

## Blank Stare

Written by Justin Goldman

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In just three frenzied days of action, five goalies have walked away with two-game winning streaks, including Craig Anderson, Miikka Kiprusoff, Ray Emery, Marc-Andre Fleury and Carey Price. And unless you watched all 23 games so far, you probably resorted to box scores and recaps to see how your goalies fared. But since they don't tell the whole story on a goalie's performance, you might be wondering where to go from here.

As is customary after the first few days of the season, many managers will see negative results and start hitting the panic button way too soon. Yes, some of you might just be "extremely active" and love tossing out trade offers right off the bat, but others simply show a lack of patience. Others have even allowed doubt to creep into their minds about the goalies they drafted, thus struggling to choose whether or not they should be started on a consistent basis or not.

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But if you're smart, you'll look at the results over the last three days with nothing more than a blank eye stare.

Whether you suffered from Nikolai Khabibulin's blunder with the puck in Edmonton, or Jon Quick and Mike Smith's six-goal letdown, it's really no big deal. It's only natural that a handful of solid starters will struggle early in the season. Even two of the best – Martin Brodeur and Roberto Luongo – have allowed more goals than anyone expected. And in a game where nobody is exempt from early season struggles, you're better off expecting the worst.

But there are a few rules that nature lives by, no matter how chaotic things may seem. For example, veterans are more prone to starting off slow than young rookies or sophomores. Don't panic with guys like Chris Osgood, Tomas Vokoun and Brodeur. They have been around the block a few times and know how to rebound after a bad game. If you doubt them this early in the season, you'll end up benching them in games where they perform just fine and it will end up costing you valuable points.

How many managers started Evgeni Nabokov against the Avalanche, saw how much he struggled in that game, then benched him against the Ducks with the mindset that he was going to lose two in a row? Probably more than you think. This just goes to show that you need to play your stud goalies with confidence, regardless of the previous game's result. This isn't always the case, but to start the season, you have to roll with skill, talent and experience.

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So pay attention to the ten goalies below as I extract the truth behind their start to the season. Honestly, all of it is no big deal. Remember what I have said for two years – base decisions on a sampling of 4-5 games, not just one or two.

## DON'T PANIC

**JON QUICK** – He allowed six goals on 30 shots in a 6-3 loss to the Kings on Saturday night, but four of the goals came off terrible turnovers. Regardless, Quick was visibly rusty and was unable to make the key save at the right time. The first goal he allowed was a slap shot off his shoulder and the two goals he allowed in the third period were slap shots as well. To me that shows a lack of focus, not a lack of skill, so there's no reason to think he's already losing the job to Erik Ersberg.

**JONAS HILLER** – He allowed four goals on 37 shots and was lit up in the first period with three goals on 12 shots. But Hiller redeemed himself in the second period with 16 saves on 17 shots. Overall, the 4-1 loss to the Sharks could hardly be blamed on his performance, especially considering how bad San Jose played in Colorado back on Thursday. So there's absolutely no need to panic. One thing I did notice (after looking at some digital photos up close) about Hiller is that the steel on his skates are pretty low. A pure butterfly goalie instantly performs better when they have brand new steel, so I'll keep looking at pictures of him in games and see if there's a connection between his level of play and his level of steel. Regardless, I'd continue to ride Hiller as if that game never happened.

**NIKOLAI KHABIBULIN** – He made one terrible blunder with the puck in the dying moments of a 3-3 game in a rabid Edmonton. Although it cost the Oilers at least one point, I could care honestly care less. In fact, this could easily be a blessing in disguise, as no veteran goalie will stand for giving up points on a young team. I'm sure most pro goalies would agree that this will light a fire under Khabibulin and force him to play with even more focus and poise than ever before. If there's one goalie sure to rebound from this loss, it's Khabibulin. He is a fiery competitor and a winner and should still be regarded as such.

## DON'T LOSE SIGHT

**MARTY TURCO** – His turnaround didn't start off with a win, but the adjustments he made over the summer were clearly noticeable. Without going into too much detail, it can be seen in his footwork. In years past, Turco would constantly shuffle laterally and forward to cover his angles. This year, his feet are set and he's higher up in his crease in a ready position sooner than usual. Personally I loved what I saw as the game went along, especially since he didn't over-handle the puck. He finished the night with 24 saves on 26 shots and some vintage stops in the shootout.

**ONDREJ PAVELEC** – The new "starting" goalie in Atlanta made 36 saves on 39 shots against the high-powered Tampa Bay Lightning in a 6-3 scoring fest. On a team that allowed 280 goals last year (2<sup>nd</sup> highest in the NHL), Pavelec will have to keep displaying mental toughness in high-scoring games if he expects to play when Lehtonen returns. Pavelec was strong early in this game and had great footwork on shots in tight. Like most goalies on opening night, he made more saves by battling hard as opposed to pristine positioning. I do have to wonder, however, how the game would have been different had the Thrashers-killer Antero Niittymaki been in goal instead of Smitty.

**SEMYON VARLAMOV** – I found this really [insightful interview with Varlamov](#) following his 6-4 win over the Maple Leafs. I think this was a great lesson for fantasy managers that drafted Varlamov really high that he is still developing his style and game. Like I've been stressing all summer, Varlamov is not going to be that strong statistically...and the game against Toronto was great proof of this. Even though he made a lot of great saves, some of the goals he allowed displayed his lack of situational awareness.

### DON'T OVERREACT

**ANTTI NIEMI** – His shutout in Finland was a very nice end to the second-annual NHL Premiere, but realize how little he was tested. He only faced three shots in the first and eight in the second. If there's one thing you can take from his performance though, it's the great focus he had in the third period while making 12 saves to preserve the shutout. Overall, Niemi proved he deserved the backup role to Huet, nothing more, nothing less. It was a good short-term decision by the Blackhawks...but I'm not sure about the long-term.

**RAY EMERY** – You couldn't ask for much more from a goalie considered to be one of the biggest risks of the season. I'm not surprised that Emery has had such [a strong start to the season](#), especially on the road where he has the chance to play spoiler. Everyone is going to rave about his focus and skill right now, but this is a story that gets written over the course of entire season. It sure helps having a blue line that includes Chris Pronger, right Anaheim? Keep in

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mind that with a high-risk, high-reward goalie, the risk still exists no matter what type of numbers he puts up.

## DON'T FORGET

**CHRIS MASON** – I've never seen a glove single-handedly beat the Red Wings, but Mason made it happen in the first game of the season. He was sensational in that game and looked like he didn't miss a single step since the playoff series against Vancouver. I loved the decision to play Ty Conklin the following day, not only because it's a goalie fired up to play against his former team, but because it breeds positive competition between the two. Don't worry about Mason losing minutes to Conklin – it won't happen and it's not something the Blues are trying to accomplish.

**CRAIG ANDERSON** – What do I love most about Anderson's start to the regular season? His focus. Please watch [this short video](#) following his 3-0 shutout over the Canucks and watch his body language. He looks determined and he understands a pair of wins is no big deal. It feels great, but it means nothing over the course of an 82-game season. When he's asked about his confidence, he understands that there's no point in getting too high. Once you start thinking you are better than everyone else, it can quickly come crashing down. So again I'll reiterate that Anderson is the full-blown starter for this team and is now going to play closer to 60 games than 55.