

## Philadelphia - The Quest for a Keeper Continues

Written by Jeff Angus

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Another season of instability between the pipes has once again come and gone for the Philadelphia Flyers. After trading for Chris Pronger last summer, the Flyers were forced to go digging in the bargain bin for a starting goaltender, as Pronger's salary pushed them very close to the cap. They signed Ray Emery, hoping that a year in exile playing in the KHL would make him a better goalie on the ice and a more stable person off of it. Emery started the 2009-10 season very well, winning 10 of his first 14 starts. However, his level of play dipped in December and January, and his season (and potentially career) was abruptly ended early in February when he suffered a severe hip injury.

After Emery sustained his injury, the Flyers turned their hopes to Michael Leighton, a goalie who they had recently plucked off of the waiver wire from Carolina. To his credit, Leighton played very well for Philadelphia in February and March, and probably stole a few points for them that they didn't deserve. He was playing so well that GM Paul Holmgren decided against making a move at the deadline to bring in a proven veteran like Tomas Vokoun, Tim Thomas, or Marty Turco. However, Leighton suffered a high ankle sprain shortly after the deadline, and is expected to miss the rest of the season and the playoffs (provided the Flyers qualify for them).

Enter Brian Boucher, the man famous for posting five consecutive shutouts with the Phoenix

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Coyotes back in 2003-04. Boucher has been able to elevate his game for brief stretches over his NHL career, but has shown no ability to play consistently enough to warrant a starting position in the league. However, with both Emery and Leighton out, the Flyers have no choice but to believe in Boucher. Since taking over the starting job a few weeks ago, he has won only two of eight starts, giving up 20 goals in the process. Even if the Flyers, who have been extremely inconsistent all season, figure out how to get things going in time for the playoffs, don't expect them to make much of a run with Boucher starting in net.

Paul Holmgren has vowed to make the acquisition of a legitimate starting goalie his priority this summer. The Flyers have a team structure similar to years' past – fantastic depth and skill at both forward and defense, but no stability between the pipes. From Jeff Hackett to Roman Cechmanek to Robert Esche to Sean Burke to Martin Biron, there hasn't been a guy to take ownership of the starting gig in Philadelphia since Ron Hextall. In their entire history in the league, Philadelphia has had 44 goaltenders start at least one game. Only three of those 44 have started more than 200 games for the team (Doug Favell, Hextall, and Bernie Parent). Philadelphia will have to move out salary if they want to add a legitimate goaltender, so expect one of Brayden Coburn, Simon Gagne, or Scott Hartnell to be on the way out. Who will be starting for the Flyers in 2010-11? There are quite a few options that will be available for Holmgren and Flyers management to pursue this off-season.

### *In The System*

### **Johan Backlund**

The Flyers signed Backlund out of the Swedish Elite League last summer. He was brought over to provide some competition in between the pipes for the Adirondack Phantoms, but was recently called into action for the Flyers after Boucher had a string of poor starts. However, Backlund injured himself in his first NHL game, after allowing two goals. He sustained the injury very early in the game, but decided to try and play through it. The Flyers may be forced to start him a few more times this season if Boucher's struggles continue. He has been solid for the Phantoms this season, but doesn't have much a future in the City of Brotherly Love.

### **Joacim Eriksson**

The Flyers used their final pick in the 2008 draft on Eriksson, and he is at least another year away from even crossing the pond over to North America. He has some upside, but won't be NHL ready for a while.

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### **Nicola Riopel**

Riopel, a Flyers draft pick, was signed last summer and played 10 games for the Phantoms this season before being send back to Moncton of the QMJHL. He has had a stellar junior career, but is far from a sure thing at the professional level. Expect him to rejoin the Phantoms next year and battle for the starting position there.

### **Adam Morrison**

Philadelphia selected Morrison in the 3<sup>rd</sup> round this past summer. He appeared in 36 games for the Saskatoon Blades this season, but is a long-term project, much like Eriksson and Riopel. The Flyers have no choice but to be very patient with the three prospects. There isn't anything in terms of immediate help within the system.

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### *Free Agency*

### **Marty Turco**

Turco won't be back in Dallas, as the Stars appear to be ready to go a different direction with Kari Lehtonen as their starter for 2010-11. However, the knock on Turco (fairly or unfairly) has been his inability to win the big game in the post-season. He carried Dallas very deep in 2007-08, but since then he has struggled to regain his status as one of the league's best netminders. Philadelphia has been burned time and time (and time) again by pursuing aging, big ticket free agent goaltenders, and I would be very surprised if they dipped into the free agent market once again.

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### Robert Esche

A Flyer source confirmed last week that the team was considering bringing Robert Esche back for the 2010-11 season. Esche has starred for SKA Saint Petersburg of the KHL this season, posting a stellar 29-7-5 record, with a 2.07 goals-against average and a .917 save percentage. I can't see an Esche return going over very well in Philadelphia, though...

### Evgeni Nabokov

Nabokov has been one of the most consistent goaltenders in the NHL for the past decade. However, if the Sharks have another quick playoff exit, he may not be brought back. Philadelphia would have to clear a lot of cap space to sign Nabokov, but it is an option. He has

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never been the main problem in San Jose during their repeated playoff failures, but he hasn't been completely free of blame or criticism, either.

### Chris Mason

Mason wouldn't represent much of an upgrade over Emery or Leighton – essentially another band-aid signing.

### *Trade targets*

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### Tim Thomas

Can the Flyers take on \$5 million per season for three more years? Even with a Vezina Trophy in his back pocket, don't expect the demand for Thomas to be all that high, as he has struggled with consistency all season. Boston will be desperate to get rid of his salary so they can use it to sign some players to help out with their anaemic offensive attack, and Tuukka Rask's stellar play has made Thomas expendable.

### Carey Price and Jaroslav Halak

If Philadelphia is serious about fixing their goalie problems for good, they will make a serious pitch for one of the two young stars in Montreal. There is still some divide in Montreal over who to keep – Halak has been the superior goaltender this season, but there are a vast number of

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people who believe Price will ultimately develop into the better goalie. Philadelphia would probably have to part with a high end young player like James van Riemsdyk to get either Price or Halak.

### **Jonathan Bernier**

The Kings won't be looking to move Bernier this summer, so the Flyers will have to put together quite an enticing package to even get Kings GM Dean Lombardi to listen. Jon Quick has been splendid all season, but his late season struggles have probably raised a microscopic bit of doubt in Lombardi's mind, and Bernier is the ultimate insurance policy. Expect him to back Quick up next year and to see 20-30 starts.

### **Cory Schneider**

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Schneider would be a cheaper acquisition than Price or Halak, as he has yet to prove himself at the NHL level. He is one of the best goaltender prospects in the world, and has the pedigree and upside to be a star goaltender at the NHL level. Canucks GM Mike Gillis has gone on record saying that he hopes to see Schneider back Luongo up next season, but I think that is just him doing some positioning to boost his Schneider's trade value. I'd be surprised if he lasts through the summer as a member of the Canucks organization.

### Tomas Vokoun

Florida was rumoured to be shopping Vokoun at the deadline, and they may do the same in the summer, as all-world prospect Jacob Markstrom is very close to making his NHL debut. Vokoun carries a cap hit in excess of \$5 million per season, so salary would have to be moved the other way. He is the best of the available veteran goaltenders, either on the free agent market or trade block.

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### Josh Harding

Harding has battled courageously through a hip injury all season, but recently has been shut down for the season by the Wild. He is a bit more proven than most young goalies, but hasn't really taken many steps forward over the past few years for Minnesota. To be fair though, he hasn't really been given a shot to start with Nik Backstrom playing almost every game.

### *Paul Holmgren's Plan of Action:*

Aggressively pursue Carey Price or Jaroslav Halak. Aside from Claude Giroux, Jeff Carter, and Mike Richards, everyone in the organization should be available. Perhaps a package including Gagne or Hartnell and a prospect would work. The Flyers may have to take some salary back from Montreal.

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If the Habs aren't receptive to a trade (Philadelphia will have some difficulty pursuing the offer sheet route, as they lack their own 2011 2nd round pick from the Upshall-for-Carcillo trade, and maybe their 2011 3rd rounder as well, as it was conditional in the Pronger deal), make a pitch for Cory Schneider. Something involving Brayden Coburn or prospect Patrick Maroon could get a deal with Vancouver done.

See what Minnesota wants for Josh Harding, and bring back Michael Leighton. Let the two goalies battle it out for the starting position. Another band-aid solution, but at least it will be cheap and have no negative long-term ramifications.

The fantasy ramifications for Price owners are huge if he is traded to Philadelphia. He immediately becomes a top ten fantasy starter with the upside to creep into the top five one day. I have a hunch Montreal will end up sticking with Price though, even with Halak's sublime play all season long. Montreal has invested a lot in Price. It obviously isn't a direct parallel to the situation Chicago faced in the early 1990's with Ed Belfour (who was way more proven at the time than Price is now) and a young Slovakian backup named Dominik Hasek, but there are some similarities.

The goaltending situation in Montreal will be the most interesting story to follow this off-season, and you can bet the Flyers will be heavily involved in whatever happens.

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