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Seeing the Good Side of Jason Zucker

By [Heather Rule](#) - March 6, 2017

Jason Zucker is finally getting the kudos he deserves.

Zucker was scratched for two games in March 2016. This was, of course, under interim coach John Torchetti who apparently wanted to let Zucker know his game left something to be desired. Before that during the Mike Yeo era, Zucker was the one riding the I-35 train to Iowa.

Here's where some lame cliché about a year is avoided and instead let's just say it's nice to see Zucker having an outstanding season.

The 25-year-old has already shattered his career-high points total with 43 points so far with 20 games left in the regular season. He's tied for second on the Wild with 20 goals, one off of his career-high of 21 two years ago, and a career-high 23 assists. He only registered 10 helpers in 71 games last season. His numbers last year: 13-10-23.

Oh, and he's a +32 after finishing in the minus column the past two seasons.

There have been many highlight-reel goals for him this season, which in some ways feels like a long time coming.

He's found a home on a line centered by Mikko Koivu and opposite Mikael Granlund on the wing. All three of them are performing extremely well this season. With the line's success, Bruce Boudreau deserves some kind of line-combo award for putting these guys together.

Last week, the Wild played Winnipeg coming out of the bye week and were dealt a blow when Zach Parise and Jason Pominville went down with the mumps. The Wild beat the bye-week-hangover odds and became the fourth team to win their first game back.

Zucker scored the game-winner in that 6-5 victory. It was a short-handed goal with 2:10 left in the game. Yes, it was not the Wild's finest hour, since they were up 5-2 and eventually needed a goalie change – their first of the year and the last NHL team to do so – before getting the two points. Erik Haula got a lead pass and went into the zone alone.

Zucker jumped off the bench and into the play, banging his stick on the ice entering the zone, signaling his stick-tap plea for Haula to send the puck his way. Zucker was all alone and buried it.

The next night, he was a partial hero again, scoring the last tying goal in the third period before Granlund dazzled and beat three opposing players to score the game-winner just 12 seconds into overtime for a 5-4 victory. Again, the Wild weren't necessarily at their best, needing a few comebacks. But as they've done all season, they didn't go away and found a way to win. Zucker's spin-around goal was a part of that.

There have been many highlight-reel goals for him this season, which in some ways feels like a long time coming. But again, it's been quite the turnaround for Zucker. He was considered to be a bust among the young "kids" on the Wild roster that wasn't living up to the potential or the hype.

He also brought an offensive mindset to a team that routinely sent three players behind the goal line as a way to set up in the offensive zone.

It's not that Zucker's made a steady climb to the top or anything. He's had injury issues and definitely underachieved last year after he scored 21 goals in 51 games in 2014-15. He only scored 13 goals last year. Still, it seemed like he was the guy who got singled out. He was one of the healthy scratches when Yeo desperately tried to shake things up during the midseason swoon, winter 2016 edition. No one was really that great during that stretch, so it still struck an odd chord when Zucker was the chosen one.

The knock on him was not being able to play two-way hockey. It's understandable that his defense took the brunt of criticism. Of course, the easy argument against that is he's a forward and not a defenseman.

The other thing with him was his speed helped garner some breakaways, but then he couldn't finish.

Once he started getting some time in the NHL, speed was a very noticeable asset. He also brought an offensive mindset to a team that routinely sent three players behind the goal line as a way to set up in the offensive zone. Instead of constant passes and dump-and-chase, Zucker often had a shooting mentality. There's obviously more to the game than just driving the net and taking shots, but it was a welcomed change from the norm sometimes.

Maybe it took a new coach to change things for Zucker, like seems to be the case for the team in general. Maybe it really was that line combination with Koivu and Granlund. Maybe he finally got the confidence.

Whatever happened, there's no doubt this is the best year of Zucker's still-young career. A healthy scratch doesn't seem to be in his cards in the near future.

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