Buy-Low Goaltenders

With the weekend acting as the NHL season's midway point, the time has come for fantasy

managers to dissect their teams and make adjustments for the second half. And if you're one of the many managers looking to improve your goaltending stats, finding a buy-low bargain can set you on a course for late-season surges and playoff success.

FANTASY MAILBAG – JANUARY 10

Before I dive into what I believe are three quality buy-low bargains, I just wanted to make sure everyone saw all of the prospects updates I posted over the weekend. My *Kevin Poulin scouting report* includes an audio recap and a scouting chart from his first NHL start on Saturday here in Denver. Then I posted the January updates for my *Top-100 Prospects Rankings* and my *NHL Goalie Depth Charts* as well. Now back to business.

Backed by wisdom and experience, a quality NHL goaltender rarely struggles for an entire season. If a veteran has a weak first half, there's a good chance they will find a way to re-focus and re-energize in time to salvage their season. If a rookie or sophomore struggles in the first half from a statistical standpoint, most will adjust to the faster pace and improve drastically,

especially if they log more minutes.

When it comes to extracting a buy-low candidate from the goaltending ranks, you need to keep in mind a couple of different factors and dynamics. Scrolling through the different goalies available in your league will present a number of different options, including free agency, trades and risky moves that could make or break your season.

First of all, it's not always wise to pick the most talented goalie with the weakest stats. Focus on different elements of progress from their most recent performances. Are they making timely saves and improving their power play save percentage? Are they showing more consistency and durability? Has their role increased in the past few weeks, or has it waned due to the stronger play of another?

Most importantly, the biggest dynamic to dissect when looking at buy-low candidates is their current confidence. Is it low with the opportunity to rise up? Is it currently surging upward with no ceiling in sight? Did they have amazing success in the second half of last season?

In my opinion, that final aspect reveals to me that a goalie like Jonas Gustavsson is a viable buy-low candidate. Here's three more quality buy-low candidates that could your struggling season around.

Martin Brodeur – The first key to analyzing Brodeur's potential as a buy-low candidate is looking at his attitude and demeanor outside of games. As you may have heard, Brodeur has put his ego in check and, for the first time ever, let the Devils know he's okay riding the pine until he's refocused. Be sure to *read some of his quotes* and understand just how big of a deal this is.

Do you really think someone like Brodeur is not capable of having a stronger second half after something like this? Because his first half was so weak, he finally had to increase his work ethic in practice. And for a goalie with more wins and experience than anyone else, it will only lead to good things in the coming weeks. I also caught this *tweet from TSN's Scott Cullen* about snagging Brodeur if you're looking for a goalie that will get consistent starts.

I could have dedicated this entire column to Brodeur's attitude change and the steps he's taking to turn his season around. But actions always speak louder than words. Stopping 19 consecutive shots against the Flyers in relief of Johan Hedberg on Saturday and then stopping 33 of 36 shots in a 6-3 win over the Lightning on Sunday is all the proof you need that Brodeur made big strides over the weekend.

Aside from his personal reflections and adjustments, there's always the key element of the team's play in front of him. If the team continues to improve, it will only make Brodeur's life easier. And as that pressure and tension is slowly released, the confidence will also rise. Don't be surprised if he finishes the season with a save percentage above .900 and a 2.75 or 2.80 goals-against average.

Jose Theodore – When a goaltender shuts out the Pittsburgh Penguins, three things happen. First of all, their confidence soars. Secondly, they instill confidence in their teammates and coaching staff. Thirdly, they create a buzz within the media and fans, which often raises their reputation and opportunity.

And it doesn't hurt to be named *one of the NHL's Three Stars of the Week* , either. Oh, and neither does a potential serious injury to Niklas Backstrom. He's currently in Colorado to visit with a specialist about his hip injury. I hate to say this, but don't expect any good news to come from this. Anton Khudobin fans, time to eat your hearts out.

So unless you've been living under a rock for the last year, you know full well that Theodore's perseverance and experience has made him one of the best backup goalies to own. He's capable of playing well despite intermittent starts and he's also capable of performing at a high level if he has to absorb a ton of minutes.

Overall, Theodore displays the traits of a true silent leader for the Wild. More importantly, however, his role is surging upwards due to Backstrom's injury. All of the elements that you want in a buy-low bargain surround him right now, so get him while you can, before it's too late.

Tuukka Rask – If you look at Rask's 3-8-1 record and think he doesn't have the strong fantasy value and upside I've been projecting over the last two years, I'll scream bloody murder. When he plays, watch him closely. He's displaying technique that every NHL goalie would kill to have and he's still stopping a ton of pucks – 384 of 414 to be exact, good enough for a .928 save percentage.

Yes, I will admit that Rask is suffering from a sophomore slump. But he has not lost any long-term value and he hasn't been de-evolving. I still consider him one of, if not the most talented butterfly goalies in the NHL and he's only going to develop his mental toughness as the weeks roll along.

Although stats aren't really my thing, there's a few that stick out in my mind as visual proof of his quality play despite the weak record. His goals against by period are 13 in the first, 10 in the second and only seven in the third. He's perfect in the shootout (only 2-for-2) and his .940 save percentage on home ice is beyond impressive.

Lastly, if you look at his stats from a month-to-month basis, you'll find t hat the elusive element missing from Rask's season is simply playing time. In October, he played two games and posted a 3.54 GAA and .894 save percentage. In November, he played six games and posted a 2.23 GAA and a .938 save percentage with one shutout. In December, he played just two games and posted a 2.53 GAA and a .929 save percentage.

This month, Rask has already played three games and has a .930 save percentage. At this rate, he'll have his busiest month and could post close to the numbers he had in November. Clearly, like most rhythm goalies, the more he plays, the better he performs from a fantasy standpoint.

Ultimately, Rask's value in the second half of season is reliant on Tim Thomas' workload. The less Thomas plays, the more enticing Rask becomes as a buy-low candidate. The more Rask plays, the easier it will be for him to get into a rhythm and stop more than 93-percent of the shots he faces.