

Stuart Wing

On Hockey Night in Canada this past Saturday, Kelly Hradey gave us all a glimpse into the mindset of those who've played hockey's most difficult position.

"I had these thoughts that were going round and round, and they were saying Kelly how much longer can you play at this level? Then they went from honest questions to irrational thoughts," said the former NHL goalie turned TV personality.

"During the start of the season when I was playing fantastic, the best start to the season of my life, right? I was playing as well as anybody in the National Hockey League, but those thoughts went from how much longer you can do it, to you can't keep going at this level."

Hradey said this on the broadcast in relation to the struggles of Toronto Maple Leafs goalie Jack Campbell, who has gone ice cold after a torrid start to the season. The common theme? Goaltending at the highest levels of hockey can be an enigma.

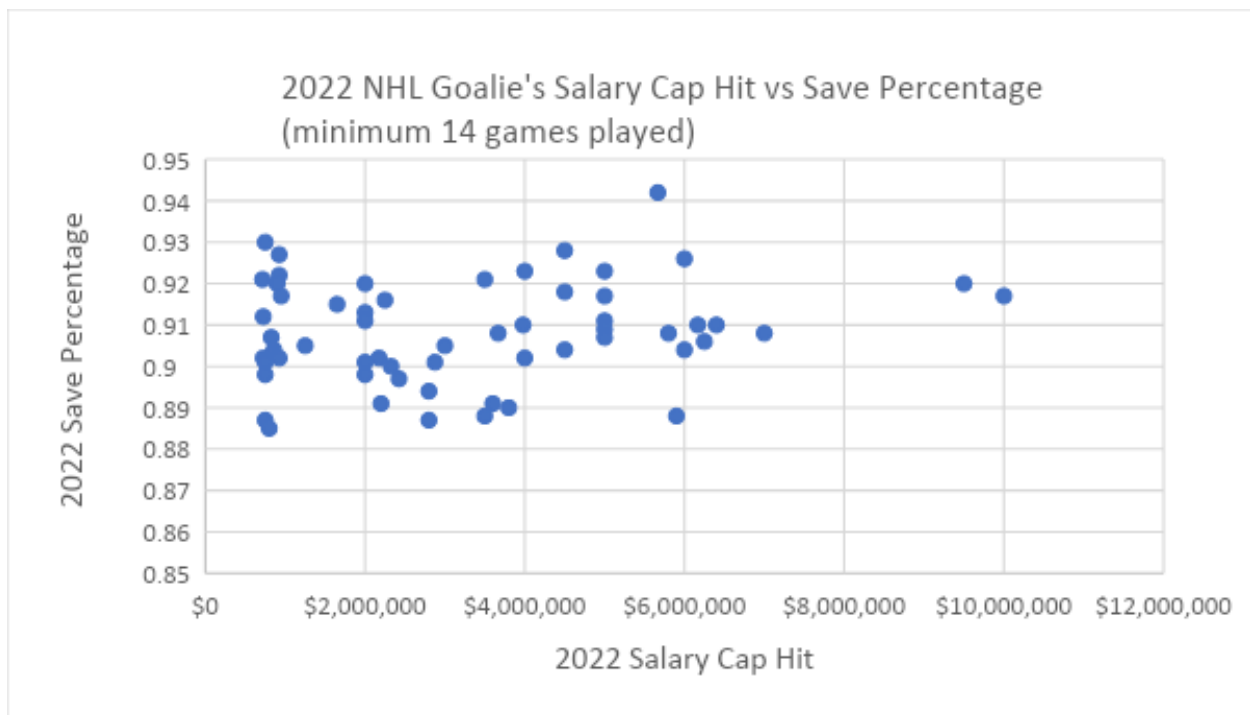
From those who evaluate goalies for a living, to those who play it, one thing is for certain, there is a mental challenge to goaltending that is completely unique to the position. "When I have a bad game, everyone knows it, because everyone knows when the puck goes in the net," said Charlie Robertson, a 16-year-old goalie who recently signed with the OHL's North Bay Battalion. "But for a player, it's harder to tell. Their mistakes don't have the same consequences."

Right from the first shot of the game, Robertson is thrown into a mental battle. "I get that first save and a big weight just drops off me." After that, it's onto his next mental checkpoint. "When I don't let a goal in during the first period, those are my best games. I'm just sitting there after, feeling like I just have so much confidence. I know I can just keep stopping the puck."

Robertson also believes that the rollercoaster mental side of the position is what makes it so difficult to confidently guess a goalie's future. He believes a goalie's confidence has many ups and downs and that it can vary significantly from shot to shot, game to game, or year to year. "How you're feeling can change so quickly and it really affects how you play," said Robertson.

"If you don't have any confidence, you're not going to save the puck."

So how do NHL front offices manage to evaluate and assign value to a goalie's future performance? The answer seems to be that this is an area that teams really struggle with. Below is a plot of each NHL goalie's 2021-22 save percentage, the most common metric used to define goalie performance, plotted against their salary cap hit. (Salary data and save percentages sourced from CapFriendly.com. Goalies with less than 14 games played have been excluded.)



Statistically speaking there seems to be no real correlation between the amount an NHL team spends on its goalies, and the level of production they receive from the position. Even with enormous resources available to them, the NHL’s biggest decision-makers seem to really have difficulty with assigning a dollar value to a goalie’s future performance.

With projecting goalies being such a massive challenge, how do analysts find goalies they think will be successful? “The best we can do really is try to describe their track record as closely as we can and try to identify high-end upside as much as possible,” said popular hockey analytics writer JFresh through text.

Big on Twitter with nearly 60 thousand followers, and a contributor at EP Rinkside, his Twitter bio states a goal of “Making hockey analytics make sense”.

While his written work commonly uses newer age statistics such as High Danger Save Percentage and Goals Saved Above Expected as tools to evaluate goalies, JFresh believes a silver bullet statistic for goalies is impossible. “The margins are so small, and the mental factors are so significant that even with a perfect model, predicting outcomes would be very, very difficult.”

The last 10 years of the NHL draft tell us that teams agree with this sentiment. NHL teams are almost totally averse to using valuable first-round draft picks on goaltenders. Since the 2010 NHL Entry Draft, of the 365 first-round selections made, only 10 have been used on goalies.

Niagara IceDogs goalie coach Jason Barron believes there are other motivations to why such little draft capital is used on the most important position in hockey. “It’s such a foreign language. There’s not the same comfort level and there’s so much more room for interpretation with goaltenders.”

So, when it comes time for an NHL team to select a goalie, Barron believes past results are less critical, and that a key aspect is the ability for a goalie's game to translate down the road. "At the end of the day, these guys are making projections. If you look at the OHL and look at the goalies who have been drafted from there to the NHL. Their numbers weren't exactly leading the league."

"I think it's a longer development path and a longer progression, and sometimes there needs to be a little more room for error because guys aren't as comfortable with evaluating and drafting a goalie compared to a forward."

When it comes to looking for a goalie with a promising future, Barron agrees with JFresh in that evaluating upside is critical. To do so, the first trait he looks for is mobility. With today's skaters becoming so much faster and more skilled, a modern goaltender must be quick in the net. "Big and slow is not a recipe for success anymore," said Barron.

"Mobility is one of the biggest pieces because it doesn't matter how big you are. If you don't have the skills necessary to get into position, your size to fill that position doesn't matter"

However, he does believe that size still is a very relevant trait. Despite the scouting communities' tendency to overvalue size in the past, there is still an edge that bigger goalies have. "It does help you more than just because you have more surface area. It helps you in traffic to look over top of screens and identify locations of the puck and it can help you in a sense of your range."

"It isn't necessarily just about filling space, it might be reaching a leg out when you're down on the ice or it might be more range with your hands as you're sliding to take away a chance."

The final major trait Barron looks for in a goalie is intellect. Hockey IQ can be the hardest thing to teach a developing goalie and it takes a trained eye to identify. He thinks that how well a player sees the ice to anticipate plays and to be able to treat similar scenarios the same way speaks to how well the goaltender understands the game.

"If a similar play unfolds five times and they attempted to make the save the same way five times, it shows they understand a play and how to give themselves the best chance to make the save. But if it's five different ways and if it's a little bit more random, that speaks to understanding the play a little bit less."

When it comes to cracking the mental side of the game, both Barron and Robertson acknowledge there is no cure-all out there that puts the mind of a goalie at ease. Every goaltender out there has a certain threshold for self-talk, and a level of swagger or confidence that they perform best at.

Mental preparation and resilience are completely unique to the athlete and what works for one goalie might not necessarily work for another.

Barron does believe that there is one unifying principle in a goalie's mental game. Playing in the moment.

"Past moments do not impact future moments unless we allow them to," said Barron.

It would seem goalies should prescribe to the theory of the titular character of the TV show, *Ted Lasso*.

“You know what the happiest animal on earth is?” says Lasso to one of his struggling players.  
“A goldfish. You know why? It’s got a ten second memory. Be a goldfish.”