The keen fantasy manager cares little about who currently dominates the crease. Instead, they care more about who is going to dominate next. Whether you're molding a keeper team for future seasons or simply taking mental notes for next year's draft, you gain more wisdom by knowing which goalies are making solid strides today in order to build a foundation for a better tomorrow.

At this stage of the season, you should have plenty of well-defined opinions regarding the fantasy value of goalies like Michal Neuvirth, Ondrej Pavelec, Tuukka Rask, Jimmy Howard and Jonathan Quick. If you don't, or you still have specific questions regarding any goalie, you can always toss me a question in the weekly fantasy goalie mailbag.

FANTASY MAILBAG – NOVEMBER 29

For those that follow me on a regular basis, you know I've shed plenty of light on aspects of the position that allow you to decipher aspects of a goalie's game. Whether it's shadowing the starter, using the pop-up and hop-step technique, or simply having really active hands, there are millions of signs out there if you know how to look for them.

But fantasy goalie analysis is a never-ending story. There's always a hidden layer of stats to examine, a new chapter to their story to dissect. And as I learned last week, sometimes it's what a goalie ***doesn't*** do that makes them so unique and valuable.

An example of this was Pavelec's dominating win over Boston on Sunday. While Rask was suffering from weak execution on his blocker side, Pavelec was staying up on his skates and eliminating space by using a more traditional post coverage technique. Rask, along with most top-flight NHL goalies, uses the VHS and paddle-down technique on a consistent basis.

Pavelec, on the other hand, does not. In fact, he almost went the entire game without dropping into that stance once. This conservation of energy helped lead Thrashers to another big win, one in which Ondrej never looked tired. So by not using an advanced save selection, one that I've said is way overused, Pavelec actually proves he's even more durable and valuable.

I'm not surprised by his tremendous play. I said in Dobber's Fantasy Guide that he was a goalie to watch for, and all season long I said to put him on your radar. Hopefully you paid attention and are now reaping the rewards. But managers be warned – member *kytmagic pointed out to us* that Atlanta plays three potent teams in Colorado, Pittsburgh and Washington this week.

Ultimately, this week's lesson is about understanding how a goalie invariably experiences success and failure, but each result reveals one or two traits that help you piece together the puzzle of their long-term fantasy value. Whether you're impressed or disappointed by what you see, remember that anything is possible if the goalie is positively reinforced with more opportunities.

No matter what happens, realize the distance between a starter and a backup is nothing more than confidence, a couple of wins and that all-important, elusive rhythm. Because of this, that distance constantly stretches and shrinks depending on an infinite number of internal and external elements. Your goal, as the keen fantasy manager, is to gauge that distance on a weekly basis and make the most confident decisions you possibly can.

Finally, don't think about "Goalie A vs. Goalie B" arguments as having a right or wrong answer. I see a ton of these in Dobber's forums and always chuckle at them. Instead, treat these topics as ongoing analysis that never ends. An unwritten riddle can't be solved and an unspoken question can't be answered. It's fun to make projections, but realize that things are rarely that simple.

COREY CRAWFORD – No NHL goalie reflected a bigger fantasy value surge last week than Crawford. For a rookie backup, his performance in such limited action is true proof of his mental toughness. His three starts leading up to last weekend all came a week apart and on the second night of a back-to-back series (Nov. 7, 14, 20). He stopped 75 of 80 shots and went 1-2 in those three games before heading into a pretty significant weekend.

On Friday, Crawford started against a team he's quite familiar with, the Anaheim Ducks. Check out *my scouting report on that game* , as he stopped 27 of 28 shots for his fourth win of the season and third in a row. He was rewarded with another start the following night against the Kings. His fourth straight win has fans everywhere screaming the putrid "controversy" word, but I explain in the scouting report how this is no controversy, just a situation where Crawford has played himself into a bigger role.

Chris Kuc from the Chicago Tribune extrapolated some solid quotes from Joel Quenneville regarding Crawford's situation, *so be sure to check them out* . So what should fantasy managers expect in the coming weeks?

Chicago has zero back-to-back games in December and Crawford isn't going to sit on the bench for an entire month. Therefore he has hurdled over the role of being a goalie that only starts in back-to-back situations. If Turco loses, expect Crawford to start the next game. If Crawford wins, expect him to play the next game. Chicago needs points and Quenneville, as history has proved, doesn't care which goalie plays, so long as they are winning. So I'm betting Crawford starts on Tuesday in Chicago.

Short-term projection: *His four-game winning streak is extended to five in a relatively light week of action.*

Long-term projection: *Ends up starting closer to 35 games and maintains close to a .920 save percentage.*

SEMYON VARLAMOV – The hyperactive, energetic Russian netminder returned to action last week and rattled off three straight wins, including an easy 17-save shutout over the Lightning on Friday night. It's great to see that he's healthy, being challenged and motivated by the strong play of Neuvirth and already in a nice rhythm due to three starts in six days.

Give the Capitals a lot of credit, as they did a terrific job of placing him in Hershey and allowing him to gradually work his way back into the pace and speed of NHL games. Because they managed him effectively, his strong stretch of play should continue. It's a far cry from a team like Colorado's management of Craig Anderson's injury, as he returned too soon and ended up pulling his groin in the first period of his second game back and going back on the IR.

The battle is back on in Washington and since the Caps have a back-to-back set of games on Wednesday in St. Louis and Thursday in Dallas, we'll get a great opportunity to see if Varlamov can steal a potential start from Neuvirth. Don't be surprised if he plays all three games (Atlanta on Saturday), as Neuvirth could still be quietly nursing a lower-body injury that was suffered in a practice last Monday.

Short-term projection: *Plays all three games this week despite the back-to-back and goes 2-1-0 with a .915 save percentage.*

Long-term projection: *Proves his streaky style by still playing fewer games than Neuvirth and backing him up in the playoffs.*

RICK DIPIETRO – Too many times on here have I stressed the importance of giving a skilled goalie three starts in a row, regardless of wins or losses. Lo and behold, DiPietro played three games in a row last week and the Islanders finally stopped the internal bleeding of a very long and arduous losing streak. It was the first time all season he started three games in a row.

After two overtime losses (1-2 to Atlanta and 3-4 to Columbus), DiPietro found his rhythm against the struggling Devils and made 29 saves for the shutout. Because of this, his fantasy value has finally been influenced enough to pique my interest. Two aspects of his game really showed me he's a goalie to watch closely in the coming weeks.

First of all, he looks very healthy. In October, his games were filled with grimaces and extra stretching in between TV timeouts and faceoffs. I didn't see that at all last week. Also, DiPietro was the first goalie I have seen to execute *the hop-step technique* to perfection in the NHL. Interestingly enough, Ryan Miller used it a day later but was beat glove side. This is a sign DiPietro's body can execute save selections at a level that allows him to read and react and rely more on his awesome reflexes.

Secondly, he worked extremely hard to dig the Islanders out of a hole, and was man enough to stand up in front of numerous media and press members to answer nauseating questions about the wretched losing streak. That takes guts. That takes leadership. That takes a pretty remarkable amount of mental toughness and perseverance as well.

The main influence that comes into play for DiPietro's short-term value is this five-day break. The Islanders play the Rangers on Thursday and Friday and then the Flyers on Monday. Three massive games in five days is a decent schedule, but it's tough to know how this entire week off will affect DiPietro. It could allow him to recover from three straight games or it could eliminate the rhythm he has worked so hard to create. Either way, I still think he'll compete well and post close to a .915 save percentage.

Short-term projection: *Healthy puck-stopping prowess against the Rangers continues to build on last week's success.*

Long-term projection: *It's still too early to say he's over the massive mountain of injury issues, but there's a light at the end of the tunnel.*