

## Answer Me This Riddle Three...

Written by Justin Goldman

Monday, 09 March 2009 09:55 - Last Updated Monday, 09 March 2009 17:50

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Over the weekend a series of games presented themselves to me as tightly wrapped enigmas that ultimately cast me into a black hole of the unknown. But it's my fault; I seem to be leaning more towards trends and patterns right now when it comes to my goalie analysis. So three different riddles prodded my mind and as I poked around for answers, it only seemed fitting to surmise my thoughts and discuss them all of Dobber Nation.

**ONE OF THREE: IS THE DU-CC RIVALRY GUARANTEED TO BREED AN ELITE NHL**

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### GOALIE?

The progression of NCAA goalies over the past five seasons has been well-documented this year thanks to the likes of Brian Elliott, Jon Quick and others. Combined with Marty Turco, Ryan Miller and Tim Thomas, the core of young NCAA products have proven in some way this year that the NCAA is definitely a viable source of goaltending talent.

But peel back another layer and you'll see a good number of NCAA products in the NHL coming from WCHA teams. That includes two teams in particular – the University of Denver Pioneers and Colorado College Tigers. The bitter rivals constantly play in big-time games against each other in the playoffs, ultimately harvesting and creating NHL talent for decades. Yes, the Gold Pan Trophy is quite coveted in Colorado and both teams stop at nothing to hoist it.

Curtis McElhinney and Peter Mannino are the latest goalies from each team to crack the NHL. Before them came the DU tandem of Adam Berkhoel (briefly with the Thrashers) and then Wade Dubielewicz (playoff push with the Isles) making NHL appearances. This year it was CC's tandem of Matt Zaba and McElhinney rising in the depth charts for their respective teams. Zaba played in the preseason for the NY Rangers and McElhinney has started a few more games this season for the Flames.

Over the weekend, however, the latest line in a breed of DU and CC goalie prospects dueled to a 1-1 tie in a game that proved they are both on their way to being legitimate NHL prospects. Cole Harbour's own Marc Cheverie (sophomore – rights belong to Florida) made 31 saves, including 13 shots in the first and Richard Bachman made 32 saves, including all 11 in the third.

And what do you know, just over a month ago on Feb. 13, both goalies were the big stars in another tied game (3-3). Bachman carried the Tigers by making 41 saves in that game and displayed one of the league's best goalie performances of the year. Cheverie turned aside 24 and stayed cool under the pressure of not getting as much work.

Both goalies are not only candidates to be long-term netminders at the NHL level, they have two more years to soak in the experience of playing monumental games in the fiercest college hockey rivalry around. The goalies that graduate often get drafted by NHL teams because they have what it takes to compete at the NHL level.

I think it's only a matter of time before one of these two goalies gets their chance to be a legitimate #1 in the NHL. So is this trend of the DU-CC rivalry breeding elite goalies going to continue for years and years?

### **TWO OF THREE: IF NOT NOW, THEN WHEN FOR STELLAR FINNISH NETMINDER KARI LEHTONEN?**

I literally spewed Dr. Pepper all over the floor when I heard the broadcasters talk about Kari Lehtonen's progression at the NHL level during his brilliant 2-0 shutout performance against the Canadiens. They said that when he was a rookie, he ate every single pre-game meal at

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McDonald's, thus earning him the nickname *The Hamburgler*.

I'm sorry, I just couldn't hold it in. I mean...if that's NOT the most hilarious nickname for an NHL player ever created in the history of the universe, please tell me one that's better. At the same time, I couldn't help but re-visit [my thoughts on Finnish goalies](#) when I heard them say he needed a few extra years to learn the professionalism of the NHL and to lose a little weight.

Seriously though, Lehtonen is simply on fire right now. He shut out Montreal and then kept Jarome Iginla and the Flames at bay. I watched the Montreal game and noticed he looks stronger and more durable than ever before. His movements are sharp and he looks focused and loose. He is having a lot of fun right now, not allowing the frustration of another loss to gnaw on his mind.

This honestly couldn't come at a better time for the Thrashers organization. Ilya Kovalchuk wants to stay in Atlanta, meaning Lehtonen's evolution making any type of progress is of utmost importance. Another summer of development for players like him and Zach Bogosian and Tobias Enstrom should put them in a position to succeed next year.

So my second riddle to thee is what would you have seen if Lehtonen was a Flame and fellow countryman Kiprusoff was a Thrasher? Both are incredible with their lateral movement and flexibility and both can simply steal games and dazzle you with awesome saves.

Theoretically speaking, couldn't Lehtonen possibly post similar statistics (but I think less shutouts) if he were on the Flames? Maybe Kiprusoff would have better stats than Lehtonen as a Thrasher, but at the same time would it be enough to get Atlanta past the first round of the playoffs?

### **THREE OF THREE – WHAT OF THE BULIN WALL, THE CRYSTAL BALL AND ANOTHER FINN NAMED ANTTI NIEMI?**

Goaltending could quickly become a major concern in Chicago. Nikolai Khabibulin has been on the shelf since Feb. 11 and can only hope to be back in a few more games. Cristobal Huet is struggling to keep his focus with a 1-3-1 record in his last five games and Antti Niemi only made 24 saves in a 5-1 drubbing by the Avs at home. The last time a Blackhawks goalie had 30 wins in a season was in 2001-02 when Jocelyn Thibault went 33-23-9 in 67 games. And with two goalies making a ton of money this year, the team is banking on one of them to eclipse the 30-win mark.

Now Niemi definitely has tons of potential, mainly because he's a big goaltender with very powerful legs. But the loss to Colorado exposed his lack of speed and experience, so he needs two or three more seasons to refine his form and positioning. He is going to look awkward at the NHL level, not because of his lack of skill, but because of his speed. He can be fairly successful at the lower professional levels, but he'll be reduced to burnt toast in the NHL right now.

That being said, Chicago doesn't have much hope beyond Huet right now and some fans might

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become uneasy with that situation. Khabibulin is not guaranteed to shine when he returns from injury and Huet has yet to start 40 games in a season in his career (39 with LA in 2003-04).

Thus my final riddle becomes quite obvious. Door one, door two or door three? Which one prevails, Khabibulin, Huet or Niemi? Which door do you open and which one leads the way to the Stanley Cup Finals!?