

Marc-Andre Fleury vs. Jimmy Howard

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 29 August 2012 08:16 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 August 2012 16:17



Marc-Andre Fleury vs. Jimmy Howard - The [Yahoo! pre-season rankings are in](#) and I am both mortified and elated. I hate to pick apart a list because it is generally rude but there is something really off about those rankings. Specifically I am looking at the pre-season goalie rankings. According to the Yahoo! staff the goaltenders should be selected as follows with overall rankings in parentheses:

[Henrik Lundqvist](#) (6)

[Jonathan Quick](#) (10)

[Pekka Rinne](#) (11)

Marc-Andre Fleury vs. Jimmy Howard

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 29 August 2012 08:16 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 August 2012 16:17

Marc-Andre Fleury (18)

Tuukka Rask (21)

Cory Schneider (28)

Ilya Bryzgalov (33)

Jaroslav Halak (34)

Mike Smith (40)

Cam Ward (42)

Carey Price (43)

Kari Lehtonen (49)

Brayden Holtby (55)

Ryan Miller (56)

Jimmy Howard (57)

Marc-Andre Fleury vs. Jimmy Howard

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 29 August 2012 08:16 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 August 2012 16:17

[Roberto Luongo](#) (66)

[Craig Anderson](#) (71)

[Martin Brodeur](#) (74)

[Devan Dubnyk](#) (91)

Where do I begin? I suppose I should start with what they got right. The Yahoo! staff have their top three goaltenders ranked in just about the perfect order. You can quibble about the specific order of these three until you are blue but no one wants to be here all day.

Things start to unravel after the top three and this is a reflection of how uncertain the goaltending landscape is. Between injuries, inconsistencies, retirements, [sabbaticals](#) and timeshares there just are no other sure things to be had. How else could you explain last season's

[Goals Against Average and Save Percentage leader](#)

not even being ranked? This isn't even about

[Brian Elliott](#)

though. This is about

[Jimmy Howard](#)

and

[Marc-Andre Fleury](#)

because I am quite certain they don't deserve their respective positions on that list.

In the list above (you may have noticed this) I actually flipped Fleury and Howard from Yahoo!'s true rankings. Yes that means Howard is their fourth ranked goaltender and Fleury is their 15th? Did you even bat an eye when reading that list, even with both names highlighted? Is that because they really should be flipped in ranking? Or maybe it simply shows how blurred the lines are when it comes to goaltending. Outside of top three but within the top 15 you could sell me on practically any order, just not this one. Howard is not the fourth best goalie in fantasy hockey and I will never treat him as such. Likewise Fleury is not the fifteenth best goalie in

Marc-Andre Fleury vs. Jimmy Howard

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 29 August 2012 08:16 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 August 2012 16:17

fantasy hockey and I defy you to tell me otherwise.

Just look at a couple of the names ranked ahead of Fleury:

[Ilya Bryzgalov](#) and Brayden Holtby. Are you serious? Let's start with Holtby. This guy has 18 career NHL starts and one nice playoff run. You know who else looked good after just a few NHL starts? [Steve Mason](#), [James Reimer](#) and [Andrew Raycroft](#). And you know who else looked good after just a few starts, the guy Holtby is supposedly replacing in Washington, [Michal Neuvirth](#), who is still there and [wants his job back](#)

. I am not saying that Holtby cannot be a better goalie than Fleury, I am simply saying he has done nothing to prove he will even be the best goalie on his own team, let alone the rest of the league. I need to see a long track record from my goalie to make a big investment on draft day and Holtby doesn't come close.

Bryzgalov's placement ahead of Fleury is even worse though. Are they seriously telling me that since Fleury had a meltdown in one of the [most absurd playoff series' ever played](#) that he gets bumped way down in the fantasy rankings which are based only on regular season play an area where Fleury has excelled the last two seasons. Meanwhile, Bryzgalov continues to be a top 10 goalie despite playing just as poorly as Fleury did in that series but is also coming off a season which can only be described as [terrible](#)

and exposed him as a both a crazy person and an [overrated product of Dave Tippett's system](#)

. Oh and none of that includes the fact that the [Flyers' defense is absolutely crumbling](#)

so yeah, Bryzgalov makes a *great bet in the top ten*

. Oh wait, that was sarcasm.

Back to Fleury though. One thing we know with absolute certainty is that Fleury will get you plenty of wins. We know this because the Penguins are absolutely stacked. We know this because Fleury has finished in the top ten in wins in five of the past six seasons with the only exception being 2007-08 when he missed half the season due to injury. Fleury has averaged 37.5 wins over the past four seasons so even if he has some regression from last season's 42 wins, he still stands to win a lot of games. In each of the past two seasons Fleury has also

Marc-Andre Fleury vs. Jimmy Howard

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 29 August 2012 08:16 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 August 2012 16:17

ranked in the top 10 (among qualified starters) in GAA, which is further proof of Fleury's value.

There are however four strikes against Fleury outside of his playoff meltdown, which frankly should be considered an aberration until proven otherwise. So what if Fleury might be a shaky goalie under pressure? That shouldn't affect his fantasy value which is based on the significantly less pressurized NHL regular season. What we can count as strikes against Fleury are the following:

[Tomas Vokoun](#) – Really, we should be chalking up Vokoun's arrival in Pittsburgh as more of an indication to how little confidence the Penguins had in [Brent Johnson](#) than to any lack of confidence in Fleury. Remember Fleury is still the guy who backstopped them to the Cup. Vokoun is just an insurance policy and is an indication that the team plans on making the most of each season going forward. Maybe Vokoun's arrival means fewer starts for Fleury and thus fewer wins but Fleury will still get the bulk of the starts and maybe a bit more rest and some real competition will push Fleury's peripheral stats up further.

[Zbynek Michalek](#) – Michalek is a shot blocker extraordinaire who led the league in blocked shots in 2008-09 and has ranked in the blocks among defensemen each of the past four seasons. Michalek's arrival in Pittsburgh two seasons ago coincides with Fleury's improved GAA. With Michalek being sent back to Phoenix and no veteran replacement being brought in things could get more challenging for Fleury.

Shutouts – Fleury is one of the worst bets in the league for shutouts. He simply doesn't get many. He has a total of 22 in his career but most of those (13) came in a three year run from 2007 to 2009. In the past three seasons Fleury has recorded just seven shutouts. So while the league is trending towards less scoring and more frequent shutouts, Fleury has been going in the opposite direction.

Save Percentage – Fleury is surprisingly mediocre when it comes to Save%. While Fleury has certainly reached a point in his career where I am willing to accept him as good, I am not willing to consider him more than a placeholder for Save%. His career average (.909) is certainly brought down by his first couple of mediocre seasons but he also has only one year where he posted a Save% above .920.

Marc-Andre Fleury vs. Jimmy Howard

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 29 August 2012 08:16 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 August 2012 16:17

Given Fleury's obvious limitations he probably isn't someone you should be counting on as a top five goalie but then again with question marks surrounding so many other goalies he is definitely a top ten talent. I can almost guarantee you that Fleury will not finish the season as a top five goalie. The position is far too volatile and Fleury, while consistent, simply does not have elite upside. Still, it is likely that at least one of the top five guys is going to come out of nowhere so Fleury does deserve top marks for what it is he does do well, which is win games. If your league allows Fleury to slip to 15th (or hell even 10th) in the goalie rankings then you will have gotten yourself a steal because Fleury is guaranteed to get you wins and won't ruin you in any other category. Consistency counts.

Now what about Mr. Howard, is he really the fourth best fantasy goalie? Well as Frozenpool will show us, based on standard categories, last season he was in the top five:

But then again if you took that same print out from the year before Howard doesn't even appear in the top 30. Still, if you go back to the year prior to that Howard's name shows up in the top five once again. That is the extent of Howard's career as a starter though – short and remarkably inconsistent. So which Howard are we going to get this season?

Well like Fleury, Howard makes his money on wins. As the Red Wings starter Howard has averaged 36.3 wins per season. Howard has is the beneficiary of the most consistent and dominant franchise of the past two decades, a team you can (or at least could) always count on to put up big win totals.

This season, however, could very well be different. The pillar of consistency at the center of the Red Wings organization for the past two decades has been now-retired defenseman Nik Lidstrom. There is no telling exactly what effect that will have on Howard but know that it can't be good. What we know is that Lidstrom was a generational talent and quite possibly the smartest and best decision-maker in the league. Now someone else will be making those decisions.

What's more, the Red Wings have also lost [Brad Stuart](#) to the San Jose Sharks. While the Red Wings are kicking tires around the league to find replacements, the fact is they have lost well over 2000 man games of experience in Lidstrom and Stuart and are replacing them with

[Jakub Kindl](#)

's 106 and

[Brendan Smith](#)

Marc-Andre Fleury vs. Jimmy Howard

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 29 August 2012 08:16 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 August 2012 16:17

's 14. I don't care how NHL ready these two are, they are not replacing what Stuart and Lidstrom brought to the table.

If you also factor in that the Central Division continues to improve and may once again be the most challenging division in hockey then you have to figure the losses of Lidstrom and Stuart will mean more goals against and fewer wins. Of course, one cannot mention the Red Wings' hellacious division without saying the same for the Penguins' but unlike the Penguins can the Red Wings can't seriously be considered favourites to win their own division anymore.

On paper I think the Penguins and Rangers will be neck-and-neck in the tough Atlantic Division but I have Detroit fourth in the Central behind St. Louis, Chicago and Nashville, with Columbus being quietly competitive in last place even though everyone thinks they are a joke. And yes I know that Nashville lost Suter who is arguably as irreplaceable as Lidstrom at the respective points in each of their careers but remember Nashville was better than Detroit last season. So yes, the Red Wings are fourth and how about this for an unpopular opinion? Consider the possibility that Detroit might not even be a playoff team.

Of course, we need to get back to Howard. If he loses his bread and butter wins then he is still left with pretty solid career numbers for peripheral stats. Howard's career 2.41 GAA is pretty solid and compares well with what Fleury has done these past few seasons. Howard's career .917 save percentage is also very promising but I am still not overly confident. Howard's track record simply isn't long enough to indicate that there will be more good than bad going forward.

I also have serious questions about Howard's ability to secure shutouts. Sure he finished fifth in the league in total shutouts last season with six but that more than doubled his career total. Is Howard becoming more of a shutouts goalie? Who knows but Howard's shutout rate (5.8% of career starts) compares favourably to Fleury's (5.3%). Now I wouldn't feel comfortable labelling Howard not a "shutouts goalie" but you definitely can't say with certainty that he is any better at it than Fleury.

Howard will also have to contend with a legitimate backup goalie threatening for his starting job this season with Jonas "Monster" Gustavsson arriving as Detroit's big off-season acquisition. Gustavsson is every bit a threat to take starts away from Howard, if not more, than Vokoun is to Fleury and if you don't believe me then check out [this piece](#) from former DobberHockey goalie guru Justin Goldman. If Howard falters, even a little bit, then Gustavsson could be nipping at his heels.

Marc-Andre Fleury vs. Jimmy Howard

Written by Steve Laidlaw

Wednesday, 29 August 2012 08:16 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 August 2012 16:17

The bottom line is that there is almost no way that Howard reproduces last season's numbers. Since he was merely the fifth best goalie in the league with that production I think it is highly questionable to rank him higher than that. If Howard could produce numbers in line with his career averages (36 wins, 2.41 GAA, .917 Save%, 4 shutouts) then he is certainly a goalie you would consider in the top ten and at or around the same place you'd take Fleury but again, do we know if Howard is even capable of producing said numbers? So far in his career Howard has been very hit or miss and I suspect this year will be a miss. I question whether Howard will even secure 30 wins this season given the competition between the pipes and weaker players outside his crease. And if we take away Howard's bread and butter (wins) then can we seriously take him ahead of Fleury?

Like I said in the outright, it is rude to criticize someone else's rankings but considering this comes from the Yahoo! staff and will thus be the rankings many people go into their drafts looking at it bears criticizing if for no other reason than it will help you DobberHockey readers gain a leg up. Truth be told I wouldn't take either Fleury or Howard as the fourth goalie in any of my fantasy leagues but I will certainly be picking Fleury higher than 15th and more importantly - higher than Howard.