When the free-agent carousel started spinning on Friday, most goalies maintained their backup roles on different teams. But a select few – Mike Smith, Jose Theodore and Semyon Varlamov – were given a new chance to let freedom ring as starters. This is a perfect theme for today, since I'm celebrating Independence Day here in the USA.

But before I dig into projecting the fantasy value of these goalies for the upcoming season, let me explain why I feel *Smith is destined to be much more of a reward* than a risk in Phoenix.

For any goaltender, facing adversity, both emotionally and physically, is a necessary component to improving. Some goalies embrace it more than others, as it's one of the surefire ways to gain perspective and truly mature as a person.

Sure enough, Smith's difficult learning experiences over the course of the past season paid off when he was thrust into action in the Stanley Cup Playoffs. By that time, his entire game, from technique to consistency, had improved. No longer caught in those awkward, scrambling, injury-prone positions, Smith displayed much more patience, a more economical butterfly style and better rebound control than ever before.

Because of this, I feel that Smith is a perfect match in Phoenix. Not only will he be comfortable playing in Dave Tippett's defensive-minded system (thanks to their time spent together in Dallas), but the chance to play at least 50 games is there for the taking. That kind of workload is important, as more consistent minutes lend a hand to more consistent play, and vice versa. If he gets on a nice little roll early, he'll be one of the best fantasy sleepers available.

These elements, combined with his bigger frame and better puck-moving skills compared to Ilya Bryzgalov, lead me to believe he's busting at the seams with rising fantasy value. Toss in his penchant for stopping pucks in a more simplified manner than ever before, Smith has the chance to take that penultimate step and never look back.

With this in mind, I project around 55 starts for Smith, since Jason LaBarbera is a reliable and

effective backup with a big frame. I can see Smith posting a 2.40 goals against average and a .917 save percentage with up to five shutouts.

I can't overlook LaBarbera, either. Last season, most of his starts came in uncomfortable and last-minute situations. This season, with less rust on his skates when he inevitably plays more, we'll finally see just how good he can be.

Without getting into projecting his stats, I can tell you that LaBarbera has come a long way since his days in Los Angeles. If the Coyotes really suspected him as incapable of handling a bigger and more important responsibility, they never would have re-signed him.

And since Smith will be an unproven fantasy asset for many poolies out there, LaBarbera's perceived value rises to an all-time high. He could start 30-35 games and post around a .910 save percentage with a couple of shutouts.

The other big winner to obtain a possible starting gig was Jose Theodore. Although he still has to prove himself, *he totally struck gold* in the improved defense category. Playing behind the newly acquired Brian Campbell and Ed Jovanovski will certainly make his fantasy value much more potent.

But at the same time, Scott Clemmensen will also be rewarded for his patience and have plenty of chances to earn starts this season. That being said, this battle could really go either way. So who has the edge in fantasy value?

Theodore will lean on his experiences in Colorado in regards to playing in a weaker market where he'll face a lot of shots, but Clemmensen has the edge in terms of comfort. So I see both guys pushing each other back and forth all season long, and while this might surprise some of you, I give an edge in statistical output (not wins) to Clemmensen.

Another goalie to obtain a starting role on Friday, in what was one of the most bizarre goalie acquisitions on July 1 in recent memory, was Semyon Varlamov. For a guy that had essentially set his sails for Russia due to a lack of a starting job, Colorado scrambled after failing to sign Tomas Vokoun and gave up way too much to acquire him.

That being said, Varlamov is still one of the most skilled 23-year old goalies in the world. He's an explosive, high-energy goalie with tremendous upside. Valued by many around the league to be the most promising of the (previous) three Caps goalies, Varlamov is foaming at the mouth to stay in the NHL and play every game.

In Colorado, he'll certainly get that chance. But as I keep saying, this team lacks a full-time goalie coach, which could be a major negative impact on a goalie that still needs (and wants) daily instruction and guidance from a mentor. With that title belonging to Jussi Parkkila, who recently signed to coach SKA in the KHL, I would consider Varlamov's long-term value in Colorado a lot less risky if they hired someone to work with him full-time.

J-S Giguere, who signed a two-year deal with the Avalanche, does make a great mentor for the eager-to-learn Varlamov, but I have very little confidence in this combination. Completely different styles coming together on a porous team with very little leadership on the blue line is not a very comfortable situation for either goalie.

Either way, Varlamov is now in a situation where he can play as many games as he wants. He's skilled enough to win 30 and post better than a 2.50 goals against average, but Colorado was dead last in goals against last year. Add in the loss of Adam Foote and John-Michael Liles, and Varlamov will need to stand on his head most nights.

Can two injury-prone goalies that haven't played a lot of hockey over the last two seasons fill the void in Denver? I know this team better than any other team in the NHL, and I personally feel like the risks totally outweigh the rewards.

But if the Avalanche can invest in a full-time goalie coach, Varlamov will be everything he's expected to be, and more. If not, he'll have to fend for himself on a daily basis and rely on

Giguere for mentorship. At least he'll earn you a high volume of shots, plus plenty of chances to prove he's a legit first or second goalie to own in fantasy leagues.

I'll also close by saying this agreement with Varlamov is a lot like Anderson's two years ago. Both guys made it very clear they wanted to be starters and just needed a chance. And while Anderson stood on his head for one season in Colorado, the second one was disastrous after injuries and frustration behind an inept team totally overwhelmed him.

Saving the best for last, clearly the biggest fantasy winner over the weekend for goalies was AHL standout goaltender Mark Dekanich. Although he only appeared in one NHL game with the Predators last season, the Blue Jackets and new (full-time) goalie coach Ian Clark saw an opportunity to sign a real rising star. They rewarded him with a new one-way contract and a paved path to be Steve Mason's backup, all but sealing his future as a full-time NHL goalie.

In just one day, Dekanich went from being overshadowed in Nashville's deep goalie system to being a prospect that could start 30 NHL games as a rookie and stretch that fantasy ceiling to an immeasurable height. I think most of you know he has also hovered in the Top-20's and 30's of my *Top-100 Prospects Rankings* over the past two years.

For the rest of the goalies that signed on Friday, we saw many backups extend their careers in new cities.

Peter Budaj will see less playing time in Montreal, but finally *have a chance to improve his game* under the tutelage of Pierre Groulx. So Budaj's fantasy value hinges on less volume, but stronger stats, possibly even a shutout or two.

Alex Auld will get to play a lot more in Ottawa , with slight odds to wrestle away some games from Anderson. *Brian Elliott will most likely win the backup role* to Halak over Ben Bishop and have a chance to extend his NHL career beyond the 2011-12 season.

And in regards to Tomas Vokoun, Michal Neuvirth and Braden Holtby's new situation, *listen to my Audio Recap* of what you'll find next season in Washington. This kills Holtby's value for next season unless he's recalled due to injury, but for both Neuvirth and Holtby, *having Vokoun for at least one year* is ultimately better for their long-term value.

For Holtby, please look at the path taken by Cory Schneider and Jonathan Bernier to understand how spending another year in the AHL can be a good thing. The only possible negative impact on his long-term value would be if the Capitals chose to re-sign Vokoun for another year. I don't expect that to happen, but it most certainly could.

And that’s the way it goes for goaltenders during the free-agent frenzy. Proven guys are left wandering in the dark, while inexperienced goalies find a way to capture the chance of a lifetime.

But it’s not about what they did to get there, or how they played to earn that opportunity. It’s about what they do next.