The top 2013 prospect for fantasy hockey, Clarkson's scoring emergence, replacing Karlsson, and more in this week's Prime Cuts.

1. If I am drafting with the top pick in a keeper league, I would take Jonathan Drouin over Nathan MacKinnon and Seth Jones. Drouin's offensive skill set is unbelievable, and I have been impressed with how he played without MacKinnon on his line at the World Juniors a few months ago.

It is a tossup who goes first overall right now, but I imagine one of the three will emerge as a clear-cut choice as the June draft grows closer. I think Drouin has more scoring upside than MacKinnon, and young defensemen tend to take a bit longer than forwards to gain fantasy value.

2. David Clarkson has quietly (at least outside of New Jersey) developed into one of the best power forwards in hockey. It goes to show what having the confidence of a coach can do for a player. Pete DeBoer, who coached Clarkson back during his OHL days with the Kitchener Rangers, has given him every opportunity to produce (especially on the power play). Clarkson has a knack for getting himself into the right position, and he has great hands around the net and on deflections.

Clarkson probably won't ever top the 50 point mark (he doesn't get enough assists), but he scored 30 goals and added 138 PIM last year. He's scoring at an even higher rate this season, with nine goals in 13 games. Here is more on his development into a scorer.

3. The Erik Karlsson injury probably means my chances of winning my head-to-head keeper this year are over. My team has struggled a bit over the past few years as I depend a lot on Sidney Crosby
up front, but Karlsson is arguably more valuable with what he brings to the table relative to the rest of the NHL's blue liners.

You have to feel bad for Craig Anderson too, who has been lights out this season and now faces an even tougher task ahead with no Spezza and no Karlsson to rely on for goal support.

4. The Dallas Stars are expected to be among the chief beneficiaries of the NHL's proposed realignment.

Meanwhile the Blue Jackets are still hoping there's a way to be put in the East, but it seems far-fetched.

Dallas appears unlikely to be one of the teams swapped, as they play division games two time zones away.

"Listen, there will always be issues no matter what," Stars' President Jim Lites told ESPN. "But what you can't do is put your head in the sand about the Dallas Stars playing in a division that is two time zones away and the Detroit Red Wings playing playoff series every year against teams three time zones away. You have to address those issues, they're anti-competitive."

The tweaked proposal could be voted on as early as late February, giving Stars fans time to enjoy the official Pacific-Division farewell tour, though it appears well under way no matter how realignment unfolds.

5. How good is Taylor Hall ? Well, he has been a more impactful player than either Ryan Nugent-Hopkins
or
Jordan Eberle
, which may come as a surprise to many of you (I know it surprised me). Essentially, Hall performed significantly better without Nugent-Hopkins or Eberle than either of them did without Hall. He drives the success of that trio.

6. I am working on my American Olympic squad for the Sochi games. There will be a lot of turnover (especially on the back end) compared to the team that won/lost the Silver at Vancouver three years ago. I don't have either Erik or Jack Johnson making the squad, for example.

My top four on the back end (if I were picking right now):

Ryan Suter – Justin Faulk

Ryan McDonagh – Brooks Orpik (the shut down pair)

Other contenders include: Dustin Byfuglien, Keith Yandle, Matt Carle, John Carlson, Kevin Shattenkirk, Tom Gilbert, and the Johnson's.

7. The importance of self-confidence cannot be understated with regards to professional athletes. Keith Ballard is playing his best hockey as a Canuck this year, but it took him a long time to adjust to the pressure that comes with playing in a hockey market like Vancouver. Ballard mentioned in an early-season interview that he has spent a lot of time working with with sports psychologists over the past few years. Alex Goligoski is a great example of a player completely devoid of any self-confidence right now. He is seeing what James Neal is doing in Pittsburgh and probably feels even more pressure to deliver for Dallas.

That pressure has taken him away from playing his game – skating, passing, and well-timed offensive pinches. Goligoski needs to get back on track – the Stars made a long-term financial commitment to him, and they need to start seeing some returns on that.

8. I wrote a piece on Chris Higgins earlier this week – Higgins was the example used, but the point I was trying to make was that good teams (like the Canucks) take players and put them in the best position to succeed. Higgins can score goals, but he isn't a goal-scorer (if that makes sense). He generates offense by winning puck battles, working hard, and skating up and down the ice. In Montreal and in New York he was expected to score, and that got him away from his game a bit.

Put players in the position to succeed, give them a clearly defined role, and good things tend to follow. Players shouldn't all be evaluated on goals and assists. Higgins, for example, has had many fantastic games in Vancouver over the past few years where he hasn't registered a single point.

9. If you aren't a member of the Fantasy Hockey Geek , allow me to bestow some praise upon them. I have been using the FHG tools for the past few years, and they make managing my

fantasy teams ridiculously easy. I spend way less time mulling over trades and free agent acquisitions, as I can now generate full and specific reports for each of my leagues in a matter of minutes. It has been especially useful with the inclusion of new scoring categories in recent years – I am consistently surprised by how player values change with certain statistics being added or removed. The Player Equivalency tool has been of particular help.

Use the Player Equivalency tool to determine what a statistics a player would have to put up at a different position in order to have the same real value to your team. Enter the player you're considering and the new position you want to assess, click search, and voila! Use this tool to assess trade value and help identify the right direction to take your team.

10. I enjoyed this Q&A with Anaheim "rookie" goaltender Viktor Fasth. This back-and-forth was my favourite:

You executed an old-school diving poke check on a Patrick Marleau breakaway. Do you practice that?

VF: I am 30 years old. I played back when goalies still did that. So it is still in my toolbox.

11. Chris Kreider was outplayed by fellow rookie JT Miller, and has been demoted to the AHL for the time being. Kreider was a dominant force with Boston College and made an immediate impact with the Rangers last year in the postseason after turning pro, but his struggles this season highlight the difficulty most young players face with bringing their best to the table every night (consistency). Kreider will be a very good NHL player for a long time, but he isn't immune to the slumps and struggles that most young hockey players go through.

12. Columbus GM Jarmo Kekalainen is a huge proponent of using statistics as a means of evaluation – it will be interesting to see what changes he makes in Columbus.

What is interesting, however, is that Kekalainen is very much an acolyte of the way in which hockey's now going. He thinks there's an incredible value in advanced stats, as do a number of other organizations throughout the NHL. I honestly don't know whether Scott Howson was a big fan of advanced stats, but given that their team staff page doesn't list anyone as being in charge of or involved with that type of thing, he probably wasn't.

Kekalainen likes them so much he's quoted on the latest Hockey Prospectus annual publication, saying, "Stats are facts...In the long run they hardly ever lie. Thorough analytical work, like that done by Hockey Prospectus, is needed to make a proper evaluation of them." That's a terribly refreshing thing for an NHL general manager to say.

13. Why did the Tampa Bay Lightning trade Dustin Tokarski last week? He was at one time considered the goaltender of the future in the organization.

This year I've been fairly disappointed in Tokarski. While there's no question that he came up big for the Norfolk Admirals in the playoffs in 2011-12, his regular season record last year with the Ads was not stellar. It wasn't horrible, but it wasn't anything to cause NHL scouts to salivate. In 45 games last year, he had a .913/2.23. And you have to realize that that's essentially average.

He was expected to do better this season. He hasn't. The areas where he was expected to improve (patience, playing bigger in net, and above all, consistency) simply weren't getting better. He still drops to his butterfly too early and stays there too frequently. And that tendency is going to become problematic the longer it goes on.

A potential explanation:

So here's one way--maybe the only way--this deal makes hockey sense. Jaroslav Janus and Andrey Vasilevskiy almost have to be coming (back) to North America in the fall.

Tokarski's claim to fame:

{youtube}V8_KugCmGxk{/youtube}

14. Noted team cancer Alexander Semin (sarcasm, of course) has been anything but in Carolina. Signing Semin last summer was a shrewd move by the Hurricanes, and the way Semin has fit in, a long-term extension could be on the horizon.

"He has been nothing but great," said [Eric] Staal. "He's been a great teammate for everyone in this room and the type of guy who competes in practice and in games and that's all you can ask for."

15. Just wanted to send out a thanks to our readers for coming back stronger than ever after the lockout. Traffic is way up, guide sales were strong, and the site boasts arguably its strongest ever team of writers and contributors.

Enjoy your weekends.

Other posts from Jeff:

- Projecting Canada's 2014 Olympic Roster
- The Impact of the Erik Karlsson Injury
- 15 Prime Cuts: Schroeder, Kadri, realignment, and more