Now that we're in the holiday season, I now have some precious free time to do what I enjoy the most: talk some fantasy hockey. The 2008 year was full of newsworthy events in the hockey world. Evgeni Malkin staked his claim as the best hockey player in the world with a tremendous 2008, ascending to the top of Dobber's Keeper-League Player Rankings. Simon Gagne returned from a severe concussion to spark a potent Flyers attack. Sensational sophomore Pat Kane is leading the rebuild in the Windy City, and the Hawks are currently a playoff club in the always-tough Western Conference. Here are my 10 biggest surprises (good and bad), my Unleashed Players of the Year, and of course some Mats Sundin talk!

My 10 Biggest Surprises of 2008

10. We will start the list off with **the return of Simon Gagne**. Gagne missed most of last season with a severe concussion, and there were doubts about him ever returning to play in the NHL. He has been on fire since returning at the end of 2008. He currently is on pace for 99 points and over 40 goals, helping to lead a very potent offense in Philadelphia. The concussion issues will always hang over Gagne, and must be kept in mind in the fantasy world, but it sure is nice to see him back and ripping it up.

9. Checking in at number nine is **the Ottawa Senators' freefall** from elite status to bottom-feeder. Ottawa finished off an inconsistent 2007-2008 with a playoff berth, but were quickly dispatched by the eventual Eastern Conference Champion Pittsburgh Penguins in four games. The Senators have been awful to start the 2008-2009 campaign, with the solid play of Alex Auld being the lone bright spot. Jason Spezza has become the scapegoat of the media as well as coach Craig Hartsburg, who looks to be in way over his head. It doesn't help that the Senators secondary scoring has all but vanished, with Mike Fisher and Antoine Vermette both slumping.

8. **The emergence of David Krejci** has probably taken even the most optimistic of Bruins fans by surprise, and he checks in at number eight. Krejci filled in last season for the injured Patrice Bergeron on the second line and earned rave reviews for his smart, steady play at both ends of the ice. He never really took off offensively until later in 2008, and Krejci currently has 33 points through 32 games (as of December 21st). The Bruins are the class of the East right now thanks to great team depth, and Krejci is a big part of that. His offensive potential is sky high, so if you have a Bruins fan you know who keeps talking about Krejci, it may be time to start listening. With Patrice Bergeron's latest injury (presumed to be a concussion), it looks like Krejci will see even more responsibility.

7. **Roberto Luongo and Martin Brodeur each going down with long-term injuries** has added a twist to the Vezina race this season. If these injuries occurred in 2010, Team Canada would be in a world of hurt as they are far and away the two best goalies from Canada (and the world, for that matter). Brodeur isn't expected back until early March, while Luongo remains week-to-week, but it probably will end up being a month-to-month injury. It seems that star goalies have been having a rough go of it this season, even workhorses like these two. Luongo has played in 73 or more games each of the past four seasons, while Brodeur has played in 70 or more since 1996 (with one 67 game season in the mix). In addition to Luongo and Brodeur going down, Evgeni Nabokov has been hurt, and Marty Turco might as well be hurt the way he has been playing. The Devils have played very well in Brodeur's absence, while the Canucks have yet to receive the consistent goaltending from either Curtis Sanford or Cory Schneider that Scott Clemmenson has been providing New Jersey.

6. **Nicklas Lidstrom's reign as king of defensemen** checks in at number six. Lidstrom, unarguably the best defenseman of the past 25 years, won his third straight trophy in 2008, continuing an incredible run that has seen him win six of the last seven trophies. He led the Red Wings to yet another Stanley Cup, firmly cementing his place among the greatest of all-time at any position. Lidstrom has been very good this season, but it appears that age is beginning to catch up to him. With all of the young talent in the league, Lidstrom may be in tough to keep his Norris streak going.

5. **Jaromir Jagr leaving the NHL** didn't really get the attention it deserved, and I am not exactly sure why. Perhaps the greatest European skater ever, Jagr left to little fanfare or media attention. Is he gone for good? I have a sneaking suspicion that we will see him somewhere in the NHL before he officially hangs them up, but if not it was a very low-key farewell to one of the most exciting and dangerous forwards of all-time. The Rangers definitely miss both his leadership and offense, as they have been in tough to score goals this season without him,

sitting 26th in the league with a measly 2.44 goals-per-game.

4. **The circus rolled in to Tampa Bay** when Oren Koules and Len Barrie purchased the team last season. They convinced Dan Boyle to sign a long-term contract by giving him a no-trade clause, but they ended up forcing him to accept a trade out west to San Jose. I wonder if Boyle still regrets leaving Tampa Bay for San Jose? The two owners then hired Barry Melrose from ESPN, while at the same time criticizing former coach John Tortorella for becoming a television commentator. Melrose and the team parted ways after an awful start, and the team has continued to struggle under Rick Tocchet. The Lightning are last in the league with 2.22 goals-per-game, and free agent signing Radim Vrbata hated things so much that he left his contract in Tampa Bay to go and play in the Czech Republic. I wonder how long until Al Strachan starts up the Lecavalier-to-Montreal trade rumors again…

3. **The Mats Sundin saga** kept a fairly low-key NHL off-season interesting, and now that it is finally over (Sundin signed with the Canucks, in case you live under a rock), it is worth looking back. To be honest, doesn't it seem a bit weird that Sundin has actually made a decision? Keep February 21st, 2009 marked in your calendar, as that is when Sundin and the Canucks pay a visit to the Air Canada Centre in Toronto.

2. **Evgeni Malkin** carried the Crosby-less Penguins into the post-season in 2008, and he continued to help carry the load once Sid the Kid returned. Malkin's effortless skating and wizardry with the puck have earned some comparisons to former Hab great Jean Beliveau. Malkin is currently on pace for a whopping 140 points, leading Crosby, and the rest of the NHL, in scoring. It is with little surprise that Malkin is my choice for Unleashed Player of the Year. He proved that he doesn't just belong with the best in the game; he stands alone. That title will probably bounce back and forth for the next decade between Malkin, Crosby, and Ovechkin.

1. A change we can believe in. The year 2008 will go down in history as Barack Obama's year, but **the Chicago Blackhawks** aren't far behind. All kidding aside, the Hawks have gone from a perennial laughing stock to one of the premier franchises in the league. The team began to broadcast their home games, hired former Chicago Cubs president John McDonough, and have put an exciting team on the ice to attract fans back. The Hawks have been selling out at home this year and look ready to challenge for a post-season birth after years of futility. Led by Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews, the criminally underrated Patrick Sharp, and the surprisingly healthy Martin Havlat, the Hawks are flying once again.