

Set Up for a Downfall

Written by Justin Goldman

Monday, 21 December 2009 13:31 - Last Updated Tuesday, 22 December 2009 09:26



Goldman delves further into the Mason/Garon situation in Columbus

Ken Hitchcock met with Mathieu Garon and Steve Mason together on Sunday morning, less than 24 hours after the team suffered a self-induced early implosion against the Colorado Avalanche. To summarize what the conversation entailed, Hitchcock had this choice quote for Aaron Portzline of the Columbus Dispatch:

"Win and you're in," Hitchcock said. "That's where we're at now. If a guy wins, he keeps on

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playing." ([Source](#))

You should know by now that I absolutely despise, nay, loathe the phrase "goalie controversy". But I can say with 100% certainty that, with this decision, Hitchcock has set things up for a downfall.

First of all, when you have two No.1 goalies (for argument's sake), why would you ever give them this message at the same time, after the original starter was pulled in the most recent game?! There are so many better times to have this conversation. I understand the validity making a change after the worst showing of the season and with the purpose of igniting Mason (and Garon) to "wake up" and show some consistency, but that's no reason for drastic measures. I would have expected better timing from a veteran head coach with a Stanley Cup ring.

How much consistency can you expect from Garon, who has only started eight games all season long? He's a rhythm goalie, and he probably would snap into rhythm if he started more than two games in a row. Oh wait...that hasn't happened yet either. Garon has played more than 100 consecutive minutes only once this season, which is more proof of what I've been saying for two years now - that Garon has been getting shafted with his minutes played. Had he started the number of games Mason has this year, you better believe the team's GAA would be much lower.

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Think about this meeting from Mason's perspective. Here's a young goalie with very little confidence, dazed by the glory that came from his Calder Trophy winning rookie season. What's the underlying message he's getting from this pep talk? Does he read between the lines and take it as motivation, or does he feel it's somewhat of a punishment?

Hitchcock might as well say, "Hey Mase, you played absolutely terrible in Colorado – now you're benched. Thanks in part to your inability to make the early save, we're now in a new 'bench-the-loser' mode. Garon starts on Monday."

I think a smarter approach would have been to speak to both goalies and tell them both the same exact thing, but not until both of them just had a solid outing. That shifts the entire dynamic of the whole conversation and keeps things positive. Remember, Mason is still very young, almost like a deer in headlights amidst the ever-changing NHL game.

If Hitchcock would have waited for a more appropriate time, he could have been saying, "Hey Mase, you played great in that last game – now KEEP IT UP!! We know how good you can be, so go out there and win again. By the way, our new approach is if you win, you keep on playing. Think of it as a challenge. Mathieu will be told the same thing."

Wait, I take that back. Instead of him saying, "you win and you're in" why not say, "you play strong and you stay in" instead? Again, it keeps things positive. It's a way to reward a goalie for their individual effort, not the collective play of the entire team. What if Garon stops 40 shots in a

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2-1 loss tonight? Should he be benched because he didn't win? No way, no how. But under Hitchcock's new approach, that's how it would work. It seems a little ridiculous to me. I guess I figured coaches would have learned their lesson by now, especially with the struggles in Anaheim, as this is the same approach Randy Carlyle uses with both Ducks goalies.

So in my mind, things could get much worse for Columbus. Their only saving grace now is steady and composed goaltending from Garon. If he gets consistent minutes (3-4 games in a row), the Blue Jackets will have a new starting goalie. If not, they will be stuck with one goalie suffering from the Sophomore Slump and another unable to get into a rhythm. And with more games for Garon comes less opportunity for Mason to rebound. It's a double-edged sword.

I scouted the Avs - Blue Jackets game on Saturday night and I can tell you that Mason seemed very nonchalant and passive hours before the game even started. He showed no signs of energy or intensity. During the warm-up, Mason was not very active at all. He didn't seem to get the blood flowing and he looked a little stiff throughout the drills.

When the game started, Mason's mind seemed to be wandering. Simply put, he just didn't show up, nor did anyone else on the team. But regardless of where you place the blame for the three quick Avalanche goals that transpired, Mason did not mentally prepare at all. And like I've explained already this year when Roberto Luongo struggled, the traffic in front of Mason was allowed to dictate his positioning, as opposed to the other way around. Overall, his attitude, from my perspective, did not look positive or upbeat. And that's what ended up being revealed on the ice.

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Now this whole “failing to show up” ordeal is only one game and let’s be realistic – he’ll start again when Garon loses. But I can’t say for sure when that will be. Garon starts tonight in Phoenix and is coming off a strong game and I expect him to play well, unless the Coyotes go roof daddy on him. But moving forward, what’s Mason’s real problem and is it fixable?

The source of his struggle is not uncommon at all for sophomore goalies. For Mason, it’s not where the goals are being scored or how they are being scored, but when. Looking through each and every loss he’s suffered this year, there are tons of goals being allowed in the first and last five minutes of each period and game. Don’t believe me that this lack of preparation or inability to make the timely save is an issue? Here are the results:

DATE **EARLY GA** **LATE GA** **FIRST-5**
LAST-5

Dec. 19	:21 (1 st)	---	4 GA	---
Dec. 15	---	19:21 (3 rd)	---	1 GW
Dec. 14	3:52 (1 st)	16:08 (2 nd)	1 GA	1 GW
Dec. 12	---	19:05 (2 nd)*	---	1 GW

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Dec. 5	4:58 (3 rd)	15:21 (2 nd)	1 GW	1 GA
Dec. 3	2:04 (3 rd)*	---	2 GA	---
Dec. 1	4:43 (3 rd)	17:37 (2 nd)	1 GA	1 GA
Nov. 28	---	---	---	SOGW**
Nov. 26	---	18:34 (1 st)	---	1 GA
Nov. 23	---	17:19 (1 st)	---	1 GA
Nov. 21	1:29 (2 nd)*	---	2 GA	SOGW
Nov. 11	1:05 (1 st)*	---	2 GA+GW	---
Nov. 4	4:17 (2 nd)	---	1 GA	SOGW
Oct. 30	---	17:43 (3 rd)*	---	2 GA, SOGW
Oct. 28	---	---	---	---
Oct. 25	---	19:03 (2 nd)*	---	2 GA

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Oct. 20	2:42 (1 st)*	15:55 (3 rd)	2 GA	1 GA
Oct. 8	1:34 (3 rd)*	19:48 (2 nd)*	2 GA	2 GA

*More than one goal against in the five-minute window, at a less-severe time

**SOGW = Shootout game winning goal against

Out of Mason's 17 losses (five by OT), only two games did not include at least one early or late goal against. In all the rest, you can see just how many goals are being allowed at what is considered the most crucial minutes of a hockey game. I could go on and on about why allowing early or late goals proves a lack of confidence and focus, but most of you have heard that rant from me before. Let's not forget he's also been pulled five times already this season.

So watch Mason's next few games and see how he starts and finishes each period. Is he giving up timely goals late or early? I don't necessarily consider the shootout goals a mental knock against him, although the shootout does impact a goalie's confidence and big-save ability.

At the end of the day, you can say that Mason will probably continue to struggle with this

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up-and-down play for the rest of the season. It's one thing to win the Calder Trophy by surprising everyone in the world, but now that each player knows what Mason is all about when it comes to technique and style, he has some work to do. The kid has no problem with talent, technique or ability but the mental game and the finer aspects of the position are still very raw.

I'm sure that at this point next season, you will see a lot less early and late goals against as he continues to evolve and develop.

JONAS GUSTAVSSON

Just a heads up that now could be the time to snag Jonas Gustavsson. At the start of the season, we all knew it was only a matter of time before he commandeered the starting role from Vesa Toskala. By the beginning of November, he had seemingly done just that, but it was mainly due to Toskala's terrible play. I was beyond excited to watch Gustavsson take over, but the fact still remained that he had zero NHL experience and tons of world-class talent.

All things considered, he actually did a good job giving the Leafs a chance to win some games. The dazzling saves were numerous, but the timely saves were not. Unfortunately, the rest of his team was not confident enough to provide any real consistent results on the other end of the ice, so Gustavsson did not get rewarded for his efforts.

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Once the groin injury came and then the second heart procedure, Toskala was able to stop a few pucks with a higher sense of confidence. This time around, the scales were more balanced and the team in front of him started to play as a group and score some goals. But Toskala resorted to his old self once again, which was right around the same time Gustavsson was returning to the lineup again.

The scales shifted a little bit more, but once again into a perfect balancing act when Gustavsson notched his first shutout of the season on Dec. 19 against Boston. This came less than 24 hours after he relieved Toskala and made 16 of 17 saves against the Sabres. Now that he has confidence, will play some consistent minutes and has support in front of him, I think this could be the moment when he takes over for good. He's in a rhythm and the health should not be an issue if he stays loose and relaxed. I'll let fate decide how this pans out, but for now, you've been warned!