The merits of PIM in fantasy hockey, Parise's struggles, Nugent-Hopkins, Gunnarsson, and more.

1. The following point has been raised numerous times over on the DobberHockey forums. Why does fantasy hockey include PIM as a measurable statistic? The reason why stats aside from goals and assists are included in most pools is to increase the number of relevant players. It is fun to construct a roster that needs to be well rounded. However, rewarding PIM seems very counterintuitive to real life hockey. Does fantasy football reward players for penalties? Scrapping PIM isn't necessarily the best option, as it takes away value from many of the power forwards who have become so valuable in recent years (David Backes, Corey Perry, and so on). However, there are some changes that could improve how it is valued:

- Reward points only record major penalties. In general, a major penalty is more indicative of toughness (fighting, major penalties for physical play), and that is what the statistic should reflect in fantasy hockey
- Reward points for specific minor penalties. This would be more work (and would require a more in-depth pool manager). Penalties like roughing, charging, boarding, and so on would be counted, while hooking, holding, interference, and tripping would be ignored.
- Have one roster spot designated to a “goon.” I have never used this one but have toyed with the idea a few times. Have the player only count for PIM and nothing else.

What tweaks have you or would you make to improve the usage of PIM in fantasy hockey?

2. The St. Louis Blues are a team that seems to be on the cusp of stepping into the Western Conference’s elite, but they keep getting stuck there. Many people (myself included) have been guilty of overrating their young talent (especially Patrik Berglund), but looking at the roster, it is easy to get excited about their future. The forward core is deep and there are some fantastic prospects on the way. The back end has a mix of defensive defensemen and blue chippers in Alex Pietrangelo and Kevin Shattenkirk. Jaroslav Halak hasn’t been the elite goalie many expected he would be, but the upside is still there.

The biggest reason why the Blues haven’t taken the next step is so obvious, but it is one I continued to overlook. They lack a true game breaker up front. The Boston Bruins won the Cup last year without a superstar forward, but they possessed arguably the best defenseman and goaltender on the planet (at the time, at least). When was the last time a team had extended

success without a superstar forward? The Sabres of the late 90's were a good team thanks to the consistently heroic efforts of Dominik Hasek.

Let's get back to the Blues and their lack of an elite forward. Berglund has all of the tools to get there, but he's incredibly inconsistent. Oshie doesn't have top end offensive upside, and Perron is just returning from a serious concussion. Jaden Schwartz and Vladimir Tarasenko are two of the best prospects in the world, but neither has proven anything at the professional level (at least on North American ice). If I were a betting man, I'd say Schwartz has the best shot of anyone in the organization to be that guy, but he's a few years away from making a significant impact.

Unless Halak (or Brian Elliott) steps his game up and becomes one of the best goalies in the league, or Pietrangelo and/or Shattenkirk become dominant defensemen on a nightly basis, I think the Blues will continue to sit right below that top tier of teams in the West.

3. The Calgary Flames would be incredibly short-sighted to not seek out trade options for Jarome Iginla. The team is clearly going nowhere, and a short, focused rebuild would do a world of good. Take every single asset on the team (save for Giordano, Backlund, and Sven Bartschi), and see what could be had on the trade front.

4. Two prospects I think will be great successes at the NHL level – Carl Hagelin (NYR) and Cody Eakin (WSH). Both are on teams with very deep forward groups, but both have also made

really quick adjustments to the NHL level. Eakin, in particular, is someone to keep an eye on, as the Capitals would love to be able to plug a cheap contract into their top six next season. He's an incredibly hard worker with a great offensive skill set.

5. I stumbled across this amazing interview with Evgeni Malkin a few weeks ago. His story is pretty incredible. Obviously leaving Russia different nowadays than it was back when Fedorov and Mogilny defected to North America over 20 years ago, but what Malkin was able to do as a rookie considering the stress he must have been under after leaving home was pretty incredible. I'll still argue that his play during the 2009 playoffs was the best stretch of hockey played by a forward in the last decade (perhaps save for Crosby last regular season before the concussion).

Since Crosby returned a few weeks ago, Malkin has looked the best he has looked in a long time.

6. I may sound like a broken record here, but the Canadiens are going to rue the day they traded away Ryan McDonagh. He is well on his way to becoming one of the best two-way defensemen in the league.

7. Sticking with the Rangers, what Dan Girardi has done this season without Marc Staal has been amazing. Girardi is a heart-and-soul player who moves the puck really well, but his most valuable impact on the Rangers has been his leadership. He acts like an assistant coach at

times working with McDonagh, Tim Erixon, Michael Sauer, and Michael Del Zotto.

At the beginning of the season, I thought that the Rangers defense was much too young for a team wanting to contend for the Stanley Cup (even with Henrik Lundqvist in goal). Thanks in large part to Girardi, it looks like I was wrong.

8. Zach Parise had his best game of the season on Friday night in Minnesota (considering he was playing in front of numerous friends and family, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised). I haven't seen a lot of Devils games this season, but I have a few friends who follow the team quite closely. There has been some concern expressed about his skating. He appears to be a step or two slower than he has been in past years, and he relied a lot on his speed to retrieve loose pucks and create scoring chances.

It does take a long time to come back from an injury as serious as Parise's last season, and some players are slower to heal than others. However, it is something to keep in mind.

9. Ryan Nugent-Hopkins is such an amazing player. His patience, passing, and shooting remind me of Joe Sakic. His slipperiness reminds me of Patrick Kane. The guy is impossible to hit, and he is always in the right position. I'd be scouring the Edmonton farm system to figure out who their next PP quarterback is going to be, as he is going to rack up a ton of assists playing with the trio of studs up front for the next decade.

10. I'm not sure I have ever seen a player learn to play defense over the course of one summer before. It has happened with Edmonton's Tom Gilbert. He has gone from complete liability to top pairing stalwart over the course of a few months of training. The biggest difference in his game is his willingness to deliver and receive contact while making plays on the puck. He used to duck out of hits and make soft plays, but that has changed.

11. Justin Goldman made an interesting point a few weeks ago in this piece I wrote for the Canucks Army. Teams that draft goaltenders similar to the ones that are already in the organization usually benefit more than those who do not (Lindback-Rinne in Nashville, for example). I wonder if the same could hold true for skaters?

Brendan Gallagher will have two undersized forwards to learn from once he cracks the Montreal roster – Mike Cammalleri and Brian Gionta. Both players likely faced similar obstacles to Gallagher. Another situation is Cody Hodgson in Vancouver. He plays the game like a Sedin, and like Daniel and Henrik he also overcame a rocky start to his NHL career.

12. Winston Churchill famously referred to Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." The saying could be applied perfectly to Mike Green. Is there a more frustrating player

in fantasy hockey right now? Green has every quality you could want in a dynamic offensive defenseman, but can't seem to stay healthy, and when he is healthy, he looks like a player without a role.

Green really took off as an NHL player under Bruce Boudreau. He played with Boudreau during his first few professional seasons in Hershey, and Boudreau let him play his high risk style of game once he graduated to the Caps. In 270 NHL games under Boudreau, Green was a plus-79 and recorded 229 points. Before Boudreau was hired, Green had 15 points in 104 NHL games. What will happen with Dale Hunter?

Green gets injured so much because of the style of game he plays. He loves to bait opposing forwards into taking runs at him by holding on to the puck longer than most players. This allows him to rush the puck into the open ice, but it also leaves him prone to big body checks. He may have to make some adjustments to his game if he wants to remain in the lineup with any sort of regularity.

13. Carl Gunnarsson is the kind of player teams need to do well. He has a very manageable cap hit at $1.325 million, and he's an efficient, smart, and reliable defenseman who can play a variety of roles on the back end. Toronto has a few bad contracts and they have had to overpay to plug some holes on the roster via unrestricted free agency. They are experiencing success this season because they have a few players on cheap contracts playing significant roles (Gunnarsson, Jake Gardiner, and James Reimer, most notably).

Gunnarsson has only seven points in 24 games (and zero goals), but he's a good defenseman with the puck. He doesn't see much PP time because of the depth ahead of him (fifth on the team in per game power play ice time), but he could be a 35-point defenseman one day if he ever does.

14. Some players I am really enjoying watching this season – Joffrey Lupul (what a comeback story from his serious injury and subsequent infection), Claude Giroux (who isn't?), Hodgson (another great story after a rocky start to his professional career), and Stephen Weiss.

15. The NHL's youngest coach, Mike Yeo, has the Minnesota Wild in first place in the entire league. Why? Read this.

"Trading Brent Burns left big questions on Minnesota's blueline, and the Wild have also had a bunch of injuries to their defensemen early this season, including their biggest offensive force from the back end, Marek Zidlicky, who is out with a concussion. Only Nick Schultz and undersized Jared Spurgeon have played all the Wild's games among the blueliners.

The injury situation has forced GM Chuck Fletcher to dip into the depth he's built into the organization, but the Wild has gotten the job done with call-ups (Justin Falk, Nate Prosser and Kris Fredheim) and, when healthy, strong contributions from Clayton Stoner and rookie Marco Scandella. Both Greg Zanon and Mike Lundin returned for the Lightning game after extended

absences, Lundin for the first time this season. The veteran of a four-year stint with Tampa Bay, Lundin figured he'd play more minutes for the team in his home state and took less to sign with the Wild as a free agent last summer. However, he hurt his back in training camp and finally made his Wild debut on Monday."

I will have my fantasy hockey year in review posted around Christmas. I will be recapping 10 biggest fantasy stories of the calendar year… let's hear yours.