For Jonas Hiller owners, this season has been nothing but pain and despair. A risk from the get-go, he silenced his Vertigo critics with a solid four-game winning streak from Oct. 8-17. Since then, however, he has won just five games, and over that period of time, has hit rock bottom by being pulled four times and venting his frustrations to the media.

But everything could change for the better now that Lubomir Visnovsky is back in the lineup. He played a game-high 24:23 last night, had seven shots on goal, and blocked four shots as well. If that wasn't enough, the Ducks received a two-goal effort from newcomer Niklas Hagman, so it was clearly their best effort under new coach Bruce Boudreau.

Hiller still has a lot of work to do in terms of getting his fantasy value back to where it needs to be, as does the team's effort as a whole. But last night's work by Visnovsky indicated to me that Hiller is on the rise. I point to one specific sequence in the third period when Lubomir literally saved Hiller's bacon by batting a sure goal out of mid-air. On the following shift, Hiller returned the favor by making a big save on a partial Coyotes breakaway.

That was a key moment for me, because I could tell Hiller really responded to the support in front by making a few big saves. Emotionally, this has to be a huge sigh of relief, as it is often a few “bail outs” from teammates that can change the synergy between a goalie and his defensemen. The whole game just had an air of positivity and progression for the Ducks, something similar to what you might be seeing with Cam Ward and Jaroslav Spacek in Carolina (although I’m sure Ward would love to have Joni Pitkanen back as well).

In his last three games, Hiller has now stopped 76 of 82 shots – good enough for a .927 save percentage. That’s what I’ve come to expect from him on a consistent basis; but to expect that the rest of December is still a pretty big stretch. The schedule isn’t conducive to him matching that stat, as Anaheim begins a four-game road trip starting tomorrow, where they’ll face Chicago, Winnipeg, Dallas and then LA.

But as I watched the game, I could easily tell the win was more about Anaheim’s solid play in all three zones, and less about the struggles of Mike Smith and the Coyotes. Hiller gained confidence as the game went along, and by the final buzzer, he had better timing, rebound control (absorbing shots) and body language than I’ve seen in weeks.

Did Mike Smith Turn A Corner?

Many Smith owners are reaching for the panic button after last night's loss to Anaheim. But whatever you do, don't push it yet. Every goalie experiences ups and downs, so allot some time for him to work through this rough stretch.

The numbers for Smith in December definitely freak me out. He's just 1-5-0 with a 4.30 goals-against average and .859 SP%. But in last night's game, he made some huge saves in the third period, leading me to believe a corner may have been turned. They weren't just routine saves, either…they were of the "stealing goals" variety.

His play in the third was too small of a sample size to say he's guaranteed to rebound, but I think most poolies realize there are way too many good people around him (Sean Burke, Dave Tippett) for this stretch to totally erode his value.

Emery Will Keep Starting

I know *I wrote about Ray Emery's rising value on Monday* , but after last night's awesome effort in the 4-3 shootout win over the Wild, I had to follow up with *some more insight on his current value* . I think it's safe for me to say that Quenneville is developing a small man-crush on his backup goalie. Why? Because he's the NHL's ultimate battler.

But don’t lose sight of the fact that Corey Crawford is a battler as well. It’s not easy to get back in the net of a Coach Q team when you’re lacking confidence, but the schedule favors Crawford next week. After the next two games against Anaheim and Calgary, the Blackhawks go back-to-back in Pittsburgh and then at home against Montreal.

So regardless of how well Emery plays between now and then, I don’t see him playing in back-to-back games. Until then, I suspect Emery to start the next two games, barring a complete meltdown against the Ducks.

String of Starts for Neuvirth?

A lot has gone wrong for the Capitals this season. Top to bottom, ineffectiveness has plagued the team since the end of October, and it seems like just about everything that could happen with their goalies has happened.

Everything, that is, except Michal Neuvirth getting a string of starts.

At no point this season has he started more than two games in a row. I have discussed at many different times the importance of *giving goalies a string of starts* , so keep an eye on his performance tonight against the Jets. If they come away with a win, Neuvirth will start until he loses.

The Darkhorses Update

Click here to download the new release . Matt Hackett (headed back to Houston) has been replaced by Evgeni Nabokov (off the IR), Antero Niittymaki (off the IR) has replaced Andrew Raycroft (performance-based), and Ray Emery (performance-based) has replaced Mike Murphy (swapped for Justin Peters).

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