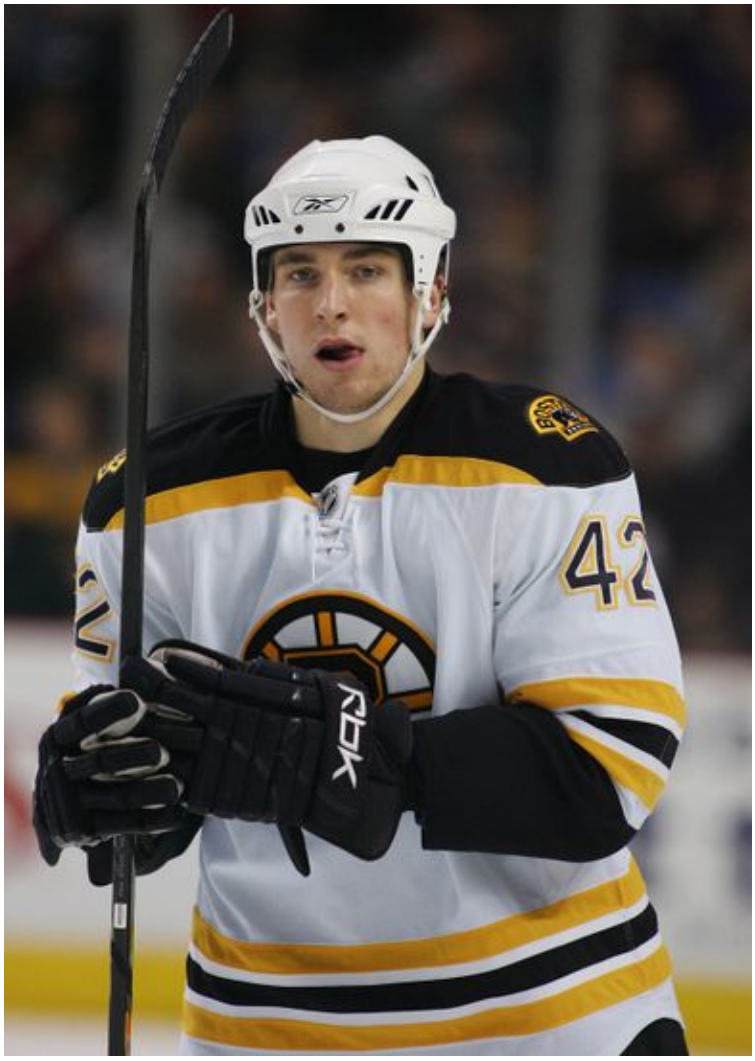

The worst mistake losing poolies can make down the stretch is to tune out their teams entirely.

It may have been clear for months that this just wasn't going to be your season.

Maybe you blew the draft. Perhaps your team has been decimated by injuries. Or, conceivably, the person in first place had a horseshoe-ectomy and has caught lucky break after lucky break on the way to an easy win.

Whatever the reason – don't bury your head in the sand as the season winds down.

There are only three weeks left in the '11-12 campaign and it's been these final few months where we may have been and will continue to see emerging trends for '12-13. Players who may have been mired in quicksand in the first half might have emerged after January and while their seasonal totals might still look average at best, the late surge might be a better indicator of what lies ahead for the following season.

Then there are the sleepers. It's one thing to read the stats line for a hot prospect, but it's an entirely different animal to see Sven Baertschi's predatory instincts unveiled in the offensive zone when he reads Keith Yandle's intent to pass the puck, pounces for the interception and then strikes for his third goal in three games on the emergency call-up. That's the sort of tactile research that will etch an indelible impression in your memory and will leave you salivating at the possibilities of him winning a job right out of Flames' camp in the fall.

Erik Karlsson's offensive abilities have been known for awhile now, but remember that he was a minus-30 last year. As much as that statistic is often completely overblown in terms of its positive and negative attributes, it's still a mainstay in fantasy hockey and it likely delayed his being drafted by a few rounds back in September. That said, the sharp minds that paid close attention down to the wire last spring, including through Ottawa's late-season Craig Anderson-inspired surge (11-5-1 with 2.05/ 939 peripherals and two shutouts with the Sens after compiling atrocious injury-related stats with the Avs), may have noticed that aside from piling up 4-8-12 in 16 March starts – Karlsson was also plus-1 in that time. He was minus-25 in January and February combined alone. He's easily on the right side of that stats line this year.

If you snoozed through the end of last season you might have missed the boat on Ray Emery's courageous comeback from that career-threatening hip injury. He snuck in nine starts with the Ducks and registered a 7-2-0 mark, including a 2.28 GAA and .926 SV% while being just what Anaheim needed at just the right time. Overlooking that period of time might have caused you to undervalue Emery's chances of not only winning the back-up gig with the Hawks coming out of training camp, but also of having the chance to supplant Corey Crawford as the starter.

If you had already turned your attention to something else when Blake Wheeler was traded from Boston to Atlanta, you likely fumbled the ball on the fact that he noticeably ramped up his shot totals with a more significant top six role and he began to make more frequent box score appearances. Fast forward to this season, where he's been a breakout star for the Winnipeg Jets and has been basically unstoppable for the past few months.

How about Dallas Stars hotshot Jamie Benn? He had a decent 56 points in 69 starts last season, but the more impactful stat included the 22 points he accumulated over his final 20 affairs. He took his game to an entirely new level in that period of time and he's carried over that

play into this season, helping the Stars make up for the loss of Brad Richards inside of their top six.

As an aside, if you think the Rangers will go deep in the playoffs – Richards has been ramping his game up to that MVP-worthy level. His seasonal stats still look fairly pedestrian, but he's coming on strong and Henrik Lundqvist won't be the only one mightily bearing the weight of this team's post-season fortunes on his shoulders.

The point here is simple though.

When your fantasy team is winning, it's really easy to stay motivated to check in daily and pour over the box scores. You want the title. You can taste it.

But when your lineup is further down, be it fourth or last, it's so tempting to just pack it in and concentrate on spring training, March Madness or whatever else occupies your free time.

Don't. Keep up that work ethic until the final buzzer sounds on the regular season and then continue keeping tabs throughout the playoffs, where even more stars of tomorrow can be uncovered.

Whether it feels like it now or not, you'll be laying the critical groundwork for a run at next year's championship instead of starting a step behind again next fall.

Not every piece of information you uncover in the stretch run will turn into gold, to be sure, but knowledge is power. The more details at your fingertips, the better chances of your success right from the start of next season's marathon known as the fantasy hockey campaign.

Should you be so inclined, follow me on Twitter for NHL and fantasy info as a safe mobile notifications options with minimal self-involved dreck in 140-character spurts.