As the final four teams slug it out for NHL immortality, work continues in Columbus in preparation for the 2012-2013 season. A major step in the process was finalized this week as the Blue Jackets removed the interim tag from Todd Richards's title and officially named him the sixth head coach in franchise history. Richards has just 205 games of NHL head coaching experience under his belt and will, presumably, grow alongside a young group of players.

One would assume that the Blue Jackets were exploring every other available name for the next head coach since Richards sat in limbo for over a month before being definitively named as the bench boss. With no real good candidates to shop for, the Blue Jackets seem to have picked Richards by default. For his part, Richards did do a great job with the Blue Jackets in 2012 following the firing of Scott Arniel, leading the team to an 18-21-2 record despite a lot of injuries and roster turnover.

Richards, like his predecessor Arniel, has experienced the plenty of success at the AHL level, including a Calder Cup victory with the Milwaukee Admirals as an assistant coach in 2004. Richards then moved to Wilkes-Barre as the head coach of the Penguins' AHL affiliate before serving as an assistant in San Jose. He got his first head coaching position with the Minnesota Wild in 2009, lasting two seasons before being let go.

Richards inherits a job that nobody wants. General Manager Scott Howson was able to handpick Scott Arniel and spent most of their relationship butting heads with his second-prize, as Guy Boucher was thought to be Howson's number one choice. When Boucher decided to go to Tampa Bay, Arniel was the Jackets' consolation prize. The Jackets are in shambles, with a potential trade of their franchise player on the horizon and years of epic failure.

Now, Richards can focus on preparing for next season. The first step in that process will be to help the scouting staff finalize a decision on who the Blue Jackets will draft with the second overall pick in the June 22 NHL Entry Draft first round. With six weekly columns between now and draft day, I will preview one draft pick for each of the next five weeks, along with my playoff update and any other Jackets news that comes along. In the week before the draft, I'll look closely at the rumors circulating about and preview the first round in its entirety. For now, here's a look at defenseman Ryan Murray.

Name: Ryan Murray

Position: Defenseman

NHL Central Scouting Bureau Rank: #2 overall, #1 defenseman

Birthdate & place: September 27, 1993; Regina, Saskatchewan

Height, weight: 6', 201 lbs

Shoots: Left

Ryan Murray bumped up one spot from his #3 mid-term ranking in the NHL Central Scouting Bureau end-of-season final rankings. Murray is viewed as one of the most NHL-ready prospects in the 2012 NHL Entry Draft and many scouts consider him a leader and future NHL captain.

Murray is probably the “safest” pick in the top five. He’s the most polished defenseman and one of the steadiest players in the draft class. In 168 games with the Everett Silvertips of the Western Hockey League, Murray racked up 20 goals and 84 assists. He missed the first part of the 2011-2012 season with an ankle injury, but returned in time to play in the Canadian Hockey League “Top Prospects” Game, where he finished second in the hardest shot competition at the accompanying skills competition with a shot of 94.3 mph.

Murray was the captain of the 2011 Canadian Under-18 team and was one of two draft-eligible players to make the 2012 Canadian Under-20 World Junior Hockey Championships team.

Murray has been compared to Scott Niedermayer, who was an extremely solid defenseman for nearly 20 years, a long-time captain, and four-time Stanley Cup winner.

Analysis: If the Blue Jackets go defenseman, this is probably the player that they will look at. He doesn’t have the upside that some of the other players have, but he is an extremely solid player who will continue to get better and has the skating ability and strength to play in the NHL from Day One. He won’t put up gaudy stat totals, but he has a hard, accurate shot that can play on the powerplay and would be the best defensive defenseman the Blue Jackets have seen in quite some time.

As for an update on the Stanley Cup Playoffs, the Rangers got past the Washington Capitals and then won Game One of their series against the New Jersey Devils after a very quick turnaround where they only had one full day of rest. Henrik Lundqvist posted a shutout and the Rangers were able to score twice on Martin Brodeur and then add an empty netter.

Out West, the Los Angeles Kings took Game One in their series with the Phoenix Coyotes in impressive fashion, firing 47 shots on Coyotes' goaltender Mike Smith. The Kings also jumped on Phoenix early in Game Two, opening up a 3-0 lead after two periods and rolling to a 2-0 series lead.

It has really been an incredible run for the LA Kings. With a 2-0 series lead, they're poised to knock off each of the top three seeds in the Western Conference en route to the Stanley Cup finals as a #8 seed. They're making it look easy as they took well over 40 shots on goal in Game Two and dominated a solid defensive team in the Phoenix Coyotes. If they can finish off the 'Yotes and hoist the Stanley Cup, it will easily be one of the most impressive runs in Stanley Cup Playoff history.