*I had a great 10 day vacation in Maui. I popped on the internet a few times (mostly to check box scores –thought my internet was loopy when I saw Sam Gagner's eight point performance), but unplugging from my phone, Twitter, and the various blogs I read and write for was a fantastic break.*

*In this week's Prime Cuts, I discuss Sam Gagner, Ilya Kovalchuk, cap space – the forgotten trade asset, the future of Rick Nash (again), and of course some potential deadline deals.*

1. Came across this interesting statistic on Twitter the other day – since December of 2009, Roberto Luongo is 13-0-6 in 19 regular season games in which he has faced 40 or more shots on goal (this record includes recent shootout wins in Colorado and Nashville). Allowing more shots on goal is never an advisable defensive strategy, but like many other goalies, Luongo tends to play better when he is busy and involved in the game early. The Canucks may be interested in trading for Cam Barker after seeing this statistic.

2. While in Hawaii, I caught a few Los Angeles Kings games on the local feed. Their season can be summed up in three words – poor Jonathan Quick. The Kings, outside of three players, can't create any sustainable offense (those three players being Kopitar, Johnson, and Doughty). They did get an impressive 3-1 win over the Lightning last week, but to be fair they were facing the rapidly aging Dwayne Roloson. The Kings are probably more than one forward away from being a true cup contender, but health and goaltending are often bigger factors than scoring once the playoffs begin. Mike Richards looks pretty good, but he has displaced Jarret Stoll to the wing, where he looks completely ineffective.

The argument could be made that Columbus and Los Angeles trade for the wrong Philadelphia forwards last summer (Richards is more of a playmaker, while Carter would likely be excelling on the right side with Kopitar).

3. Sticking with the Kings – they could likely dangle Johnson for a top-six forward with upside, as the emergence of both Alec Martinez and Slava Voynov would help offset the loss of offense

and mobility on the back end (like Johnson, both are left-shooting defensemen who can skate, play on the power play, and move the puck). If the Kings don't want to move Johnson, a package involving futures for someone like Ales Hemsky or David Jones would make a lot of sense as well.

4. I'll reiterate a point I made last month – Ryan Johansen will get to 80 points in the NHL before Rick Nash does (pending a trade out of Columbus for Nash). The big winger simply coasts too much on a nightly basis, and it is more apparent than ever that he needs to go to an environment where hockey is the focus. I'm not trying to dump on Columbus, as they have had enough of it this season, but we have all seen how good a motivated Nash can be (especially when he is playing for Canada).

The Jackets could fetch a bounty for him (perhaps a future star goaltender like Cory Schneider or Jonathan Bernier), and they have several solid assets to build around – David Savard, John Moore, Johansen, and the improving Derrick Brassard.

5. Steve Yzerman has proven to be a patient GM during his tenure with the Lightning, but how much longer can he continue on with no goaltender? And if he does target Schneider or Bernier, who does he give up? Ryan Malone is currently injured and doesn't have a great contract. Victor Hedman would be coveted by the Canucks, but he's a future cornerstone defenseman. Brett Connolly probably has the most value among the forward prospects, but he is far from a sure thing. It will be interesting to see if the Lightning go after a top young goalie, or if they decide to go for more of a veteran waiting for a shot to start –Josh Harding, for example.

6. A new blog to add to your bookmarks – Bobby Holik's take on the hockey world. Holik was always one of the more insightful quotes during his time as a player, and I have enjoyed reading his content at his new site. Holik believes the Devils should trade Parise (and I don't disagree, depending on what they could get in return for the impending free agent and my favorite NHLer). The read I want to mention today involves the Devils other star winger, though.

I agree with Holik's take on Kovalchuk benefitting on his natural wing:

*"Playing on the right wing has been great for Kovalchuk too. Many thought it was the wrong move, but it's appearing to be working out. The right wing position is forcing Kovalchuk to be more creative. On the left wing he overused his cut-to-the-middle move, and now, defenses have to adjust. He's become better on the cycle playing with Parise and Henrique, as they allow Kovalchuk to get "lost" in the offensive zone. Also, Henrique and Parise have given him more opportunities for the give-and-go. It allows him to pick up speed without the puck and receive it back in better position near the net or entering the zone with speed. All of these forces lead to Kovalchuk getting different looks throughout the game, and when a player like Kovalchuk is unpredictable, he is unstoppable."*

6. The lack of goal scoring in the NHL this season can be attributed to some fantastic goaltending performances (Thomas, Quick, Howard, Lundqvist, Rinne, and so on), but more and more we are seeing teams playing not to lose instead of trying to win. With so many three point games (overtime and shootouts), it is almost impossible for teams to make up ground on those above them in the standings. This works well with the (false) parity the NHL has successfully created, but it has hurt the on ice product. There is a simple solution, and one that

has been mentioned before – award three points for a regulation win.

7. As the trade deadline approaches, don't forget about the trade value that cap space carries. Let's use the Ryan Suter situation as an example. The Preds are rightly going to hold on to Suter, for a few reasons. One, they are in the thick of contention in the West, and he is arguably their most important skater, Two, they made a large financial commitment to Pekka Rinne, and likely will want to do the same with Suter and Shea Weber this season and next. And three – if Suter does end up leaving, the Predators are not left with nothing. Even though they are a team that doesn't spend to the salary cap upper limit, they have an internal budget/cap. Clearing Suter's theoretical new cap hit (somewhere around $7.5 million would be my best guess) allows them a lot of flexibility to add a few forwards. It also opens up a roster spot for one of their young blue chip prospects.

Losing Suter in the summer as a free agent is not ideal for Nashville, but preemptively trading him before the playoffs would completely destroy any chance of success they may have. The point of the NHL, we must remember, is to win the Cup. Not to hoard prospects or draft picks, but to win. With Rinne in goal, the Preds could surprise a few teams if they get some goal scoring.

8. We have seen how Brad Richards has been a positive influence on several young Rangers, especially defenseman Michael Del Zotto. However, his production (on pace for less than 60 points) leaves much to be desired. For now, his contract isn't affecting the team negatively. However, when the likes of Derek Stepan, Carl Hagelin, and Ryan McDonagh are up for new contracts, the Rangers may have to get creative. Richards and Gaborik clearly haven't worked together – like Richards, Gaborik is at his best when he is the puck carrier. He excelled in Minnesota playing with defensive centers, and he's excelled in New York on a line with Stepan and Artem Anisimov.

Having two or three scoring lines is imperative in the league, but Richards needs to be a front line 20 minute player if he is going to provide the value to equal his compensation.

9. The Frans Nielsen extension is a great move for both player and club. Nielsen contributes to the Islanders in a variety of ways. Right now, he's the second best center behind John Tavares. He'll likely continue to hold that title until Ryan Strome is ready to play in the NHL. He has settled in nicely as a 35-45 point player. He doesn't have a ton of fantasy value (especially in PIM leagues, as he impressively has only one minor penalty through 54 games this season), but he allows other Islanders to be better fantasy players – Tavares, for example. Nielsen is last among all Islander forwards in offensive zone starts
(meaning he is seeing tougher assignments and more neutral zone and defensive zone starts).

10. Another center in the Islanders organization to keep an eye on is gritty center Casey Cizikas. The AHL rookie is having an impressive season in Bridgeport, with 14 goals and 43 points in 47 games (through February 12th). His offensive upside isn't close to Strome's, but he projects to be a really good third or fourth line center at the NHL level. His 41 points is hard to ignore as well, especially considering the next highest scoring Sound Tiger has only 28 points (Matt Donovan).

11. According to Stephen Brunt , Quebec City is gearing up for an NHL return. Like Winnipeg, Quebec City isn't a huge market, but (again, like Winnipeg) they have an owner with actual money, and it sounds like they are going to be getting a new arena in time for 2015, as well.

They have an arena right now that would serve as an adequate stop gap measure, as well.

12. Sticking with the Quebec City news, you can bet Shane Doan is a goner from the Coyotes if/when the team moves. He and his family have established roots in the Phoenix area and he hasn't even entertained the thought of leaving, largely because of this. However, if the team moves, you can bet he'll listen to offers from contending teams that are interested in him. The Canucks have had heavy interest in him for the past few seasons, but he'll likely play out this season (and his contract) in the desert before deciding anything.

13. What else can you say about Sam Gagner? An eight-point game from a Sedin, Stamkos, or Malkin would be insane enough, but the fact that it came from a player who had 22 points through the first four months of the season makes it even more incredible. Gagner's development has stalled since his promising rookie year (mostly because he has been playing on awful teams with almost zero veteran support offensively), but he seems to be turning a corner in February. He's not big or fast, but he is skilled, creative, and smart. With the right players, he's going to be a good top six center.

I wonder where he would be right now had he been drafted by San Jose or Detroit?

14. Two potential Avalanche players who are likely to be on the move in a few weeks are winger David Jones, and defenseman Kyle Quincey. Jones scored 27 goals last year and is fast, gritty, and has a nose for the net. He'll probably be cheaper to acquire than some more notable

players, but he could have a bigger impact in the right situation. Quincey is a defenseman who can do a variety of things, and he's a restricted free agent this summer. The Avalanche may want to open up a roster spot for Stefan Elliott and/or Tyson Barrie for the rest of this season and next.

One more thought regarding Colorado – depending on the health of Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, don't be surprised to see Gabriel Landeskog walk away with the Calder this season. He's playing a ton and contributing to Colorado in numerous ways. He is fourth on the team in scoring. His plus-15 rating is far and away the best on the team (plus-minus is a stat that needs some context, and the lower ratings of Landeskog's linemates and teammates provides that). He leads the team in shots on goal, as well.

15. The Copper & Blue boys deliver another great piece, this time on Ken Holland and how he has constructed the Red Wings.
Interestingly, the Red Wings have turned only 14 draft picks into NHLers since 1997 (the year Holland was hired). Things have changed since the lockout, as the salary cap now factors into trades (in the past the Wings could move only picks for rental players, now they usually need to find a way to clear some salary first).

This just goes to show that picking high each year isn't the only way to build a successful team (although having Nick Lidstrom playing 25-30 minutes per game sure helps).