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Capt'n Koivu Is Having A Career Season. Leave The 'C.'



By [Heather Rule](#) - February 20, 2017

Sports are filled with milestones. Some are statistically significant, while others are just arbitrary thanks to round numbers. Either way, they can be a gauge of how athletes are performing. Hitting 40 home runs in a single major league baseball season is quite the milestone. As the games and points stack up for NHL players, 100 points might be considered a milestone. Or 600 points.

Two Minnesota Wild players reached those marks in Saturday's 5-2 home victory over the Nashville Predators. Jason Zucker, in his sixth NHL season (with some minor-league and injury time in there, too), hit 100 career points, while elder teammate and captain Mikko Koivu hit 600 points in his 12-year career.

WITH THE TYPE OF YEAR HE AND THE WILD ARE HAVING, THE "STRIP THE C" CROWD HAS BEEN NOTICEABLY SILENT.

Koivu might be having the best year of NHL tenure, with 17 goals (already matching last year's total) and 27 assists for 44 points putting him third on the team behind Mikhael Granlund (53) and Eric Staal (45).

Koivu's plus/minus rating is on pace to be the best of his career by far at 32; his best was 13 in 2007-08. Actually, five of the top six spots on the plus-minus list among NHL leaders are Wild players. Koivu is fourth behind Ryan Suter (35), Jason Zucker (34) and Jared Spurgeon (33). Granlund is plus-31.

With the type of year he and the Wild are having, the "strip the C" crowd has been noticeably silent. During Koivu's past struggles, some fans turned on Captain Finn and wanted the "C" noting his captain status forcibly removed from his Wild jerseys.

It's not that they didn't have a point in criticizing him. He is often described as a third-line center. Perhaps expectations were set too high with putting him on the first line. It's not like their teams have had a lot of depth in this position though, so the first line was his spot, for better or worse.

He really shines in the faceoff circle, which some might overlook because it's not a bright, shiny stat like goals.

Like many Wild players this season though, Koivu is on top of his game. He's playing the best hockey of his career, creating scoring chances and being a consistent goal scorer. The 33-year-old Finnish player was also drafted by Minnesota, taken sixth overall in the first round of the 2001 draft. It's a bit of a throwback, really, that he's played his entire career until this point with just one team. That just doesn't happen much anymore.

He really shines in the faceoff circle, which some might overlook because it's not a bright, shiny stat like goals. He's won 55 percent of draws this season, ranked fifth in the NHL. That's 689 times he's given his team a head start on the play.

When Koivu wasn't playing too well, or just having average seasons, the fans got feisty. Whether it was his lack of offensive production during a losing streak, or the fact that his seven-year contract

for \$47.25 million was taking up salary cap space, some people wanted to “strip the C.”

He made some progress last season for 56 points. It's probably safe to say many have changed their tune about him this year, since the trio of him with Zucker and Granlund looks unstoppable. Plus, Koivu is just playing well. Stats aside, he's noticeable during games. He makes good plays and doesn't induce eye rolling.

Like the rest of the Wild this year, he's been just one more thing that's been fun to watch.

Maybe Koivu will have some more hockey milestones before his career winds down. It could be playing in 1,000 games or reaching 700 points. Whatever it is, he'll be the guy on the ice in the No. 9 jersey, winning faceoffs and setting up goals.

HEATHER RULE



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