We're nearly into December, so who would you consider some of your biggest surprises of the NHL season among the point leaders?

BIGGEST SURPRISES?

Dave in Vancouver, B.C.

“Chris, I was just wondering who you’d consider your biggest surprises so far in terms of the scoring leaders? I’d like to hear you “ramble” a bit on that subject, if you don’t mind. Thanks and I enjoy your Sunday offerings and your work on Sportsnet. The live nightly recaps are invaluable.”

Chris: Thanks Dave, I appreciate it.

Biggest surprises. Hmm. If you’d have told me in September that Joffrey Lupul or Kris Versteeg would be averaging a point-per-game as we head into December, I’d have suggested you up your meds. We knew going into the season that Lupul would have a pretty good chance alongside Phil Kessel, but to see those two work so well together with a variety of centres and still produce night after night has been a treat. Kessel’s dominance has driven the line, but Lupul’s efforts this season – now that he’s finally healthy – cannot be undersold. He’s truly been an extremely effective guy out there and I couldn’t be happier for him.

Aside from the health issues, I was never really happy with how he was often used in Philly and, to a lesser extent given his low GP total, Anaheim. Part of that was his own fault with a lack of consistency, but part was one of those “chicken and egg” things where he can’t produce if he’s not in a good spot, but he can’t get into a good spot unless he produces.

I still think Versteeg is better-suited for an L2/L3 role, but he's been perfectly complementary in his first line spot with the Panthers. To be fair to him, he also seems to be both healthy and really comfortable where he is right now. He's taking full advantage of his chance and good for him. So many of their guys are firing on all cylinders.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins was my Calder prediction when we did award picks at the start of the year here, I think, but he's far surpassed any of my expectations as a fantasy writer or Oilers fan. What he's doing as an 18-year – especially with his slight build - is ridiculous. And wonderful. Jordan Eberle's breakout campaign, along with Ryan Smyth's resurgence, has been one of many treats too.

I'm not surprised, but I'm really happy for Jamie Benn to have continued his second half surge from last year. For James Neal to have erased last year's post-trade disaster and to have been downright nasty out there against the opposition this season. For Nicklas Backstrom to get back to where he should be, despite Alex Ovechkin's struggles. For Marian Hossa to have taken his game to the next level of "great", whereas he was stalled a bit in recent seasons at "quite good". More PP time has also helped his cause and there was that recent story about how fatherhood has made a positive impact on his life too.

Anze Kopitar has been solid on the whole and he's tied for 10th in points, but I still think he has more to give this season. I didn't think Tyler Seguin would be at a point-per-game pace this early, but he's been fantastic and clearly his career path is going to be golden. So much talent.

I'm happily not surprised to see Joe Thornton back at the point-per-game level. I thought too many people dismissed his chances to get back to that form after last year's 70-point campaign.

Marc-Andre Bergeron has cooled off a bit, but 19 points in 22 GP? He's one of those hit or miss guys. In the right spot, he legitimately has that sort of talent. Consistency and health have been the issues.

One of the fun aspects of fantasy hockey though is that the first quarter every season is going to be filled with surprises, both good and bad, which makes what we do as poolies so challenging and enjoyable.

LINE SWAP

Matt in Montreal

"Chris, I have a chance to land all three members of Anaheim's top line for my top trio of Florida's #1 line (Fleischmann, Weiss, Versteeg) and Brian Elliott. Standard scoring. 12 teams. 10 forwards per team and positions don't matter. I drafted Weiss and Fleischmann fairly late

and added Versteeg in the first few weeks. I already have Thomas, Rask and Lundqvist in net, but jumped on Elliott as a FA early on. Take the deal? No brainer before the season started, but it has me thinking twice now. Your thoughts? Thanks!"

Chris: IMO, it's still a slam dunk Matt. I'd take the deal without a second thought. For starters, there's not a doubt in my mind I'd rather you have Ryan-Getzlaf-Perry than Florida's guys from today forward, despite Anaheim's miserable stats across the board. Whether Elliott keeps this up or not, you're set in net and can EASILY afford to give him up regardless to make that forward swap. Yes, yes and yes.

For the record, I do expect pretty sweet stats from both Elliott and Halak all season on the whole. This is what Ken Hitchcock does. Aside from Steve Mason's rookie season, look at what Pascal Leclaire did in Columbus. His career NHL stats are littered with mediocrity, but that one magical year stands out like a sore thumb.

And Halak, let's not forget, has November splits of 1.64/ .937. Poolies in general would be wise to remember that going forward.

TEAM AUDIT

Simon from Edmonton, AB

“I'll take you up on your team audit offer. Here are the details for my H2H league and roster:

CBS 15 Team Dynasty League (keep 4)

G(3), A(2), PPP(1), SHP(2), DG(+2), DA(+1)

W(5), S(.1), GA(-1), SO(5), OTL/SOL(2.5)

Dress weekly: 6 FW, 3 D, 1 Goalie

[B]Forwards:[/B] Stamkos, Roy, C. Stewart, J. Staal, Clowe, C. Smith, Hartnell,

Fleischmann, Read

[B]Defense:[/B] Green, Karlsson, Chara, Whitney, Larsson, Orlov

[B]Goal: [/B]Bryzgalov, Hiller

I currently have Green on IR, and picked up Orlov to gamble on him producing and staying with the team. Defensemen are very important with our scoring, and I feel that I have a very good group for this year, once Green returns.

I could use some advice on who I could target to improve, and who I should be looking to get rid of. I still have faith in Stewart, but he's going to have to produce in the next few weeks. Thanks!”

Chris: In your type of format which favours goal scorers Simon, a guy like Chris Stewart should be golden. So far this season, yikes. What really troubles me is that in three of the last four games, he has no shots. Still, let’s definitely give Ken Hitchcock some time to work his magic. Since you only have to dress six forwards per week, Stewart can easily be kept on the bench and he’ll have more long-term upside for the season than many other options you might have.

Stamkos, Roy, Staal, Clowe, Hartnell and Fleischmann are pretty solid on the whole to roll out weekly and Smith/ Read offer depth production... but I don't think you'll end up keeping them all season.

I'd agree with your D being especially strong once Green is back. Karlsson and Chara are locks in two of the three slots now anyway and you do have good options there. Whitney is slowly getting back up to speed. Larsson has really been producing well of late and Orlov has that massive potential, but I really don't think he'll start for you too much given how few spots you have.

You're hurting a little bit in net now, but will be fine in the long run.

I think the main thing to keep in mind here is that you want to shape this team for your playoff run. Make it as strong and as deep as possible for that time. So when it comes to Stewart, as an example, just keep in mind that even a dry spell that lasts into January might not be the end of the world because he has a better shot than many FA options to get hot in the second half and when your team needs him most.

Similarly, a guy like Hiller hasn't been helping as much as you'd like now. But you only need one goalie each week and the Ducks will most likely turn this season around and start winning

games with the sort of regularity we'd expect. So he's a really strong insurance option behind Bryzgalov, who will also find his form again. It's just that when the Bobrovskys or Schneiders of the world go on their tears, it hurts a bit more in the short term in these sorts of formats with only one goalie starting each week.