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My latest for the CanucksArmy - Chris Higgins and the value of the role player.

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And a look at five overperforming teams, including three from Canada.

Montreal wasn't expected to make much noise in the Eastern Conference this season. Sure, they have arguably the best goaltender in the Conference, and entire NHL for that matter, in Carey Price, but their forward group wasn't all that impressive on paper. The defense was without young star PK Subban to start the season, but they didn't miss him all that much, thanks to the stellar play (especially offensively) of Andrei Markov.

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A few minor trades have come through in the past two days. Let's break them down.

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Alexei Ponikarovsky to the Devils for a 4th and a 7th round draft pick. This trade is all about New Jersey acquiring a big body to replace Danius Zubrus up front. Ponikarovsky's days as a consistent secondary scorer are over, but he is a decent top nine forward and the Devils coaching staff liked his play with the team last year.

New Jersey had originally planned to re-sign Ponikarovsky last summer, but they spent so much time on the Parise chase that Ponikarovsky opted to go to Winnipeg. It didn't last long.

I would say the fantasy impact of this move is negligible for either team.

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The Jets brought in Eric Tangradi from the Penguins earlier in the day. Tangradi has a lot of skill, but he simply isn't a good enough skater to stick at the NHL level. I'm not sure what will be different in Winnipeg - if you can't hack it on a line with Neal and Malkin, where can you fit in?

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And this morning, Montreal and Tampa Bay swapped goaltenders - Dustin Tokarski to Montreal, and Cedric Desjardins to Tampa Bay. Tokarski was at one time a really good prospect (he still is), but the Lightning like Lindback and Helenius more.

Desjardins is a great AHL goalie who has little NHL experience.

Tokarski is a 23-year-old native of Humboldt, Saskatchewan. Originally selected with the No. 122 pick in the 2008 NHL Draft by the Lightning, Tokarski has spent the 2013 season with the Syracuse Crunch of the American Hockey League. In 33 games played this season, Tokarski has compiled a 18-8-4 record with a .900 save percentage and 2.46 goals against average.

In seven career appearances in NHL games (all with Tampa Bay) Tokarski has a 1-3-0 record with an .871 save percentage and 3.54 goals against average.

*

Obviously the big news from the three games last night – Erik Karlsson suffered a torn Achilles tendon and is likely done for the season (and perhaps longer). He was hit by Matt Cooke, whose skate came up onto the back of Karlsson's leg. Probably an accident, but Cooke's reputation precedes him (even if he has cleaned up his game).

To put it mildly, the Senators are pretty much screwed without Karlsson and Spezza.

Stephane Da Costa scored a goal, won six of seven faceoffs, and played close to 16 minutes. A bright spot for the Sens.

Milan Michalek was a late scratch with a lower body injury. Things couldn't be going worse for Ottawa.

Real Deal James Neal scored two goals and added an assist – Alex Goligoski was absolutely brutal in the first frame against Calgary. Trade isn't looking good for Dallas right now.

Sidney Crosby – three points, four SOG, and 16 faceoff wins. I'll take that in my head to head league, thank you very much.

Very rarely will Neal score twice without Malkin's involvement – the big Russian finished pointless last night.

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Jake Allen won his first career NHL game, but it wasn't pretty (15 saves on 18 shots).

Vlad Tarasenko scored in only 12 minutes of ice time. He's hitting a bit of a rookie wall right now.

Brunner/Zetterberg were a combined minus-6 with no points.

Tomas Tatar played only 12 minutes for Detroit, but he scored a beauty of a goal. Showed great hands.

Jakub Kindl recorded an assist for the Wings, and he played the second most PP time among Detroit defensemen (3:32, trailing only Kronwall's 3:59).

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Thoughts on Dallas/Calgary will be up later in the morning.

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Five NHL teams underperforming relative to preseason expectations – yes, the Washington Capitals are on here.

If games were played on paper, the Capitals would be a lock for the postseason. They have two solid young goaltenders, a balanced defensive group, and a nice mix of size, skill, and two-way

play up front. However, they have really struggled out of the gate in 2013, and currently sit dead last in the NHL. There is no shortage of blame to go around.

GM George McPhee overreacted a few years ago when the Capitals were bounced in the postseason by the sublime goaltending of Jaroslav Halak . Instead of tinkering with his offensive juggernaut, McPhee tried to overhaul the philosophy of the team. One problem – he didn't get buy in from his top players. Doomed to fail from the start.

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Is Taylor Hall the best young player in Edmonton? Some interesting research in this piece says yes.

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The Ryan O'Reilly counter-argument, from Adrian Dater.

Your camp may be ridiculing supposed friend and teammate Matt Duchene for taking a short-money contract and thereby setting a floor too low for your own self. Fine, but guess what? Matt Duchene worked his butt off this summer, got himself in incredible shape and has played great this season, and now he's likely looking at a huge new contract before too long. Maybe the Avs even reward him already with a rich contract extension before too long, to not have to worry about keeping him down the road.

*

Jaromir Jagr 's impact in Dallas has already been profound, and we are only a month into the season:

That belief in themselves that Jagr speaks of is a mentality that did not exist last season and is a big reason for the late collapses by the Stars the past few years -- and a big reason for the changes the franchise made last summer. This season the Stars struggled without a true identity while working through the absences of several key players; now the Stars have won five of their last six games and finally seem to be coming together with a locker room culture once

again built around hard work but more importantly -- a belief in themselves and each other.

*

Scott Howson's tenure in Columbus wasn't all bad. He did a lot of good things for the organization.

Take a look at some of the guys who we're most excited about in the prospect pool: Cam Atkinson
,
Matt Calvert
,
John Moore
, Will Weber,
David Savard
,
Boone Jenner
,
Ryan Johansen
, Oscar Dansk, and Ryan Murray. Not all of his draft picks succeeded, but there's a deep core of talent now that Howson established and nurtured. More than a few players in the club's prospect pool are still marinating in the NCAA, and may very well come through to make an impact on this club in the near future - particularly standouts like T.J. Tynan and Mike Reilly.

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Tyler Myers has really struggled to find his game over the past few seasons. How should Myers play?

A very good read (the link above):

Some will point to the 7-year, $38.5 million contract he signed in September of 2011 as a reason for his poor play. Maybe he can't handle the expectations? Maybe he's not working as hard now after getting paid so well at the age (at the time) of 21? One or both of those may be true, or at least contributing factors.

But I say it's "hockey identity confusion." Who is Tyler Myers as a hockey player? What kind of player does he think he should be? Does his head coach want him to be? Do his teammates expect him to be?

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Kiprusoff will be out for another two weeks (at least) with his MCL sprain. I'd expect Joey MacDonald
to get the bulk of the starts during that time.

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A lengthy Kyle Turris bio from Silver Seven. Turris has huge shoes to fill with Jason Spezza out for a few months.

But it hasn't all been rosy for Turris and the Senators. Since Spezza's injury, the team has seriously struggled to put up consistent offence. Or offence at all, with just seven goals and a 2-3-1 record since it was announced Spezza would go under the knife. That can't all fall on the shoulders of Turris (especially since he's still got four points [all assists] in those six games), but there's no denying that the Senators need more from Turris if they're going to find a way to off-set the loss of Jason Spezza .

That might come with more shots, as Turris has only seven shots in his last six games. He's still a very young player and has months to get more comfortable in this new position on the depth chart, granted, but based on the few games we've seen so far Turris has looked (to me, at least) more like a complementary second-line centreman who's pretty good at most things but not exceptionally good at many of them.

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Jonathan Drouin is staking his claim as the best prospect available for the 2013 draft.

With Halifax teammate and competition for the #1 overall pick Nathan MacKinnon on the shelf, Drouin steps up with a huge performance:

{youtube}hOyRr28dA8k{/youtube}

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Former Calgary Flame defenseman Rhett Warrener with some strong words regarding Jarome Iginla
:

“His greatest asset was his shot but more importantly his compete-level — his refuse-to-lose attitude — and now you are watching and … it’s not there,” said Warrener, based on the Calgary Sun’s transcript.

“He’s not Dany Heatley -slow, but he’s not getting there. I don’t know if he’s slowed down and his compete level has followed, but you don’t see that compete and fire in his eye now. I think you see frustration setting in.

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I did some digging and found a few more articles to give us some more perspective and background on Columbus' new man in charge, Jarmo Kekalainen.

Hockey Prospectus:

What do you take out of the Combine? How much input does it give you towards your choices in the draft?

JK: It's important support material. The performance on the ice is 99% of our evaluation process, but this is important to support what we've seen on the ice and what we've done for research on the players, on their character, on their background. All of that puts a face on all of our reporting. Then, we have our strength and conditioning coach who comes to see the testing, which is a valuable part of our evaluation process, for sure. Yes, it's important, but it's the most important part is obviously on the ice.

NHL.com:

As the scouting director for the Blues, Kekalainen was responsible for drafting many top players, including current Blues captain David Backes , along with T.J. Oshie and Alex Pietrangelo
.

"Jarmo has an excellent feeling for players and knows how to put the puzzle together," Stubb said. "I have never worked under him, so I do not know if he is hard or not. But understand, both players and management have a lot of respect for him and his inside knowledge of hockey."

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If you feel like torturing yourself, here is another read on the Coyotes ownership debacle. This is a pretty good and level-headed piece.

As of the 2012 rankings, the Phoenix Coyotes are valued at $134 million, which is 29th among the 30 teams according to the magazine.

Yet, the NHL continues to list the Coyotes sale price at a firm $170 million. If you were any of the astute businessmen named above, would you pay well above market value? The value in Phoenix "does not pencil out," as I'm told by sources in the wake of Jamison missing the deadline.

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Even though they have been dominant at even strength this season, the Chicago powerplay has left much to be desired.

This writer has a suggestion – get Brent Seabrook to shoot more.

There's too much talent for the Hawks to be this bad with an extra skater. And again, I'm not dumping all this on Seabrook, but too many times, it seems, the Hawks defenseman has had the puck at the point or the top of the slot and then hesitated and looked for a pass. No. Stop. Get it and shoot it. Got it?

Even if the opposing goalie figures to see the puck because the Hawks lack net presence to start with, Seabrook and the other point men need to just shoot the puck and let the $18-million-plus collection of forwards crash the net looking for rebounds.

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Impossible to stop, and just another reason why he is on my top line for Canada's Sochi team:

{youtube}cnzZdz2QbUI{/youtube}

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Danius Zubrus has been placed on the IR, and the Devils have recalled Andrei Loktionov . Time to see what you can do, kid!

Lamoriello said Loktionov was called up so the Devils coaching staff can get a look at him. Loktionov, 22, was acquired from Los Angeles last Wednesday for a 2013 fifth-round draft choice and played two games for Albany.

"We wanted to bring him in and just see where he's at," Lamoriello said. "He played two games and he played extremely well. We'll give the coaching staff a chance to see him the way they've seen all the other players. We had the spot with Zubrus."

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My 10 Nutrition Tips for February – the death of energy drinks, GSP's diet, hormone hacking, and more. Give early morning exercise a try if you are trying to lose fat:

The researchers discovered that those who had exercised in the morning did not consume additional calories or experience increased appetite during the day to compensate for their earlier activity.

They also found that those who had exercised in a fasted state burned almost 20% more fat compared to those who had consumed breakfast before their workout. This means that performing exercise on an empty stomach provides the most desirable outcome for fat loss.

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