I hate the dog days of summer. They breed suspicion and skepticism in my mind about even the most elite NHL goalies. I've discussed the likes of Turco, Elliott, Mason, Ward and Fleury over the last few months and all I'm left with are even more questions. Sure, some are easier to solve than others, but somehow it's always you and I getting stuck with the "damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't" ones.

They're not like unlike the waves. Every hour of every day these questions smash and crash against your mind, slowly eroding your confidence and clarity over time. Without warning they forcefully try to pull you in, only to spit you back out again. And all I can do is toss out a lifesaver every Monday afternoon in an attempt to reel you back in.

I've been reading a lot of literature lately about two Russians facing more questions than usual - Semyon Varlamov and Evgeni Nabokov. Upon reading a member's fantasy dilemma regarding these two goalies on Saturday, I was excited to extrapolate on them, for I consider them to be on complete opposite sides of the goaltending spectrum.

One is a nine-year veteran with plenty of big-game experience that happens to be coming off the worst playoff performance of his career. The other has started five regular season games, only to take over the Caps' crease in the second game of the Stanley Cup Playoffs. He won the first series in shocking manner, only to crash in a fury of glorious flames in Game 7 to the eventual Champions. And that's just scratching the surface of their differences.

The questions surrounding these guys from a fantasy perspective have no answers. Will Varlamov blow teams away like rookies Pekka Rinne and Steve Mason did, or will he stumble in a typical sophomore jinx fashion? Will he STEAL the job from Jose Theodore or just wait patiently for it to come his way? And what of that Michal Neuvirth fellow?

Will Nabokov bounce back after the poor playoff series against Anaheim? Will the persistent trade rumors cause him to live up to waiving his no-trade clause? Will he be emotionally distracted from all of this? Is he even being shopped right now, or is it a wait-and-see situation? And can we really expect 47 wins by playing in 75+ games???

The Hockey News seems to think so. They have Nabokov slated to win an astonishing 47 wins, combined with seven shutouts, a 2.39 GAA and a .910 save percentage. For Varlamov, they think 37 wins with seven shutouts, a 2.35 GAA and a .918 is in the cards for the true rookie goaltender.

Now while I don't disagree with these predictions because, well, they're predictions, I struggle to comprehend how they got these numbers. Instead of trying to unravel that mystery, I decided to make my own personal predictions.

NABOKOV – Incredibly durable and consistent, regardless of what the opposition throws his way. He could still be hampered by a lingering groin problem, but he'll still find a way to start at least 65 games this season. I see him just barely reaching the 40-win plateau, as it would take close to 80 games played in order to reach THN's 47-win mark.

With the Olympics and at this stage in Nabokov's career (he's 34 now) the Sharks would be well advised to rest him more over the course of the season. With these stingy trade rumors and his willingness to waive the no-trade clause comes urgency for the franchise to look beyond him by bringing in some more prized goalie prospects. That means Thomas Greiss will play – and I see him factoring into the Sharks' season in the same manner Brian Boucher did.

If Nabokov stays healthy, I expect his save percentage to be closer to .918 or .920 because he'll be in much more of a rhythm over a longer period of time. That means even though he may not play as many games, he'll be that much more effective and consistent. If he does play fewer games but averages his usual number of shutouts (seven or eight), his save percentage will actually improve more than if he played 77+ games.

Overall, Nabokov is a rock and will play like one all season long. Last year he went 7-2-0 in October, but allowed a whopping 25 goals in those nine games. But regardless of his "slow" start, his success will be determined by how he handles the mental aspects of those trade rumors, the Olympics and his wretched playoff series against the Ducks.

VARLAMOV – Ironically, the NHL Network replayed the Penguins-Capitals series this past week, so I was able to re-absorb a 21-year-old goaltender finding a way to win hockey games after being thrown into the middle of a vicious battle. He came through with numerous big stops at key moments against the Rangers and Penguins. Technically, the Penguins ripped him up over the course of the series, which resulted in a quite deflating Game 7. In the end, Varlamov proved that mentally, he was already a superstar. Technically, however, he's still developing those skills.

I see Varlamov in the same light as many other young Russian goalies. They either have tons of raw talent and potential that takes longer time to develop* or they are straight up desperation-style goalies that play somewhat of an unconventional butterfly, but find a way to win games due to their excellent mental toughness.** Technically they're not elite or even strong by any means, but they find a way to make it work with athleticism.

In that regard, I think Varlamov still has a lot of work to do before he's capable of winning close to 40 games and collecting seven shutouts, even with the most potent offensive team in front of him. I would say he's similar to Peter Budaj, who was technically sloppy all year long, but still has the athleticism needed to win games (his shootout record is proof of this). At this point, all I can say is that Budaj and Varlamov will be successful at the NHL level by relying on their mental toughness and a lot of athleticism, not necessarily the mastery of things like rebound control and reading shooters. Those are skills that come over time, so neither of them should be expected to have it so soon.

For Varlamov I see a more realistic save percentage being around .908 or .910 in what is officially his rookie season. But due to the games he played in the playoffs and the number of times he was called up last season, I can see why some of you would consider it his sophomore campaign. The seven shutouts seems a little high, but then again if he's playing enough games to win 37-40 of them, anything is possible. A goals against average of 2.35 is very plausible and I would say to expect a low number of 2.25 and a high number of 2.55 for his season.

THEODORE – I'll try to get through this as quickly as possible. The Capitals and the NHL will treat him with all the respect in the world, just as they do with every player that goes through a personal tragedy. Therefore I feel that Theodore will get the same number of opportunities to be Washington's #1 goaltender. From training camp until the Olympics, Theodore will have the chance to play just as much as Varlamov. A lot of how Theodore is personally handling the situation will obviously dictate his playing time, not so much his puck-stopping ability.

Health and rust is just as much an issue as any other NHL goalie for Theodore, but emotionally and mentally, what happened to his family will never be shaken off. There is no way around this, other than to go right through it. Fortunately I know that he will get the support he needs and the

opportunities he deserves to keep his starting role with the Capitals. And you will see no arguments from anyone in that regard.

DESPERATION vs. SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

When it comes to comparing the two Russian goalies, one of the most obvious differences I saw between them is a term I've used before - ***situational awareness***. Basically, Nabokov is much more aware of plays that develop in his end and ultimately manages games with much more ease than Varlamov.

Nabokov has age, experience and wisdom on his side. He has been in numerous overtime games and been successful. But more importantly, Nabokov has also experienced games that were downright heartbreakers. I'll never forget his Western Conference Semifinals series against the Avalanche back in 2004 when Joe Sakic fired two ballistic missiles past him in two consecutive overtime games. The Sharks went on to win that series, of course.

That kind of adversity has slowly turned Nabokov into a veteran warrior capable of handling just about anything that comes his way…sans the Hiller-injected Anaheim Ducks. Experience from playing and being able to execute big moments almost always prevails over youthful enthusiasm, at least in the sense of execution and consistency.

Unfortunately, it takes a lot more than just that to win a playoff series. Nevertheless, Nabokov is rightly still considered one of the Top-10, sometimes Top-5 goalies in the NHL. He will certainly have another strong season this year, but how he handles the trade rumors and his nagging groin will ultimately dictate if he can eclipse 46 wins.

With Varlamov, I saw an AHL goaltender with average talent but elite mental toughness play with desperation, poise and confidence behind one of the best offenses in the league. His big-save ability was an inspiration to his coaches, teammates and fans. What he did will definitely go down in history as one of the top performances in the playoffs for a Caps goalie. But from a technical standpoint, Varlamov should not yet be considered a full-time elite NHL starter.

{youtube}01Ow7Kxaqb4{/youtube}

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01Ow7Kxaqb4

I've watched this video numerous times and even dissected it frame-by-frame. I'll quickly dissect this play.

Varlamov is so focused on Kunitz' backhand pass that he bites and drops into his butterfly without even realizing Crosby is OBVIOUSLY heading to the net after making the original drop pass just inside the blue line. To me, Varlamov's severe lack of situational awareness forces him to make a desperate, but AMAZING stick save.

A quickly-developing 2-on-2 at the blue line with Crosby and Kunitz results in a nice crossing drop-pass play. That constitutes some type of give-and-go situation where Crosby heads to the net to do what forwards have been doing for years - create traffic and provide Kunitz with more options. Varlamov's massive mistake was biting so hard on a backhand shot by butterfly sliding to his left. Kunitz reads this and has an easy decision to make by sending a cross-crease pass back into the slot area.

This is one of the most routine plays for a goalie to READ coming from the blue line. But making the actual save is tough because a goalie has to show enough patience to hold the inside post until the pass is being made. If he leaves too soon, Kunitz fires it off the inside post on the glove side. Leave too late and either Kunitz powers to the front of the net with a strong forehand move and buries it in the opposite corner, or Crosby gets the pass and buries it.

Even though this is just one little play from an entire series, it's quite obvious that Varlamov was noticeably struggling against a more potent offensive Penguins team. This is pretty much all you need to know about Varlamov, as the biggest difference between his play against the Penguins compared to that of a veteran's (like Chris Osgood) is simply having the experience of reading plays that happen fast. Compared to Osgood, Varlamov was a clear step behind in reading plays.

Finally, this lack of situational awareness is not meant to be a knock against Varlamov. Instead it should be regarded as proof that he is human, he's only 21 years old and he has very little NHL experience. He's only been in the minors for one season in North America and typical of many Russian goaltenders, he still needs a few more years to develop his technique and style. Therefore I find it very hard to believe he will win 37+ games and collect seven shutouts.

Again, as I've always said, experience is everything…especially in the playoffs. But is Varlamov an even stronger mental mastermind than he was before? You better believe it. It's truly "onward and upward" for the Varlamov faithful, but not without some adversity first.

**See Khabibulin, Nabokov, even Shtalenkov*

*** See Kolesnik, Bobkov, etc. In the history of Russian NHL goalies, Bryzgalov's path was the most rapid and unique.*