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The Friday Five - Kesler's return, Lehtonen carrying the Stars, and more.

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John Tavares was sensational last night against the Rangers – his game continues to evolve. A goal and 15 faceoff wins in the shootout victory.

Visnovsky had an assist, and his six SOG tied Tavares for the team high. He’s fitting in offensively, to say the least.

Kyle Okposo 's struggles continue – I'd look to move him (probably negligible trade value) if you want to upgrade your RW spot – he simply hasn't developed as hoped over the past few years.

Carl Hagelin is playing great right now, and it figures because I dropped him a few weeks ago. He had two points, seven shots on goal, and a ton of scoring chances last night. He has been the best Ranger forward after Nash this season.

Brad Richards played 15 minutes, Derek Stepan played 22.

Rich Nash played 25 minutes – typical John Tortorella. He loves to ride his top players.

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Ben Scrivens let in three goals on 33 shots, but I thought he had a good game. The Leafs

hung him out to dry on more than a few occasions.

Nazem Kadri got a goal (lucky bounce on a deflection), but he wasn't nearly as effective without Matt Frattin on his wing.

Jay McClement took Frattin's spot.

I was surprised to see Tim Brent out there on the PP for the Hurricanes – he played almost two minutes with the man advantage.

Jeff Skinner had two helpers and was the best Hurricane forward (as he has been on many nights this season).

I am not sure there are many/any players that cover as much ice as Jordan Staal does. "Rangy" doesn't even begin to define his game.

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Jose Theodore usually struggles against his former club, but both he and Carey Price were great last night. One combined goal against on 58 shots.

Andrei Markov watch – 23 minutes of ice time. Still holding steady there, Mr. ACL!

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Watched a lot of Washington/Tampa Bay – I thought the Caps looked really good. Mathieu Perreault
and
Eric Fehr
combined for five points – Washington needs to get secondary scoring from these guys on a more regular basis.

Ovechkin made a few Ovechkin-like rushes up the ice – was nice (and a bit surprising) to see. He absolutely blew by Victor Hedman on one, taking the puck hard to the net. Reminded me of

his play from 2005-2009.

Cory Conacher was pointless and finished with a minus-2 rating.

Brian Lee was brutal defensively and finished minus-3 – plus/minus isn't always indicative of defensive performance, but it is/was in Lee's case.

Richard Panik was pointless and played only 8:30 for the Lightning.

Anders Lindback missed the game with the flu – Garon let in four goals on 39 shots. He was decent.

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I play basketball games every Thursday evening, and because of that my game recaps for the later games will usually be added to the ramblings throughout the morning on Friday. Apologies in advance to the Colorado/Minnesota fan(s).

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I didn't recap the Flames/Stars game in yesterday's ramblings, so here are my thoughts:

Alex Goligoski looked like a forward learning to play defense for the first time on Wednesday. His gap control and defensive positioning were both horrendous. The Flames were having a field day with cross-ice passes in the Dallas zone, and it didn't help that Richard Bachman was very, very shaky.

Jarome Iginla had by far his best game of the season. Coincidence after getting called out earlier in the week by Calgary media for his lack of “compete?”

Roman Cervenka and Jiri Hudler continue to look really good together – they have been Calgary’s most consistent offensive threats this season.

Loui Eriksson is gripping the stick really tight right now – he has been a pillar of consistency over the past three/four years. This slump is something new for him, which explains why he is struggling to get out of it.

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Dustin Penner is on the trade market again. He is a UFA this summer, and could be an attractive commodity to a team looking for a winger. For all of his faults, Penner has two Stanley Cups with two different teams to his name. Hard to argue with that sort of success.

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Potential 1st overall pick Nathan MacKinnon is out for a week or two with a lower-body injury.

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It sounds like Matt Frattin may be out for closer to a month, a lot longer than the initial “week” estimation given by the Maple Leafs. He has a knee issue.

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Ryan Kesler could make his return to the Vancouver lineup – perhaps as early as tonight. He skated on a line with Zack Kassian and Chris Higgins at practice yesterday. The Raymond/Schroeder/Hansen speed trio were kept together.

Kesler has been coy with the media during the rehab process, but he has been skating/practicing hard for the past few weeks. He won't be as rusty as most players are coming off of long-term injuries. He took his time after rushing back in 2011-12.

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A nice passing play from Tuesday night:

{youtube}X4Dh5kh2dxs{/youtube}

Bonus marks to Mason Raymond for that filthy toe drag.

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What will the Rangers do with prospect JT Miller?

Which brings us to the very obvious question: Would you keep Miller up with the Rangers even though it burn a year off his ELC?

My guess is the Rangers will. I think Miller brings speed and an all-around game to the Rangers fourth line. He also makes things happen when he's on the ice, and brings it every single shift. He's shown some good chemistry with Chris Kreider and his forechecking has been a revelation at times these past four games.

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I'm going to share my USA Olympic roster picks next week – until then, here is Fear the Fin's roster for Sochi.

I don't have too many disagreements with the roster, but I'd take Justin Faulk over Tom Gilbert or Cam Fowler. Jack and Erik Johnson have both been passed over on the American depth chart by younger/better defensemen.

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With the Ponikarovsky trade, the Devils returned Andrei Loktionov to the AHL yesterday. When will he get his chance in the NHL?

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A good read from Ansar Khan on how the Red Wings have adjusted their playing style in LAL (Life after Lidstrom):

The Red Wings still have some good puck-movers in Niklas Kronwall and Ian White , as well as injured players Brendan Smith and Carlo Colaiacovo . But, the blue line has undergone a transformation the past couple of seasons.

“We don't move the puck (as well)," Babcock said. “When you got (Nicklas) Lidstrom, (Brian) Rafalski, Stewie (Brad Stuart) and Kronner, they go back, they turn the corner and they fire it to someone who hasn't had to work quite as hard to be quite as close, to be in the exact position.

“We can't play like that. We have to be closer and tighter and more available and better defensively, and sometimes it's not very pretty, but that's just the way it is."

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Manny Malhotra has been placed on the IR and is out for the season. The Canucks came to him and recommended the move, as he hasn't been the same player since the gruesome eye injury two years ago.

This way, Malhotra is off the books but he still gets paid. He is likely to retire at the end of the year and continue on with the team in a coaching capacity. He is one of the most respected guys in hockey. Pretty amazing how good he still is at faceoffs with very limited vision. It is a real shame that his time in Vancouver was cut short, but he was a quintessential pro during his time here.

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Kari Lehtonen is an elite goaltender – preach on, Mr. Goldman!

Beyond the stats, Lehtonen belongs in the "elite" category because he has undergone a significant transformation since joining the Stars. Once considered an injury-prone goalie, he's more committed to nutrition and physical fitness, his practice habits are stronger, and he's more detail-oriented with his technical and positional game than ever before.

To top things off, Kari can make some of the most dynamic and dazzling saves imaginable, one of which is a candidate for the save of the year (behind-the-back glove save on Jan. 31 against Columbus).

Stability, consistency, unquestionable skills and athleticism; Kari has everything needed to be considered an elite goalie, and we feel his play this season has earned him that title.

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Pittsburgh has recalled 2010 1st round pick Beau Bennett – the skilled winger may make his NHL debut tonight.

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A few of my posts from the past few days – Chris Higgins has found a home in Vancouver thanks to a clearly defined role – the value of the role player.

Even when Higgins was scoring 20+ goals with Montreal, his best attributes were his skating, tenacity, and his two-way play. The goals came naturally because of how hard he played. I think he got away from that a bit when he bounced around the league, as teams were maybe placing unrealistic expectations on him as a goal scorer. But put players in the right position to succeed - Alain Vigneault and his staff do a great job of this - and it's a whole new ballgame.

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An early season evaluation of the forward in Winnipeg. Evander Kane earns an A-.

Speaking of unfairly criticized... What more do we want from Evander? He's fourth in team scoring, leads the team in shots with 45. Expect a large increase in production out him and Jokinen once the bounces start going their way. Grade: A-

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A great interview between Ray Ferraro and Jaromir Jagr from TSN the other night:

{youtube}K-iPWeNrGzI{/youtube}

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A lengthy read on what an Achilles tear means – both in terms of injury and recovery.

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Dallas has sent Jamie Oleksiak down to the AHL – he wasn't bad during his time in the NHL, but the team probably wants him playing more than 15-16 minutes per night.

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Minnesota has sent Charlie Coyle down. He looked OK recently in the games I saw, but still a bit raw without the puck. He has a lot of upside.

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