

Heat Seekers

Written by Justin Goldman

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Thanks to some great pre-season coverage by the NHL Network over the last week, I was able to decipher a handful of goalies that are already heating up for a red-hot start to the regular season. Although these exhibition games were meaningless in the standings and filled with prospects and rusty veterans, things like positioning, body movement and rebound control still reveal a lot when it comes to how a goalie might start the regular season.

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If you are one of the more active managers in your league, there's still time to make some changes to your teams or even acquire your favorite fantasy sleeper by trade. Like I explained last week, there's always a solid crop of backup and third-string goalies available (anywhere from 10-20) in the free agent pool. And odds are that at least one or two of them will surprise us all by breaking out or getting a chance to play tons of games due to another's injury.

There's even a situation where an injury is already mucking things up for one team. Kari Lehtonen hasn't played a single minute of pre-season hockey for the Thrashers yet, which means Ondrej Pavelec (who has logged a ton of exhibition minutes), Johan Hedberg and Manny Legace have battled it out for two spots. If Pavelec ends up grabbing the reigns to start the regular season, watch out. If he catches fire, he could finally stick in the NHL for good.

Now one goalie you won't find on this list is Jonas Gustavsson. But the only reason for that is due to the fact he only played one full pre-season game. And since I've never seen him play in an NHL game before, it's tough to say if he's on the right track. But [one look at this video](#) of his 2-on-0 save against the Red Wings from a few nights ago and you better believe he's going to have plenty of chances to take over Vesa Toskala's starting role in Toronto. By now Gustavsson is probably taken in most leagues anyways. But if he is out there...grab him while you can.

One thing I love about watching goalies during the pre-season is that you can see which ones are motivated and focused right off the bat as opposed to those that slowly ease their way into things. Usually the difference is revealed in age and experience. The older veterans like Chris Osgood, Miikka Kiprusoff and Evgeni Nabokov won't panic or worry if they struggle in the pre-season because they have the ability to "turn it on" when the regular season hits. There's a certain level of confidence that goalies have from being in the league for many years.

But the younger goalies like Steve Mason, Pekka Rinne and Jon Quick will ultimately put more effort into these games and as a result can receive a tremendous boost of confidence when they play well. At the NHL level, part of what makes a goalie so valuable in the fantasy world is simply getting into a rhythm as soon as possible. So here's a list of goalies already heating up for the start of the season later this week!

RYAN MILLER – In my opinion he was the most impressive starting goalie in the pre-season besides Roberto Luongo. It definitely helps his rhythm when the Red Wings pepper him with 42 shots in a single game. Regardless, I noticed that his improvements over the summer stem more from his mental toughness and focus and not necessarily because he's stronger or quicker or has better technique. As he becomes more and more comfortable as a team leader for the Sabres, his fantasy value will ultimately improve.

ROBERTO LUONGO – His scary pre-season numbers were even more revealing when he played his best game against Miikka Kiprusoff in Calgary. He already looks to be in mid-season form with only five goals against in four games (230 minutes) and a .947 save percentage. Often goalies that suffer an injury halfway through the season and come back in time for the playoffs are able to re-gain their timing before the summer hits, which allows them to focus on strengthening their body and then refining movement over the summer. It's hard to believe his technique can improve, but after watching him this past week, you can definitely tell he's sharper and stronger than ever before.

CHRIS MASON – How about allowing only three goals over 180 minutes in four games? That's about as far away from the start he had last season as you could hope for, so this is great news for those that heeded my advice over the summer. There's no way he's going to be nearly as bad as he was last October, so he should continue to gain confidence as he starts the next chapter in his career. Another benefit to Mason's season is the fact that Ty Conklin is going to provide some competition for starts this year, which will push Mason to stay focused all year long.

ALEX AULD – I watched Alex Auld almost steal a game against the Avs here in Denver and then he went and beat them in Dallas just a few days later. In both games [he showed many flashes of brilliance](#) and I noticed his legs were much more efficient and stronger than last year. If you are looking for a solid third goaltender and Auld is still available, he is a gem for sure. I seriously think the move to make him the backup to an inconsistent Marty Turco might have been the most intelligent goalie move made over the summer (Anderson to the Avs is another).

CRAIG ANDERSON – Although he's probably already coveted by a fantasy manager in your league from a save percentage standpoint, there's still a chance some deeper pools have him available. Anderson was rock solid in the pre-season and had great rebound control and focus. If you want even more insight, you can read some of my scouting notes on him from a pair of home pre-season games by clicking [here](#) and [here](#).

JAROSLAV HALAK – Like Anderson, Halak has only allowed a few goals in a few pre-season games. His rebound control is in fine form and he looks to be quicker and sharper than usual (most goalies do, however). That's always a sign that a goalie is heating up, but unfortunately he probably won't be rewarded right away with a ton of regular season minutes. Unless Carey

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Price struggles, Halak will have to work even harder in practice to be ready to rock and roll when opportunity knocks. But all those minutes played this pre-season certainly helps his case for playing more games as a whole.

DAN ELLIS – He didn't play a ton of minutes in the pre-season, but the ones he did were efficient and high quality. Just last night he made 36 saves in a 4-2 win over Steve Mason and the Columbus Blue Jackets. In four games (but only 159 minutes) he's only allowed four goals against. I highly suggest reading my School of Block column [*The Grand Illusion*](#) written back on Sept. 7 as it reveals a lot about Ellis' skill level and real fantasy value.

A few other goalies worth nothing for their pre-season performances would be Josh Harding and Niklas Backstrom, and then some solid prospects like Nathan Lawson, Kevin Lalande and Jon Bernier. It should also be mentioned that in Dave Tippett's first game behind the bench for the Coyotes, Ilya Bryzgalov made 27 saves in a 2-0 shutout win over the Sharks. There were many other good performances out there in the pre-season, but these were the ones that stuck out to me and should result in a positive fantasy impact as the season gets underway!