

Roos investigates the fantasy impact of teams changing philosophy down the stretch...

As if fantasy hockey isn't challenging enough, we've now entered the final stretch of the regular season. This means that NHL teams have changed their focus and approach, depending on where they are in the playoff hunt. Of course this will impact players on those teams, and fantasy owners who are in tight races will need to factor in even more variables than usual in setting their lineups. So this week, let's discuss the ways that three types of teams will alter their game plans, and how that in turn will affect the fantasy value of their players:

- 1. locks for a playoff spot
- 2. actively fighting for a playoff spot
- 3. out of the playoff hunt.

Teams who are a lock for the playoffs (Chicago, Anaheim, Pittsburgh, Vancouver, Montreal, Boston, Los Angeles)

The remainder of the regular season is first and foremost about getting healthy and rested, even if that comes at the expense of winning each and every game or generating the kinds of stats that fantasy hockey GMs care about. And although these teams might try to experiment with different lines or power play combinations, they probably won't "rock the boat" too much, since whatever they were doing as a team up to this point has clearly worked well enough to get them locked into the playoff picture already. That means you're pretty safe if you have stars like Patrick Kane

P.K. Subban

or

Ryan Getzlaf

on your roster, but you might not want to bet on banged up guys like Brad Marchand

or

James Neal

being rushed back, even if they'd otherwise be considered healthy enough to suit up if these were do or die playoff games.

In terms of specific things to watch for, these kinds of teams will want to try to ignite important players who have underperformed (<u>Milan Lucic</u> , <u>Drew Doughty</u> , Brendan Morrow) or who are just returning from injury (<u>Ryantarana Markana Mar</u>

n Kesler

Kris Letang

), perhaps at the cost of playing time for some of their other, less proven players (Jake Muzzin

Beau Bennett

). And to get healthy, not only will they err on the side of caution and rest players who might

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have otherwise played through injuries, but they could go so far as to keep healthy players out of the line-up, especially if they're very young (

Dougie Hamilton

) or old (

Teemu Selanne

) or were among those who suited up for a lot of games during the lockout. But they also won't hesitate to rely heavily on veterans (

Saku Koivu

Brian Gionta

Justin Williams

), especially those with past experience hoisting the Stanley Cup.

For goalies, teams who have a 1A/1B situation (like Chicago and Anaheim) could be more likely to divide time between both guys, hoping one of them heats up and emerges at the go to guy. Look for unquestioned #1 guys (<u>Carey Price</u>, <u>Tuukka Rask</u>, <u>Marc-Andre Fleury</u>) to rest for at least a couple of their team's final stretch of games, as no one wants their stud goalie to suffer a fate like Fleury did last season, when he entered the playoffs tired and overworked and proceeded to implode with a 4.63 GAA and 83.4% save percentage.

Teams who are fighting for a playoff spot (NY Rangers, NY Islanders, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Detroit, Dallas, Columbus, Phoenix, Minnesota, plus others)

For these teams, it's all about doing whatever they can to get into the playoffs. Undisputed #1 goalies (<u>Jimmy Howard</u>, <u>Henrik Lundqvist</u>, <u>Evgeni Nabokov</u>, Sergei Bobrovky) could end up playing each and every game until their team's playoff fate is determined, and guys with minor injuries will play through them if at all possible. These teams also will give "hot" players (<u>Josh Bailey</u>

Rick Nash

Mika Zibanejad

Andrew Ladd

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, Alex Chiasson) every chance to continue to succeed, without considering whether those players are young or old or what their offseason contract status might be. But there is a risk with younger players on these teams, since just a single mistake that causes a costly loss could lead to a rookie – even one who's been doing well – losing ice time or being a healthy scratch. Look for these teams also to turn to veteran players with valuable stretch run experience (Eric Cole, Lubimor Visnovsky,

Daniel Alfredsson

, Vinny Prospal), even if those players have been underperforming and despite the fact that leaning on them might take away playing time from younger players who had been occupying significant roles (

Cody Eakin

Damien Brunner

).

It's also possible that some of these teams with better goaltending than scoring (Ottawa, Columbus, Rangers) will now shift even more toward a "defense-first" mentality, figuring that's their best path to getting points in the standings. And of course that would lead to a risk of decreased offensive output for players on those teams. But for teams with #1 goaltenders who might have been injured, struggling, or playing inconsistent in net (Winnipeg, Phoenix, Dallas), the opposite might be true in that they could try to ramp up their offense since they know they could end up needing four or more goals every game to give themselves a chance to win.

Teams who are out of the playoff mix (Florida, Carolina, Calgary, Colorado, Philadelphia, Nashville, Edmonton, Tampa Bay)

In some ways these teams already started to take actions with fantasy impact, with some having been active sellers at the trade deadline. These squads won't hesitate to give meaningful minutes to younger or less proven players (Tyson Barrie, Drew Shore, Aaron Palushaj

Filip Forsberg,

Taylor Beck

), since there is nothing to play for except improving the team for next season and beyond. Players who will be UFAs or RFAs (

Shawn Matthias

,

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Roman Cervenka

Mikael Backlund

Simon Gagne

Joe Corvo

Benoit Pouliot

Ben Bishop

Sam Gagner

Magnus Paajarvi

Roman Josi

Patric Hornqvist

, to name just some) are good candidates to improve their play, as this is their last chance to help boost their offseason value.

With nothing actually at stake, these teams will also err on the side of caution when it comes to injured players. This means that some "day-to-day" guys or players with legitimate but less serious injuries who might have been considered well enough to play at other points during the year could instead be held out of games, perhaps for the rest of the season. And since there's also little value in these teams trotting out their #1 goalie each and every game, look for a few back-ups to get some starts.

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