

The Grand Illusion

Written by Justin Goldman

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We're all aware of the three-year trend that exists within Nashville's goaltending regime. It started with Chris Mason taking over Tomas Vokoun at the tail-end of the 2006-07 season, then continued with Dan Ellis taking over Mason in the second half of the 2007-08 season. Then the trend was perpetuated again when the lanky Pekka Rinne took over Ellis' job last year, which resulted in the rookie phenom starting all but two games in March and April.

This season, the roles have flipped. Now the high expectations fall on Rinne's shoulders to continue where he left off in April. It's the same type of pressure Ellis faced at the start of last season. But now Ellis is the one lurking in the shadows with less pressure than Rinne, even though he's still expected to work hard at reclaiming his starting role.

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From a fantasy perspective, Rinne was easily one of the best sleeper picks around and Ellis was one of the biggest busts. But I had my eyes on both goalies all season long and I can prove that Ellis was not nearly as bad as the stats made him look. In fact, when dissecting every single game he played, it's my belief that Ellis was the victim of a grand illusion and still has the ability to take back his starting role (if Rinne struggles). So let's dive right in and take a look!

Ellis' season started with a pretty lousy 4-4-1 record in October, including games where he was lit up twice for five goals against (DAL, STL) and twice for four goals against (CAL, LA). His failure to find a rhythm right off the bat ultimately propagated his struggles the following month, as he posted a 4-7-0 record in November. But in order to show you why Ellis has been unfairly cast in a negative light, let's break down November game-by-game.

On Nov. 4, Ellis made 35 of 39 saves in a 4-0 loss to Vancouver in a game where he was Nashville's best player. The next game was Rinne's third career start, but he was pulled after allowing four goals on ten shots. Ellis relieved Rinne and made 16 of 19 saves but allowed the game-winner, which pinned him with the loss. In the next game (Nov. 8), Ellis was back in net and made 19 of 20 saves in a 1-0 loss to Colorado. I was at that game and remember Peter Budaj made 26 saves in a rare flawless performance. The only goal Ellis allowed that night was a cross-ice feed from an Avs winger that went directly off a Predators defenseman's stick, leaving Ellis completely helpless.

Even with the 0-1 loss, Ellis was fairly rewarded with the next start in the most difficult game of their season to date. It was the final game of a four-game road trip in San Jose and Ellis stopped 54 of 57 shots in a 4-3 victory. He followed that up by stopping 32 of 35 shots in a 4-3 win against the Ducks (at home) and then played another stellar game the very next night by stopping 33 of 34 shots in a 3-1 win against the Kings. Overall, Ellis had made an overwhelming

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119 saves on 126 shots in just three games - the only time all season long that he would win three games in a row.

Ellis' scintillating streak led many to believe he had found the rhythm he desperately needed after a slow start. But the following two games, either due to being overworked the previous week or just being out-played, he allowed four goals against the Sharks and Tampa Bay, both in 4-1 losses (Nov. 17 and 21). Two days later, Ellis rebounded by stopping 24 of 26 shots in a 5-2 win in Carolina. Two days after that, he actually posted a shutout by stopping 17 shots in 65 minutes of play, but lost in the shootout (0-1 to STL). Unfortunately, the month ended on a very sour note when Ellis was lit up for six goals against the Wild on the second night of a back-to-back.

To kick off December, Rinne started four straight games and went 3-1 with two shutouts. That may have been the turning point for the two goalies, as Ellis started the next four straight games and went 1-3, with his one win coming by way of a shutout. But by the middle of the month, it was clear to the coaching staff that Ellis was not performing consistently enough compared to Rinne. When the 2008 calendar year ended, Rinne had all but taken over for good.

In January, Ellis only started four games and was pulled twice. In February, Ellis only started three games and actually posted a shutout in one of them, but by then it was too late. Rinne was off and running and had gained way too much momentum for the coaching staff to turn back to Ellis. It was a luxury they couldn't afford in the standings.

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As you can see, Ellis struggled with his rhythm and consistency in October and parts of November, a point in time where the team in front of him struggled defensively as well. By the time Rinne caught fire in early-December, the Predators' team defense started to heat up as well, as they collectively found the poise, energy and consistency needed to turn their entire season around.

But by looking closely at Ellis' games in November, it's unfair to say he didn't perform admirably. Nevertheless, with hot and cold streaks comes a lack of consistent playing time. I give full credit to Rinne for his unbelievable play and for straight up stealing the starting role from Ellis with his skill and energy. Even though Rinne's record was only 4-3-0 in December, the second half of his season is summarized nicely in [this article published in The Tennessean](#) :

"The 6-foot-5, 207-pound Rinne made quite an impression in his rookie season, setting a franchise record with seven shutouts, posting an 18-1-2 record when getting at least three or more goals of support and stopping 19 of 24 shootout attempts — the second-best percentage in the league."

One important aspect I touched on was the team's weak defensive play in the first half of the season. The Tennessean article even mentions this as well (see the final sentence). So many Predators followers would agree that the team really started to come together in the second half of the season, which resulted in a lot less headaches for the goalies. Real quickly, here's a chart of Nashville's month-to-month goals against averages. This **does not** include empty-net goals as they are not counted against a goaltender's statistics:

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OCT 3.30 33 GA in 10 GP
NOV 3.07 40 GA in 13 GP

DEC 2.00 26 GA in 13 GP

JAN 2.58 31 GA in 12 GP

FEB 2.00 30 GA in 15 GP

MAR 2.64 37 GA in 14 GP

APR 3.60 18 GA in 5 GP

October and November were their worst months defensively, except for April of course. So combined with Ellis' struggles to start the season, the team's weak defensive play led him to become a victim of pretty inflated stats. He was not nearly as bad as they show. Unfortunately, stats are all that matter from a fantasy perspective, so the lack of playing time in the second half of the season caused many managers to drop him without any hesitation. This may seem unfair, but that's the way the cookie crumbles in the fantasy world. If he's not playing, he's pretty worthless.

This season presents some different dynamics for the goalies. No longer do they have Greg

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Zanon, who was second in the league in blocked shots. Their inspirational leader, Steve Sullivan, is back in action (no pun intended) and we all hope Jason Arnott stays healthy this season. Their fairly young defensive core is one year older, as Ryan Suter, Shea Weber and Kevin Klein are all 24 years old. Head coach Barry Trotz has another year of working the same exact system he's had for years and you can surely bank on him riding the hot goaltender, as it's quite obvious that's something he believes strongly in. I'm thinking Cody Franson would be the team's sixth defenseman? I only see five of them listed on their official roster: <http://predators.nhl.com/club/roster.htm>

How these dynamics will impact Rinne and Ellis' fantasy value remains to be seen and is for you to consider. Personally I think Ellis holds decent fantasy value this season because Rinne could go through the normal sophomore stumbles. Rinne is way too good to fall apart completely, but with healthy competition between the two over the course of the season, I wouldn't be surprised if Ellis starts close to 30 games this year.

I think Rinne is clearly a genetically superior goaltender when it comes to some aspects such as agility, quickness and size. Like I've been saying for years, Finnish goalies take longer to develop than North American goalies, so in a long-term sense, Rinne could easily be considered one of the league's best goalies in just a few more years. I've also discussed his insanely active hands and his propensity for poke-checks and flashy glove saves on here before and I'm sure if you haven't already, you'll notice it with little effort once the season begins.

So in conclusion, please do not underestimate Ellis' skill level or his chances to continue the crazy dethroning trend that has transpired the last three seasons. He will have a legitimate shot to provide just as much stability as Rinne did last year...all hinging on Rinne's play, of course. But both goalies are well-positioned with their future in this league and there's no denying that Rinne could potentially struggle to start the season. It may not be as likely to happen since he's so talented, but goaltending is 90% mental and sometimes talent can only take you so far.

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Ask goalie analysts around the world about Ellis and they will all say that he's one of the better puck handlers in the league. He also has elite talent of squaring up to shooters and taking lots of shots off the chest. He's fast and agile and has great situational awareness. Mitch Korn has worked wonders with Ellis since he came over from Dallas and I'm sure he worked hard over the summer. He has all the tools needed to succeed, but will have to take advantage of every minute he's in the crease, as a whole season can be dictated by how a goalie plays in their first ten games.

Simply put, there's no reason why Ellis couldn't do this season what Rinne did last season. It literally comes down to each and every start, minute played and save made. Taking advantage of a strong start goes a long way not only in overall fantasy value, but overall momentum. In a world of unknowns, one thing we know for sure is that the more you play, the more likely you are to achieve a good rhythm.

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