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Here is my weekly Friday Five post for the PlayNow Sports Blog – Nugent-Hopkins, the flying Ducks, and more.

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Minor trade to report - Florida has moved defenseman Keaton Ellerby to the Kings for a fifth round draft pick. A bit about Ellerby:

He was picked 10th overall back in 2007, and turns 25 in November. Has only 125 NHL games under his belt, including two goals and 15 assists.

He was never an offensive defenseman in the WHL or the AHL, instead using his size (6-4 and 220 pounds) to play the role of a defensive defenseman.

He'll replace, or at least try to replace what the Kings lost with Matt Greene's injury. I don't see much/any offensive upside here.

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Two assists last night for Dmitri Kulikov – he has gotten off to a slow start, but he has a ton of offensive upside (especially if he plays alongside Brian Campbell). Now may be a good time to make a trade offer for him.

Erik Gudbranson had zero points, but he logged over 20 minutes. He won't ever contend for any scoring titles, but he should be a very solid fantasy defenseman who can fill a number of categories.

Claude Giroux won 18 of 30 faceoffs last night. All other Flyer players combined to take 27 faceoffs.

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Sidney Crosby had a very strong game – one goal, two helpers, two shots on goal, and 12 faceoff wins.

Not to be outdone, Malkin also had three points, three shots on goal, and 10 faceoff wins.

Apparently Washington reporters have never seen Ovechkin as angry as he was after last night's loss to Pittsburgh. Ovechkin had a team high six shots on goal and he finished with a goal and a helper, but the Capitals imploded last night.

Mike Ribeiro continues to be a lone bright spot – he had two more points last night and continues to lead the way offensively for Washington.

Zack Boychuk was pointless in 11:38 of ice time.

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TJ Brodie is a defenseman who doesn't get much attention, but he is a huge part of the offense in Calgary. He had two points last night, and was a catalyst for scoring chances on the Calgary back end.

Mikael Backlund had a goal and continued his strong start, but he did leave the game with an apparent knee injury. I'll update when news comes in.

Jiri Hudler continues to look good in the Calgary system – he had two more helpers last night and played a lot on the power play (not really a surprise, that is why the Flames brought him in).

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Phil Kessel finally put a puck past an NHL goaltender, and he did it with a vintage Kessel wrist

shot.

Matt Frattin scored another goal for the Leafs – he gets a lot of scoring chances because of how hard he crashes the net (his goal last night was off a deflection right beside Pavelec). He didn't play a lot (14 minutes), but he still is finding ways to be productive.

Jets defenseman Zack Redmond scored his first career NHL goal last night.

Nothing on the board for Wheeler, Kane, or Jokinen.

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Erik Karlsson scored and had a ridiculous 11 shots on goal for Ottawa in their loss last night.

Zack Smith had an assist and won 17 faceoffs – he also played close to 17 minutes, and is seeing more ice time because of the Jason Spezza injury.

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Red Wings goaltender Peter Mrazek made his NHL debut against the Blues last night, and the rookie was sensational, stopping all but one of the 27 shots he faced.

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A more typical Predators game last night – Pekka Rinne with a 32 save shutout, and Shea Weber
chipping in offensively with an assist (his first point of the season) and a lot of tough minutes logged.

Jonathan Quick faced only 14 shots, but he allowed three to get behind him.

Colin Wilson is off to a solid start in Nashville, and he had two goals.

Nick Spaling led Predator forwards in ice time with 20 minutes, but a lot of that came on the PK.

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Cory Schneider was very good last night in Minnesota. Although the Canucks got up early to a 3-0 lead, Schneider had to make several point-blank saves on Zach Parise later on in the game.

Alex Burrows returned to the top line and recorded a helper on Daniel Sedin 's goal. I imagine he and Zack Kassian will rotate in and out of that spot depending on opponent and time of game.

Mason Raymond 's strong start continues – he had a goal and an assist and is looking dangerous on a line with rookie Jordan Schroeder .

So much for being a rookie – Jonas Brodin logged 24 minutes of ice time for the Wild, second only to Ryan Suter on the team. Brodin was pretty good, too.

Mikael Granlund was a healthy scratch.

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The Blackhawks continue to show why they are the best team in hockey right now. They thrashed Phoenix last night, and their offensive studs led the charge.

{youtube}xsvLYFvWC-0{/youtube}

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Rene Bourque had a team-high seven shots on goal to go along with two helpers last night. Montreal got balanced production from a number of forwards.

Too bad they went up against the white-hot Thomas Vanek, though. Vanek had two goals, eight shots on goal, and he added the shootout winner, too. En fuego.

Christian Ehrhoff was pointless in his return to the Buffalo lineup, but he adds a ton of offense and a dynamic dimenson from the back end. Oh, and he played close to 30 minutes.

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How many of you went out last night and tried to add JT Miller to your lineup? He scored a pair of goals for the Rangers, but just as impressive has been his poise (I know, overused word). He makes the right play, and he sees the ice really well. Very encouraging to see out of a rookie.

Nice to see some production from Ryan McDonagh, who hasn't done a whole lot offensively this season (yeah, I know that isn't his game, but as a poolie who owns him some goals once in a while would be nice).

Two points for Marc Staal - fitting, as I just traded him yesterday. Thanks for the going away gift, Marc!

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I'll have the rest of last night's 12 games recapped in the morning.

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My look at five NHL players who are probably overperforming a bit right now.

Cory Conacher – LW Tampa Bay Lightning

Conacher's road to the NHL is a great story. The gritty and tenacious winger has had to overcome a lack of size (5-8 and 175 pounds), as well as diabetes, which he has been battling since childhood. There is something special about Conacher though, and much of that comes from his fearless playing style. His lack of size hasn't been a detriment to him during the first few weeks of his NHL career, and his high skill level has allowed him to play – and fit in – alongside Vincent Lecavalier and Ryan Malone in Tampa Bay's second scoring unit.

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When Ryan Kesler and David Booth return from injury, what will the Canuck lines look like? I offer up a few suggestions:

Vigneault is going to have to make some tough decisions in the next little while. Does Schroeder stick around, even when Kesler returns to the lineup? Does Vigneault trust Schroeder enough to give him a reasonably tough two-way role? Does he give Kesler the shutdown minutes again? Does he think about moving Kesler to the right side, where he flourished with Mats Sundin and Pavol Demitra back in 2008-09? What line combinations would you go with to give the Canucks the best chance to win?

*

The 10 most hated NHL players – no way should Patrick Kaleta be anywhere but number one.

Reacting to Kaleta's 2009 head shot on Montreal's Andrei Markov , TSN's Dave Hodge wondered if the agitator might be better off playing without a stick since he wasn't bothering to play the puck. Kaleta has matured somewhat, but he's still basically a hit-to-hurt player, a human missile with little interest in anything other than creating chaos on ice.

*

More on Andrei Loktionov from the Jersey beat writers .

From former Windsor teammate Adam Henrique :

“He’s a very skilled player,” Henrique said of Loktionov. “He sees the ice very well. He’s smart. He’s patient with the puck. He’s good in tight spots.”

Listed at 5-foot-11, 185 pounds, Loktionov is not a big player, but Henrique said he makes up for that with his skill and hockey sense.

“He’s a little smaller than me, but he’s so smart with the puck,” Henrique said. “He’s smooth. He’s quick. He’s shifty. He creates a lot of opportunities.”

*

Because of the Whitney and Jagr signings, many people are overlooking the fact that the Dallas Stars are a very young team.

According to NHL Numbers the Oilers average age is 27.184, to Dallas' 27.725. Not a lot of difference there. Perception is a funny thing, though. If it's Taylor Hall and Nail Yakupov versus

Jaromir Jagr
and
Ray Whitney
, then I guess that makes the Dallas Stars a veteran team.

*

Justin Goldman delivers the goods over at NHL.com on some under-the-radar goaltenders to watch:

Danny Taylor: When Miikka Kiprusoff left Tuesday night's game against Detroit with a lower-body injury, Calgary was without a legit third-string goalie. That led them to sign Taylor, who earned the two-way contract by posting a 1.77 GAA and .930 SV% in 26 games in Abbotsford. Taylor is one of the best goalies in the AHL this season, so he's certainly worth watching.

*

Dobber tackles the question on everybody's mind – what is wrong with Alex Ovechkin ?

From a macro perspective, Ovechkin has changed his game - probably due to coaching philosophy. When the Capitals were eliminated from the playoffs by Montreal in 2010, the entire organization panicked from ownership on down. They played a style that was too loosey-goosey. Too run-and-gun. Rather than accept that they just ran into an insanely hot goalie in Jaroslav Halak (and even then they hung in for seven games), the team turned everything on its ear. The new defensive system didn't fit with Ovechkin's style. Or Mike Green's style. Or Alexander Semin's style. Or coach Bruce Boudreau's style, for that matter. But they wanted the team built for the playoffs.

*

A great read on the maturation of Carey Price in Montreal.

"At a certain point of your career you start to think you're as good as you're ever going to get, and you don't need to get better," Price said. "You start listening to people who may not really know, they'll tell you you'll win a Stanley Cup and you think, 'Yeah, I'll just do that on my existing abilities instead of improving on those abilities.' The best athletes in the world are constantly improving and trying to get better and finding techniques and ways to improve. That's one of the big things I've learned over the last few years."

*

Friend of the website Farhan Devji offers up his thoughts for Canada's 2014 squad – I really like the look of this team, for the most part

The forwards:

Rick Nash — Sidney Crosby — Claude Giroux

John Tavares — Steven Stamkos — Martin St. Louis

Mike Richards — Jonathan Toews — Patrice Bergeron

Jamie Benn — Ryan Getzlaf — Corey Perry

Jordan Eberle

*

I'll have my Canada roster out in a few weeks as we look ahead to Sochi in 2014.

*

Ray Whitney believes that he didn't re-sign with the Coyotes because the NHL wasn't willing to pay him what he thought he was worth. Tough to read if you are a 'Yotes fan. Although GM Don Maloney disagreed with Whitney's thoughts.

"Not having an owner, trying to go to the National Hockey League to get approval on a contract like I got, which I'm assuming Don has to do, it's not necessarily Don saying no. It's Don fighting to get the dollar where he wants it, but it's the league saying, 'We're not giving a 40-year-old a two-year contract,'" Whitney said. "Bill Daly and those guys aren't really out here on a day-to-day basis watching games. They're just saying, 'He's 40, and we're not giving it to him.' I would guess."

Maloney said that wasn't the case nor has it ever been since the league started regulating the team's budget almost four years ago.

"That was a complete misunderstanding on Ray's part," Maloney said. "The league, they have never objected to anything we've done on a contract."

*

It isn't a huge surprise to me that the Sabres are struggling – they are getting production from their top line and no one else. And they have one of the weakest groups of centers in the league. It all starts up the middle at both ends of the ice, and their defensive zone coverage has been atrocious.

How can this team be so bad right now?

We asked that question to an Eastern Conference team executive: "When you're depending on Miller to always save games, you take that for granted, I think," he said. "The defense group, on paper, should be better than it is playing right now. They haven't played well back there. The other thing is with this short season, teams play so many games in a short period, when you get on a bad streak the losses really pile up in a hurry. A slump is really magnified. One bad week really jumps out at you. Whatever the reason, that team just isn't clicking right now. They should be better than this."

*

Dobber's latest Puck Daddy piece is full of advice.

Two sleepers:

Colin Wilson* , Nashville Predators (2-0-4-4 plus-4, 0 PIM, 3 SOG) – For seven games, Wilson was given ice time and opportunity by coach Barry Trotz. And Trotz was rewarded with a single point and a minus-4 rating from his young player. But in a most un-Trotz-like fashion (just ask Craig Smith), he stuck with Wilson and it paid off. Players on this team tend to get hot one line at a time. For a week or two it will be Wilson's line.

***John Mitchell* , Colorado Avalanche** *(10-4-3-7, plus-7, 4 PIM, 16 SOG) – I've tripled-checked these numbers, using multiple sources. And I quadruple-checked the name. But it is indeed John Mitchell doing this, and those numbers are correct. He's playing with Paul Stastny and Milan Hejduk . Go figure.*

*

Brenden Ross delivers terrific prospect thoughts over at DobberProspects . Here is a link to his most recent ramblings.

The Winnipeg Jets returned Mark Scheifele to the Barrie Colts (OHL) as they feel his experience leading his junior club will be more beneficial to his development than playing limited minutes in Winnipeg. I am torn on whether this is good or bad for Scheifele. The big forward has looked dominant at times but his consistency and work ethic continue to wander from game-to-game. He's good enough to play in the NHL but I don't think this return to Barrie will hurt him in the long run since he will gain invaluable experience as the key piece to the Colts' offense. Next year, watch out for Scheifele.

*

Dallas rookie Brenden Dillon has found himself on the top pairing over the past few games. His story is an interesting one.

"I've never seen a kid –when I was in the American League – come right out of juniors, step into a season when were in a playoff battle right to the end, step into our lineup, play top four minutes, and play it very effectively," said Gulutzan. "The second thing I remember is what a quality individual he was. You could see he reeked of character as a young guy, mature, very passionate. He fit in right away with the group."

*

Here is a solid profile on rookie defenseman Patrick Wiercioch of the Ottawa Senators.

The extra size and strength is helping Patrick make a big impression. He has looked very comfortable and very good on the Senators blueline this season and is making his case to stick around with the club and potentially fill Sergei Gonchar 's role as the puck mover on the second pairing.

Goes to show sometimes you just have to wait a little while for a guy to show you what he can do.

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Should the Rangers keep rookie forward JT Miller up with the big club?

The New York Rangers are presented with an interesting situation when it comes to J.T. Miller. The team has four more games to look at him, any more than five NHL games and the Rangers automatically burn a year off his ELC no matter what happens.

Miller looked really good in his NHL debut. Like, really, really good. We talked about it a little yesterday in one of the threads, but he simply looked poised and calm out there. He never panicked, was smooth with the puck and made things happen. He went to the tough areas of the ice, made a few crisp passes and took a couple of shots to boot.

*

Steven Stamkos has the fourth-most goals of any 23-year-old in NHL history.

Active players

Player	**Goals**
Steven Stamkos	186
Sidney Crosby	183
Alex Ovechkin	163
Ilya Kovalchuk	160
Jaromir Jagr	138

All time

Player	**Goals**
Wayne Gretzky	329
Dale Hawerchuk	220
Mario Lemieux	215
Steven Stamkos	186

Pretty impressive company there.

*

The future may be now for the Flames, writes Eric Duhatschek.

It is a course of action that doesn't get talked about much in Calgary: the possibility of finding a middle ground between a scorched earth rebuild and the organization's standing mandate of staying competitive year after year. The challenge of doing so has left it open to considerable mockery around the NHL, where the prevailing wisdom is the only way to create a Stanley Cup contender is to bottom out periodically.

Scorched earth rebuild is what Edmonton did. And the perpetual mediocrity of what Calgary currently strives for isn't really working out for them.

I agree with this last point – a bad 2013 regular season wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen to the Flames:

And if the shortened 48-game season represents a bottoming-out moment for the franchise, the possibility of landing a prospect such as Seth Jones, Nathan MacKinnon or Jonathan Drouin should be a well-received consolation prize.

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He's still got it:

{youtube}45jQ7Kuh-KI{/youtube}

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Hits, hits, and more hits:

{youtube}uT3RayG9XcI{/youtube}

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