

Early Season Goaltending Controversies

Written by Jeff Angus

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It seems now more than ever there are multiple goaltending controversies around the league. With more teams carrying two capable (and often equally skilled) netminders instead of the more typical starter and backup, unwanted frustration has been placed upon us poolies. With goalies at such a premium in basically every fantasy hockey format, it is essential to have at least two capable starters. Chances are you were rewarded if you took a late round flier on Pekka Rinne or Jonas Hiller last year. How will the goalie controversies facing several NHL clubs play out in 2009-10? Who will win out?

Anaheim

Jonas Hiller started in Anaheim's first game (a loss to the Sharks), and unless he really falters expect him to see 50-60 starts this year. Giguere is in the last year of his current contract (one

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that pays him \$6 million per season), and he probably won't be brought back unless he takes a gigantic pay cut. Expect Hiller to be given a long leash as the starter.

Atlanta

This is a battle essentially between Kari Lehtonen and his body. If he is healthy, he will play. He is slated to return later in the month, and Ondrej Pavelec is starting in the meantime. Pavelec complained about a demotion last season believing he wasn't getting a fair shot – well kid, here it is! Look for Lehtonen to play 40-50 games, and Pavelec to see 20-25. Johan Hedberg will see spot duty but he should not be on anyone's fantasy radar.

Chicago

Cristobal Huet has been a massive disappointment thus far in Chicago. He quickly lost his starting job to the now-departed Nikolai Khabibulin last season, and he has young Finnish goalie Antti Niemi breathing down his neck already in 2009-10. Huet is a capable goalie, as he has proven in both Montreal and Washington. Because of his experience and salary, he will be given the benefit of the doubt. Unless Niemi pulls a Hiller/Rinne/Steve Mason (or conversely Huet decides to slip below mediocrity), expect Huet to see close to 60 starts.

Nashville

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Dan Ellis got the start in the season opener against Dallas, after vastly out-performing Rinne during the preseason. Ellis is a capable goalie, but Rinne is better. Rinne was fantastic for the Predators last season, and will get an opportunity to firmly entrench his position as the starting goalie early on this season. Everyone is well aware of the quirky "backup taking over for starter" thing that the Preds have going on, but it will end with Rinne. Ellis is a solid depth goalie option, as he should still see 30 or 35 starts.

Long Island

There are some rumblings coming out of New York that Rick DiPietro's recovery is ahead of schedule. There are even some speculating for a late November/early December return for the franchise goaltender. This news really confuses things for poolies that own Dwayne Roloson and/or Martin Biron. Roloson and Biron were slated to split the games (perhaps with a slight edge to Roloson), but if DiPietro returns one would assume he would get at least half the games, even while being eased back into the lineup. My advice? Avoid the three-headed monster here, and head for a more stable situation. Further advice: grab DiPietro if you can stash him on your bench.

Toronto

The way Vesa Toskala has looked (yes, it has been only two games), the Monster's reign should begin shortly in Toronto. Toskala surprises me - he was a great goalie in San Jose, and played well last season for the Leafs before battling injuries down the stretch. He and Evgeni Nabokov pushed each other really well, and I think the Leafs were hoping Gustavsson's presence would have that same impact - so far, not so good. The Leafs defense has been abysmal so far, but Toskala hasn't helped his cause at all. Give each goalie 40 games this year. Gustavsson should be the full-time starter by October 2010.

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Washington

Washington is a really interesting situation. On one hand, you have Jose Theodore, who has proven he can get motivated by a contract. He had a fantastic year for the Avalanche in 2007-08, essentially playing for his future in the NHL. It is unlikely that Theodore will get picked up this coming off-season unless he rebounds in Washington. On the other hand, you have Semyon Varlamov (hope I got that one right). Varlamov is calm, cool, and collected between the pipes, and he has immense upside. I personally think Michael Neuvirth is the real gem in Washington to watch. He impressed the hell out of me during Hershey's 2009 Calder Cup win, but he won't see many games in the NHL this season. Like Toronto, I see both goalies splitting the games. Washington will probably ride the hot hand down the stretch, and Theo's chase of the coin could vault him past Varlamov.