Of all the cities where ***Antti Niemi*** could have played, very few ever imagined that his final destination would be San Jose. Even I figured it was only a matter of time before he cut his losses and played anywhere that guaranteed him enough starts to improve.

You know…like Finland…or Sweden, maybe?

And of all the frustrating rumors floating around over the past few weeks, how many times did the Sharks find a way to let people know they were totally comfortable with Antero Niittymaki and Thomas Greiss as a tandem? Too many to even pay attention.

Well…surprise, surprise. *Niemi is now a Shark for the 2010-11 season* .

So what exactly happened that caused San Jose's ship to change course? Where, and more importantly why did the Sharks compromise their original plan of attack? Which side manipulated the other and what does this mean for the Sharks' goaltending pipeline? Let's break it down, School of Block style!

When dissecting a major acquisition or trade that drastically changes the complexion of a team's goalie depth chart, I break down situations. As you know, goalies cannot be judged by statistics alone. One must take into account who they are as humans and athletes, where they come from, where they are going and what the organization might have planned for each goalie's future.

Essentially, in order to get a better understanding of the influences behind this signing, one must start at the top. Enter ***Wayne Thomas*** , the Sharks vice president, assistant general manager and two-way goalie consultant. He not only works with the Sharks goalies, but the ones in Worcester as well. His resume is beyond impressive, staggering in fact, as he has a lot of control over what the Sharks are doing in the goaltending department.

"For the past four seasons, Thomas has taken on a more advanced, day-to-day role in working

with the Sharks goaltenders on- and off-the-ice."

Having an "off-ice" role in goalie development, to me, means the following – video analysis and coaching the non-tangible aspects of motivation and mental toughness. Thomas clearly knows how to teach the true elements of the position that can take an average goalie and make them great. In that sense, who wouldn't enjoy the opportunity to continue molding a guy like Niemi?

It's impossible to argue with someone who has such a strong influence on the organization. Thomas is like a wizard – you don't challenge their wisdom and you soak in every morsel of knowledge you possibly can. Has there been a prospect in the Sharks' system in the last decade that hasn't developed into a quality NHL goalie? Exactly.

Speaking of previous Sharks goalies that developed under Thomas' watchful eye, one angle of the Niemi signing that perpetuates tradition is the fact that San Jose has a rich history of developing goalies from Finland – namely Miikka Kiprusoff (and Vesa Toskala, but don't laugh).

When Kiprusoff first displayed his acrobatic aura in a Sharks uniform, just like Niemi, he had just spent one full season in the AHL. The following season (2000-01), Kiprusoff spent the majority of his time in Kentucky, but did play five NHL games, including three more in the playoffs. Niemi on the other hand was able to steal the backup job from Corey Crawford and re-write the history of what we know as a "successful" rookie goalie.

Kiprusoff would continue to develop his style in teal, spending the next season going 7-6-3 in 20 games for the Sharks and a perfect 4-0 with the AHL's Cleveland Barons. By the end of the 2001-02 season, Kiprusoff had built up a reputation strong enough to solidify his presence in the NHL for good. He would spend the 2002-03 season with San Jose, but he really struggled before finally being traded to the Calgary Flames.

One season spent exclusively in the AHL. A second season spent mainly in the AHL with a few NHL games. A third season spent mainly in the NHL with a few AHL games. A fourth season spent exclusively in the NHL before reaching peak development and sent off to the Flames.

What does this say about San Jose's plan of attack with a "raw-skilled" Finnish goalie? It's a project that the organization is not afraid to spend time and money on to accomplish their goal of creating a winning goalie. The project is dictated through consistent analysis and scouting and watched closely by Thomas.

What does this tell me about San Jose's current trifecta? They are all placed on the same pedestal heading into training camp, but the two goalies that they feel gives them the best chance to win *IN THE PLAYOFFS* have been established.

Let's look at each goalie and how their specific traits influence this signing.

ANTERO NIITTYMAKI - A hard-working goalie that was signed for a reason, Niittymaki spent five seasons with the Flyers and one with the Lightning in a very consistent manner. Other than the hip injuries, he was a serviceable goalie that persevered in a variety of roles and did the job quietly. With a two-year contract that pays him $2 million each year, the onus is on him to play his way into another deal. *Per CapGeek.com* , he's an unrestricted free-agent when the contract expires in June of 2012.

His fantasy value certainly takes a hit compared to where it was yesterday, but he can still win 30 games if he's at the top of his game and playing in a good rhythm. He's no less of a goalie, but he's definitely being challenged now. No margin for error, no chance for complacency. Most 30 year-old goalies would welcome this kind of competition.

FANTASY PROJECTION: Expect close to 40 starts, around a 2.25 GAA with a .915 save percentage and four shutouts. He'll notch 20 wins easily and could reach 25+. It's a drastic drop from the 40 wins and 60 starts he was expected to get, but he has the chance to establish a starting role if he plays above expectations.

ANTTI NIEMI - You can't pass up the most recent Cup-winning goalie. Thomas loves to

develop and mold Finnish goalies, just like he did with Kiprusoff and Toskala. There's a bond between two Finnish goalies that have worked in other cities and situations before. He, like Niittymaki, is a silent assassin that gets the job done awkwardly, yes, but quietly. He doesn't carry a big ego and the fans will rally around his great work ethic. Two million for one year is a no-brainer.

The Sharks had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Regardless of how Niemi looks, how he stops pucks or what he did last year, he's about to enter his sophomore season with a strong team, a Stanley Cup ring and tons of potential. What goalie coach/vice president/assistant GM wouldn't want to try and mold Niemi? Direct from the *confirmation story on the Sharks' official website* :

"Antti's play last season speaks for itself," said Sharks Executive Vice President and General Manager Doug Wilson. "Our goal this summer was to create the best goaltending unit we could and we feel we have successfully done that."

They sure have. And the boost it brings to the team's chances - even if for one season – is exciting and positive. It definitely impacts the goalies below, but again, it's only for one year.

FANTASY PROJECTION: Expect close to 40 starts and around a 2.30 GAA with a .910 save percentage and four or five shutouts. Like Niittymaki, he could notch 25-30 wins depending on his ability to play in a solid rhythm and get consistent starts. Considering he had no fantasy

value at all yesterday, this is amazing news for Niemi owners. Celebrate with a glass of champagne and hope for some consistency.

THOMAS GREISS - Has been developing steadily in the Sharks' system since the 2006-07 season. *Per CapGeek.com* , he's signed for the season under a one-way contract, so he would have to clear waivers and is eligible for re-entry waivers.

To understand why Greiss is in a difficult situation, just take a casual glance at the type of goalies you see in Niittymaki, Niemi and Stalock. Then glance at what kind of goalie Greiss is. He is not the same type of mold and he has many different traits compared to the other three. He is, in my mind, the odd man out.

Where he goes from here is unknown, but a decision will be made by the coaching staff that should set him up for future success in the NHL. If Greiss goes down to Worcester to play with Stalock, it's a sign that they don't feel Tyson Sexsmith is ready to compete with those two. It doesn't mean his value is any less, it just means he needs to work harder. It's a tough pill for Greiss to swallow, but it's not the end of the world.

At 24 years of age, Greiss has a bright future ahead of him. It must be said that just because Niemi is now part of the Sharks organization doesn't mean they think Greiss is incapable of winning in the playoffs. It is not a lack of confidence in him, either. It's more a sense that Niemi brings dynamics and assets that Greiss doesn't. They developed Greiss in a similar fashion to

that of Kiprusoff and there's no reason why Greiss can't be traded to a team that sets him up to be successful for many seasons to come.

FANTASY PROJECTION: Expect Greiss to battle hard in training camp, but ultimately be the odd man out. It is unclear where he plays this season. A trade or waiver claim is certainly possible. Regardless, his ability and potential is only affected depending on where he's moved to or who wants to trade for him.

ALEX STALOCK - Extremely bright future in the NHL with the ability to stand tall and win big games through a tremendous work ethic and a passionate energy level. Is not the most refined goalie, but plays to his advantages and never seems rattled. Shattered records in Worcester last year, proving he has the ability to develop into a brilliant NHL goalie. Must be one of Thomas' favorite students because all you hear about with this kid is how much he loves to learn.

At 23 years of age, Stalock is a young goalie with wisdom well beyond his years. He's extremely appealing in the sense that he could be the missing piece in a few more years. Signing Niemi to a simple one-year deal allows Stalock to develop this season and then have an opportunity to sign a new contract that keeps him in San Jose for good. *Per CapGeek.com* , Stalock is a restricted free agent after this season.

CONCLUSION AND FINAL THOUGHTS

In conclusion, I think the positive points that rise to the surface clearly outweigh the negative ones. The team is better as a whole. The depth chart is more competitive. The organization has more assets. The move makes sense. Niemi fits the mold of a Wayne Thomas goaltender. There is a sense of confidence and assurance that Niemi has a great opportunity to improve and to put the fate of his NHL future in his own hands.

I think San Jose did a great job of putting the heat on the goalies to perform. This was not a factor in previous seasons, as Evgeni Nabokov was always the workhorse and was rarely challenged by another goalie since the lockout.

Personally, I think a major point is that Niittymaki, Stalock and Niemi are similar in the sense that they stop the puck in unconventional ways, have good net presence, are remarkably cool under pressure and are capable of winning big games in the playoffs. That's the trend I've been able to uncover here. Niittymaki has that big game moxy and ability from the 2006 Olympics. Stalock has it from his high school and NCAA days. Niemi has it from last season. All three aren't the most technically skilled goalies in the world, but they know how to win and they're durable.

Those are a few elusive ingredients that Greiss has not proven or shown yet. The ability to win big games, the deep-playoff experiences and the mental toughness. It's not that he isn't capable of those things, but he just hasn't proved it yet. But he does have the potential and the brilliant technique and foot speed.

In that sense, compared to the other three, Greiss is perfect trade bait. He's appealing to other teams with other plans, or teams that feel he's capable of evolving in their corner. Truth be told – someone out there would definitely be interested in acquiring him. He's extremely talented and it's obvious to most scouts.

Ultimately, signing Niemi for one year is smart. For all of his pundits that still exist out there, they are only looking skin deep. It has to be established (especially by now) that Niemi is a battler, not an elite talent. He is now partnered with a comrade in Niittymaki and is under the wings of one of the most influential goalie coaches an organization has ever had in Thomas.

The decision to sign in San Jose had to be an easy one. A winning team on the cusp of the Stanley Cup Finals. A place where he's guaranteed to play some games. A home where, most importantly, he is in a position to improve. Again, it's a no-brainer.

I personally see the playing situation as a similar tone to that of the Ottawa Senators with Brian Elliott and Pascal Leclaire. Neither has firmly established they are the rightful starter. They both have to push each other and prove to the coaching staff and their team that they deserve long strings of starts. Of course it helps Elliott's cause that Leclaire is a band-aid boy, but when he's healthy, Leclaire certainly brings an element of skill and winning to the team. It's not the most optimistic situation right now, but why is Ottawa comfortable with it? Because the future is bright with Robin Lehner coming through the pipelines.

Reflected in San Jose's situation, I see a great 1A-1B situation where either goalie could be considered the starter. It will simply come down to who plays better in training camp, who wants it more in the pre-season and who gets the first opportunity to run with the starting "tag" on their shoulders.

You will read a lot of stuff out there that says Niemi is still no good, that Niittymaki is average and that San Jose has really shot themselves in the fins. But that's crazy talk. San Jose brought in two goaltenders that, as I've been pointing out, are capable of winning big games. The regular season success will be there and those will be perfect opportunities for Thomas and his goalie assistants to really hone skills and prepare each goalie for the playoffs. And since neither of them will play more than 60 games, they will both be well-rested as well. That might have been the one elusive ingredient missing from Evgeni Nabokov's runs with the Sharks in years past.

I'll leave you with one final thought – Thomas up in the press box watching Niemi slowly erode the Sharks in the Western Conference Finals. He saw first-hand what Niemi was able to do in a series where he didn't face consistent shots and had to win behind a strong set of mental skills.

Those are the kind of goalies that win Stanley Cups. And that's why Niemi is now a member of the San Jose Sharks.