Happy December poolies! Two Saturdays ago didn't exactly go exactly as planned. However, aside from the four shootouts (coin tosses) I managed to split my picks down the middle. Unfortunately, the SO's cannot be excluded and will be on the rebound this weekend. As we enter the NHL's 3rd month, this is where things start to get that much more interesting. Preliminary evaluations have now surely been made by GM's league-wide and resulting plans of action will begin to stimulate some activity, as evidenced by the Hannan, Hunwick, Fleischmann movements this week. And so, without further ado let's get to this week's Saturday night slate!

New Jersey @ Philadelphia (1:00 pm ET)

Let the ***Goaltending Controversy*** in Philly begin! Michael Leighton has completed his conditioning stint with the Phantoms and is up with the big club now. Laviolette will surely go with the hot hand for the forseeable future as there is no rush for any tender to claim # 1 status in front of the league's deepest defensive cores. However, expect Brian Boucher to be the one that ultimately gets lost in the shuffle.

According to Yahoo! Sports, Kovy finished the season last spring ranked 10th overall. Now he's ranked #452. Enough said. However, this ridiculousness can't go on much longer now, can it?? Jamie Langenbrunner has returned to the lineup, and Elias is also back after skipping a few days for the birth of his daughter, so the troops continue to march back in.

The Flyers are coming off a poor week which saw them go winless, and will be looking to not only ramp things back up a bit.

Pick

Philadelphia – Home Win – H(ProLine)

San Jose @ Montreal (2:00pm ET)

A matinee in La Belle Province this week features the Northeast division leaders hosting a struggling Sharks team who are coming off of a November to forget. They finished the month winning just 2 of 7 and 6 of 14 overall and started off December on the right foot with a 4-0 shutdown of the Sens in Ottawa. However it appears Jumbo Joe has broken out of his personal slump with seven assists in the past five after only posting a measly two points last month through the 23rd of November. Now he can channel his efforts level headedly, toward guiding his Sharks back to respectability as they tread water in the depths of the Pacific (Ocean?) Division.

The Habs continue to impress, going 8-4 in their past 12 largely due to the stellar play of leading all-star vote getter for goaltenders, Carey Price. Scott Gomez has begun to show signs of coming back to life lately, slowly making in-roads to a return to respectability. Goals have been hard to come by against Montreal this season as the Habs sit near the top of the league in terms of GAA.

The Sharks have a tough week ahead in the form of a four game in six night stretch, including

contests against Detroit, Philly & Chicago. Don't think for a second that Coach McClellan doesn't hope to bag a victory before hitting this tough patch, or else December could begin to look a lot like last month for San Jose.

Pick

San Jose -- Visitor Win – V(ProLine)

Pittsburgh @ Columbus (7:00pm)

The Pens are the hottest team in the NHL right now, and their captain is the most in-form player in the league. Ya think there's a correlation?! Sid the Kid has been absolutely tearing it up,

taking player of the month honours for November, increasing his points streak to 14 games encounting, with 15 goals and 14 assists in that span, including 2 hat tricks in the space of the past week to boot!

The Jackets haven't been too shabby themselves by in large over the 1st two months, in a tie with vancouver for 2nd spot in the West, despite a 3 game skid heading into the weekend. Mason has appeared to throw the sophomore slump as far behind him as possible, emerging this year at a level somewhat closer to that shown in his R.O.Y campaign. With Brassard well on his way to posting a career year, and Nash on pace for another 40+ goal season, this young Columbus squad has been this year's Colorado Avalanche.

The Kid is at the moment the best player on the planet surging past Stamkos at sonic speed for both the scoring and overall points lead in the NHL. One can only imagine what heights can be reached once Geno turns things up and Jordan Staal finally makes his season debut in the coming weeks. However, this freight train is going to be tough enough to derail as it is.

Pick

Pittsburgh -- Visitor Win – V(ProLine)

Atlanta @ Washington (7:00pm ET)

The NHL Leading Washington Capitals are gearing up for yet another lengthy President's Trophy season and Surprise, Surprise! are once again the NHL's largest offensive juggernaut pacing the circuit in scoring, led by the Alexander bros. and Little Nicky. Perhaps most impressively is their dominance on home ice, sitting at a league best 12-1-1 so far!

That being said, this very Thrashers squad has somehow managed to be a little thorn in Washington's side in the early goings. They've beaten the caps twice already this season, including a 5-0 whipping two weeks back and are fresh off a 6 game winning streak, which was snapped in yet another hard fought battle @ Pittsburgh. Ondrej Pavelec has been gradually making a case for feel-good story of the year, after rebounding nicely from quite the on-ice scare.

At the end of the day, regardless how much of a Cinderella team the Thrashers have been thus far, Washington is just too stacked and quite frankly, probably a bit blood thirsty after being embarrassed the last time these two met in Atlanta.

Pick

Washington by 2 or more goals – Home Team Plus – H+(ProLine)

Boston @ Toronto (7:00pm)

Who would have thought after last season, that soon-to-be 37 year old Timmy Thomas would win his job back from the young, up and coming Rask, let alone completely dominate the entire league for the 1st 2+ months! Thomas is the Vezina runaway as we pass the quarter pole, while the team in front of him hasn't been all that bad themselves. The exclamation point was Thursday night's 8-1 thrashing of the more than respectable Lightning. The scoring is spread through the top 9 with even Old Man Recchi contributing decently.

Not much can be said about how abysmal things have become in Leaf land, yet again, in this downward spiral that has seemed eternal- post lockout. If only Burkie had a soft cap to play with like a certain other Brian across the hall at MLSE that he could delve into a luxury tax threshold with to save this season from becoming a total disaster. Oh wait! It already IS a total disaster. The Leafs have lost 16 of 20 and are stuck in the quicksands of the eastern conference sinking to the bottom in a hurry. They desperately need the return of Dion Phaneuf, but the captain is still a ways away from being able to make a return to inject some life and (false?) hope into this team.

With so many weapons at their disposal, Boston should not have too difficult a time with their favourite trading partner after getting a handle on how to neutralize their former star, Phil Kessel. This one goes the way of the B.

Pick

Boston – Visitor Win – V(ProLine)

Buffalo @ Ottawa (7:00pm ET)

The Sens have pretty much owned the Sabres over the course of the past two seasons, taking 10 of the past 12 meetings. With another 4-0 lost being dealt Thursday night by the returning Dany Heatley-based Sharks, it's a virtual lock that Pascal will be sitting this contest. Really, Brian Elliott hasn't been all that terrible this season, posting a tolerable 2.94 GAA, and .910 SV%, as opposed to LeClaire's well above 3.00 GAA and sub .900 SV%.

The Sabres come into this one splitting their past 10, without winning OR losing more than two consecutive games over the past month, proving to be quite consistently mediocre. Tim Connolly and Tomas Vanek need to re-assert themselves as the superstars they can be if this team is to have any success at all. They cannot depend on youngsters Tyler Ennis and Luke Adam to carry any kind of offensive load this early on in their careers. Also, not to jinx him, but you can't help but notice that Tyler Myers is the latest pro to suffer from the Sophomore slump curse.

Both teams have been equally unspectacular as they pass the 25 game mark, with some

considerable work still to do before attaining a top eight spot can become a reality for either. Despite losing 14 of 25, Ottawa is above .500 when Elliott suits up, with a 10-8 record. Although, Ryan Miller has proven to be comparably important to the Sabres, as they are 7-6-2 with him and 2-6-1 without him. It is primed to be a tight one, going down to the wire. Don't be surprised if this one ends in a penalty shot joust!

Pick

Shootout -- Tie – T(ProLine) ------- [Ottawa in SO]

Colorado @ Tampa Bay (7:30pm ET)

Tampa is coming off of two results from totally different ends of the spectrum: an uplifting come from behind OT win in Toronto, and also a complete shellacking at the hands of the Bruins in Beantown. Simon Gagne's rounding back into form will prove to be very positive news for the Lightning as they march forward, but they will be counting on Stamkos to end his first mini slump of the season after not scoring since four games back. Forwards such as Downie and Malone will also be needed to produce more moving forward. Neither netminder appears to be

able to put together a sustainable enough streak to warrant being awarded the #1 job.

The Avs' acquisitions of Matt Hunwick and Flash this week were shrewd moves to bolster this lineup for a legitimate run this season. Fleishmann will be primed to make a great first impression and will be given plenty more minutes tonight to do so than he had been accustomed to Washington.

It will be a see-saw battle for sure, but look for the Avs to gut one out for the two newbies.

Pick

Shootout – Tie – T(ProLine) --------- [Colorado in SO]

Minnesota @ Dallas (8:00pm ET)

Dallas has been the latest team on the rise in the ever-fluxuating Western conference, moving into a 2nd place tie, with a 5 –game winning streak on the line gathering points in eight of nine. The last of which was an impressive win against Washington- Impressive in the sense that they limited the Cap's arsenal to a single marker. In addition to the how fantastic Brad Richards continues to be & how consistent Brendan Morrow is, youngsters Neal and Benn will continue to try establishing themselves vs. Minny. Dallas took the last three meetings between the two.

After a half decent start to the campaign, the Wild have been slowly whittling away recently, currently trying to snap out of a 3-game losing streak. Marty Havlat has been one of the lone bright spots for the Wild as of late, increasing his production three-fold since his agent campaigned him to get some more ice time. Niklas Backstrom is going to be given ample opportunity to work his way out of this funk. But in the meantime, Jose Theodore will continue to get more spot starts until he gets his rhythm back.

Look for the Stars to continue their fantastic home stand and extend the winning streak to six!

Pick

Dallas -- Home Win – H(ProLine)

Florida @ Phoenix (8:00pm ET)

Phoenix comes into this one RED HOT winning 8 of 10. Bryzgalov continues to put up solid numbers and Ray Whitney seems to age like a good red wine, pacing the team in scoring. This young bunch, behind a very smart bench boss can go along way without huge marquee names.

Florida comes into this one on a down note, having thrown away a late one Thursday night in L.A. There's hardly been much to cheer about in Sunrise, sitting in last place in the SouthEast & tied with the Leafs for 3rd last in the NHL. However, amazingly, lone bright spot, Tomas Vokoun is among the league leaders in goaltending stats across the board. To put this in perspective, the Cats have allowed less goals per game than the top dog Capitals!! (if even just by a marginal amount) Amazing nonetheless! Nobody has shown the slightest ability to help make up for Nathan Horton's lost production, nor does one such player appear to e on the Horizon for the Panthers.

Phoenix will continue their winning ways at home, only having lost 1 regulation result on home ice dating back to late October.

Pick

Phoenix -- Home Win – H(ProLine)

Carolina @ Nashville (8:00pm ET)

It’s been a tough stretch for Carolina with only one win in their past six and two in the previous nine games. However, a positive sign for improvement is the re-emergence of Eric Staal as a bona fide elite NHL Star, showing to be capable of coming somewhat close to the level produced during his 100 point season of 2005/06. Although, aside from star 18-year old & Calder Trophy hopeful Jeff Skinner, several players on this roster have been underachieving. It’s certainly not Cam Ward’s fault, as he’s been very good to great all season.

Nashville are again right in the mix of things sitting on a two game winning streak and looking to extend on home ice where they’ve been better than good, earning points in all but one of their 10 games so far.

Carolina will etch this one out in a low scoring affair

Pick

Carolina -- Visitor Win – V(ProLine)

St. Louis @ Edmonton (10:00pm ET)

The Oilers' *Big 3* have all broken their respective absences from the scoresheet this week. The Oil have quickly built some momentum on the heels of their quick Eastern Canadian sweep of the Sens, Habs and Leafs—and all in different styles…In a war, dramatic comeback and a romp, respectively. The Bulin Wall made a fantastically successful return from the IR with a goose egg in his 1st game back as Edmonton easily dispensed of the hapless maple leafs in front of a demoralized crowd at ACC.

St. Louis have hit a bit of a rut, losing four straight despite an overall satisfactory start. However, they are really singing the Blues on the road as they've only taken home four W's from 13 home starts so far.

Edmonton will continue to gain momentum as Eberle, Hall and Paajarvi experience their first legit NHL winning streak. There's absolutely zero pressure on these kids to succeed and the fans are all in. Great environment for these studs to grow and flourish in.

Pick

Edmonton – Home Win Plus – H+(ProLine)

Detroit @ Los Angeles (10:30pm ET)

The Engine built in motor city just keeps on running! The Wings continue to be ranked #1 by many with the NHL's top winning % in tow, perched atop their familiar throne. As predicted by many, the mighty Detroit Red Wings have once again positioned themselves to extend their North American Pro Sports active record of 20 straight playoff appearances and more likely, their NHL record 10-straight 100-point seasons to 11. From the top-down, there's no other organization run quite like this one in hockey. The perfect blend of experience, youth, veteran leadership, scoring punch and creative dazzles from the likes of Datz & Zetts keep this team in contention through and through. At 16-4-2, the wings keep on trucking.

The Kings, who got off to a sizzling start have begun to simmer quite a bit as of late, losing seven of eight before coming back to beat the Panthers at home Thursday night. Because of how tight the West is, despite being last in the division and 12th in the conference, they still remain very much in contention (3 pts back of 2nd place Vancouver) if they can string a few wins together.

Detroit will be given more than a fair challenge from a Los Angeles team yearning to prove this little funk is not representative of the true quality in their locker room. They will be surely looking to take advantage of a Red Wing team in the 2nd of back to back games and apply plenty of pressure on home ice.

Pick

Shootout -- Tie – T(ProLine) ------- [Detroit in SO)