

A New Empire's Birth

Written by Justin Goldman

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There is no solace that comes with losing your starting goaltender due to injury. There's no extra IR spot on the roster or free agent acquisition to be made, there's no antidote to fix the scar. Live with it and move on. Roberto Luongo has been placed on the gurney, clad in white sheets and neatly lined up next to Rick DiPietro, Kari Lehtonen, Martin Brodeur, and for now Evgeni Nabokov and Marc-Andre Fleury.

Yes, for fantasy owners everywhere, the aforementioned warriors have been reduced to withered ghosts. Their value has been destroyed (some for much longer than others) along with the archaic notion that goalies come with a stamp of credence for long-term success. But it

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looks like nothing lasts for long this season, regardless of whether it's from an injury or incompetence. There's a number of perfectly healthy goalies worthy of the gurney status as well, including Marty Turco, Jose Theodore, Martin Gerber and even guys like Jason LaBarbera, Andrew Raycroft and Freddy Norrena.

It seems to me that what once was achieved with a single goaltender slowly changed over the years into the need for a real solid one-two punch in goal. And now with the advent of equipment restrictions and rule changes, almost every NHL team not only needs to secure a THIRD strong goalie in their system in order to reach the Stanley Cup Playoffs, they downright must have one.

So all of the backups and AHL starters will continue getting more chances to play; that we know for sure. But for how long is really what matters. In a position where culpability is overshadowed by capability, it all comes down to consistency - and for longer than two or three games. The proof is in the rising number of coaches that now follow the mantra of 'to the victor goes the spoils'. Those playing consistently play more - those that fail are doomed to the bench, ultimately struggling to stay at the top of their game from the lack of minutes.

This shift has already gripped a number of teams - the Vancouver Canucks being the latest victim. Luongo is gone and the only speculation now is whether it's a knee or groin injury and whether he's out for the rest of the season or until March. Cory Schneider, the AHL's best goaltender bar-none, is obviously going to get his chance to inaugurate his NHL career, so the real dilemma for you simply becomes which goalie to acquire - Schneider or Curtis Sanford?

Well, the answer depends on if your need is short or long term. If you already have another successful starter, that's a little different than someone who banks on Luongo 75% of the time. For those that have a long-term need, show a little patience and go with Schneider. Give him a five-game trial and watch to see how quickly he adjusts to the speed at the NHL level. If he gets comfortable in less than three games and gets a little puck luck and some offensive support, you may have the birth of a new goaltending emperor.

If you need a short-term fill, then your line of reasoning sides with Sanford. He's a capable netminder that has practiced under the best goalie in the Western Conference and is just biding his time for this exact opportunity. He did a great job in relief against the Penguins and technically, Sanford is just as talented as any other backup goalie out there, with great size and strength. But will he show any consistency, well, that's the root of the dilemma my friend. If you're asking me, I say not any better than Schneider will be able to do.

So whether you're battling between the two Canucks goalies, Kevin Weekes and Scott Clemmensen, or Johan Hedberg and Ondrej Pavelec, you're all looking for the same thing - consistency. To figure out exactly which one will come out on top, you better start hitting the stats and watch as many games as you can! Just remember that there is no Empire without an emperor, so every team will end up doing whatever it takes to get a leader in their lineup.

That's no longer an issue in Los Angeles, as Erik Ersberg has officially taken over the team. With nine straight starts and a 5-2-2 record in that span, Ersberg allowed only two goals in five

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straight games in this stretch, oddly enough by facing an alternating total of 21 and then 26 shots against. He currently has a 2.05 GAA (6th best in the NHL) and .907 save percentage. It certainly looks like Terry Murray is a coach that implements a system and a starter and sticks to it no matter what, so that's good news for Ersberg owners.

Edmonton's empire continues to be oligarchic at best, although it's really unnecessary. Mathieu Garon started the season with a chance to prove his consistency, but by the start of November it was time for Jeff Deslauriers to get four consecutive starts to prove his worth. His back-to-back wins were an enticing sign of things to come, but after allowing five goals against Toronto back on Nov. 13, his short reign abruptly ended.

Then it was back to Dwayne Roloson for another set of four straight games. Roloson was able to hang on until he allowed three goals on 10 shots and was pulled against the Red Wings on Thursday, at which time Garon came in relief and played strong enough to make 23 saves on 24 shots. Okay, this madness has got to stop. Why is Craig MacTavish so hesitant to give Garon another chance with his own handful of games?

Unfortunately there's no clear-cut answer, for no matter what angle you look at it from, the answer is simple – whoever plays the strongest. Throw talent level out the window and embrace the mental toughness and sheer will to prevail. That's a way to describe why Roloson has seen so many games lately, despite his lack of success. He simply works hard and has a lot of spirited outings, similar to Tim Thomas in Boston. That makes it difficult for any head coach to bench him, but at the time it must be done sooner rather than later.

In Columbus, Freddy Norrena got the call when Pascal Leclaire went down with an injury (Oct. 25). In the next four games, Norrena was decent at 1-1-2, but you knew sooner or later Steve Mason was going to get his well-deserved chance. Turns out Mason did, and played ... you got it ... four straight games, running off three straight wins (including Montreal and Calgary) before Leclaire finally returned from injury.

Leclaire's first game back was a huge 31-save effort in a 6-1 win over Buffalo, but his second was a total disaster in a 7-2 loss to Edmonton. Norrena has been scratched the last few games, giving Mason the chance to post a 15-save shutout over the Thrashers on Saturday, pushing his record to 4-1-1. It was a full week between games, so Mason showed good mental toughness by battling through Atlanta's lack of shots.

So as you can see, whether by upsetting injury or lack of ability, there is a strong need for consistency in net right now – from coaches and fantasy owners alike. Goalies that play consistently for more than three periods are ultimately getting more starts, which allow them to get into a rhythm and play even better, ultimately increasing their fantasy value.

But the lines are more blurred than ever before when it comes to the workload of starters and backups. Right now, everything is up for grabs and as a result, many NHL teams have experienced the birth of a new empire. One where an unsung goalie is forced into the starting role and either succeeds or fails. How long their reign lasts, however, is up to them and them alone.

A NOTE ON THE LUONGO INJURY and SMITH'S STATUS

Check out the Dobber forums to get my thoughts on the Luongo injury. I believe it was something quite serious with his left knee, not a groin. Or it could be a groin TEAR as opposed to a simple groin PULL. Either way, until someone can find me a solid source of Luongo being quoted as saying he hurt his groin, you will never really know the truth. Until some type of official statement is made or released, don't be surprised if it is in fact a knee injury. If so, pray it's not a torn meniscus.

The Mike Smith situation is interesting because of some conflicting quotes I found on a story online. Check the forums in injuries section for Mike Smith ... I noticed that even though the Karri Ramo recall is standard procedure, Smith received 48 hours of therapy and rest to help him get over the "nagging lower body injury." This begs the question of whether or not it's serious or not, because to me, 48 hours of therapy and rest seems like a lot for something being labeled as nothing serious.