As of today, it’s no longer about the goalie with the most wins, saves or shutouts. It’s not even about the goalie with the most experience or the fastest reflexes. As of today, it is only about the goalie with the most focus, confidence and situational awareness. Finally, the long-awaited 2010 Winter Olympics and ice hockey tournament is here and I’m excited to be tracking the men’s goaltending every single step of the way.

Canadians everywhere are freaked out about their goaltending and they have a right to be worried. Martin Brodeur and Roberto Luongo were both pulled in their final NHL game before the break. But by no means should this lead anyone to lose all hope, for every goalie on every team mentally pushes the reset button. As of today, it’s a clean slate for everyone and the previous games will only mean as much as each goalie allows.

Does it help to have some momentum and confidence heading into tomorrow’s action? Of

course. But it's not a necessary component or a determining factor for being successful. So when it comes to figuring out which goalies have the best chance for stealing a game, look less at stats and more at the mental aspects of the position.

In the Olympics, everything is magnified. It's similar to what you experience during the Stanley Cup Finals. Every save shifts and manipulates the momentum of a game more than ever. It can energize the team and give them more confidence, allowing them to play more comfortably. Goals against can be a mental burden and destroy a goalie's confidence. Most importantly, a surprising coaching decision or change in goal can impact the team's play as well.

One dynamic to watch closely is each goalie's first five minutes. How they settle into the first game will go a long way in determining their overall pace for the Olympics. If a capable goalie on a weaker team comes out with some big saves early, the swell of confidence could influence the team's entire performance for a lot more than one game.

So don't be surprised if Jonas Hiller or Thomas Greiss find a way to steal a game in this tournament. Both of them are elite, young prospects with the ability to shock the entire world. Everyone knows how much Hiller has improved over the last year and Greiss has shown flashes of brilliance as Nabokov's backup. Both goalies have major hurdles to overcome in their first game, as Hiller faces off against USA and Greiss goes up against Sweden.

It's also worth pointing out that goalies coming into the tournament "struggling" will be thinking

about it much more than those that are already on a roll or in a rhythm. There is no real correlation between their statistics and how they will play at the start of the tournament, but that depends on the goalie's mental toughness. Will the struggling goalies like Brodeur be able to shake off the pressure to perform at their best, or will their struggles be the onset to bad play?

Only time will tell. Nobody has the answers, not even the goalies in question. And when all is said and done, I think the most exciting aspect of the Olympics will be the influence a hot goalie can have on the final outcome. There are some elite young goalies that have a very good chance to steal a game, so the Gold Medal is there for the taking. It's one of the most wide open tournaments ever, so be sure to follow along with our ***Olympic Goaltending Notebook*** , which includes an Olympic Beast Tracker, scouting reports, live chats and much more!

**TEAM CANADA**

Despite terrible numbers in January, this is Martin Brodeur's job to lose. All three goalies have been inconsistent this year, so I won't be surprised if Mike Babcock seriously considers starting all three. The first game against Norway should allow Brodeur to settle into a situation he's very familiar with – not facing a lot of shots. Although Brodeur comes with the best pedigree and most experience, he also instills the most confidence in his teammates. But all three goalies have different strengths to draw on, so they should all get serious consideration for starts. Ultimately, I think Canada will have to live and die by Brodeur's ability to stay focused in their round-robin games.

## TEAM USA

Ryan Miller is one of the few goalies coming into the tournament with a win. He beat the Sharks 3-1 and played more confident than he did at any point in the last two weeks. That game, combined with Tim Thomas' lack of minutes and consistency, warrants Miller getting the start against the Swiss on Tuesday. But the dynamic that Jon Quick brings to this team is interesting to discuss. Although he's the least experienced of the three, he's been the most consistent and shut out the Avalanche (22 saves) on Saturday, which was the final NHL game before the Olympic break. If I had to list the hottest goalies heading into the tournament, Quick would probably be the first one. I would also consider him Miller's backup, just because he's in a great rhythm and at the top of his game – the polar opposite of Thomas.

## TEAM RUSSIA

Although Evgeni Nabokov played a somewhat pedestrian game in the loss against the Sabres, I can easily say that he's going to be one of the best Olympic goalies out there. Similar to Brodeur, he's going to have some major goal support on his side, so it will be all about focus and timely saves. Because Semyon Varlamov has been injured over the last few months, the pressure falls on Ilya Bryzgalov to come up big if Nabokov struggles. Russia's schedule is not terribly difficult, as they start off against Latvia and then face Slovakia and then the Czech Republic.

## TEAM SWEDEN

With this tournament being played with regular NHL rink dimensions, I have to wonder about Henrik Lundqvist's ability to play as strong as he did in Torino. Over the last month, I have documented and discussed how deep he's playing in the net...even deeper than usual. If he doesn't play with extreme confidence and take a step off the goal line, how will he fare against powerful offensive teams like Canada and Russia? Fortunately for Sweden, Lundqvist has a great chance to settle into the tournament. They play Germany, Belarus and then Finland. But watch to see where Lundqvist is making his saves. Is it right on the goal line or is he actually pushing out a step or two?

## TEAM FINLAND

Miikka Kiprusoff got his wish a few months ago and will be leading this team in the round robin games. Antero Niittymaki has had an outstanding season for the Lightning but struggled in his final game before the Olympics. Nevertheless, he's the reigning 2006 Tournament MVP and he definitely deserves a chance to play if Kiprusoff allows that window of opportunity to open. Kiprusoff has been extremely consistent this season and made so many spectacular saves that you have to expect the same throughout this tournament. With games against Germany and then Belarus, key in on their final round-robin game against Sweden as a huge test heading into the Medal round.

## TEAM SLOVAKIA

Jaroslav Halak, like Brodeur and Luongo, was pulled in his final NHL game before the break. Peter Budaj hasn't even played a game since early January. So with a team that doesn't have nearly the offensive talent of Canada or Russia, Halak's play is extremely influential and important to Slovakia's success. But Halak is capable of making the big saves look easy and his composure will be a major asset, as it will be infectious to his teammates. If there's one team that could pull off an upset, Slovakia might be it. Their schedule is tough – they start against the Czech Republic and then face Russia before playing Latvia.

## POTENTIAL UPSETS

Five exciting round-robin games that could result in a major upset:

1. Germany over Sweden
2. Switzerland over Canada
3. Slovakia over Russia
4. Czech Republic over Russia
5. Switzerland over USA

Finally, here's a list of some Olympic goalies and how they fared in their last five NHL games:

J. QUICK 4-1-0 / 12 GA / 109-121 / .901% / 1 SO

R. LUONGO 2-3-0 / 13 GA / 140-153 / .915% / 1 SO

T. VOKOUN 0-4-1 / 13 GA / 164-177 / .927%

E. NABOKOV 3-2-0 / 14 GA / 175-189 / .926%

R. MILLER 1-2-2 / 14 GA / 147-161 / .913%

J. HALAK 3-2-0 / 15 GA / 144-159 / .906%

M. BRODEUR 1-3-1 / 15 GA / 105-120 / .875