

## Optimization

Written by Justin Goldman

Monday, 30 November 2009 14:24 - Last Updated Tuesday, 01 December 2009 12:02

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When Ray Emery's season in Russia ended, I knew his play would lead to a shot at NHL redemption. I also knew that, regardless of his talent and ability, Emery would no doubt experience a set of mental highs and lows that could have very negative results. When October arrived, I was surprised that Flyers management had so much confidence in his ability, as they all but handed Emery the starting job without him having to prove much of anything. To me, actions speak louder than words, especially for someone in his situation.

Sure, Emery silenced even his toughest critics with some excellent play in October, but it was very early in a very long season. To me, part of the problem was that the Flyers didn't give themselves any real buffer zone or backup plan. Nothing against Brian Boucher, but I could think of maybe five or six other goalies available at the time that could be pushing Emery harder for minutes. Now through 24 games for the Flyers, Emery has started 20 of them.

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Nevertheless, things have worked out well so far. Emery has been consistent in his approach to handling the responsibility of being an NHL starter, both on and off the ice. Everything was fine and dandy during a five-game winning streak that stretched through the middle of November, until they headed west on a three-game road trip. All of a sudden, without warning, Emery's game took a nose dive.

I was scouting the Avs/Flyers game last Monday with extreme interest, as it was my first time seeing Emery's entire pre-game routine in real life. This routine was extremely over-active for a big goalie. It included a lot of foot and leg movement while standing in the slot during the national anthem, combined with an extravagant ritual that took place as soon as the singing ended. He immediately skated to the net and placed his head in the goal right beneath the crossbar. He held there for a good 4-5 seconds, then came back to life, put his helmet on and proceeded to hit the crossbar with his glove before the puck dropped. More than anything, it was a razzle-dazzle routine to fire him up.

From the first shot on goal, Emery's hands were the source of his struggle. They were over-active, forcing him to mishandle shots up high. He over-reacted badly on a simple Paul Stastny wrist shot to his glove side, a player who was struggling to score. He had a lot of excess footwork during simple tracking plays in his zone and he never seemed to settle into a rhythm. The puck control problems continued until Emery was pulled after allowing four goals.

Every Tuesday on The Goalie Guild, we post an article by Shaun Smith from [Absolute Mental Training](#). Now from someone who has provided sound goalie advice for years, let me be the first to tell you that his articles are pure gold. Not only are they resourceful for goalies of all ages, but also for any fantasy manager that will go beyond the norm to improve their goaltending decisions.

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Simply put, if you are reading this, you should be reading them.

As soon as I saw last Tuesday's article [about work ethic](#) and saw the term **Optimal Arousal Level**, I nearly shouted out Emery's name. A few minutes later, I rabidly e-mailed Shaun to get his thoughts on Emery's struggles in the 5-4 loss to Colorado. I was not surprised at all with what he said.

"I did watch the highlights and Emery was definitely not in his optimal arousal level," he wrote. "The goals that Emery let in were brutal. Even some of the saves he was making were made to look harder because he was over-playing the puck and looked like he was trying to block too much."

As you can tell, both of us know that Emery is a goalie with plenty of talent and solid technique, but mentally struggles in so many areas that it severely affects his fantasy value. It could be things like his work ethic, his lack of dedication to practicing like he plays, or his overall focus. Does he prepare like most mentally sound goaltenders do? It sure didn't show when he was falling from grace in Ottawa.

Emery is struggling with his optimal arousal level right now and regardless of the reason for it happening, he's starting to lose value in the fantasy realm. He also has one foot deeper in the grave by working with the same type of goalie coach that Brian Elliott had before his game got refined. The positioning that Emery has displayed over the course of the season is a little bit

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more of a blocking style, not the free-flowing hybrid style that dominates the position today. But that's another article for another time, my dear goalie aficionados.

When it comes to your fantasy goalies, realize there's a big difference between a pre-game routine that allows a goalie to reach a comfort zone and a routine that is just a bunch of random movements that end up exceeding an optimal arousal level. Do you know what your goalie's optimal arousal level looks like? Can you tell if he's "in the zone" or a step behind a lot of plays? Does he react to plays with composure, or is he wildly attacking the puck, with excessive movement and bad rebound control?

Read Shaun's article so that you too can understand what Optimal Arousal Level looks and feels like from a goalie's point of view. I promise, if you watch your goalies close enough, you'll be able to discern the signs and symptoms just like any goalie scout - and then benefit from knowing whether or not your goalie is playing at his best or just playing well enough to scrape by with some wins.

## J-S GIGUERE

I will be the first to come out and say I'm eating my words regarding J-S Giguere. Not that I thought he was incapable of winning games, but the last week was beyond impressive. He went 3-0-1 in his last four starts and only allowed seven goals. He did not allow a power play goal against and also has one awesome shutout. His shot totals have dropped each game, going

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from 43 to 30 to 28 to 26, so he's not over-worked mentally or physically either.

The most impressive aspect was Giguere's ability to clear out the drama regarding his statements to the press, hit the refresh button and play poised, focused hockey. It's a sign of remarkable mental toughness and part of what makes him such a strong competitor. I don't see anything different technically speaking, other than he's playing with a lot of confidence now and making the big saves...and a lot of them.

From a fantasy perspective, this may seem like a really tough consideration for many managers. Giguere is just hanging out there like a juicy grape on the vine of good and evil. Will he keep this play up and re-claim the starting role or will he come back down to earth and give way to Jonas Hiller once again? To be honest, that's not the most pertinent question right now. What you want to know is exactly HOW LONG Giguere's great play will last.

I would say you can depend on Giguere for another week. Don't be afraid to pluck him up, as there's very little risk involved considering he hasn't been on many managers' rosters up until last week. You probably already have two or three quality goalies, so why not add another and let it ride for a week? If you don't have faith in his consistency (I personally don't) then try trading him while his value is high. Some of you might sign him and use him wisely, while others might sign him just to package in a trade. Regardless of your motive, he's definitely worth picking up.



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Fleury	1,277	554	4-1-0   13 GA
Lundqvist	1,255	634	2-3-0   15 GA
Backstrom	1,253	601	2-1-2   13 GA
Vokoun	1,205	700	2-1-2   13 GA
Miller	1,182	565	2-2-1   12 GA
Emery	1,177	557	1-3-0   18 GA

The noticeable correlation here is that the veteran workhorses have the better numbers. Anderson, Quick and Emery are struggling while Brodeur, Nabokov (we explained his durability last week, but he also allowed three goals against in each of the last five games) and Kiprusoff, are flourishing. Bryzgalov benefits from a much lower shots against ratio thanks to Dave Tippett's system and Fleury's record looks nice thanks to a lot of offensive support.

Although stats will never really show a correlation between the grid above and the same thing for goalies that have played 10-15 games, it's still interesting to think about. One thing's for sure, it's never good to be atop the shots against category as well as minutes played. Remember last week when I said that if Anderson played three of four games, it was one too many? Well, he played all four of them, including back-to-back games against Minnesota.

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Once again, the Avalanche plays four games this week, all of which are on the road. How many games will Anderson play this time around and what will his numbers look like when the road trip is over?