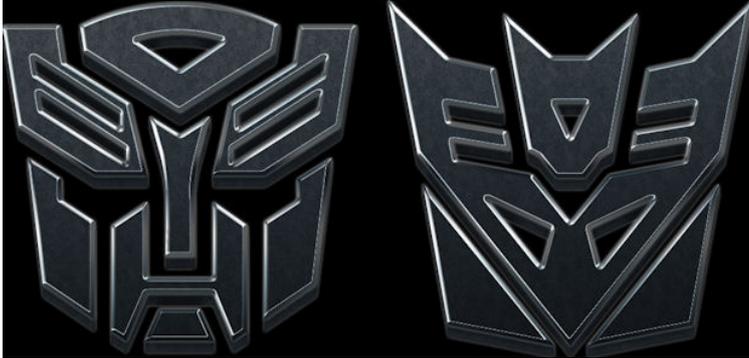


## Autobot or Decepticon?

Written by Steve "Metaldude" Laidlaw

Wednesday, 30 March 2011 15:46 - Last Updated Wednesday, 13 April 2011 00:18

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I normally don't talk goaltenders. Justin Goldman does such a good job that it seems fairly redundant to do so. I do however have this theory on goaltenders in the current NHL, the gist of it being that goalies are the most replaceable players in the NHL. I believe there are probably a hundred goalies currently playing around the globe that could step into an NHL lineup and win games right now. All they need is an opportunity and a little bit of luck. That is why every year we see the same story; rookie goalie comes out of nowhere to put together an amazing run helping to push his team to new heights. It never fails. Every season there is at least one *rags to riches*

or

*before his time story*

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What we have trouble with is determining if they are for real. Every rookie sensation comes in with self-confidence and conveys to us a certain sense of infallibility to the point that we have a tough time believing the good times will end. But remember, there are plenty of goalies who can do it for brief periods. The trick is in maintaining that for long stretches. So what we must do is look for signs, hints, the proverbial writing on the wall that we so often ignore. Some goalies are built to succeed for the long haul, others will fade away.

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This year's goalie crop is no different. It just so happens that the inspiration for this whole piece, the brilliantly nicknamed James Reimer (Optimus Reim), gives us a whole new way to look at these rookie sensations. Are they truly the guardians of truth and justice or are they more sinister beings, simply baiting us with unsuspected gifts. In other words are they **Autobot or Decepticon?**

### **Sergei Bobrovsky – 27-11-6 – 2.53 GAA - .917 SV% 0 SO**

Two things stand out right away when looking at Bobrovsky's numbers. The first is his lack of shutouts. That tells me he struggles to maintain his focus for entire games, which is entirely understandable for a goalie playing not only his first NHL season but also his first North American season. The second thing I see is that his numbers are nearly identical to those of his teammate Brian Boucher. Boucher is your classic Decepticon. When he broke into the league over ten years ago with the Flyers he set the league on fire. He impressed not only with his regular season play but also helping the Flyers to a long playoff run.

Boucher never did rediscover that form and it makes perfect sense. That was a career year for Boucher, at any level. He set the bar far too high for himself and stumbled from there. He has managed to carve out a reasonable career for himself but many thought he was a star, the future franchise goaltender for a goalie starved franchise. The writing was on the wall but we just missed it.

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What sets Bobrovsky apart is that he has played this well before. He posted very similar numbers in his two previous seasons in the KHL. He does not have a load of pro experience, nor has he the endurance to be a workhorse goalie yet (his 48 games this season are the most in his career by far) but he does have a proven track record. We also know that he has performed from start to finish. His February and March numbers are well down but for over half the season Bobrovsky was outstanding. It was not until he surpassed his previous high for games played that things started to go South for him. Clearly fatigue is the issue but that will improve.

What I love about Bobrovsky is that while he is no doubt a tandem goaltender, he plays for a very strong franchise in the Flyers, which will guarantee him wins. He is also guaranteed of getting starts because of his cheap contract. There is no reason to believe he cannot continue to produce these numbers so long as he remains a tandem goalie. He reminds me of fellow Russian goaltender, Semyon Varlamov, who absolutely lit it up for Washington two years ago and has been able to maintain good numbers despite splitting time. Like Varlamov, Bobrovsky came in with limited KHL experience and a little international experience but has succeeded because he is a solid goaltender on an excellent team. Bobrovsky will maintain his numbers just as Varlamov did and that makes him an **Autobot**.

**AI Montoya – 8-4-4 – 2.35 GAA - .920 SV% - 1 SO**

Montoya is the most ruthless form of Decepticon. With his age and experience you cannot help but assume he is an Autobot but with a careful look at his numbers will tell you that Montoya has been anything but consistent throughout his career. In fact he has been consistently inconsistent. Montoya has thrown together great seasons at every level but he has also had bad ones as well. In fact, his season was going abysmally in the AHL before he got shipped to the

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Islanders and given an NHL shot.

Montoya is pulling out all the stops to deceive you. He has pedigree as the sixth overall selection in the 2004 draft. He has also posted some fantastic win/loss totals, particularly in college where he played for a powerhouse Wisconsin team. He reminds me of another Decepticon, Dan Ellis who bounced around quite a bit posting mediocre numbers as a pro before hitting the big time with the Nashville Predators. The Predators cannot help but make goalies look good and Ellis looked really good. Look at him now though and you realize it was all just smoke and mirrors.

Montoya has landed a prime gig on a crappy team playing inspired hockey. He is definitely among the group of goalies who can win games at this level but his inability to maintain consistency will keep him from putting up numbers like this again next season. Keep in mind he will be facing stiff competition from many competitors if he remains on Long Island. The situation manifested itself into a great short term gig but long term he is not to be relied upon because he is a **Decepticon**.

**Corey Crawford – 29-15-5 – 2.27 GAA - .920 SV% - 4 SO**

Unlike many Transformers there's not more to Crawford than meets the eye. He is a classic Autobot. He has plenty of pro experience and has not only posted good numbers at every level but has shown improvement at every level as well. This shows a tremendous ability to learn and

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adapt as he progresses. That just screams long term success and because of the team he plays for we have known for quite some time that Crawford would be successful. It was simply a matter of when, not if. The 27-year-old has finally caught his break and is not letting go. There are reasons to be concerned about his contract status with the Blackhawks as he is an RFA but much like fellow Autobot Antti Niemi he has all the talent and experience to succeed wherever he winds up.

Crawford is the truest **Autobot** in this year's class so do not sleep on him.

**James Reimer – 17-8-4 - 2.53 GAA - .920 SV% - 3 SO**

Optimus Reim has taken Leaf Nation by storm. He has done so well, in fact that I believe the Leafs have an agreement with Hasbro to produce a new line of action figure. Under any other circumstances I would assume an action figure that transforms into a brick wall wouldn't sell, but the Optimus Reim figure has a chance to be the next Tickle Me Elmo, at least in the GTA.

The problem with all this is that there are clear chinks in Reimer's armour. He reminds me a great deal of Blue Jackets goaltender Steve Mason. He is a big athletic goaltender who excels at taking away the bottom half of the net. The problem is that Reimer struggles with rebounds and is absolutely clueless with shots up high. I am sure you have all seen the classic Reimer flinch where the shot is up high and he has no idea where it is. This is a major flaw that needs to be worked out.

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The good news for him is he has a solid mentor in JS Giguere. The bad news is he seems too young and inexperienced to maintain this torrid pace he is on. If he had come in sooner in the season as Mason did in his rookie year I believe teams would have been able to take the time to reflect and figure him out and we would have started to see the signs of weakness.

Reimer is in just his third year of pro hockey and has not started more than 32 games in any season since 2006/07 with Red Deer of the WHL. Your typical Autobot has years of pro experience before making his fulltime NHL debut. While Reimer is more experienced than Mason was in his rookie year, he still has not had the years of experience necessary to know how to adapt and re-adapt at the NHL level. He is also not experienced a full season of NHL hockey. It is one thing to come in half-way through the season as an unknown but it is quite another to come into a season from the start with teams prepared and gunning for you, all while you have the pressure coming from your home team to produce.

Autobots often have a tremendous support structure. What I mean by that is, they generally play for very excellent teams. Look at the examples of Antti Niemi and Nicklas Backstrom. They came in with a world of pro experience to play for teams built to win and protect their goaltenders. Toronto is not such an environment. Toronto is more like the Ottawa Senators of the past couple seasons, reasonably competitive but ultimately not a great team, which brings me to my final example, Brian Elliott, a Decepticon through and through. Elliott like many goaltenders is capable of standing on his head for stretches but ultimately holes in his game and holes in the team derailed his deceptively bright start to his career. I believe Reimer is no different. Optimus Reimer is a **Decepticon**.

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So now you know what they are. Hold onto your Autobots tight because they should continue to produce at their current level. Look to shop your Decepticons around because it would be a miracle for them to repeat this season's performance.

**Do you think Bob will ever be able to handle the full load of a 60 game starter or will he always need a Leighton or Boucher to be a 1B goalie?**

I think Bob will eventually get there. Right now it's about honing his craft and figuring out how to be a true professional that brings it each and every night and also about getting his endurance up.

Goalies are a lot like pitchers. When they are young and inexperienced like this, you need to set limits on how much they play or you will wear them out. Even the workhorse goalies benefit from taking time off these days. When I say that goalies are the most replaceable it's not to say that goaltending has become easier over the years. I actually think it has become harder considering all the talent in the league today. The difficulty is in bringing it every single night for as many nights as possible in a year. No goalie can do that for 82 games and with the amount of quality goalies popping up it is becoming much easier to replace a goalie that falters for a couple of games.

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What I love about Bob is that despite the fact he lets in some softies and has some lapses in focus he seems to always bounce back the next game. He was always going to be a product of his environment. That's just the way goalies are. Even when Luongo was amazing us with his talent in Florida, his numbers were crap because the team sucked. Bob plays for an excellent team so as long as he just keeps doing what he has been doing there's no reason for the numbers to slip. He will probably have played in over 50 games when the season ends. In my opinion that was too many for him. Boucher has played a lot more down the stretch and that will have Bob rested for playoffs but 50 is still well over the 37 games he played last season in the KHL. If you think about it that is greater than a 33% increase in usage. I would prefer to see increases of 25% or less.

No league plays more games than the NHL so increase in goalie usage is often inevitable so that is why I prefer to see goalies get a few AHL seasons before making the jump. That way they get their reps and up their endurance all the while not having the sort of pressure faced by NHL goaltenders. Because the microscope is always on them a goalie has to play well every night and if he does then there is a great deal of pressure on the coach to continue tossing him out there every night. When that happens, you burn out your goalie. I feel like NHL teams can mandate to their AHL coaches not to burn out their goalies so those coaches can gain job security simply by following those mandates. Wins and losses are still important at that level but I think teams value the actual player development that goes on there more than simply experiencing wins.

So after that long rant let me really answer your question. Bob can get to be a workhorse goalie eventually, in that I think he will eventually build up the strength and endurance (both mentally and physically) to play 60+ games in a season BUT I also believe that the way the NHL is trending that 60+ games may be too many for any goalie. Teams will play studs that much when they are desperate for wins. In Bob's case the Flyers shouldn't be desperate for wins any time soon so there's no reason to push him beyond his own limitations.

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I also feel that this is going to be a general question everyone has with regards to these goaltenders so perhaps a clarification is necessary. Labelling a goaltender an **Autobot or Decepticon** is not about determining their long term value. It is about deciding whether they can repeat this season's performance the following year. Carey Price is a perfect example of a Decepticon who eventually panned out. He was simply brought along too early and had too much competition for the starting job. Look at him now. He is an All-star. He is fantastic but there was enough evidence that one could have deduced he was due for a slip in his sophomore season. So with regards to the other three goaltenders discussed in this article, I believe that Crawford definitely has a future in this league as a workhorse goalie. He is basically at that level already. That is what you get from a 27-year-old rookie. Reimer reminds me a great deal of Cam Ward and Steve Mason. So he will get to be a workhorse eventually. The talent is there. Right now he is not playing on a strong enough team to carry him through the inevitable stumble that is coming. Finally, I do not believe Montoya has what it takes to become a fulltime starter. In fact, I suspect he will be in and out of the league as soon as next season. He has backup/journeyman written all over him.

The problem however with looking too far down the road gets back to my original thesis: goalies are the most replaceable players in the NHL. So if either of these Decepticons slips next season there could be another rookie wonder ready to step in and steal the job away and that goalie might just be an Autobot who never slips and opens the door for someone else so personally, I would not put any trust into a Decepticon.