The 2012 NHL draft class is quickly emerging as one of the best groups in recent years. Highlighted by a slew of first round talent defensemen, the 2012 draft is shaping up to bring a little bit of everything from elite forwards to skilled agitators. While the defensive depth will likely become what the 2012 draft is known for, there are also several skilled forwards who have the potential to become elite NHL stars. The top three forward candidates make things even more intriguing as each of them are Russian talents and NHL GM's surely couldn't pass on all three of them because of their "Russian Factor". Could they? In its DobberHockey debut, *The Dean's List* will take a look a few forward skaters who are likely to be selected in the first round of next year's NHL Entry Draft.

Nail Yakupov, Sarnia Sting (OHL)

2010-11 Statistics: 65 GP – 49 G – 52 A – 101 P

Please welcome the "Nail" to the Mikhail vs. Nail 2012 first overall discussion. When a high-flying, game breaking Russian talent enters the CHL and destroys all rookies finishing in the top five of OHL scoring all while breaking franchise scoring records (in less games) previously held by NHL Superstar Steven Stamkos, he will get noticed. Yakupov has solidified himself into the 2012 NHL Draft classes' Top 5 (in my opinion) with his Bure-like speed, Datsyuk-like shiftiness, Kovalchuk-like sniping abilities and Ovechkin-like celebrations and passion. Simply put, Yakupov is a treat to watch play hockey and Sarnia has never seen a talent like him in their franchise history (yes, even Stamkos). The young Russian's offensive flare and his love of the game have become contagious for everyone watching. Last season, Nail Yakupov entered a foreign country and saw little (if any) adjustment period.

Entering his second OHL season, it will be interesting to see if Yakupov can improve on his production in his draft year, especially since Sarnia has added solid team depth that they did not have last season. There is a chance that Yakupov does not improve on his numbers as scoring will be spread around and the young Russian may not be relied upon as much as last year. If that situation arises, it will be intriguing to see if Yakupov becomes frustrated with his own personal success. Yakupov loves to score goals and loves winning so I expect him to enjoy his season more as Sarnia finally becomes a winning team.

Mikhail Grigorenko, CKSA-Krasnaja Armija Moskva (MHL)

2010-11 Statistics: 43 GP – 17 G – 18 A – 35 P

NHL Scouts will not have to travel as far to see Grigorenko this upcoming season as the big

Russian center has decided to come across the pond by committing to the QMJHL's Quebec Remparts. The decision to play in the CHL for his draft year will help ease some of the Russian factor that stigmatizes these Russian talents in past years. Prior to his CHL commitment, Grigorenko appeared to be determined to make his mark in the KHL in his next step towards professional hockey. Coming to North America will surely intensify the "Mikhail vs. Nail" discussions for first overall. Unlike his country-mate, Grigorenko has favourable NHL size (6'3") and has been compared to Canadian stars Joe Thornton and Mario Lemieux in the style of game that he plays. Grigorenko was a dominating force during the past Under-18 World Championships notching four goals and 18 points in only seven games en route to Russia's gold medal win. The 2011-2012 QMJHL Season will determine Grigorenko's fate for the 2012 NHL Entry Draft and it wouldn't be surprising to see the talented Russian lead all Q players in scoring.

Alex Galchenyuk, Sarnia Sting (OHL)

2010-11 Statistics: 68 GP – 31 G – 52 A – 83 P

With "AG94" (my personal tag for Alex) playing in my own backyard, I have had the privilege of watching this emerging superstar on a nightly basis. Galchenyuk often finds himself playing in Yakupov's shadow but it's my belief that Alex will become a more valuable NHLer. Remember, Galchenyuk (83 points as a '94) finished third in CHL rookie scoring behind Yakupov (101 points as a '93) and Sven Bartschi (86 points as a '92) which is impressive as a 16 year old for most of the year. The dynamic two-way center has quickly become my favourite OHLer as he competes hard at such a high level in all areas of the rink. Scouts will learn to love this American born Russian as he plays a game that is almost identical to NHLer Marian Hossa. Finding any flaws in Galchenyuk's game is very difficult. Alex is a great skater, strong on the puck,a deft puckhandler, owns a hard accurate shot, plays extremely responsible in his own end and has elite vision. While Grigorenko and Yakupov may have the upper hand on pure offensive upside, Galchenyuk is no slouch in that area yet he owns a better overall game.

Henrik Samuelsson, US Under-17 Team (USHL)

2010-11 Statistics: 38 GP – 12 G – 16 A – 28 P

The son of former NHLer Ulf Samuelsson, Henrik is a big strong talented winger with tremendous on-ice vision and playmaking abilities. Samuelsson competed in the Under-17 Hockey Challenge where he tied the tournament lead with his six goals while notching an impressive 10 points in only five games en route to a USA Championship. Henrik also represented Team USA in the U-18 World Championships scoring one assist in six games as USA earned Gold again. Samuelsson's blood lines (father Ulf and brother Philip) won't hurt his draft status but it is *his* combination of size, skills and elite hockey sense that will make Henrik a 2012 first round selection next summer.

Martin Frk, Halifax Mooseheads (QMJHL)

2010-11 Statistics: 62 GP – 22 G – 28 A – 50 P

Frk (pronounced "Firk") finished his first CHL season with a respectable 50 points in 62 games

on a poor Halifax Mooseheads team. The 5-foot-11 solid powerful Czech winger has not quite broken out but Frk has the skills to become a very good NHLer. Frk may be missing some vowels in his name but he's not missing much in his hockey game as he's gifted with plenty of attractive skills. Frk has a powerful skating stride with a fantastic shot and is a player who is not afraid to get dirty. Frk has shown that he does not back away from much on the ice and plays an edgy game. The Czech winger enters his second 'Q' season with some much needed junior experience and will be joined by top QMJHL prospect Nathan MacKinnon after a trade last week. Frk will be given more responsibility on the Czech WJC team this December and it will be interesting to see how he succeeds. There are several scouts who feel that Frk has fallen in the 2012 draft class ranks but the gritty winger has good upside and lots of intangibles that NHL teams search for year after year It is too early to write off a player with Martin's skills. If Frk can put together his total package then we could be looking at a Cam Neely or Steve Downie clone.

Pontus Aberg, Djurgarden J20 (SuperElit)

2010-11 Statistics: 41 GP – 13 G – 17 A – 30 P

Pontus Aberg is an intriguing prospect as his progression has been trending upwards as his successes continue to add up. The Swedish goal scoring winger has been dubbed as one of the best scorers of his age. Aberg possesses great speed with strong puck handling skills, a good shot and above-average hockey IQ. The 5-foot-11, 190-pound Swede has caught the eye of many scouts with his skill but also his enviable work ethic. Pontus Aberg formed a deadly line with recently drafted prospects Mika Zibanejad (OTT 1st Rd, 6th) and Victor Rask (CAR 2nd Rd, 42nd) during the 2010 Ivan Hlinka Tournament where Aberg notched 5 goals and 8 points in just 5 games. Aberg rarely takes a shift off and plays the game consistently on a nightly basis. These attributes will surely get him noticed for the 2012 draft.

Zemgus Girgensons , Dubuque Fighting Saints (USHL)

2010-11 Statistics: 51 GP – 21 G- 29 A – 49 P

The Latvian born centerman quickly earned the trust of his coach Jim Montgomery as he showed his urge to compete as hard defensively as he did offensively. At 6-foot-1-inch, Girgensons has good size to go along with good hockey sense, strong puck protection skills and good feet. Girgensons is another 2011 CHL import draft pick (Kelowna Rockets) and has already committed to playing at University of Vermont beginning in the fall of 2012. Zemgus' passion for the game of hockey is admirable and he prides himself on playing the game "the Canadian way" which is likely why he has been compared early on to strong character players like Jonathon Toews and Mark Messier. Those comparisons will attract a tonne of scouts as this big strong center enters into his draft year.

With the 2012 NHL Entry Draft eleven months away, there will be plenty of movement within the first round (as Sean Couturier can attest to). The next ten months will determine who rises to the top amongst his peers and who struggles to maintain their position. The projected talent of the 2012 draft class gives NHL teams and fans lots to be excited about and there will be plenty of scrutiny of these young kids as they chase their NHL dreams.

Be sure to follow *The Dean's List* as the series continues to release names for the upcoming draft and also prospects from past drafts as they look to become fantasy relevant. Next up, *The Dean's List*
will feature the defensemen to watch for the upcoming 2012 NHL Draft.

Follow *The Dean's List* writer on Twitter @rossyyoungblood for more prospect information.