Year of the Backup Goaltenders

Typically in the world of fantasy hockey, backup goalies are somewhat of an afterthought. Most simply don't see the ice frequently enough to be worth occupying a valuable roster spot for a poolie. A lot of head-to-head leagues have minimum weekly starting requirements for goaltenders and on most occasions if you own two quality starters that is more than enough to meet them. Unless you are in a league as deep as the Pacific Ocean or there is an unforeseen injury to a starter, backup goalies are probably destined for the waiver wire all season.

In this 2013 shortened campaign, at first glance it may seem like backup goalies are even less valuable from a fantasy perspective than normal. With just 48 games, many starting goaltenders like Jonas Hiller , Miikka Kiprusoff , and Henrik Lundqvist are used to greatly exceeding that number on a yearly basis. Some even joked that a lot of teams may not even use their backup goalie this year.

Looking at the substantially lower number of games as a way for a starter to be between the pipes for most of the season, may be a little deceiving. There is a flipside to that equation in 2013 as well. With a ton of back-to-back and three games in four night's scenarios, certain teams could be counting on their backup goalie heavily in this season. Not to mention the fact that so many games crammed together without a proper training camp leaves the door open for more injuries to starters.

Take the Los Angeles Kings for example. The 2011-12 Stanley Cup champions actually benefited in some regard because of the lockout when it came to Jonathan Quick . The goalie played in 69 games last year and was dominant in a lengthy playoff run to the Cup Final. However, Quick played hurt throughout the playoffs with a herniated disc in his back, which required surgery in the off-season. Had the season started on time Quick would have surely missed some action, but instead was ready to go when things resumed last week.

With that being said, Jonathan Bernier could still see a fair amount of starts in 2013. The Kings will likely be cautious about giving Quick a huge workload coming off back surgery, and they are going to want him well rested if they plan to duplicate a playoff march to the Stanley Cup once again. Bernier is one of the league's most promising young talents and has been the subject of several trade inquiries in recent years. He boasts a career .910 save percentage with five shutouts.

Another team with two strong goaltenders at their disposal is the Vancouver Canucks. It's hard to view Roberto Luongo as a backup, but that's essentially what the Canucks implied when they handed the keys over to Cory Schneider this past summer. Many would have figured Luongo to be traded away by now, but he is still in Vancouver and may be around for a while. Schneider got off to a rough start by giving up five goals against the Anaheim Ducks on opening night before being yanked. Luongo then started the next night against Edmonton, which is something he could be doing frequently in back-to-back situations.

If you are one that believes Luongo may get shipped out of town in the near future, that may not be the case anymore. Mike Gillis appears content on waiting for the perfect deal, and injuries to Eddie Lack may have just thrown a wrench into things. Lack, a Canucks goaltending prospect who would figure to be the backup should Luongo move, had a stellar season in 2011-12 with the AHL's Chicago Wolves, and posted a .925 save percentage. This year has been a different story, however. Lack has battled groin issues and appeared in just 13 games, with a save percentage below .900. This might have Gillis thinking that keeping someone like Luongo around for a short season may make sense as an insurance policy, should Schneider turn into the next Jim Carey.

Some teams are not as fortunate to have backups with the skills of Bernier or Luongo, but that doesn't mean they can't be thrust into action at a moment's notice. Last Wednesday in a game against the Columbus Blue Jackets, Mike Smith was forced to leave after just 11 minutes. Enter Jason LaBarbera who stopped 21-of-22 shots, giving the Coyotes their first win of the season. As mentioned earlier, injuries, especially in the lower body area, could be much more prevalent this year. That means more opportunities for backups.

Of course there are also a few teams who have starters who could use some Stick 'Em to increase their grip on the number one role. Jaroslav Halak certainly wouldn't have feared someone like Brian Elliott coming in and taking his job, but after last season Halak's hold on the starting role is tenuous at best. Elliott's nine shutouts in 2011-12, along with a 1.56 GAA and a .940 save percentage, give the St. Louis Blues extreme confidence in playing both goaltenders if necessary.

One of the Blues' rivals, the Chicago Blackhawks have an interesting goaltending situation of their own. Although Corey Crawford is still the number one and off to a strong start this year, his numbers took a substantial hit in just about every area last season, and he failed to record a single shutout. Chicago has the luxury of having Ray Emery as a backup who has played in a Stanley Cup final. If there was any doubt Emery wasn't fully recovered from his hip issues, starting 27 games with the Blackhawks last year and going 15-9 with a .900 save percentage should have put an end to those discussions. Crawford has never really stepped up and silenced his critics, so with the condensed schedule expect to see a fair bit of Emery.

While Niklas Backstrom didn't regress quite like Crawford did in 2011-12, there is no denying his play has dropped off in recent years. Josh Harding has been pushing Backstrom for the starting spot over the last few years and appeared in 34 games last

season. Harding already has a shutout to his credit in 2013 and has never finished a campaign with a save percentage lower than .900. The Wild have confidence in both goalies, so they won't be afraid to use Harding often.

There is always a concern about the positives you will receive when owning a backup goalie. This shortened campaign will bring with it many different anomalies that you just wouldn't see in a full season. Organizations may be more likely to hang onto players like Bernier and Luongo for depth with this congested schedule and increased opportunity for injury. Owning either of them could still provide you a benefit, or if they do indeed get dealt somewhere and become the starter, their value will skyrocket. Depending on your league and its rules, owning a backup goalie may or may not make sense. However, this is a unique fantasy season thanks to the lockout, and thinking outside the box could give you a leg up on your competition.

Feel free to follow me on Twitter at @amato_mike

Also from Amato:

Call of the Wild

Dynamic Duos