The development of Finland's native goaltenders and their great success at the professional and international scene has been covered extensively over the last few seasons by many scouts and pro writers. While some attribute this recent Finnish crease dominance to the great goalie coaching systems used for many years within their national programs, others are saying that, more importantly, goalies from Finland are getting bigger and faster and adjusting their style to better suit play in North America. But the more I continue to analyze the Finnish goalies in the NHL and AHL, the more I realize there's still something that hasn't been uncovered about their development.

For example, NHL.com's Bill Meltzer does a great job documenting the growth of the technically-sound positional systems taught by a select few goalie coaches in the country. During the early 1990's, Finnish goalies were always considered under-sized at an average of 5-foot-8, yet very agile and acrobatic players. Less than two decades later and now they're taller (averaging around 6-foot-1), stronger and playing a more in-your-face butterfly style, where goalies play higher up in their crease and take away more space, instead of always relying on reflexes and agility.

Even world-renowned goaltending coaches like Vancouver's Ian Clarke says that Finnish goalies are not just more positionally sound and taller than before, they also have incredible instincts AND they're overall just amazing athletes. Put it all together and Clarke paints a very positive picture for the future of Finland's production at the goalie position. Take nothing away from these observations, for the world truly needs to recognize the increasing power of their raw skills and cool-as-ice mental focus.

Still, there's an obvious missing piece of the puzzle. What hasn't been brought to light about the Finnish goalies is the time needed for them to develop and play at their best. I see such a very strong correlation between age and level of play – so strong in fact that I can say with confidence that clearly Finnish goalies take longer to reach their pinnacle talent level. But once they get there, boy you'd better watch out because they are capable of doing some incredible things for your fantasy team. I also see a strong correlation between skill level for the goalies that actually stay in Finland and develop their game for at least three to four seasons and those that decide to start their pro careers much earlier in North America.

Miikka Kiprusoff (6-foot-1) turns 32 on October 26th and will obviously act as the ultimate example, because right now he's the true living, breathing example. At the ripe age of 27, Kipper set a new career-low GAA with a 1.69 mark during the 2003-04 regular season and then led the Flames to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Finals. Following the lockout, Kipper captured the Jennings and Vezina Trophies at the age of 29. Sure, his GAA has gone up since then, but it's not due to a decline in talent. Rather it could be seen as more of a product of the team in front of him, so with contract negotiations behind him, Kipper is poised to dominate the crease again in 2008-09 at 32 and remains one of the top-five goalies chosen in most fantasy leagues.

Vesa Toskala (5-foot-10) turned 31 back in May and is one of the most mentally tough goalies in the game. His size is the rare exception to the growth in Finnish goalies, yet he's one of the few Toronto goalies to handle the barrage of shots (on and off the ice) and still play with a focused mentality. He's only going to play better this season and he's not in jeopardy of crumbling like Andrew Raycroft did. Toskala didn't play North American pro hockey until the 2000-2001 season (Kentucky of the AHL) when he was already 23 years of age. So considering he's entering only his second season as a true full-time starter, you have to expect Toskala to still play the best hockey of his career in the next two or three seasons.

Antero Niittymaki (6-foot-1) turned 28 on June 18th and has shown flashes of brilliance with the Flyers. But his fantasy value skyrocketed almost overnight during the 2006 Winter Olympics, when he single-handedly led Finland to a Silver Medal (after Kiprusoff and Kari Lehtonen bowed out due to injury) and was named the tournament MVP as a reward for his stellar play. A torn

labrum during the 2006-07 season really hampered his development, which led to Martin Biron's arrival as Philly's new starter. But Niittymaki will continue to improve over the next two seasons and when he's finally given the chance to become a starter somewhere in the league (and that will happen), he is going to be capable of doing incredible things.

Pekka Rinne (6-foot-3) turns 26 on November 3rd and is touted as the next up-and-coming Finnish star. He developed primarily in the town of Karpat and helped lead his team, SM-liiga, to championships in both 2004 and 2005. Interestingly enough, Rinne was reportedly roughed up by some "assailants" a few years ago and had to undergo shoulder injury, which hampered his development for more than four months. With that drama behind him, Rinne is on a roll to turn into a premiere puck stopper. With only two games of NHL experience, I feel that Rinne probably has the best timing of all the Finnish goalies around. He's already 26, he has a large 6-foot-3 frame (some say he's taller than Lehtonen) and he only faces a relatively un-proven Dan Ellis in front of him.

Kari Lehtonen (6-foot-4) turns 25 on November 16 and undoubtedly has some of the quickest reflexes in the league. With his incredible agility and size in net, he makes electrifying saves and puts together heroic 40-plus save performances as a Thrasher. And while nobody will argue that Lehtonen lacks elite talent in goal, the only real knock on him will be his health and mental focus. But as you can see, at such a "tender" age for a Finnish goalie, he's only going to get stronger, smarter, mentally tougher and more consistent in the next two seasons. If you decided not to choose him this season for your fantasy team, you can expect him to be tougher to obtain next year and I'm betting he rises higher up on Dobber's lists. Lehtonen is the latest in a list of Finns playing in Atlanta, following in the footsteps of Pasi Nurminen and Jani Hurme.

Karri Ramo (6-foot-2) turned 22 back on July 1st and has been silently developing his game in Tampa Bay. Actually, that could be seen as a negative on his career, as the more successful Finns seem to spend more time playing in their native country as opposed to trying to develop their game in North America. Nevertheless, Ramo has a ton of potential and a few years to keep working on rebound control. Ramo's chance to break out may not come with the Lightning, as they shored up Mike Smith as the future of the organization, but whatever experience Ramo can soak up in the next few seasons will be very important for his career's future.

Tuukka Rask (6-foot-3) turned 21 back on March 10th and is my favorite goalie prospect because of the flashy, quick hands he displays and the tremendous movement he has in the crease. He is fun to watch, he has a flair for the big save and he's incredibly competitive. Match that up with a knack for calmness and consistency, Rask turns out to be my ultimate upcoming Finnish prospect. With just one season of North American hockey under his belt (Providence – AHL), including four games with the Bruins, in four or five years Rask has the potential to be the best goalie in the league.

And it would only be respectful to Finland to include a short tribute to Jussi Markkanen's play in the 2006 Stanley Cup Finals. When Dwayne Roloson went down with an injury early in the series, the 31-year old Markkanen got the nod for Game 3 and displayed tremendous poise, focus and consistency. He pulled out a shutout in Game 6, but we all remember the story – simply no goal support in Game 7. Markkanen would walk away from the NHL with a

tremendous badge of honor, however, as he will be remembered for being called into such a difficult and pressure-filled situation and handling it to perfection. Nerves colder than ice - that's the Finnish way. Even though Markkanen no longer has an NHL contract, he is playing in the KHL and he also put up some very impressive numbers last season.

In conclusion, goalies from Finland are not just amazing acrobats that continue to get bigger, stronger and more positionally sound, but they are also the distinguished architects of their own painstaking evolution. It has come to my attention that they visibly develop slower than others, but they evolve into more well-rounded and successful goaltenders. Like the snow-capped mountains that populate the Scandinavian country, over the course of many years the Finns start to reach higher and higher and separate themselves from the smaller peaks seen around the globe.