

## Walking the Fine Line

Written by Justin Goldman

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Whether it's used correctly or not, the trendy term "goaltending controversy" is being tossed around in many markets right now. I can't get away from it here in Denver, nor can analysts in Ottawa, Dallas, Chicago, St. Louis...and the list goes on. But no matter what the reasoning is, when you look a little deeper, all of these situations actually walk a very fine line between healthy competition and a real full-fledged controversy.

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What causes people to throw that word around so much anyways? Is it because of a goalie's slow start, a three-goal outburst in a single period, a goal allowed from a horrible angle in two straight games? Come on, hockey is totally chaotic these days and rebound goals are a dime a dozen right now. Regardless, the situations I listed above will still have people screaming for change, calling out the term goalie controversy like a chased villain calls out sanctuary.

The Webster's dictionary defines a controversy as 'A prolonged public dispute, debate, or contention...a dispute concerning a matter of opinion.' And now that you mention it, this does make things quite interesting when I try to explain what the word actually means compared to how it is more commonly used.

The key word within the definition is 'prolonged', which means a single game or a pair of games does not constitute a large enough sample to even consider a controversy. It really needs to be an issue that develops over the course of at least two weeks. In my opinion, five games is a perfect sample size to determine where a goalie stands compared to his expectations.

'Opinion' is the other key word in the definition, as someone's competent opinion must differ with another (one of which should be in congruence with the coach's decisions) in order to spawn a controversy. Especially when you factor in the passionate and heated atmosphere of fantasy hockey, everyone's opinion means something logical, thus the word "controversy" will be batted around as long as pucks go into the net.

So what, exactly, makes a TRUE goalie controversy? You can try your hardest to define it, but unfortunately, it's not something you can calculate mathematically or truly map out. It's something much more objective, because you know when it's there and you know when it's not. Ultimately, it just depends on the situation.

But like everything else in the game of hockey, there are a few things you can still look for. First of all, is there a major disappointment or shift in the play of the UNDISPUTED starter? I say 'undisputed' because a new-found starter lacks experience, thus there's no guarantee of his continued leadership. Secondly, there must be a serious coaching decision to be made when it comes to time in the crease. Other than that, you just have to dissect every game to truly understand the situation, so let's break down a few scenarios that may seem like one, but could be nothing more than your run-of-the-mill healthy competition.

The situation between Ron Wilson and Vesa Toskala in that ridiculous shootout loss to Anaheim is a perfect example of a coaching decision influencing what is or is not a real controversy. And up until Toskala's huge win against Montreal on Saturday, he was seriously lacking confidence, which stemmed from being benched for the shootout. Just look at his game-by-game results since that night and you will realize just HOW big of a win that game was for him.

There is a real controversy brewing in Dallas because Marty Turco still cannot find his game no matter how many chances he has. There are only so many games that Dallas' coaching staff can let Turco single-handedly lose, and with Tobias Stephan having no real standard of play, it makes it difficult to bench Turco for more than a few games. Stephan is not expected to come out and steal the starting job anytime soon, so Dallas could be scrambling to find competent

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goaltending if Stephan and Turco continue to putter along.

Steve Mason's week was beyond impressive after beating three Canadian teams en route to a 3-0 record, including the latest on Saturday against Calgary. A three-game streak is enough in my mind to say he has made Freddy Norrena expendable, especially with his solid technique and great reflexes. But regardless of how well you think Mason has played, this does not become a real controversy until Pascal Leclaire returns. At that time, Ken Hitchcock will have to make a tough decision on who gets the start. If he goes with a rookie on a roll to start his NHL career, it could negatively affect Leclaire. If he decides to go with Leclaire, it could end up in another injury or a bad game, thus slowing down Columbus' current hot streak.

Is there a controversy in Colorado since it took Peter Budaj six games to lift the Avalanche out of their longest losing streak in nearly ten years? Nope. But only because Andrew Raycroft hasn't played well enough in his limited chances to warrant any type of controversy. The proof is also in the fact that Budaj keeps getting the call from head coach Tony Granato. It finally paid off with a great 26-save shutout win over the Nashville Predators on Saturday, but again, one game really means nothing. Colorado doesn't play again until Wednesday against Roberto Luongo's Canucks, so the debate will continue through the week.

There's a controversy in Washington because Jose Theodore was the UNDISPUTED #1 goalie heading into the season, yet his consistent struggle over the course of October forced the Capitals to depend a lot more on Brent Johnson. Johnson's 2-1-2 record and 2.37 goals against average last week led Bruce Boudreau to change his system into one in which the better goalie starts each game. That shift in a rotation system is a classic cause for a controversy. Fortunately for Johnson owners, he is playing well...for the time being.

So feel free to hold your own controversy conversations about the goalie rotation in Edmonton, thanks to the incredible performance from Jeff Deslauriers on Sunday. He made 37 saves in a 2-1 victory over the New Jersey Devils and will certainly get the next start for the Oilers. Then of course you have Atlanta's situation with Ondrej Pavelec and the return of Kari Lehtonen. It's ironically similar to Edmonton, because Johan Hedberg, a third goalie in the system, came in and got a huge win over the weekend.

As you can see, the more you dig into these so-called controversies, the more interesting they become. And if you are struggling in goaltending statistics in your league right now, you know first-hand that the daily decisions seem to be much more frustrating this season compared to last.