Upon the horizon and around the corner, under the surface and out of thin air, they’re coming in waves and I don’t know from where. A backup here, an emergency recall there, you just simply can’t prepare for when a fantasy sleeper will appear. The key is to remember that anything is possible when the stars are aligned and a goalie quickly gets comfortable.

All rhyming aside, last week’s action included many different scenarios in which a lesser-owned goalie played well enough to raise a manager’s eyebrows. Whether it was Craig Anderson getting a surprise start last Friday, Ondrej Pavelec and Tuukka Rask pitching shutouts or the Devils giving Mike McKenna a start in his hometown, the surprises were aplenty.

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As of today, we know who has already successfully established a strong fantasy presence. Determined by their consistency, high comfort level and the ability to win despite giving up a few weak goals, it screams Michal Neuvirth, Tim Thomas and Jonas Hiller. At the same time, a few goalies that have logged too many minutes in Martin Brodeur, Ryan Miller and J-S Giguere were stricken with injuries last week. This has stirred the proverbial pot and forced fantasy managers to reconsider their strategies.

Brodeur’s right elbow has once again been mangled to the point he was told to rest it for ten days. In my opinion, without any scientific knowledge of his injury, this might be a recurring theme all season long if he tries to come back too early again. Extra padding on the chest protector helps, but I don’t think that should be used as an excuse to come back a game or two sooner.

The extent of Miller’s injury is a little foggier, so I got an update from Sabres reporter Bill Hoppe. *He told me that Miller’s practice today went well* , but will proceed cautiously. Because Patrick Lalime coughed up a point on Saturday against Tampa Bay, his 0-4 record puts even more pressure on Miller to return as quickly as possible.
Hoppe also mentioned
that Miller’s recent groin issue sprung up in the third period of Friday’s game.

Finally, Giguere’s groin pull may have been a result of dehydration issues last Tuesday against the Predators. It happened late in the game, thus prompting Jonas Gustavsson to come into the

game and make six sparkling saves to preserve the win. The comfort level that Gustavsson experienced instantly led to his confident play and successful outing as the week continued.

JONAS GUSTAVSSON – On my list of the most improved goaltenders this season, Jonas sits second behind only Carey Price. With Giguere on the shelf, Gustavsson nestled in to a comfortable rhythm right away and was a bright star in a 3-1 win over the Devils and again in the 0-2 loss to Montreal on Hockey Night in Canada.

First and foremost, Gustavsson's terrific play stems from his improved rebound control and footwork. Against Montreal, I noticed that his anticipation and ability to set his feet as shots are fired his way has drastically improved. This is a true sign that he's finally locked into the speed and pace in which plays are developing. He's more comfortable reading and processing shot releases, his vision is improving and his butterfly recovery mechanics are much more balanced than ever before.

Please don't let his 2-4-1 record deceive you. Gustavsson's starts have been very difficult. Realize that long-term, these losses are a blessing in disguise. A goalie learns how to truly win through the experience of losing close games. Gustavsson has already had his fair share of those this season, so don't be surprised if he finds a way to replicate last year's progressive incline.

Tonight's game against Dallas will be a perfect opportunity for you to watch his game evolve

before your very own eyes. Also keep an eye on his ability to shrug off upper body shots that hit him in the shoulders and upper arms. Ron Wilson was quoted as saying Gustavsson will start every game in Giguere’s absence, so the rhythm and comfort level should continue to be displayed.

Short-term projection: Plays well every game this week during Giguere’s absence and posts around a .920 save percentage.

Long-term projection: Continues to evolve and improve his angles and vision, while also developing a better starter mentality.

CRAIG ANDERSON – Not many managers expected him to play last Friday night, but I knew it was going to happen because goalies are creatures of habit. The last time he dressed for a game, he was the backup and injured his right knee during the warmup. So I was not surprised that he wouldn’t allow his first game back to be in a backup role.

I covered the game and I thought he looked great against the Rangers. He was comfortable from the get-go by controlling the rebound on the very first shot he faced. From there, the confidence seeped from his pores and then the Avs dominated offensively in the second period, chasing Henrik Lundqvist and running away with a 5-1 win. He only had to stop 25 shots, which is basically a night off for the guy who faced more shots than any other goalie last year.

With the Avs riding a four-game winning streak heading into a back-to-back on Wednesday and Thursday in Western Canada, don’t be surprised if Anderson plays both if he wins on Wednesday in Vancouver. He’s well rested, so if he wins, will have more than enough energy to win again on Thursday.

If Budaj does start on Thursday, it is a huge indicator that coach Joe Sacco finally has enough confidence in Peter Budaj to start him on a more consistent basis. That corrodes Anderson’s fantasy value just a little bit and continues to make Budaj a solid third or fourth goalie to own.

Short-term projection: Colorado is historically very good against Luongo, so expect two wins this week for Anderson.

Long-term projection: Workhorse ethic and solid play will continue, but Budaj will play more games.

MIKE SMITH – Don’t let the zany 8-7 win over the Flyers last Thursday lead you to believe Mike Smith is continuing to struggle heading into this week. That game was off the deep end and no goalie would have thrived coming off the bench in that situation. In fact, Smitty responded with a terrific road win over the Sabres on Saturday night, stopping 29 of 30 shots.

If you happened to catch the final seconds of the game, you saw Smith’s animated reaction when he realized he notched the win. What I loved about that reaction was the instant confidence boost he received from it. It was a sure sign that he’s starting to embrace his ability to refine his style and footwork in order to be much quieter in the crease. Loud footwork leads to lunging and over-amplified rebounds, but quiet footwork creates patience, better positioning and solid rebound control.

Heading into this week, Smith has shown me that he knows how to use his size to his advantage and square up to shooters with his core, not just with his arms or legs. Because of this, he’s no longer forced to exert copious amounts of energy in order to make a simple save and he’s not getting caught out of position nearly as often. He’s staying home and allowing his great size to stop the puck. He’s absorbing instead of re-directing and he’s not diving around or scrambling nearly as much as last year.

Short-term projection: Similar to what I predicted with Antero Niittymaki, my senses are tingling and I feel a solid streak is right around the corner.

Long-term projection: I think his refined mechanics and quieter footwork will lend a hand to good health and quality play as the season goes along.

TUUKKA RASK – I won’t waste my time explaining what makes him such a brilliant talent and awesome long-term keeper. You should already know these things, especially if you’ve sat and watched him closely for a 60-minute game. What he has shown me in the last week, however, is that his work ethic outside of games is improving and he’s developing a thicker skin and a

stronger mind.

Just look at his 1-4-1 record. He played Oct. 9, then Oct. 23 and then not again until Nov. 5 in relief of Tim Thomas. That night, he stopped 12 of 13 shots and suffered a tough loss. The following night he got his fourth start of the season and stopped 34 of 35 shots and suffered another tough loss. On Nov. 11 he started the second game of a back-to-back in Montreal and stopped 38 of 41 shots and, yep, suffered another tough loss. A week later, again on the tail end of a back-to-back, he finally put it all together against Florida and stopped all 41 shots he faced.

The moral of Rask’s story is this - his ability to achieve a strong comfort level is happening right at the drop of the puck and that has led to terrific play despite the losses. He’s reading plays with precision and preparing like each game is a playoff matchup. Rask has stopped 125 of 130 shots in November and I don't think any goalie has played better in tough outings than he and Gustavsson.

Ironically, Rask goes up against Smith tonight, so one will ultimately continue their winning ways, while the other will suffer a setback in the loss department. But don’t be surprised if both play well and ultimately display all of the things I explained above.

Short-term projection: I boldly predict he starts three of the four games Boston has on the docket this week and wins them all.

Long-term projection: Works his way into a very nice split with Thomas in December, playing at least six of their 14 games.

MIKE MCKENNA – Brodeur’s injury led to Mike McKenna’s recall, which caused the stars to align in St. Louis. With family present, McKenna was offered up a start against the Blues in his hometown. He played very well and showed many signs of being totally comfortable, but a couple of tough bounces ultimately led to a 3-2 loss on the road. Nevertheless, he proved he was capable of making big saves, so don’t be surprised if he starts one or two more games during Brodeur’s absence.

What you’ll see from McKenna is a very big presence in the crease with very long legs and extremely sharp movements. He tracks the puck very well and seals the ice with his lower body effectively. He appears very square to shooters and plays fairly high in his crease for his size. Because of this, he is prone to getting caught moving his feet when shots arrive and giving up some juicy rebounds.

Overall, however, his combination of size, speed, technique and age makes him a terrific goalie to spot start during Brodeur’s absence. This is not a situation right now where managers should be rushing to pick him up, but if Hedberg struggles tonight against Washington, we could see Mike on Wednesday against Calgary, or most likely on Friday or Saturday during their back-to-back weekend.

Short-term projection: Appears in one game this week, two at the most, while Brodeur is out of the lineup.

Long-term projection: Holds very little fantasy value right now, but will play his way into more starts if Brodeur continues to suffer setbacks.