Three more young forwards for the Canucks to target - Brett Connolly, Peter Holland, and Eric Tangradi - my piece for the CanucksArmy today.

If you don't read our hockey forums, you are missing out on some gems, like this thorough analysis of 2012 WHL draft-eligible defensemen.

*"Long-term Upside:*

*1) Morgan Rielly (10-45-55)*
*2) Derrick Pouliot (5-45-50)*
*3) Matt Dumba (17-33-50)*
*4) Ryan Murray (12-33-45)*
*5) Griffin Reinhart (7-30-37)"*

A great piece on Lidstrom from the Detroit Free Press:

*"You can get another person that can come in and can do a good job and be good in their own right," Howe said, "but to expect him to be a Nick Lidstrom or do what he's done? Nick has to be one of the best defensemen ever. Can you replace that? No. But if lose a guy like that, you can use the money and hopefully add other assets. You can make your team a little deeper, but not as good in that one area."*

*The Wings have a touch more than $20 million in salary cap space. Even before their hopes of Lidstrom returning were dashed, they planned to pursue, first and foremost, Nashville defenseman Ryan Suter. He isn't expected to re-sign with Predators, even though they'll try hard to make it happen, because their priority is to get their captain, Shea Weber, signed to an extension. Weber, a Norris Trophy finalist, is eligible to become a restricted free agent.*

According to Gary Bettman, the NHL salary cap could rise to over $73 million for 2012-13. The salary cap increase could be short-lived, as a new CBA must be negotiated. The current 2005 CBA expires on September 15th, 2012.

What a start to the series. Martin Brodeur and Jonathan Quick were sensational. Both teams were fast, extremely aggressive, but a bit rusty offensively through the first 20-30 minutes of the game. Great pace to the game overall, though.

As an impartial observer, I really enjoyed it.

Anze Kopitar fittingly scored the OT winner. He was the best forward all game long, dominating at both ends of the ice. He led the Kings with four SOG and 14 FOW.

Mike Richards had a quiet game, as did his linemates Dustin Penner and Jeff Carter .

No one really stood out for the Devils – Kovalchuk was good, Parise didn't accomplish a whole lot but he did work his butt off as usual.

You know it is the playoffs when Marek Zidlicky is credited with three hits.

Danius Zubrus led the Kings with eight. He is a big man – both sides have a number of extremely large forwards.

Willie Mitchell played an airtight 27 minutes of ice time – only Drew Doughty (29 minutes, and an assist) played more.

Stephen Gionta literally throws his entire body into each hit. I was surprised with how effective he was at knocking numerous Kings off of loose pucks.

The Wings signed a favorite prospect of mine – Calle Jarnkrok. Jarnkrok had 39 points in 50 games for Brynas, and 16 points in 16 playoff games, leading Brynas to a league title.

Jarnkrok has been compared to Zetterberg for his tenacity, hockey sense, and ability to win puck battles. He only had one point in eight games at the World Championships, but he had an impressive 67% faceoff percentage for the Swedes.

Brynas has to give Jarnkrok the go ahead to come over to Detroit training camp, and they may not want to let him go if they feel like he will make the team.

Jarnkrok may benefit from staying over in Sweden for one more year to get stronger and improve his play away from the puck.

Detroit hasn't had a Swede make the transition to the NHL since Johan Franzen since 2005 (direct jump from Sweden to the NHL, that is).

Nicklas Lidstrom retiring – the second best defenseman after Bobby Orr. Ryan Suter likely to replace him in Detroit – how big are those skates he is going to have to fill?

How will Detroit do? Well, they can plug in Brenden Smith, sign Suter, and probably bring another defenseman in, too.

One would think this also opens the door a bit wider for Justin Schultz and Detroit.

Kronwall, Ericsson, White, Smith, Kindl probably gives you a solid #2, #3, #4, #5, and #6 defenseman. Suter would be that #1 guy, and there are several depth options for the Wings to

pursue.

The Habs inked stud rookie Nathan Beaulieu to an ELC. He and PK Subban are going to be a lethal PK duo in a few years.

Beaulieu had 52 points in 53 games for the Sea Dogs.

Fantasy sleeper pick – the Rangers signed Marek Hrivik to an ELC.

Hrivik has a great shot, good size, and he is very hard to knock off the puck. The 21-year-old was signed as a free agent after a three year career in the QMJHL with Moncton. In 2011-12, Hrivik had 70 points in 54 games with the Wildcats.

What was most impressive was Hrivik's play once turning pro. He had only one goal in eight regular season games, but followed that up with nine points in nine postseason games.

I had some fun writing this – compared the 2003 and 2008 draft classes, with a focus on defense. The depth of the 2008 draft class is ridiculous.

I profiled arguably the top 12 players drafted, and didn't include Jared Spurgeon , Justin Schultz (left him off as he has yet to play a game at the NHL level), or Philip Larsen
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The 2003 draft may have more top end talent with Seabrook, Weber, Suter, Enstrom, Byfuglien, and Phaneuf, but 2008 isn't far behind.

The Justin Schultz sweepstakes – I still think Edmonton is the most likely destination, followed by New York and Toronto.

*"Edmonton, like Vancouver, is close to Kelowna (that is the first and last time I will compare Edmonton and Vancouver). The Oilers have a roster spot open for him – this is the same team that gave Cam Barker a contract to play defense. If Cam Barker can get another NHL deal, his agent deserves a Hart Trophy nomination. Edmonton is doubly attractive because of their collection of elite young talent, as McKenzie alluded to. Edmonton has some talented young defensemen in their system, but none that project as elite power play quarterbacks. Jeff Petry*

*has developed into a decent offensive option, but he projects as more of a two-way defenseman.*
*Ryan Whitney*
*is fine as long as he doesn't have to skate or change directions, both of which are unfortunately important requirements of playing defense."*

Another Detroit prospect signed the other day – Teemu Pulkkinen. The 5-10 forward will spend another season in Europe.

He is a pure shooter, which is somewhat of a rare trait for a Finnish player.

As we mention here quite often, Detroit has some really intriguing prospects. Pulkkinen and Jarnkrok are two of them.

AHL Calder Cup Game 1 is this Friday.

Matt Frattin will miss the series for the Marlies with a knee injury. I'll preview the two teams in more detail tomorrow.

Johnny Oduya 's three year deal may set the market for second tier defensemen. He's nothing better than a #4, but he left a bit of money on the table and obviously liked how things fit for him in Chicago. His cap hit is around $3.3 million.

The Canucks signed gritty center Alex Friesen to an ELC yesterday. Friesen was the second line center on the Ice Dogs, behind Ryan Strome . He plays a game similar to Mike Peca, or more recently, Chicago's Andrew Shaw.

My piece on Friesen from a few months ago.

This Puck Daddy piece from Kent Wilson is over a month old, but I somehow missed it. An interesting and insightful look at rebuilding, and why some teams avoid it.

An amazing ad for the Cup Final:

{youtube}RKQIuvlWb-M{/youtube}