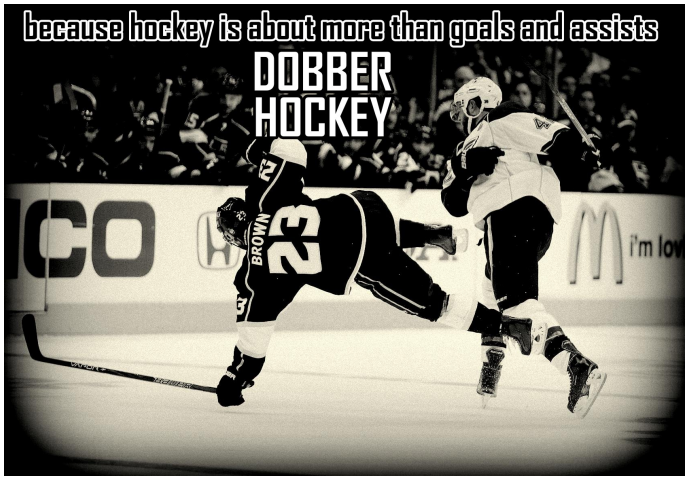

This year has been a turbulent one for the NHL (and in turn, fantasy hockey). The 2011-12 regular season saw some fantastic performances from the likes of Henrik Lundqvist , Evgeni Malkin , and Erik Karlsson . The playoffs saw the Los Angeles Kings completely dominate the competition en route to capturing their first Stanley Cup in franchise history. However, all of the positive momentum generated by the game has been snuffed out by the most ridiculous and unnecessary work stoppage in the history of professional sports.

What have been the 10 biggest hockey stories from the past calendar year? I'll shift the focus a bit to the world of fantasy hockey, since, you know, this is a fantasy hockey site and everything.

The NHL had done a great job of rebuilding its brand after the 2004-05 lockout. NHL COO John Collins worked hard to develop a relationship with HBO, and the 24/7 Winter Classic series was hockey's way of tapping into a brand new market. A new wave of talent around the league emerged as the future of the league – Claude Giroux and John Tavares looked poised to join Steven Stamkos, Malkin, and Sidney Crosby at the top.

And speaking of Crosby, he appeared to have finally emerged healthy after a lengthy battle with head and neck injuries. I will do my best to include lockout discussion only where it is absolutely necessary – I know at this point all hockey fans are so sick of the dreaded "l" word.

10. Claude Giroux 's arrival

There was a lot of pressure on Giroux this past season in Philadelphia. The Flyers decided in the summer of 2011 to jettison Jeff Carter and Mike Richards out of town, and that meant Giroux was the club's new top line center and face of the franchise. He embraced the pressure, and was one of the best NHL players from start to finish. Giroux is the classic example of a player being more than the sum of his parts.

He was a prolific scorer in junior, but many thought he was too slow or too small to dominate at the NHL level (he slipped into the bottom third of the 2006 1st round). What Giroux lacks in straight-away speed or strength he makes up for in skill, vision, creativity, and hockey sense. Giroux has the “it” factor that I talk about from time to time. He simply “gets” the game of hockey. He knows how to lead, how to best use his teammates, when to shoot, when to pass, and where to be on the ice.

He isn’t as physically imposing as Ovechkin. He isn’t as powerful as Crosby. And he isn’t as elegant as Malkin. But he is just as effective as any of them.

Don’t wear out the repeat button:

{youtube}kZWKE56iN-Y{/youtube}

I will always have a soft spot for Giroux because I saw his dominance coming before he was a household name
. I have had my fair share of misses, too (and the evidence is in the 500+ daily ramblings I have written), but I knew there was something special with Giroux after seeing him at the end of his QMJHL career. It did surprise me how quickly he adapted to the NHL game, though.

Oh, and Giroux also has the best contract in hockey.

9. King Henrik's reign

Lundqvist became the first goaltender in NHL history to record at least 30 wins in his first seven seasons in the league. An argument could be made for him to win the Hart Trophy every single season – he is the backbone of a very good club in the Big Apple, and the Rangers are able to play their system because they have so much confidence in Lundqvist.

At the age of 30, Lundqvist still has many more years in him. He made his NHL debut after the last NHL lockout – what will he do for an encore this time around?

In a time when NHL goaltenders seem to fluctuate performance-wise from season to season (
Andrew Raycroft
, Ilya Bryzgalov,
Ryan Miller
, the list goes on and on), Lundqvist's consistent elite play allows him to stand alone as the best

goaltender in the NHL.

8. Detroit's 23 consecutive home wins/Lidstrom's farewell

The Red Wings have been the NHL organization that all the others aspire to be like for the past 15 years. Regardless of who wears the winged wheel, Detroit finds a way to win year after year. A large part of that continued success has been thanks to the consistently dominant play of Nick Lidstrom, who laced up his skates in the NHL for the final time this past season.

Detroit lost in the first round to the Nashville Predators this year, but their season will be best remembered for their NHL record 23 consecutive home wins. In an age of parity across the NHL, 23 straight wins is a ridiculous total. It took a heroic performance from Canucks goaltender Roberto Luongo for the streak to finally get snapped. It is very likely that the Red Wings stumble a bit without Lidstrom to lean on for 20-25 minutes each night. But he made sure to leave on his terms, which is important for pro athletes.

{youtube}lX1uvEsDnag{/youtube}

7. The Justin Schultz saga

The Edmonton Oilers have struggled mightily over the past three seasons – that is news to no one. They have received the 1st overall pick in three straight years, but their best fortunes may have come in early July when prized free agent defenseman Justin Schultz opted to sign with

Edmonton over the likes of Vancouver, Toronto, and Philadelphia. Schultz currently leads the AHL in scoring (as a rookie defenseman no less), and he has the talent and upside to develop into one of the best defensemen in the game.

The best part of Schultz's performance is that he has had to live up to so much hype and pressure. He was billed as the third best free agent available after Parise and Suter by many in the media. He had NHL teams basically crawling over themselves to sign him. Going to Edmonton was a great decision for Schultz – he'll get more ice time than he would have elsewhere, and that will lead to more goals and assists (and a bigger contract in two years from now).

That isn't trying to take away from Nail Yakupov's potential impact (of the four young star forwards in Edmonton, Yakupov may have the highest upside). But the Oilers weren't going to go anywhere without a capable puck moving defenseman. I have made the point before – a team with a strong forward group and no defensemen who can pass the puck is like buying a Lamborghini or Ferrari and then putting the cheapest possible fuel in it.

Schultz's NHL impact is going to immediate. His adjustment to pro hockey has been impressive (to say the least), and the AHL is a very strong league right now. Schultz is generating headlines on the ice for the right reasons.

Schultz ranked as #1 on my top 10 keeper league defensemen list back in July , and he has

only tightened his stranglehold on that position with his play in Oklahoma City.

6. Evgeni Malkin ’s continued dominance

No Crosby, no problem. Malkin continued to terrorize opposing defenders and goaltenders with his skill and ability to do so many things with the puck on his stick. He found chemistry with James Neal on his wing, and the two combined to form the NHL’s most lethal scoring punch. Malkin and Neal finished first and second in shots on goal in the league – the first time that teammates have placed one and two in that category since Brendan Shanahan and Brett Hull did it with the Blues in 1993-94.

{youtube}qKB2a3_roPk{/youtube}

I’ll have the rest of my top 10 list published later in the week. I didn’t have any specific/set criteria for this list – how would yours look?

Previous Posts from Jeff Angus:

- Life with the San Francisco Bulls
- Five Sleepers to Watch For in 2013 - West
- Five Sleepers to Watch For in 2013 - East
- Avoiding Mistakes in Fantasy Hockey
- The Underutilization of Mike Green
- The Top 50 NHL Players