The start of the 2011-2012 NHL season is well and truly underway. There have been a few pleasant surprises, as well as few “red alert” moments involving key injuries. The main thing that you need to keep in mind is that the season is still young and there’s still seven months of quality hockey remaining. Similar to last season, I’ll provide you with weekly updates so that you have access to the latest news that’s been happening from the Western Conference front.

Anaheim

After splitting their overseas games last week, the Ducks are now heading back to North America with an even record. What poolies need to keep in mind is that Anaheim is traditionally a very, very slow starting team. Since 2007, the Ducks have started 1-3-1, 2-2-1, 1-4-0 and

1-3-1 respectively, so their current one goals for per game average is kind of the norm. Now might be a good time to try to “lowball” a panicky Ryan Getzlaf or Corey Perry-owner just to see if you can pry the two stars off their hands. Another positive for Duck fans is that goalie Jonas Hiller looks healthy after dealing with a bout of vertigo late last season. Statistically speaking, Hiller’s career .921 save percentage is one of the best amongst his active peers, if he can manage to maintain those numbers the Ducks should be in good shape come April.

Calgary

It’s been a rocky road for the Flames during the early part of 2011-12. Their defense has been atrocious while giving up 10 goals in two games. Combine that with being the worst offensive team (18.5 SOG per contest) in the league and things aren’t looking too rosy in Cow Town. The good thing is that it’s only two down and 80 left, but is there an outside possibility that the Flames finish last in the league this year? Calgarians tear me apart! Matt Stajan is getting the early season shaft as he’s averaging just 10:18 per contest, which is a sharp drop from the 14:13 that he averaged last campaign. His days in Calgary are numbered. Roman Horak is starting to garner more attention from the prospect front. He was a late fifth round draft pick by the Rangers back in 2009, but has shown plenty of gusto in the first two games of the season. The Flames will probably give him the nine-game stint then return him to the juniors, but he’s probably worth monitoring in deep keeper leagues. As I mentioned during last week’s column, Miikka Kiprusoff is a notoriously slow starter. His career October numbers (2.96 goals against average and .896 save percentage) are a night and day difference compared to his numbers for the rest of the months. If you are in a ROTO league, it might not be a bad idea to bench Kipper for October and save those value starts for later on in the year.

Chicago

The Hawks split their early season series against the Stars. Coach Quenneville has been experimenting with his lines just to see if there's any chemistry developing amongst his players, but they should settle back towards the "usual" lines pretty soon. A player that poolies should keep a close eye on is Dave Bolland. During the final three years of his OHL career, he posted a remarkable 342 points in 238 contests (including playoffs), which certainly highlights that he has plenty of offensive upside. The main problem for him is trying to avoid that dreadful injury bug that has plagued him throughout the early part of his NHL career. After the big four of Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews, Marian Hossa and Patrick Sharp, Andrew Brunette is also picking up plenty of PP ice-time (3:26 per contest), if he can managed to maintain that rate, look for another under-rated 50 points from him this campaign.

Colorado

So far, so good for the Avalanche. They haven't scored very many goals, but their stingy defense is getting it done. Gabriel Landeskog is really impressing me by leading the team with 10 SOG. The points aren't really there yet, but if he maintains this SOG rate, they're sure to come. Same could be said for Paul Stastny. Having a rejuvenated Chuck Kobasew on his wing is certainly lighting a fire under his bottom. Colorado's top-four D of Jan Hejda, Erik Johnson, Ryan Wilson and Kyle Quincey have combined for 14 HITs and 15 BS during the first two contests of the season. I mentioned during the Dobber Radio show about month ago that their D was the biggest improvement during the off-season and so far it's proving true. Semyon Varlamov is proving every bit that he's worth the first and second rounder that the Avs coughed up for him. Considering he's been on average taken as the 26th goalie in Yahoo! leagues, he could be the sleeper of the year for poolies who took the leap of faith on him. If he can stay healthy that is*.

Columbus

The big line of Jeff Carter, Rick Nash and Vinny Prospal have done alright on the scoresheet (seven points and 21 SOG), but something still doesn't look right in my opinion. Grant Clitsome is picking up where he left off from last season. If he can cement a role on that top PP unit, his production could skyrocket. Another surprise candidate stemming from the Jackets' blue-line is youngster David Savard. He picked up 77 points during his final year of juniors with Moncton in the QMJHL and then followed that up with 43 points with Springfield of the AHL last campaign. He's playing with a lot of confidence and has definitely shown that he's NHL ready. With James Wisniewski suspended for the first eight contests, this is the time for Savard to strut his stuff. The question of whether or not he'll stick with the team full-time will linger until Wissy returns. 0-3 with a dreadful 3.82 goals against average along with a dismal .873 save percentage, how much longer before the Jackets' coaching staff loses faith in Steve Mason? Surely a 600k one-year contract to Marty Turco should get it done.

Dallas

The Stars' power-play has been anaemic to start the season as they've gone just one for 14. The addition of Sheldon Souray has helped, but it hasn't completely replaced the quarterbacking skills from the departure of Brad Richards. The lack of a power-play quarterback

to carry the puck into the offensive zone is going to hurt them throughout the season. Steve Ott is the early recipient of some decent quality ice-time. He's leading all Stars' forwards by averaging over 20 minutes per contest, which is a huge upgrade over the 16-17 that's he's used to getting from the last few campaigns. Ott's probably not a pick up at the moment, but he's someone that you should probably keep a close eye on. Michael Ryder is another player to place on the watch list, he's garnering plenty of PP ice-time (4:16) on the team's top unit alongside Mike Ribeiro and Brendan Morrow. Ryder has had a couple of 30-goal, 55+ point seasons playing alongside Riberio in Montreal, so the history was definitely there. Kari Lehtonen went absolutely bonkers in Tuesday night's victory over the Coyotes. He sports a 0.96 goals against average along with a .975 save percentage. Wow! He could singlehandedly keep the Stars out of the basement this campaign.

Detroit

It's not surprising to see Pavel Datsyuk's name amongst the scoring leaders for the Red Wings, but to see Cory Emmerton (who?), beneath him is certainly surprising. Emmerton was a second round draft pick back in the 2006 NHL entry draft by the Wings. After doing a bit of research, I noticed that he was drafted in the same round as players like, Michal Neuvirth, Jamie McGinn, Andreas Nodl, Nikolai Kulemin, Shawn Matthias, Artem Anisimov, Jesse Joensuu and Jamie McBain, so I mean the pedigree is kind of there. He spent the last three years seasoning in the AHL (typical Detroit development model), so he's a bit more NHL ready than a few of the other prospects out there. He's receiving just marginal time (10:02), but if an injury to the top-six were to happen, Emmerton could see a large rise in fantasy value if he can prove that he can skate alongside the Datsyuk's and Henrik Zetterberg's in Detroit. As I've mentioned it a few times during my previous columns, Jimmy Howard owners need to tread carefully. He was lucky to get the number of starts that he received last campaign because Detroit didn't have a trustworthy backup. Howard won't appear in 63 games if he continues to post a 3.00 goals against average along with a run-of-the-mill .906 save percentage, especially with Ty Conklin registering goose eggs. If you are a Howard owner, it might be worth it to bite the bullet and snag Conks as your handcuff to protect your early round investment of Howard.

Edmonton

It's only been a game, but I'm ready to declare that Ryan Nugent-Hopkins is NHL ready after demonstrating enough power and strength while recording the first goal of his career. With the injury to Ryan Whitney, it appears that Cam Barker (5:20) and Jeff Petry (4:08) received the bulk of the PP ice-time from the blue-line on Sunday night. Keep an eye on Barker as he certainly has the offensive upside to be of fantasy worth during this campaign. I was pleasantly surprised to see Shawn Horcoff not receive a lot of PP ice-time. I thought they'd try to keep the trio of Horcoff, Ales Hemsky and Ryan Smyth together, but instead coach Renney distributed most of the man advantage time to the youngsters which shows that the Oilers are in full-blown development mode. If you are in a league that count faceoff wins, take note of Horcoff. He won 17 of the 26 faceoffs (65.4 percent) that he participated in on Sunday and could very well single-handedly boost you up in the standings just by owning him (think of him along the lines of utilizing a goon for PIMs). Could 2011-12 be the year that Devan Dubyuk finally establishes himself as a legitimate number one goalie in the league? 0.92 goals against average and .971 save percentage certainly say it's a strong possibility.

Los Angeles

Much like the Ducks, the Kings are on their way back to North America after starting the season overseas. The Kings' top-line of Anze Kopitar, Simon Gagne and Justin Williams (27.3 percent according to FrozenPool), has registered seven points along with 21 SOG during the first two

contests. With Dustin Penner dealing with a “lower body” injury, Brad Richardson has slotted in alongside Dustin Brown and Mike Richards, while picking up a lone assist and three SOG. He could be a dark horse candidate if Penner is out for an extended period of time. Jon Quick vs. Jon Bernier, round one goes to Quick, but should be an interesting battle all season long.

Minnesota

The Wild might not have the strongest team on paper, but they could certainly surprise many poolies this campaign. The top-line of Devin Setoguchi, Dany Heatley and Mikko Koivu have garnered the bulk ice-time and offense (four points and 20 SOG), in Minnesota (not surprising). P.M. Bouchard was dropped with a two-game suspension for his high stick on Matt Calvert, lots of debate has been raging on about that one. The line of Matt Cullen, Guillaume Lattendresse and Bouchard has also played well and could produce a trio of 50-pointers by season’s end. Maybe the Wild won’t be so bad after all? Jared Spurgeon is getting an early season confidence boost from Coach Mike Yeo. He’s averaging 3:53 on the PP per contest in Minny. He won’t unseat Marek Zidlicky as top dog, but playing second fiddle isn’t a bad outcome. Nicklas Backstrom has always been a great statistical goalie (career 2.42 and .918 numbers), if he can remain relatively healthy he’s a top 10 threat.

Nashville

Coach Barry Trotz has also been experimenting with his lines at the start of the season, as there really hasn't been a lot of consistency in establishing "top lines" in Nashville, but with that said they're 2-0, so I really shouldn't be complaining. David Legwand is off to a blazing start with five points in the first two contests, the trio of Colin Wilson, Craig Smith and Legwand seems to have a lot of chemistry playing alongside each other while posting 10 points and 11 SOG during their two victories. Nashville is a revolving door of "hot and cold" lines, so I wouldn't put too much stock into their blazing start. Ryan Suter and Shea Weber continue to be the workhorses on the blue-line with Jon Blum pacing along in a distant third. With how important Weber is to the Preds' offense, can Nashville really afford to move him at the deadline? I'll pose another question, with how well Pekka Rinne has started the season, is he pricing himself out of Nashville? Keeper leaguers better get onto Anders Lindback quick.

Phoenix

There's no doubt that Shane Doan is the heart and soul of the Coyotes, as well as being the lone offensive threat. He might be the only player in Phoenix that tallies more than 50 points this season. With that said this is a contract year for him, and I wonder if management would entertain the idea of moving him for rebuilding pieces at the trade deadline? A pre-season favourite sleeper of mine was Martin Hanzal. The points haven't been there yet, but the ice-time (22:02 and a whopping 6:42 on the PP), and SOG (seven), certainly has, it's just a matter of time before the puck bounces his way. He was a menace in front of Kari Lehtonen all night on Tuesday. There's been quite a bit of rumblings (Pengwin7), about how the Yotes are going to be terrible this year. I agree with that statement from a fantasy standpoint, but Phoenix is a team built to win 1-0, 2-1, or 3-2 games. They won't dazzle you with huge, offensive 6-4 wins. What's going to save their bacon is that, as a team they've blocked 37 opposing shots as well as maintaining a takeaway:giveaway ratio of 1.75 along with a respectable 51.5 faceoff winning percentage during the first two contests of the season. Those are the reasons that will keep them out of the basement in 2011-12.

San Jose

I won't lie, I have a heavy bias for the Sharks this season, as I think they're going to have a very strong year fantasy-wise. The "big named" trio of Joe Thornton, Patrick Marleau and Joe Pavelski looked unstoppable on Saturday night, while Brent Burns and Dan Boyle looked like they've been playing alongside each other for years and should both post decent numbers throughout the season. Tommy Wingels is currently occupying Martin Havlat's top-six spot, but Andrew Desjardins is giving him a run for his money, with two goals on Saturday night. The Sharks have a history of producing "surprises", Jonathan Cheechoo (2006), Matt Carle (2007), Milan Michalek (2008), Devin Setoguchi (2009), Ryane Clowe (2010), and Logan Couture (2011), could Wingels or Desjardin be 2012? After Boyle and Burns, Jason Demers ranked third in PP ice-time while snagging 3:24 on the man advantage, he could be an outside candidate for 30 points and 125 SOG come April. Todd McLellan says that Antti Niemi is pretty close to being ready, so no more scrambling for starts for poolies much longer.

St. Louis

As predicted, the Blues have pretty much split their ice-time amongst the top nine forwards fairly evenly. Dave Backes (19:43) leads the way followed by T.J. Oshie (19:11), Andy McDonald (18:48), Chris Stewart (18:16), Alex Steen (17:39), Patrik Berglund (16:27), Jamie Langenbrunner (14:54), Matt D'Agostini (14:50) and Jason Arnott (13:06). The most noteworthy point might be that Berglund is ranked sixth amongst the Blues forwards, he's been lucky enough to post two points in two games, but if he continues to garner that low amount of ice-time, the numbers will return to the norm. Alex Pietrangelo is receiving all the ice-time in the

world (24:45 and 3:38 on the PP). If he maintains those numbers, a 50-point out-of-the-blue Keith Yandle-like season won't be surprising. The Blues have been the stingiest team in terms of shots allowed to their opponents (16.5 per contest), but Jaroslav Halak will certainly need to improve his current .844 save percentage if the Blues are going to experience success this campaign.

Vancouver

What, Alex Burrows on the power-play alongside the Sedins and Mikael Samuelsson? Never thought I'd see the day when that happened! Just kidding. Either way, Burrows has certainly deserved to garner some PP ice-time alongside the Sedins after getting short changed the last few years, which resulted in him being rewarded with his seventh power-play goal of his career on Tuesday night. He also leads all Canuck forwards with eight SOG. Now it's a question of whether or not he can make it stick. Alex Edler claimed top spot in seizing most of the power-play ice-time vacated by the departure of Christian Ehrhoff. Sami Salo also saw a spike up to 2:22 with the man advantage. Keep an eye on his situation, as he would make a good sleeper fourth D. I brought up this interesting stat regarding Roberto Luongo in the comments section in last week's column as well as a thread in the forums. The Nucks faceoff against the Flyers on Wednesday night, will he get pulled?

Questions or comments? Like always I'll be ready and willing to discuss them with you in the comments section below. See ya next week.