If the Islanders want to take full advantage of their current hot streak (4-0-1 in last five), Jack Capuano needs to label Al Montoya as his starter and be done with it all. Not only is Montoya statistically the team's best goalie, but he's also the strongest horse to ride if they want to push for the playoffs. He played in all five games during this current run, so the players know it, the coaches know it, and he knows it.

Since landing on the Island, Montoya has just eight losses in 33 total appearances. He's currently 5-3-2 with a sparkling .933 save percentage and 2.07 goals-against average. He's not winning games at a torrid pace, but he's getting more comfortable with each game he plays, win or lose. Aside from three games where he allowed four goals (two of which were OT losses), the rest of his starts this season have resulted in one or two goals against.

Not only does Montoya have valuable stats as a fantasy sleeper, many managers still don't realize he has a solid combination of skills, including quickness, agility and aggressiveness. Compared to Rick DiPietro and Evgeni Nabokov, Montoya is thinking the game at a higher level. Staying healthy helps, and that's a huge part of the battle. But he's making the big saves, he's playing with nothing to lose, and he's moving with a lot of confidence right now.

Wednesday night's 5-1 win over Tampa was another example of why Montoya not only quietly carries the "starter" label, but why he also has hidden fantasy value as the top Darkhorse right now. After allowing a goal on the first shot he faced (PP tip by Martin St. Louis), he shut the door and stopped 23 of 24 shots for the win. That's a great sign of mental toughness, proof of a starter's mentality, and how an inexperienced goalie earns more starts from his coach.

Montoya goes again tonight against the Blackhawks. What was I saying a few weeks back about a string of starts?

Bryzgalov's Questionable Value

I watched Ilya Bryzgalov last night against the Sabres, and now I'm really starting to wonder about his actual value for the rest of the season. He made some nice early saves, but the Sabres still scored three goals in the final 9:44 of the first period. Yes, the Flyers came roaring

back and won 5-4 in overtime, but they did so in spite of their goalie, not because of him. Bryzgalov finished the night with 20 saves on 24 shots, an unimpressive .833 SP%.

When I dug a little deeper, I realized “a strong start” is a key component to his game, especially in terms of displaying consistency. He has now allowed 10 first period goals in his last five games, so his struggles might stem from simply not showing up when the puck drops. He has a fairly weak .837 penalty-killing SP% and is just 4-4-1 on home ice with 32 goals scored (3.29 GAA) against him and a .888 SP%. That is alarming, almost frightening stats for poolies.

How much influence Chris Pronger’s injury woes have on Bryzgaov’s numbers is up to you, but I know he’s an elite talent really under-performing right now. Giving up 15 total goals in the first period is one thing, but giving up 18 in the third (and two more in OT) is another. He’s just not making the clutch saves that push “quality” stats to “superb” stats.

Therefore, the question has to be asked; what type of value does Bryzgalov truly have outside of a Dave Tippett system? I discussed over the summer how tough the adjustment can be for goalies going West to East, especially going from a market like Phoenix to one like Philly’s, and I do see most of those signs in Bryzgalov’s game right now.

On the technical side, sometimes I feel like Bryzgalov is way too casual. For example, he gets caught too deep because he simply doesn’t step out to challenge a shooter, or “tricklers” squeeze just under his arms. He also allows a lot of goals where he only gets pieces of the

puck, not the whole thing. Or he's simply hung out to dry.

Because he's a graduate of the Francois Allaire school of goaltending, he's prone to being picked apart some nights because he can get caught defaulting into the blocking mode, playing too deep in his crease. It takes an active mind to actively challenge shooters, and like I said, sometimes he's too casual, or simply not working as hard as he can.

Of those three first-period goals last night, each one was worse than the one before it. He wasn't fighting back – he was falling apart. Rarely tested in the second and third period, I do still give him credit for getting the win, but man, was it ugly.

I expect Bryzgalov to go through some more ups and downs this month. But keep an eye on how he plays early in games. I know from watching him many times here in Denver that he's either "locked in" or fighting the puck and giving up bad rebounds. He needs a bunch of early saves to get into the zone, and this hasn't happened very often so far this season.

The Darkhorses Update

Click here to download the new release. Matt Hackett, Leland Irving and Matt Murphy are introduced, while Jeff Deslauriers was removed since Dan Ellis is back for Anaheim. Montoya continues to be my favorite Darkhorse, followed closely by Curtis Sanford, and then Mathieu Garon. All three goalies play tonight, including Hackett.

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