

Three Goalies with Everything to Prove

Written by Justin Goldman

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Training Camp is here and there's plenty for National Hockey League goaltenders to prove this season. In fact, all 30 teams have some type of question mark surrounding their tandems - and in some cases - trios. Think about the Western Conference alone and conglomerates of Q's quickly arise; Can Dominik Hasek stay as healthy as he did last season? Will David Aebischer and Alex Auld join forces to help save Phoenix? Does Peter Budaj have the poise to play 70 games?

(School of Block is subbing in for the Wild West this week)

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These questions are unique to each goaltender, for each one has a critical aspect of their game that must be answered in order to silence the critics. But three goalies in particular – Martin Biron, Evgeni Nabokov and Jason LaBarbera – have significant scores to settle on a personal and professional level.

Martin Biron - The Man in the Biron Mask

There's an unfair perception floating around that Martin Biron will crash and burn with his opportunity as the "true starter" for the Philadelphia Flyers. Sure, he's only seen limited minutes as a Sabre, but Biron has moved on and now he has to prove he can provide confidence for his re-structured defensive core. At least there is one man who trusts in Biron - Flyers GM Paul Holmgren - who says this "unfair perception" is perpetuated by uninformed masses.

"I'm not sure it's fair," Holmgren said. "I think there were a couple of years in Buffalo where he probably was their No. 1 goalie and there were also a couple of years he was behind Dominik Hasek, then in the last few years, Ryan Miller."

Those are certainly some brilliant goalies that Biron has backed up, yet there comes a time in every goalie's career where they can no longer handle slithering around in the shadows of others. So Biron drew a line in the sand and took matters into his own hands, mainly due to an opportunity to lead a struggling (and now promising) team to greatness.

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“We think Marty Biron is the No. 1 goalie,” Holmgren added. “When he came here last year, he provided us immediately with stability and gave us a chance to win a lot of games. I look for more of the same from him this year.”

Not only does Holmgren expect his #1 goaltender to win 35 to 40 games, but more importantly, so does Biron. And so long as his defensemen play stable hockey, Biron will finally shed that unfair perception as the man in an iron mask.

Evgeni Nabokov - Playing for His Fallen Hero

Evgeni Nabokov is in a much different situation than any other goaltender this year. Sure, Vesa Toskala's departure is an obvious change that Nabokov will easily deal with, but the death of Sharks goalie coach Warren Strelow has snake-bitten the entire organization, and none more than Nabokov.

So it will be a quiet, lonely road for Nabokov to travel down as training camp begins, as Strelow was the comrade that he could call upon, whether he struggled or succeeded. But Nabokov has incredible poise, persistence and mental strength, the main ingredients needed to move on and live out Strelow's words.

Nabokov's play this season (especially in training camp) will speak volumes for how he's handled such an excruciating set of events this offseason. Remember how he played with fire in his eyes (and his heart) in the 2007 Stanley Cup Playoffs? He was the epitome of fortitude despite the loss in the Sharks-Red Wings series, as he played without any type of setback or letdown from Strelow's passing.

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Yes, with Toskala's departure comes a chance for complacency to set in. The job is finally Nabokov's, for good, without question. Nevertheless, his approach to this season must not change, so expect the former Calder Trophy winner to lead the Sharks like a Spartan in the Battle of Thermopylae. He will be their silent leader and quietly dedicate this season to Warren Strelow - the voice of the voiceless, the close friend and understanding confidante. Nabokov will make sure his coach's voice lives on forever.

Jason LaBarbera – Another Day in Quicksand

The better Jason LaBarbera played, the same distance away from the NHL he stayed. He was so productive for Manchester last year that the Kings were too afraid to bring him up, due to the risk of losing him through waivers. Yet Marc Crawford dug himself a hole by choosing to keep Dan Cloutier and Mathieu Garon over LaBarbera, which resulted in a ton of injured goalies and the fifth-most goals allowed.

Now LaBarbera is coming off an amazing AHL season, winning both the "best goaltender" and "lowest goals-against average" awards. Unfortunately, however, his supposed slam-dunk spot on this year's roster is not such a solid thing. Cloutier is said to be healthy and ready for revenge, free-agent addition Jean-Sebastien Aubin will try and vie for a spot and Swedish import Erik Ersberg and heralded rookie Jonathan Bernier will also be flashing the leather in training camp.

The Kings must realize that LaBarbera, a 6-foot-2, 220-pound monster with loads of promise is much more valuable than J.S. Aubin, a third-stringer with less than 200 games played in eight NHL seasons. The risk is minimal to put Aubin or Cloutier in Manchester, but LaBarbera knows that nothing is set in stone. He must prove on the ice that spending another day (or year) in quicksand will be a huge mistake.