VAUGHN

There's no denying it, the increase in scoring to start the season has numerous goalies melting under the glow of the red light. Even when they put together a tremendous game, they are still allowing close to an average of three goals, sometimes four or five. But despite this period of inflation for save percentages and goals against averages, there are still plenty of admirable performances and performers to be found. But now they're just more spread out and somewhat elusive.

Come on, Dobber is right; scoring will most definitely start tapering off soon…like it usually does. But I really believe this rise in scoring is going to be sustained for longer than usual. In order to see why this might be the care, don't just look the simple fact that scoring is up TO START THE SEASON - look about how the goals are being scored and why it's happening.

The source for all of this is fairly simple on the surface. More plays are being converted off of rebounds, third and fourth chances and goal-mouth scrambles. There's also much more traffic around the net and plenty of screens right in front of goalies. Combined with the institutionalized changes and restrictions in leg pads and gloves, those tiny holes are not just a little bit bigger, they're staying open for just a split second longer.

Because of this, many starting goalies are not playing to their true potential. And since we all know that consistency is something that is rewarded, it's only natural that more coaches are calling upon the backup, sometimes much earlier in the season than they wanted, sometimes out of frustration, sometimes out of desperation.

It kills two birds with one stone as well, because it pushes the starter to play better in an attempt to secure their status. If they still don't straighten up, then it's even more playing time for the backup. In fact, one could argue that how goalies react to their workload and limited opportunities is more important right now than any other time in the post-lockout era. But no matter which way you slice it, there's still no satisfaction guarantee.

Tobias Stephan played admirably well for Dallas in a 4-2 win against Minnesota on Wednesday and then suffered a loss in Chicago, but even with the loss, he did a much better job of giving the Stars a chance to win than Marty Turco has in his losses. Stephan's game ultimately didn't do much to stop Turco's bleeding, however, as Turco was lit up by the Bruins in a 5-1 loss, a game in which he only made 20 saves.

Michael Leighton's solid two-game streak that included a big win against Anaheim and then a tough loss in Pittsburgh four days later instantly made Cam Ward raise his level of play, even though he has actually been quite solid all season long. Ward looks much more focused right now and is playing more of a desperate game and that has resulted in bigger saves at important junctures in the game.

Ward was a star in a losing effort against Edmonton on Saturday with 29 saves (3-1 loss) and that came just a few days after he pitched a 19-save shutout against the Blues in St. Louis. At the same time, Leighton just added another win to his record with a solid performance in a 6-4 win over the motivated Maple Leafs on Sunday. It wasn't pretty, but he made numerous key saves in the third period to keep the Canes on top.

On the other end of this spectrum, Andrew Raycroft was horrible in his "scheduled" start against Columbus back on Thursday, looking eerily similar to his play last season in Toronto. There were goals from behind the net, goals that seemed to surprise him right over his glove, etc. So without much of a showing from Raycroft, Peter Budaj responded by playing a very normal game in a 5-3 loss to the San Jose Sharks. It was a game where he was continually left out to dry in the second and third period, but he still didn't make the spectacular save when it was really needed. Ultimately, it just wasn't a motivating performance for Budaj.

BEWARE of the "scheduled" start for a backup, except of course when it's on the first or second night of a back-to-back game. There's no benefit to slating a backup to play a specific game weeks in advance. Backups are meant to play when the starter struggles or when there are numerous games in a week. They are trained to be ready at any given moment, so to schedule a start for a backup really only complicates the situation. Giving them all of that time to think about the game, along with heightened expectations will usually result in failure...especially when the last name is Raycroft. It's more mental pressure that is really unnecessary. The decision mine as well be kept quiet until a day or two before.

Look around the NHL and except for a few teams like Calgary, Vancouver and New Jersey, you can make some type of argument that there is a lot of inconsistency and struggle in net. That's what happens when scoring goes up and the pads continually get smaller. Maybe that's why Tim Thomas is kind of the big story this season for NHL goalies. He strung together a pair of 1-0 shutouts on the road in back-to-back games and is once again amongst the leaders in save percentage, mainly because his passion is bar-none and his competitive level is through the roof. Nobody works harder than him to make a save and nobody wants the puck more.

Now if only he would just realize that being so frantic with his hands and diving out at pucks actually causes rebounds where a spectacular saves is absolutely necessary, maybe he would actually have the energy to sustain his shutout streak even longer and at the most crucial moments. But that's an argument I'll have to leave for another week.

RICK DIPIETRO UPDATE

Being able to give a verified update on injured goaltenders is more and more difficult thanks to this ridiculous trend where teams refuse to disclose the true place where an injury is sustained, or for how long the goalie is going to be off the ice. Some teams have actually mandated that all injuries are "undisclosed", which is only making the problem worse.

Rick DiPietro owners might have their entire fantasy season ruined, thanks to the nature of DiPietro's injury. Yep, I'm talking about the aggravating and frustrating rehabilitation that comes with sustaining a meniscus injury. You know my thoughts on them – they're horrible. They've

already set back Pascal Leclaire and Manny Legace and it looks like DiPietro may be next.

Because of the injury, Yann Danis made his first NHL start since playing in six games in the 2005-06 season, one in which he went 3-2-0 and pitched a shutout. But he didn't fare too well against his former team, the Montreal Canadiens, as he failed to hold onto a 4-1 advantage in a 5-4 loss.