

## Emery or Bust for Blackhawks

Written by Justin Goldman

Thursday, 01 March 2012 15:27 - Last Updated Thursday, 01 March 2012 21:11

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I felt so left out on Monday. Not a single goalie – not even an AHL prospect – was traded all day long. I was up at six o'clock in the morning, only to sit on my butt with nothing to analyze, nothing to say, nothing to do. So instead of this being the final piece of my four-part series on goalies at the trade deadline, I've decided to stay on the topic of Blackhawks goaltending, since their team was (and still is) in dire need of an upgrade.

I was really surprised that they didn't make a move, but the market was in a true goalie gridlock; as much as they may have wanted to upgrade, no moving pieces were there for the taking. So the season-long discussion will continue to stretch into March, under the premise of one all-important question. Who will be the team's go-to goalie for the final stretch of the regular season, Corey Crawford or Ray Emery?

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After last night's performance against the Maple Leafs, it looks as if it's "Emery or bust" for the Blackhawks.

A team's confidence in their goaltender flows in similar fashion to the goalie's play. If Crawford is fragile, the team's confidence in him is fragile, and they're more likely to play fragile in front of him. If he continues to display negative body language after allowing goals, his defensemen will continue to have negative feedback towards his play. The more this happens, the shorter Joel Quenneville's leash will become, and the more impatient he will be.

This avalanche of negativity does not happen with Emery. He is as he always has been since returning from his major hip surgery. His game and his style is a static element, it's quite straightforward and simple. As a result, he plays a more consistent game, one that relies on battling hard, staying big, and doing the best he can when he's forced to scramble. His experience adds an even-keeled component to the crease that Crawford currently lacks.

Right now, I feel that Crawford is at a point in his career where there's a lot of over-thinking. He's over-thinking his angles. He's wondering about his depth in the crease. He's wondering about his rebound control, and where pucks should be placed. He's worrying about being able to see pucks through traffic. He's worrying about making the timely save. He appears dejected on the bench, in front of the cameras, and around his teammates.

I have not seen these elements when I watch Emery. He just battles. He just goes out and stops

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the puck.

Over the course of the season, Crawford has had to deal with the many phases of the sophomore slump. I have already discussed this at least twice this season, including my introduction of [\*a theory I call the Dynamic Entity\*](#).

Some statistical proof does exist that the Dynamic Entity is a very real component that almost every sophomore goalie deals with. Crawford is 5-1-1 with a .929 save percentage and 2.21 goals-against average versus the Eastern Conference, teams and players he rarely sees.

But as you will find with every statistic, nothing happens in a vacuum. Crawford is also 8-3-2 with a .923 SV% and 2.36 GAA against the Central Division. So whether you want to pin Crawford's inconsistency this season on a idea like the Dynamic Entity, or you feel like he's just an average goalie with very limited upside as a starter, or you want to place more of the blame on surrounding external forces that he can't control, that is up to you to decide.

Me? I think it's a special elixir of all three, an unquantifiable amount coming from all sides. It's what makes the sophomore slump so scary. It's a constant struggle, and to get through that struggle, as teams scout you, tweaks to your game need to be made in order to push back.

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Unfortunately, it's a very fragile balance to reach. If you push too hard, if you make too many changes and tweak too many things, even off-ice elements like your daily routine, sleeping schedule, and eating schedule, you end up opening the door for even more frustrations to occur.

Most goalies with only one or two years of NHL experience expect these technical changes to solve all problems. But bad bounces and the natural flow of the game still lends a hand to bad goals, frustrating losses, and inconsistency. As you solve some problems, others arise. Now you're over-thinking everything, you're frustrated due to the lack of results, and you're caught in the middle of trying to play a refined style, and trying to play the way you did last year.

This happens. To everyone. It happened to Marc-Andre Fleury. It happened to Roberto Luongo. It happened to Jaroslav Halak, and it's happening to Crawford as we speak.

Therefore, my advice to goalies is very simple: roll with Emery. He showed up for the Ducks late last season, and there's no reason why he can't do it for the Blackhawks again. I watched his performance last night, and was very impressed with his 21 saves on 22 shots. He stepped in to begin the second period, he shut the door with authority, he quickly instilled confidence in his teammates, and now they are back on the winning road.

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There's no doubt in my mind that Crawford can bounce back next season. He will also earn a few more wins this season as well. But even if he strings together two or three wins in a row, how quickly will his fragile confidence come crumbling down when a bad bounce victimizes him once again? Is that a risk you're willing to take at this crucial point in the fantasy season?

The Blackhawks have two more back-to-back sets this season, and the first one doesn't transpire until March 20. I don't think Emery is destined to start all nine games leading up to the first back-to-back, but he is likely to play the majority of them. And when Crawford does get a chance to regain the crease, I am very hesitant to say he's going to keep it for the rest of the season.

There's only 17 games remaining for the Blackhawks, and it's truly crunch time. If Crawford can't find a way to eliminate all of the negativity punching holes in his game, he might only be playing in six or seven of those games...and watching from the bench when the playoffs begin.