

The Crawford Conundrum

Written by Justin Goldman

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With Corey Crawford's sixth straight win on Sunday night against the feeble Calgary Flames, the Chicago Blackhawks are very close to having a controversy on their hands. And although there are many ways the Blackhawks can handle their goalies in a positive manner moving forward, many questions surround both Crawford and Marty Turco's short and long-term fantasy value.

[FANTASY MAILBAG – DECEMBER 6](#)

Before I dig into some of the dynamics currently affecting Crawford and Turco, please be sure to read the [Scouting Report I wrote on Crawford](#) back on November 26. This will give you great insight on Crawford's skills and his play as of late, as well as some good fantasy insight at the end of the piece. Also check out my [updated Top-100 Prospects Rankings](#) [updat](#)

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through December 5, as Crawford has jumped up eight spots to 19th overall.

If you look back at last week's School of Block, my short-term projection for Crawford came true, as he did win his fifth game in a row. That was extended to six on Sunday night in a 4-2 win over the Flames. Both goals he allowed were to the glove side, but otherwise he was once again extremely solid between the pipes.

My long-term projection stated he would end up starting closer to 35 games and maintain close to a .920 save percentage. That's a reachable number for the rookie, but with Marian Hossa and now Patrick Kane out of the lineup for a solid chunk of December, expect the save percentage to be closer to .910 for this month and as a whole for the season.

As asked of me in the forums, many of you wonder how the Blackhawks currently regard Crawford and how it might differ from their regards in the past. I think it's safe to say, as a former second-round draft pick (52nd overall) in 2003, Chicago holds him in high esteem and fully expects him to evolve into a very successful starting goaltender. With a solid junior career under his belt, one in which he had some decent playoff success, Crawford has shown the organization he can handle a starter's workload and numerous nights of high-caliber shots and scoring chances.

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Don't let Antti Niemi's surge last year influence your thoughts on Crawford's long-term value. Niemi was an isolated incident and somewhat of a risky decision by the organization. Although it didn't bode well at the time for Crawford's fantasy value, in hindsight, another season in the AHL has done more for his development than potentially riding the pine behind Cristobal Huet. Now he has just one more year of experience under his belt, and that has helped him play with more confidence this year.

As of right now, I would say the Blackhawks are very excited about the not too distant future. Crawford has stepped in and played with poise, confidence and energy. He's making timely stops regardless of the workload and he continues to improve on a daily basis. Having Turco mentor and reflect certain skills such as moving the puck, challenging shooters and having active hands will continue to bolster Crawford's skill set and that will push his long-term value in a positive direction.

Definitely take a few minutes to read an in-depth piece I wrote called [The Science of Shadowing](#). Then relate the dynamic to Turco and Crawford. I believe as time goes on, we'll see more similarities between the two, especially moving the puck. This is a current weakness of Crawford's game, but by the end of the season, I'm sure I'll be singing a different tune.

In regards to Turco's value, I don't feel his skill or ability is on the decline at all. In fact, I remember distinctly seeing some good reformation to his game back in late October and early November. His footwork was much "quieter" and he was allowing the puck to hit him more, as opposed to lunging out and chasing it with over-active movements. He handled the puck a lot less and focused more on absorbing shots and controlling rebounds.

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But in the past three weeks, due to a lack of consistent minutes and Crawford's surge, I feel he has gotten away from that. He doesn't have the intensity or focus he had at the beginning of the season and that lack of precision is causing him to give up more untimely goals, something we saw in his final two seasons in Dallas. His fantasy value is clearly on the decline, but it is only fair to recognize that he's still a very skilled and streaky goalie capable of snapping into a rhythm at any time.

I remember the day Turco signed in Chicago. It was like the Blackhawks wanted to repeat last season's situation with Cristobal Huet and Niemi. Turco, like Huet, is a veteran and a pure rhythm goalie. Crawford, like Niemi, is a raw-skilled rookie with tons of energy that has pretty much flown under the radar as a prospect. When the prospect gets the opportunity, they play with so much intensity that they usually perform well and make the veteran look lazy or unfocused. When the veteran is forced to sit on the bench, they can't get into a rhythm and they fail to produce the results that are expected of them.

That being said, the more Crawford plays, the more difficult it will be for Turco to play up to his potential. The infamous Joel Quenneville leash will continue to shorten on Turco and lengthen on Crawford. This will ride out for most of the season until the organization is forced to make a decision when April rolls around. Depending on how each of them performs between now and then, the decision will be easier or tougher to make.

Ultimately, I think fantasy managers simply want to know what kind of potential Crawford has as a future starter in a Blackhawks uniform. Although I'm merely reflecting on what I have seen over the past three years, I think Crawford is capable of taking the Blackhawks deep in the playoffs in each of the next three to four years.

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I say this because of his combination of talent, mental toughness and promise. He stops pucks on a consistent basis and has allowed very few “weak” or “untimely” goals so far this year. He’s a goalie that analysts refer to as having amazing legs, he also has great size and a good balance of active and passive styles. He’s as strong mentally as he is technically and he’s only getting better. The more knowledge he absorbs from watching Turco on the ice and in practice, the quicker he will evolve a true starter’s mentality.

I think we’ve all learned our lesson by now. Goalies don’t have to be technically perfect or elite to be dominant fantasy assets. They don’t need to be veterans or All-Stars to win Stanley Cups. They just need to stop the puck when it matters most and take advantage of opportunities. And not once has Crawford shown me that he’s not capable of doing this for the rest of the season. If the Blackhawks make the playoffs, everyone will talk about his lack of experience. But I’m betting he does very well and continues to mold into a future starter for the Blackhawks.