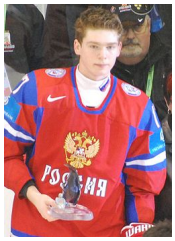

The NHL and European's highest leagues may be on hold for two weeks, but the rest of the hockey world continues to turn during the Olympic Break. In the shadow of the world's biggest winter sport showcase, who is jumping up the mock draft chart with standings frozen in place?

1. Edmonton Oilers- LW/C Taylor Hall (Windsor OHL)

2009-10: 50 GP, 34-54-88, 46 PIM

The season from hell officially became, well, the season from hell for the Edmonton Oilers following Nikolai Khabibulan arrest for a DUI in Arizona. Despite providing great amusement for an otherwise dejected fan base- see: reKhabbing- even gaining a potential superstar by way of the of the Draft is almost not worth it. But, speaking as an Oilers fan, we'll take it. Please?

Taylor Hall may no longer lead the OHL in goals, assists OR points, and performances like Tyler Seguin's from Friday night will do nothing to make the debate any clearer (see: 3-1-4 vs. 0-3-3 for Hall the day before) but Hall continues to lead both the class and Edmonton's wish list based on two things: a higher battle level in traffic and along the boards, and a Jekyll-and-Hyde nasty side that has had some comparing him to Mark Messier.

Hall's emergence physically is sort of like Steve Stamkos' show for the scouts at the 2008 Top Prospects Game where he dropped the gloves. Both are calculated, sure, and don't represent either player's game night in and night out, but it's just another category Hall and Seguin will be measured in from now until June.

There's also a growing sense among the Oilers fanbase that Hall just has that charisma and starpower that Seguin seems to lack. This means nothing in the grand scheme of things, but think of any big event- Mem Cup, WJC, Top Prospects Game- and Hall has been a presence both off and on the ice.

While this means nothing in the scheme of things, it's a draw for a town that lacks a truly marketable star. A certain Cup-winning goalie was supposed to add that kind of name

recognition but his face is now more memorable for a mug shot than any poster or advertisement in Edmonton... but we digress.

2. Boston Bruins (via Toronto)- C Tyler Seguin (Plymouth OHL)

2009-10: 53 GP, 42-52-94, 52 PIM

Defense is an organizational priority for the Bruins, both now and at the Draft. If that wasn't obvious prior to the Olympic Break, Darren Dreger's reports that Boston has put a high bounty on acquiring immediate help for a disorganized and shallow blueline make it so now.

Long-term, the Bs may be in even more trouble. Colorado cast-off Johnny Boychuk has found a home on Boston's bottom pairing but the good news has far out-weighed the bad: see Dennis Wdeman's regression and 25-year-old Mark Stuart's stagnation. That's why picking #2 will be so hard for the Bruins.

Carolina would likely pay a lot in relation to other draft-day pick swaps in the top five in order to have a chance at Whalers star Tyler Seguin, but why not keep him? After all, if the Bs are to compete with the likes of Pittsburgh and Washington, depth down the middle will be paramount.

Seguin's talents have been much gushed-over, but the simple fact is he'd be a natural replacement for Phil Kessel- and, as GM Peter Chiarelli likely planned for- he'd much cheaper during the duration of his ELC.

3. Carolina Hurricanes- D Cam Fowler (Windsor OHL)

2009-10: 47 GP, 6-41-47, 12 PIM

For a little while, it looked like Tyler Seguin was going to fall back in the rearview mirror. However, a nightmare seasons for the Carolina Hurricanes has continued with the news that starter Cam Ward re-aggravated his back. Ward has not played since February 3rd and may not even be ready after the Olympics. If that's the case, Manny Legace will once again be the first star in Carolina's 'push' for Seguin.

Regardless, finishing bottom three may not even guarantee the team a shot at the Plymouth product. If that's the case and the decision is between Hall and Windsor stud Cam Fowler, it's certainly possible the Canes could find themselves once again calling an American defenceman's name in the top five.

However, GM Jim Rutherford needn't have any reservations about gambling on another moody, untamed and unpolished player like Jack Johnson. Quite literally keeping pace point-for-point with Ryan Ellis in terms of PP scoring- both had 31 entering the weekend- what Fowler lacks in explosive speed or a big shot he more than makes up for in poise and pure strength. Fowler is essentially NHL-ready right now, another bonus for Carolina. The team has no rearguards

signed beyond 2012 and five this year alone will enter free agency.

4. New York Islanders- LW Kirill Kabanov (Moncton QMJHL)

2009-10: 12 GP, 6-9-15, 16 PIM

Two years ago, the idea that the Islanders could walk away from their rebuild with John "Next Bossy" Tavares and Kirill "Next Ovechkin" Kabanov would have led to wet seats in Nassau. Now, it's likely to cause dissent within the fan base- the Isles, after all, are still playing for their last flashy Russian forward. Literally.

After almost four months on the shelf with a broken wrist, Kabanov returned to action last night, netting a goal, seven shots and 4 PIM. Despite chipping in just once during an eight-goal explosion, the Moncton Wildcats are trying to fit a long list of trade deadline acquisition into the lineup and Kabanov may as well just have arrived. Nevertheless the dazzling forward brought the intimidating, relenteless forecheck game that was becoming a trademark prior to his injury.

Kabanov has a long way to go to recover his draft position, but 25 more performances like last night's wouldn't hurt.

5. Florida Panthers- D Brandon Gormley (Moncton QMJHL)

2009-10: 47 GP, 8-27-35, 42 PIM

The Florida Panthers have officially gone into crisis mode- but, what season since the Cup run hasn't been?- and it just so happens a notable player in their draft range is a big, smooth-skating defenceman who plays an efficient and intelligent brand of hockey. That's gotta open some wounds.

Brandon Gormley doesn't have anywhere near Jay Bouwmeester's pedigree, or his production in junior for that matter (see: 61 points in 61 games versus 35 in 46) but both nevertheless share a number of traits. Florida might have reservations about selecting a defenceman with a high first round pick for a second consecutive year but Gormley has the potential to be a special talent. Like Bouwmeester, however, Gormley lacks imagination and urgency with the puck on his stick and routinely defaults to a more reserved style of play as soon as it's off his blade.

6. Columbus Blue Jackets- C Alexander Burmistrov (Barrie OHL)

2009-10: 50 GP, 19-35-54, 36 PIM

While the two events may not necessarily have been connected, Jackets ownership and GM Scott Howson ended the Ken Hitchcock/Nikita Filatov fight via technical knockout when the team fired Hitchcock February 3rd. What will follow is trying an effort by the next bench boss to

re-make the team in hisimage- not only in free agency but at the Draft. The lead candidate for the job is the current incumbent, former Hitchcock assistant Claude Noel. Under Noel's tutelage, the Jackets went 3-1-0 prior to the Olympic break and goaltender Steve Mason seemed to be finding his rookie season form.

Noel, like Howson, was an IHL scoring star- Howson netted 120 points in that league during the 1981-82 season, Noel 123 a season later. His style also seems to be that of a laissez faire coach: look over quotes from his time in the minors and you'll see plenty of reference to 'ebb and flow' and players and emotion- rather than systems- deciding games.

The biggest issue that continues to plague the Jackets is depth down the middle, but Noel has a reputation for molding skilled, responsible centers. Rich Peverley developed exponentially under him, as did Nashville's Cal O'Reilly and current Sabres PK star Matt Ellis. That's why Alexander Burmistrov would be a perfect fit. Blessed both with offensively and with tremendous drive away from the puck, Burmistrov as adapted so well to the North American game that he may as well *be* a North American.

7. Atlanta Thrashers- LW/RW Nino Niederreiter (Portland WHL)

2009-10: 55 GP, 32-21-53, 64 PIM

It's officially the post-Kovalchuk era in Atlanta, and as the Edmonton Oilers shown, a team's first moves in the wake of a franchise cornerstone can provide the foundation for the future.

For all his talent, one thing Ilya Kovalchuk struggled with- and continues to struggle with in New Jersey- is dedication from shift-to-shift. That's not to say he's never taken the Thrashers on his back or showed intense passion; it's just impossible to gauge when it's going to happen.

Nino Niederreiter is the complete opposite. A similar blend of size, power and skill, Niederreiter may never win a Richard Trophy, but he'll never disappear when the going gets tough. In fact, he'll be initiating it!

The Thrashers acquired a skilled young left wing in Nicklas Bergfors as part of the Kovalchuk Trade so positionally it's not so important, but 'El Nino' would be a fan favorite from Day 1. Since the World Juniors Niederreiter has cooled off slightly, posting 'just' 12 points in 18 games.

8. New York Rangers- D Jon Merrill (USA NTDP U18)

2009-10: 38 GP, 5-22-27, 8 PIM

The Rangers certainly don't need any more defencemen. Despite boat anchors like Wade Redden and Michael Rozsival, a steady parade of youth like Mike Del Zotto, Matt Gilroy and Bob Sanguinetti have assured the team has the depth to replace their troubled stars upon buy-outs or permanent AHL vacations.

However, all five of the names listed above share a similar MO: lots of offense, but little snarl. Marc Staal is the only defensive rock on the back-end, but the constant pressure of having to cover up for more risky partners is wearing on him. Staal will also never be confused for a puck rusher, although he's steadily seen his production rise.

Enter Jon Merrill. As refined a defensive player as you'll find in a 6'3 18-year-old rearguard, Merrill's game is starting to round out. He's now the NTDP's leader in points from the blueline, closing and passing the gap between he and 5'11 powerplay specialist Justin Faulk.

9. Tampa Bay Lightning- C/RW Vladimir Tarasenko (Siber KHL)

2009-10: 39 GP, 13-10-23, 18 PIM

For those who couldn't fathom the thought of three Russians in the top ten, you may as well stop reading, because here comes #4. Vladimir Tarasenko recently gave those afraid of Russian players even more ammunition when he stated that he wanted to finish his career 'at home'. The backlash among fans has been immediate, with generalizations about Nik Zherdev and Aleksei Morozov coming to the fore.

But let's not get carried away. What's likely happened is merely a translation issue. While it's absolutely a possibility Tarasenko remains behind in Siber for the duration of his 'career', what the sublime forward was likely talking about was his current contract- not to set expire until summer 2011. And why would he leave? After all, his dad is Siber's coach. If he wants to not be ex-communicated by his family, finishing his duties with his KHL team makes sense.

However, that's not going to stop a number of people from declaring we won't see a single

Russian in the top half of the Draft, or that Tarasenko will never, ever come over. From a statistical perspective, Tarasenko now has as many goals as Alex Ovechkin in his draft year and more than Evgeni Malkin in the same league as a 19-year-old. However, he's still five away from tying Alexei Cherepanov's production at the same age.

10. Montreal Canadiens- D Derek Forbort (USNTDP U18)

2009-10: 9 GP, 0-3-3, 2 PIM

Even the best scouts have their failings. Former Edmonton head birddog Barry Fraser may have unearthed Mark Messier and Glenn Anderson, but that didn't stop him from recommending the likes of Jason Bonsignore and Kim Issel.

For the Canadiens and Director of Player Development Trevor Timmins, the organization's kryptonite is big American defencemen. While the team picked four of them at various stages of the Draft in four straight years from 2004 to 2007, few expected much of Jon Gleed (7th rnd 2004) or Phil Paquet (7th rnd 2006). However, Ryan McDonagh and David Fischer will forever be missed opportunities and Andrei Markov's injury was a reminder of that as no bluechip call-ups were to be found in the farm system.

Derek Forbort would be a continuation of that trend. Like those NFL wide receivers who can run a 40-yard dash in 4.4 seconds but provide little else in game situations, the 6'4, 200 lbs NTDP defenceman has struggled to adapt to the position at an elite level. While an agile, powerful skater going forward, Forbort struggles to pivot when moving back- likely due to weak ankles trying to support his big frame.

While his defensive positioning has improved, there are still more 'adventures' than one would expect of a player ranked *fourth in the entire draft* by a certain other scouting service; it's not uncommon to see Forbort chase the puck like a puppy dog, only to crash into his defensive partner. As it is, his best defensive move continues to be aimless, inefficient poke checks.

On the other side of the rink, Forbort's shot is hard and low but rarely ever on net, and he does not possess elite passing skills (although his puckhandling is better than most forwards). He is a big-time project who could turn into a special, special player, but with his many deficiencies, it's hard to defend such a risk in the top ten.

11. Minnesota Wild- C/RW Mikael Granlund (HIFK SM-Liiga)

2009-10: 35 GP, 9-23-32, 0 PIM

If you only caught the occasional shift for Team Finland at the Olympics, you'd swear the Minnesota Wild were merely in disguise. Antti Miettinen, Niklas Backstrom and Mikko Koivu are all representing their homeland in Vancouver and all three happen to be driving the results.

Three other players of Finnish descent feature prominently in Minnesota's prospect pipeline, but none of Erik Haula, Eero Elo or Harri Ilvonen look to have the national team in their future. If the team is going to send a fourth Finn to Sochi, it could very well be their first round pick in 2010.

Mikael Granlund is a perfect fit for the Wild, both in skills and situation. After years in the goalless desert that was Jacques Lemaire's system, Granlund's combination of vision, tenacity and puck wizardry is something the fans in Minnesota have never really seen a lot of. Despite his poor showings internationally, Granlund is a home-run caliber talent who continues to make hay back home. In 35 games, the newly-turned 18-year-old has 32 points.

12. St. Louis Blues- C Riley Sheahan (Notre Dame NCAA)

2009-10: 32 GP, 6-11-17, 22 PIM

The Blues don't necessarily need anything, but what must be alarming to the organization is a sudden regression in seemingly every prospect ready for the big leagues. T.J. Oshie has been a beast away from the puck and in the corners, but Brad Boyes (35 points), David Perron (33 points), Alex Steen (28 points) and- worst of all- Patrik Berglund (18 points) has left St. Louis in a precarious position playoff-wise.

Any pick outside the top ten is not likely to pay immediate dividends, Notre Dame pivot Riley Sheahan is a mix of everything the Blues love: Oshie's leadership and physical play, Berglund's vision, and Perron's hands. Struggling in the second half of the NCAA season, as former HNIC producer Ralph Mellanby said of Gordie Howe, Sheahan may not be a strongest, fastest or most skilled, but in this Draft he's the only one as good in each category.

13. Boston Bruins- LW Brett Connolly (Prince George WHL)

2009-10: 12 GP, 7-6-13, 8 PIM

The Boston Bruins continue to be the best destination for trouble Prince George star Brett Connolly. While the latest test results have shown no potential for long-term damage, playing just 12 games in one's draft year and likely no more than 30 is not a way to improve one's stock. If Connolly is picked in the third round, it will be entirely based on his rookie year in the Western League when he potted 30 goals and 60 points. For a team with two picks in the top fifteen, it's a risk worth taking.

14. Anaheim Ducks- D Erik Gudbranson (Kingston OHL)

2009-10: 31 GP, 2-17-19, 57 PIM

Injury or illness has become the biggest story of the Draft, with an unprecedented three prospects in the top ten suffering from a variety of maladies. Of them, Kingston stud blueliner

Erik Gudbranson's is the least serious- mono- but it's also the worst in terms of its effects.

There's simply no cure for it besides time and for a player with just 19 points in 31 games and little opportunity for exposure left, time is not on his side. Gudbranson was progressing quickly prior to his diagnosis. The 6'3, 199 lbs rearguard had 16 points in 20 games prior to the second half of the year when his illness began to affect him.

The Ducks will take it, though. If GM Bob Murray has learned anything from Brian Burke, it's that size and skill should never be ignored no matter the other deficiencies or circumstances. Anaheim's entire first line of Bobby Ryan, Ryan Getzlaf and Corey Perry was built via this strategy. Gudbranson is also a good fit positionally as the team lacks depth on defense.

15. Anaheim Ducks (from Philadelphia Flyers)- D Mark Pysyk (Edmonton WHL)

2009-10: 48 GP, 7-17-24, 47 PIM

How about that? Back in the summer, Flyers GM Paul Holmgren could never have foreseen giving the Ducks two lottery picks, let alone back-to-back lottery picks. This likely doesn't remain the same- rumors are building by the day that Philly has finally found a solution to their goaltending problem- but it's an interesting circumstance to consider.

Either way, the Ducks could very well opt for two defenders with their two first picks. That's how bad the situation is on defense. Brendan Mikkelson and Mark Mitera have progressed little, and neither were expected to be two-way world beaters either. Pysyk has the added advantage of being able to play out of the gate next year; he's that polished.

16. Detroit Red Wings- C Jeff Skinner (Kitchener OHL)

2009-10: 56 GP, 41-35-76, 60 PIM

What do you call an undersized, only average skater who nevertheless trails Tyler Seguin by a one goal? Why, a future Red Wing, of course. We waxed at length last month about the disparity between the Kitchener Ranger star's production and profile and it's continued into February. A great deal of that has to do with the fact Skinner has been his own worst enemy; already fighting an uphill battle, the 5'10 center has produced just seven goals since January 9th. On the flipside, he has 14 assists in that span for 21 points in 16 games. Teams may shy away from the diminutive goal machine but not Detroit. While he might not be as fast as Martin St. Louis, Skinner can provide the shot Henrik Zetterberg hasn't had on his wing since being on a line with Brett Hull in his rookie season.