

Halak on the Attack

Written by Justin Goldman

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Thank you, Carey Price, for finally wearing out Guy Carbonneau's already paper-thin patience. Your month-long meltdown made last Friday's game between Montreal and Colorado the most exciting scouting experience I've had as co-host of *Avalanche PostGame* (KCKK 1510 AM) this season. That's because Montreal turned to Jaroslav Halak, which ended my year-long wait of wanting to see one of the league's premier goalie prospects in some real-life action.

With vigorous enthusiasm and anticipation, I arrived at Pepsi Center and quickly glided into the press box, where my reserved seat was anxiously waiting. It's the ultimate spot to scout the opposing goaltender, as it sits directly along the visiting goal line to the right of the cage. Of course I'm there to cover the Avalanche, but I'd be a downright lying fool if I didn't fess up to the fact that I'm also scouting the goalies.

Adding to the excitement of this Friday night delight was the historical atmosphere surrounding the goaltending matchup. Colorado announced that Peter Budaj would start his 41st start of the

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season, making it the first time in NHL history that two Slovak goalies played in the same game. And since I know you're wondering, there have only been two other goalies from Slovakia to play in the NHL, Rastislav Stana and Jan Lasak.

This transformed the game into something much more monumental than anyone could have imagined. In Slovakia, this was going to be beyond huge. As I continued to prepare for the game, it just so happens that my Slovakian friend Peter was also in attendance. He covers the NHL for a Slovakian newspaper and spoke proudly of the game's importance from his country's viewpoint. He also promised to relay some post-game thoughts from both goalies in their native tongue, since I was going to be stuck in the studio. So all my ducks were in order and the duel between Budaj and Halak was a perfect sub-plot for me to follow.

From the drop of the puck, scoring chances came at a fast and furious pace. Montreal was caught running around all night, turning it over behind their net more than a few times and giving Colorado tons of great scoring opportunities. But Halak absolutely stood on his head, enduring 35 shots in the final 40 minutes to help the Canadians defeat the Avalanche by a final score of 4-2. Even though Colorado completely dominated the entire game in every single category and aspect of the game, they failed in the one's that matter most - goaltending and goals.

In the first period, Halak made a number of technically proficient and poised saves, including a pair of full-fledged breakaways en route to helping the Canadians take a 2-0 lead. In the second period, Colorado turned on the jets and reached another gear, out-shooting Montreal by a 16-4 margin. But Halak only allowed Jordan Leopold to score on a play in which his defensemen did not give him much help, but one where he did allow a rebound from a bad angle.

In the third period, Halak downright stole the show. He made 18 more stalwart and scintillating saves, including some momentum-changing stops when the score was tied 2-2. Those saves lifted the bench and gave Montreal a chance to grind their way to a 3-2 lead, which came late in the game thanks to a breakaway goal by Andre Kostitsyn. Thirty-five saves in the final two periods on 37 shots. That's enough work through 60 minutes to be considered a busy game, let alone having to handle that workload in 40 minutes.

What Halak showed me in this game was something much more valuable than good positioning; it was a combination of raw talent and strong mental toughness. He allowed a weak Tyler Arnason shot to squeeze underneath him, tying the game 2-2 halfway through the third period. But his big-save ability and durability to handle the workload along with the pressure of playing in a monumental game was amazing – he really looked like a 12-year veteran out there.

Halak proved not only to the organization that he's looking more and more like an elite #1 goalie in this game, but he was the sole reason Montreal finally stopped the bleeding, as they had lost seven straight games on the road and things were on the verge of spiraling out of control. He also proved to Slovakia that he should be the starting goalie in the 2010 Olympics over Budaj. Simply put, Halak is on the attack and there may be no stopping him next season.

Friday's win is the kind of game that takes on a greater importance as the season goes along and can push a young goalie's game to the next level. It could be seen as one of those

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career-changing games that come along once in a big blue moon, especially when you look at Halak's mediocre numbers. But with a flair and big-save ability that whets my scouting appetite, I can easily say he's a certified choice for any fantasy keeper league.

My friend Peter relayed some pretty interesting post-game comments from both Budaj and Halak. It looks like they were both not only fully aware of the historic setting and the implications it would have on the Olympics, but they also honored and respected each other in a competitive manner. They were both pushing for OT in the hopes of a shootout, but Halak came out of it as the well-deserved winner in regulation.

Now Halak did come back down to earth in last night's 4-2 loss to Vancouver, but he still made numerous saves to start the game and in the second period when the score was still close. Regardless of being pulled in the third, which was mainly done to give Price the chance to play in front of over 100 friends and family, there's a very healthy competition (not controversy) in Montreal. Halak's display of wizardry in the last two games proves that he's going to continue getting better and better. So if you're in a keeper league, I would snag him at a low price while you can.

Again I would like to stress how I feel Halak's development is kind of similar to that of Finnish and other European goalies. They need a few years to adjust, but once they do, it's almost revolutionary what they display when they are at the top of their game. Halak is a brilliant netminder with very powerful movements and strong, squared positioning. He's not the biggest guy in the crease, but it's not easy to push him around either.

True, he won't have great statistics this year and may not be the best fit for a one-year fantasy team next year, but remember that mental toughness is the X-factor in separating good goalies from the great ones, and Halak has it all. So while his stats are mediocre at best, he still has the ingredients to become a true #1 for a very long time. He is only owned in 6% of Yahoo leagues, but he's certified to be a premier starter in as little as two seasons and could take over the starting job in Montreal if Price continues to struggle.