

Holding Court: Will Howard or Rinne Falter?

Written by Rick Roos

Thursday, 15 November 2012 10:46 - Last Updated Saturday, 17 November 2012 17:58



Welcome to this week's edition of Holding Court, a column where both sides of a fantasy hockey debate are argued just like in a courtroom, complete with a final verdict. Then you, the DobberHockey readers, can comment on whether justice was properly served! You can also leave ideas in the comments section for other debates to be settled right here in future editions of the column.

[Last week's column](#) on whether [Shea Weber](#)'s stats would suffer because of the departure of [Ryan Suter](#) generated a lot of great feedback and comments, including from one reader who wanted a future edition of this column to focus

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on the impact that Suter's departure would have on

[Pekka Rinne](#)

. So this week we'll take a look at that, but with a bit of a twist to make it appeal to an even larger group of fantasy hockey enthusiasts.

Although [Ryan Suter](#) may have been the most high profile free agent defenseman to change teams this offseason, there was another defenseman departure that many think might have as much (or even more) of an effect on his former team's goaltending, and that was the retirement of [Nicklas Lidstrom](#) from the Detroit Red Wings (be sure to also take a look at [Michael Amato's recent column](#) for more about the impact of Lidstrom's retirement on Detroit players.

That leads us to the specific debate for this week's column – which goalie will be hurt more by his team's defensive loss, Jimmy Howard (by the retirement of [Nicklas Lidstrom](#)) or [Pekka Rinne](#) (by the free agent departure of [Ryan Suter](#))?

Howard – Past data points to bad results for Howard, and Rinne still has [Shea Weber](#) and a team with a defensive mindset

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To put things in proper perspective, let's talk for a moment about the truly amazing career accomplishments of [Nicklas Lidstrom](#). He won seven Norris Trophy awards, ended his career with a mind boggling +450 rating (good for 10th all time), and led the Red Wings into the playoffs in each of his 20 seasons (winning four Stanley Cups in the process). Simply put - the loss of [Nicklas Lidstrom](#) to the Detroit Red Wings, and to Jimmy Howard in particular, is among the most significant that any NHL team has been forced to deal with in at least the last decade. But because Lidstrom was a truly spectacular player who made such an impact on his team, and its goalies in particular, it's hard to look to other examples for adequate comparison of what might happen to his former team now that he's retired.

As can be seen from the table below however, there have been three instances in the last 30 or so years where a multiple Norris Trophy winning defenseman left a team that he'd played with for 15 or more seasons:

Defenseman (number of Norris trophies won; years played for the same team)

Goals given up by his team during his last full season with the team (goalies who played 20+ games for

Goals given up by his team during the season in which he was traded (goalies who played 20+ games for

Goals given up by his team in the first full season after he left (goalies who played 20+ games for the team)

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Dennis Potvin

(three; New York Islanders 1973-74 to 1987-88)

267 goals

(Kelly Hrudey – 47 games, Billy Smith – 38 games)

Not applicable

(Potvin was not traded during the season – he retired in the offseason)

325 goals

(Kelly Hrudey – 50 games)

Ray Bourque

(five; Boston Bruins 1979-80 to 1999-00)

181 goals

(Byron Dafoe – 68 games)

248 goals

(Byron Dafoe – 41 games, Rob Tallas [Join Game](#) – 24 games)

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249 goals

(Byron Dafoe – 45 games, Peter Skudra – 25 games)

[Brian Lee](#) tch

(two; New York Rangers 1987-88 to 2003-04)

231 goals

(Mike Dunham – 43, Dan Blackburn – 32)

250 goals

(Mike Dunham – 57, Jussi Markkanen – 26)

215 goals

(
[vin Weekes](#)

[Henrik Lundqvist](#) – 53 games,

[Ke](#)

I'll pause for a moment to let Howard owners (and Red Wings fans) pick their jaws up from the

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ground after reading this table.....Okay, ready? Let's just say that if the data for Dennis Potvin and Ray Bourque isn't proof that the departure of a defenseman of Lidstrom's caliber spells imminent doom for Jimmy Howard's stats, then I don't know what is. In the case of [Brian Lee](#)

and, the only reason why things didn't turn out as poorly as when Potvin and Bourque left the Islanders and Bruins is because Leetch's departure from the Rangers coincided with the arrival of superstar goalie

[Henrik Lundqvist](#)

to right the team's ship, which had already begun to sink during the season when Leetch was traded (the goals allowed for the Rangers had already gone from 231 during Leetch's last full season, to 250 during the season he was traded).

But it's crystal clear from what happened to the Islanders and Bruins that in cases where a legendary defenseman like Lidstrom leaves his long time team and the team's starting goalie situation remains essentially unchanged (like it will in Detroit), that starting goalie will feel a whole lot of statistical pain, which also will be passed along to his unfortunate fantasy owners (in this case, Jimmy Howard and his current owners).

Shifting now to focus on the impact of Suter's departure on Rinne, that too makes it clear Howard will be more negatively affected than Rinne. In Nashville's case, they still have [Shea Weber](#)

, a player who has been both first team NHL All Star and Norris nominee on multiple occasions and is in the prime of his career; that, in and of itself, is far more than what was left among those who manned the blue line for the Islanders, Bruins, or Rangers after Potvin, Bourque and Leetch were gone. Given Weber's skill and dominance, plus the fact that he's signed with Nashville for 14 years, we could very well see him turn into this generation's Lidstrom. But what's more, Rinne has amassed better career stats than Howard (Rinne's career GAA and SV% are 2.35 and 92.1%, Howard's are 2.41 and 91.7%) despite playing for a less successful team (the Red Wings had 244 wins in the past five seasons, while the Predators only had 220 over that time).

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It's clear that Nashville knew – and still knows - its path to success lies with a defensive mindset among its entire team. That will make Suter's departure a lot easier to handle for the Predators than Lidstrom's retirement for the Red Wings, since Lidstrom was the defensive anchor of the Red Wings even up until the very end of his career. And although Detroit's remaining defensemen have more NHL experience than some of Nashville's younger players, Nashville still has [Shea Weber](#), while there is no one in Detroit who is even close to being able to give the team the defensive stability and leadership - not to mention skill - that Lidstrom provided (and Weber essentially still provides in Nashville). That void will take a while to fill in Detroit, and during that time Jimmy Howard (and his fantasy owners) will be the ones left to largely suffer.

Rinne – Detroit has a solid core of defenders still left, and Lidstrom had already begun to contribute less in recent years



Here's a simple fact – [Pekka Rinne](#) has always been able to count on the tandem of [Shea Weber](#)

and

[Ryan Suter](#)

to make his job easier. Suter was the Hutch to Weber's Starsky, the Ferb to Weber's Phineas, the Garfunkel to Weber's Simon. It's a big mistake to assume just because Weber is staying with Nashville that Rinne will continue to do as well as he has. For one, and as was touched upon in last week's column, the longest stretch of games that Rinne ever had to endure without Suter was a month long period that occurred in 2010-11. And in the seven games Rinne played

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without Suter (but with Weber) during that stretch, he gave up a total of 22 goals for an average of 3.14 per game, which was a full goal higher than his 2.12 GAA for the year. What's more, he gave up five goals in one of those games and four goals in three of those games; for perspective, consider that in the other 57 games Rinne played during 2010-11, he only gave up five goals one other time, and four goals only five more times. Sure, this is a small sample size, but it says a lot and what it says does not bode well for Rinne or his fantasy owners.

The other thing to keep in mind that as great a defenseman as [Nicklas Lidstrom](#) was, he had already become somewhat of a shell of his former self during the last three seasons (more below on why it's important to focus on these three seasons). His 34 points last season was his lowest in any season where he played more than 50 games, and in 2010-11 he recorded the only minus rating of his entire career. In fact, his points per game average over the past three seasons was .62 and his plus per game ratio (i.e., his total plus minus divided by his total games) was .175, both of which were well below his career averages of .73 and .29.

In truth, Lidstrom's impact during his last three seasons was not at a level that will be impossible to replace. And in looking at the Detroit defense, what you have left is better by leaps and bounds than what's in Nashville, even after you factor in [Shea Weber](#). In Detroit, you have seven defenseman who are between age 23 and 31 (six between 25 and 31), with those six each having between 100 and 500 games of NHL experience – quite the sweet spot. In contrast, the Predators defense other than Weber essentially consists of three young guys with 140 total NHL games between them and two fossils (age 34 and 37, one with over 900 regular season games and the other with over 1000). So while I'm sure that everyone in Detroit is somewhat concerned that Lidstrom is gone, the truth is that the defensemen who remain are almost all in the primes of their careers, as opposed to Nashville's blue liners, who are either young and inexperienced or old and washed up. Jimmy Howard should do just fine with what he has left to line up in front of his net. And for those concerned with the leadership void that Lidstrom's retirement leaves, the Red Wings still have

[Pavel Datsyuk](#)

and

[Henrik Zetterberg](#)

, not to mention many other players who've won at least one Stanley Cup.

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But back to Jimmy Howard - let's not lose focus of the fact that he had his two finest seasons last year and in 2009-10 despite, as proven above, Lidstrom no longer being the Lidstrom of old in terms of points or +/- during that time frame. Also, as was the case with Rinne in 2010-11 when Suter missed a stretch of games, we have been able to get an idea of how Howard would perform without Lidstrom, who missed nearly a month from late February to late March last season. During that time Howard completed a total of four games, giving up 11 goals for a GAA of 2.75, and although that is not great, it was only a jump of .62 over his average for the entire year, compared to the much higher jump of over 1.00 that Rinne had when Suter missed games in 2010-11. And keep in mind that the debate here isn't whether Lidstrom leaving will hurt Howard – it probably will to some degree. The question is who will suffer more, Howard (due to Lidstrom retiring) or Rinne (due to Suter signing with Minnesota) and all signs point to Rinne (and his fantasy owners) feeling the pain a whole lot more than Howard and his owners.

The Final Verdict

There are compelling arguments on both sides of this debate, but in the end what it really boils down to most is the impact of Lidstrom's retirement. While it's true that a player like Lidstrom only comes around once every 20 or 25 years, and there have been cases (the Islanders with Potvin and the Bruins with Bourque) where the loss of a player like him has been devastating, let's not forget that the Red Wings are different than either of those Islanders or Bruins teams in that so many of Detroit's remaining players have won one or more Stanley Cups with the team. That wasn't the case with the Islanders (they had won several Cups in the 80s, but by the time Potvin left most of the players from those teams were gone) or Bruins.

If ever there was a team with the right personnel to successfully move on from the retirement of a guy like [Nicklas Lidstrom](#), it's the Red Wings, especially with defensemen who are in the

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prime of their careers. With Rinne, although Weber will still be there, he'll be surrounded by other defensemen who are either really young or really old. Plus, splitting up a defensive tandem like Weber/Suter could have far worse effects – on Weber and Rinne - than people might think, as was shown in the 2010-11 time that Suter missed. So my final verdict, perhaps to the surprise of many (even myself – I guessed I'd have the opposite conclusion when I started to write the column) is that [Pekka Rinne](#) will be hurt more by the departure of [Ryan Suter](#) from Nashville than Jimmy Howard will be by the retirement of [Nicklas Lidstrom](#).

Rick is an attorney, which made him the perfect choice to write the "Holding Court" column on DobberHockey, where he debates both sides of a fantasy hockey issue and renders a verdict for readers to debate.

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