



Kings have plenty of talented kids in net

By Josh Brewster - NHL.com Correspondent

Just three seasons ago, the Los Angeles Kings employed a startling seven goaltenders during a disastrous 2007-08 season. The Kings, coached by Marc Crawford at the time, finished tied with the Tampa Bay Lightning for fewest points in the NHL with 71.

Since that disappointing season, three of the seven goaltenders have risen to the top of the organization's goalie heap. None were big-name free agents; none came to the franchise via trade. None of the three are stars, but that could change soon.

Jonathan Quick, 24, is the clear-cut No. 1 netminder, although Jonathan Bernier, 22, is pushing for that designation. That leaves Erik Ersberg, 28, as the possible third wheel, barring a training camp miracle.

"Some GM's are probably sitting back thinking they should go a different route (in goal)," Quick said. "If they can sign the right guy for the right price, maybe it's better than going for the big name with the big ticket. I don't think that at the beginning of the season, you would have said (Antti Niemi and Michael Leighton) would have been the goalies going head-to-head in the Stanley Cup Final."

Quick solidified his hold on the Kings' starting position last season, appearing in 72 games and posting four shutouts with a solid 2.54 goals-against average and .907 save percentage. Most notably, Quick broke the franchise record for wins with 39.

Coach Terry Murray has made it known that he'd like to cut Quick's starts to roughly 60 this season, but it's also clear that he's the go-to guy and could be on the cusp of entering the League's elite.

"The wins record is not so much a personal achievement," Quick said. "That's a team achievement. That's something that there's not a chance you can do it alone, you need 25 guys in front of you, all working their (tails) off, which they did all season long. I'm grateful to be the guy in net for those games."

Quick learned some hard lessons in the Stanley Cup Playoffs when the Kings took an early 2-1 series lead, only to fall to Vancouver in six games.

"To be honest it was the first seven-game series I ever played in my life," Quick said, "so I did have a lot to learn from going through it and seeing the ups and downs firsthand. Vancouver played well to come back from the deficit that they were in at the beginning of the series. The biggest thing you learn is that it's never over."

Quick also earned a silver medal while serving as a backup for Team USA at the Vancouver Olympics. He says that watching Ryan Miller was educational.

"It's an experience watching how (Miller) went about his business," Quick said. "He's a guy who had a lot more experience than I did going into that tournament and I got to see how he handles his day-to-day work and how he prepares for games. He's a winner whenever he steps on the ice."

Quick was selected in the third round (No. 72) of the 2005 Entry Draft. His likely partner this season is Bernier, a first-rounder (No. 11) in 2006.

Bernier's career path has been forged by a patient climb. At age 19, a surprising victory over the champion Anaheim Ducks at the 2007-08 season opener in London, England, made it appear that he would be anointed starter sooner rather than later. Not wanting to rush the highly-touted Bernier, he was restricted to only six more appearances over the next two years. Considering his success in Manchester of the AHL over the past two seasons, Murray says patience is a virtue.

"I look at Bernier and what he did last year," Murray told NHL.com. "The right decision was made for him to go back and play in Manchester and develop his game."

Last season, Bernier was named to the AHL's first all-star team, and walked away with the Baz Bastien Memorial Trophy, given to the AHL's best netminder.

"He was probably the best player in the American Hockey League," Murray said. "He put up great numbers. Got himself organized with his game physically and emotionally and that process has proven, over time, with many, many players (that) there's no need to rush."

While it's tough to be patient, Bernier admits that the process has been to his benefit.

"I've grown up for sure," Bernier said. "(The) years go really fast, but I learned a lot, especially the last two years in Manchester. That made me a more mature person. It's been hard because I see a lot of guys who I played with or against, and they play in the NHL. When you're young, you don't understand why you play there, but I'm sure at 25 or 28 I'll really understand why I played two years in the minors."

With wins in three-consecutive starts during a late-season appearance in the Kings net, Bernier may have edged teammate Ersberg out of the picture. Ersberg appeared in 11 games in 2009-10, winning seven, but is looking like the third wheel. What makes it a tough call is that Ersberg's 2.40 GAA was a touch better than Quick's, and his save percentage was similar (.906). His potential is great, however, and Ersberg may have to settle for being one of the more interesting early season candidates for teams looking to improve in net.

Quick says that all three netminders get along well.

"We have a good relationship," Quick said. "It's going to be interesting to see how everything plays out. I wish the best for the two of them."