Some thoughts that have been gathering dust in my head over the past week or two – removing head shots for good, the next Erik Karlsson , Braden Holtby , Ray Whitney , and more.

1. If the NHL really wanted to remove dangerous headshots, they would target a star player with a significant suspension (assuming a suspendable act is present, of course). Evgeni Malkin has made at least a half-dozen predatory hits over the past few seasons, and he has gotten away with all of them. Some of Malkin's "finest" work –
hit from behind on Boychuk
,
hit from behind on Mitchell
,
head shot on Couturier
, and a
head shot on Grossman

. I am singling him out, but he isn't the only star player to get away scott-free with multiple suspendable offenses.

2. That being said, I also understand the Raffi Torres suspension. It is the exact same thing as when the NHL threw the book at Matt Cooke last year – this has everything to do with Torres the player, and it is a direct warning from the NHL to change his game, and fast. Cooke has gone to great lengths to clean his game up (although he'd have to cure a major disease to ever remove the 'dirty' label), and Torres now needs to do the same. His hit was once a hockey play, but no longer.

3. Who do the Red Wings keep this summer? Assuming they bring in Zach Parise (a big assumption, I know), they would likely let one of Valtteri Filppula, Johan Franzen, or Jiri Hudler go. Filppula would fetch the most in return, but that is because he is the best of the three. Franzen is a dominant scorer at times, but he has battled injury and appears to be slowing down a bit. Hudler was fantastic for the Wings after a dismal 2010-11, and he can run a power play from the half wall. I'd bank on the Wings debating whether or not to bring Hudler back. Detroit is the team to watch this summer, as they have lots of cap space and a few roster holes.

4. You win some, you lose some. I have received more than a few emails regarding Claude Giroux over the past 12 months. Is he for real? Is he a legitimate Art Ross candidate? Yes, yes, and yes. Is he a superstar?

I gave you my answer three years ago.
From the summer of 2009:

"This may not come as a surprise to many (any) of you, as I have been a Giroux supporter for quite some time. He is far from an unknown commodity in fantasy hockey. However, he fits the mold as a sleeper because his short-term value (the next three years) is underrated. It is widely agreed upon that Giroux is destined to become a star in the NHL. He possesses an unbelievable arsenal of offensive skills, and his compete level is through the roof. Giroux recorded 27 points in 42 games last season for the Flyers (a full-season pace of 53 points). Will he improve on that for 2009-10? Bet your bottom dollar he will. Giroux will soon become the best Flyers forward to own in fantasy hockey leagues (yes, ahead of Jeff Carter and Mike Richards). He has a shot at hitting 70 points in 2009-10. Long-term, his upside should be somewhere between 90 and 100 points."

5. Having the skill to dominate is one thing, but working hard enough to maximize it is another. That is what separates Sidney Crosby , Giroux, and Steven Stamkos from other skilled players. Simply put, they work their butts off each summer.

{youtube}RfMc3xfc8lM{/youtube}

6. Are you looking for the next Mike Green Erik Karlsson ? The odds that another young

defenseman puts up close to a point-per-game any time soon are low, but Justin Faulk is as likely as any to do it. From Canes Country:

"A player's performance on the power play is usually judged by goals and points, but those aren't the only things that should be looked at. In order to score on the power play, the team with the man advantage has to get into good position to create shots and scoring chances. The general rule of thumb is that if the power play unit is creating at least 1-2 scoring chances per opportunity then they are on the right track. Creating chances with the man advantage is something that Faulk excelled in, especially compared to the rest of the defense."

And more importantly….

"Whenever Faulk was on the ice, the Hurricanes were surrendering fewer scoring chances than they were with any other defenseman by a considerable amount. Taking into account that Faulk regularly played on the second unit and had over 100 total minutes on the PK this season, him giving up such a small amount of scoring chances is unbelievable.``

7. My top five goaltenders to own in a keeper league (in order): Henrik Lundqvist , Pekka

Rinne , Jonathan Quick , Cory Schneider , and Tuukka Rask . Mike Smith is playing out of his mind right now, but we see great goaltending performances come and go each year. If he re-signs long-term in Phoenix/Quebec/Seattle, I'd be more comfortable including near the top of my list.

8. Regarding Rask – Bruins GM Pete Chiarelli came on record a few days ago saying he would like to keep both goalies for next summer. I don't buy his words for one second. Thomas will be shopped this summer, and there should be considerable interest in him. Unlike other big name goalies who could be available (Roberto Luongo and Miikka Kiprusoff , to name two), Thomas has only one season left on his contract. He could be the perfect bridge in Florida for Jacob Markstrom , for example.

9. As a fan of offensive hockey, I'd be concerned with the results of the first round. In general, the successful teams employed defensive systems that involved ample obstruction (or they were lucky enough to face Marc-Andre Fleury). The crackdown on holding, hooking, and inference has obviously been lifted, but why? The league wants more excitement, and more offense. Fans of every professional league like to lay claim to the worst officiating, but the NHL is the only league I know of that has a different rulebook depending on time of game and point in the season. If you hold a guy in double OT of the Stanley Cup Final, you go to the penalty box.

Game one between Nashville and Phoenix was an encouraging sign though. Fantastic two-way hockey with many great scoring chances.

Perhaps this season is an anomaly and the offensive teams like Chicago, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Vancouver reign supreme next year, but poolies shouldn't like the way the game is headed.

10. One attribute I always look for in young defensemen – confidence. Confidence to make a mistake and keep playing the same way, and confidence to not always defer to someone else on the ice – both are crucial. Karlsson and Green received criticism for taking too many chances, for not always having tight defensive gaps, or for playing too loose. They are (and in Green's case, was) the most prolific offensive defensemen in the league. Roman Josi plays with the same level of confidence. And unless
Ryan Suter
has a change of heart this offseason, the Preds will be expecting Josi to step in to their top four next season. An offensive explosion could be in order.

11. Proof that diving is not limited to certain teams, or certain players. I'd love to see John Tortorella react to a question on diving after watching this clip. Callahan is a hard-working leader, but he isn't immune to the in-game tactic that we all know and hate.

{youtube}CWLJyf2yumA{/youtube}

12. Mike Smith is a great example of what a structured system can do for a player (coming from Tampa Bay to Phoenix). Rostislav Klesla (coming from Columbus to Phoenix) is another. The defensive stalwart has six points in seven postseason games, tops among all NHL blue liners.

13. Should the Oilers sign Josh Harding ? Jonathan Willis thinks so. I'd agree, too. They just need to find a way to get rid of Nikolai Khabibulin , first. Buyout, anyone?

"There are more competent goalies available than there are job openings, particularly when the trade market is taken into account.

Beyond that, Harding's injury history is a big risk for a team looking at him as a starter. A knee injury cost Harding the entire 2010-11 season. He's missed time with both hip injuries and head injuries, and given that a team might hesitate when penciling him in for 60+ starts.

Edmonton is the perfect middle ground. Harding's career save percentage is better than that of Devan Dubnyk, and he'd stand a decent shot at taking the starting gig away if he signed with the Oilers, and even if he didn't he'd still undoubtedly play regularly. Because the Oilers already have Dubnyk, they'd be more willing to gamble on Harding's health than a team with an untrusted backup would."

14. Braden Holtby – sell high. Now. He's a really good young goalie, but he won't sustain this level of play up over the long term. He's untested at the NHL as a starter. He could come in next year and win 40 games and prove me wrong, but if I'm a betting man, a regression to the mean is in store for Washington's surprising star goaltender (Holtby posted a pedestrian .906 save percentage in 40 AHL games this past regular season). I'd expect him and Michal Neuvirth to battle for the number one gig next season.

15. I am working on finalizing my top 10 keeper league left wingers list, and am hoping to publish it either this week or next. Accurately listing positions is important, especially for left and right wingers. A few examples – Ilya Kovalchuk played right wing for most of the season, but he could move back to the left side if Parise leaves. James Neal was a left winger in Dallas, but he played right wing with Malkin in Pittsburgh. Whatever position a player spent the majority of his 2011-12 season at is the one I will use. How would your list look, keeping a three-year scope in mind?

16. Bonus cut – I have no particular rooting interest among the remaining eight teams, but I'd love to see Ray Whitney win the cup. The former waiver wire fodder is one of only 79 players

to record at least 1000 points at the NHL level. He's the 'North American Datsyuk' with how he sees the ice, moves into space, and handles the puck. He's all class off the ice, too.

The Edmonton Oilers put him on waivers back in 1997-98, and Whitney was ready to walk away from hockey if he went unclaimed. I think I speak for all hockey fans when I say, thanks Florida.