

Rediscovered

Written by Justin Goldman

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While looking over this week's NHL schedule, I couldn't help but wonder about the different goalie stories and surprises that will pop up before the Olympic break. The fate of a fantasy manager is much more sinister than it is serene, so taking a risk or two could go a long way in getting your pound of flesh before the two week NHL hiatus.

One thing I know for sure is that the Olympics, and the consequential condensed schedule, has been a lot more influential on a goalie's rhythm than I ever expected. Injuries have become an issue for some, which has led to some new prospects being uncovered. As you have come to learn, when one window closes, another opens, meaning there's good moves to make if the price is right and you know where to look.

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And in a week where many managers won't pay as close attention to their teams as usual due to the Olympic buzz, a smooth goalie move could be a perfect way to finish up strong. So keep an eye on the names below, because one of them could mean the difference between winning, losing or landing a playoff spot in your fantasy league.

STEVE MASON

What a difference a week can make. Mason, who has repeatedly failed to turn around an atrocious sophomore slump, may have been cured with the firing of Ken Hitchcock. In fact, there's a very good chance that the coaching change could have a similar impact to the firing of goalie coach Eli Wilson on Ottawa's Brian Elliott.

I credit Mason's success in his last four games (3-1-0, 7 GA, 1 SO) to the fact he's simply enjoying the game again. Under Hitchcock, Mason had succumbed to the pressure of having to play with the label of a failure. It wouldn't be a surprise to learn he took the media's negativity too personally, and after hearing so many times that the cause of the team's problems was inconsistent goaltending, finally stopped believing in himself. With Hitchcock being fired, Mason and the rest of his teammates had finally hit rock-bottom.

What I noticed about Mason's struggles under Hitchcock is that he simply stopped competing after a while. Hitchcock is a very demanding coach, so some players are bound to lose their motivation more quickly than others. Mason was under the microscope more than any other

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Blue Jackets player, mainly because a defensive-minded coach lives and dies by their goaltender. But under Claude Noel, there's no more pressure for Mason to duplicate last year's success and the whole team experiences a rebirth. Now Mason's singular task is to focus on the basics and go from there.

In the last two games, Mason has done just that. He's playing higher in his crease with much more consistency through 60 minutes. He also controlled rebounds extremely well and executed butterfly movements with confidence. He had explosive pushes and sliced through the air with ease, as opposed to moving through sludge like before. His high energy level and confidence is slowly coming back, with proof found in [Tom Reed's Columbus Dispatch article](#) .

Moving forward, Mason's fantasy value is on the upswing. Not only is he readily available in a number of leagues, but as it stands, his value can only go up from here. Remember, the source of Mason's struggles this year were mainly mental, not technical. Playing deep in his crease is a result of weak confidence, not weak ability. Now that there has been a coaching change, there's a new mental approach, one in which Mason has learned a valuable lesson and now has more experience. Mason is maturing before our very eyes and by getting back to the basics before he gets two weeks off to rest and re-focus, don't be surprised if all of this leads to a spike in fantasy value come March 1.

KARI LEHTONEN

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I look at Kari Lehtonen's fantasy value heading into this week in a fairly positive way. First of all, there's a good chance he plays at least two games this week and comes out with loads of energy and enthusiasm. Lehtonen was re-called to Atlanta yesterday after he went 1-1-2 with a 2.67 GAA and .899 save percentage with the Chicago Wolves, which isn't bad considering he hasn't played since April 11, 2009.

So it's not much of a stretch to expect Lehtonen will come out and play better than expected.

The plot will really start to thicken after the weekend is over. Ondrej Pavelec has struggled over the last few weeks, almost to the point where he is starting to lose a little bit of long-term appeal. And since the Thrashers don't play until Wednesday (in Denver) and then again on Friday and Saturday, odds are strong that Lehtonen sees more minutes than both Pavelec and Johan Hedberg before the Olympics begin.

True to my form over the last three years, I say grab Lehtonen while you can. His value is low, he's still an elite talent when he is healthy and with four AHL games under his belt, signs are good that he can be considered "healthy" for the first time all season. One or two NHL games with positive results before the Olympic break will be a major factor in the type of confidence Lehtonen has coming out of the break, so it's another one of those classic big risk, big reward situations that could turn things in your favor down the stretch.

MARTY TURCO

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Marty Turco is turning it on at the moment of biggest desperation for the Dallas Stars. Like I've explained before, Turco's issues are mainly mental and have to do with his level of focus. And with a little bit more rest than usual over the last two weeks, it looks like Turco is staying focused for a full 60 minutes.

Together with trade rumors, more minutes for Alex Auld and weakening support from fans, Turco is playing with a real sense of urgency. Reading [some of the quotes](#) (scroll down) from his 4-0 shutout win over the Coyotes a few days ago, it looks like he is finally starting to gain the confidence of his teammates and coaching staff. So regardless of any trade rumors, you still should consider his value on the rise. The

[Turco Turnaround](#)
is still in sight!

WILD GOALIES

Now that I know Anton Khudobin is capable of being an NHL backup (I scouted his 38 save, 2-1 win over the Flyers on Saturday), it looks like the big key is when Niklas Backstrom returns for Minnesota and how he performs. He has been on the shelf over the last few weeks with back problems and then a bout with the flu, but practiced on Saturday and is expected to be in the lineup for Wednesday's game.

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Wade Dubielewicz was then sent back down to Houston yesterday, which is even more proof the Wild liked what they saw in Khudobin's first career NHL start. But it's somewhat of an illusion, as Khudobin only remains with the Wild until Josh Harding is re-evaluated (on Tuesday), which will then determine whether or not another goalie is still needed.

Khudobin's NHL debut was impressive but not surprising, as he has excelled at many different levels in the last four seasons. The list includes the WHL, many international competitions for Team Russia, the ECHL and AHL. When you put it all together, Khudobin is pretty experienced for a 24-year-old and he proved it against the Flyers. Even to the untrained eye, Khudobin's similar style to Evgeni Nabokov is very noticeable. The narrowed stance and the deceiving appearance in net (he's only 5-foot-11 but plays bigger) are just the start of their similarities.

When it comes to fantasy value, Khudobin remained at #40 in my Top-100 Prospects despite not winning an AHL game in two months. He will probably move up a few spots for next month. Backstrom should return to the lineup and play strong while Harding could miss another game and continue to be the subject of trade rumors. If either of the original two goalies have health issues, Khudobin will continue to be a storyline heading into the Olympic break.