

## Early-Bird Specials

Written by Justin Goldman

Monday, 07 March 2011 15:25 - Last Updated Tuesday, 08 March 2011 10:37

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Regardless of age, experience, or skill level, an NHL goaltender must always prove themselves on a nightly basis. Failure to do so results in an open door or an extra start for their counterpart. From there, the potential for a goalie to collect rust or lose their rhythm and confidence grows. Such is the life of a goaltender, where every minute matters.

**[FANTASY MAILBAG – MARCH 7](#)**

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Even though the playoffs are clearly out of sight for a handful of NHL goalies, jobs are still on the line. Others are molding their identity by gaining the confidence and experience needed to go from being a backup to fighting for a starter's role. Because of this, how a rookie or pending free agent plays in the next five weeks will go a long way in determining their fantasy value (in a keeper and one-year league) for next season.

Some goalies fighting to elevate and increase their role are playing under a lot of pressure to win. That would include the likes of three stellar rookies – Sergei Bobrovsky, Corey Crawford and James Reimer. Others have nothing to lose this season, but don't have the best job security in the world. That would include the likes of Al Montoya, Brian Elliott and Craig Anderson.

Either way, all of those goalies and many more simply have no room for failure at this stage of the season. And whether a goalie is fighting for their playoff lives or simply pushing for a new salary and a better opportunity, the intensity and importance of every game and every save continues to rise.

So for this week's School of Block session, let's look at some of the goalies that could see their fantasy value be severely impacted by how they play in the next five weeks. I'll also present some great buy-low options for those in a keeper league. Also, be sure to check out the latest releases of my [Top-100 Prospects Rankings](#) and [NHL Depth Charts](#), both of which were updated on March 4.

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### **Jaroslav Halak makes a great buy-low option right now.**

Simply put, this has been a year of transition for Halak. Not only has he never faced this kind of workload before, but he has never faced any real negative adversity over the course of a full NHL season. Yes, he hasn't played nearly as well as we all expected, but chalk the whole thing up to a massive learning experience. I discussed a lot of his issues way back in November, including the energy drain and the dynamic of being in a totally new surrounding as well.

As such, now might be the best time to procure him for your keeper league. He hasn't played in weeks and he's probably still a few games away from coming back, so he's not really on many managers' radars. And with a big fat lesson learned this season, expect him to be very dedicated over the summer and play with a much higher comfort level and much more consistency next year.

And if he's feeling some heat from a budding (but still very raw-skilled) Ben Bishop, he'll be more alert and attentive than at any point this season. Consider this year a wash and don't let his stats deceive you – he's still very much the kind of goalie that we saw in the 2010 Winter Olympics and 2010 Stanley Cup Playoffs.

### **AI Montoya has legitimate fantasy value for next season...but how much?**

I'm excited to say that adding Montoya to your roster has been one of the better pieces of advice I've dished out this season. His play has been exactly as I expected – a little rough around the edges to start, but better and better as he logs more minutes. At this point, after making a number of solid saves in a shootout loss to the Devils on Sunday afternoon, Montoya clearly has the goods to be a full-time NHL goalie.

But what remains to be seen is where he fits in either an Islanders uniform or with another organization heading into next season. I have to say that the odds are very high right now that the Islanders re-sign him to back up Rick DiPietro. Two American boys doing whatever they can to push this team into the playoffs is a great tandem and one that could be wildly successful if the Islanders find a way to play like they have been over the last month.

It's important to understand that Montoya's value – if he's re-signed by the Islanders – could be a double-edged sword. If DiPietro stays healthy and plays well, Montoya's play will probably be wildly inconsistent. I say this because he's the type of goalie that thrives by being in a rhythm. He didn't perform well in San Antonio behind Matt Climie and I don't see him playing well behind DiPietro if his workload is limited to 20 or 25 games.

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But if DiPietro gets injured, which of course is a very possible situation, Montoya's play will elevate with an elevated role. So in that regard, the choice is up to you. Either way, I would think Montoya makes a terrific #3 goalie for most one-year leagues next season.

**Devan Dubnyk is working his way into a 50-50 split for next season.**

Looking beyond his basic stats, it has been a terrific season for the Giraffe. Currently sitting with a 10-9-6 record, a 2.78 goals-against average and a .914 save percentage, Dubnyk has come a long way since his abysmal numbers to finish off the 2009-10 season. I've watched him closely during the two wins here in Denver against the lowly Avalanche and was very impressed with a number of improvements he has made this season.

Most notably, Dubnyk is in much better control of his movements and has better footwork, so he makes sharper pushes and sets his feet sooner, thus generally improving his balance and rebound control. His whole game has become much more economical and efficient, so he's more durable and staying focused for longer periods of time.

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If you dig a little deeper and look at some more important statistics, you'll see that he's a 24-year-old goalie worth obtaining in a keeper league. Aside from his intimidating 6-foot-6 frame, Dubnyk is gaining confidence with each and every game he plays. Just one of the impressive stats you'll find is a .888 power-play save percentage, stopping 151 of 170 total PP shots. That's a very solid number for a goalie with his limited experience killing penalties in the NHL.

Dubnyk's ability to win on the road is another impressive component of his game this season. He's 7-3-3 with a .924 save percentage and 2.62 goals-against average, along with one shutout (Feb. 7 in Nashville). Yes, he's only 3-6-3 at home, but still holds a .901 save percentage and a 2.96 goals-against average.

Heading down the stretch, a few positive elements are on Dubnyk's side when it comes to his blooming fantasy value. First of all, he's clearly Edmonton's future. They made the decision last summer to roll with him over Jeff Deslauriers, and they made the right decision (and I was admittedly wrong). So as Nikoai Khabibulin gets older, the more Edmonton will rely on Dubnyk to carry the team.

All that being said, I expect Dubnyk to work his way into a full-blown 50-50 split with Khabibulin and continue to improve his fantasy value. Of course a lot of that will be tied to how the Oilers perform in front of him, but as a stand-alone option, I am an advocate of owning Dubnyk as a weaker #2 or extremely strong #3 for your fantasy team.

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**There are a few more buy-low options and early-bird specials out there.**

Semyon Varlamov, who continues to build a band-aid boy reputation, could be a terrific buy-low option right now. Although I'm still, and always will be, more of a Michal Neuvirth fan, it doesn't take away from Varlamov's potential. Neuvirth will cause Varlamov's value to diminish so long as the two play together. But with Braden Holtby very close to being NHL-ready, all three goalies could see their fantasy value change suddenly over the summer.

Varlamov's biggest issue is durability. That's something everyone can clearly see. With that in mind, don't be surprised if you hear stories about Varlamov taking Yoga or Pilates lessons during the summer. That's one of the best things a goalie can do to improve their balance and eliminate the stress they put on their groins and hips. And if he does take the summer seriously in regards to off-ice training, all I can say is watch out – he could be this year's Jonas Hiller, minus the vertigo.

Jhonas Enroth is another goalie that I consider to be an early-bird special. With four wins to his name, all of which have come in overtime, it is finally time for the Sabres to [name him the full-time backup to Ryan Miller](#)

. I expect this to happen and I expect him to play well in close to 20 games for the Sabres next year.

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Finally, I've revised my Trade Deadline Primer piece to act as [a Free-Agency Tracker](#). This is a great resource if you're looking for pending UFA and RFA goalies for the upcoming off-season. I'll keep it updated of course, and have full-blown analysis of all goalie movement over the summer. I have a feeling there will be a ton of movement with Tier-II goalies and prospects, so keep an eye out!