams a centralized opinion on available players. The bureau's rankings also serve to give outsiders a glimpse into insider impressions of prospects. You might wonder how relevant these rankings are, and how well they inform the actual draft. Let's have a brief look.

Central Scouting releases rankings at the beginning of the hockey season, in midseason, and a final ranking before the draft. There are four categories, each ranked separately: North American skaters, North American goaltenders, European skaters and European goaltenders. No overall ranking of players is done. This categorization certainly reduces the usefulness of the rankings. They are also puzzling to a degree; Central Scouting can rank defensemen against forwards, but not goaltenders against defensemen? The North American/European split makes sense at least, because they use different scouting staffs for either side of the Atlantic, although this again points to a limitation in their methods. Indeed, this is a limitation of traditional scouting in its entirety, since no one scout sees all players being evaluated.

The number of players drafted in each category has been remarkably consistent in recent years. A typical draft of 211 players will feature 156 North American skaters, 33 European skaters, 16 North American goaltenders and 5 European goaltenders. A summary of the last four draft years follows:

Summary of players drafted, 2007-2010

Category	2007	2008	2009	2010	Average
North American skaters	161	154	155	154	156.0
European skaters	30	34	35	35	33.5
North American goaltenders	14	18	15	16	15.8
European goaltenders	6	5	6	5	5.5
Total	211	211	211	210	210.8

With this degree of consistency, it should be relatively easy for Central Scouting to determine how many players of each category should be ranked, in order to cover at least the great majority of players that NHL teams might be interested in drafting. But it seems they don't have a good handle on this. In 2008, Central Scouting ranked 60 European skaters. In 2009, they ranked 200 European skaters. In 2010, they ranked 150. Given that no more than 35 such skaters are drafted each year, 150 seems like overkill. After all, they only rank 210 North American skaters, which is expected to cover 155 draftees (it doesn't, as we'll see).

This strongly suggests that the lowest-ranked European skater does not match the quality of the lowest-ranked North Americans, which makes equating the lists difficult. It seems they don't stop when they reach a certain minimum level of quality; apparently an arbitrary number is decided and the lists filled until that is reached. Again, this is likely due to having two different groups of scouts rating North American players and Europeans.

Ranked and Unranked Draftees

How well do the players ranked by **Central Scouting** cover the players that actually get drafted? In 2010, of the 210 players that were ultimately drafted only 174 (or 83%) appeared on the ranking lists. One in six drafted players were not ranked by **Central Scouting**, despite having nearly twice as many players ranked as would be needed to fill a draft.

Percentage of unranked players drafted

Category	Ranked	Not Ranked	% Not Ranked
North American skaters	126	28	18.2%
European skaters	29	6	17.1%
North American goaltenders	15	1	6.3%
European goaltenders	4	1	20.0%
Total	174	36	17.1%

Although it would seem the percentage of unranked players is very similar for skaters on both sides of the Atlantic, if you think about it, you see that **Central Scouting** does a much poorer job with the Europeans. A certain amount of inaccuracy is to be expected among North American skaters, since only 210 players are ranked, and 154 were drafted in 2010. They left themselves with a very small margin for error, so it's not surprising there were a number of unranked North Americans drafted.

But with the European skaters, over four times the number of players were ranked as were actually drafted. Even still, one out of six such drafted players were not ranked by **Central Scouting**. There's little point in ranking so many superfluous players if you're still going to miss so many draftworthy players.

These percentages do exaggerate the degree to which these unranked players come into play in the draft. Ben Gallacher was the first unranked player chosen, almost half way through the 2010 draft at 93rd overall by Florida. The Panthers selected two more unranked players in later rounds, which left them in a tie with the Canucks with three maverick picks each. It seems clear that **Central Scouting** needs to rank more North American skaters, and less European ones. Ranking more than 60 or so from across the Atlantic would seem to be a wasted effort, assuming that the ones you do evaluate are truly the best available.

Integrating the Player Categories

Any real analysis involving **Central Scouting**'s player ranking is hindered by the fact that there are actually four sets of rankings: North American and European rankings for both skaters and goaltenders. To overcome this obstacle, we should have a system to integrate the four lists into one.

Such a system will never be absolutely precise, but having an approximation is far better than having nothing at all. Such was the impetus for the **Central Scouting** Integrator, or CeScIn (CSI was taken), or Cescin. Using this simple -inator you can combine the four **Central Scouting** lists into a single ranking.

We know that a draft is currently comprised of 210 selections, and that 156 of these selections are expected to be North American skaters (see above). Therefore, we multiply a North American skater's **Central Scouting** ranking by 1.35 (210 divided by 156), rounding down, to arrive at his Cescin ranking. This operation is repeated for each category of player, with Cescin factors calculated as follows:

Cescin factors for translating Central Scouting rankings

Category	Factor
-----------------	---------------

North American skaters	1.35
European skaters	6.27
North American goaltenders	13.29
European goaltenders	38.18

Obviously, this system means that the number one rated player will always be a North American skater, and that no European goaltender will ever be ranked as a first-round draft pick. Such imprecision is not a death blow to the validity of Cescin, as long as you bear the limitations in mind when using it in your analysis.

Based on the results of the 2010 Entry Draft, at least, it seems that Cescin is quite decent. The top European players as ranked by [Central Scouting](#) were Mikael Granlund, Vladimir Tarasenko and Evgeny Kusnetsov, who would be ranked sixth, 12th and 18th by Cescin, they were in fact drafted ninth, 16th and 26th overall, very close to the Cescin rankings. In future *Up and Coming* articles, we'll be making use of the Integrator to run some analysis on how teams perform at the draft versus expectations.