

## Freedom Fighters

Written by Justin Goldman

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If there was one subject I loved more than any other in high school and college, it was world and state history. Whether it was the fight for the Alamo or the Civil War, not a day went by where I didn't ponder a country or society's fight for independence. It was not just a lesson in history's wild timeline, but a lesson in life and in human nature.

As a high school and college goaltender, I experienced more bloody battles lost than wonderful wars won. As such, I went through many of my own personal ice fights for freedom. Whether the goal was to get more starts or simply out-perform another set of goalies in tryouts, I fought hard to create an identity in a world full of other unique netminders.

And now, as a pro goalie scout, I easily recognize those same trials, tribulations and traits in goalies all over the world. That struggle to prolong a storied career, the fight for a second

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chance or the battle to bounce back from an abysmal season happens to every player on the road to the NHL. But with only two spots per team for a goalie, only a select few will celebrate their own independence, while the rest will fail and continue to trudge forward.

This is the circle of life for an elite goaltender. It's simply part of what makes the position so stressful and rewarding.

There are many reasons why a goalie thrives under a new sense of freedom. For one, they receive a big boost in confidence. When goalies fail to win one war, they feel alone, ashamed, unwanted. But when another army comes calling, they are once again wanted, needed and important to winning the war. For goalies that battle in the minors and finally get the call from the big club's General Manager, the sense of accomplishment is like none other. They feel special, like one perfect tasty grape plucked off the vine of thousands.

This positive reinforcement reassures the goaltender that they are capable of not only being a winner, but a great leader as well. And every goalie longs for that increased role on the team, so most of them thrive and improve. They all work hard for that moment and they'll be buried deep in the ground before they let that opportunity slip away.

Just in the last week, a string of goalies from Antero Niittymaki to Dany Sabourin have been rewarded with a chance to write a new chapter in their careers. Their patience and perseverance has paid off, as they see a rise in their short and long-term value. So in order to sort out the

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mass confusion that was the free agent frenzy, here's a look at eight goalies that have fought hard for their own independence.

**ANTERO NIITYMAKI** –Although many goalies moved in the last week, Niittymaki's leap from Tampa Bay to San Jose is easily the biggest fantasy boost of them all. He'll be pushed by Thomas Greiss to hold onto the starting role, but statistically speaking, Niittymaki owners struck gold. Antero fought admirably on a team that had many defensive issues, but now he's on a well-rounded successful team. Therefore it's not a stretch to expect between 35 and 40 wins. It's a feel-good story of liberation, so a boost in his role means he'll have little issue carrying a heavier workload.

**DAN ELLIS** –Another goalie with clear-cut starter potential was liberated by signing a two-year deal with the Tampa Bay Lightning. Although he had plenty of success in Nashville, the writing was on the wall with the long-term contract signed by Pekka Rinne. Since Ellis carries a strong work ethic and reputation into the deep south, he'll have no problem handling the role of taking the team back to the playoffs. With the starter role his for the taking, expect close to 30 wins and much better statistics than one would expect on a weak defensive club. His rhythm will be excellent.

**CORY SCHNEIDER** –With Andrew Raycroft signing a two-year deal in Dallas, Schneider will finally graduate to the NHL as Roberto Luongo's new backup. And thanks to a boost of confidence from the coaching staff and a new full-time goalie coach in Roland Melanson, Schneider will be more than ready for his planned 20 starts. After years of toiling in the AHL, he's now free to write his NHL career story, one that will probably have more ups than downs.

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**JACOB MARKSTROM** – The big boy out of Brynas paid his dues in Sweden and is now free to take the first step in his pro hockey career. With a one-way ticket to Rochester, Markstrom has the perfect opportunity to not only legitimize the #2 spot in our [Top-100 Rankings](#)

, but give Panthers fans even more reason to be excited for the future. Although he might struggle in the first few months, it's only a matter of time before he adjusts to the new battlefield and his surroundings. Expect great things from him this season while paired with Euro stud Alex Salak.

**JASON BACASHIHUA** – Although he's no longer considered a prospect, I love when a hard-working, patient goalie gets rewarded with a starting gig. The last time Bacashihua was part of the Avalanche organization, he was somewhat buried in Lake Erie. This time around, he's the clear-cut starter and is partnered with a somewhat feeble veteran in John Grahame. Entrenched as the #3 goalie for Colorado, his value is the highest it has been since his days with the Blues. He's only one man down from returning to the NHL, and if called upon, he will thrive in Denver.

**CAREY PRICE**—By far the most obvious freedom fighter in the last week is Montreal's golden boy. With Jaroslav Halak out of the picture and Alex Auld coming in as nothing more than a backup, Price is being called upon to start around 65 games and lead the Canadiens back to the playoffs. Pressure is the biggest key here, as he must do everything he can to legitimize his status within the organization on a daily basis. He'll be watched like a hawk from above, but if the fans can rally behind his youthful enthusiasm, the Habs will be one of the last teams standing.

**GUSTAV WESSLAU** – Under the surface and below the radar, Wesslau's dreams came true by

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signing a one-year deal with Columbus. The former Djurgardenstud has very lofty goals, which includes the dethroning of one Steve Mason. Thanks to Columbus' solid scouting work and the dismissal of Kevin Lalande, he has now been given that opportunity. Expect him to command and conquer the starting role in Springfield, all while honing his ability to stop pucks in North America. They ask players and fans to carry the flag in Columbus - he could carry the whole city soon.

**JUSTIN PETERS** –When a goalie is called to duty without warning for the first time, it is often a tense situation that leads many goalies to play with stress and anxiety. For those that have the maturity and situational awareness to play in a calm and effective manner, it goes a long way to proving their merit to the organization. For those that succeed in flying colors, it is important they are rewarded in some way for their services. Especially after Carolina made a major mistake by letting Michael Leighton walk, it is great to see them reward Peters by not re-signing Manny Legace. Their self-professed faith in Peters will pay off, as he'll be the perfect complement to Cam Ward and thrive in his new role.

## THE BATTLE WAGES ON

With so many minor league goalies on the move, a number of internal battles are underway and will last through the summer. When one goalie's situation is confirmed, it impacts the value of all other goalies below them, and to a lesser degree, the goalies above them as well. Below are just a few of the decisions a General Manager and his cabinet of scouts must make in the coming months. In some instances, it will be up to the goalies in question to decide their own

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fate through their actions on the ice during training camp. So ask yourself these questions:

*Should the Islanders have Mikko Koskinen or Kevin Poulin play behind Nathan Lawson in Bridgeport?*

*Should the Flyers have Sergei Bobrovsky or Nicola Riopel play behind Johan Backlund in Adirondack?*

*Should the Ducks have Timo Pielmeier or J-P Levasseur play behind an unnamed starter in Syracuse?*

*Should the Penguins have Brad Theissen or Mattias Modig play behind John Curry in Wilkes/Barre Scranton?*

These are crucial questions to be answered on key prospects, as their placement greatly impacts their future value.