

Stick-to-itiveness

Written by Justin Goldman

Monday, 15 November 2010 15:08 - Last Updated Tuesday, 16 November 2010 10:46



Sometimes I wonder if it's even a real word and other times it seems like a tacky term only used for the sake of being creative. But "Stick-to-itiveness" is actually a pretty important aspect of managing fantasy goalies. It also happens to broach many levels of the goaltending position, and when that happens, I have to take the time to explain what it can teach a fantasy manager.

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From the manager's perspective, stick-to-itiveness is a trait of mental toughness. To me, it means I must be willing to lose a few games before I'm set up to win a bunch more. Goalies thrive on confidence. So while they may struggle in the first six weeks of a season, you have to know that just about every goalie with viable fantasy value is also capable of having surprising success.

Having the confidence that your goalies are going to get over the proverbial hump and prove their worth is crucial to success in March and April. It's a long season – you know this – so just because a goalie struggles in the first month does not mean he's going to play that way all season long. Just about anything positive within a game can turn things around, whether it's a clutch save or a big win born out of desperation.

In that regard, two goalies and two types of situations quickly come to mind when discussing this sudden surge in value.

ONDREJ PAVELEC - The first would be Ondrej Pavelec, who came off the bench halfway through Sunday's game and played very well in relief. It happened with Dan Ellis a few weeks back and his value surged a bit until last night's loss to Minnesota.

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But think about what could come of Pavelec's performance last night against the Capitals after Chris Mason was pulled. He was tabbed with the loss after giving up the game-winner, but was stellar otherwise. He gave the Thrashers a chance to win after Mason single-handedly dug his own hole, which gave Pavelec a heightened sense of responsibility for his team and himself.

Because of this, now is the time he could experience a huge boost in fantasy value. His 1-3-2 record leads many managers to give up hope, but a 2.38 goals-against average and .926 save percentage is plenty of proof that the losses could suddenly turn into wins. He had to come off the bench twice last week and played great both times, so those tough situations are proof he has improved the mental toughness aspects of his game.

Technically, his demeanor and style is much calmer. He's relying more on his solid size and positioning to let pucks hit him and he still has that great balance of reflexes and patience. His overall combination of size, speed and mental toughness is the real recipe for success in today's NHL and he has quickly mixed those ingredients together in the past few weeks.

I'm not saying the wins are destined to happen, but the stars are certainly aligned. I have Pavelec in two of my four leagues and I'm not frustrated by the losses he's suffered. I've watched him closely and I know my stick-to-itiveness will ultimately pay off.

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Short-term projection: He steadily elevates to the “starter” status in Atlanta and turns some of those tough losses into big wins during this crucial six-game home stand.

Long-term projection: Ends up with a 60-40 split and continues to develop a starter mentality and improves his long-term potential and fantasy value.

MARC-ANDRE FLEURY – The second situation that took place last week when discussing a sudden change in fantasy value was Fleury’s disastrous struggle that quickly turned into two straight wins.

I was exhausted explaining to everyone why Fleury was losing and what it would take for him to turn things around. So it was very gratifying when he finally displayed some patience and composure over the weekend. The root of his issues was clearly all mental, which was a blessing in disguise because it taught fantasy owners all of the things I try to stress on a weekly basis: The elements of the position you can’t see impact short and long-term success way more than peripheral statistics.

On Friday night against Tampa Bay, Fleury finally stopped playing with a sense of pressure and executed with an amplified energy, precision and focus. The confidence was rock bottom before that game, but he approached the game by mentally “faking” the confidence. He went out there and played to win as opposed to not making mistakes. And even though he only had to stop 15 of 16 shots, he was consistently focused from the drop of the puck until the Penguins blew their lead wide open.

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Because of the win, he was rewarded with the start on Saturday night against Atlanta. In that game, Fleury was his old self again. He stopped 31 of 33 shots and was timely, sharp and in control. It was a great lesson in the volatility of a goalie's confidence. Without it, he's a disaster because he second-guesses everything. Even with a Stanley Cup ring, he never dealt with a weak slide like that before. And since that losing streak is a thing of the past, he's more experienced than ever before.

Short-term projection: Fleury's back. Three games this week with a day off in between each one allows for a consistent routine. There's no reason why he can't win all three and possibly be one of the Stars of the Week next Monday.

Long-term projection: The stats won't be where fantasy managers want them to be, but he'll approach a 75-25 workload.

JONAS HILLER – I can't remember the last time a puck squeezed through the cage of a goalie mask and cut someone's eye. But that's exactly what happened to Jonas Hiller during an off-day practice last weekend. Most goalies might take a day off and make sure their vision is perfect before playing again, but not Hiller. He was on such a roll that sitting simply wasn't an option. And on Sunday night against Chicago, he stood on his head again and stopped 40 of 43 shots in a tough 3-2 OT loss.

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When that game ended, Hiller had revealed to me the best example of fantasy stick-to-itiveness so far this season. His value was equal to slurry through the first few weeks of the season and the team in front of him was abysmal. He was basically giving up four goals a game and tons of managers were trading and waiving him for goalies like Anders Lindback and Cory Schneider.

It's tough to pinpoint an exact moment when everything turned around, but I would say the arrival of Tony Lydman provided just enough support on the blueline to change everything. As of today, Hiller is 5-0-1 in November and has allowed 16 goals in those six games. He has stopped 188 of 204 shots in that streak and has displayed a level of physical durability that I never knew existed.

Heading into this week, the Ducks play four games including a back-to-back in Dallas and Minnesota on Tuesday and Wednesday. Those two games are difficult starts, but Hiller already has two wins against the Stars this season, so he's aligned for another positive performance on Tuesday. Expect to see Curtis McElhinney on Wednesday, but Hiller back in goal for their two home games against Columbus on Friday and Edmonton on Sunday.

Short-term projection: Steady as she goes for Hiller. Expect a 2-1-0 record this week with close to a 2.50 GAA and .920 save percentage. His great play against Dallas this year is a good sign and the Columbus and Edmonton games are not tough starts.

Long-term projection: Continues to carry a 75-25 workload and thrive facing around 31-32 shots per game.

CAREY PRICE – His body of work this season so far has been scintillating and being named a Star of the Week after going 3-0 was well-deserved. I talked about the intense pressure he was under when the season started and it was by far the most of any starting goalie in the NHL. As such, Price deserves all the credit in the world right now.

Clearly, he was not mentally mature last season. He didn't manage his emotions as well as he could have and would fall apart after giving up a weak goal. But the one element that has made him such a great fantasy value this year is his focus.

I have watched him closely over the last few weeks and he's playing with a sense of mental clarity never seen before in his game. The way he's tracking the puck and the control he has of his movements, his puck placement and his hands is unlike anything I've ever seen. Right now, he's one of the best goalies in the NHL. And when he was interviewed on NHL Live on Monday morning, when asked about his recent success, he revealed some of the reasons why.

“For me personally, it's just getting set before the shot comes,” he said. “It's something I worked on at the start of the year. Getting into early positioning, you can track the puck from there, and everything gets simplified if you're ready right away.”

Overall, this focus has led to some great consistency, which should continue this week. Overall,

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he has matured by an extreme degree in a short period of time and like I often say, the tough losses and intense mental pressure on his shoulders last season and over the summer has lent a hand to valuable experience and early success this season.

“I’m not Ken Dryden and I’m not Patrick Roy, I’m me,” he said to Billy Jaffe on NHL Live. “Expectations are sometimes a little too high, but it is what it is. You just have to deal with it.”

That quote proves he’s starting to understand what it takes to perform at a high level on a consistent basis in Montreal. And even though he might have some low points this season, he’s clearly one of the best goalies right now. I don’t see that stopping anytime soon, as an improved mental approach has clearly lent a hand to his improved “calm butterfly” technique. For managers that showed some stick-to-itiveness in keeper leagues, it’s going to pay off. And those that took a chance and drafted him as their first or second goalie in a one-year league, continue to reap the benefits of an excellent draft choice.

Short-term projection: Continues to display the great patience and calm demeanor and makes the timely saves needed to win.

Long-term projection: Carries an 80-20 workload and reveals more long-term potential fantasy managers hoped to see last year.

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In conclusion, whether you consider Stick-to-itiveness as an important term or not, it's clearly worth discussing. Harness the power of patience with your top-flight goalies and don't be afraid to lose a few games if they are capable of going on a tear at any given moment. Nothing damages your confidence as a manager more than trading or dropping a goalie that goes on to experience huge success, so don't let that happen. Hang on tight and do whatever you can to decipher the elements explained above!