For the Week of December 13th. Elliotte Friedman's weekly *30 Thoughts* column on the CBC website is currently the best read in hockey. Friedman is insightful, articulate, knowledgeable, fair, and most importantly, interesting. He has sources and contacts in the hockey world that most could only dream of. He has an ability which is rare in this day and age - providing a balanced and reasonable opinion on the league, the players, and all 30 of the clubs.

Each week I will post my own observations (I couldn't completely steal Friedman's idea so I'll pick a number other than 30) – with a heavy emphasis on the fantasy side of hockey, of course. Prospects, goalies, sleepers, busts, it will all be covered each week.

1. Keith Ballard is a player worth targeting. For a multitude of reasons, his ice time was limited early on in the season (and he was even healthy scratched on a few occasions). Ballard will get

a ton of ice time with Christian Ehrhoff out, and if he plays well he can expect that trend to continue even when the German defenseman returns.

Ballard is fast, gritty, and offensively gifted – he fits the Vancouver system like a glove. His value will rise even more in leagues that count hits and/or blocked shots.

2. You would win a lot of hockey games with an entire team composed of players like Brandon Dubinsky and Ryan Callahan. Both are skilled, feisty, gritty, and responsible. Both (especially Dubinsky) are finally getting the recognition they deserve in fantasy hockey circles as well.

3. One of my favourite prospects is off to a terrific start in his professional career. Matt Calvert is hovering just below the point-per-game mark with the Syracuse Crunch. He projects as more of a two-way energy player, but one should never discount the small player with a big heart.

He is in the same mould as Zach Parise (obviously not nearly as skilled) – a real nose for the net, understanding for the game, and a motor that doesn't quit. He sticks to the puck like white on rice.

4. This not just in – Marty Turco stinks. Corey Crawford's grip on Chicago's starting position continues to tighten.

5. Nashville rookie Anders Lindback has two consecutive shutouts filling in for the injured Pekka Rinne. Lindback slid far in his draft year because of a medical issue (one that he still deals with on a daily basis). Nashville continues to pump out the quality goaltending. My only question – how long until Rinne is jettisoned out of town? Mike Dunham, Tomas Vokoun, Chris Mason… the list goes on.

6. Kudos to those of you who held on to Jonathan Quick this past summer. I traded him for a few reasons – I thought last season was a bit of an anomaly, and I was worried about the arrival of Jonathan Bernier. Quick has picked up right where he left off last (regular) season – consistent and quality play every game for the Kings. He's athletic and talented, but most importantly he is very mentally tough.

7. I agree 100% with Dobber's take on the Washington Capitals. They are not a defensive team, and they don't have the personnel to play a defensive game. They lost last spring because of a hot goalie, not because of an ineffective system.

Acquiring Scott Hannan (who may be the worst passing defenseman in the league) made

sense, but he doesn't fit that team at all. Bruce Boudreau may be the problem, but he can only do so much defensively with the personnel on the roster.

8. I get asked this question a lot, so I'll update my thoughts. My top five young defensemen in a keeper format: 1) Erik Karlsson, 2) John Carlson, 3) Cam Fowler, 4) Jamie McBain, 5) PK Subban. Kevin Shattenkirk and Alex Pietrangelo are close behind. Fowler has shot up my rankings list for good reason – he's an 18-year-old playing like a veteran.

9. Eric Tangradi was recently named AHL player of the week. His value has peaked (in the summer) and fallen (after being sent down) all in the span of a few months. I'd still value him quite highly in keeper league formats.

Obviously if he were a Florida prospect he wouldn't have the same value, but its only logical that a young, cheap, big, and offensively talented winger on Pittsburgh gets fantasy attention. If you don't own him, it may be time to toss out a few feelers to the owner that does.

10. My World Junior Championship preview column(s) will be out at some point over the next seven days. Based on my early research, I'd look for a few things – Adam Larsson to receive a ton of hype from the media (which essentially means Pierre McGuire), Canada to play a very physical and aggressive style, and the USA to score a ton of goals. My dark horse for the Canadian team is undersized forward and Montreal prospect Brendan Gallagher of the Vancouver Giants.

11. There are a number of surprise players and teams this season, but to me the biggest may be the Dallas Stars. Did anyone see them leading the Pacific Division midway through December? Kari Lehtonen has stayed (relatively) healthy, they are getting offense, and the defensive group is holding the fort down as well. It helps that the Pacific Division has weakened a bit (especially in San Jose).

One Star I really like for keeper league formats is Jamie Benn. His short-term value took a hit when the team decided to move him permanently to center, but down the road it probably helps his long-term value.

12. The Avalanche are going to win a ton of games this year by simply outskating the other team. Aside from Paul Stastny and Milan Hejduk, every single forward can fly. The defense aside from Adam Foote is very mobile as well. With the emergence of Kevin Shattenkirk, I could see the Avalanche shopping the swift-skating Kyle Cumiskey as the deadline approaches.

13. If I'm Steve Yzerman, I hopped on the first plane to Russia yesterday after learning that Evgeni Nabokov was leaving his KHL team. Sure he'd have to pass through the waiver wire if a contract was signed, but few teams possess the cap space and the need for a goalie that the Lightning do. Nabokov would fill a huge need for the team, as Mike Smith is arguably the worst goalie in the league, and Dan Ellis far from a legitimate starter himself.

14. Jeremy Morin is going to be a player. Scoop him up (more value in keeper leagues, obviously) if you can.

15. Willie Mitchell's first game back for the Kings: 27+ minutes in a shutout win (although the Kings allowed over 50 shots on goal). He is the kind of player who has a ton of secondary fantasy value – he eats up the minutes that Doughty/Johnson don't need to. Not surprisingly, Doughty had his best offensive game (three points) in quite some time.