

## Clad in Shadows

Written by Justin Goldman

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When it comes to drafting goalies in a simple one-year fantasy league, ranking your top goalies of choice is a routine tradition. It's fairly easy to slot guys like Roberto Luongo, Marc-Andre Fleury and Martin Brodeur high on your pre-rankings. But with all of the unproven and relatively unknown "starters" this season, what direction do you take for the second and third goalie on your team?

This season is not without a number of goalies that are clad in shadows. Either they haven't been playing long enough to be considered a "bona fide" starter (like Jon Quick), or they have been terribly inconsistent over the last two seasons (like Marty Turco). Or maybe they're in a contract season and have to deal with a younger, more energetic goalie (like Jose Theodore and Semyon Varlamov).

Regardless of the situation, you have important decisions to make. And if you're like me, live drafts often turn into a hectic ordeal where the original strategy flies out the window and a fevered decision must be made within 90 seconds. So like most fantasy managers, you need to adjust your decision-making process on the fly.

Ultimately, it's the strong planning that can pull you out of a sticky situation – and with only seconds to react, it's all about having quality resources handy. With that being said, allow me to provide you with what I consider to be the ten most underrated goalies in a straightforward one-year fantasy league.

Although this Top-10 list is displayed as a ranking, please understand this is my own personal list. The term “underrated” is an amorphous term that can mean many things, so be advised! In fact, this list should call for some great discussion in today's live chat\*, as I'm curious what you consider to be underrated. Also, a quick shout out to ***ItsAlwaysSunnyinDetroit*** from the forums for bringing up this awesome topic in our School of Block live chat!

**10. CAM WARD** – The Hurricanes get plenty of respect in the Southeast Division, but barely make waves beyond the Eastern Conference. This team is led by Ward, a young and stalwart goalie that relies on great composure to make the big saves. In that regard, many managers don't realize just how good Ward is technically and positionally. Sure, there's a valid argument that he's been inconsistent over the last three seasons, but when you take into account how he performs in the playoffs, Ward is still underrated by many managers. He's lowest on this list because he's easily recognized as an elite, Stanley-cup winning goaltender.

**9. KARI LEHTONEN** – I know, I know...my man-crush for Lehtonen continues to grow. I dare anyone to debate that he's not an elite goalie when he's healthy, but at the same time he's rarely ever 100%. With news spreading about minor back surgery, tons of fantasy managers

have already written him off. It's safe to say that off-season surgeries are usually blown out of proportion, as Lehtonen should be considered healthy until he's hurt in pre-season or during training camp. Personally, I still believe in his ability to stay in the lineup for most of the season, thus making him much more valuable than he's currently portrayed.

**8. ANTERO NIITTYMAKI & MIKE SMITH** – Two goalies plagued by injury problems last season are now playing on the same team, so I placed them together for that reason. This list is reserved for starters, but until Smith hits the ice in goalie pads and is taking shots regularly in training camp or during the pre-season, I have to consider Niittymaki as the starter in Tampa Bay. And if he does take Smith's role through October, there's no reason to believe he can't carry the team into a 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> seed in the playoffs. Also, even though this may seem trivial, Antero is a perfect 13-0-0 against the Thrashers in his career. Now that he will have a chance to see them six times this season, he has a pretty good chance of stealing some important intra-divisional points.

**7. PASCAL LECLAIRE** – Another injury-prone goaltender is playing in a popular hockey market while having to deal with the reality that he's considered a band-aid boy. But Leclaire had surgery way back in April and has been regaining his strength and timing ever since. So even though I'm often heard downgrading Leclaire due to a previous meniscus injury, it's not like he's a walking matchstick. Leclaire has elite foot speed and agility, making him a quality goalie to own regardless of previous injuries. Hey, if Ray Emery can take the Sens to the Stanley Cup Finals, so can Leclaire. He just has to stay consistent through a full game and not waste all of his energy in the first five minutes. Managing minutes comes much easier with maturity, and it's hard to argue Leclaire isn't wiser than last season.

**6. NIKOLAI KHABIBULIN** – The Bulin Wall took Chicago deep into the playoffs last season but over the three series, he wasn't very sound technically or statistically. Nevertheless, whenever it comes time to strap on the work boots and win some hockey games, Khabibulin is one of the

best around. In Edmonton, he finds himself amongst a pretty underrated defensive corps. With Khabibulin playing close to 70 games if he's healthy all season, I like that he can get into a rhythm much easier than when he was dealing with Cristobal Huet. Similar to St. Louis in the Spring, I like Edmonton's chances of making the playoffs based on Khabibulin's big-save ability. He's still an elite, strong, clutch goalie with a Stanley Cup ring on his finger. Treat him as such and you'll be rewarded handsomely.

**5. TOMAS VOKOUN** – Everyone knows that Vokoun has been an underrated goalie for most of his NHL career. It comes with the territory of playing in non-traditional markets like Nashville and Florida. But right now the thorn in his side is his traditionally weak starts. But credit him for working hard to remedy that issue by working out more and skating earlier than usual (by three weeks). Hard work can pay off in many different ways, so even if he does struggle out of the gate, there's still plenty of reasons to keep him on your radar. Over the course of an entire season, I like Vokoun's ability to adjust and perform better with Scott Clemmensen continually pushing him for playing time.

**4. CRAIG ANDERSON** – Yes, this is Anderson's first legitimate shot at being a starting goalie, and it's coming with on one of the worst teams in the Western Conference. But youthful enthusiasm counts for plenty in my mind, as too does his exceptional positioning and size in the net. Anderson is a tough read because his season with Florida was spectacular, but with only 27 games played, nobody really knows what he's capable of doing on a rebuilding team like Colorado. Anderson posted a .924 save percentage last season, so even if he drops to around .910, that's extremely solid for the Avalanche. He will face close to the same average shots against as he did in Florida with a less physical defensive crew in front of him, so one thing you can count on is a lot of second and third saves.

**3. MARTY TURCO** – Turks has been more maligned than any other starting goalie this summer. His inconsistencies over the last three seasons have forced many fantasy managers

to cringe and the thought of dealing with his drastic ups and downs. But if Turco has been inconsistent without any other goalies pushing him for minutes, what leads you to believe he will struggle with Alex Auld behind him? Simply put, Turco knows the pressure is on and he's situationally aware. He even worked with a couple of different goalie coaches over the summer to solve his issues. As a result, you can expect Turco to be more focused than ever before. Look for him to handle the puck less to start the season until he reaches a mid-season comfort level in November. Dallas' defense is being heavily scrutinized right now, but with Turco only wanting to play 55-60 games, don't worry about him wearing down or losing focus this year.

**2. CHRIS MASON** – Mason is one of the most determined goalies I've watched over the last two seasons. What he did with the Blues was a story that will go down in goalie history. Does it get any more insane than losing an appendix and every single game in the first few months of the season, and then somehow still have the endurance to make the playoffs? Nope. Straight up, it was a task that had never been accomplished before. Last season aside, Mason has features that you have to love in a starting goalie – amazing stamina, great endurance and sharp focus. Yes, his face was rubbed in the dirt against the Canucks in the playoffs, but he never once buckled under pressure. That first-round sweep will only make him mentally tougher as this season rolls along. Do not underestimate his ability to stop plenty of pucks, win games and provide consistent leadership on a Blues team that's should be even better than last year.

**1. JON QUICK** – Although ranking a list of the most underrated starting goalies is unique to the individual, it should come as no surprise to many of you that Quick tops this list. He had a mini-breakout in the second half of last season, so more fantasy managers are starting to regard Quick like a slightly less-talented Semyon Varlamov. Personally I'd say Quick is more talented Varlamov, but that's another point of discussion for another time. All you really have to do is look at some recent stories on Quick to see that he's shattering the mold of what a run-of-the-mill NCAA graduate is capable of doing. Many within the Kings organization, none more influential than Ron Hextall, believe Quick has something to prove about Bernier being the future of this team. Quick will be the hands-down starter for the Kings and more importantly, his rhythm won't be negatively impacted if Erik Ersberg goes on a couple of hot streaks.

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