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Being A Backup Goaltender

Very rarely is there a goalie who has not been a backup goaltender before whether it was for a few games or an entire career. Since being a backup is a normal part of goaltender development MTN feels the need to discuss this important position. Yes, we just called the backup important. Being a good backup does a lot of good for a hockey team and this was never more evident than in the 2006 NHL Stanley Cup Playoffs. Out of the 16 playoff teams, four teams employed their backup goalie for a number of games. One quarter of the playoff teams used backups. Even in the Stanley Cup finals we saw Jussi Markanen, who played excellent, and Conn Smythe winner Cam Ward battle for the silver chalice. The two teams in the finals rode on the shoulders of goaltenders that were not supposed to see a lick of ice time in the playoffs. From this recent example we can direct our discussion about being a good backup.

After the injury to Dwayne Roloson, Oilers head coach Craig McTavish talked about the professionalism of Markanen while adding that “there is nothing more cancerous to a team than a miserable backup goaltender”. This shows the importance that the attitude of the backup goalie goes a long way as to whether your team will find you valuable. In essence, the first virtue a backup must have is a good attitude. Any time you hear about career backups such as Jamie McLennan, Craig Billington, or Corey Schwab it is always mentioned how much they were appreciated by their teammates. The backup needs to be a cheerleader for the team and the other goalie. Show enthusiasm for the team because there will always be people lined up to take the place of the backup. The backup must never publicly announce they should be the starter, instead the backup should strive to push their goaltending partner on a daily basis through the way they practice and how they perform in a start. A backup is watched carefully as well; be sure to conduct yourself accordingly.

Along with a positive attitude a good backup must try to work even harder than the starter. A strong work ethic and a willingness to stay late after practices or be at optional practices is another way to be a key contributor and to show your drive to be better. Good backups work extremely hard to stay game ready so they can try to steal some more ice time or to carry the team through an injury/illness. Backup goalies need to practice as though they deserve to be the no. 1 guy. Good backups have the drive to be the starter no matter how long it takes them to become the starter.

Any self-respecting backup goaltender will acknowledge that they need to be game ready all of the time. If you have to be a backup make sure to prepare the same way for games whether you are playing or not. No matter what happens you are expected to perform very well whether that is in relief or a start. There should not be a big difference between the starter’s play and the backup’s play. Make sure to be mentally sharp on the bench because it only takes one...

One of the hardest things to remember when being a backup is that when you play do not place extra pressure on yourself to perform well. If you go in mid-game due to injury or poor team play you need to remember that the situation is less than ideal so you are there to help stop the bleeding. Sometimes the opposition has all of the momentum and you need to understand that a comeback is

unlikely so...be relaxed yet energized and have fun. If you are starting the game you need to perform well. Do not think about stealing the starting job in one start. Be in the moment and play your best. If you play a solid game you will get consideration for more ice time. No matter how much you want to be the starter you must progress to that through consistent preparation and consistent, solid efforts.

No matter how much you hate being a backup it is your job to be a good team player. Work hard on and off the ice. Prepare to play whether you are playing or not. Stay mentally into the game while on the bench even if that means you run the gate to stay active and game ready. Just play your game; do not worry about stealing the show, although that may be required once in a while. Most of all relax, have fun and be a warrior!