If 2010 was the year of the Olympics in the hockey world, 2011 has been the year of the concussion. Unfortunately, the concussion issue is one that is going to linger around for the forseeable future. We have seen its effects in the worst possible plays, from the death of Derek Boogaard to the uncertainty surrounding Sidney Crosby's career. This summer was perhaps the worst we have ever seen in hockey. Along with Boogaard dying, the hockey world also lost Rick Rypien and Wade Belak. And only a few weeks later, the devastating plane crash that killed the entire Lokomotiv hockey team in Russia occured.

Needless to say, the negative news was dominant in 2011.

That isn't to say we didn't see some great stories. Boston and Vancouver played in one of the most spirited Stanley Cup Final matchups in recent memory. We saw some young stars dazzle us night in and night out - most notably Claude Giroux and Steven Stamkos. The Sedin twins continue to show why they are such special talents, and the Maple Leafs (finally) are on the road to respectability with a solid team for the first time in a long time.

Without further adieu, let's get to the top 10 fantasy hockey stories of the past calendar year....

10. Sunrise Rising

Turns out Dale Tallon may have known what he was doing after all. He did a masterful job constructing the 2010 Cup-winning Blackhawks squad, but he was promptly kicked to the curb as the ownership wanted Stan Bowman in charge. Tallon came to Florida, and quickly put his stamp on the team. He shipped out long time Panthers like Nathan Horton and David Booth. He chose not to re-sign star goaltender Tomas Vokoun, and he proceeded to give half of the avaible free agents four-year contracts (or at least it seemed that way).

Florida is playing a gritty, inspired brand of hockey under Kevin Dineen, and from top to bottom the roster is very solid. The top line of Fleischmann-Weiss-Versteeg has been not only one of the biggest surprises in the league, but one of the best overall lines as well. When healthy, Fleischmann is one of the best offensive talents in the game. On defense, the overpaid but underrated Brian Campbell is on pace for a spectactular season. Jason Garrison has gone from unknown to All-Star candidate. In goal, Jose Theodore has been better than expected, although it is only a matter of time until Jacob Markstrom takes over the reigns as the starting goaltender.

The Panthers used to have one or two fantasy-relevant players, if that. They are now chalk-full of them, and they also boast arguably the deepest prospect cupboard in the entire league.

9. Perry, Shrugged

Corey Perry absolutely torched opposing goaltenders this past year. After the All-Star break, he scored a whopping 25 goals in 30 regular season games. Perry had 82 PIM in the first 52 games last season, and only 22 PIM in the final 30 games. Who knew that less time spent in the penalty box would correlate to an increase in offensive production? The Ducks marched from the Western Conference basement right into a home-ice seeding thanks unquestionably to Perry's dominance. They got by without star goaltender Jonas Hiller, who was battling vertigo. Perry seemed to be scoring timely goals every single game for the Ducks. He deservedly won the Hart Trophy as the league's most valuable player, and he wasn't even in the mix for it as late as January or February.

Like the rest of the Ducks, he has had an inconsistent 2011-12 season to date, but what Perry did at the end of last season was more than enough to earn him a spot on his list. I imagine he won more than a few of you your hockey pool(s) last season.

8. The Great Debate

For the past two or three years, the Malkin or Stamkos debate has dominated DobberHockey. The daily ramblings, the hockey forums, and even a column or two have all covered why one player is preferred over the other. Camp Stamkos has had the upper hand in recent years, as Malkin has had to battle back from reconstructive knee surgery. Stamkos has done nothing but

score goals at a ridiculous clip over the past few years. He's durable and consistent. Malkin isn't either of those things. However, over the past few months, we have been seeing the Malkin from the 2009 playoffs once again. The Sergei Fedorov/Jean Beliveau hybrid. The player who seems to be operating on a different level than anyone on the ice.

Malkin's ability to do everything at an elite level is unmatched. At his best (which we saw when he won the Conn Smythe), he overshadows everyone. Crosby (healthy edition), Ovechkin (of years past), you name it. He remains and will likely always remain an injury risk. Stamkos is probably a smarter bet in most scoring formats, as his upside is almost as high, but his downside is much, much less. However, with Malkin, there will always be that tantalizing upside... we could see him pop off for 130 points given the right circumstances.

I managed to write on both players without even picking one, and that is how it should be. Just sit back and enjoy two of the best and most exciting talents in hockey. If you own one of them in your pool, count your blessings.

7. A Stranglehold on the Calder

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins wasn't expected to play in the league this season. At 165 pounds, many (myself included) assumed he was too small and too weak to compete successfully against the size and strength of NHL defensemen. Like Patrick Kane, another recent undersized first overall pick who had an immediate NHL impact, Nugent-Hopkins has shown that his lack of size is actually an advantage. As an 18-year-old, Kane had 21 goals and 72 points for the upstart Blackhawks. Nugent-Hopkins is currently on pace for 31 goals and 82 points for the upstart Oilers. He has been so effective because of his on-ice awareness. The skill level he possesses is one thing, but he never puts himself in a bad spot on the ice.

Nugent-Hopkins isn't physically strong, but he is hockey strong. He has great balance on his

skates, and he is able to shield the puck quite effectively against players who outweigh him by 40 or 50 pounds. He has slowed down a bit after a hot start, but the fact that he is still at a point-per-game pace at the end of December is amazing, and far exceeds even the most optimistic of expectations.

6. The Art of Goaltending

Tim Thomas, simply put, has had a year for the ages. His save percentage in the Stanley Cup Final against Vancouver, the league's best offense in the regular season, was a ridiculous .967. The Bruins are a great defensive team, but they lean on Thomas more than people think.

The Thomas story is such a good one. On the ice, he's an athlete in every sense of the word. Thomas relies on elite flexibility, anticipation, agility, and coordination to make saves that other goaltenders would never dare to attempt. Off the ice, he's as nice as they come in professional sports. He didn't even get his break at the NHL level until the age of 31, after dominating over in Europe for multiple seasons. A true rags-to-riches story, and the unpredicability of them is so much of what makes sports a significant part of our culture. Thomas is the everyman (if the everyman was an unbelievable professional hockey goaltender).

5. Big on Talent

21 teams decided they liked at least one player more than Claude Giroux back at the 2006 NHL Entry Draft. Save for Chicago (Toews), I'd wager that all of those teams would like another chance at drafting Giroux. A winger at the QMJHL level, the Flyers fell in love with him at center, and for good reason. In general, the center plays a more important role on the ice. He takes faceoffs (a hard skill to learn for a young player), he usually plays more of a defensive role than a winger, and he carries the puck a lot more. Giroux quickly emerged as Philadelphia's most dangerous forward with the puck on his stick, and putting him in a position to maximize his talents was a no brainer.
The Flyers made the shocking Richards and Carter trades for a few reasons. One that doesn't get talked about as much is the fact that Giroux's quick and easy transition to center granted

them a level of comfort with their top two lines (the other center being Danny Briere). Giroux is currently leading the league in scoring, and the Flyers are looking like geniuses for their leap of faith.

Personally, I have been a Giroux fan ever since seeing him in the QJMHL playoffs a few years ago. Stats at the junior level don't always translate to pro hockey, but in Giroux's case the numbers were too hard to ignore. 17 goals and 51 points in 19 games for Gatineau in 2004-05 - almost double the second highest playoff scorer on his team.
Like Nugent-Hopkins, Giroux isn't big, but he is hockey strong. He's also one of the best players in the league.

4. Is Seguin Better?

The Phil Kessel for Tyler Seguin/Dougie Hamilton/Jared Knight trade will likely define the next five to 10 years for both Toronto and Boston. Kessel's play this year has made Brian Burke's gamble look less foolish than it did a few seasons ago. Seguin will likely become a better player than Kessel, and the two prospects both have NHL star upside (Hamilton as a defensive force, and Knight as a second line power forward). However, there may not be a more dangerous forward with the puck on his stick in the entire league than Kessel right now.

As a fan of hockey, it has been great to see the Leafs have an interesting team once again. They aren't the best defensive team in the league (nor are they close), but they are fast and exciting offensively, and it all starts with Kessel. He'll have more than a few 40 goal seasons by the time his career wraps up.

3. The Return of the Hockey Trade

The Erik Johnson for Kevin Shattenkirk/Chris Stewart bombshell trade last year was one of the

most interesting trades to break down in quite some time. Both teams traded away significant long-term assets. Even with the benefit of hindsight, picking a winner of the deal isn't an easy decision. Stewart has struggled this season after lighting it up with the Blues after the trade. Shattenkirk is a phenomenal offensive talent, and he'll be a mainstay on the St. Louis power play for the next decade. Johnson's play has ranged from average to dominant for Colorado, but he doesn't have much support defensively there.

Several other notable hockey trades occured. When I say hockey trade, I am referring to deals where each team acquires a player/players as the main asset - not a contract dump, not a deadline deal, and not a futures trade (prospects/picks). The Leafs have loved their Joffrey Lupul and Jake Gardiner acquisitions from Anaheim for Francois Beauchemin.

Minnesota and San Jose engaged in two significant summer trades - the Sharks received Martin Havlat and Brent Burns in exchange for Dany Heatley, prospect Charlie Coyle, and Devin Setoguchi. The Wild have been great this year, but moreso due to coaching and goaltending than Setoguchi (who is injured) or Heatley (who has been good, not gerat). Havlat has struggled mightily for the Sharks, and is now injured. Burns has been as advertised, but he probably won't show his true worth until the postseason.

The James Neal for Alex Goligoski trade looked like (and still looks like) a win for both teams. Dallas added one of the best young puck movers in the game, while the Penguins added a legitimate sniping winger. Neal is contending for the NHL scoring lead right now, and has established terrific chemistry with Malkin.

The aformentioned Richards/Carter trades were quasi-salary dumps (clearing space for Ilya Bryzgalov), but they did net the Flyers some great young players - Jakub Voracek, Wayne Simmonds, Brayden Schenn, and Sean Couturier. Hockey trades are so interesting as they are more similar to those we make as fantasy hockey GMs, and the fantasy hockey ramifications are usually quite significant.

2. Where Art Thou, Ovechkin?

Once the most dominant force in the hockey world, Ovechkin hasn't been the same player since Russia was elimiated at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver. He was the prototypical multi-category stud - goals, shots on goal, plus-minus, PIM, hits - Ovechkin really did it all. Whatever reasons have contributed towards his demise (rift with his coach, unwilling to change his playing style, performance-enhancing drugs, among other things), it would be a shame if Ovechkin was unable or unwilling to return to the level he once reached. He was the most exciting hockey player since Pavel Bure, and he had that ability to pull you away from something whenever you heard his name mentioned (I call this the "kitchen ability"). If I am cooking something in the kitchen, it has to take a special player for me to leave what I am doing and go into my living room. Ovechkin used to be one.

Remember how good that Pittsburgh/Washington playoff series from a few years ago was? Perhaps the best pure hockey we have seen in the past 15-20 years. Only a few years later, and there are some significant question marks surrounding the two focal points of that series. A real shame.

1. The Crosby Show, Cancelled?

The concussion epidemic is going to define the next decade in sports. Crosby is unfortuantely going to be (if he isn't already) the poster boy for concussions, as he has been limited to 11 games in the 2011 calendar year because of the after-effects. The scary part was to see how easily his symptoms were triggered upon a return (an inocuous hit by David Krejci). Crosby has/had the potential to be a top 10 player in the history of the game. He does/did (I hate using past tense here) all things on the ice at an extremely high level. Speculating his retirement is extremely premature, but it is unfortuantely within the realm of possibilities.

It will be interseting to see what actions the league takes to attempt to minimize concussions. It seems that as more and more research comes out, we end up knowing less and less about what causes them, why some people are affected more than others, and how to properly recover from and prevent them. As I mentioned at the beginning, there were some great surprises and stories this year, but, like Crosby, a cloud of doubt and darkness hung over the

hockey world in 2011.

All the best to the loyal DobberHockey members and readers. Thanks for a great 2011!