The return of Lecavalier, free agency predictions, replacing Rafalski, the next Zetterberg, and more.

1. The surprise retirement of Brian Rafalski has significant fantasy ramifications. Detroit suddenly has a huge need for an offensively-inclined defenseman, and Rafalski's $6 million cap hit is now off the books. They'll be huge players in the free agent market, targeting the likes of Kevin Bieksa, James Wisniewski, and Christian Ehrhoff. The team is probably expecting Nicklas Kronwall to take a step forward offensively, as well.

2. The player to watch, regardless of who the Wings do or do not sign, is top prospect Brendan Smith. Smith cracked the top three on my top 10 keeper league defenseman prospects list a few months ago, and this news does nothing but increase his stock. He had a dominant college career at Wisconson and made a quick and smooth transition to the pro game in Grand Rapids. He's big, gritty, skilled, and extremely confident in his abilities.

Detroit is notoriously patient with their prospects, but spending one season learning from Nick Lidstrom wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, would it?

3. The Malkin/Stamkos debate that has raged on here at DobberHockey for the past few months needed some hard numbers. A must read analysis of the two fantasy studs. I've made no secret that I favour Malkin. Consider him a risk after the knee injury/surgery, but I can't erase the memories of the 2009 postseason from my mind.

4. The Tampa Bay Lightning will clear about $9 million in cap space this summer with the expiring contracts of Simon Gagne and Eric Brewer. Do they take a run at Brad Richards? On the surface, another offensive center with Stamkos/Lecavalier makes little sense. However, Richards would give them countless options at even strength and on the power play.

If I were a betting man, I'd expect the Rangers to open their wallet in a big way for Richards. Tortorella loved him in Tampa Bay and they clearly need a top line center to pair with Marian Gaborik. Richards wouldn't be a bad player for Derek Stepan and Artem Anisimov to learn from, either. People may bring up the failed signings of Scott Gomez and Chris Drury, but the difference with Richards is that he actually *is* a top line center.

5. Are Vincent Lecavalier's days done as an elite point producer? Some say yes, citing his slow

skating (which I don't really get, considering he's never been particularly quick or fast). Some say no, citing his fantastic stretch run and postseason. Lecavalier has been around forever but he is only 31. His recent couple of seasons have been filled with injuries, including a serious one to his shoulder courtesy of a Matt Cooke check. If I own Lecavalier, I'd be cautiously optimistic for next season and beyond. If I didn't own him, I'd toss a feeler or two into the water to see what it would take to acquire him.

5. The Hurricanes were an extremely young team in 2010/11. With both Jussi Jokinen and Joni Pitkanen headed for free agency, they could be even younger in 2011/12. On defense, look for Jamie McBain to take a huge step forward in terms of production and overall play. He played well at times, but didn't see enough power play ice time to get into any sort of groove. Joe Corvo is signed for another season, but Pitkanen's minutes will mostly fall to McBain.

Up front, there could be a slew of youngsters joining Jeff Skinner and Eric Staal. Zac Dalpe is the best prospect and the future number two center, but I'm not sure he's ready for a regular top six spot just yet. Zach Boychuk and Drayson Bowman also have top six upside, but both need to get bigger and stronger to play at the NHL level. It could be a long season in Carolina unless they get another Skinner-like emergence from one of their young players.

6. I came across this Stamkos training video , and was really interested by something he said at the 2:08 mark. Stamkos is talking about Guy Boucher and his philosophy regarding strengths and weaknesses. Instead of focusing on weaknesses and improving them, Boucher told Stamkos to spend 80 percent of his time on his strengths. His logic makes sense – if you are working on your weaknesses, they may become average or slightly above average, but your strengths will suffer. If you are working on your strengths, they become that much better. Boucher strongly believes in well-defined player roles, a mindset that fits in very well with the above philosophy.

7. Ottawa has some potential sleeper picks for next season up front. Colin Greening signed a three-year, one-way contract. He played well with Jason Spezza (not hard to do, mind you) down the stretch along with Bobby Butler. Ryan Potulny tore the AHL apart during the postseason, but he hasn't been able to crack an NHL roster thus far in his professional career. Milan Michalek and Daniel Alfredsson are both signed through next season, but neither can be counted on for top line production. Do the Senators speed up the rebuild and add a top six winger for Spezza to play with? Or do they stick with the likes of Butler and Greening?

The Senators need a legitimate center behind Spezza after trading Mike Fisher. Do they take a run at one of the second tier free agents?

8. No mention of Peter Regin, who was a monumental flop this past season. He was probably my biggest "miss." He was Ottawa's best forward during the final part of the 2008-09 season and into the postseason, and I figured that he would have carried it over into the next season. He didn't.

9. Teddy Purcell became a legitimate NHL player in the span of a few months. It finally clicked with him that he needed to play with more intensity and physicality if he wanted to produce at the NHL level. Skill has never been the question with him. The Kings must be kicking themselves for giving him up early (they moved Purcell and a pick for Jeff Halpern at the deadline last season). He could have been the perfect playmaking winger to put with Anze Kopitar. To be fair to the Kings, Purcell was inconsistent and played a very perimeter game in

his time with them.

10. Brooks Laich is a Swiss-army type of player – he can fill a variety of roles and positions on a team. It doesn't sound like he will be returning to Washington next season. Where does he end up? His fantasy value could increase dramatically if he goes to a team that puts him in a position to succeed. Thanks to a weak free agent class, Laich may be the second best forward available.

11. Keep this name in mind – Calle Jarnkrok. Detroit's best prospect has Henrik Zetterberg upside. He's two years away, but should be able to jump right in to a scoring role in the NHL.

12. Make a point to watch what Buffalo does this summer. They have a new owner with deep pockets and a willingness to use them. They also have cap space and a few holes on the roster.

13. A few free agent predictions, as per multiple requests – Richards to New York, Gagne back to Philadelphia, Markov to Washington, Wisniewski sticks around in Montreal, Ehrhoff to Tampa Bay, Bieksa stays with the Canucks, and Vokoun to Colorado. Philadelphia will move either Carter/Hartnell for a defenseman or cap space, opening up a spot for Gagne in the top six.

14. My writing has improved leaps and bounds since joining the DobberHockey team, but it is still far from perfect. Anyone looking to improve their writing should go and pick up a copy of *On Writing Well* – I use it every time I sit down to write a column.

15. I have received a few questions as to how I see Vancouver's blue line shaping up for next season. The cap increase is definitely going to help them, as they'll need to spend some bucks to keep one or both of Kevin Bieksa and Christian Ehrhoff. Dan Hamhuis and Alex Edler will be around. I don't see Sami Salo returning (retirement, other team). Keith Ballard will probably be dealt if both defensemen are re-signed (and yes, he does have trade value). Chris Tanev will have to have a miserable camp not to make the squad. I'd guess Bieksa re-signs at a discount, and Ehrhoff receives a ridiculous contract and leaves town.

Enjoy the rest of the Final.

Jeff Angus has been writing at DobberHockey since 2007. His monthly 15 Points to Consider column was inspired by Elliotte Friedman's weekly 30 Thoughts column on the CBC website – 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. Most importantly, 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.