Before the season started, many expected Florida to be a bottom-feeder in the Eastern Conference. They traded their captain and best player (Olli Jokinen) in the off-season, in what many said was an incredibly lopsided deal (the Panthers received Keith Ballard and Nick Boynton in return). However, new head coach Pete DeBoer has the Panthers playing a very strong team game, The Panthers are built around a solid defense and a balanced group of forwards. In their past 11 games they have scored 41 goals. It is offensive production like this that is making Florida a fantasy-relevant team.

The biggest issue facing the Panthers is Jay Bouwmeester. If you are one to read between the lines, it appears that he is not going to be a Panther much longer. Bouwmeester has been increasingly non-committal towards signing an extension, and the Panthers management has recognized this as a genuine sign he wants to play his hockey elsewhere. Florida will trade him at the deadline long before they lose him for nothing in the off-season. One can only speculate

what the return would be on a young, franchise defenseman just entering his prime. If Bouwmeester and his new club can agree on a extension before any deal is made, look for Florida to be rewarded with a hefty return in any trade made.

As a team, the Panthers sit eighth in goals-against per game, which is impressive considering they play in the offensively volatile Southeast Division (which now boasts three playoff-caliber clubs). They have a good mix of veterans and youngsters. Unlike in years past, these youngsters are making significant impacts as well. Michael Frolik's play has been anywhere from good to dominant. His size, skill, and skating ability have enabled him to quickly adjust to the NHL game after being so highly touted as a youngster. He is on pace for a very respectable 40+ point rookie season. Expect big things for him in the next few years; I did not think he would adjust to the NHL game this quickly.

Perhaps the most interesting player in Florida to keep an eye on is David Booth. He came out of nowhere last season, putting up 22 goals in 73 games. He is on pace to shatter that mark, as he is already has 20 goals with just under half a season left to go. Booth is a very tough player to contain because he is so fast and so tenacious after the puck; similar to Zach Parise he rarely loses puck battles to defensemen. He also is able to create offense on his own, so the risk of a prolonged slump does not enter into the equation with Booth. He is still a bit of an unknown (like the rest of the Panther team) fantasy wise, but if they keep playing like they have been this season, do not expect him to remain that way for much longer.

Nathan Horton is another player to consider. There have been a few rumors circulating this season that he is unhappy in Florida. He is on pace for 50 points, but his combination of size and skill leaves people wanting much more from him. Factor in some of the players selected after him in the 2003 draft (Getzlaf, Weber, Phaneuf, Vanek, Richards, and Carter to name a few), and Horton has been a disappointment thus far in his career. I would not sell low on him, as he may find himself in a different situation next season where he flourishes.

Florida is a team to start watching from a fantasy perspective. The Panthers have two streaky goaltenders, but Vokoun has cemented his position of starter after Anderson briefly stole it from him. They have some defensemen producing under the radar (especially Bryan McCabe), and some young forwards (Booth, Frolik, Gregory Campbell, and Stephen Weiss) who fall far under many fantasy radars.

My rankings of their value, in order:

Short-term:
1. Bouwmeester
2. McCabe
3. Booth
4. Horton
5. Frolik
6. Weiss

Long-term:

1. Bouwmeester
2. Horton
3. Frolik
4. Booth
5. Shawn Matthias
6. Weiss