

The Quiet Assassins

Written by Justin Goldman

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Every goaltender faces different struggles throughout their career, such as unfair criticism from the media, bad goals and disgruntled fans. But one thing that separates a good goalie from a great one is handling all of the finger-pointing and controversy by turning it into success when failure is expected.

Some play through long stretches in their career without having to handle these pressures, while others face it on a daily basis. Some let it affect their game and others fend it off and survive to see another day.

There are two current NHL goaltenders that I call the quiet assassins, two that have overcome the disdain of the press and nightmarish bad goals to become a silent part of their team's

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success. Both have started this season off very strong, even though they're labeled as nothing more than backups. So don't underestimate their fantasy value this year, for they come to play every night and they play hard.

The one I will focus on has been someone I've looked up to since the very first day I watched him play more than 12 years ago - when he made a terrible mistake that haunts him to this day. He's Chris Osgood and he's taught me the most important life lessons I'll ever learn as a goalie and an individual.

It was April 30, 1994 and #1 Detroit faced #8 San Jose in Game 7 of the Western Conference Quarterfinals. Osgood was playing well leading up to a 2-2 tie late in the third period. That's when the puck was dumped into the zone and he played it up the boards, but he did so feverishly on his backhand. The puck landed directly on Jamie Baker's stick and Baker slammed it into an empty net and the Sharks held on to win the game and the series. It was a tremendous upset and Osgood was seen crying in his stall after the game, completely shocked at his destructive mistake.

Here's the clip (Dobber edit Oct. 25, 2007 - this is no longer the clip, we are testing this function):

[youtube:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VUWdMfmtvA>]

I watched this all unfold on ESPN2 as an impressionable kid growing up a Stars fan in Dallas, learning the game thanks to their recent relocation from Minnesota. The whole thing appealed to my emotions, but I wasn't even cheering for the underdog Sharks. Instead I just soaked the whole thing in, feeling horrible for what Ozzie just went through, as I watched him weep like a baby and become the instant scapegoat for Detroit's downfall. So what were my exact thoughts

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once the post-game analysis ended?

“I have to see how he responds, if he ever gets the chance. How does someone come back from such a devastating mistake?”

Well, he came back strong and turned into a true winner. And through all of the weak goals and mistakes he made over the years, he continued to teach me the lessons that all goalies should learn sooner rather than later. It was that no matter what bad goals you allow, no matter what bad decisions you make, you must learn from them and focus on the next shot. Don't think about a mistake for a moment. Forget about it and always think positively and focus on the future.

Osgood faced another “bad goal” moment in Game 5 of the 1998 Western Conference Finals against Dallas. Jamie Langenbrunner ripped a shot from center ice just 46 seconds into overtime and the puck went right over Osgood's stick into the net. The Wings headed back to Detroit with the Stars taking all of the momentum. Fans were calling for Osgood's head, but instead of buckling under the pressure and criticism, he rebounded with the heart of a lion by posting a 26-save Game 6 shutout. From there the Wings ended up sweeping the Washington Capitals for a second-straight Stanley Cup.

So why is Osgood my hockey hero? Because he's the ultimate teacher for mental strength and confidence no matter what bad things happen to him. He never gives up, and to this very day he

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displays great poise. Point being last night's 4-1 victory over the Kings in his 600th career start. He handles the difficult role as Dominik Hasek's backup better than anyone else ever has.

"He just goes out and plays, he's a real pro," said head coach Mike Babcock. "He's a great support guy for Dom and he knows what that's all about."

The other silent assassin is an obvious one - Tim Thomas. Books could be written on his incredulous journey to date, yet it's very simple to understand. He just possesses an insane amount of determination and passion despite being labeled as an "unconventional" goalie. Even with Manny Fernandez in the mix, Thomas is still going to be a quiet leader for the Bruins this year.

So be sure to watch how some of the rookie and inexperienced goalies handle adversity this year. Jonathan Bernier has struggled since his first game in London, so how he responds to this will say a lot about what could become of his career. And what of guys like Chris Mason, Josh Harding or Mike Smith? Harding's first game was a sparkling 2-0 shutout against the Ducks last night, but how will he respond when things don't go his way? How a youngster handles these obstacles is what helps a great goaltender ultimately turn into a Stanley Cup Champion.

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