There's an interesting decision for Team Canada to make regarding their third goaltender. Obviously Martin Brodeur and Roberto Luongo are currently seen as the team's top two masked men of choice, as they lead the way in overall experience. But between Cam Ward, Marc-Andre Fleury and Steve Mason, which one is best suited as the third?

When analyzing three elite goalies, all of which just put together pretty incredible seasons, you know that the decision cannot be based strictly on what they accomplished or where they might rank in talent. Instead, the key is to choose the goalie that would be the most successful in a third-string ROLE once the rest of the team is constructed.

Of these three goalies, who would handle going from wearing a business suit to a Team Canada jersey in an instant with the utmost success? That is the true essence of this decision, one that could in turn bear great importance if an injury or terrible game occurs. And what hammers this lesson home for fantasy managers is, like Team Canada, we all have a similar decision to make.

With a pool of very solid goalies to choose from, which one will act as our own third netminder? We have a fantasy team comprised of some very talented hockey players, but still, it's not always the most talented goalie that fits a certain team best. In fact, different countries have

different pools to choose from, just like your own fantasy team and league settings. So join us as we discuss who should be the third goalie on an Olympic level, which acts as a perfect example of how you could handle similar decisions at the fantasy level.

STEVE MASON – How can you possibly not choose a kid who just had a Cinderella rookie season in which he provided Columbus with the edge they needed defensively to make the playoffs for the first time in franchise history? That alone is a monumental achievement, let alone some of the games he won single-handedly.

Mason is set to start around 65 games as the undisputed starter in Columbus, but what impact could a sophomore slump have on his overall value? From a fantasy standpoint, you should feel quite confident that Mason won't fall victim to the same influences that others have gone through in the past. I say this because he has more than enough confidence heading into the season, especially now that his long-time goalie coach is by his side. That being said, there's going to be times when Mason's timing and rebound control is not his best, but they will be addressed quickly and fixed in a timely and efficient manner.

But at the same time, you will need to personally weigh some of the real pressures he will face to perform even better than last season. He's the Calder Trophy winner, which means he has to show some consistency, lest he be mentioned in the same sentence as Andrew Raycroft. What about the pressure to put the Blue Jackets in the playoffs once again…and even win a game in the series? It's there and it has to be managed with maturity and hard work.

And that exposes one of the main reasons why Mason becomes such a quality netminder for fantasy teams and Team Canada. His ability to handle bumps in the road along the way was on display last season, so he already has the confidence to work through them quickly. To me, this is exactly the kind of mental toughness and maturity you want in a young third-string goalie for Team Canada. He has some flair and clout and can provide an emotional spark on the bench, all while bringing that much-needed calming sensation as well.

Unfortunately, there still exists a certain level of unknowns within Mason's game. Yes, he literally broke out at the World Junior Championships and took full advantage of his first call-up, but I still don't feel he is the best choice for Team Canada. And the only reason I have is that he lacks true experience. He has been through a lot in a few short years, but how he plays one pro season to the next is yet to be seen.

Simply put, you just don't know what he's truly made of until it happens in the next 3-4 months. But with all of that being said, do I still think he'll be one heck of a goalie this year? Absolutely.

MARC-ANDRE FLEURY – It's tough to not pen the Stanley Cup winner into the third spot, but when he's placed side-by-side with Mason and Ward, that aspect of his season is tough to weigh on an international level. Yes, he did some admirable things in Game 6 and 7 of the Cup Finals, including an incredible turnaround after being bounced in Game 5, but what does that say about his play this season, other than having more experience and confidence?

Let's look at Fleury's season from a different angle. He's certainly primed for another 60+ starts

this season, but what of his level of play? Is he being challenged enough by Brent Johnson to keep him looking over his shoulder? Will he have a Stanley Cup hangover? Personally, I think slow but steady progression with rebound control over the last three years lends a hand to him starting the season a little rusty, which doesn't bode well for him in a third-string role.

Fleury often needs a little time to get into a rhythm with his game, which is not a negative thing, but a natural aspect of the position. In the Olympics, however, most of the practice time goes to Brodeur and Luongo, so I would seriously question whether or not Fleury was able to achieve that much-needed rhythm…or be in the best rhythm in January.

As much as Fleury would represent his country in fine fashion, his game is still developing and being refined in different areas, like rebound control and moving in a more efficient manner around his crease. Even his weaker aspects of the position like stick handling have been openly worked on in practice over the last two years. In fact, some of his best hockey was played when Ty Conklin came in, pushed him for minutes and helped him work on handling the puck.

Because of his experiences over the last few years, now you can safely say that Fleury is truly an elite goaltender. But in the third string role for Team Canada, I don't see him as being the best choice available. From a fantasy aspect, I think Fleury's numbers will be great, but there will be some frustrating roller coaster stretches along the way.

CAM WARD – To get right to the point, I not only consider Ward as the most talented of the three goalies, but the one best suited to be Team Canada's third goalie.

Ward not only has more experience than both Fleury and Mason, he has a proven track record for incredible poise in difficult games and situations. He has been through inconsistent times, but has always carried himself with a strong sense of confidence, wisdom and maturity. He is what you call a stalwart goalie, one that shows no negative emotion and never wastes energy with unnecessary movements. He lets the game come to him and reacts with pure skill.

Ward can step in at any given moment and achieve a high comfort level with extreme precision and speed. Part of this comes from his past opportunities to do this, but recently it has been through the mentoring of Tom Barrasso, who will soon be in the Hockey Hall of Fame. Yep, Ward's playoff and big-game experiences since winning the Stanley Cup as a rookie is all the proof I need that he can take over in any situation and truly succeed.

All of those reasons alone make it pretty clear that Ward is the best choice for Team Canada, and that's not even going into the technical aspects of his game. In fact, he's considered by many analysts to be more talented than Mason and Fleury, but ultimately it is Ward's experiences and mental toughness that gives him the edge.

And there you have it, three amazing goalies that, on the surface, all seem like perfect fits to get the job done in a certain third-string role. But in the end, there's one clearly defined choice. Now I hope you noticed that I had not one statistic within this discussion. That is all you need to know about making a similar decision for your own fantasy team's third goaltender. Do not look at which goalie has the best statistics or who is the most talented.

Ask yourself what it takes to be successful in that role. Which goalie from your list will get the most playing time, the most help from strong defense and the most support from a head coach? Which goalie has the most experience in this type of spot-start situation and which one is the most consistent? Those are the questions you should ask, depending on your league's settings.

On that note, if you want even more insight or advice on a particular third goalie dilemma, you can always ask me in the forums! Also feel free to check out the new www.TheGoalieGuild.com version 2.0, which was uploaded over the weekend. We are still working on some new features this week, but feel free to check it out!