This column is a part of the Province newspaper's "Replace the KB" blogging competition. Give it a thumbs up here!

There are few certainties in the world of hockey each and every season. Daniel and Henrik Sedin will be near the top of the scoring race. Tim Connolly, Ales Hemsky, and Sami Salo will keep their respective team doctors busy. Teemu Selanne will continue to defy father time, and Pierre McGuire will remind us why every single young Canadian is the next Bryan Trotter/Joe Sakic/Steve Yzerman/all of the above.

There will always be disappointments, and this year is no different. Some proven stars are off to brutal starts, and some inconsistent players are unsurprisingly struggling. Let's get to the first quarter LVP's (Least Valuable Players) at each position.

Goaltenders

The contenders: Rick DiPietro (New York Islanders), Roberto Luongo (Vancouver Canucks), and Steve Mason (Columbus Blue Jackets)

While both DiPietro and Luongo are signed for the next 50 years (or at least it seems that way), Mason has allowed 50 years worth of bad goals in a little over a month. He is giving the Blue Jackets a shockingly abysmal level of goaltending. Should we be surprised? Considering he has been a *well* below average starting goaltender for his entire NHL career (outside of a ridiculous hot streak during his rookie season), the answer is probably no.

Goaltenders with a better save percentage than Mason's .866 include every other starting goaltender currently in the league, Felix Potvin during his tenure with the Canucks (.887 was his lowest), and Glen Healy for his career (.887 as well). Mason has been so bad that Blue Jacket

fans are clamoring for Allen York. Don't feel bad if you have no idea who that is.

DiPietro is the third wheel on Long Island, as the goaltending was humming along nicely with Evgeni Nabokov and Al Montoya before he returned. When he's healthy, he's inconsistent. When he's injured (which is often), he is eating up a large chunk of the cap (although this doesn't really affect the frugal Islanders). In a tribute to his declining level of play, DiPietro has started wearing a mask similar to Dan Cloutier.

Luongo had another awful October. It seemed worse this year though, because the blowouts from the Stanley Cup Final are still fresh in people's minds. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to perform poorly at work for one month of the year, and your only excuse be, "well, it's October!"

The winner: Steve Mason

Dishonourable mentions: Jaroslav Halak (looks like Montreal knew what they were doing after all),
Cam Ward ("Red Light Ward" has allowed four or more goals in five of his starts),
and
Jonas Gustavsson
(the Monster has been scary bad).

Defensemen

The contenders: Keith Ballard (Vancouver Canucks), Mike Green (Washington Capitals), and Lubomir Visnovsky (Anaheim Ducks)

Each of the contenders above are on here for different reasons. Ballard is on pace for less than five points (which means he'll be paid about $1 million per point), and he's far from a stalwart in his own zone. If it wasn't for the consistently awesome hip checks he delivers, this wouldn't even be a competition. The Canucks owe him a lot more money over many more years, and they had better hope he turns his level of play around, quickly. With Cody Hodgson now out of Alain Vigneault's doghouse, Ballard can stretch out his legs.

Green is the most talented defenseman in the league, but his durability is starting to resemble that of humpty dumpty. His production isn't bad (three goals and six points in eight games), but he has been the single biggest frustration for many poolies. He is becoming impossible to rely on, which is a tough pill to swallow for the Capitals (who pay him over $5 million annually), as well as his fantasy hockey owners, who likely used a very high draft pick on him.

Visnovsky led NHL defensemen in scoring last season, and the Ducks returned essentially the same team to the ice in 2011-12. What changed? Visnovsky, before breaking his hand on November 11th, had one goal through 16 games (only 17 less than he scored last season). He's not useless defensively, but he is paid $5.6 million to put up points. There is no excuse for a defenseman not to produce when he gets to play a regular shift with Bobby Ryan, Corey Perry, and Ryan Getzlaf.

The winner: Lubomir Visnovsky

Dishonorable mentions: Andrei Markov (No ACL apparently doesn't mean no problem),
James Wisniewski
(eight game suspension, the Jackets wish it was longer after watching him play),
Kevin Bieksa
(plays defense like he's a free safety at times), and
Tomas Kaberle
(has played at the level of a bottom-pairing defenseman since leaving Toronto).

Forwards

The Contenders: Eric Staal (Carolina Hurricanes), Matt Stajan (Calgary Flames), Dustin Penner (Los Angeles Kings)

Staal is on pace for a minus-81 rating and 10 assists. Not exactly inspiring numbers from a franchise player. Penner's commitment in the offseason to fitness has translated into absolutely nothing on the ice. He's on pace for zero goals and 12 assists. Stajan makes $3.5 million to eat popcorn in Calgary's pressbox most nights. The Flames sure made a smart move signing him to a massive $14 million extension only a short while after acquiring him from Toronto. I think they misjudged the market demands for a middle-of-the-road third line center a bit.

Staal's poor start to the season has been linked to the hit he threw on brother Marc last year. I'm not sure you can blame his struggles entirely on that, but he does look very out-of-sorts on the ice. Penner looks lazy and disinterested, which isn't a new problem with him. Stajan simply isn't a very good hockey player, and Calgary has tried the likes of Roman Horak and convereted winger David Moss at center rather than play him at all. Quite telling, no?

As bad as Penner has been, and as bad as Stajan's contract is, Eric Staal and his awful game in all areas takes the cake here.

The winner: Eric Staal

Dishonorable mentions: Kyle Okposo (no goals and three assists)**, Henrik Zetterberg** (six points in 14 games a far cry from his usual production level)
, Blake Comeau (
no points through 13 games, makes $2.5 million)
,
and
Scott Gomez
(one of the most overpaid athletes in pro sports, as he has scored only 19 goals in 164 regular season games with the Habs)