

## Men with Mystery

Written by Justin Goldman

Monday, 11 January 2010 14:47 - Last Updated Tuesday, 12 January 2010 09:50

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When it comes to young and relatively unknown talent in the NHL, it's easy for a goalie scout to decipher their upside compared to others because it's visible with the naked eye. Without even trying, I clearly see Pekka Rinne's quick hands, Jonas Hiller's awesome lateral movement and even Jaroslav Halak's great composure. Although their future is still up in the air, recognizing their unique puck-stopping traits proves they have some tremendous potential.

If you were to look back at every prediction I've provided for Dobber Nation over the last eight

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months regarding prospects, it would be tough to find any that would now be considered completely off base. Well, I did go back over the last week while working on the [Mid-Season Guide](#) and found one glaring right back at me. Yes, I was wrong about Jimmy Howard's ability to win at this level, so allow me to be the first in line for 50 lashings with a rusty nail-studded leather strap - I feel like I deserve it.

But can you really blame me? I mean, when watching Howard play, I still notice many aspects of his game that need a lot of work. Even with my own reasons for not overly-loving him as a long-term keeper, I am extremely unbiased in my scouting. I always give credit when it's deserved, and maybe no goalie is more deserving right now than Howard.

I won't waste time trying to explain how he moves or what he does that is different from other goalies, because it's not pertinent halfway through the season. The point is that he's winning games, coming up with the timely save and stopping a ton of pucks, all at the same time, all when least expected, against the odds and to my utmost surprise.

To be honest, sometimes it's good to leave these men with mystery alone – they could very well be the first of a new breed. Whether we are talking about Rinne, Antti Niemi or Jonas Hiller, they all deserve the chance to make a name for themselves. And even though I've already taken the time to dissect their styles, there's no point doing it here, because underneath the surface, all goalies are the same kind of creature. If you have followed my rants at all this year, then you know equal opportunity is something every prospect needs, whether they completely deserve it or not.

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So it looks more and more like Howard could be the next successful goalie that doesn't look the prettiest, but still gets the job done. If you look past Niemi, Tim Thomas, Craig Anderson and a few others, not many NHL goalies display a clearly discernable "alternative" butterfly style. The pure butterfly or the Flybrid currently dominates today's game.

But does that mean these quasi-butterfly goalies are any less capable of stopping the puck? Not in the slightest bit. Sure, there may be a few instances where the butterfly is the only technique that will work in a given situation, but there still exists other ways to get from point-A to point-B just as efficiently. Plus I can always state the obvious - that no two goalies move or make a save the exact same way.

When looking at the bigger picture, this stigma that Detroit goalies are worth owning only because the team in front of them is defensive-minded and doesn't allow a lot of shots against has to die already. Yes, it's safe to say there's a real feeling of security that comes with owning a Red Wings goalie. And although they may not post the best stats ever, you can bank on them being one or two goals better than their opponent on most nights.

But it doesn't take anything away from what they have accomplished or how they are playing from time to time. If you haven't done what I did last week, just face the facts – Howard is a good fit for the Red Wings. I mean, how many times have you heard that it doesn't take a great goalie to be successful in Detroit, just a good one? Well, there you go. The Red Wings now have another "good one" in the fold.

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So even though Howard doesn't look like an elite talent, you simply can't argue with results. He's now on a 5-1-1 run since Christmas, facing an average of 35 shots against per game and stopping 235 out of 245 total shots. When was the last time Detroit allowed an average of 35 shots over the course of more than seven games? Good luck finding it.

Regardless of where Howard goes from here with his rookie season, it's the first time in what seems like ages that fantasy managers can drop the belief that Red Wings goalies are only as good as the team in front of them. I still personally don't think Howard is an elite prospect, but he has the ability to win games by making timely saves. And the more he plays, the more comfortable he becomes, all while Detroit only gets healthier for the big playoff push.

## CAM WARD

If you haven't noticed after last night's stellar performance against the Senators, Cam Ward has upgraded his game from Tropical Storm to Hurr-i-caaaaane.

Ward is 3-2-0 in his last five starts and has only allowed nine goals against. It is my belief that you can point to one reason for this upswing - strong play in the first period. In a 2-1 loss against the Rangers on Dec. 31, Ward stopped 13 of 14 in the first and gave his team a chance to win. In the second game of this home-and-home series, he would stop all eight shots he

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faced en route to a 2-1 win. On Jan. 7 in Nashville, he only stopped 10 of 12 shots and simply did not have the same focus in a 4-2 loss against the Predators.

But in his two previous games, he stopped 14 first-period shots in a 2-1 victory over Colorado on Friday and then an incredible 16 shots in the first period against Ottawa in a 4-1 win on Sunday. Okay, it may not be the only reason Ward is improving, but it is certainly a legitimate reason and highly-visible statistic. I wonder how many times in those five games he was voted as one of the Three Stars of the Game.

Another reason for his improved play, although not as visible, would be his aggressiveness. I don't just mean his positioning in the crease, but more so his active hands. He's ripping a page out of Rinne's book and showing confidence with his ability to poke check, cut off passing lanes in tight and then take away space by holding his hands a little further out in front of him than usual.

I've said it for years and you've even heard it recently from Dobber (somewhere in his ramblings I believe), but of course I'll reiterate for new readers and those left unaware - Ward is one of the elite goalies in the league. Despite the terrible start the Hurricanes had and despite his slashed leg, there's nothing I see when I watch him play that leads me to believe he's worse than he was last year.

I've come to understand that fantasy hockey is based more on trends and statistics than

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anything else, but when it comes to goalies, legitimate talent should never be overlooked, no matter how bad their statistics may be through the first three months. Ward has turned his game around and now he's motivating his teammates with very strong starts.

Of all the prophecies and prognostications I've made in the last eight months, one I can say is dead on was [Mason vs. Fleury vs. Ward](#). After what you have seen from the other two goalies in the last two weeks, who do you think would have been the best choice for Team Canada's third-string goalie? Exactly.

## MATHIEU GARON

Isn't it amazing what happens when a goalie gets three consecutive starts? It's like a Renaissance – a rebirth. The Columbus Blue Jackets are back. I've only been ranting about this for over a year (since Garon started the first two games of last season with the Oilers).

And that's all I have left to add, because Garon's shutout over the Stars on Sunday night is all the analysis you need. What a concept – three starts in a row for a pure butterfly goalie. Amazing! Until my next blunder, which hopefully never comes, I'll sit here and do what I always do – watch it all go down and try to escape another 50 lashings.

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