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Being a Closer: Going in, in relief

A few times per season some poor goalie gets the hook and a backup has to come in to mop up, possibly saving game. Despite the embarrassment that comes with getting pulled there is whole different mentality that goalies need to understand about going into a game, in relief.

The first thing we must understand are the possible reasons why a starting goalie may get "the hook". The most common reason a goalie has been pulled was due to poor team performance. Even though it is the goalie's responsibility to cover up teammates' mistake there are times where the mistakes lead to plays that are nearly impossible to stop and a goalie and their team may need to shake things up. Usually, in the case of poor team performance, the coach is trying to show the players that they have hung their goalie out to dry and thus are trying to guilt the players into better performance. Next, we have a goalie that just under performs. As much as goalies wish this didn't happen there are times when, even the best, are not on their game and it is worth the risk of bringing in a cold goalie to get the saves that should be made. Sometimes a team's performance is so poor that the goalie is the only thing standing between a team and a blowout, so a coach may want to sacrifice the confidence of the backup goalie in an attempt to shield the starter from losing confidence in their abilities and possibly wasting energy that might be needed later on; usually over a series of games. If a goalie is pulled there is often some sort of communication as to why the coach made the decision to pull the goalie. If no communication is made it is up to the goalie to get the explanation from the coach. Keep in mind the coach may say something that may not feel good, but is often true

Once a coach makes the call to pull the starting goalie, the backup will hear, "you're in, kid". Once the backup gets the call there are some physical concerns that goalie needs to deal with, usually the possibility of being cold/stiff. Any backup, that is worth their salt, will have dealt with avoiding being cold or stiff through proper pre-game preparation where he/she has maximized the time available to physically prepare to a similar extent as though he/she was starting. Once on the ice the goalie needs to take some time warming up with net orientation drills, stretching, vigorous skating during breaks in play and trying to physically get into the play immediately(see the article: "Physical Tools for Increasing Mental Readiness") by following the play as it moves around the zone, getting into a shot-ready stance early, and playing the puck safely but as much as possible. When coming in cold a goalie may also experience physical awkwardness thus they must focus on tracking the puck well and making sure that they are doing everything possible to keep the puck out of the net, no matter how awkward the movement seems.

Perhaps, the most strenuous part of coming into a game, in relief, are the mental aspects of closing out a game. Usually, at least in elite hockey, the person who is expected to mop up is the backup; a true backup that does not play regularly. All backups strive for more ice time so the first thing that may come to mind is the thought, "if I play well maybe I can earn more ice time". This line of thought is troublesome as it takes a goalie out of the moment and gets them thinking about future possibilities; a

recipe for disaster. Mop up goalies need to ONLY worry about the task at hand. Another issue may be the reverse where the starting goalie is getting a rare night off and is called into duty, when not expecting to play. If a starter is getting a night off they need to realize they still need to prepare properly for the game. Basically, the starting goalie, getting a night off, needs to know how to be a good backup as well. No matter what the situation may be the backup may experience the “hero of the day” syndrome where they truly believe it is their job to save the game and turn it around. Look, all goalies want to be the hero, but it is a less than ideal situation the goalie is going into so the job is quite simple; the goalie is just there to stop the bleeding. The goalie that goes in mid-game just needs to make sure that they keep the game respectable. By keeping the game respectable there is a possibility their team may be able to slowly work back into the game. If the goalie does help turn the game around there may be a chance the goalie that comes in and plays well, in relief, may get a chance to play more. Both goalies need to ensure they are both preparing to play as the situation can reverse very quickly.

If a goalies must go in mid-game there are some suggestions on **how to have a successful outing**:

- Remember a closer’s job is to stop the bleeding, not save the day. By lowering expectations about the situation that goalie will find it easier to worry about the task at hand/being in the moment.
- Be prepared to play, while on the bench. Goalies that are backing up need to stay ready and keep their head in the game by working the gate effectively, taking stats or just by trying to figure out the other team’s dangerous players to watch for, individual and team tendencies and game plan.
- Proper pre-game preparation is key as the backup needs to prepare to play, with some minor tweaks. The backup needs to spend a little extra diligence before suiting up by doing a little extra off-ice prep work in order to stay a little warmer since time in the net during on-ice warm-ups is usually limited. Backups need to pay more attention doing net orientation and goalie specific skating drills whenever they get the chance.
- Getting physically comfortable, early, is important. Goalies need to skate between whistles, get ready early and stay ready, play the puck (if not getting shots) and slow down the pace by controlling as many shots for faceoffs as possible.
- Since going in late is not easy the backup goalie must keep track of self-talk and stay in the moment. The goalie must make sure they are not thinking about being cold/tired/stiff, trying to gain extra ice time by saving the game or telling the other team, “please don’t shoot”.
- No matter what, do whatever it takes to **“keep the puck out of the net”** - don’t give up.
- Communication is key. It is important that teammates are comfortable with either goalie and their communication. Of course, communication begins off the ice and carries over to on-ice communication. A fresh goalie brings fresh perspective to the ice and should be able to control the game upon entering the game.

To conclude, going in, in relief, is a tough situation for any team and their goalies but there are ways the “closing” goalie can make a positive influence on the game and their team.