

## The Winds of Change

Written by Justin Goldman  
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It's quite amazing what a trade can do to rejuvenate a goaltender's game. But it's also equally impressive how it can totally destroy one. Some thrive in a new setting and others simply crash and burn. For fantasy owners, the only question left to ask is just how long a goalie can play well in his new surroundings. Sustainability is all that matters to you, because that puts points on the board.

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At first glance, sustainability depends on about 15 million different things. Age. Skill level. A team's defense and system. Development. Big-save ability. Work Ethic. Blah. Blah. Blah. I could write a book on each of those things, but for the sake of all things concise, you really only need to analyze one thing above all others, and that is confidence.

When a traded goalie comes into a new locker room with confidence, it instantly shows in their play. Even if the final result is not always a win, they gain the respect of teammates and become a vital part of the crew. If they provide good outings in their first few games, they will only get more opportunities to continue that success. If they work even harder in practice and push the other players to compete harder, that will also make a positive impact. Either way, head coaches will recognize, respect and reward the type of confident netminding that comes from a recently-acquired goalie.

Most traded goalies instantly get a chance to display that confidence on the ice, but for others, sometimes it's a matter of getting the opportunity to do so. This is where Colorado's goaltending situation currently stands. Andrew Raycroft has seen very limited action this season and only once (Oct. 16 and 18) started two games in a row. But that was until last week after Peter Budaj lost three straight games, a stretch in which he allowed 11 goals against Phoenix (3), Columbus (6) and Minnesota.

Raycroft was sensational in a 2-1 win over Chicago last Thursday, one in which he made 43 saves. He also pulled out a one-goal win over Nashville a few nights before that and then was rewarded for the two huge one-goal wins by getting a third start against the Penguins, one in which he led Colorado to a 5-3 win back on Saturday afternoon.

Now don't go throwing Budaj under the bus for good just yet. He is still a very good goaltender with a bright future ahead of him. But the big difference right now is that he's still in a developmental stage in his career. Maybe he's a late bloomer, maybe he's a patience project, but either way he is not the confident starting goalie the team needs to make the playoffs.

But for everything Raycroft has been through during his downfall in Toronto, including a total thrashing by many analysts including myself, he still plays with an air of CONFIDENCE. Sure, he walks a very fine line between playing cool in net and slipping into a state of catatonia, but he actually shows a bit of flair and silent cockiness when making a key save. Not only does he feed off it, but so do the players and the fans. And that is how the team was able to snag huge home wins against Chicago and Pittsburgh.

I'm the complete opposite of a statistical wizard like Dobber, but I can tell you one thing that is proven in the numbers - Raycroft plays better with a lead and with more confidence in one-goal games. Budaj struggles with them because he tenses up and gets nervous and his rebound control deteriorates as a result. But what do you expect? He's a young kid trying too hard to be the #1 goalie he's supposed to be.

Jason LaBarbera is another goalie currently riding high on the winds of change. Although he has gone just 3-2 in his five-game stint with the Canucks so far, he has in fact played very strong and with plenty of confidence. So feel free to ride with him, fantasy owners, but be

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forewarned - he still falls in my "do not touch" category for fantasy teams.

And why is that? Because sometimes a goalie is acquired for the sole purpose of being nothing more than a suture; they come in to close a wound for just a small amount of time. They are not a long-term solution, so owners should stick to the rule of a short-term acquisition for a short-term gain.

There's also a decision to be made when Roberto Luongo returns. Who will stay and who will go? It's actually a pretty worthless debate because neither LaBarbera nor Curtis Sanford is a future franchise goalie. They swim in a sea of mediocrity compared to Luongo, no matter how confident they play.

Therefore when it comes to analyzing the value of a traded goalie - a lot also depends on the goalies around him. Sure, LaBarbera has played well to start his career as a Canuck, but how will things change when Luongo returns? Expect Sanford to be moved or placed on waivers, as LaBarbera has more potential than Sanford...and better size.

In closing, I'm sure there are many fantasy owners that could choose between snagging LaBarbera or Raycroft right now. Hopefully after reading this column the answer is obvious and you go with Raycroft. His experience lends a hand to his confidence, which aids in his future sustainability. Especially when you factor in Colorado's lack of a Luongo-caliber goalie, Raycroft's recent play becomes even more valuable to the Avalanche organization. Therefore he will certainly play more in the second half of the season.