When you think of top teams in the Eastern Conference several names come to mind: Ottawa, Pittsburgh, Rangers, Buffalo, New Jersey, and Atlanta. This coming season we may see a few surprise teams make the Eastern Conference playoffs.

The Carolina Hurricanes still have many of the weapons that carried them to a Stanley Cup a few seasons ago. In Tampa, the triple threat of St. Louis, Richards, and Lecavalier still exists. Many people are also talking about the Capitols this upcoming season too. Their top two lines could look like this; Ovechkin, Kozlov, and Clark followed by Semin, Nylander, and Backstrom. This team has several key new faces that could make them much more formidable and potentially playoff bound. Fantasy managers will certainly pay close attention to them. However, after all the talk and anticipation, are there any other potentially hidden surprise teams that could quietly stalk and sneak their way up out of the darkness and launch themselves into the playoffs?

Is this a shocker? The Florida Panthers could be the surprise playoff team in the East that leaps

from nowhere, gobbles up some of the competition and may even provide some meat for fantasy owners. Besides known fantasy studs Olli Jokinen and Jay Bouwmeester, there are some other players that could have some big fantasy upswing but have not received much pre-season respect. For starters how about goalie Tomas Vokoun?

Going into last season Vokoun was one of the top drafted goalies in fantasy leagues. As expected, Vokoun was starting just about every game for the Nashville Predators. They were a well-balanced team with three scoring lines and a solid defense. Vokoun and the Predators were doing great but much to the chagrin of many fantasy managers that owned him came his untimely injury. Soon afterwards the cheaper, younger backup goalie Chris Mason showed off his talent and Vokoun had to share the spotlight. While Nashville has stuck with Mason, Vokoun has found a new home.

Last season's tandem goalies Ed Belfour and Alex Auld were not the solution in Florida as originally hoped. Vokoun now brings them a top-notch steady goalie much like they had with Luongo. If Vokoun stays healthy he could potentially produce 35 wins and five shutouts. Many fantasy owners may not give him the respect that he got on Nashville and he may not be ranked as high as in the past. Some may even rank his former Nashville backup Chris Mason ahead of him. He does have the potential to slide further in a draft and if healthy all season be quite a bargain on draft day. Vokoun however, is not the only Panther with something to prove this season.

The Panthers are strong up the middle. Their top four scorers last season were all Centers and will all be returning this upcoming season. Among them is Panthers' pivot Nathan Horton, who has the skill and ability to have a breakout season. Going into his fourth NHL season, the former third-overall pick from the 2003 draft is just beginning to reach his much anticipated potential. Early on last season Horton spent some time in the doghouse but his play turned around and thus came more ice time. He tallied a respectable 31 goals. This season however, Horton expects to raise his game even further and could potentially net 35 goals. There's no doubt in order to do so, he will need to take more shots like his teammate Jokinen. He continues to mature as a player and has reportedly come to training camp in great shape.

Last season the Panthers had a 23-12-6 record at home, which was tied for the best in the Southeast with the division leading Atlanta Thrashers. There road record was not so hot. They will have to play better to make the playoffs. Another positive worth mentioning is their strong play after the All Star break. While they did miss the playoffs, unlike many NHL teams many of their players finished with a higher point total than their mid-season pace. The numbers show it too. In their last 23 games of the season they only had five regulation time losses. Could Vokoun be the key to put them over the hump and into the playoffs? Only time will tell but keep an eye on this mysterious dark stealthy Panther team.