

Frankly Plank

By Duane Plank

Got some new things to consider as the kid nears the golden age of 16. Like the fact that he already has his driver’s permit, and best I can figure will be driving around, by himself, in about four months. So as I was limo’ing him around town the other day, he may have mentioned that I kinda rolled through a stop sign. The “California Stop,” I believe that they call it. So now I have to watch myself while tooling around, and try to set a good example for the whippersnapper. And now it looks like I will have to start sharing my shaving cream, too.

What a sports day last Saturday, eh? Started out for the Plank family with a trip to the San Gabriel Valley area and San Marino High School, where the club soccer kids came away with a 3-1 victory, evening their season record at 3 and 3. Got back to Mayberry in time to catch the second half of the UCLA loss to Stanford, which was predicted in this column. Watched LSU edge Georgia, and Washington lose a tough overtime game to the Notre Damers. So many games, so little time. But I do what I have to do to keep informed. UR welcome.

Also predicted that the Trojans would venture up to Cal and knock off the overmatched Bears, and the boys from SC came through, waxing Cal 30-3. So as I was keeping an eye on the Trojan onslaught, a second Lasik-aided eyeball started glancing at the Dodger game against the Colorado Rockies. Los Dodgers had tanked on their abysmal road trip to Washington, Pittsburgh and San Diego, causing some of their faithful to become a tad bit squeamish, right *RJ*? Some never lost faith, right *DG*?

Anyway, as we all know, the Dodgers finally figured out a way to score some runs, tallying five markers in the bottom of the seventh to take a 5-zip lead over Rocks on the way to the division-clinching win. Party time at the Ravine for the Dodgers, who are now in the midst of the NLDS against the St. Louis Cardinals and their stud starting pitchers.

Isn’t it a bit ironic that it was my Halos who clinched their division title five days before the Dodgers completed their business? But that is all history now, isn’t it? Doesn’t matter when you qualify for the postseason, as long as you are still playing in the second week in October.

So as you are perusing this fine column, hope that you are supporting my Angels, and the Trolley Dodgers. We are all in this together, right?

The Angels will have no excuse if they don’t dispatch the Bostonians. They are healthy and ready to roll. They have been able to set up their rotation, starting with John Lackey. Who I don’t know about. Wackey Lackey wants the ball, is the main man, at least for this postseason, but something tells me that he can be had. I could be wrong, have been before, but I guarantee you that if the Angels somehow lose the first game of the series Thursday night, they and their faithful will be looking at another disappointing playoff run. My prediction: Angels in four.

Nothing against ex-Halo closer Frankie Rodriguez, but did the guy fall off the baseball

face of the earth once he took the big bucks and his herky-jerky delivery to Nuevo York? Nice season for K-Rod and friends. ERA of 3.71. Seven blown saves. Maybe Brian “Tito” Fuentes ain’t that bad trying to close out the game for the Angels?

On second thought, Fuentes scares the crud out of me when he enters a game. But I will be positive and expect nothing less than perfection. Much like my readers do.

So the Dodgers have regrouped, and are hosting playoff baseball at the Ravine. Didn’t fare so well against the Birds this season, losing the season series, 5-2 and being outscored, 31-19. Don’t know who they are counting on to be their ace in the series that started Wednesday night. Can’t be Randy Wolf, the dude who, when last spotted on the hill, was chucking 70-m.p.h. Frisbee-like curve balls to the Rockies. Maybe Clayton “Koufax” Kershaw will be the man, but the kid is just 21 and has no track record of anything in the postseason. How bout the alleged ace, Chad Billingsley, who has done nothing but scuffle for the past three months?

The Cards will lead with two bona fide aces, Chris Carpenter and Adam Wainright, who pretty much stifled the Blue Crews’ lumber when they faced the Dodgers this season. Gave up something like five runs in a combined 30 innings.

Manny better be Manny, or the Dodgers could be out in four. But because I am a homer, have friends who bleed the Blue, I will select...Cards in four. Sorry, but I must maintain, or try to establish, my journalistic integrity.

And because I know that you really, really hang on my predictions, I will say Yankees in four, and the Phillies in four.

The NFL enters week five and I have already screwed up in my Fantasy League. Those of you who participate in the colossal waste of time that is FF football may feel my pain. I didn’t check my roster this week, obviously being incredibly busy doing who knows what. Anyway, returned to the mansion on Sunday morning after my run around the local dilapidated high school track, and checked on my team. And noticed that about half of my players weren’t playing, were having a bye week. Including my man-crush QB, Kurt Warner. So I scrambled to move players around, and ended up adding the bust Mark Sanchez as my QB. That worked out well. Think that the dude garnered me about four points. Loser. And running back Darren McFadden, who plays for the joke that is the Raiders, scored 0.5 points. Seriously. I think if you get injured during the game, they award five points. Damn.

So I tanked, as did my Rams, who were edged by the 49er’s 35-0. And sorry Raider fans, but you are still stuck with J. Russell at QB. But we all must stand behind our teams, right?

Least that’s what I overheard Sunday afternoon from a Raider supporter, who cheers for her team, whether they lose, or lose! But she does have an alternate jersey she sometimes sport from the fine city of New Orleans. Who happen to be 4-0. Can’t hurt to hedge your bets, can it? •

Kings and Ducks Both Tank NHL Openers

By Duane Plank

Time to spend a little column space looking at the purveyors of the puck, pro-style. Both the Kings and the Ducks opened up the regular season last weekend, with the Kings stinking up the joint, losing 6-3 to Phoenix. And the Ducks tanking to San Jose, 4-1. Nice!

May have mentioned in prior columns that I have been a King fan since the birth of the franchise, having actually toured the Fabulous Forum in Inglewood before the facility was completed. Way back in 1967. The Fabulous Forum is where the Kings used to play before moving their pucks and sticks over to Staples Center, where the rich folks’ seats are conveniently separated from us riff-raff by the gents who own the lucrative building--the guys from *AEG*.

And, if you care, I used to watch the LA Blades play some minor league hockey in the mid-60s, so I feel that I have a decent hockey pedigree.

Quick aside. As I was checking the www. to make sure that I wasn’t just blowing smoke to the fans, I came across a different LA Blades hockey entity. According to their fine website, the Blades were “established in 1995, and are the first openly gay and lesbian hockey team in the United States. We participate in the Gay Games, we host the Coors Cup tournament in Los Angeles, and we play yearly after the Kings Game at the Staples Center.” So, fans, if you happen to venture out to Staples to watch the Kings and don’t want to fight the traffic on the way home after another Kings’ loss, apparently there will be some evenings when you can sit back and watch the Blades poke-check their opponents.

By the way, the Blades “will be playing in the Gay Games in Cologne, Germany in July 2010.” If interested, they ask that you contact them. Sounds like a different type of summer vacation, doesn’t it?

All right, so the Kings haven’t made the playoffs in way too long of a time, and some of the prognosticators out there in the Great White North and Bristol, CT. have been hypothesizing that this is the year that the crown-shirts make it back to postseason play. Which means that they must finish in the top eight spots in the Western Conference. Which hasn’t happened since the 2001-02 season. That’s a long and pathetic playoff drought for a team that still charges a pretty penny for most of their decent duckets.

But hope springs anew each October, and the Kings enter this season bolstered by the acquisition of forward Ryan Smyth and defenseman Rob Scuderi, who comes to L.A. from the roster of the Stanley Cup champion Pittsburgh Penguins.

Smyth, who was a Kings’ nemesis when he played for the Edmonton Oilers, was picked up in the off-season from the rebuilding Colorado Avalanche. The 33-year-old left winger should play on the Kings’ top line and log significant minutes on the power play. He scored 26 goals last season, including 10 on the power play, and added 33 assists to the stat sheet. He’s a proven goal scorer, brought here to score goals. Simple enough.

Rob Scuderi? Don’t know much about him--not exactly a marquee name in the league or a guy who will sell a season ticket or two. He was known as a shot-blocking defenseman for the Pens. Which is a great thing, cuz every shot blocked by a willing blue-liner is one less shot that can find its

way past a startled goalie and into the back of the net.

Don’t look for much, if any, offense from the 30-year-old Scuderi; he has tallied a whopping three goals in his 300-game NHL career.

Per usual, the Kings entered the offseason this summer seeking a top-level sniper to bolster their somewhat anemic offense, which averaged about two-and-a-half goals a game last season. And, per usual, the locals couldn’t convince a top shelf free agent to relocate to L.A., despite all of the perks that come with living in the mecca known as the South Bay.

So where will the extra offense come from this season? Leading goal scorer Alexander Frolov notched 32 lamplighters last season and probably can’t be counted on to score more than that in this campaign. One of the knocks on the 27-year-old Russian is that he doesn’t shoot the puck often enough, preferring to hold onto the disc and make the perfect play. Shoot the puck, my man! As a guy by the name of Gretzky said, “One hundred percent of the shots that you don’t take, don’t go in the net.” Or something like that.

By the way, now that The Great One has cleaned out his office in Phoenix, rumors have surfaced linking 99 to a possible opportunity with the Kings. And King GM Dean “Don’t Call me Vince” Lombardi is receptive to the possibility. Lombardi has been quoted thusly, in the *Toronto Globe* and *Mail*: “Maybe it’s just for selfish reasons, but with all he has been through, wouldn’t he just enjoy being in the dressing room, talking hockey again?” The Kings could do much worse than resurrecting 99 and letting him mentor some of the young talent that Lombardi has acquired.

Back to the game on the ice. Young gun Anze Kopitar, just 22, starts his fourth season in L.A. He led the team in scoring in 2008/09, with 66 points. A lot is expected of the young Slovenian, who could be ready to make the jump to big-time NHL prominence if he can score 35 goals this season. And tighten up his defense a tad bit. Kopitar was a minus 17 last season.

Captain Dustin Brown has always been known as a tough, hard-working forward. He produced 24 goals last season, down from his career-best year of 33 in 2007-08. A 30-goal season from the captain should make Coach Terry Murray happy. Other forwards who need to pick up the scoring slack include center Jaret Stoll, right-wing Justin Williams, and second-year King Wayne Simmonds, who tallied five markers in the pre-eason.

On the defensive side of the ice, second-year pro Drew Doughty, all of 19, will again get tons of ice time. This kid is going to be a superstar, write it down, folks. Just hope that it happens here in L.A. But he really struggled against Phoenix. Jack Johnson, old man Sean O’Donnell, and Matt Greene are a few of the other blue-liners that the Kings will throw out on their side of the redline, hoping to keep opposition forwards in check.

And between the pipes, Jonathan Quick and Erik Ersberg return from last season. As mentioned in a previous column, the Kings need one of their netminders to seize the number one job, make the routine save, and occasionally make the brilliant stop. Limit the so-called “bad” goals, which seem to sap a team’s will to compete.

That’s a bit of info on my favorite hockey team. The Kings are talking playoffs, and it is about time. Time to put up or shut up, eh? •

