

## A Finale: Late-Season Sleepers

Written by Justin Goldman

Thursday, 08 March 2012 15:32 - Last Updated Thursday, 08 March 2012 23:20

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Now that March Madness is in full swing, poolies everywhere are right in the middle of the playoff push. Desperation mode consumes our minds, we consume more coffee than ever before, we stay up later to watch games in the Western Conference, and we keep a website tab locked on the NHL standings page until the regular season ends.

The madness of March has been exponentially greater in goal, due in large part to injuries sustained by Craig Anderson, Niklas Backstrom, Tuukka Rask, Mathieu Garon, and Tomas Vokoun, who returns tonight after going 15 days between games.

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That's a lot of fun for me, as I've been able to evaluate Michal Neuvirth and impressive rookies Matt Hackett, Robin Lehner and Ben Bishop, then bask in the glory of vintage Marty Turco donning a Bruins jersey, and know that Dustin Tokarski is finally going to earn his NHL debut either tonight or in the next few days.

That's not so fun for a bunch of you poolies out there, as seasons could have had the life squeezed out of them due to one of those workhorses being sidelined. But have no fear, when one goalie's value is suddenly crushed, another's is sure to rise. The end of one surge is merely the beginning of another.

"End of the season" sleepers. Suddenly, base metals and raw-skilled prospects have the potential to turn into pure gold, almost overnight. Nobody sees them coming, nobody really knows where they're going once the season ends, and most poolies don't even care. You guys need points right now, and that's all that matters. So below I've listed three sleepers that are tough to decipher, but ones that I feel could be steady risers over the next three weeks.

**Steve Mason:** With three straight wins and 101 saves on his last 105 shots, Mason transcends the one-year league paradigm and has keeper-league managers turning heads as well. Is this a sign of things to come? Has he gotten over the proverbial hump of inconsistency and focus issues? Unfortunately, I pose those questions because I don't know the answers. Furthermore, Columbus still has four more back-to-back sets this season, and that includes a home-and-home with the Blues this weekend. This is a volatile situation, where just about anything could happen.

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My advice for one-year poolies would be to hold off on acquiring him until after this weekend. If he plays well again tonight against the Kings, then that adds more fuel to this fire, and maybe that gives him enough momentum to play well against the Blues. If he doesn't, you saved yourself a costly mistake. It's always good to err on the side of caution with Mason, but this depends on your needs. I would personally wait until Sunday night, then reevaluate.

My advice for keeper poolies would be to wait for him to cool off a bit, and then snag him. For next season, he may not be wearing a Blue Jackets uniform, which is the best thing that could possibly happen to his long-term value. There has been serious disharmony in both the external and internal states of his game this season, but in another city, with a clean slate and a fresh start, I see promise in Mason's future over the next three to four years.

I'll be honest, no goalie has been tougher to decode than Mason. I thought he was going to be a silent killer this season due to his strong off-season and new goalie coach, but that clearly didn't happen, and I was dead wrong there. Most of his issues still stem from within, and technically speaking, he still has the talent and skills to evolve into a steady and consistent performer. He's considered a true "head case" but he's still a fairly immature goalie in terms of overall experience, so his mental game is still evolving into what you want to acquire in a steady performer.

Regardless of how he finishes the season, there's no way it can be worse than what it was over the past few months. This season was one giant learning experience, so all we can do is hope that experience will be applied to his mindset, and that it will go far in developing and improving the focus and work ethic needed to succeed. But ultimately, the trend of "more questions than answers" continues with this kid, so proceed with caution.

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**Dustin Tokarski:** With Garon out for three or four weeks, Tokarski's recall couldn't have come at a better time for poolies leaning in his direction. He enters this afternoon with true swagger, winning a franchise-record eight straight games down in Norfolk, posting a 1.75 goals-against average and .927 save percentage along the way.

In terms of his value moving forward, I think the odds are certainly on his side to be a valuable sleeper. He's in a rhythm, his confidence is at the highest point it has ever been, and I have been ranking him in the top-30 of my [Top-150 Prospects](#) for almost two years. Garon earned the starts he received in February, and the timing is much better now that Tokarski spent last month dominating the AHL. If I were to pick a true sleeper over the next three weeks, it would be Tokarski. I just get good vibes, and I think the timing is right. Let's hope it translates to a good first start.

\*As of posting this, there is still no confirmed starter for the Lightning tonight, but don't be surprised if he earns the start. [Read this informative piece](#) to learn more about the potential "win and you're in" situation moving forward.

**Ben Bishop:** I wasn't overly-impressed with Bishop's debut in a 7-3 win over the Lightning a few days ago, but he did show good composure and even-keeled elements in his game. He made a few timely saves, and he's definitely ready to be a full-time NHL goaltender. I like his value moving forward, especially for next season, and you can read all of my thoughts from his debut, [some of which are fantasy-related](#), at the end.

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With Craig Anderson on the ice today holding a stick at practice, I wonder about his injury timeline and sense that if he returns in 10-14 days, Bishop's workload only stretches to seven or eight more games at the most. They have three more back-to-back sets over the next four weekends, and don't lose sight of Robin Lehner's influence as well.

Bishop's value is way more enticing for next season. If he has good performances over the next few weeks, he's a lock to be Anderson's backup. And since Anderson has been so incredibly streaky over the past three seasons, I can see Bishop stealing a good amount of starts due to his maturity and experience for a 25-year-old.

**Thank You, Dobber Nation!** I would like to thank everyone for their tremendous support of my weekly articles here on DobberHockey. I am announcing that this is my final weekly piece, and [\*I've posted a thank you note right here\*](#)

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