Pens/Flyers, Braden Holtby, betting tips, and a few breakout candidates.

1. Is Braden Holtby this season's Cam Ward ? The circumstances are different (Holtby is taking over for two injured goaltenders in Tomas Vokoun and Michal Neuvirth , while Ward unseated a healthy Martin Gerber in Carolina), but there are some eerie similarities.
Cam Ward

was 22-years-old in 2006 when he led the Hurricanes to the final. He played the majority of that season in the AHL, compiling a 27-17-3 record with a 1.99 GAA and a .937 save percentage in Lowell.

Holtby is 22-years-old right now, and he spend the majority of the season In the AHL, although his numbers aren't as good as Ward's were (20-15-2 with a 2.61 GAA and a .906 save percentage). Both goalies were stars in the WHL – Ward with Red Deer and Holtby with Saskatoon. Both are similarly sized, although Holtby is a bit stockier. Will be interesting to see if he can turn in a similar performance – the Caps will need it to get past a superior Boston squad.

2. The LA Kings didn't hard match a forwards line against the Sedin twins at all this season. According to the line matching tool in DobberHockey's fantastic Frozen Pools section , the Kings had their top line out against Daniel and Henrik most frequently. A pairing of Drew Doughty and Rob Scuderi played against the Sedins almost 30% of the time – look for that to be the match up the Kings try to get. Doughty plays the Sedins really physically. That would leave Willie Mitchell and Slava Voynov against the Ryan Kesler unit. Mitchell and Kesler often butted heads in practice when both were Canucks – two fiery personalities. Could be a matchup to watch.

3. The Kings really targeted Logan Couture from a physical standpoint during the final two games of the season, and you can bet Daniel Sedin will receive the same treatment. Los Angeles struggles to score, but they are a big and physical

team from top to bottom, especially with midseason call ups
Jordan Nolan
and
Dwight King
.

3. In the four most recent Flyers/Penguins games, Evgeni Malkin played against a line centered by Sean Couturier nearly 40% of the time. That is a matchup the Flyers are likely to keep – the amount of responsibility the Flyers have given to the rookie is incredibly impressive. When was the last time a Cup contending team leaned on a 19-year-old as their primary shutdown center?
Patrice Bergeron
in Boston?

4. There are many reoccurring story lines that pop up every spring, but one of my favorites is the spotlight that is placed on the checking lines. Chris Higgins has clicked with Sammy Pahlsson and Jannik Hansen , and I'd expect the trio to be out against
Anze Kopitar
as much possible. Max Talbot will see a lot of former teammate
Evgeni Malkin
, as well.

5. If you are inclined to bet on some hockey games this spring, I'd recommend a little trick I have used to success over the years – take the under in as many first round games as possible (only if the total combined score is 5.5 or over). The bookies smarten up and tend to drop the lines down to 5.0 by the end of the first round for many games, but there is a bit of a lag.

Another successful strategy – always bet the over in any game Marty Turco is playing.

6. The San Jose/St. Louis series will provide a great example of the difference between top end talent (San Jose) and depth (St. Louis). The Blues can roll out four lines that can score, hit and defend. The Sharks can only say that about two of theirs. On defense, the Sharks will lean on their top three defensemen a lot. St. Louis is comfortable with their top five or six (depending on the health of Carlo Colaiacovo).

7. In 81 career playoff games (CHL and NHL, combined), Claude Giroux has 116 career points. What is he going to do this year for an encore? I'm looking forward to watching him go head to head against
Sidney Crosby
– there is no player in the NHL more similar to Crosby in terms of skill set and demeanor than Giroux.

8. If Chicago fans aren't familiar with Martin Hanzal , they will be in a week from now. Expect the mammoth Coyotes center to be a blanket on
Jonathan Toews
all series long. Hanzal has received the
Jordan Staal
treatment a bit in Phoenix (offensive abilities have been suppressed a bit due to elite defensive ability), but that doesn't take away from his importance to their success.

9. Most DobberHockey readers are familiar with the rapid rise to elite status by Alex Pietrangelo . A lot of casual fans are not, as the Blues haven't received a ton of national media attention. He's a likely candidate to be the breakout star of the postseason, just as Giroux was two years ago (and Brad Marchand last year).

10. Chris Kreider is likely going to make his debut for the Rangers during their first round series against Ottawa. I doubt he will see much ice time to start off (provided there are no significant injuries), but that could change if he has a strong game or two. He has NHL speed and size (to say the least – Kreider is a physical specimen at 6'3" and close to 220 pounds), and has the defensive acumen to play in the bottom six right now.

11. The Nashville Predators had eight players with 15+ goals this season. Alex Radulov would undoubtedly have reached that total, too. They are both deeper and more talented than the team that took the Canucks to six games in the second round last spring. Detroit will likely have to balance their defensive pairings out as the Predators like to spread their offensive stars among two or three lines. A lot of pressure on the rookie Jakub Kindl and the inconsistent Jonathan Ericsson .

12. Early pick for deadline acquisition of the year – Nicklas Grossman n on Philadelphia. The Flyers figured Grossmann would be insurance in the event of injuries – he has been one of their best and most consistent defenders over the past month or so. He missed the final three regular season games with a knee injury, but will be good to go for game one against Pittsburgh. His presence has been a huge contributor to the strong play from Ilya Bryzgalov recently.

13. Even with Nathan Horton out, Boston is still my pick to come out of the East. Pittsburgh has a tough road in the first round, and I wonder about the fatigue factor with Marc-Andre Fleury.

14. Who is the first player to get Kronwall'd? Radulov? Martin Erat ? There should be a pool for this. Kronwall seems to throw a big hit every 10 games during the regular season – in the playoffs, it seems to be one every period.

15. When making your picks for the DobberHockey Playoff Challenge, my advice is to go big or go home. Bet big on two or three teams. Don't bother hedging your picks, as the third liners on Cup finalists often outpoint the top liners on teams eliminated early. Teams I am betting on this year – St. Louis, Vancouver, and Boston. A fewsleepers on those teams to consider – Vladimir Sobotka
,
Chris Higgins
, and
Brian Rolston
.

One more sleep…

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