

Block Party

Both ends of Earth are melting, but not our ice: shot differential and goaltending through the 1st quarter

Nonsense typically spews from the lips and tongue's of sports fanatics. It's a global issue, not one isolated to the Chicagoland area.

Cristobal Huet is the goaltender atop the Blackhawks' depth chart for one simple reason. He's the best between the pipes here locally. Lately though, the dissertation by many is Huet is playing too much too soon. A notion certainly brought on by the surprise output of late by backup Antti Niemi.

The fact of the matter is Huet has started 79 percent of the games so far this season. That ratio is substantially less than Martin Brodeur (89% of Devils' games), Miikka Kiprusoff (90% of Flames' starts) and Los Angeles's Jonathan Quick, who has started all but two of Kings' games so far, for a league leading 94%. Other star goaltenders, Ryan Miller (89%), Evgeni Nabokov (87%), Ilya Bryzgalov (87%), Marc-Andre Fleury (84%), Henrik Lundqvist (83%) and even Nicklas Backstrom (83%) have all seen a larger share of playing time on their respective teams than Huet.

While the Blackhawks made a season of platooning two number 1 or 1A-level netminders in 2008-09, the reality is only two teams are having success with that approach this season; Boston, who's rookie backstop Tuukka Rask may in fact be better than reigning Vezina Trophy winner Tim Thomas right now. And Washington, who own the league's best record seemingly in spite of their goalie tandem.

Antti Niemi has exceeded my expectations six starts into his first full NHL season. A .931 save percentage and 1.71 goals against average is nothing to shrug at. However, he's still the backup goalie, with backup pressures and tempered expectations. This coming off a year in Rockford in which he exhibited a lack of consistency and was out-dueled by Corey Crawford in the AHL and watched his teammate handle the bulk of the workload. Fast forward to training camp. Niemi wins the back job predominately by luck of the draw as Crawford was picked to start at Washington during the preseason and was lit up for six with a skeleton crew in front of him.

What's fueling this is Huet's rocky start. The transition from being the guy on the bench for all but the final postseason game last spring, to THE guy didn't go as Huet, nor the Hawks, had hoped. Huet was visibly tense and uneasy in the way he battled pucks the first three weeks of the season and it wasn't lost on his coach. While Joel Quenneville has made Huet his workhorse, he's strategically kept him out of games a typical franchise goalie would get the nod for without hesitation.

Take last Saturday night for example. Blackhawks-Penguins. Probably the two best teams in hockey right now. Possibly a preview of the forthcoming Stanley Cup Final. Quenneville chooses to play Huet the night before against a surging, but normally low-scoring Predators team instead of holding him off for the defending Cup champions.

In November, Quenneville started Huet in Edmonton, the most winnable game on the Western Canada swing, while opting to start Niemi against the Hawks' new arch-nemesis, the Vancouver Canucks.

And in what at the time was the most decisive indictment of his number one goalie's lack of confidence, at least in Q's view, Huet sat and watched Niemi oppose the Oilers back on October 14th in Nikolai Khabibulin's return to the United Center.

The Hawks took all six points available in the above mentioned contests, so you can't really argue with those decisions now. However, it's obvious Quenneville's strategy is to get Huet the most work possible, while putting him in the best situations to succeed. And Niemi's role is to enter the equation on nights when Quenneville senses danger, and hopes the scout-ing reports don't catch up to Niemi before Huet's machismo hardens.

It's not to say Niemi can't become a reliable regular. The attributes are there. His head is the question. He was incredible in Pittsburgh and in Vancouver, but equally as bad in Colorado. In the latter, three starts back, he was down on his knees the moment he anticipated an Avalanche player putting a puck towards him and played the better part of the game in a ridiculously low crouch which took away his biggest strength, his large, six

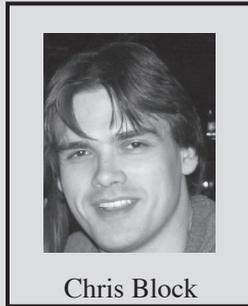
foot-two frame.

We can appraise Huet's glove hand til we're all spinning in a Blue Moon haze. It's bad news. And probably always will be. But understand, Henrik Lundqvist has the same problem and he's got 83 percent of Ranger wins since making New York his home post lockout.

Truth is, outside of a shaky start, Huet has performed admirably. He's ninth in the league in win (13) and is tied for 8th in goals-against-average (2.24). His save percentage still leaves room for improvement (.906 ranks 28th) but lately he's seeing the puck well and that should subdue the doubters at least for now.

While Quenneville has carefully slotted goaltending duties to this point, he'll be forced to match his best against the opposition's best as the season wears on and points become ever so precious. This means at least as much Huet and probably less Niemi. Soon we'll see how Huet handles not only the "load" but the advanced competition. It's his job to lose.

Coach Q knows his go-to guy has two weeks in February to recharge the batteries. He also knows if the Hawks are going to win a Cup this year it will be done riding the Frenchman. Huet, 34, has never been a starting goalie from the beginning of a season to its end, much less played virtually every other day from April through the first week of June. Every start counts, now and later.



Chris Block

-Patrick Sharp is well on his way to making Stan Bowman's summer a shade less stressful. As is now well-known, the Hawks' GM will be faced with the unenviable task of not only shaving a considerable amount of payroll next summer, but also doing so without taking any on and moving players all while accomplishing this with minimal after affects to the 2010-11 team.

Sharp-Shooter has eight tallies on the season, but just three since October 14th. Eight is a modest total twenty-eight games through the season yet well-below paces he set in 2007-08 and his injury-hampered season a year ago. As it is now, Sharp, who'll turn 28 two days after Christmas, is on pace this

year to score 23 goals. Certainly not befitting of a \$4M sniper, especially on a team with cap issues and a surplus of wingers both at the pro and amateur levels.

We've pointed out many times how Sharp works best with Patrick Kane and how the two have incredible on-ice chemistry. Well, since Kane is establishing himself as the premier passer in the game, a lot of guys will come through this town in the coming years feeling the same effect. So the question becomes – if Sharp can only thrive when he's receiving Kane's backdoor, goal line pass through two defenders, is he really worth \$4M and a spot on this team going forward? If Sharp doesn't clear out of his latest funk, the answer is a decisive "No."

The flip-side of this however would mean more ice time for Kris Versteeg. I know he's a popular guy, but no one should want that.

Versteeg is a mess. Twice on the same power play shift Saturday in Pittsburgh, on consecutive rushes no less, he temporarily lost consciousness and attempted to beat all four Penguins' defenders by his lonesome. The result was a wasted power play in a tight game on the road against the Stanley Cup champs. You'd think he'd know better. We saw the same kinds of things last year and wondered the same. He's boasts a wealth of skill from the neck down, but on top of all that there isn't much.

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