The thinking process that goes in to selecting the *Prime Cuts* roster is similar to Pierre McGuire's "Monsters" team on TSN (I promise that is the first and only time I will compare my thinking process to Pierre's). Since this is a fantasy hockey site, the selection process favors players that have had strong seasons on the score sheet, obviously. However, not just goals and assists are weighted – perhaps a player has started to shoot the puck more, or play better defensively. Intangibles like heart, grit, and determination factor in to the selection process as well. It is far and away my favorite article to write each year, and I hope you will all enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

The second part of this series will name the bottom six forwards and two goaltenders.

The fourth line: Brandon Prust – Zenon Konopka – Brad Marchand

The one staple of any good fourth line in hockey is energy provided. Some NHL teams opt for

brute force; some tend to go with a checking unit, while others opt for speed and secondary scoring. My unit encompasses all of the above. **Brandon Prust** arrived in the Big Apple by way of Calgary. He was known as a solid fighter and adequate depth player during his time with the Flames, but has developed into a strong two-way player who can play in a variety of situations under John Tortorella. Prust scored 13 goals, added 160 PIM, and played just a shade under 14 minutes on average per game (all 82). He saw 1:41 of ice time per game on the penalty kill, as well.

Zenon Konopka's name was mentioned as trade bait at the deadline. Several contending teams were heavily interested in him. The Islanders decided to keep him, as they liked the presence he brought to the team both on and off the ice. Why were so many teams interested in him? Nine points in 82 games is far from impressive, even for a depth forward. Konopka was fourth in the entire league on the draw, posting a sparkling 57.7% success rate. His 307 PIM made more than a few poolies happy, as well.

Look up tenacity in the dictionary, and you'll see a picture of **Brad Marchand** beside it. The former junior star burst on to the scene in Boston this year. He clicked instantaneously with Patrice Bergeron, and the two quickly formed one of the better two-way duos in the league. Marchand does everything at 110%. He isn't a fourth liner any more, but he was one at the beginning of the season. He finished with 21 goals, 51 PIM, and a plus-25 rating.

The third line: Michael Grabner-Logan Couture-Jeff Skinner

Not a prototypical third line, and by the end of the season none of the three players were playing in a third line capacity. However, I wanted to highlight three extremely impressive (for different reasons) rookie seasons. Grabner started as a depth forward, as did Couture. Skinner bounced around the lineup in Carolina a bit before solidifying his spot in the top six.

Michael Grabner was waived by the Florida Panthers after a poor training camp. If the Panthers management did their homework, they would have realized that this was a common trend with Grabner, who had awful camps in years previous with Vancouver. Grabner, a sniper with speed to burn, tried to play a defensively responsible game each camp, as he thought the coaches would appreciate it. It wasn't until the Islanders told him to stick to what works (skating, shooting), and ignore what doesn't. Let the checkers check. He lit the league on fire, scoring 34 goals (six of the shorthanded variety, a huge boost to many poolies). He is one of a handful of players who can create offense purely with his speed (Marian Gaborik is another). His 228 shots on goal is an extremely impressive statistic considering his ice time (only 15 minutes per night).

Logan Couture has been overshadowed by flashier players his entire career. He is a good skater but not extremely quick. He has a good shot but not a lethal one, and he is a solid player in all three zones. His lack of flash hurt his fantasy value, but it didn't stop him from having arguably the best rookie season among all NHL skaters in 2010-11. Unlike Grabner and Skinner, he was a huge part of a playoff club. Patrick Marleau was the only Shark with more goals. Jason Demers was the only Shark with plus-minus higher than Couture's plus-18. Only Marleau and Joe Pavelski had more shots. An argument could be made that Couture was San Jose's MVP for much of the season.

Jeff Skinner… what else needs to be said? Born in 1992 (the year Chris Chelios turned 30), he surprised many by making an effortless jump from the OHL to the NHL. He was compared to Sidney Crosby by some because of his extremely strong skating stride, and the comparisons

weren't unwarranted. Skinner is more sniper than playmaker, and he was a huge part of Carolina's offensive attack all season. Skinner is extra special to me because he was one of my bit "hits."

From June 3rd of last summer: "*I am not a prospect guru like Van Horne, Dobber, or Bugg, but aside from Hall and Seguin, Jeff Skinner really intrigues me from a fantasy perspective."*

From June 19th: *"I have said this before, and I'll say it again. Whatever team drafts Jeff Skinner is going to be very, very happy. After the big two, he is the best pure goal scorer in the draft. Not big or fast, but he "gets" the game of hockey. I wouldn't be surprised to see a team trade into the top 10 to make sure they get him."*

If you look through the archives, I have my share of misses (Steve Bernier, Peter Regin), as well. It only took two or three viewings of Skinner last year during his time with Kitchener to recognize the kind of potential he possessed. Because of my big mouth, I missed out on him in every single league. Luckily for you I have no plans of keeping my cards at my vest any time soon.

The goaltenders: Tim Thomas and Cory Schneider

Tim Thomas had a statistically dominant season. I don't care how good the Bruins are defensively, he consistently stopped more pucks than any other goalie in the league. Throw in his style of play, and he was an easy choice for this team. Who has two thumbs and loves watching Timmy play? This guy.

Cory Schneider leapfrogged Jonathan Bernier and Jacob Markstrom as the best goalie prospect in the world. Whichever team ends up landing him this summer or next is in for a treat. Zero weaknesses. Good puck handler, unflappable, big, quick, agile, and consistent. He gave Roberto and the Canucks more than they ever could have hoped for.

Coming next week… the top six forwards.

The roster (so far):

XXX-XXX-XXX

XXX-XXX-XXX

Michael Grabner-Logan Couture-Jeff Skinner

Brandon Prust-Zenon Konopka-Brad Marchand

Keith Yandle-Dustin Byfuglien

James Wisniewski-Mark Giordano

Adam McQuaid-Travis Hamonic

Tim Thomas

Cory Schneider

2009-10 Prime Cuts

Alex Ovechkin – Henrik Sedin – Martin St. Louis

Jussi Jokinen – Steven Stamkos – Chris Stewart

Steve Downie – Brandon Sutter – Eric Fehr

TJ Galiardi – Jay McClement – Ian Lapperiere

Duncan Keith – Mike Green

Tyler Myers – Joni Pitkanen

Keith Yandle – Mark Giordano

Ryan Miller

Tuukka Rask

2008-09 Prime Cuts

Zach Parise – Evgeni Malkin – Martin St. Louis
Scott Hartnell – Travis Zajac – Martin Havlat
David Booth – Ryan Kesler – David Backes
Cody McLeod – Jay McClement – Cal Clutterbuck

Mike Green – Zdeno Chara
Mark Streit – Keith Ballard
Jan Hejda – Matt Greene

Tim Thomas
Scott Clemmensen

2007-08 Prime Cuts

Alex Ovechkin – Evgeni Malkin – Alex Kovalev
Zach Parise – Tomas Plekanec – Jason Pominville
Niklas Hagman – Ryan Kesler – Patrick Sharp
Steve Ott – Brandon Dubinsky – Milan Lucic

Nicklas Lidstrom – Brent Burns
Mark Streit – Mike Green
Braydon Coburn – Alex Edler

Evgeni Nabokov
Mathieu Garon