

ONTARIO REIGN HAVE FOUND A MENTOR IN A REVIVED PETER BUDAJ

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 December 3, 2015



Peter Budaj, Ontario Reign at Manitoba Moose, October 15, 2015 (Photo credit: Jonathan Kozub)

When the **Los Angeles Kings** signed **Peter Budaj** to a professional tryout in late August, the news was met with a great deal of curiosity.

Jhonas Enroth was signed earlier in the summer plus **J.F. Berube** and **Patrik Bartosak** were each developing nicely enough in the minors that their respective shots with the big club were fast-approaching. In fact, some thought Berube would be donning a Kings uniform this season. Still, Budaj entered Kings training camp with something to prove.

A nine-year NHL veteran, Budaj, now 33, found himself in an unusual situation last year, suiting up for the **St. John's IceCaps** of the **American Hockey League**. The last time Budaj had played in the AHL was with the **Hershey Bears** — the then-affiliate of the team that drafted him, the **Colorado Avalanche** — in 2004-05.



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Coming off a Calder Cup Final appearance, the IceCaps were coming off a great deal of momentum. Unfortunately for Budaj, his time in Newfoundland wasn't anything to write home about.

In 19 games with the IceCaps, Budaj went 0-9-6 with a 3.55 goals-against average and a lowly .888 save percentage. After going 183-124-107 in 296 career NHL games with Colorado and **Montreal**, Budaj suddenly found himself in unfamiliar territory.



Dusty Imoo, the Kings' first year goaltending development coach, was with the IceCaps last year and saw first-hand the troubles Budaj was experiencing.



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"Sometimes as goalies, we lose the feel, or mojo if you will, and I think Peter just had one of those years," said Imoo. "Through it all, Peter was a trooper and constantly worked with me in trying to find his game. This season I think he came into camp with no contract and a healthy pressure to earn a spot, and prove to himself that he can still play. It's been great that we are back together. It's been fun."

After Jhonas Enroth secured the backup spot in Los Angeles, Budaj was sent down to Ontario to attend the Reign's training camp. It wouldn't be long before the club signed the veteran netminder to a one-year deal. But with J.F. Berube being claimed off waivers by the **New York Islanders** and Patrik Bartosak suffering an injury during camp, Ontario's starting job was suddenly inherited by Budaj — a position the veteran would not relinquish, even with the signing of fellow veteran goaltender, **Ray Emery**.

This season, the Reign are off to an 11-4-2 with Budaj turning his fortunes from night into day. En route to the Ontario's fast start, Budaj has posted a record of 10-2-1 with a stellar 1.53 GAA to go in hand with a .938 save percentage in addition to an already-impressive four shutouts. The Reign's success, however, has not been limited to what Budaj has done on the ice.

Being the eldest statesman of the group, Budaj has become a mentor to his Reign teammates which, in turn, has contributed largely to the club's on-ice success thus far. I asked Dusty Imoo what specifically has helped support Budaj's new role.



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"He does a lot simply from his actions," Imoo said. "He works very hard on the ice, in the gym. Basically, how he conducts himself would be his biggest influence on the young players."

From his immense struggles last season to his unyielding success this year, Dusty Imoo holds the unique distinction of seeing one of his netminders on one end of the performance spectrum to the other in alternating years — with different teams, no less. From being unable to win a game with the IceCaps to making a habit of winning with his new club, it was fascinating to hear Imoo's observation of Budaj's attitude from last season to this.

"He is exactly the same guy as he was when I had him in St. John's," Imoo stated matter-of-factly. "Humble hard worker."





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There are those who lead by standing in the middle of the dressing room professing a sermon or who confront individuals with constructive criticism or a pat on the back. But there are those who aren't as vocal, who choose to lead by example. Peter Budaj, as Imoo alluded to, fits the latter. Reign head coach **Mike Stothers** can even attest to that.

"Budaj is a quiet leader, not so much of a rah-rah inspirational speaker," Stothers told me. "He leads by the way he prepares, the details in his work and how hard he works.

He sets a real good example on the ice and in the locker room."

To make Budaj's role even better, there has been no controversy in the Ontario goal according to Imoo.

Despite both being NHL veterans, Budaj and the aforementioned Ray Emery are collectively focused on the task at hand, letting their respective egos take a seat, so to speak, for the benefit of the team.

"Peter and Ray have gotten along very well," Imoo said. "Each have been true professionals. Ray knows his role as does Peter and they just go about their jobs and nothing more. Makes my job easy."

The AHL season may have only wrapped up its second month but Peter Budaj has already made fools of his doubters. To go from his year in St. John's to his year so far in Ontario certainly isn't a common occurrence, but there is good reason as to why Budaj has lasted in professional hockey for as long as he's had. In addition, while the recent suspension of Patrik Bartosak — and the reasons for it — are certainly unfortunate, it does create more opportunity for Budaj to thrive as the Reign's starting netminder.

A return to the NHL could likely be in the cards in the very near future but for now, Peter Budaj is helping the Ontario Reign pick up where they left off in Manchester last season. His leading ways may be quieter than his determination to restrengthen his stock as a performer, but they speak volumes nonetheless.

It may be fun winning games in Ontario but with Peter Budaj there as a mentor, it just makes the Reign's rise to the top especially enjoyable.

Peter Budaj, Ontario Reign at Manitoba Moose, October 15, 2015 (Photo credit: Jonathan Kozub)