Heading into play last night, the Devils were only three points up on the cellar dwelling New York Islanders. If that isn't bad enough, the Isles have played one less game than New Jersey.

New Jersey has had trouble scoring this season, recording a paltry 1.76 goals scored per game, way back of the second worst aforementioned Islanders who are averaging 2.11 goals per game played. If that's not bad enough, they have also had trouble keeping the biscuit out of their own basket, allowing an average of 3.00 goals against per match. That combination isn't going to net you many wins.

Was last night's 3-0 shutout against the Phoenix Coyotes the turning point in the Devils season? Ilya Kovalchuk scored twice, Martin Brodeur notched another shutout and Travis Zajac chipped in with a pair of helpers. New Jersey doesn't have enough depth to compensate when their best players don't play their best.

There were many negative opinions when New Jersey signed **Ilya Kovalchuk** to a 15 year contract. While I don't agree with signing a player for 15 years (five years is long enough), it was only done to bring the cap hit down to a very Devilish $6,666,666 per annum.

Now as gross as that cap hit may seem, there are 24 other players who eat up as much or more cap space than Kovalchuk. Included in this illustrious list of multi-millionaires are Scott Gomez, Vincent Lecavalier, Brian Campbell, Thomas Vanek, Brad Richards, Jason Spezza, Jay Bouwmeester and even Chris freaking Drury! Meanwhile Kovalchuk has averaged 45 goals and 87 points over the last six seasons.

Who has put up better numbers over that period? Alex Ovechkin who in five years has averaged 54 goals and 106 points. Sidney Crosby has averaged 37 goals and 101 points over five seasons and Evgeni Malkin, 36 goals and 95 points over four seasons. Dany Heatley is the closest comparable with 44 goals and 89 points over five campaigns. All four of these players have higher cap hits than Kovalchuk. Condemn Lou Lamoriello for the signing if you like, but at least the player has had the statistics to justify the contract.

Back in November, Brent Lemon talked about a book he read that questioned **Martin Brodeur** 's status as maybe the best ever to play his position.

The biggest problem I have with this is using a statistic (Shot Quality Against) that is purely subjective. Who gets to decide what is a quality shot? Distance alone is a poor indicator. So much depends on the shooter; a 30 foot wrist shot from the outside by a guy like Ovechkin with a defenseman providing a screen is much tougher to stop than a breakaway from Zack Stortini.

The shots are only part of the equation, it's also about rebound control, timely saves and the ability to bear down when the game is on the line. Being the NHL career leader in shutouts attests to Brodeur's ability to focus until the final buzzer.

The argument used to be that Brodeur played behind a studly defence, but as you can clearly see below, that hasn't been the case since the lockout.

Year

Top Four Defensemen (based primarily on average time on ice)

09-10

Andy Greene

Paul Martin

Mike Mottau

Johnny Oduya

08-09

Paul Martin

Johnny Oduya

Bryce Salvador

Colin White

07-08

Paul Martin

Mike Mottau

Colin White

Greene/Oduya

06-07

Brian Rafalski

Paul Martin

Colin White

Brad Lukowich

05-06

Brian Rafalski

Paul Martin

Colin White

Richard Matvichuk

Lockout

03-04

Scott Niedermayer

Scott Stevens

Brian Rafalski

White/Martin

What has Brodeur accomplished since the lockout? Two Vezinas in those five seasons with basically a no name top four (Rafalski and maybe Martin being the only exceptions).

Let's go back even further and look at the last 10 seasons; no goalie other than Brodeur has won this award more than once. Brodeur has won it four times in those 10 years. The other Vezina winners: Ryan Miller, Tim Thomas, Miikka Kiprusoff, Jose Theodore, Dominik Hasek and Olaf Kolzig.

Even last season, at the advanced age of 37, Brodeur topped the league in wins (45) and shutouts (9). He was third in goals-against-average (2.24), bested only by Tuukka Rask (1.97) and Ryan Miller (2.22). Imagine what his numbers might look like if his defensemen weren't mostly AHL material?

So back to the question, was last night's game the turning point in New Jersey's season? We'll have to wait to find out, but it sure felt like it was. It will be interesting to see if they can close that 18 point gap for a chance to dance in the post season. After starting the season 8-19-2, the odds are very long, especially considering that Zach Parise isn't due back until February at best. The table below shows how successful the Devils have been over the last five seasons:

Year

Record

Points

Conf Pts Rank

NHL Pts Rank

09-10

48-27-7

103

2

4

08-09

51-27-4

106

3

5

07-08

46-29-7

99

4

6

06-07

49-24-9

107

2

5

05-06

46-27-9

101

4

8

Just remember, swamp gas can be deadly. One spark might be all it takes to set off an explosion.

Thursday Trivia Time

A double minor worth of trivia questions this week:

What is the NHL record for the most penalties (not minutes) called against one player in one game?

Who holds the NHL record for most penalty minutes in one game?

Again, please refrain from simply using Google to find the answer and posting right away, try and let those who want to guess do so.