Every year there seems to be a few players that come out of nowhere to magically to give you a surprising boost, (Corey Perry, Pekka Rinne, Kari Lehtonen, Dustin Byfuglien, or Lubomir Visnovsky last season), or one that you ranked so highly but ended up destroying your season because you invested so highly on them, (Steve Mason, Bobby Ryan, or Evgeni Malkin). With a few weeks remaining before the first puck drops in the 2011-12 season, hopefully I can provide you with a last-minute look of some players out West who will either make or break your fantasy season.

Teemu Selanne – RW - Anaheim Ducks

At 40 years old, Selanne certainly had himself quite a fantasy season by posting 80 points along with 213 SOG and 34 power-play points in 73 contests. The question is whether or not he'll be able to repeat that for another season when he's 41. The major drawback is that it's the left

knee that's been giving him problems in the off-season, and knee injuries vs hockey isn't exactly a great combination. Either way if he can manage to stay healthy, a repeat of last campaign isn't too far-fetched, but an injury-riddled underperforming season isn't out of the question either.

Mark Giordano – D – Calgary Flames

Much like Selanne, Giordano had a great breakout season last year by posting 43 points in 82 contests. The only knock that I have on him is that 58 percent of his points last season came with the man advantage. The 25 PPP ranked him tied with Tomas Kaberle for ninth overall amongst all blue-liners in that department. I just want to see another season of similar production before I leap head first onto his bandwagon.

Brent Seabrook – D – Chicago Blackhawks

Pretty much an identical statement as the one written above. Seabrook had a great season, but it's a matter of whether or not he can repeat the offensive output this season. Over the last couple of seasons that I've watched him play, he seems more of the 35-point, rock of a D type of player than the 48-point offensive two-way D that he showcased last year. Also given his currently average draft position of 122.5, I'd be mighty annoyed with myself if I drafted Seabrook for an end of season total of 35 points, and bypassed a few potential better candidates like James Wisniewski (123) or Alex Edler (124) at the draft table.

Peter Mueller – C, RW – Colorado Avalanche

After missing all of last season dealing with concussion issues, Mueller has returned to the NHL in fine and dandy form. All I can think about Mueller was when he exploded for 20 points in 15 games lining up alongside Matt Duchene and Milan Hedjuk post-trade deadline in 2010. Their chemistry was completely off the charts. Coach Joe Sacco has attempted to keep the trio together during the pre-season, which might lead to a higher chance of them remaining together for the regular season. The thing that you also have to attach with Mueller is that he's a single headshot away from a seasonal (or even career) injury, so there's plenty of risk if you're rolling the dice with his services.

Steve Mason – G – Columbus Blue Jackets

Will the real Steve Mason please stand up? In 2011-12, will we see the 2.29 and .916 Mason? Or will we see the 3.05 and .901 Mason? Here's a couple of interesting stats that I've dug up regarding Mason. He has career home numbers of a 47-33-9 record, along with a respectable 2.58 GAA and .910 SP at Nationwide Arena. It's the pretty average 28-31-14 record and 2.99 GAA along with a .901 SP on the road where his problem lies. If you were a smart poolie, a very clever move might be to utilize him as a third goalie and just stream him for his home starts, and then subsequently bench him for any road games. Or things might just turn for the better and he ends up pulling a "rookie year" campaign to make your fantasy season.

Jamie Benn – LW – Dallas Stars

Benn reeled off 32 points and 86 SOG in the final 30 contests of last season. With Brad Richards out of the picture, Benn will need to step up to the plate to become one of the focal points of the Stars' offense. The biggest improvement will be to his PP ice-time as he'll be the primary candidate to eat up some of the 5:20 that Richards' left behind. On average he's the 62nd LW taken in Yahoo! drafts, but he could certainly post top 10 by season's end. Benn could

definitely make a few poolies' seasons if that outcome occurs.

Jimmy Howard – G - Detroit Red Wings

Starting between the pipes for the Red Wings definitely has its perks. You don't necessarily have to give it your best night after night, as the offensive will certainly help you win a few games on sub-par nights, which is exactly what happened with Howard last campaign. He finished with 37 victories tying him with Cam Ward and Miikka Kiprusoff for third overall amongst all goalies, but it's the 33rd ranked GAA and 30th ranked SP that would have hurt your fantasy squad. Howard caught a bit of a break because the Red Wings didn't really have a legitimate backup to act as competition for him, but with Ty Conklin entering the fold, Howard might not be as lucky this season.

Taylor Hall – LW- Edmonton Oilers

If you compare the early career stats between John Tavares and Hall, there are some very similar trends. Hall was on pace for 53 points and 234 SOG before cutting his season short with an ankle injury. Tavares finished his rookie season with 54 points and 186 SOG. He also averaged 18:00 and 4:08 on the PP during his rookie campaign, while Hall averaged 18:12 and 2:43. JT had a solid sophomore jump from 54 points to 67, can Hall pull off a similar improvement or will he be another victim of the dreaded sophomore slump?

Simon Gagne – LW – Los Angeles Kings

Gagne has battled injury problems the last few seasons as he's averaged just 56.3 games played during the last four campaigns, but the positive is that he's still averaged 0.76 points-per-game during that span. Another positive for Gagne is that he'll have some form of familiarity with a former line mate, with Mike Richards joining him in LA. Since the 2008-09 season, 97 of the 112 points that Gagne has registered was with Richards on the ice (86.6 percent). So it can go either way with Gagne this season. You might see an injury-free 82-game season where he might pot 70+ points, or he could be injured and post 40. Definitely a polarizing player that could make or break your season.

Dany Heatley – RW – Minnesota Wild

If you've been a follower of the NHL over the last few years, then you're probably well aware of the whole Heatley drama that unfolded with the Senators. In two seasons with the Sharks, Heater posted 146 points in 160 contests (0.91 points per game). In four seasons with the Sens, Heater posted 362 points in 317 contests (1.14 points per game). The difference for him in playing for the Sharks and playing with the Sens was that in San Jose he wasn't a "go to" guy, there were four or five others to help contribute to the scoring. In Ottawa, he was one of the main "go to" guys. For 2011-12, he will be returning to a role where he'll be one of the main focal points of the Wild's offense. That or he'll continue to "half-a**" things and poolies will be frustrated for a third consecutive season and tearing their hair out.

Pekka Rinne – G – Nashville Predators

The sad reality of small market teams is that they need to make tough financial decisions that might not necessarily be the best decision for the team, which is a pretty much the predicament that the Preds will face with Rinne heading into UFA status this summer. If you look at their goalies since the lockout, Tomas Vokoun (moved to FLA), Chris Mason (allowed to walk), Dan Ellis (traded to Montreal, then signed as a UFA with TB), and now we have Rinne. The Preds

have always developed goalies and moved them on when they get too pricey, with Anders Lindback (11-5-2, 2.60 GAA, and .915 SP), Chet Pickard, and Magnus Hellberg waiting in the wings, it could certainly be a strong possibility that Rinne gets moved at the deadline and loses all fantasy value if he becomes a backup.

Mike Smith – G – Phoenix Coyotes

It's not a surprise that the Coyotes have a primary focus on playing strong defensive hockey. Much of that stems from the player playing between the pipes. Ilya Bryzgalov posted fantastic stats in that role last year, so it'll be interesting to see if Smith can do the same for Phoenix this year. The downside is that Smith is unproven and doesn't exactly have great career numbers (2.71 GAA and .906 SP), but can the system prop up his numbers to respectability? Smith does have a history with coach, Dave Tippet, when they spent some time together with the Stars, so there's a familiarity factor there. Either way Smith could certainly make or break a few fantasy seasons this year.

Joe Thornton – C - San Jose Sharks

Thornton had a bit of a "down" year after donning the "C" for the Sharks last campaign. If you discount last season, Thornton had a 1.26 point-per-game ratio since the lockout, which kind of shows you how dreadful his 0.88 point-per-game ratio was last year. There should be no way that he should be outside of the top 10 (currently 16th) in terms of drafted C. He could certainly pull off a Corey Perry and be one of those under-rated players that just end up winning the season for you, or he could remain status quo and post back-to-back unimpressive seasons.

Jaroslav Halak – G - St. Louis Blues

I didn't recognize his splits until I dug a little deeper into his stats. Halak actually had very similar splits as Mason mentioned above. Halak owned a 17-10-5 record along with a 2.10 GAA and .923 save percentage at home compared to a 10-11-2 record along with a dreadful 3.01 GAA and .894 save percentage away from the Scotttrade Center. There wasn't really a backup option for Halak, but this year the Blues have two in Brian Elliott and Ben Bishop. If Halak continues to struggle on the road, there certainly could be some cracks appearing in the solidity of the number one gig.

Marco Sturm – LW - Vancouver Canucks

Sturm is another candidate that could boom or bust your fantasy campaign. He has speed to burn and a knack for getting the puck on net which should be a great complement with the Sedins on the Nucks' top PP unit. It's a matter of whether or not he'll receive the opportunity. He's mostly been undrafted in Yahoo! leagues, but things could change if he experiences a hot start to the season. With Mason Raymond on the shelf till late-November, Sturm should see some significant time on the Vancouver top-six.

Other Notables:

C

RW

LW

D

G

Steve Ott

Corey Perry

Alex Tanguay

James Wisniewski

Corey Crawford

Daymond Langkow

Ales Hemsky

Gabriel Landeskog

Ian White

Antti Niemi

T.J. Oshie

P.M. Bouchard

Dustin Penner

Alex Edler

Martin Erat

Questions or comments? Or any make or break candidates of your own? Like always I'll be ready and willing to discuss them with you in the comments section below.