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NHL

# A Back Seat To No One

Darcy Kuemper takes his game to another level



by [Heather Rule](#) November 14, 2019



Former Wild goaltender Darcy Kuemper has thrived in a starting role for the Arizona Coyotes. (MHM Photo / Jonny Watkins)

## Darcy Kuemper takes his game to another level

ST. PAUL – Former Minnesota Wild player Darcy Kuemper, now with the Arizona Coyotes, didn't become one of the top goaltenders in the National Hockey League overnight.

Far from it.

"He wants to be a No. 1 goalie," said Arizona Coyotes coach Rick Tocchet. "He's been a back-up for eight years."



Darcy Kuemper (Photo by Norm Hall/NHLI via Getty Images)

Yes, Kuemper's rise to the top of the goaltending heap in the NHL came with many seasons playing second fiddle to teammates. The 2009 sixth-round Wild draft pick made 89 starts (played in 102 games) for the Wild, going 41-34-14 with a 2.60 GAA and .910 save percentage from 2012-17. Kuemper played six, 26, 31, 21 and 18 games a season across his five seasons with the Wild, playing back-up to the likes of Niklas Backstrom, Ilya Bryzgalov and Devan Dubnyk.

Kuemper played for Los Angeles, again in a back-up role, before being shipped to the Coyotes in February 2018.

Kuemper didn't start Thursday's game against his former team in St. Paul, a 3-2 win for the Wild, but his numbers so far have been stellar. He's 8-5-0 with a 1.99 GAA and .931 save percentage. Going into Thursday night's games, his GAA was the best in the Western Conference and second in the NHL behind Thomas Greiss (7-1-0 in 9

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games for the New York Islanders). Kuemper's save percentage is tied for third in the league.

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His mindset is to work hard and keep improving his game, he said.

"I've gotten some good opportunity here to play a lot," Kuemper said. "Have guys really committed to playing defense in front of me, so it's just kind of a good recipe for success."

He's allowed just 26 goals, has a shutout against Colorado (33 saves) and only allowed 4 goals in a game once this season – in that 4-3 loss to the Wild (7-11-1) on Saturday.

"I'm sure Kamps still would like to beat us," Wild coach Bruce Boudreau told the traveling media following Saturday's game. "His last year, we probably weren't as good to him as we should've been. He's gone and become one of the best goalies in the league numbers-wise."

So what's changed? Well, things started to turn around for Kuemper last season when he saw an opportunity. Kuemper started the season in familiar territory, once again a back-up to Antti Raanta, who took the loss on Thursday. But Kuemper needed to step up after Raanta sustained a season-ending injury in late November (Raanta's last game that season was a 4-3 Coyotes win in Minnesota.).

"I love playing, so it's a lot of fun," Kuemper said. "I just cherish the opportunity to be out there as much as I can."

Suddenly vaulted into the top spot, Kuemper struggled some, losing eight-of-nine games from mid-November through December. But then something clicked. Kuemper turned the calendar to 2019 in January and he turned to a winning page on his hockey performance.

That's when Tocchet saw the change, too, in Kuemper's mentality.

"He wanted to talk to the general manager... he (Kuemper) didn't like his play," Tocchet said. "He (Kuemper) says, 'if I don't play, we can't win.'"

"Since that day, he's been arguably the top two, three goalies in the league. It's a strong mentality that he found in himself. There was another level, and he found it."



Former Wild goaltender Darcy Kuemper makes one of his 29 saves in Minnesota's 2-1 win over the New York Rangers on March 13, 2014 at the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul. (MHM Photo / Jeff Wegge)

Kuemper rattled off a seven-game winning streak starting in mid-February, winning 9-out-of-10 games into March. He went 13 games in a row from March 23 to Oct. 22 allowing two goals or less in a game, setting a new Coyotes franchise record; it was also the 12th longest such stretch in NHL history. Since Jan. 6, only Sergei Bobrovsky (with Columbus last season and Florida this year) has more shutouts (eight) in the NHL than Kuemper (six).

He helped put his team into the playoff conversation before finishing fourth in the Pacific Division. Kuemper had a career year last season, going 27-20-8 in 55 games with a 2.33 GAA and .925 save percentage with a career-high five shutouts, including a 4-0, 39-save victory against the Wild on March 31. The now-29-year-old set career marks in games played, starts, wins, save percentage, shots faced and saves.

That's something that shouldn't be all too surprising for a perennial back-up who finally found some playing time in the No. 1 spotlight.

"The consistency of his game has been terrific," Tocchet said.

Last year's success has spilled over to the 2019-20 campaign. After a couple early losses, Kuemper won his next four starts and seven-of-his-next-eight games, a stretch where he allowed just 14 goals. Kuemper's next game will be No. 200 in the NHL, which includes 182 starts. He's a career 88-66-27 with 17 shutouts.

But after giving up those four goals to his former team on his home ice, Kuemper did not get the nod in St. Paul. In the Arizona game, it appeared as though Kuemper was chirping his former team during that game, but he brushed it off when asked about it a few days later after Thursday's morning skate.

"There honestly wasn't really much going on," Kuemper said. "I don't know how that really became a story. It just was another game."

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That's how he saw Thursday's re-match, too. A couple years removed, and with plenty of turnover in the Wild dressing room as well, coming back to his roots in Minnesota isn't that big of a deal to Kuemper. Instead, it's "just another game" with a chance for an important two points on the line.

For the second-place Coyotes (11-7-2), Kuemper isn't the only one getting it done. Nick Schmaltz leads the way with 4 goals and 15 points. And Tocchet has the ability to rely on two solid goaltenders; Raanta is 3-2-2.

"It's always a lot more fun when the team's having success," Kuemper said. "It's still early in the season, but we're pretty happy with our start. We know there are things we've got to keep working on and a lot of games ahead of us. But it's been a good start. We've just got to keep building off it."


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Heather's love for watching hockey started when the Minnesota Wild came to town in 2000. Before that, she caught a few Minnesota Moose games as a youngster, and more recently she's kept up with the Austin Bruins and Fargo Force. She's a writer, freelance journalist and blogger who previously worked as a news reporter in Austin and Fergus Falls, Minn. She enjoys watching sports and closely follows the Wild, Minnesota Twins, IndyCar Series, tennis and prep sports. Heather keeps up her sports blog [Thoughts from the Stands](#). You can follow her on Twitter/X [@hrule](#) or Instagram [@hrule](#).

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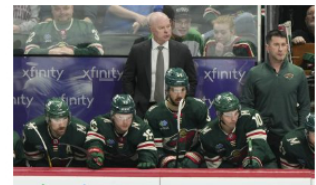
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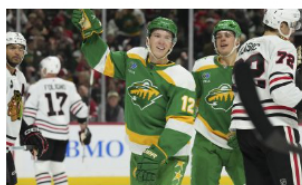
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