

The Diabolical Backups

Written by Justin Goldman

Monday, 16 August 2010 10:48 - Last Updated Tuesday, 17 August 2010 08:37



Listen for the soft steps of the Diabolical Backups, lest you fall victim to a sneak attack! Those pesky, conniving, crafty, devious teammates are like a swarm of locusts digging into your skin. They test the patience, irritate the mind and eat away at one's focus. They pressure starters to play at their best on a nightly basis, and like a virus, can exponentially destroy confidence from within. The diabolical backups - they force other goalies to keep their foot on the gas. The diabolical backups - anything can happen when a starter's playing time is cut in half.

As the summer comes to a close, more than 30 goalies are pushing for opportunities at a higher level or for more playing time at their current level. Because of this, more starters are facing a tremendous amount of pressure from their backups than ever before. Every day of the year, that elusive job is there for the taking. Sometimes it's handed over without a fight, other times it's stolen in the blink of an eye. And sometimes it has to be wrestled away over the course of two or three seasons.

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But no bother, it's all part of the fantasy goalie dance. It's easy to see that most fantasy managers don't have a clue what's going to happen when it comes to backups breaking out. Most intermediate owners struggle with this issue and learn the hard way that there's no such thing as a guarantee. Just when you think a stone-cold starter will repeat last season's success, another Tuukka Rask or Antti Niemi goes from being a mist in the wind to wearing a big fat diamond ring.

So which NHL backups (or highly touted #3 goalies) are most likely to steal playing time this year? And as I was asked on Twitter last week, not counting any kind of injury situations except for the most oft-injured starters, which backups have the best chance to commandeer minutes from their superiors with some stellar play in limited opportunities? Below are the "backup" goalies I feel have the ability to get this done, along with the amount of certainty or chances they may have to exceed their normal expectations.

Brian Elliott, Dwayne Roloson and Jeff Deslauriers are omitted from this list because they're currently considered starters thanks to Pascal Leclaire, Rick DiPietro and Nikolai Khabibulin being oft-injured goalies. Please keep in mind that "certainty" is the likeliness that a goalie will play more games than expected, not their chances to outright steal or take over the starting job.

*[Click here to learn more about my expectations for Deslauriers](#)
this season.*

Chris Mason – Some fans won't even consider Mason as the backup, but he still has to win a starting role from Ondrej Pavelec. But history is on his side. Take a gander at his post-lockout seasons with the Predators, especially in a backup role behind Tomas Vokoun. In just 23 games during the 2005-06 season, Mason was 12-5-1 with a 2.54 goals against average and .913 save percentage. With an increased role the following season, Mason played 40 games

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and went 24-11-4 with a .925 save percentage and 2.36 goals against average. With two years of positive results as a backup, Mason enters this season with confidence to come off the bench and post stellar numbers. We've seen him excel with a hefty role and we've seen him excel with a reduced role. So regardless of how many games he plays, there's little reason to believe he can't do it again on a different team, but in the same manner as in Nashville – under the fantasy radar. **Certainty: 55%**

Corey Crawford - You would be downright foolhardy to ignore Crawford's value in a one-year league. Although there's no guarantee he'll win the backup job over Hannu Toivonen,

[*I do expect him to be Marty Turco's new protégé*](#)

. But one thing I've learned from my experiences here in Colorado is that anything's possible when Joel Quenneville is steering the ship. Crawford's ceiling could be as high as Niemi's last year (during the regular season) and the floor is as low as it was last year. He played in one game for the Blackhawks and made 32 saves on 35 shots in a 4-2 loss in Anaheim back in March. Despite his injuries from last season and the limited playing time, it was an experience that will help him succeed as an NHL backup.

Certainty: 40%

Brent Krahn – We all know Kari Lehtonen won't play every game for the Stars this year. And if some of those missed games are due to an injury, Krahn will be called up and he will be given the chance to show what he's got at the NHL level. The Stars actively provided Matt Climie with some starts the past two seasons and he performed very well, which acts as strong proof that they like Krahn's upside as well. Because the organization feels he's a potential NHL starter, Krahn has opportunity on his side. He also fills the net much more than Climie, as he's listed at 6-foot-5 and 220 pounds. He's an older prospect at age 28, but all he needs now is some patience and a good start in the AHL to set things on the right path. **Certainty:**

30%

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Jon Bernier – Probably one of the most obvious 3rd string goalies on the list, Bernier's time to shine in a Kings uniform is closer than ever before. Although there's a clear possibility he ends up starting in Manchester once again, there's also a clear chance he'll find his way onto the roster at some point this season. It could come from the Kings trading one of Erik Ersberg or Jon Quick, or it could come from another three-game winning streak like he notched back in March and April. And as soon as one of those events go down, he's instantly one of the most prized prospects to own for any kind of fantasy league. For that reason alone, his certainty is extremely high.

Certainty: 55%

Thomas Greiss - One of the surging backups that many consider a 1B goalie due to Antero Niittymaki's unproven workhorse ability, Greiss is primed to have one of the best opportunities to steal games. He's one of the many prospects in the NHL and AHL that have all-world skills, but needs to prove it on a consistent basis. He's guaranteed to log more minutes this year and he'll have more experience, so when he plays, he'll be forcing Niittymaki's pressure straight up.

Certainty: 60%

Michal Neuvirth – He's been waiting for two years to be on a fantasy list such as this. But now his time has come, and he's got a big, juicy, prime opportunity staring him right in the face. With plenty of support from goalie coach Arturs Irbe and a strong offensive team, the starts he gets this season are going to be high-quality ones. The skill level is clearly there, as is the momentum from two straight Calder Trophy victories. Neuvirth has faced all kinds of adversity and will be battling with Semyon Varlamov, another goalie that has a somewhat volatile value due to last season's nagging injuries.

Certainty: 65%

Honorable Mentions

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Tim Thomas – I spent a good deal of time explaining [why Rask is one of the best goalies to own right now](#). And that led to a lot of hard knocks against Thomas. He's coming off a serious hip injury, is playing in fewer games than he'd like and didn't instill a lot of confidence in fantasy owners once he relinquished the starting role to Rask due to an injury. But Thomas is the epitome of perseverance and mental toughness. He's a former Vezina Trophy winner and he can motivate and spark a team as good as anyone else in the league. He's a veteran who has seen it all, and for that reason he must be watched closely. **Certainty: 30%**

Mathieu Garon – I expect Steve Mason to be more consistent than he was last season, which takes away from Garon's opportunities to steal starts and relief efforts. But then again, there's a lot of questions surrounding Mason's potential this year. He's still not mentally tough enough to be a workhorse and he's coming off a terrible season, so there's no momentum and little confidence compared to other starters around the league. But we all know Garon has the experience needed to step up in any given situation, along with plenty of skill to back it up. **Certainty: 30%**

Curtis McElhinney – The Mac Attack is not on this list because I expect Jonas Hiller to struggle. He's on this list because he's experiencing a peak in his skills progression. The post-trade run with Anaheim last season was his best stretch of hockey in his (limited) pro career, so he benefits from a lot of momentum and positive vibes. He played 10 games with Calgary last year, but once traded to Anaheim, played 10 games in just over a month and went 5-1-2 with a solid .917 save percentage. He elevated all aspects of his technical and mental game when it mattered most. As such, he'll have a slightly elevated role. **Certainty: 20%**

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Henrik Karlsson – Because nobody really knows who he is, or where he came from, [just remember his similarities to Jonas Gustavsson in terms of style and situation](#)

. He probably won't play a lot of games, and he probably won't post the strongest statistics in his first handful of games, but a smooth transition and a chance to play due to the fact Calgary needs to scout him for a potential new contract next summer, he deserves to be on the radar.

Certainty: 25%

Cory Schneider – Similar to Karlsson, Schneider won't play much behind a workhorse in the loaded Northwest Division. And despite his terribly shaky season last year, the lack of Olympics pressure and a brand new goalie coach have many excited for Roberto Luongo's season, and for good reason. But for Schneider, he'll still get close to 20 starts and display a high level of skill and plenty of NHL readiness. His issue, however, will be showing mental toughness in a situation that breeds inconsistency. This is somewhat of a "make-or-break" season for Cory, and there's a solid chance he can perform well enough to get more than a fourth of the starts.

Certainty: 25%

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