

Solid Masonry

Written by Justin Goldman

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Steve Mason has seven shutouts on a team that has never made the playoffs before. He's only 20 years old and although still a rookie, is probably never going back to the minors again. Sounds like another classic Cinderella goalie story...one that has to end sooner than later, right? Well it turns out that the clock may never strike midnight for Mason because he's performing better as the season ticks down.

Before diving into his game, you have to recognize that he's on a team coached by the defensive-minded Ken Hitchcock. The sultan of a stifling neutral zone defensive system is what brought the Stanley Cup to Dallas in 1999 and made contenders out of the Flyers a few years ago.

Regardless, Mason's success is only slightly marginalized by this "defense-first" system. It does explain how four of Mason's seven shutouts only called for 15, 18, 20 and 24 saves but it doesn't explain a 45-save shutout against Washington or 47 saves against San Jose.

Next you look at his experience gained during last year's run with Canada in the World Juniors. It was remarkable to say the least and no matter what expectations were placed on Mason's

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shoulders afterwards, the boost of confidence was monumental. Mason's big-save ability through the tournament was the icing on the cake for Columbus, meaning he was primed to get at least one chance this season.

Positionally, Mason's skill, technique and foot speed sticks out as a rookie once you factor in his size. The most important aspect of his game that I feel separates him from other young netminders is his extremely straight and broad back, which makes it very hard to beat him up high. You will notice players trying to pick corners in a hurry on him and then hesitate or fire the puck wide. He forces shooters to think too much about aim and accuracy and that is what goaltending is all about.

But there are a few things that indicate Mason is still human – he struggles in games following ones where he doesn't face a lot of shots. Just look at his game-by-game results and you will see that his confidence has been fragile at times. But the winning streaks have out-numbered the losing streaks, making him a bona fide starter for any fantasy owner.

Ultimately, Columbus is headed in the right direction and that means Mason should stay statistically consistent as the season comes to a close. He is capable of winning big games and combined with his display of composure as the starting goalie for Team Canada in the World Juniors, Mason quickly developed a cool and calm nature in something a lot less arbitrary – an NHL regular season game.

The real test for Mason starts today. After battling back spasms during All-Star break, it has been confirmed that he's battling a nasty case of Mono. It's tough to say if he's been "hiding" the sickness from coaches and playing through it, but if he is, that's even more testament to his durability and determination. In a league where coaches ask, "what have you done for me lately", the biggest test comes upon his return. Will the sickness impact his timing to the point where he begins to struggle?

Don't Bet on Elliott

Brian Elliott has some of the same puck-stopping qualities of other rookies this year, but with a smaller frame and a slightly narrower stance, he's not nearly as intimidating or as "big" as a goalie like Mason is. At the same time, Elliott has been getting caught very deep in his crease on a number of goals over the past two games, especially against Washington on Sunday afternoon.

If a goalie struggles to make saves at the top of his crease because he can't establish some space in order to make them cleanly, the goalie will struggle mightily. That's exactly what has happened with Elliott, as forwards have been picking up on his tendency to slide back in his crease. He got caught doing this too many times over the last week and as a result his confidence has been wasting away exponentially. Another example of this happening is with Peter Budaj – a fragile confidence and mindset on a poor team that leads to some very bad outings.

Elliott's work ethic does impress me, and usually that is enough to get two thumbs up. But

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unfortunately I notice some positional anomalies in his game that has bothered me for a number of years. Don't get me wrong, I know Bob Howard is an amazing goalie coach, but I just feel he teaches an irrelevant style for the current NHL game. A goalie coach at Wisconsin for over 36 years, Howard coaches a progressive hybrid style that employs a slightly offset stance, something that no NHL goalie currently uses.

There's not much more to discuss when it comes to Elliott. He's a suture on a team bleeding profusely from every orifice on its body. He has done a formidable job considering the Sens can't put a consistent effort on the ice, but it's obvious that right now Elliott is nothing more than a mediocre goalie at best.

With a new coach coming into town this week, the Senators should improve to finish the season. Maybe they have an instant turnaround and Elliott reaps the rewards of a more defensive-minded team. Either way, expect Elliott to see the bulk of the workload down the stretch. Ottawa wants to give him the chance to experience seeing a lot of shots at this level, for it will only bolster his value for next season.

Considering all of the factors I discussed last week between NCAA and Canadian prospects, the fact that Elliott can flash some of the same qualities as these other rookies from Canada and Europe, it's more proof that good goalies can come from anywhere. But after seeing Elliott get rattled against Washington, you have to realize that he just doesn't have a ton of value right now.