

Survival Scars

Written by Justin Goldman

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The goalie's eyes say it all. A blank stare to the heavens after an innocent shot sneaks through, a piercing glare at their defenseman after a deflection in front, or a vengeful look towards the referee in anticipation of an interference penalty. All of these looks of desperation and helplessness are increasing by the week and no goalie can escape the perils that lie ahead, not even those that have eluded it many times before.

Take a quick minute to look at all 30 NHL teams and see just how many of them have started a clear-cut, no-questions-asked #1 goaltender so far in December. Whatever your total was, it should be less than 15 (my list had 12) and it should show you that as time goes by this season,

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the list is seemingly getting shorter and shorter.

But we've all heard the old adage before; sometimes you have to struggle before you can succeed. That statement rings true with all young goalies (except Patrick Roy and Cam Ward, both of which won a Stanley Cup in their rookie season) no matter what type of talent they have. Just in the last few weeks we've seen another wave of rising stars and falling duds, but one thing can be said for them all – that which does not kill them only makes them stronger.

Ask Dwayne Roloson, Chris Osgood, Tim Thomas or Martin Brodeur if this year is any different than the past few years of their career. These guys have the survival scars to prove what it takes to win. They have a good idea of the bigger picture, so don't be surprised if all of them told us the same thing - that it comes down to effort, not skill. That should be the goal for these youngsters. That's the real key to a long and successful career.

It was Roloson's first period against San Jose last Saturday that becomes the perfect example. That was by far the best 20 minute effort a goalie has posted this season. Then on Saturday night he was strong and smart in a 23-save shutout over the Vancouver Canucks. He didn't face nearly as much rubber, but the confidence he instilled in his teammates was enough for them to score three goals and play strong defense in front of him.

So if you still don't know why Mathieu Garon hasn't been getting the same opportunities as Roloson so far this year – well, ***it's because Roloson just works harder***. Roloson has won all three games he's started since November 29 and has only allowed four goals in that span, including the 41-save thriller over the Sharks. Now Roloson has pushed his record to 6-5-1 with a 2.52 goals-against average and a .924 save percentage. He could be over the proverbial .500 hump and ready to go on a nice little roll, especially with the coaching staff raving about how hard he works.

Another situation where work ethic comes out on top is in Florida. Because of Craig Anderson's stalwart play in net over the last six weeks, the writing is on the wall for Tomas Vokoun. This is not a situation where Vokoun has totally lost his fierce competitive nature or is struggling with his positioning. This is a situation where Anderson has exploded with confidence and has proved over the course of the season that he's capable of taking the #1 label from Vokoun.

Even when Vokoun made 35 saves in a 3-2 win over Calgary last week, it was back to Anderson last night against Vancouver. Anderson is now 5-2-2 since taking over for Vokoun, with two shutouts in that span and three this season. What is truly amazing, but not surprising, is the 8-0-1 record when facing 40 or more shots in the 2008 calendar year. He has posted a 1.09 goals-against average, .975 save percentage and three shutouts in those games. This doesn't surprise me, mainly because we all know that if a goalie gets into a rhythm early, it's much easier for him to ride that wave of confidence through the entire game, no matter how many shots he faces.

I have fielded many questions about the long-term fantasy value for guys like Simeon Varlamov and Steve Mason and my answers are always the same; they are all talented enough to become the No.1 goalie for their team, but they will all go through a series of highs and lows

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and they will all struggle at some point in time. And beyond that, unless your name is Nostradamus, my guess is as good as yours. You know what to watch for (remember my 5-part series?) and you know that the more experienced youngsters have the better odds to sustain their abilities.

My main advice is to be cautious with these youngsters. If they haven't had at least 3-4 years of experience in the NHL, they are going to be prone to bad streaks from time to time. Even Henrik Lundqvist, one of the most consistent goalies in the last three seasons, is struggling right now. And it might last longer than usual because he's never really been through a cold streak like this before. It was bound to happen sooner or later, so the key for him is to just accept this reality and work harder and harder every day at practice.

So just like the weathered veterans have come to learn the game through their years of experience, so too will the rookies need to develop their own set of survival scars. But the more they play, the more they will learn and the faster they will adjust to the NHL's speed. Ultimately, that's the one thing you can bank on when it comes to fantasy value.