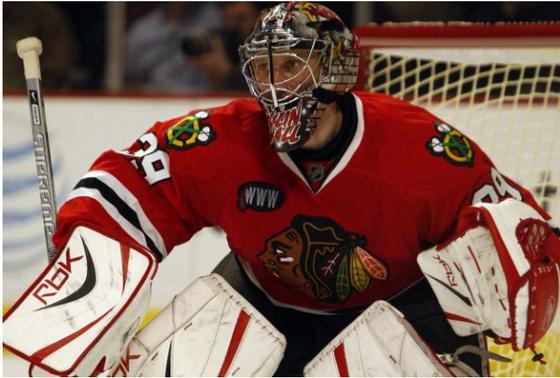


## Blackhawk Down

Written by Justin Goldman

Monday, 16 March 2009 09:15 - Last Updated Tuesday, 17 March 2009 05:52

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When Nikolai Khabibulin originally suffered a groin injury back on Feb. 11, Cristobal Huet only needed to keep the Blackhawks nestled safely in Stanley Cup playoffs. He delivered immediate results with a succulent four-game winning streak, but when that streak ended against Minnesota, Huet's game completely reversed. Since then he has struggled to a 2-4-0 record and has allowed 23 troubling goals in seven games played.

Khabibulin's highly-anticipated return Sunday afternoon was another troubling game for the Blackhawks, as he allowed four goals on 19 shots in a 4-2 loss to the Islanders. Now Chicago has dropped three of their last four and is 3-6-1 in their last ten games. And as I suspected in last week's School of Block, the team now has some legitimate goaltending issues.

Routine saves are turning into momentum-shifting goals right now for Huet, which shows he currently lacks the focus needed to win close games at this crucial point in the season. It could be a sign of the heavy workload he has endured over the last month, as he played in 12 of the last 15 games including a pair of back-to-back situations. Regardless, pucks are leaking through Huet at crucial moments, so he isn't displaying a lot of confidence in his abilities. He's playing hesitant and tense at times and doesn't seem to be finding the puck through traffic very easily.

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And let's face it, Khabibulin just returned from a groin injury, so he will need a few more games to get his timing back. So it's pretty much safe to say that a few more soft goals are headed the Blackhawks' way. Especially with teams like Columbus and Nashville getting big saves from well-oiled (rookie) goalies, has the rotation with two #1 goalies finally caught up with Chicago, or will it actually be the remedy they need down the stretch?

It's hard to believe that splitting time between the two premier goalies will do much good down the stretch, so the path (to me) is clear – the Blackhawks should roll with the Bulin Wall. He has the wisdom and experience, which should come through big-time for a younger team. You can also bet that Khabibulin will play more desperate than Huet, because extending his NHL career for a few more seasons depends on it.

### EVALUATING TALENT

Evaluating talent at the tail end of the regular season is crucial to reading a goalie's momentum heading into the summer. Youngsters like Yan Danis, Josh Tordjman and Kari Ramo are all future stars soaking in valuable playing time and experience in big games down the stretch. Watch these goalies if you get a chance - it's pure fantasy hockey analysis gold.

For example, while Khabibulin struggled in his return on one end of the ice yesterday, Peter Mannino (former DU Pioneer) was making 40 highlight saves in his first career start on the other end. That included a lengthy 6-on-3 situation at the end of the game, so cheers to Mannino for staying poised in the third to clinch his first NHL win.

Mannino's comments after the game included some valuable insight on his game. He mentioned how the 13 minutes he played in a total beat-down against the Bruins a few weeks ago turned out to be a blessing in disguise. He also mentioned that his goal was to "stay focused" and block out all of the storylines and just stop the puck. So I could tell he was situationally aware of Chicago's hard-working team and that he successfully prepared for a long, tough night.

Mannino's style and positioning no doubt still needs a lot of work, but I can say that he has a lot of good mental traits, including great poise and confidence when he is seeing the puck clearly. His size also makes him tough to beat at times, so a few more seasons of work in the AHL and Mannino could be a legitimate NHL goaltender.

It looks like Garth Snow has tinkered around with his goaltending so much that now he's stuck with a Band-Aid boy in Rick DiPietro and three mediocre goalies with different levels of potential over the summer. I would say Danis has the most fantasy value of them all, with Mannino sitting slightly higher than MacDonald.

Another former DU Pioneer (and Islander), Wade Dubielewicz, also captured his first win of the season after making 38 saves in a 4-3 shootout win Thursday night for the Blue Jackets. It was his third appearance since they claimed him on waivers in January, so the win proved that boosting a young netminder's confidence by giving him a chance to play will usually yield positive results, especially when that team is coached by Ken Hitchcock.

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So I think the Blue Jackets found their backup of choice to Steve Mason. Dubielewicz is affordable, understanding of his role, capable of stepping in and winning big games and a good guy to have in the locker room. He's in a good defensive system and his prior NHL experiences means his stock is worth a look next year if he stays in Columbus.

Washington will be the next team to continue evaluating goalie talent, as Michal Neuvirth was sent down and Simeon Varlamov was brought back up. Bravo to Washington and other teams that take a look into the future to see what they have. If only a team like Colorado were smart enough to bring up either Jason Bacashihua or Tyler Weiman to take a peek at their potential, maybe they would realize they have something special in either one or both of them.

### WITH TERMINAL INTENSITY

Martin Brodeur tied Patrick Roy's all-time wins record on a picture-perfect Saturday night in Montreal. It was a game laden with storylines; everything from Roy and Brodeur's father being in the stands watching it all go down, to Brodeur reaching the 551 wins mark in his hometown of all places. It was a surreal moment when the thousands of fans honored him with a standing ovation. His stick raised in the air to Canadians fans will be a lasting NHL moment.

What I admire most about Brodeur is his graceful display of terminal intensity. He always plays at the highest level possible, with extreme focus and pure energy. Every single game is the Stanley Cup finals, yet his emotions and confidence are never affected by what takes place in or outside of his crease. He is and always will be seen as nothing more than a kid out on the ice having fun. He still embraces a youthful pride this late in his career, which is one principle factor in his ability to keep winning.

But I wanted to explain something about Brodeur's classic "half-butterfly" style real quick. Everyone understands the idea behind it – Brodeur is the last of a dying breed because nobody stands up to make a save anymore and all of the "kids" these days go down in the butterfly "all the time" no matter what type of shot comes their way (Don Cherry tried explaining this on Hockey Night in Canada, calling his style "stand-up").

Now there's a bunch of reasons why Brodeur has been so durable over the years, but one major factor is his "half-butterfly" style. Brodeur's legs are almost always directly underneath him, which allows him to employ a recovery system that totally differs from butterfly and Flybrid goalies. Brodeur actually gets back up on both feet to get into good position behind the puck, instead of sliding on his knees like Marc-Andre Fleury or Roberto Luongo would.

Therefore Brodeur rarely stretches in a severe manner (full butterfly toe-save or post-to-post stretch) to stop the puck. That takes a lot of pressure off his knees, hips and ankles. Other goalies that have close to the same half-butterfly style includes Niklas Backstrom, Evgeni Nabokov and to a lesser degree, Jaroslav Halak – all of which employ a narrower butterfly stance with their leg pads more perpendicular to the ice, instead of flared out to either side.

The "wide-butterfly" goalies like Fleury, Huet and Henrik Lundqvist put a ton of pressure on their knees and ankles, because their style depends on a solid core and strong legs to help move

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laterally on their knees. And that style of goaltending is more prone to groin pulls, hip problems, etc. It's no surprise that goalies like Pascal Leclaire have to deal with the type of injuries that come from so much stress on the knees and hips. Lateral movement requires a lot of power from your core, so that means legs need to be underneath you in order to make that powerful push.

So Brodeur's half-butterfly style combined with his overall focus leads me to believe he could hit the 700-win mark in another four years. His style is perfect for conserving energy over the course of a game or an entire season. Now combine that with a stalwart Devils defense that never rests and you have the ultimate winning goalie machine.