A pair of Badgers (one current, one former) top my latest list.

My annual top 10 keeper league rankings lists kicks off with the best young defensemen in hockey. The Wisconsin Badgers are represented very well on this list, much like they were in 2011 . I am happy to see

so many players from my 2011 edition graduate on (or, in other words, play more than 25 games at the NHL level).

I have a few general rules when it comes to building a team in a fantasy hockey keeper league. One of the more important ones is to not plan beyond a two or three year window. You are not building a real NHL club, and too often I see poolies place too much of an emphasis on youth and prospects instead of trying to add players who could help them win now. Using this rule, take a look at your team(s). Can you realistically say you will have a shot at winning the league at some point within the next two or three seasons? If not, time to scrap the rebuild and start adding proven NHL talent.

Keeping the two-to-three-year window in mind, I have compiled a list of the top 10 keeper league defenseman prospects to own (assuming standard keeper league rules and scoring categories). Using the three-year scope, the long-term upside of these players is balanced with their NHL readiness.

The cut-off point for this list is 25 games played at the NHL level. Almost the entire list from last summer has graduated on from prospect status, including Stefan Elliott, David Rundblad, Dmitri Orlov, and Jake Gardiner. A premium is being placed on puck moving defensemen around the NHL right now, and there certainly has been a huge influx of young defensemen into the league over the past few seasons.

Here is the 2010 list.

Here is the 2011 list.

This list is in order, which means that I wouldn't trade the fourth player straight across for the fifth player, and so on.

1. Justin Schultz – Anaheim Ducks

Schultz moves up into the first spot from his 2011 ranking of seventh. He's the best skater in college hockey, and should have an immediate impact at the NHL level. Wisconsin is churning out high-level talent right now. Schultz didn't miss a beat this season after losing his defensive partner Jake Gardiner to the professional ranks, winning a second consecutive WCHA Defensive Player of the Year award.

Off the ice, Schultz is in an interesting situation, as he could theoretically become a free agent able to sign with whichever team he pleases this summer. For a comprehensive look at his options, read this. Some have speculated that Schultz would like to play in Toronto with Gardiner, or in Vancouver, only a few hours away from his hometown of Kelowna, BC. College

players rarely are able to opt for the free agency route, but it has happened recently (Blake Wheeler and Billy Sweatt are both examples).

Schultz scores goals like a forward, (38 in his last two seasons, combined) and he's no slouch in his own zone, either. He's a mobile skater, and he possesses good size, too. He is the first Wisconsin skater (not just defenseman, but skater) to post back-to-back 40-point seasons since Joe Pavelski did six years ago. Essentially, he's the total package with a good head on his shoulders. The sky is the limit. The only question now – where does he play next season?

Player Comparison: Mike Green

One Year Optimistic Projection: 5-30-35

Three Year Optimistic Projection: 10-40-50

2. Brendan Smith – Detroit Red Wings

Just like last year, Smith occupies the number two spot on this list. He's getting his feet wet in the NHL right now, something that would have happened long ago in many other organizations (Detroit takes their time with young defensemen). Like Schultz, Smith played his college hockey at Wisconsin. Like Schultz, there are few weaknesses in his game. He plays with a bit more flash and snarl than Schultz – he isn't afraid to drop the gloves, and he loves to throw bone-crunching hits.

Smith recorded 32 points in 47 AHL games in Grand Rapids before getting the call up to Detroit a few weeks ago. Don't be surprised if he has played his last AHL game. He also had 32 points last season, but it took him 63 games to get there. In 110 career AHL games, Smith has racked up 198 PIM. Detroit may try and rein his game in a bit, but he has the skating ability to cover a lot of ice in a short period of time. Expect him to learn well from the likes of Lidstrom and Kronwall.

Smith skates, shoots, and passes the puck like Duncan Keith. He plays on an edge a bit like former wing Chris Chelios. If you want to be successful in a keeper league, I think it is time to start tuning in to more University of Wisconsin games in the near future.

Player Comparison: Chris Chelios

One Year Optimistic Projection: 8-25-33

Three Year Optimistic Projection: 13-32-45

3. Ryan Murphy – Carolina Hurricanes

Murphy didn't crack the top 10 last go-around, but it wasn't for a lack of skill. He was ineligible because I only consider drafted players (Murphy was picked by the Hurricanes in the 1st round of the 2011 Entry Draft, months after my list was published). Murphy suffered a concussion earlier this season, and he also failed to crack the World Junior squad for Canada. He likely would have been running the Canadian power play if he was fully rested and healthy. After getting over his concussion, Murphy returned to the OHL without skipping a beat – 21 points in 12 January contests earned him a Defenseman of the Month award.

The competition in Carolina for ice time among young defensemen is high. Justin Faulk has been arguably the best rookie defenseman in the entire league this season. Jamie McBain is settling in, and Bobby Sanguenetti is playing his way back into Carolina's plans with a strong AHL campaign. Still, it is hard to ignore Murphy's talent and upside. He does things with the puck most forwards could only dream of.

With the aforementioned depth in the system, Carolina may send Murphy back to the OHL for a fourth season in 2012-13. However, you can be he will make their decision a very, very difficult one. He's not big, but he's nearly impossible to hit. Slippery is the term I'd use to describe his play with the puck.

Player Comparison: Erik Karlsson

One Year Optimistic Projection: 7-25-32

Three Year Optimistic Projection: 15-35-50

4. Dougie Hamilton – Boston Bruins

The 9th overall selection from last June's NHL Entry Draft is making easy work of the OHL right now. Through March 13th, Hamilton has amassed 67 points (including 17 goals) in only 47 games. He is close to 6'5", and is developing more of a physical side, too (he recently earned a 10 game suspension for a dangerous hit). Hamilton projects as a complete defenseman, but don't let his size and defensive acumen overshadow his offensive ability.

The Bruins have five defensemen signed through next season – Chara, Boychuk, Seidenberg, McQuaid, and Ference. Hamilton will push for a roster spot at camp, provided he is strong enough to handle the size and strength of most NHL forwards (Lucic and Horton should provide

a great test).

Hamilton's offense could take a few years to arrive, much like Alex Pietrangelo in St. Louis.

Player Comparison: Brent Burns

One Year Optimistic Projection: 5-20-25

Three Year Optimistic Projection: 10-30-40

5. Joe Morrow – Pittsburgh Penguins

Morrow, in his third year with the WHL's Portland Winterhawks, has already come close to doubling his goal total from all of last season (nine, and he sits at 17 as of March 13th). He's a really good skater and solid defensively, but he earns his ice time with his offensive ability. Morrow is unafraid to rush the puck with great frequency, and he sees the ice extremely well.

Pittsburgh's top four on defense is locked up for the foreseeable future (Letang, Martin, Michalek, and Orpik), and the surprising Matt Niskanen is a restricted free agent and should be back in the fold next season. The Penguins also have some other solid defensive prospects, including Simon Despres and Sean Harrington (who both project to be more defensive players compared to Morrow). Martin and depth defenseman Ben Lovejoy are the most likely to be traded, provided one of Despres or Morrow is ready to step in to the top six. Morrow may have to wait another year before getting a crack at a roster spot, but he's worth holding on to in most keeper leagues. Lots of upside, and he'll get to line up with some pretty good players on Pittsburgh's power play.

Player Comparison: Paul Coffey

One Year Optimistic Projection: 5-15-20

Three Year Optimistic Projection: 8-30-38

6. Nathan Beaulieu – Montreal Canadiens

The rangy puck-mover is once again having a solid season for the dominant Saint John Sea Dogs of the QMJHL. Beaulieu is a high-risk defenseman who loves to get involved offensively. His defensive game has improved immensely in the past two seasons, as well. He was a big part of the Memorial Cup winning team from last season, earning a Tournament All-Star nomination for his play. His skating and puck movement is already NHL caliber, but he could stand to get stronger and more consistent with his physical play.

Beaulieu plays the game with a lot of confidence, which supports his high-risk, high-reward game. Because he has a late 1992 birthday, Beaulieu is eligible to play professionally next season. Look for him to start off with Hamilton of the AHL. He dropped to 17 at the 2011 draft, but many scouts and media members had him ranked in the top 10.

Player Comparison: Keith Yandle

One Year Optimistic Projection: 3-12-15

Three Year Optimistic Projection: 7-25-32

7. Jon Merrill – New Jersey Devils

Merrill's 2010-11 freshman season in the NCAA was a success – he was named to the NCAA All-Rookie Team, finishing with seven goals and 25 points in 42 games for the Michigan Wolverines. Merrill missed the first part of this season due to a team-related suspension, which hurt his stock in the eyes of many scouts around the league. Bob McKenzie wrote extensively on the suspension a few months back at TSN – check it out here if you want to read up on it.

Merrill made his season debut in earlyJanuary, and he currently has 10 points in 16 games. With his off-ice issues in the past (hopefully), he has been able to concentrate on logging heavy minutes in all situations for Michigan. He's always been known for his offense, but his defensive play (in particular his positioning and play away from the puck) has improved tremendously. Merrill a really smart player with the puck, and he'll be a mainstay on the New Jersey power play in a few years, likely alongside Adam Larsson.

Player Comparison: Paul Martin

One Year Optimistic Projection: 5-15-20

Three Year Optimistic Projection: 10-30-40

8. Brandon Gormley - Phoenix Coyotes

If Gormley were a member of a different NHL organization, he would likely place higher on this list. He's close to being ready for the NHL, but he's behind the likes of Yandle, Ekman-Larsson, and Rundblad in Phoenix. He's a steady, durable, and reliable player defensively, and he's a weapon offensively with his vision and ability to get pucks on net. He had a very strong World Juniors, earning a spot on the Tournament All-Star Team. He played more of a shutdown role with Canada, displaying his versatility on the ice.

Gormley was recently traded to Shawinigan, where he figures to play a huge role in their Memorial Cup run (the Cataractes are the host city this year). The Coyotes may dangle him as trade bait for a good young forward.

Player Comparison: Ryan Suter

One Year Optimistic Projection: 3-15-18

Three Year Optimistic Projection: 7-28-35

9. Sami Vatanen – Anaheim Ducks

The Ducks made a trade a few months ago, sending prospect defenseman Jake Gardiner to Toronto. One reason why they felt comfortable moving Gardiner away was the stellar play of Vatanen this season over in Finland (although trading Gardiner away may cost them Schultz, as the two would likely have had a great desire to play together). Vatanen currently has 12 goals and 40 points in 47 games, and seems poised to make the leap over to North America for next season. He is by far the smallest player on this list, as he checks in at 5'9" and 165 pounds. He does get outmuscled in puck battles, but he is a smart player who relies on a great stick and good positioning to defend against bigger and stronger forwards.

Vatanen makes up for his lack of size with blinding speed and great acceleration. He can rush the puck up the ice as well as any other defenseman on this list. He was named the top defenseman in Finland last season, and he could repeat the feat this year. He has worn the "C" for Finland at various international events, as well.

Player Comparison: Kimmo Timonen

One Year Optimistic Projection: 4-20-24

Three Year Optimistic Projection: 7-30-37

10. Mark Barberio – Tampa Bay Lightning

Who the heck is Mark Barberio? Let me tell you. The 2008 6th round pick of the Tampa Bay Lightning is tearing up the AHL right now, to the tune of 53 points in 61 games. He'll get a long look next training camp at a roster spot with the Lightning, and he faces little in the way of competition for offensive minutes among the other defensemen signed through next year. Barberio had a stellar junior career in Moncton – in his last year with the Wildcats, he tallied 82 points in 86 games (playoffs included). Barberio was a defensive partner to Gormley for a while with Moncton, as well.

The knocks that made him drop to the sixth round were related to defensive play, especially from a physicality perspective. He has improved immensely in that regard, especially this season. He is dictating the pace of games on a consistent basis – the sign of a game-changing defenseman. Guy Boucher hasn't had a true power play weapon on Tampa Bay since he took the coaching job there (no, Marc-Andre Bergeron doesn't count) – the system he employed with Hamilton of the AHL encouraged defensemen to rush the puck and join the attack as much as possible. If Barberio can translate his AHL success to the NHL, big numbers could come very soon.

Player Comparison: Mark Giordano

One Year Optimistic Projection: 5-30-35

Three Year Optimistic Projection: 10-35-45

Honorable Mentions:

Calvin de Haan – solid rookie season in the AHL now under his belt – needs to have a strong camp this fall for the Islanders.

Tyson Barrie – solid all-around prospect, projects as more of a two-way guy for Colorado.

Alex Petrovic – physically imposing and well-rounded with his play, Petrovic is one of the better defensemen in the WHL.

Brian Domoulin – another smooth-skating offensive defenseman in Carolina's system.

Brayden McNabb – big and strong, and offensive game has really blossom med over last two years. He could see some PP time with the Sabres next season.

Paul Postma – the 23-year-old has little left to prove offensively at AHL level. Aspects of his game are NHL caliber, but other parts are not.

Kevin Connauton – dynamic physical, offensive, presence. Think Jack Johnson. Learning defensive game slowly – a few years away.

Tim Erixon – he was the closest to making the list out of the honorable mentions. Great skater, terrific puck mover. Will be a full-time Ranger next season.

Cobly Robak – another physically imposing and well-rounded defenseman in Florida's system, joining Petrovic and Gudbranson. He's closer to the NHL than Petrovic – could earn a spot next season. Offensive game revolves around booming point shot.

Ryan Sproul – another late round gem by the Wings? Only turned 19 a few months ago, and the rangy young defenseman is close to a point-per-game in the OHL. A few years away.

Derek Forbort – Forbort is a tantalizing package of size and skill, but will he be an elite offensive producer? The jury is out.

Oscar Klefbom – Klefbom has a big shot and skates really well for a big guy, but isn't going to be a power play quarterback. Has emerged as arguably Edmonton's best defensive prospect (there are a few others).

Jonas Brodin –Great skater, projects as more of a steady, reliable, two-way guy. Compares to Kim Johnsson.

Mattias Ekholm – played two games with the Preds before returning to Sweden. Will come back for another crack at the NHL next fall – depending on Suter fallout, there could be a spot for him.

My honorable mentions list is far from comprehensive. If I have left off any glaring omissions, please let me know. Feel free to weigh in with your own lists, as well.