

**May 12, 2013**

Written by Thomas Drance

Sunday, 12 May 2013 03:22 - Last Updated Sunday, 12 May 2013 18:42

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I found it a bit unnerving that there was only a single NHL game on Saturday. Thankfully game six of the Islanders/Penguins series (a series affectionately referred to on Twitter as the Penislanders series) delivered, and then some, with a 4-3 overtime thriller. Still the single game slate served as a reminder that the season is beginning to wind down, which is pretty much the worst. There's still some riveting stories left to be told and some exciting hockey left to be played, but once the Cup is hoisted in mid-to-late June, this lockout shortened season will have felt altogether too short.

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There's no doubt about it: the Penguins/Islanders series deserved a seventh game. The Islanders controlled play for most of the game on Saturday night, and according to Cory Sznajder (who is [a must follow on Twitter](#)) generated 24 quality looks against Tomas Vokoun while surrendering only ten against. They still lost, presumably because the hockey god's hate Charles Wang and fair enough.

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In all seriousness, after a Cinderella year the Islanders deserved better, but that's playoff hockey for you. Ultimately if your goaltender saves less than 80% of the shots he faces while short-handed and fewer than 85% of the shots he faces overall - you're not going to last seven games in a playoff series.

\*

Besides John Tavares, Josh Bailey was probably New York's best forward in the Pittsburgh series, which I'll admit surprised me an awful lot. I've never been particularly impressed by his underlying numbers nor has he previously wowed me by the eye test, but he played some stellar hockey over the past ten days and on Saturday night in particular.

\*

We all know that Garth Snow constructed this Islanders team by taking liberal advantage of the waiver wire (and his club's habitual place at the top of the priority list). But his best move of the past few years (and taking Tavares first overall doesn't count since it was a slam dunk) was by far the Lubomir Visnovsky trade in my view. Visnovsky was dynamite on Saturday as he has been all season long. Though the team had to fight with Visnovsky to get him to report (similar to what the club went through with Nabokov, you may recall) he was their best defenceman this past season by a fair bit. Consider this: in "score close" situations this season, the Islanders scored 66 goals and surrendered 65 against. In "score close" situations with Lubomir Visnovsky on the ice, the Islanders scored 26 goals and permitted only 11. Those are absurd numbers, and it's crazy in retrospect that Snow managed to acquire a legitimate top-pairing defenceman for a second round pick. Hell, Ray Shero spent twice that much and all he got was Douglas Murray!

\*

There's lots of "Evgeni Malkin doesn't have heart" chatter out there in the hockey broadcast ether, most of it based on cherry-picked video clips of Malkin dogging it on a line-change or having a tough defensive shift. Whatever. Name me an active player who has put together a better postseason than Malkin did when the Penguins won the Stanley Cup in 2008/09. You just can't (though for my money Anze Kopitar in 2011/12 was close). My point is that Malkin knows how to win, is a more talented player of hockey than all but a select few other human persons on the planet, and will continue to light it up so long as Pittsburgh remains alive in the postseason...

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Last night the schedule may have been relatively barren, but today we've got a delicious triple header. The Rangers and Capitals will open the proceedings at 4:30 PM/1:30 PST at Madison Square Garden, where the Rangers are facing elimination. I liked the Rangers going into this series, and I still do, but I still expect a tense sixth game.

\*

After the Rangers/Caps game, we've got the Bruins in Toronto for a game six (7 PM EST, 4 PM PST) that I think very few people expected would be necessary (myself included). I've been covering this series for the Sporting News, and as a hockey fan have really enjoyed soaking up the atmosphere and tension at the Air Canada Centre over the past week. I'm expecting another fun, fast paced game on Sunday.

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[A bit earlier this week I wrote about Randy Carlyle stumbling into a formidable top-four](#) after

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Mark Fraser was struck in the forehead by a puck in game four of this series. I've seen Fraser play an awful lot of hockey over the past few years and have a lot of respect for his on-ice snarl in particular. Needless to say I hope he makes a full recovery in time for next season. That said, if the Leafs manage to force a seventh game against Boston, Fraser's injury will have been the major turning point in the series. The reason? Once Fraser went down, Carlyle had no other option but to lean on Jake Gardiner in a top-four role. Eating up huge minutes the past two games, Jake Gardiner has pushed Toronto's transition game to another stratosphere. This Leafs team isn't really ready to contend seriously yet, obviously, but with a Franson-Gardiner second pairing they can skate with anybody at five-on-five and that includes Boston at TD BankNorth.

\*

Speaking of Boston, until Zdeno Chara loses a step (or four) he should be a slam dunk Norris trophy nominee every season. Suter's the sexy pick because he played a tonne of minutes, but come on. Drew Doughty is probably the best human defenceman in the National Hockey League, but Chara's the best defenceman. Guy is nails.

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To the surprise of nobody, the three blueliners who led the league in points were the three Norris nominees this season (Suter, Subban, Letang). It's time to have an award for best

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offensive defenceman and best defensive defenceman, in my view. The Bobby Orr Trophy and the Norris. Let's split it up so that guys like M.E. Vlasic, Drew Doughty (in a season where he's not that productive offensively) or Dan Hamhuis can have a hope in hell of getting recognized for their work shutting down the opposition.

\*

Finally the night cap is game seven of the Western Conference Quarterfinal series between the Red Wings and Ducks at 10:30 PM EST, 7:30 PM PST. What a crazy series that has been. I thought Detroit would win pretty handily, but they've needed two quick over-time wins to even force game seven in the first place. I don't bet against Datsyuk in game sevens, and I'm not going to start now.

\*

Considering how poorly Nabokov played in the first round, you have to wonder if it's possible that they might get in on the Roberto Luongo bidding this summer. Or at least, you certainly had to after Bob McKenzie advocated for them to do just that during the second intermission panel on the TSN broadcast Saturday night.

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I actually think Roberto Luongo makes a lot of hockey sense for every New York based team that doesn't employ Henrik Lundqvist already, frankly. The rub obviously will be whether or not either notably thrifty franchise has the financial wherewithal (or the willingness) to swallow the Strombonian one's poison pill contract...

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One other club that would, I think, make good sense for Luongo is St. Louis. This isn't hyperbole: if you put Luongo behind that Blues defense literally no one would score on them ever again.

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There are no second round matchups set out West yet, but we do know that the Penguins and the Senators will face off in the Eastern Conference semi-final. That series is chalk full of upset potential in my view, as the Senators are the better puck possession club with the better goaltender. Containing the Pittsburgh power-play will be a huge challenge for Ottawa (though having the league's best penalty-kill in terms of conversion rate this season could be helpful), but I see a series against the Penguins as very winnable for the Kanata based upstarts. In fact, I think I'll go on the record and take the Senators to win in six.