

## Roll Them Bones

Written by Justin Goldman

Monday, 14 March 2011 14:17 - Last Updated Tuesday, 15 March 2011 10:07

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The clock is ticking, my fantasy friends. The playoffs, at least for most one-year leagues, are just a week away. And with that in the back of everyone's mind, the chance to make one or two last-ditch efforts to improve your team for the playoffs is there for the taking. I mean, this is why you rationed your allotment of trades and waiver moves, right? But are there any risks worth taking right now in the world of NHL goaltending?

[FANTASY MAILBAG – MARCH 14](#)

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I say yes, there most certainly are. Just like we see every year around this time, a goalie appears out of the mist and finds a way to write a special story we never expected to read. This year, the potential for Ray Emery in Anaheim and Braden Holtby in Washington to convert opportunity into fantasy points clearly exists. But it's up to you to roll them bones and take a chance.

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to be dissecting Emery's short and long-term fantasy value in March. When he was placed on the IR last season, I figured that was it. Avascular Necrosis?! He's done! But with a few weeks left in the season, and with him finally getting into a game last night against the Coyotes, he will be a possible tipping point in the Ducks' playoff push.

The same can be said for Holtby in Washington. As long as Semyon Varlamov is out with his knee injury, clearly the Capitals have no other choice than to roll with the 21-year-old rookie that was just named the NHL's First Star of the Week.

So let's take a look at what the future might hold for both of these goalies in the final month of the season. One goalie is simply looking to keep his hot streak going, while the other is right in the middle of a playoff push and heading for a crucial off-season that could easily determine the fate of his NHL career.

**Will Ray Emery play enough games to bring me legitimate fantasy value?**

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Just like any veteran player, a goaltender like Emery comes attached with a fantasy reputation. Like a tag on a t-shirt, it gives you basic pros and cons of what you can expect from said player. In Emery's situation, experts will consider him a major fantasy risk due to his fight with Avascular Necrosis. He's also considered a risk due to the many off-ice shenanigans that have distracted him from playing at his best in years past.

Now don't get me wrong, those are both legitimate risks. But due to his horrific hip issues and his burning desire to return to the NHL, and then accomplishing that goal, I feel like the off-ice attitude problems are a thing of the past. He has matured through this process, his focus is now where it needs to be, and he now relishes any opportunity thrown his way. And where there's opportunity, there's always a chance for success.

Emery's revival story started in Syracuse, where his numbers were very good. It was a perfect test after the Ducks signed him in early-February. He faced a ton of shots and performed well enough to prove to his new organization that he was ready to help them make the playoffs during the absence of Jonas Hiller. But even with those numbers on his side, one must realize it doesn't always translate to success in the NHL.

I'm clearly no doctor, but while watching him make nine saves on nine shots in the third period against the Coyotes last night, I learned that they rebuilt his right-hip joint and excised about a five-inch section of his leg. They didn't replace it with a post or anything - it's just gone. But since the area they removed was not a weight-bearing bone, it hasn't affected his balance.

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But since I have no real idea how this procedure affects him in the long run, I can only go off what I see. And in last night's relief effort, I saw a goalie that still has tremendous size, good active hands, a fierce presence and the ability to stretch and make timely saves. He definitely looked rusty and uncomfortable, but he made a few impressive stops that gave the Ducks a chance to fight their way back into the game. He also had a few situations in which he read the play extremely well and eliminated a scoring chance due to his active stick and quality decision-making.

With Anaheim sitting two points out of a playoff spot, don't be surprised if Emery starts on Wednesday. It's tough to reward Dan Ellis for such a bad performance through two periods, and he's a very streaky goalie that rises and falls with ease. The Ducks signed Emery for a reason, so now is the time to reward him for his relief effort with a start.

I feel Emery's value over the next three weeks is legit because he's a goalie you can acquire for very little cost, with the potential to sell very high. As of Monday morning, he was owned in just three percent of Yahoo leagues.

Anaheim's schedule is also very conducive for Emery's late-season value. They have four back-to-back sets and 13 games remaining. With that being said, I can almost guarantee that he'll play at least four more games. And if he happens to post a big win or have a dominant performance in one of those games, he'll get the next start and have the opportunity he needs to shake off the rust, re-adjust to the late-season NHL pace and gain some confidence.

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In conclusion, I feel the odds are very good that Emery increases his fantasy value between now and the end of the season. And that means he's worth buying low right now and selling high, either at any point over the summer or sometime next season. If he plays well, he'll definitely warrant a look from other teams, since he will sign for cheap.

### **Could Braden Holtby play his way into a playoff role for Washington?**

As of right now, yes, there's a chance Holtby could be Washington's go-to goalie in the playoffs. [\*It all depends on who has the hot hand\*](#) in the final 13 games. Bruce Boudreau has publicly stated he's rolling along with Holtby, so it's up to him to keep winning hockey games. The ball is clearly in his court.

Holtby, who went 4-0 with a 1.05 goals-against average, a .965 save percentage, notched his first NHL shutout and stopped 110 of 114 shots last week. That not only garnered him the NHL's First Star of the Week award, but pushed his season record to 7-2-2 with a 1.84 goals-against average and a .934 save percentage for the Capitals.

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Eleven games might not be a large enough sample size for Boudreau to consider him an option for the playoffs, but the team clearly has the confidence to play well in front of him. And since the Caps are surging and getting much better performances from their star players, the pressure on the goalies is not nearly as high as it was a month ago.

Because of this situation, one could logically deduce that Holtby is just as capable, and therefore holds more fantasy value than Neuvirth down the stretch. Not only that, but Holtby is really hot right now. Neuvirth is fortunately healthy and ready to play, but won't get into another game until Holtby falters. And it's easy to keep things going in a positive direction when the team is scoring goals and winning on a nightly basis.

That leaves Varlamov as the odd man out. He's the most rusty of the three goalies and hasn't played since February 20. [The suspected knee injury](#) has not only taken him out of the lineup, but caused him to see a lot less practice time. He did skate over the weekend and saw some shots in practice, but it didn't last long.

Simply put, there are only 12 games left to determine who will be Washington's starter in the playoffs. And since it takes at least 2-3 games for someone like Varlamov to get back into a groove, I don't think there's enough time to get him where he needs to be. Those 12 games are much better off going to Holtby and Neuvirth – let them battle it out and determine who has the hot hand riding into the playoffs.

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When you take into account all of those things, it becomes quite clear that Holtby has terrific fantasy value heading into this week. If Varlamov does find a way to play a few games before the season ends, the odds are lower that he's in a good enough rhythm to instill confidence in his teammates and coaching staff. The games he plays only takes away from Holtby's and Neuvirth's ability to gain confidence and momentum heading into the playoffs.

If a team has three capable goalies, all with their own valuable traits, why not ride the hot hand and see how far it will go? And with Holtby playing this well, does it really make sense to send him back to Hershey in exchange for a injury-ridden goalie that hasn't played in almost a month? All three goalies are also rested, so energy drain isn't a concern.

In that regard, the decision, in my opinion, is quite clear – roll with Holtby and Neuvirth. Instill more confidence in Holtby by riding out his hot streak. And if things falter over the next two weeks, instill your confidence in Neuvirth, who most people expected to be this team's playoff starter to begin with.