This is the fifth year I have put together my Prime Cuts roster. To make the team, a player must have made a significant contribution this season, with an emphasis on fantasy hockey production. I'm not picking an All-Star Team – don't expect to see Claude Giroux centering the fourth line. However, this team is better than any of the 30 NHL clubs (in my opinion, at least). I wanted to reward depth forwards and defensemen who had underrated or surprising seasons, as well.

I enjoyed putting this team together, and I hope you enjoy reading it.

The goaltenders:

Starter – Jonathan Quick

Quick was an easy choice to start for the 2011-12 Prime Cuts. Unless you have been living under a rock on the East Coast, Quick should be an easy vote for the Vezina Trophy. He carried a brutal offensive club in Los Angeles to a playoff spot. Quick led the league with 10 shutouts, and he was among the league leaders in every other major goaltending statistic, as well. The Kings scored 2.29 goals per game, good for 29th in the league. Without Quick, they'd be looking forward to the draft instead of a round one matchup with the Canucks. Quick has been on the wrong end of five 1-0 losses, this season – true torture for a goaltender.

Backup – Cory Schneider

Schneider, from start to finish, was sensational for the Canucks this season. He played more than most thought he would, and the team showed great confidence in him, giving him important starts down the stretch (Boston, San Jose, and so on). He isn't going to be a good goalie, or even a very good one – he has the mental toughness and skill that only a few in the league possess (read: elite). After the All-Star break, Schneider went 10-3-1 with a 1.54 GAA and a .949 save percentage.

If, for whatever reason, his goaltending talent suddenly dries up, he has a career in comedy to fall back on.

{youtube}Kyh3_FdEMYs{/youtube}

The defensemen:

Brian Campbell – Erik Karlsson

Campbell would be receiving some Norris consideration if he played in a more prolific hockey market. He finished in a tie for second in defensive scoring with 53 points. He led all defensemen in even strength ice time, total ice time, even strength ice time per game, and total ice time per game. Campbell played over 2200 minutes this season, 50 more than any other player in the league.

What else needs to be said about Erik Karlsson 's season? It was one of the most dominant offensive performances by a defenseman in recent memory. Karlsson finished with 25 more points than any other defenseman in the league. He led all defensemen with 261 shots on goal, as well.

Oliver Ekman-Larsson – Dustin Byfuglien

It took only 30 games this season for Ekman-Larsson to unseat Keith Yandle as the top dog in the desert. The slick Swede can do it all – he has the size and defensive ability to log tough minutes, and the mobility and vision to run a power play or move the puck up the ice with ease. He scored only one goal in 2010-11 (48 games), but his 13 this past regular season ranked him fifth in the entire league. His shot total (141) was the lowest among any of the top 15 goal scorers among NHL defensemen – he needs to shoot the puck more. He's already a very good defenseman, and he's going to be a great one very, very soon.

Byfuglien is a fantasy hockey monster. He scores, he racks up PIM, and he shoots the puck a ton. He's better defensively than many think – the Jets had him playing a lot and playing against good opposing players on a consistent basis. Over the last three years, he ranks second in goals among defensemen (49), seventh in points (140), sixth in PIM (259), first in shots on goal (776), third in power play goals (18), and first in game winning goals (12). I realize he played part of one of those seasons as a forward in Chicago, but his dominance has been quite remarkable nonetheless.

Jason Garrison – Mark Fistric

Garrison's 16 goals may be the biggest statistical surprise of 2011-12 (it also set a new record for goals from a Panthers defenseman in a season). He played on Florida's top shutdown pairing with the equally underrated Mike Weaver , as well. Garrison is a free agent this summer, and he will be rewarded handsomely for his breakout campaign. Garrison's 16 goals was the highest single-season output since 2004-05, when he played with Nanaimo of the BCHL.

Fistric only has value if your fantasy league records hits. If they ever find a way to record "really big hits," Fistric's value will go through the roof. I got to see a lot of him back when he patrolled (literally, and figuratively) the blue line for the Vancouver Giants. Fistric, simply put, is a monster on the back end. He's crossed the line a few times with his vicious checks (head shots and boarding penalties), but his physical dominance is something I wanted to recognize.

Not many players can make Shea Weber look insignificant:

{youtube}Vi4r4PQFwC4{/youtube}

The forwards:

James Neal – Evgeni Malkin – Blake Wheeler

Neal was the only left winger in the league to score 40 goals. Neal and Malkin were the first two teammates to finish one and two in shots on goal in the NHL since Brendan Shanahan and Brett Hull did the same back in 1993-94. Neal is the total package offensively – size, skill, and speed. He is locked up for the foreseeable future in Pittsburgh – there aren't many better wingers to own in any fantasy hockey format.

Like Karlsson, not much really needs to be said about Malkin. He was on another level than any other player this season (save for a healthy Crosby during the stretch run). Malkin is a pleasure to watch, and can take over games at a moment's notice. Kudos to those of you who took a chance on him last summer during your fantasy drafts – he value was suffering a bit due to some concern over how his knee was recovering from the surgery a few years ago.

There were better right wingers in the league than Blake Wheeler this season, but none of them were as much of a surprise. Wheeler looked every bit the former 4th overall pick for most of the year in Winnipeg. Opposing defensemen simply had no answer for his size and speed. Wheeler only scored 17 goals, but his playmaking and vision set the table for the rest of the Winnipeg offense. He is finally starting to scratch the surface of his offensive upside. He had 31 points in the final 32 games of the season.

Max Pacioretty – David Desharnais – Wayne Simmonds

Of all of the disappointing teams this season, Montreal can right the ship the quickest. Why? A talented young core of players, led by Carey Price , PK Subban, and Pacioretty. The big American winger was Montreal's arguably Montreal's most consistent forward (Erik Cole also deserves a mention). After overcoming a career-threatening injury last season, Pacioretty returned without skipping a beat. He is at his best when he is using his size and speed fearlessly to drive around (or through) defensemen and to the net.

Desharnais was one of the feel-good stories of the season. His success is motivation for all undersized talents trying to break through to the NHL. The 25-year-old center finished with 60 points, a feat accomplished by only 19 other centers in the league. By that definition, Desharnais is a top line center, and he certainly was in Montreal. Several Habs had strong statistical seasons that will largely go unnoticed because of the turmoil surrounding the team.

Simmonds scored close to 30 goals, and quickly endeared himself to the Flyer faithful with his

work ethic and phyiscal playing style. He doesn't make down from any opposing defenders, and as is already a load to handle down low and in front of the net (and he still has some filling out to do). His offensive role with the team will only increase once Jaromir Jagr retires (this summer or next).

Gabriel Landeskog – Kyle Brodziak – David Clarkson

Landeskog was the most impactful rookie this season, and many nights he was Colorado's most impactful player, too. He is the total package – a rare quality for a 19-year-old. He may not have the top end upside of other young stars, but he will be a multi-category contributor for a long time.

Brodziak was a lone bright spot in another disappointing season in Minnesota. He has turned into one of the better two-way centers in the game since coming over from Edmonton, and he stepped up his game offensively with the injury to Mikko Koivu , as well. Brodziak was one of only two Wild players to eclipse the 20-goal mark.

Clarkson was one of the best combo players to own this season. A combo player can score goals and record PIM at a high level. Clarkson scored 30 goals and finished with 138 PIM – hard to find that kind of fantasy value, and Clarkson was likely floating on the waiver wire in many leagues to start the season.

Matt Martin – Sean Couturier – Derek Dorsett

Hits are an inconsistently recorded stat – some buildings seem to be more liberal with awarding them, but don't let that take away from Martin's record setting campaign. Martin finished with almost 100 more hits than any other NHL player (374, Dustin Brown was in second with 293). Martin stands out in an Isles squad that could be accused of being soft, and his role will only increase as the team's skill players increase in number and ability.

When was the last time a rookie stepped in right out of junior to become the checking center on a Stanley Cup contender? Couturier is Philadelphia's best defensive center, and he was given a ton of responsibility right away. He logged a ton of short-handed minutes (not something poolies want to read, though), and earned his stripes in divisional battles against the likes of Zach Parise and Evgeni Malkin. He may get Jordan Staal'd in Philadelphia – the offense taking a back seat to the defensive side of the game. However,

Couturier, like Staal, may force his way into a top six role.

Like Clarkson, Dorsett's goal output and PIM totals are both impressive. He led the league with 235 PIM, and he finished with 12 goals, as well. He was only the fifth player since the lockout to score at least 10 goals and record over 200 PIM.

The final roster:

Neal - Malkin - Wheeler

Pacioretty - Desharnais - Simmonds

Landeskog - Brodziak - Clarkson

Martin - Couturier - Dorsett

Campbell - Karlsson

Ekman-Larsson - Byfuglien

Garrison - Fistric

Quick

Schneider

There are obviously a ton of players who could have made this roster. I left off some great players. Let's hear your thoughts on who should have made it, and why? Who would make your Prime Cuts squad?