Eleven Goalie Prospects to Watch in 2011

There's no better way to kick off the new calendar year than by writing a School of Block lesson that reflects the general psyche of a goaltender. So instead of looking behind us and recapping 2010, I want to look ahead and help you prepare for what could be a 2011 stuffed to the brim with goalie prospects.

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Just look at all of the prospects making their NHL debut these days. Richard Bachman for the Stars, Nathan *Lawson for the Islanders* , *Cedrick Desjardins for the Lightning* and *James Reimer for the Maple Leafs* alone has created a surge in the development of their team's goalie depth charts. And I don't expect it to slow down anytime soon.

There are just way too many solid AHL and European goalies stepping up their game and looking for that elusive opportunity. And the more I watch tournaments like the World Junior Championships and the Memorial Cup, the more I find even younger talent displaying the mental toughness needed to excel at the professional level.

With that being said, below are 11 prospects I feel will have an impact on the fantasy goalie scene in 2011. If you want to know more about some of my comments below, drop me a line in the comments section or in this week's Fantasy Goalie Mailbag! Please note that no current NHL goalie is included on this list. Goalies like Cory Schneider, Jon Bernier, Corey Crawford and Sergei Bobrovsky, in my mind, are already stars and legit fantasy assets.

Jhonas Enroth – Although his lack of size will limit his long-term NHL success, Enroth has clearly established he's ready for the next level. More importantly, he improved his ability to read plays and react to the shooter's release with each game he played during his stint with Buffalo earlier this season. His work ethic and positive attitude is a good influence on his teammates and that makes him a perfect backup to Ryan Miller next season.

Leland Irving – What happens if the Flames decide to part ways with Henrik Karlsson? Similar to what we saw in Chicago with Corey Crawford, Calgary has been patient with Irving's development. He's done an excellent job rebounding from last year's dismal season and that has made him even stronger than before. Irving also makes this list because of the management turnover and the possibility that Miikka Kiprusoff could also be moved. Although he is yet to play an NHL minute, Irving could win the job in training camp and seamlessly step in to an NHL backup role.

Jacob Markstrom – Markstrom is primed to get his first taste of NHL action in the next year. At some point in 2011, you have to expect Tomas Vokoun will no longer be on the Panthers roster, and that will pave the way for Markstrom to start providing fantasy owners with some points. His start to the AHL season was brutal, but he pitched his first shutout on December 17 in a 2-0 win over the Marlies. As expected, he has slowly transitioned to the smaller ice surface, leading me to believe he will be ready to handle a backup role next season.

Jeff Frazee – He's one of the more "long shot" goalies on this list, but since Mike McKenna is barely considered a prospect anymore, Frazee is worth a close look. More importantly, Martin Brodeur's weak play has finally forced the Devils to feel a strong sense of urgency with their goaltending development. Frazee is at the age where he could easily land the backup role behind Brodeur and adequately replace Johan Hedberg. I don't think the Devils will want an inexperienced goalie behind Brodeur, but it's certainly possible.

Nathan Lawson – With Dwayne Roloson being traded to Tampa Bay over the weekend, the 2011 year begins in earnest for Lawson. He was recalled to back up Rick DiPietro a day later and will do an excellent job backing him up for the rest of this season. Give credit to Garth Snow for decapitating the three-headed monster in Bridgeport and giving Lawson, who has paid his minor league dues, a well-deserved chance to establish an NHL career. Because Lawson is a patient and positional goalie with exceptional puck-moving skills, he will succeed alongside

DiPietro.

Chad Johnson – The start to this season has been a major setback for a goalie that got a taste of the NHL last season. But regardless of his unimpressive stats with Hartford, his combination of size, speed and technique will give him another opportunity to claim the backup role behind Henrik Lundqvist. And this time, he'll capture and cling to it with success. There's always a good chance the Rangers will opt to sign a veteran backup, but at some point in 2011, I feel Johnson will get at least one opportunity to establish his presence in the NHL.

Robin Lehner – Any team with Pascal Leclaire on it will see some kind of impact from their prospects. Lehner has already experienced the backup role in Ottawa once this season, therefore he's legitimately capable of stealing starts in Ottawa at some point in 2011. Lehner didn't perform as well as I expected leading up to this point in the World Juniors, but he did skate away with a shootout victory over Canada. That alone was a display of his poise and ability to fight through a tough game and still come up big with a pair of timely breakaway saves when it mattered most. His evolution has surged since the start of this season and I don't see it slowing down anytime soon.

Matt Climie – You've heard me discuss numerous times how there's a goalie war being waged in San Antonio. With both Ilya Bryzgalov and Jason LaBarbera set to become unrestricted free agents at the end of this season, both Climie and Al Montoya are essentially fighting for a 2011-12 backup role in Phoenix. Climie, who has already made an appearance with the Coyotes this year, has more NHL experience and that will ultimately be the edge he needs to claim the job. He was exceptional coming off the bench in his game against the Penguins – a trait all general managers want to see in a backup.

Ben Bishop – Because of the success Jake Allen is having in Peoria this season, the Blues will want to elevate his AHL role and increase his minutes. Because Ty Conklin is merely a veteran presence behind a young and emerging All-Star in Jaroslav Halak, the door will open wide for Big Ben to step through. He'll be Halak's backup next season and he'll be very successful in that role. Bishop has been one of the most improved prospects in 2010 and that will continue to give him fantasy relevance in 2011.

Cedrick Desjardins – Clearly he's capable of being a major fantasy influence in 2011. Don't be discouraged by the acquisition of Roloson. In fact, you should be encouraged, because there's your potential tandem for next season. Not only are both of them very animated, energetic, hard-working guys, they both make a terrific veteran – prospect duo on a team that thrives on chemistry. I couldn't think of a tandem (one older, one younger) that better matches the kind of players Steve Yzerman wants on his team. I feel very strongly that Roloson will play well enough to snag another one-year deal and that Yzerman will find a way to move Dan Ellis so that Cedrick can secure the backup role.

James Reimer – The Maple Leafs have all of their goalie prospects right where they want them. If J-S Giguere's career continues to slowly decay, Jonas Gustavsson will have to prove he's ready to carry a heavier workload. And with Jussi Rynnas still transitioning to the smaller surface, he'll need a much heavier workload with the Marlies if he wants to be a full-blown NHL starter in a few years. That leaves Reimer with the chance to notch more NHL minutes on his belt in 2011. He was terrific in his NHL debut and plays the blocking, positional style that Francois Allaire loves to teach. Reimer flies under the radar, but is more than capable of developing into a legit fantasy asset this year.

Other Notable Prospects – Don't forget that ***Braden Holtby*** could find some more NHL

minutes in 2011 if the Capitals decide that Semyon Varlamov or Michal Neuvirth are ready to handle the reigns alone. ***Anton Khudobin***
could find himself backing up Niklas Backstrom next season if the Wild part ways with Jose Theodore and Josh Harding continues to be haunted by untimely injuries.
Richard Bachman
could surprise everyone with an opportunity to back up Kari Lehtonen next year, but I really think the Stars like Andrew Raycroft's stability as a backup. Finally, if Nashville parts ways with Pekka Rinne or Anders Lindback,
Mark Dekanich
will step in nicely and produce quality fantasy points during the 2011 calendar year.