

Parasites of Positive Performances

Written by Justin Goldman

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It was another week of torture for many fantasy owners, as starting goalies struggled to hit the .900 save percentage mark by allowing more goals than usual. This is like some kind of eerie twilight zone, because it seems that no matter how hard some of these goalies work, their stats aren't improving at all. It's like rolling a huge rock up a mountain only to watch it roll down the other side and crumble into a million pebbles. So what exactly is wrong with all of these so called sure-handed starters? Well, that's the problem. Round these parts, there's no such thing as a sure thing. Heck, there's no more meaning to the phrase "comfortable lead" either. And so the beat goes on, at least for another week.

Opening the regular season with a bad start, that's understandable. Two weeks in and the rust still hasn't been removed and it's only natural to question your goalies and start looking at trade opportunities. But three weeks in and your stats are still inflated means it's time to make some important decisions. Of all the different directions you can take, let me preclude any hasty moves by explaining how some of the inconsistent netminding around the league is NOT a direct result of their actual play. Yes, some are struggling from within (Marty Turco), but others

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are battling an exterior source from the coaching staff – something I call negative reinforcement. It's a real parasite and it completely destroys positive performances.

My main example of this is Vesa Toskala in Toronto. Nothing short of being emotionally skinned, meat-hooked and thrown into a freezer, Toskala was benched in favor of Curtis Joseph after Ron Wilson chose to "...go with the percentages..." in a shootout against Anaheim last Tuesday. This was after Toskala had allowed two goals in the first 10 minutes of the game and then battled hard to shut the door the rest of the game. He stood there in the third period, not facing a single shot, before showing mental toughness by making three huge saves in overtime to preserve the 2-2 tie. To me, that type of performance is worthy of a reward, not a demotion. Instead, he was benched for the shootout and Toronto ended up losing.

"I was playing the percentages," coach Wilson said afterwards. "I'm not going to hesitate to do that until we get Tosk a little more practice - a different way of thinking on stopping the other team in shootouts. I had nothing to lose."

Nothing to lose? How about Toskala's fragile state of mind? What kind of message does that send Toskala? It doesn't matter how good Joseph's stats are in shootouts, you NEVER bench a goalie that worked so hard to preserve a tie and then put in a stiff goalie that has been sitting on the bench. Especially with a team where every little moral victory counts, trusting one statistic will almost always backfire. Wilson failed to approach his decision without Toskala's emotional mindset taking the forefront, and that's a very destructive negative reinforcement to the entire team. Cujo's quote after the game was even more telling...

"It's entertainment, right?" Joseph said. "I have had some success at shootouts but those were two good shots. I've got to like being in that position, at least you can come in and you've got a chance. Unfortunately, the quick releases look a little quicker when you've been sitting."

If you ask me, the shots were nothing extraordinary, but they sure look that way when they come against an iced goalie. And somehow Wilson failed to recognize that a cold goalie will struggle with timing in a shootout. It was last season when Paul Maurice made the foolhardy decision to start Andrew Raycroft over Toskala on opening night and everyone knows what long-term result that had...not a very good one...so you have to feel bad for Toskala. Coaches need to be a little more sycophantic with a goalie like him, mainly so that he has a reason to prove his worth to the coaches, players, fans, media and most importantly, himself!

On the flip side, an example of positive reinforcement is seen with Jason LaBarbera in Los Angeles. He has been given the opportunity, no matter what, to lead this team, through good and bad. This was stated right when the summer started and it paid off with a fresh mindset for LaBarbera. He re-invented himself physically and as a result he's a much better goalie. Even though I personally still see him struggling (which he is), the fact remains that he is more competitive than last season. Even though he allowed three goals in 13 minutes against Nashville on Saturday, here's betting that he starts again on Monday against the Red Wings. LaBarbera has started all seven games this season for the Kings and is a surprising 3-3-0 and that's a feel-good situation in the Kings' locker room that should only get better as time goes on.

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Peter Budaj in Colorado is another perfect example of positive reinforcement. Sure, he started the season off 0-3 by allowing some extremely weak goals, but Tony Granato stuck to his guns and showed faith in the 26-year-old Slovak. Granato went back to Budaj after Raycroft barely won his first two games and Budaj was able to stop the bleeding with his first win in Los Angeles. Young goalies thrive on this type of positive reinforcement and it has already paid off for Budaj, as he was brilliant in a 2-1 shootout victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday, stopping a combined 11 shots against Tomas Vanek, Ales Kotalik and Maxim Afinogenov. The fact he made such solid saves on three shifty Sabres scorers is proof that Budaj's timing and confidence is back.

Other examples of this over the past week was Michael Leighton being rewarded with a second start after a fabulous game earlier last week when he made 32 saves against the Ducks in a 4-1 win and the same with Craig Anderson in Florida. Both goalies followed up with losses, but the fact remains that they were rewarded for a tremendous game and given the opportunity to perpetuate that success right away. That's the type of coaching that creates a positive atmosphere and potential breakout seasons for budding stars.

The moral of this story is that coaches should show more positive reinforcement when it comes to struggling goalies. That may cost the team a point or two, but ultimately it will result in more success and bring players and coaches closer together. So keep an eye on the stories that develop over the course of two or three games. How does a goalie like Martin Gerber, who has a lot of negativity surrounding his situation right now, fare compared to someone like Mike Smith, who, despite the losses, still plays within a positive light? This will help you make more effective decisions on when to bench that superstar goalie and when he's poised to play a strong game and escape the perils of early-season inflated numbers.

OTHER NEWS AND NOTES

The injury bug is more like an injury beast right now and it's devouring some important goaltenders. Manny Legace and Pascal Leclaire being injured shouldn't surprise you, especially since both may have aggravated those meniscus injuries that I've often mentioned. Rick DiPietro is also on the shelf from re-aggravating whatever bothered him in the pre-season. It's not fun and it's not something you want to deal with, but it does give opportunities to young, capable goalies like Ben Bishop, Freddy Norena and Yann Danis.

It will be interesting to see how Cristobal Huet plays tonight after Nikolai Khabibulin played admirably in two straight games for the Blackhawks. Khabibulin has been such an intriguing story, mainly because he never gives up and is actually keeping the Hawks in games and giving them a chance to win. This makes the whole trading paradigm much more interesting, because as his value increases, so does his price tag. With the latest reports saying that Ottawa is now seeking a goalie, it might just be a matter of time before he's moved. Although one has to think that maybe keeping him would be a better idea. The guy is a gamer and he can still win in this league, no matter how old he is or where he plays.

Remember when Brian Boucher put together an NHL-record five straight shutouts as a Phoenix Coyote? Well, he has been able to put together two straight shutouts as a backup in San Jose,

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begging the question of whether or not the Sharks will start to play him a little more. Don't expect that to happen, but do expect to see Boucher at least once this week as he attempts to go for three in a row. It's one thing to do it as a starter but it's much more interesting if he can do this as a backup.