Shea Weber's future in Nashville, Erik Cole's fantasy impact in Montreal, a sleeper defenseman for 2011-12, and more.

1. Glen Sather has never been one to draw a hard line in the sand with unrestricted free agents (ever since coming to New York, at least). However, he seems to be more than willing to fight tooth and nail each and every summer with his restricted free agents. The Rangers have three players who filed for arbitration – Brandon Dubinsky, Ryan Callahan, and Michael Sauer. Sure, restricted free agents have fewer rights than unrestricted free agents, but since the death of the "second contract" (thanks to Kevin Lowe's offer sheet to Thomas Vanek), these young players seem to be hitting pay dirt, much, much earlier.

Dubinsky and Callahan are the heart and soul of the Rangers team (especially Callahan, who epitomizes everything I value in a hockey player). I doubt either player leaves Broadway this summer or any time soon, but I don't see how potentially straining a team-player relationship

over a few bucks is the best way to go about negotiations?

2. The Leafs made a great move in acquiring Cody Franson from Nashville for next-to-nothing, but I don't get all of the "top four defenseman" talk. Darren Dreger and other media members mentioned how the Leafs had acquired a legitimate top four defenseman. Some basic stat checking paints a different picture. Franson played just over 15 minutes per game in the postseason for Nashville, good for sixth among the six defensemen. During the regular season, his 15:10 per game ranked him eighth among all defensemen who suited up for at least 30 games. He's big and has a phenomenal breakout pass, but his mobility and defensive positioning is severely lacking.

The real winner in this trade will probably end up being one of Ryan Ellis, Mattias Ekholm, or Roman Josi (my personal favorite). Nashville's three best defensive prospects now have an open roster spot to compete for.

3. There is perhaps no bigger opportunity for a player to increase production than the winner of the top line LW battle in New York. Brad Richards and Marian Gaborik are firmly entrenched at center and on the right wing, but the left wing is wide open. The contenders: the inconsistent but talented Wojtek Wolski, the agitating but talented Sean Avery, the young and savvy Derek Stepan (who is better at center), the scrappy Brandon Dubinsky, or do the Rangers bring back Vinny Prospal for one more kick at the can?

Callahan would be a great fit if he could move over to the left wing – I know Gaborik likes to play exclusively on the right side.

4. Rumor out of Nashville is that Shea Weber wants a short-term deal. If he signs for two years or less, I can't imagine the amount of Weber-to-Vancouver threads/columns I will be reading for the next year (Weber is a British Columbia boy). If I am David Poile, I'd probably look into trading Weber either this summer or next. He can become an unrestricted free agent in two years, and I'd want a long term commitment from him as soon as possible. Weber is an amazing player but Nashville needs to ensure long term stability without potentially losing their best player for nothing.

5. I've received a number of tweets and e-mails regarding Dany Heatley in Minnesota. Does he have more fantasy value than in San Jose? I'm not really sure, to be honest. San Jose is a much better team than Minnesota, and Heatley seems to be a shadow of his Ottawa self. His shoulder injury is probably to blame for his decrease in shots on goal. Perhaps a fresh start will reinvigorate him (again), but I'm not holding out hope.

Mikko Koivu is far from chopped liver, so it isn't out of the realm of possibilities for a bit of a resurgence from Heatley. Like my point on New York above, the Wild have an opening on the left side with Koivu and Heatley. I like PM Bouchard in that spot – he's a crafty playmaker and it looks like he has completely recovered from his concussion issues.

6. I'm expecting a huge year from Zach Parise in 2011-12 – there are fewer star players in the league who work harder. He has a lot to prove after coming off of a serious knee injury. The Devils appear reluctant to give him a long-term deal. Perhaps they are trying to give him some added motivation?

7. I am seeing more and more leagues add hits and blocked shots to their statistical repertoire. I can see both sides of the argument – more categories means more players have value, and it gives value to some players who may otherwise not ever be fantasy-relevant (Greg Zanon, for one). On the other hand, hits aren't recorded consistently from building to building. One example is Madison Square Garden. The statistician there is notoriously trigger happy. Another example is in Carolina. The Hurricanes are a physical team, sure, but they ended the season with four players in the top 30 for hits – Tuomo Ruutu, Erik Cole, Tim Gleason, and Chad LaRose. I balked at trading for Cole this summer as I feel he'll probably lose 70-80 hits (at least) from the move to Montreal.

8. One sleeper defenseman to watch if you are in a league that counts both of the above statistics is Vancouver's Keith Ballard. Ballard will see an increase in ice time with Christian Ehrhoff now gone. He'll be fully healthy coming into camp, unlike last year when he was coming off of serious hip surgery. Ballard (aside from his miserable 2010-11 season) is a proven point producer, and he hits and blocks a ton of shots. He just needs to earn the trust of Vancouver's coaching staff, something he failed to do at any point last year.

9. In baseball, the real breadwinners are the third and fourth pitchers who get paid about $10 million to pitch .500 or slightly better. In hockey, the number four or five defenseman seems to be the same – play 18-20 minutes a night, don't do anything stupid, and collect a nice, fat contract. Two examples are Marc Methot, and Andy Greene. Both are solid number five defensemen on good teams, and both received four-year, $12 million extensions from Columbus and New Jersey, respectively.

10. If nothing else, Ottawa is going to be entertaining to watch next season, as their lineup will likely feature three or four noted tough guys – Chris Neil (Toronto fans may hesitate to call him a noted tough guy), Zenon Konopka, Matt Carkner, and Zack Smith. Francis Lessard is in the mix as well. Colton Orr better start working on that speed bag…

11. This thread is one of thousands, and it highlights why our forums are so damn good – we stop you from making bad trades, and conversely we let you know when it's time to click "accept" as fast as you can!

12. I don't think any team in the NHL has improved more over the past few weeks than the Los Angeles Kings. Mike Richards is a legitimate top line center, and Simon Gagne was a point-a-game player for the final 40 regular season games and playoffs. The Kings have a fantastic top four on defense, they have two great young goaltenders, and they have a budding superstar in Anze Kopitar. There are a few fantasy sleepers to make note of, as well. Scott Parse looked like he was going to get a shot in the top six before the Gagne signing. He'll likely play in more of a depth scoring role and slide up with injuries and/or slumps. He has top six talent.

13. I've been looking around the league at teams that need a young, starting goaltender (Cory Schneider and Jonathan Bernier being the targets). Anaheim – maybe, depending on Hiller's long term health. Calgary – maybe, but Kiprusoff may have a few elite years left in him. Dallas – Lehtonen looks like the goalie for them. Edmonton? Definitely. New Jersey? Definitely.

Phoenix? Definitely. Tampa Bay? Definitely. I think Schneider is a likely candidate to get moved next summer. Jonathan Quick has entrenched himself as an elite NHL goaltender (in my eyes, at least). I think LA discusses moving Bernier only if they are looking like a true contender and need to add a missing piece or two.

14. Keith Yandle re-upped with Phoenix for the next five years. The odds the team is in Phoenix for five more years? I'm not sure, but it is a nice show of loyalty by him ($25 million other reasons, as well).

15. I'm hoping to head down to Las Vegas in September to join up with my head-to-head keeper league to take part in our annual dispersal draft. Tim Lucarelli (author of *Eastern Edge*, and formerly
Dub & Chase
) is a member of this pool, and most of the other members are regulars on the forum. Not sure how a bunch of guys drinking beer and drafting hockey players in September in Vegas could top the Hangover, but we'll definitely try.

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