

## Pekka Rinne: The Gift of Absorption

Written by Justin Goldman

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Like giant glowing moons, the two ominous I's of goaltending linger and sulk in the night sky. One of them, Injury, represents the physical component of the position, along with the notion that anyone can fall victim to the dreaded IR list. The other is Inconsistency, representing the mental toughness component, along with the notion that "hot streaks" or "crease takeovers" don't last very long. And sometimes they don't even last for an entire week.

Welcome to the Land of Confusion. It's an unbearable, amorphous world out there, one where we are left gasping for fresh air, a change, a quick shot of oxygen. But today there is a real reason to breathe freely. All hail Finland's Pekka Rinne, the amalgamation of all the necessary ingredients needed to succeed at the NHL level. This warrior is the real deal, blessed with something special – the gift of absorption.

Rinne learned important facets of the position as a backup to Niklas Backstrom in 2003-04 for Karpat. Rinne's game developed like many of Finland's finest; shaped and formed slowly over time. By 2005 Rinne had progressed to the AHL, earning a chance with the Milwaukee Admirals. But during an off-season in the summer of 2006 in Finland, he was suspiciously

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roughed up by some unknown native assailants. This baffling turn of events forced off-season shoulder surgery, which resulted in Rinne missing the start of the 2006-07 AHL season.

To be attacked and roughed up by deranged thugs is one thing, but to push the reset button and return to the AHL stronger and better than ever (in just four months) is quite another. In 29 games total that season, Rinne went 15-7-6 with a 2.34 GAA and .920 save percentage. With this run came plenty of interest from Nashville, thus making Chris Mason expendable. Sure enough, Mason was traded to the Blues after the 2007-08 regular season and Rinne had no problem securing a roster spot alongside Dan Ellis.

And while Rinne's first outing of the season was a forgettable night, since then he has gone on quite a hot streak. He rattled off a pair of shutouts last week against Minnesota and Buffalo and added a 3-2 win over Colorado to boot. The three straight wins is part of an impressive 6-0-0 record, 2.25 goals against average and .917 save percentage. His play has the Predators on a roll with four wins in five games and not only is Nashville getting balanced scoring and taking fewer penalties, but the defensemen are also blocking a ton of shots.

On the surface, it was Rinne's sponge-like ability to soak up the game during October and November and then use it as a catalyst for this current 3-0 streak. Go ask Michael Leighton or Steve Mason what it takes to be successful in that first NHL stint and they will all say "adjusting to the speed" in some way or form. But aside from the stats, great size at 6-foot-4 and Dobber's prophecies, there's another aspect of Rinne's game that separates him from the entire class of young NHL goaltenders.

Rinne has extremely strong, active and quick hands. He uses the goal stick more than any other NHL goalie, mainly to deflect cross-crease passes, poke-check unaware forwards and most importantly, to take away passing lanes and options for forwards playing behind his net and goal line. This aspect of his game seems like nervousness at first, but at a closer look you can see how just how effective it can be.

First of all, active gloves and stick causes the shooter to have difficulty reading and reacting. It forces a moment of hesitation, as players never know when Rinne is going to jump out and attack them. Secondly, Rinne has a strong ability to read plays, especially for his lack of NHL experience. And I'm not talking about those simple back-door plays or the wacky moves a shooter pulls in the shootout. I'm talking about this intrinsic mental focus of tracking a puck seamlessly through traffic, deflections and flurries right around his crease. He doesn't just read the first shot, but he seems to know where the second and third chance is going to come from.

And let's face the facts; scoring is up due to traffic in front of the net, forwards driving to the goal and because pucks are being thrown at the net from every angle conceivable to man. The goalies are slowly adjusting to this, combating the traffic by playing every shot from the point as if it was going to get through no matter what. Basically, the goalie should make the proper tight butterfly movement in order to guarantee a save if the shot happens to get through.

Goaltending-101 teaches that there is a progression to the way a goalie makes saves. When in the butterfly stance, the first piece of equipment a puck will hit is the stick, then the glove or

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blocker, then finally the leg pads and chest protector. The goalie stick is the most important piece of equipment because it's the first thing that a puck will hit.

Because of this, stick placement and the ability to keep it on the ice, yet extremely mobile, is necessary for success. NHL goaltenders are very sound in this area of the game, because without decent skills, they are sure to fail. But Rinne brings something totally different to the table: he really is a big step ahead of everyone else when it comes to using the stick and being active with the gloves.

When it comes right down to it, Rinne is a breed apart from his native Finnish goaltender counterparts. Finnish goalies are known to employ very little extra movement in the crease and they rarely attack shooters with their stick. Rinne does all of those things, almost to an excessive degree. But it's working really well right now, as his athletic ability and size allows him to make more second and third saves than most goalies. Rinne is a steal right now in many leagues. Even if he slows down and struggles for a bit, Rinne is definitely still a great long-term solution in goal.