

Leclaire vs. Elliott

Written by Justin Goldman

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With the re-signing of Brian Elliott, many of you are wondering just what will happen this season between he and Pascal Leclaire. The Senators definitely have one of the more interesting (yet fairly positive) goaltending situations in the league right now. The recently acquired and highly touted “starter” is coming off an extremely difficult ankle injury, while the “backup” has been rewarded for his strong statistical play last season with a new contract, which means the expectations exist for him to improve on those numbers.

On the surface, this situation seems difficult to analyze because of all the “unknowns” surrounding Leclaire’s injuries. But then again, that aspect alone presents some very obvious obstacles that Leclaire will have to overcome. We know he has to remove the rust right away, all while keeping a team that hasn’t improved at all this summer from losing too many one-goal games.

We also know he has to find a higher level of consistency, all while Elliott gets plenty of chances to commandeer more minutes. And since you’ve learned in previous classes that playing a lot of minutes and finding that elusive rhythm is everything for goalies that seek consistency, let’s take a look at the two goalies from different angles before deciding which one has the best chance at playing the most minutes, thus being more valuable in a fantasy league.

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PASCAL LECLAIRE – The rising star was once a fan favorite in Columbus, but quickly turned into trade bait once the ankle injury ended his season and Steve Mason started writing his spectacular Calder Trophy story. With an extensive list of injuries that has now seen him miss the majority of three out of the last five seasons, we are still waiting for Leclaire to be more consistent and stay healthy enough to play more than 54 games in a season.

Unfortunately, Leclaire's game depends a lot more on agility and lateral quickness than overall size and stature. So his collision with Derek Boogaard was just about the worst thing that possibly could have happened, at just about the worst time possible. Why? Because a goalie that relies on lateral quickness to 'survive' in today's NHL, bone spurs and torn ligaments in an ankle is deadly. It's not as severe as a torn meniscus, but the two injuries COMBINED calls for one muddy recovery process.

Right now I consider Leclaire as one of those extremely talented goalies that can make the desperation and "big" save on a routine basis. But he lacks the focus and poise (or calmness) needed to play his style consistently. He also lacks durability, as more often than not he starts off a game on fire but wears down as he sees more work.

Simply put, Leclaire is extremely streaky, and that combined with injuries makes him a lot less valuable in the fantasy realm. I remember that everyone (including myself) was pretty high on him to play a ton of minutes, but in 12 games he only ended up with a 4-6-1 record, a 3.83 goals against average and a .867 save percentage. That's not very elite-like numbers, no matter how bad your team is playing to start the season.

Nevertheless, more and more reports and stories are popping up about Leclaire's hard work and full recovery from reconstructive surgery on his right ankle. The surgery took place in late-January and by late-April he was finally back on the ice and taking plenty of shots, albeit not at the pace of a full-fledged NHL practice.

When I read these stories and learned of his strong work ethic this summer, I was a little less apprehensive that another injury could come in the first 15 games again this season. Now that's not to say it won't happen again, but it sure makes a big difference knowing he's totally healthy and up to speed before the Senators' training camp opens.

Looking back at last season, I see that the more talented goalies that return from serious injuries but have been eased back into the lineup (like Leclaire has been) can often reach the top of their game without missing a step.*

But I still don't think Leclaire is going to remain healthy for the entire season. Why is that?

Smaller and injury-prone goalies have more trouble dealing with numerous game situations like collisions, body contortions and crease crashing confrontations. In fact, every time a goalie kills a penalty, they become more prone or exposed to the hulking forwards that are trying to block their vision of the puck. As long as skaters are creating havoc in front of the net, the smaller and weaker goalies will be more prone to serious injuries. (Every once in a while, the more solid and strong goalies like Luongo and Brodeur will hurt themselves, but it happens a lot less

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frequently.)

BRIAN ELLIOTT – Elliott has nowhere to go but up after putting together a solid rookie season. Those that owned him in fantasy leagues probably struggled to decide whether or not to drop him or keep him, because he didn't play at all in the first three months of the season and then started off inconsistently due to a lack of rhythm and playing time.

Looking back, I definitely underestimated Elliott's abilities. He surprised me last year. I remember saying that his style at Wisconsin was a little awkward due to the teachings of his goalie coach, Bob Howard. And while I knew that Elliott could get away with this unique style at the AHL level, I never thought it would work at the NHL level. But once he stuck with the Senators for good, it seemed like Elliott's stance was refined and made more effective as time went on.

In his first seven NHL games, which came about in mid-January after the Senators had seen enough of Martin Gerber, Elliott only went 4-3-0, but then again he only allowed 16 goals against. That solid 2.29 goals against average was actually quite brilliant for a very inconsistent Senators team. By the time March rolled around, Elliott adjusted his stance and continued to improve his quickness and reaction speed, which led to an incredible eight game winning streak. That proved he was ready for more steady NHL action, as he posted a 2.38 goals against average, another brilliant mark on a maligned Senators team.

Sure enough, the decision to keep Elliott on the roster was an easy one, and the right one to make. To me, Elliott is one of those goalies that flies below many radars, but has legitimate talent and has already made the transition from the AHL to the NHL without a lot of people even realizing it. He is straight up primed to improve this season.

And that's what I'm left with after looking at the two goalies and deciphering their games. Basically, it's only a matter of time before Leclaire either gets injured or falls into his inconsistent ways and Elliott steps in and provides more consistency. It would result in the Senators riding a less-talented goalie, which calls for slightly higher statistical categories like GAA and save percentage, but I think Elliott would actually instill more confidence in his teammates.

In conclusion, I have no problem saying that Elliott and Leclaire could literally end up splitting the number of games played right down the middle, all of which hinges on Leclaire's play in October. I can't say for sure where Leclaire stands with his health status, but it looks like he's already 100% healthy.

Overall, I guess I personally view Elliott as a hidden gem that's quietly on the rise. If (and when) Leclaire goes down, he has a very good chance of changing the tides of your fantasy league by compiling great numbers on a more consistent basis over the course of the whole season.

** Evgeni Nabokov missed most of November with an injury and came back only to rattle off five straight wins. Then he missed the tail end of February and the first half of March, but returned only to win five out of six games. And then of course we all know what Martin Brodeur accomplished after returning from his torn biceps injury. Roberto Luongo missed seven weeks*

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with that nasty groin injury (November 22 to January 15) and saw the complete opposite happen – maybe he came back a week too soon, because he lost five straight games before completely setting fire by winning eight straight games and 12 out of 13.

***A great source I found for a lot of the recent Leclaire happenings can be found in this [article](#)*

School of Block live chat on today's subject [and Pogge trade] from 3-4pm MST [is found here](#)

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