



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 4, 2020

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Finally, Hurricanes and Capitals have a rivalry to savor

By Luke DeCock

It's hard at the exact midpoint of the season to see the possibility of the playoffs somewhere down the line, so take full enjoyment from games like this, the manifestation of a rivalry that took forever to get its feet on the ground.

After years of Southeast Division Showdowns that were more sound than fury, the Carolina Hurricanes and Washington Capitals have a full-blown rivalry now, always the best stuff in hockey, and it produced a furious third period Friday that was as entertaining a spectacle on this ice in January in a long, long time. Even in a 4-3 Hurricanes loss.

There wasn't a ton of calm before the storm -- the Hurricanes peppered Ilya Samsonov with 18 fruitless shots in the first period, punctuated by Nic Dowd throwing Andrei Svechnikov's stick into the crowd at the intermission -- but when Jordan Staal scored in the first minute of the third to make it a one-goal game, everything really broke loose.

The Capitals scored two goals in less than three minutes, followed by a pair of Hurricanes goals thanks in part to T.J. Oshie's indiscretions with Warren Foegele, and the entire third was back-and-forth enough to cause whiplash, with the Hurricanes unable to close the gap but offering every indication they could -- and the Capitals threatening to extend their lead at the same time.

Foegele continues to be the uncomfortable centerpiece of this newborn rivalry, thanks to his goal-scoring exploits in the playoffs and the hit on Oshie that had the unfortunate consequence of a broken collarbone for the Capitals forward. The spotlight, especially a villainous one, doesn't suit his personality, but it's a role cast upon him, for better or worse. (And not merely by the Capitals: The Hurricanes took the opportunity of the first television timeout to display a montage of Foegele goals against Washington, expert trolling.)

That dynamic nearly played a role in the outcome of the game, with Oshie cross-checking Foegele in front of the net in the third, then taking another run at him while Foegele was on one knee. The Hurricanes scored on the ensuing power play, their final goal of the game as it turned out.

There were a few other incidents and flashpoints, with the Hurricanes' chances to get a point out of this dying when Dougie Hamilton retaliated for an Oshie hit into the end boards with a swipe at the back of Oshie's helmet, and on the whole it was far from the ordinary at this time of year, much to the delight of a third straight sellout crowd.

The Hurricanes and Capitals were always supposed to be rivals, thanks to convenient geography, but it wasn't until the seven games last spring that any life was really sparked. Alex Ovechkin's knockout of Svechnikov was the kind of moment that creates feelings that tend to linger, and the resentment over Brock McGinn's double-overtime winner to send the defending Stanley Cup champions home clearly lingers. As it should. Such are the legacies of playoff series won and lost. More often lost.

"When you see a team in the playoffs, usually the next year there's always a little added rivalry I think," Staal said. "Obviously a good team and a good test when they come into the building, and our fans know it."

Throw in the Hurricanes' two wins over the Capitals since and the two-game losing streak upon which the Capitals entered this game (one of those here to the Hurricanes), and there was a ripeness to Friday that even the first two games lacked, but a welcome one. Such frisson is uncommon in the long slog of the hockey season. There used to be more of it, before expansion, when the NHL was a smaller league and teams more often bumped shoulders with each other.

The Hurricanes have it with the Capitals now, a real and honest rivalry, full of bad blood and scores to settle. The good stuff. There should be more to come.



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Canes make push in third period, but Samsonov, Capitals hold on for 4-3 victory

By Chip Alexander

For a long time Friday, it appeared the Washington Capitals might take a routine win over the Carolina Hurricanes.

After third-period goals by Lars Eller and Jakub Vrana, the Caps led 4-1. PNC Arena was mostly silent, except for the smattering of Caps fans in the building. Rookie goalie Ilya Samsonov was in control in net for Washington.

But if we have learned anything in the past year, it's that Canes-Caps games have become unpredictable, emotional, usually contentious and always physical. So it was again Friday as the Caps won 4-3, but only after the Canes used power-play goals by Teuvo Teravainen and Ryan Dzingel to spur a third-period surge and bring PNC arena alive.

"I thought the guys did a good job of pushing and fighting our way back into that game and making it interesting," said Canes center Jordan Staal, who scored the Canes' first goal in the opening minute of the third.

The third period was punishing, with bodies banging bodies. At one point, the Caps' T.J. Oshie cross-checked the Canes' Warren Foegele, knocking him to the ice, then hit Foegele again as the Foegele tried to regain his balance.

Bad blood? Yes, there's bad blood. It was Foegele's collision with Oshie in the Stanley Cup playoffs last spring that ended Oshie's season.

Late in the game, Canes defenseman Dougie Hamilton, not happy with Oshie's hard check into the end boards, turned and hit Oshie in the back of the head. The roughing penalty against Hamilton, with 2:44 left in regulation, stymied the Canes' momentum and left Oshie smiling.

"That's what you'd expect," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "It seems like every time we play them that's pretty much how the games go. Pretty tight, lots of scoring chances there, but we just didn't find a way to pull it out."

The Caps (28-9-5) ended a two-game losing streak, both regulation losses, and a four-game overall losing streak to the Canes, including the playoffs. The Canes, in turn, lost their first game of 2020 but ended the first half of their season 24-15-2, holding a wild-card playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

The Canes outscored and generally outthrustled the Caps in their Dec. 28 game at PNC Arena, never trailing in a 6-4 win.

Foegele, who aggressively pestered the Caps in the Canes' seven-game playoff series win, did it again with a goal and two assists in being named the game's first star.

But the Caps countered Friday with Samsonov, who now has won the first eight road games of his career and as the backup -- for now -- to veteran goalie Braden Holtby. Samsonov stopped all 18 Carolina shots in the first period, then denied Hamilton on a shorthanded breakaway in the second and was given a 2-0 lead as Richard Panik and Evgeny Kuznetsov scored in the period, Kuznetsov on the power play moments after Hamilton was stopped.

"The first period was pretty good," Brind'Amour said. "We deserved better out of the first. Then, the second was not good. I thought our power play sucked the life out of us and their power play got them going. That second period was where we lost it."

The Canes finally got the puck past Samsonov, who had 38 saves, in the third on a tip by Staal. But 14 seconds later, Canes center Erik Haula was called for slashing and Eller's power-play goal made it a 3-1 game. When Vrana scored off the rush at 4:51, it was 4-1.

The Canes, generally listless on their first four power plays, converted on their last two as Teravainen scored his first goal in 17 games and then Dzingel ripped a shot from the slot off a Martin Necas pass. The sellout crowd of 18,680 was loud.

"That's how the game is, it's a game of momentum," Dzingel said. "There are a lot of swings in the NHL and you kind of have to ride those. But we can't get ourselves in that hole. That's the bottom line."

The Canes had 15 shots in the third and crowded the crease, but Samsonov made enough stops to improve to 11-2-1 this season.

"Gave up some goals but he was, no doubt, the first star tonight," Caps coach Todd Reirden said.

The Caps, 17-5-1 on the road this season, face the Canes again on Jan. 13 in Washington. It should make for more of the same emotion.

"When you see a team in the playoffs there's always a little added rivalry," Staal said.



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THE ATHLETIC

Civian: If you don't vote Teuvo Teravainen into the All-Star Game you're a coward who hates good passing

By Sara Civian

Teuvo Teravainen stood in the Canadian Tire Centre visitors dressing room after a win over the Senators during a snowstorm last season. It's no rarity that his multi-point effort lifted the Hurricanes to a win, but those points are usually found in the assist column.

That night, a week or so after he signed his steal of a five-year extension, he scored two goals.

"If I saw a good play I might still try to pass it," he said, smirking.

He's got a great shot, actually, and swears he's been trying to use it more. Even former Hurricanes captain Justin Williams once waved him along for a goal in-game, because Williams knew he'd try to pass it to him on their two-on-one. Teravainen made it.

He is who he is, and he knows exactly who that is. He sees the play five times faster than most of his peers, so on most occasions, he passes the puck where he knows it should end up.

"He's so good," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said, pausing for a second after Teravainen's 400th NHL game Tuesday. "He's so good for us. All those little things he does that no one really notices — well you guys do, now, cuz you've been seeing him now for a long time. He doesn't get credit for it. The little defensive plays, the little stick plays. He's just — I can't say enough about him. If he's not one of our most valuable players, I don't know who is."

The nature of his play creeps up on you. Sneaky assist after sneaky assist until you realize he actually leads the Hurricanes in points with 7-33—40 in 40 games played.

Not Sebastian Aho, not Andrei Svechnikov, not extremely worthy All-Star Dougie Hamilton.

It's Teravainen.

That's why, after giving full kudos to Hamilton on his well-deserved All-Star nomination, Brind'Amour mentioned Teravainen could "easily" be in there based on how he seems to keep the team at an even-kilter every single night.

But the Metropolitan Division is dark and full of big-named terrors, so the Canes are only sending Hamilton for sure.

Teravainen did make it onto the "Last Men In" ballot, so fans have a chance to vote him in.

If they're being honest with themselves, they should.

Overview of the Metro "Last Men In" ballot:

Teravainen: (7-33—40, plus-14)

Capitals: T.J. Oshie (15-13—28, minus-3)

Islanders: Brock Nelson (14-16—30, plus-4)

Penguins: Kris Letang (10-16—26, plus-7)

Flyers: Claude Giroux (12-16—28, plus-8)

Blue Jackets: Nick Foglino (4-11—15, minus-6)

Rangers: Mika Zibanejad (16-15—31, plus-3)

Devils: Nico Hischier (8-15—23, minus-6)

Teravainen leads the ballot in assists, plus/minus rating and overall points, but more than that he's making passing fun again. That's what All-Star weekend is all about, right? It seems like the best Teravainen highlights come from searching Sebastian Aho highlights — the Finns have connected 17 times this season for a goal.

Aho screamed "Wow!" after this one.

"That was sick. That was unreal," Aho said postgame. "Even I had a hard time putting that in even though it was an empty-netter because I was as surprised as everyone."

What an endorsement from last year's All-Star.

"We get to see him, so we're spoiled, but he makes those plays regularly," Brind'Amour said. "He sees the ice so well."

Hence the passing.

He makes these plays so regularly that they almost seem ordinary — but they aren't.

The Canes have a 59.94 Corsi for percentage at five-on-five when Teravainen is on the ice. This leads all NHL players with at least 200 minutes logged this season (NaturalStatTrick.com). That's roughly 14 games, so the impressiveness of this stat is enhanced when you realize Teravainen has maintained that level of puck possession through 40 games.

His 24 primary assists are tied with Brad Marchand for No. 4 in the NHL, behind only Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid (aka the 2019-20 Edmonton Oilers) and Florida's Jonathan Huberdeau.

He plays on the penalty kill like it's the power play. He moves the puck on the power play like he's removing all the suck out of last year's man advantage, like snake-bite poison. He loves to pass so much that he literally one-times passes from the circle on the power play.

He's got 16 power play points and three shorthanded points, meaning he's a boss at even strength, meaning he ain't a cheater.

He gives the best interviews of all time.

If you don't vote Teuvo Teravainen into the All-Star Game you're a coward who hates good passing.



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Hurricanes dig too deep a hole in loss to Capitals

The Carolina power play scored twice in the third period but couldn't erase Washington's three-goal lead

By Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — The Carolina Hurricanes had won four straight against the Washington Capitals dating back to last season's playoff matchup that saw the 2018 Stanley Cup champs knocked out in the first round.

While the Capitals snapped their drought against the Hurricanes with a 4-3 win Friday in front of a sellout crowd of 18,680 at PNC Arena, the game lived up to its billing.

Washington built a three-goal lead early in the third period, only to see Carolina score twice on the power play and push for the tying goal.

But Dougie Hamilton's roughing penalty — a punch to the back of Washington forward T.J. Oshie's head following a hard hit into the boards — stalled momentum, and the Capitals held on to end their first two-game losing streak of the season.

"That's what you would expect," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said of the playoff-like intensity of the game. "It seems like every time we play them, that's pretty much how the games go. Pretty tight, lots of scoring chances there. Just didn't find a way to pull it out."

It looked like Carolina's penalty kill — a strong point all season — would be its undoing.

The Capitals got the game's first goal early when the rebound of a Richard Panik shot hit Carolina's Brett Pesce and went in the Hurricanes' net, and then Washington's power play went to work.

With Sebastian Aho in the penalty box for interference, Capitals defenseman John Carlson crept in from the blue line and made a perfect backdoor pass to Evgeny Kuznetsov for a two-goal lead at 5:07.

Carolina got one back — a Jordan Staal redirection 39 seconds into the third period — but the Capitals' power play quickly struck again.

With Erik Haula off for an offensive zone slashing call, Washington captain Alexander Ovechkin blasted a shot that went wide of Petr Mrazek (25 saves) and caromed right to Lars Eller on the other side of the net. Eller banged it in for an easy goal and a 3-1 lead 2:29 into the third.

"Our PK's gotta be better," captain Jordan Staal said. "Obviously, they have a very good power play."

Jakub Vrana seemed to deliver a dagger shortly thereafter, depositing a cross-ice feed past Mrazek at 4:51 to push the Capitals' lead to 4-1.

"We can't get ourselves in that hole, that's the bottom line," said Hurricanes winger Ryan Dzingel. "I don't know what else to say other than that."

Carolina's power play — "horrendous," according to Dzingel, in the first two periods — made it a game.

Teuvo Teravainen scored for the first time since Nov. 24 — a 16-game drought that included 14 assists in his last 11 games — on a rebound just eight seconds into Carl Hagelin's hooking minor to make it 4-2 at 6:35 of the third.

Then the second power play unit scored exactly six minutes later when Martin Necas faked a one-timer from the left flank and instead slap passed the puck to Dzingel in the slot. Dzingel rifled the puck high glove past Ilya Samsonov (38 saves) for his eighth goal of the season.

"He's been trying to look for me there for a while, and it was a great pass by him," Dzingel said of Necas' feed.

But Carolina couldn't get the equalizer despite the building momentum on the ice and in the sold out arena, and Hamilton's penalty with under three minutes left gave the Hurricanes little time to pull Mrazek in an effort to tie the game.

Oshie seemed to relish the call and was all smiles as he got off the ice after drawing the infraction.

It added just another layer to a rivalry that is growing by the game.

"When you see a team in playoffs, usually next year there's a little added rivalry, I think," Staal said. "Obviously, a good team and always a good test. When they come in this building, our fans know it, we know it."

"We came up short this time, and we'll have to get them in their building."

That rematch will be Jan. 13 in Washington, the final time the teams meet this season. At least in the regular season.

Notes: Carolina held a 71-43 shot advantage. ... The Hurricanes won 36 of 58 faceoffs, led by a 13-of-19 showing by Aho. ... Aho was called for two minor penalties for just the third time in his career. ... Svechnikov had two assists for his 13th multipoint game of the game. ... Defenseman Joel Edmundson was the only Hurricanes skater to not register a shot on goal. ... Warren Foegele had five shots for Carolina, the fifth time in his career he's registered at least five shots on goal. The previous four times he scored in each game and had a combined seven points — that includes his three-point game in the Hurricanes' Game 3 win over the Capitals in last season's playoffs. ... Nic Dowd was given a 10-minute misconduct at the end of the first period after he threw Svechnikov's stick into the stands following a scrum.



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Recap: Canes' Rally Falls Short Against Capitals

Canes score three goals in the third period but fall, 4-3

by Michael Smith

Trailing by three goals in the third period, the Carolina Hurricanes rallied to pull within a goal of the Washington Capitals but fell just short in a 4-3 final.

Jordan Staal, Teuvo Teravainen and Ryan Dzingel each netted goals for the Canes in the third period, while Jakub Vrana's 16th of the season held up as the game-winner for Washington.

Here are five takeaways from Friday night in Raleigh.

1. Comeback Falls Short

In front of an energized, sold-out crowd - the third straight sellout and sixth of the season at PNC Arena - the Hurricanes nearly orchestrated a dramatic third period comeback.

It would have blown the roof off the barn.

Instead, the Canes' rally fell just short in their second meeting with the Capitals in a seven-day span.

"It sucks losing still, but it is a prideful room," Jordan Staal said. "We don't like going away. We're going to fight until that horn goes. I thought the guys did a good job of pushing and fighting our way back into that game."

"We were right there. You could arguably say we could have won that game," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "We kept coming at the end and had a lot of opportunities."

Though the Canes didn't come away victorious, Friday's game was another exhilarating installment in the bubbling rivalry between these two divisional opponents. The regular-season series finale, slated for Monday, Jan. 13 in Washington, should be a doozy.

"When you see a team in playoffs, usually the next year there's always a little added rivalry," Staal said. "It's always a good test when they come into this building. Our fans know it, and we know it. We came up short this time. We'll have to get them in their building."

2. You're Probably Wondering How I Ended Up in This Situation

A misstep of a period put the Hurricanes in a 2-0 hole after 40 minutes.

Richard Panik's shot bounced off Brett Pesce and in at the 2:58 mark of the second to put the Capitals up one. Just past the five-minute mark, Evgeny Kuznetsov tapped in the puck alongside the net on the power play to double the Caps' lead.

The Canes headed to the locker room having been out-shot, 14-8, and out-scored, 2-0, in the middle frame.

"Really, our second period just kind of put us in a hole. We didn't play our game in the second," Staal said. "They do a good job of when you're not on, they're going to make you pay."

"The second was not good," Brind'Amour said. "I thought our power play sucked the life out of us, and then their power play got them going."

Indeed. The Canes were 0-for-4 on the power play through two periods, while the Capitals were 1-for-2.

3. A Push in the Third

Jordan Staal got the Hurricanes on the board just 39 seconds into the third period with a deflection on a Brett Pesce point shot. That cut his team's deficit to just a goal, 2-1, with plenty of hockey left to be played.

The Capitals answered back, though. First, it was Lars Eller scoring the team's second power-play goal of the night, banging in the puck after it kicked off the end boards from an Alex Ovechkin bomb. A little more than two minutes later, Jakub Vrana one-timed a cross-ice pass, and the puck trickled in past Petr Mrazek.

A two-goal deficit turned one-goal deficit turned three-goal deficit, all in the first 4:51 of the final frame of regulation.

The Canes weren't done, though.

A minute and 44 seconds after Vrana scored, Teuvo Teravainen smacked in a power-play goal to bring the Canes back within two goals.

Exactly six minutes later, Ryan Dzingel accepted a pass from Martin Necas and sniped a shot glove-side high on Ilya Samsonov from the slot, the team's second straight power-play marker.

"[Necas] had been trying to look for me there for a while," Dzingel said. "It was a great pass by him, and we finally got one on the power play, so that was huge."

The Canes pushed and pushed and pushed but couldn't find the equalizer.

"You can't put yourself in that hole, especially in the NHL. Teams are too good," Dzingel said. "You can't get down 4-1 against the Capitals. That's the bottom line."

4. Nothing to Show From the First

The Hurricanes were the better team in the first period, but they unfortunately had nothing to show for it. Other than



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allowing a breakaway to Garnet Hathaway, which Mrazek turned away, it was virtually all Canes in the second half of the opening stanza. In total, the Canes put 18 shots on Samsonov, but he was the difference.

"The first period I thought was pretty good," Brind'Amour said. "We deserved better out of the first."

5. Whoa, We're Halfway There

The Hurricanes have officially arrived at the midpoint of the 2019-20 regular season. Through 41 games, the Canes have accrued 50 points and a 24-15-2 record.

Compare that to a season ago, when the Canes had a 19-17-5 record and 43 points, having just begun their massive second-half push to the playoffs.

"We need to put ourselves into a good spot heading into (All-Star) break," Dzingel said. "We've put ourselves in a decent spot so far, and we've got to keep going."

If you break the Canes' first 40 games down into 10-game segments, the team has been incredibly consistent, too: 6-3-1, 6-4-0, 6-4-0, 6-3-1. If that continues in the second half of this season - this current 10-game segment has begun at 0-1-0 - the Canes should easily make a return to the postseason.

"It's been pretty good," Brind'Amour said. "I like this group how they come to work. They don't quit. That's pretty positive. We've had some tough losses this year, but the guys seem to always dig in. That's all you can ask for as a coach."

Up Next

The Canes' seven-game homestand continues on Sunday when the Tampa Bay Lightning come to town for a 5 p.m. puck drop.



Samsonov makes 38 saves, Capitals hold off Hurricanes

Rookie is 8-0-0 on road; Kuznetsov has goal, assist to help Washington end skid

by Kurt Dusterberg

RALEIGH, N.C. -- Ilya Samsonov made 38 saves, and the Washington Capitals held off the Carolina Hurricanes for a 4-3 win at PNC Arena on Friday.

The rookie is the second goaltender in NHL history to win at least each of his first eight starts on the road. Brent Johnson won his first 10 starts (11 games) on the road with the St. Louis Blues from Feb. 26, 1999 through Jan. 13, 2001.

"That's OK, I like it with the shots at my net," said Samsonov, who made 18 saves in the first period. "It doesn't matter where (the game) is played. I'm feeling comfortable playing at home or on the road."

Evgeny Kuznetsov and Lars Eller each had a goal and an assist for the Capitals (28-9-5), who had lost two straight in regulation for the first time this season.

"[Samsonov] was, no question, the first star tonight," Capitals coach Todd Reirden said. "His emotional control never changes. I think it allows our team to not get too derailed. He was outstanding."

Teuvo Teravainen and Ryan Dzingel each scored a power-play goal in the third period for the Hurricanes (24-15-2), who had won two in a row. Petr Mrazek made 25 saves.

"Seems like every time we play them that's pretty much how the games go," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

"Pretty tight, lots of scoring chances. We just didn't find a way to pull it out."

Teravainen cut Washington's lead to 4-2 at 6:35, scoring on a one-timer after Sebastian Aho got the rebound of Andrei Svechnikov's initial shot in the slot.

Dzingel made it 4-3 at 12:35 when he took a pass from Martin Necas and beat Samsonov glove side from the slot.

"It's never over," Eller said. "They got a little bit of help with the penalties, giving them a little bit of room. All of a sudden, it's a game again. It was a little self-inflicted for us, giving them power plays, so we lost a bit of a step there."

Carolina continued to pressure in Washington's zone before Dougie Hamilton took a roughing penalty on T.J. Oshie with 2:44 remaining in regulation.

Richard Panik gave the Capitals a 1-0 lead at 2:58 of the second period. His initial backhand attempt was stopped by Mrazek, but the rebound redirected off Hurricanes defenseman Brett Pesce into the open net.

Kuznetsov extended the lead to 2-0 with a tap in on the power play after receiving a backdoor pass from John Carlson at 5:07. The goal came 25 seconds after Samsonov stopped Hamilton on a breakaway.

"I think that breakaway when [Samsonov] stopped it and we got the goal right away, that gave us a lot of momentum," Kuznetsov said.

Jordan Staal scored 39 seconds into the third period to cut it to 2-1 on a redirection of Pesce's point shot.



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Eller pushed the lead to 3-1 at 2:29, scoring at the right post after Ovechkin's shot caromed to him off the end boards, and Jakub Vrana converted a cross-ice pass from Kuznetsov to make it 4-1 at 4:51.

"You can't get down 4-1 against the Capitals, that's the bottom line," Dzingel said. "We can't get ourselves in that hole."

They said it

"Almost every night [Samsonov] is playing, that's his level. I think he's passed all the expectations you could think of for that young of a rookie goaltender. It's not easy. Sometimes (he doesn't) play for two weeks and he comes in and delivers. I can't think of a game where he didn't play well." -- Capitals forward Lars Eller

"Even when we lose, they're hard losses. We're right there. You could arguably say we could have won that game. I like this group, how they come to work. They don't quit. It's pretty positive." -- Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour

Need to know

Ovechkin remains two goals from tying Teemu Selanne (684) for 11th place in NHL history. ... Washington reached 60 points in 42 games, tied for second-fewest in its history (39 games in 2015-16). ... Vrana's goal was his first in 11 games. ... Svechnikov had two assists and has 40 points (17 goals, 23 assists) in 41 games this season. Only Ron Francis (32 games in 1981-82; 28 games in 1982-82) has reached 40 points in fewer games as a teenager in Hurricanes/Hartford Whalers history.

What's next

Capitals: Host the San Jose Sharks on Sunday (12:30 p.m. ET; ESPN+, SN, TVAS, NBCSWA, NBCSCA, NHL.TV)

Hurricanes: Host the Tampa Bay Lightning on Sunday (5 p.m. ET; ESPN+, FS-CR, SUN, NHL.TV)



Capitals edge Hurricanes behind Samsonov's 38 saves

By Ken Tysiac

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Ilya Samsonov isn't playing like a rookie. He isn't playing like a backup, either.

Samsonov made 18 of his 38 saves in the first period, and the Washington Capitals edged the Carolina Hurricanes 4-3 on Friday night.

"We allowed them to get the momentum, and he was really, really sharp, definitely the difference-maker tonight," Washington coach Todd Reirden said.

Evgeny Kuznetsov and Lars Eller each had a goal and an assist for the Capitals, who had dropped two in a row. Richard Panik and Jakub Vrana also scored.

Washington led 4-1 early in the third period before Carolina rallied on power-play goals by Teuvo Teravainen and Ryan Dzingel. Samsonov stopped Warren Foegele late in the game to preserve the win.

Jordan Staal also scored for Carolina (24-15-2), which dropped to 2-1-0 on its seven-game homestand.

"It seems like every time we play them that is pretty much how the games go, pretty tight, lots of scoring chances," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "But ... we just didn't find a way to pull it out."

The NHL-leading Capitals (28-9-5) had dropped their last four games against the Hurricanes dating to Games 6 and 7 of the Eastern Conference semifinals last season.

After Carolina posted a 6-4 win over the Capitals on Dec. 28, Hurricanes forward Warren Foegele confirmed the series had developed into a rivalry, saying: "We don't like them. They don't like us."

Samsonov helped Washington break through against the Hurricanes. He is the Capitals' No. 2 goaltender behind Braden Holtby, who is an NHL All-Star for the fifth straight season.

But like Holtby, Samsonov has been outstanding this season, and he entered as the first goalie in NHL history to open his career with wins in his first seven road games in the same season. He is 11-2-1 overall.

"Both of our goalies play unbelievable hockey," Kuznetsov said. "It's not easy to be behind Holts, but I think at the same time he has learned a lot from Holts."

Samsonov seemed unfazed by the 41 shots he faced and the 18 saves he needed to make in the first period.

"I like it," he said. "I like a lot of shots at my net. It's a hard game, a good win."

After Panik scored 2:58 into the second, Samsonov used his right pad to stop a backhand by All-Star defenseman Dougie Hamilton on a short-handed breakaway.

Seconds later, Kuznetsov sneaked behind Hamilton on the same Washington power play to score at the goalmouth on a pass from the point by John Carlson.

The emotion of the rivalry led to 12 minor penalties on the teams and a 10-minute misconduct for Washington's Nic Dowd.

Hamilton took an ill-advised penalty with 2:44 remaining, hurting Carolina's chances for the equalizer.

"The second half of the season everything ramps up and the emotion gets higher, especially against a rival like Carolina has become for us," Reirden said. "They pushed hard, and I think both teams took some penalties that they wouldn't like."



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NOTES: Kuznetsov has four goals and one assist in his last three games. He has 16 goals this season and is on pace to score 30 in a season for the first time in his career. ... Washington is 9-1 this season in games played on Friday and 17-1-3 when scoring the opening goal. ... At the halfway point of the season, the Hurricanes have the second-highest point total through 41 games in franchise history with 50 points.

Only the 2005-06 team, with 58 points and a 27-10-4 record, had more points through 41 games.

UP NEXT

Capitals: Return home to meet San Jose on Sunday.

Hurricanes: Meet Tampa Bay on Sunday.



The lessons that propelled Justin Williams to three Stanley Cups

By Chris Johnston

Long before Justin Williams won three Stanley Cups or played 1,000 games or scored on the first shift of his NHL career as a teenager, they told him he was too small to play for the best junior team in his hometown.

Well before everything stopped dead in Cobourg for a parade on a steamy July afternoon in 2014, Williams faced more than one defining moment where he was forced to decide whether it was worth continuing to chase his hockey dream.

But that steamy July day happened to be the same one they memorialized his biggest professional accomplishments on the town sign. Whether you're driving in from the north on Burnham St. or the east on King St., you're now greeted by the same message: "Welcome to Cobourg. Home of Stanley Cup champions Justin Williams & Steve Smith."

Imagine that?

Williams was bestowed the honour just five weeks after he'd accepted the Conn Smythe Trophy at centre ice in Los Angeles, and it wasn't entirely clear which meant more to him. Instead of 20,000 fans at Staples Center, he stood in front of a couple of hundred locals at Victoria Park. Rather than shaking hands with NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, he watched then Cobourg mayor Gil Brocanier unveil a replica of the new town signpost.

The emotions were different, but even a stoic like Williams couldn't disguise the fact it made him emotional.

"It's pretty overwhelming for me. I'm just like all of you," he told the crowd while standing on stage at the bandshell. "Just from Cobourg, a small town, and doing the best I can with what I'm given."

The more you understand that last sentence, the more you will come to understand a career that defies easy explanation.

Williams was deemed too slight to play a regular shift for the Cobourg Cougars at age 16 and won a job with the rough-and-tumble Philadelphia Flyers before his 19th birthday. He was never an elite skater, never the top scorer or best player on any of his teams during 19 years in the NHL, and yet virtually every teammate he ever had would trade achievements in an instant.

Even the "Mr. Game 7" persona he privately wishes never came into existence can be traced to the way he was raised

and supported by a tight-knit family in a town the orders its collars in blue.

There's both an honesty to the way of life in Cobourg and the way Williams approached his existence in the world's top hockey league. He was forever mindful that someone was gunning for his job and believed he continually had to prove himself.

Williams stayed present, did the work, embraced the grind and did the best he could with what he was given. He possessed a will that couldn't be bent. And a passion that was unrelenting.

The kid from Cobourg set a goal of winning the Stanley Cup and achieved it. And then he did it again. And again.

"You can do anything with your life and nobody has the right to tell you that you can't, even though they will," Williams said in an address to the hometown crowd after that third Cup win in 2014. "Trust me: People will tell you you can't. I've been told 'no' many times in my life, I've been cut from several teams when I was younger, but I persevered.

"Sometimes the word 'no' — or someone telling you that you can't do something — is exactly what you need to hear to get yourself to the next level. Prove 'em wrong, believe in yourself."

Imagine if Williams had decided to pack it in after the AAA Quinte Red Devils cut him loose? Or if he'd chosen not to go play Jr. C in Colborne when the Jr. A team in Cobourg had no use for him? What if he had stopped pushing when the Ontario Hockey League's Plymouth Whalers sent him away for a stint with a lower-level team in Michigan?

Then there's no parade, no name on the town sign, no "Justin Williams Hockey Camp" in Cobourg every July. There are likely none of the private acts of generosity he's quietly known to perform in the community, either.

There certainly wouldn't have been all of those nights in his childhood basement where his parents, Denise and Craig, performed the same ritual before watching him play more than 1,200 games: Lighting a candle, listening to the broadcast call from his first career NHL goal and linking fingers for good luck.

Most importantly, a town of fewer than 20,000 residents in Southern Ontario might never have come to appreciate one of its most influential homegrown role models.



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When Williams paraded the Stanley Cup down King St. a few summers back, an overwhelming number of those lining the sidewalks were kids. After taking the microphone he urged them to "shoot for the moon — and when you get there, grab the stars." He told them to train to be a champion: "The best construction worker, the best doctor, the best veterinarian, the best councilman, policeman, teacher that you can be. And trust me that it will feel real rewarding when you do."

Like many people from small towns, Williams had to go elsewhere to realize his dream. He actually started playing minor hockey in neighbouring Port Hope and commuted to places like Belleville, Colborne and Vaughan while climbing the ranks, before eventually moving in with a billet family in Michigan once he graduated to the OHL.

He's made NHL stops in Philadelphia, Carolina, Los Angeles and Washington, and became a dual U.S. citizen a few years back.

This current hockey season is basically the first one Williams has missed since he could walk. He's kept in contact with the game by coaching his son Jaxon's team in Raleigh, N.C., while also skating three or four mornings per week in case he decides to resume his NHL career after taking a hiatus in September to ponder his future.

That decision could be finalized any day now.

If Williams chooses to come back, he will be coming back for one reason only: To chase another Stanley Cup, to try to climb that mountain again, to give the folks back home another reason to throw a parade in his honour.

There's not a soul in Cobourg who doubts he can make that dream a reality.



NHL Awards Watch: Nathan MacKinnon has Hart; new Jack Adams leader

By Greg Wyshynski

The calendar has flipped to 2020, which means we have even more clarity about the NHL Awards picture. Or at least a little more than we had last month.

Here's the NHL Awards Watch for January. Again, this is a prediction of how I expect the voters would consider the current candidates, as well as a look at their merits. Keep in mind that the Pro Hockey Writers Association (PHWA) votes for the Hart, Norris, Calder, Selke and Lady Byng; broadcasters vote for the Jack Adams; and general managers handle the Vezina. Also keep in mind the "You Gotta Be In It To Win It" protocol for the Hart and the Jack Adams.

All stats from Hockey Reference, Natural Stat Trick and Evolving Hockey.

Art Ross Trophy (points leader)

Current leader: Connor McDavid, Edmonton Oilers (64 points)

Watch out for: Brad Marchand, Boston Bruins (59 points)

Dark horse: Artemi Panarin, New York Rangers (55 points)

Rocket Richard Trophy (leading goal scorer)

Current leader: David Pastrnak, Boston Bruins (29 goals)

Watch out for: Auston Matthews, Toronto Maple Leafs (27 goals)

Dark horse: Sebastian Aho, Carolina Hurricanes (23 goals)

Hart Trophy (MVP)

Leader: Nathan MacKinnon, Colorado Avalanche

Finalists: Brad Marchand, Boston Bruins; Connor McDavid, Edmonton Oilers

Let's start with the usual caveat when it comes to the Hart Trophy and the postseason race: "You gotta be in it to win it." As of this writing, the Buffalo Sabres are outside the playoff picture. Should they creep back into a playoff spot, or bump up close enough to the playoff bubble, then Jack Eichel (26 goals, 28 assists in 41 games) would absolutely be one of the top three players, supplanting Marchand. He's having a career-redefining season, with 19 more points than the next highest scorer on the Sabres.

But you gotta be in it to win it. As of this writing, the Avalanche, Bruins and Oilers are all in a playoff position. The Sabres, unfortunately, are not.

MacKinnon is everything one wants in an MVP candidate. His 58 points through 40 games is 31 (!) more than the next leading scorer on the Avs. He carried the team when Mikko Rantanen, Gabriel Landeskog and Cale Makar were injured at various times. He was second for the Hart in 2019, so he's clearly on the radar for the award. Unlike the other two candidates, there isn't another player on his team who could lay claim to it.

McDavid was our leader last month, and could easily win his second MVP award if the Oilers make the playoff cut. His 1.49 points per game leads the NHL, Edmonton looks like a completely different team when he's off the ice, and McDavid has filled several highlight reels in the first three months of the season. Plus, voters who have in the past applied the "in it to win it" standard to the Hart Trophy -- raises hand -- would gladly cast a lot to honor Connor. The only wrinkle: Parsing out McDavid's impact on the Oilers and that of teammate Leon Draisaitl, who could swipe the Art Ross from McDavid by season's end.

Marchand has the same issue with teammate and linemate David Pastrnak, who leads him in goals (30 to 20)



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and points (60 to 59) and hence points per game as well (1.43 to 1.41). But Marchand leads the NHL in goals (15.9) and wins (2.8) above average.

One name to watch: Artemi Panarin of the New York Rangers, who are surprisingly close to the playoff bubble. He's averaging 1.41 points per game, has 18 more points than the next highest scoring Ranger and is second to Marchand in goals (14.3) and wins (4.9) above average.

Norris Trophy (top defenseman)

Leader: John Carlson, Washington Capitals
Finalists: Dougie Hamilton, Carolina Hurricanes; Roman Josi, Nashville Predators

With 50 points in 41 games -- that's 1.22 points per game as a defenseman, for those of you scoring along at home -- it's still Carlson's trophy to lose. It's not just a power-play feast for him, either: Carlson leads all defensemen with 35 even-strength points. There is an analytic case to be made against him. Opponents have a slight shot advantage when he's on the ice, and the Capitals get barely more scoring chances (50.87%). He's 47th among defensemen in goals above average (4.9) and doesn't break the top 30 in wins above replacement (0.9). But he doesn't embarrass himself defensively, which is pretty much all you need when you're scoring at a rate higher than any other defenseman in the past 25 seasons.

While attending the Winter Classic and asking around, it's clear that Josi is getting his "turn" as a Norris contender after previously finishing no higher than fifth in the voting. He had 41 points in 39 games, second to Carlson, with a plus-17 on a Nashville team that's 25th in goals-against average. He's also second to Carlson with 26 even-strength points, and third among defensemen in average ice time (25:36). He's second to teammate Ryan Ellis in goals above average (14.0) and wins above replacement (2.4). In a right and just world, that would mean Ellis would get the awards love. But only one of them is an All-Star this season. Guess which one?

(That Ellis stays healthy would seem paramount to Josi's campaign, given they've played 607 minutes together at 5-on-5 this season. Ellis is "the guy behind the guy.")

Hamilton is going to have to ward off Alex Pietrangolo of the St. Louis Blues, who is really making a case with 31 points in 41 games and ranks third in both goals and wins above average; Shea Weber of the Montreal Canadiens, who has some stellar underlying numbers in possession and scoring chances to go with his 31 points in 40 games; and Victor Hedman of the Tampa Bay Lightning, who is better than a point per game offensively (1.03), right there with Hamilton in goals and wins above average, and is also Victor Hedman, a.k.a. a Norris finalist three years running and last season's winner.

But we're casting our vote for Hamilton here, for his 37 points in 40 games and plus-31, coupled with being fifth in goals and wins above average. The Hurricanes get nearly 60% of the scoring chances when he's on the ice. Like Josi with Ellis, a right and just world would have Hamilton's partner Jaccob Slavin in the Norris mix, but 20 points aren't going to get him there. So the nod goes to Hamilton. Now, if

we could only figure out what his Winter Classic pig race name would be ...

Calder Trophy (top rookie)

Leader: Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche
Finalists: Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks; Victor Olofsson, Buffalo Sabres

December shook up this race a little bit.

Makar was injured for all but six games of it, and his scoring pace cooled a bit. Olofsson, meanwhile, went bonkers with six goals and 14 points to win the league's rookie of the month award and claim the lead in goals (16) and points (34) among all rookies. But Makar built up so much of a lead in the first two months of the season that he's still the default pick, at least for the voters we pestered recently. With 29 points in 31 games (0.91 points per game) and fourth in goals and wins above average for all defensemen, he's certainly built a formidable case already. But he's also been protected: 16:39 even-strength time on ice per game, which is sixth among rookies, and 64.8% of his shifts starting in the offensive zone. Hughes starts 56.7% of his shifts there and plays 17:14 at even strength on average. His 28 points in 39 games rank him third among all rookies.

Keep an eye on center Martin Necas of the Hurricanes (22 points in 36 games), center Nick Suzuki of Montreal (23 points in 40 games) and defenseman John Marino of the Pittsburgh Penguins, who deserves way more attention than he's getting as a glue guy for a broken team.

Vezina Trophy (top goaltender)

Leader: Darcy Kuemper, Arizona Coyotes
Finalists: Jordan Binnington, St. Louis Blues; Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

Note: The NHL's general managers vote for this award

No changes here from last month's Watch. Kuemper leads the pack in both traditional (.934 even-strength save percentage) and fancy stats (0.538 goals saved above average per 60 minutes, by far the best in the NHL). He's working back from an injury that's kept him out since Dec. 19.

Hellebuyck hasn't been great lately, but his .933 even-strength save percentage and 0.475 goals saved above average per 60 entering Thursday night's games were second to Kuemper. Binnington is fifth in goals saved above average (0.418) but 10th in even-strength save percentage. Keep in mind that it's the general managers voting on this award, and Binnington's record (19-6-4 entering Thursday night) and accomplishments last postseason might influence these easily swayed ballots.

Tuukka Rask of the Boston Bruins, Ben Bishop of the Dallas Stars and Frederik Andersen of the Toronto Maple Leafs are all in the mix. All eyes are on Tristan Jarry of the Pittsburgh Penguins, who has appeared in just 18 games but has a .949 even-strength save percentage. If he plays his way into a "season savior" role given their injuries, he could get a nod.

Selke Trophy (best defensive forward)



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Leader: Sean Couturier, Philadelphia Flyers
Finalists: Patrice Bergeron, Boston Bruins; Mark Stone, Vegas Golden Knights

Couturier's Selke moment is upon us. He's having the best defensive season for any forward, and in particular in comparison to the other contenders. Bergeron is by far the closest competition, as shown by this head-to-head comparison from Natural Stat Trick. Couturier runs just ahead of him in most possession metrics, along with goals against per 60 and on-ice save percentage. Bergeron takes him in other metrics, like in takeaways. Others are a wash. It's close, but Couturier overall has had the better season.

If we're being honest with ourselves, center Aleksander Barkov of the Florida Panthers is just a tick behind Stone, the best defensive winger in the NHL. The Natural Stat Trick comparison between the two reveals significant advantages for Stone in possession and goals-against categories. Then there's that incredible 3.71 takeaways per 60 minutes at 5-on-5. Barkov is one of those candidates where the voters could just believe it's his turn, but the numbers have him running behind these three. Keep in mind both Stone and Barkov were a plus-4 entering play Thursday night; as superficial and insufficient as that stat is, a minus-rating could be a vote repellent.

Lady Byng Trophy (gentlemanly play)

As usual, this award for "sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct" has no business being in the soiled grasp of professional hockey writers, and should instead be voted on by the players themselves or the NHL's on-ice officials.

As currently constituted, the Lady Byng typically goes to the player with the most points who has the least penalty minutes. Nathan MacKinnon has 58 points and just eight penalty minutes. Teuvo Teravainen has 40 points and eight penalty minutes. Auston Matthews has 48 points, just six penalty minutes and virtually no chance of winning an award dedicated to gentlemanly conduct.

Honestly, they should just give it to Connor McDavid for not going on expletive-laden tirades every other night. The stress that guy's under? Give him something for the effort.

Jack Adams Award (best coach)

It is incredible to ponder what Craig Berube has accomplished since being named interim coach of the Blues last season. AP Photo/Jeff Roberson

Leader: Craig Berube, St. Louis Blues
Finalists: Sheldon Keefe, Toronto Maple Leafs; Barry Trotz, New York Islanders

Note: The Professional Hockey Broadcasters Association votes on this award.

Berube moves to the lead here as the clear-cut candidate from the Western Conference. The Blues haven't shown one iota of Stanley Cup championship hangover in pushing for the conference title and the President's Trophy. That speaks directly to the mindset and confidence Berube has preached since taking over on an interim basis midway through last season. That they've been this good without Vladimir Tarasenko is also astonishing. One could easily see the broadcasters honoring Berube not just for this season, but for everything he's brought to the franchise since taking over the bench.

The Islanders continue to punch above their weight, and hence Trotz will continue to get the lion's share of the credit for their system. The Isles are fifth in goals-against average, score enough to win and have a .697 points percentage. The biggest hurdle for Trotz is having won it last season: In the history of the Jack Adams Award, only one coach -- Jacques Demers in 1986-87 and 1987-88 -- has won the award in consecutive seasons.

At least one of the coaches who took over during the season was going to get some Jack Adams love, and Keefe is that guy. The Leafs are winning, and there's a discernible difference in the way they play under Keefe vs. how they looked under Mike Babcock. It also doesn't hurt to be a Jack Adams candidate with the fully armed and operational Toronto hockey media behind you. Or at least the ones that aren't Babcock loyalists.

Mike Sullivan of the Pittsburgh Penguins, who has led this team through a plague of injuries, is in the conversation. So are Bruce Cassidy of the Boston Bruins and Rick Tocchet of the Arizona Coyotes.



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Recap: Hurricanes fall to Samsonov, Capitals in chippy style

These teams don't like each other much, and it was evident from the drop of the first puck on Friday.

By Brian LeBlanc

RALEIGH — Never let anyone tell you that the Washington Capitals and Carolina Hurricanes don't have a healthy rivalry going.

Ilya Samsonov made 38 saves and the Capitals stopped a two-game losing streak in physical, snarly fashion, topping the Hurricanes 4-3 in a game marked by special teams play on both sides.

The decision to play Samsonov paid dividends for Todd Rierden early, as the Caps rookie faced 18 shots in the first period and stopped every one, including an early chance for popularity-contest winner Warren Foegele (subject of a hilarious bit of opponent trolling by the Canes video team at a TV timeout) on the game's first shift. Lucas Wallmark had the other grade-A chance, just missing on a rebound, but for the most part the Hurricanes struggled with net front presence, especially on their two power plays.

But at the other end, the Caps could be rueing their misfortune despite only taking seven shots on Mrazek. Jaccob Slavin broke up a two-on-one in textbook fashion to deny Carl Hagelin, and Mrazek himself had to cover for a Jake Gardiner gaffe that sprang Garnet Hathaway in alone.

The game-within-the-game was perhaps more entertaining than the action between the whistles. Expected agitator Tom Wilson did his thing, chasing after Nino Niederreiter a couple of times to no real impact, and Samsonov was tagged for a diving penalty. Capping off the nonsense, Nic Dowd was assessed a ten-minute misconduct penalty at the end of the period for launching Andrei Svechnikov's stick into the crowd for some reason.

The Canes' luck ran out in the second, though. Washington opened the scoring 2:58 into the period when Richard Panik's pass intended for Hagelin on the back door bounced off Brett Pesce and past Mrazek, who had overcommitted. Ninety seconds later, Sebastian Aho took the first of his two interference penalties in the period, and seconds after Dougie Hamilton was stuffed on a breakaway Evgeni Kuznetsov pushed Hamilton out of the way in front of the net, leaving the winger with a tap-in at 5:07 to double the lead.

It could have been even worse, with the Hurricanes failing to establish any offensive pressure for most of the period and only making Samsonov work occasionally. The defense was caught in quicksand most of the period, repeatedly allowing the Capitals to take off on odd-man rushes and forcing Mrazek into bailing the Canes out time and again.

The Canes came out with their pants on fire in the third, Jordan Staal finally getting the home team on the board

on the first shift, but an ill-timed slashing penalty to Erik Hauula led to the Caps going up by two again on a friendly bounce off the end boards right to an unmarked Lars Eller. Mrazek then let one in he'd want back, surrendering an odd-man break goal to Jakub Vrana by failing to hold the near post.

But down by three, the Canes weren't done yet. Seven seconds after Hagelin went to the box for hooking, Teuvo Teravainen took advantage of a fortunate bounce to pull the Canes back to within two. Mrazek did his part, again, stoning Hathaway on another breakaway and swallowing the follow-up as well.

Then, all hell broke loose when T.J. Oshie, looking for revenge on the player who broke his collarbone last season, cross-checked Foegele at the side of the net and everyone came together. With 24 seconds remaining in the penalty, the Canes got it back to a one-goal game when Martin Necas faked a shot and instead found Ryan Dzingel cruising through the slot. Dzingel buried it, sending PNC Arena into hysterics.

But that was as close as the Hurricanes would get, with Hamilton sent to the box with 2:43 to go for a retaliatory punch to the back of Oshie's head. Despite killing the penalty and pulling Mrazek for the final seconds, the Canes couldn't finish the job, giving the Capitals their first win of the season series and avenging their loss from six days prior.

They Said It

Rod Brind'Amour:

That's what you would expect. It seems like every time we play them that's how the games go. Pretty tight, lots of scoring chances there, but we just didn't find a way to pull it out.

The first period I thought was pretty good. We deserved better out of the first. The second was not good. Our power play sucked the life out of us, their power play got them going, and that's the second period. The third period, to come out really good and get another power play goal, I was going to say it was the difference in the game but I really guess it wasn't necessarily because we got two power play goals as well. The second period, that little lull there, that was where we lost it.

(On the PK's recent decline:) I'm not sure. The second one, there's not much you can do about that. Maybe get in the lane initially, but it misses the net and goes off the backboards. Not going to do much differently there. But the first one, honestly, that was a mess up. We messed that up. It's a tough game because I really thought, of the last games we've played, that was one of the better games we've played. I thought we were going pretty good. It's a tough loss.

I think (the season has) been pretty good, if you really look at it. Even when we lose, they're hard losses, but we're right there. You could arguably say we could have won that game.



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We kept coming at the end, we had a lot of opportunities. I like this group, how they come to work and they don't quit. That's pretty positive. We've had some tough losses this year, but again, the guys seem to always dig in, and that's all you can ask for as a coach.

Jordan Staal:

Our power play kind of bailed us out with a couple of goals, which was good, it made it a game. But I think really, our second period put us in a hole. We didn't play our game in the second period, and they do a good job of when you're not on, they're going to make you pay. They did a good job of that, and we made a push in the third. It's tough to come back in this league, especially a team like that.

Sucks losing still, but it's a prideful room. We don't like going away. We're going to fight until the horn goes, and I thought the guys did a good job of pushing and fighting their way back into that game, making it interesting. It's too bad we couldn't find the last one.

When you see a team in the playoffs, the next year there's always a little bit of a rivalry. Obviously [they're] a good team and it's always a good test when they come in this building, and our fans know it. We know it, and we came up short this time. We'll have to get them in our building.

Ryan Dzingel:

Obviously you can't put yourself in that hole, especially in the NHL. Teams are too good. They're usually not going to give up that many goals. We just put ourselves in too big of a hole.

I don't think they were bad bounces. I think we have to clean some stuff up, like I said. You can't get down 4-1 against the Capitals, that's the bottom line.

Every team's going to have a couple teams like that, you play them a lot and there's history. That's normal in the NHL, and that makes it a little more fun, especially midseason game 41. It's nice to have a little extra on the line here and there.

The first two periods (the power play was) horrendous. I don't think you can get one or two when you have six power plays.

We were horrendous in the first two periods. We have to clean it up, at practice tomorrow we're going to work on it a little bit.

Game Notes

- It's kind of weird to try to boil that game down to a few talking points. The power play was garbage, the penalty kill only marginally better, yet both were effective at times so you can't really say they were complete disasters. The Hurricanes did everything but tie the game late. It was entertaining, if nothing else.
- I know we rag on the NHL schedulemaker plenty, but this business of two teams that really hate each other playing three times in the span of three weeks is fantastic. I'd sign up for seven games of this in the playoffs in a heartbeat.
- Oshie was bound and determined to get someone in black dispatched to the penalty box, and it finally paid off when Hamilton, who had a game to forget, came off his rocker for a split second and clocked Oshie in the back of the head with three minutes left. It was as understandable as it was needless, and it probably cost the Hurricanes a real chance at the tying goal.
- Something has changed in the Canes' penalty kill the past two weeks. I'm not sure what it is, but it isn't effective anymore. It doesn't look like anything different on their own end, so maybe other teams have found a weakness and are exploiting it. So now it's on Rod Brind'Amour and Dean Chynoweth to move their own chess pieces and tinker a bit to make it effective again. These things happen over the course of the season, so it's not concerning per se but it does need to be fixed.
- The Canes practice tomorrow at noon at PNC prior to the late afternoon matinee against the Lightning on Sunday.



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Metropolitan Division Weekly Roundup: Welcome to the 2020s

How is each team entering 2020, and how are they performing after the calendar flipped to the new year?

By Zeke Lukow

1. Washington Capitals: 59 Points (27-9-5)

The Capitals have now lost two straight games in regulation for the first time this season, and have lost three of their last four games. The Caps were the only team that had not lost consecutive regulation games before Tuesday. Since December 9, goalie Braden Holtby has a 2-5-0 record and has lost his last three starts. Since then, he has just a .871 save percentage and 3.71 goals against average in these last seven starts. Ilya Samsonov has played well in his relief appearances, winning his last five starts and last recording a loss on November 15.

Tuesday's game also had an unexpected absence. Forward Nic Dowd missed Tuesday's game as his wife went into labor Tuesday and gave birth to their first child. Dowd is not expected to miss any more games, and it is a perfect time for him given that the Capitals have only two road games in their next eight games, both of which are just short trips to Raleigh and Philadelphia. He will also be able to spend time with the family at the end of the month for the All-Star break, so the timing can't be much better for a young family.

2. New York Islanders: 53 Points (25-11-3)

The Islanders have struggled to find consistency since their win-streak. Last season the Islanders loved playing at Nassau Coliseum, but this season hasn't worked so well. They have lost their last four games at home and have four more games at Nassau this month, so maybe their next game in Brooklyn on January 11 can turn their home troubles around. One place they have had few problems is in net with Semyon Varlamov, who lost his first game in regulation since November 27 last night.

Even in the loss to the Devils he performed admirably, allowing two goals on 31 shots for a .935 save percentage. Of goalies that have played at least 10 games since the start of December, he ranks tied for fifth in the league with a .923 save percentage and third with a 2.31 goals against average. The only problem is that the only goalies better in GAA are Joonas Korpisalo and Tristan Jarry — who, of course, are both in the same division. Varlamov's hot run has come at the perfect time, since backup Thomas Greiss has been struggling. Since November 25 Greiss has a 2-6-0 record after winning his previous eight starts.

3. Pittsburgh Penguins: 53 Points (24-11-5)

The Penguins received more bad news on the injury front. This time they lost Jake Guentzel for the season with a shoulder injury. This comes just a week after he was announced as an NHL All-Star for the first time in his career. Guentzel is tied for 12th in the league with 20 goals and leads the Pittsburgh Penguins team in both points (43) and goals. Guentzel is projected to miss four to six months after having surgery on his injured shoulder.

The Injury occurred during Monday's game against the Ottawa Senators. After scoring a goal he was tripped up

and went into the boards head-first. He has now been placed on Long Term Injured Reserve which means that his six million cap hit will be off the books. The injury will also likely force Jim Rutherford's hand to make a trade sooner rather than later, now that they are going to need to replace the scoring.

4. Carolina Hurricanes: 50 Points (24-14-2)

Elliott Friedman of Sportsnet reported that Justin Williams and the Hurricanes are approaching finalization of a new contract that Williams will re-sign by the end of the weekend. We have covered how the Hurricanes can afford the cap hit despite being up against the limit and reducing daily cap as much as possible. Now the question everyone is asking is how he fits in. He isn't going to be the captain anymore, but he will still be a huge calming presence in the locker room and will benefit the team off the ice.

On the ice, though, is he still going to be effective? It has been lost on most that Williams had his best year since 2011-2012 with 23 goals and 53 points. The 23 goals were the fourth most of his career, even with a 9.7% shooting percentage which was worse than any of his seasons with the Capitals. Williams probably slots in with Jordan Staal and Andrei Svechnikov on one of the top two lines.

Yes, this changes the top six, and Warren Foegele is the presumed odd man out despite having a good season and a hot streak at the moment. But, this could move Foegele down onto a line with Lucas Wallmark and Jordan Martinook, keeping him in the lineup and perhaps leaving Brock McGinn as the healthy extra. Williams' addition strengthens the top six and therefore the bottom six downstream. Also, looking at teams like the Penguins who are losing forwards week after week, why would you not want to add depth and fresh legs with a top six forward?

5. Philadelphia Flyers: 49 Points (22-13-5)

Anytime the Flyers have had the ability to make significant moves in the division, they have failed to capitalize on their opportunities. They currently sit just a point behind the Hurricanes in fourth and three points behind the Penguins in the division. The Flyers are in the middle of a six-game road trip that has seen them already lose three games, including one against the bottom dwelling Los Angeles Kings and the struggling San Jose Sharks. They were dropped last night by the Golden Knights and they have two games left in their trip that concludes with a game in Raleigh on January 7.

With the return of Michael Raffl, the Flyers had to send a forward down to the AHL, and they chose 20-year-old Morgan Frost. Frost has played 18 NHL games this season and has seven points. He has failed to record a goal since he scored in back-to-back games to start his NHL career. He has struggled to produce consistently, so his move to the AHL will be good to get him additional time and confidence. If he goes down and produces, he can force the front office's hands to call him back up and send another player down in his place.

6. Columbus Blue Jackets: 46 Points (19-14-8)

The Blue Jackets had a rough week, as they lost their starting goaltender in Joonas Korpisalo for four to six weeks to a



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meniscus injury. Korpisalo started a lion share of the games and had recorded every win for the Blue Jackets this season with a 17-10-4 record. Elvis Merzlikins now fills in as the starter for Columbus. Despite not winning a game so far this season, he has now won back-to-back games against the Panthers and Bruins (!), the latter in overtime.

Head coach John Tortorella also made news when he criticized the officials after the Korpisalo injury and a non-review for time remaining on the clock led to a shootout loss to the Blackhawks. While sometimes Tortorella can be over the top, this time he was spot on. There was no real explanation from the refs at the time or from the league after the game as to why the refs didn't put time on the clock despite an obvious error. He has been fined \$20,000 for his comments, plus a pending \$25,000 fine if he does it again.

7. New York Rangers: 42 Points (19-16-4)

Despite the Rangers' struggles this season, it is crazy to think where this team would be without Artemi Panarin. Panarin has 55 points in 39 games played and ranks sixth among all skaters in points. By way of comparison, he has 15 more points than Teuvo Teravainen, who leads the Canes in points with 40. Panarin has been moved from the top line and is now playing along side of Ryan Strome and Jesper Fast. While the top line was clicking before, this gives the Rangers a more balanced top six, and has proven to be effective since MikA Zibanejad returned from injury.

The bad news for the Rangers is their power play has not had the efficiency that they did early in the season. They were red hot out of the gates, scoring on over 30% of their chances in the first two weeks of the season, but have declined since. Their season total is just 18.7%, but in December had a success rate of just 15.9% on the strength of just seven power play goals, two of which came against the Hurricanes on the 27th. Outside of that game, they have really struggled to find consistent success on the man advantage.

8. New Jersey Devils: 36 Points (15-19-6)

The Devils have gone on quite a little run in the second half of December. They now have points in their last four games and have a record of 6-2-1 since December 14th. They are still in second to last place in the league but have clearly shown Ray Shero who is willing to be part of the rebuild and who can be shipped out. Being so far down in the standings also means that the Devils will continue to be active in the trade market before the deadline.

With the second most cap space in the league, they can add salary from a contender earlier than the end of February deadline. The earlier they take on salary, the more valuable the trade because the extra month on the Devils' books frees up space from the trading team. This could be a way to get NHL assets in return rather than just getting prospects like they did in the Taylor Hall trade.



Canes' rally comes up short in rematch against Capitals

By Ryan Henkel

The Carolina Hurricanes were unable to find another gear as their weak second period put them in too big of a hole to get out of, falling to the Washington Capitals by a final score of 4-3 Friday night at PNC Arena.

It was set up to be an important game for the Hurricanes as the previous night had seen two of the teams ahead of Carolina in the standings (the New York Islanders and Pittsburgh Penguins) lose.

To make matters worse, four of the five teams directly below the Hurricanes picked up wins the night before making the wild-card gap even smaller.

It's hard to be upset with a loss to the league's best team by only a single goal, but the game was available for Carolina's taking and it let it slip away.

"It seems that every time we play them, that is pretty much how the games go, pretty tight," said head coach Rod Brind'Amour. "Lots of scoring chances there but we just didn't find a way to pull it out."

"Our second period put us in a hole," said captain Jordan Staal. "We didn't play our game in that second and they do a good job of, when you are not on, they make you pay. We

made a push in the third but it's tough to come back in this league, especially to a team like that."

The Canes had a flurry of chances in the first period, outshooting the Capitals 18-7, but they couldn't get the bounces to go against rookie netminder Ilya Samsonov. Carolina's usually solid power play found no success in the opening frame and quickly gave way for Washington to climb back into the game.

"Our power play sucked the life out of us and then their power play got them going," Brind'Amour said.

The Caps grabbed two early goals a bit over five minutes into the second period. The first was an own goal off Brett Pesce as Richard Panik's initial shot was saved by Petr Mrazek, but as Carl Hagelin and Pesce battled for position, the rebound was knocked in by Pesce.

The second goal came on the power play as the Canes suffered a bad breakdown in coverage. With two players cheating towards Alex Ovechkin, John Carlson was able to thread a pass straight down the middle of the ice to Evgeny Kuznetsov for a back-door tap in.

Throughout the entire second period, the Hurricanes looked uninterested and slow, being outworked in every zone by the Capitals.



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"Our first two periods were horrendous," said Ryan Dzingel. "You get six power plays you should get one or two goals. We were horrendous in the first two periods and we got to clean it up."

Some momentum built at the start of the third with Staal cutting the deficit to one just 39 seconds into the period. A point shot from Pesce deflected in off Staal who was providing the big net-front presence. It is a position Staal should find himself in more as his 6-foot-4, 220-pound frame provides an excellent screen.

Right off the ensuing faceoff after the goal, though, Erik Haula took a slashing penalty in the offensive zone and cut all of the momentum the Hurricanes could have built. The Capitals went on to score on that power play as Ovechkin ripped a one-timer that bounced off the endboards and right to Lars Eller perfectly positioned at the far post for an easy goal.

The Hurricanes then reverted back to second period form and a combination of lazy efforts led to the Capitals going up by three. First, Dougie Hamilton made a weak attempt to knock Kuznetsov off the puck at the blue line. Kuznetsov popped free of that, springing a 2-on-1 rush which he fed over to Jakub Vrana who was being trailed by three Hurricanes skaters, none of which had initially picked him up. Vrana was able to knock home the pass and it looked as if the Hurricanes were ready to call it there.

However, as they have proved many times before, the team is a resilient group and doesn't go down without a fight.

"It's a prideful room," Staal said. "We don't like going away. We are going to fight until the horn goes."

The jump came on the Canes' first successful power play, their fifth attempt, as Teuvo Teravainen was able to score on a rebound chance even he couldn't pass off.

Andrei Svechnikov's initial shot was blocked out in front but with about five bodies in front of Samsonov, Sebastian Aho was able to win the puck and send it out to Teravainen at the

far post for a great look. Teravainen wasted no time and cashed in his eighth goal of the year and pushing his team lead in points to 41.

After that goal, Carolina began buzzing.

The offense generated chance after chance and Washington was struggling to handle the surging Canes.

Eventually, emotions boiled over for the Capitals as T.J. Oshie cross checked Warren Foegele after he barely missed the net off a great feed. Even Aho got involved with Oshie and Kuznetsov as the teams again came together.

Carolina came away with the power play from the scrum and it was Dzingel who found the back of the net. Martin Necas faked the one-timer and sent a pass to Dzingel in the slot. Dzingel picked his corner and beat Samsonov to bring the game within one goal.

The building became electric from that point on. With the team rallying, the fans got behind them and one could feel the energy coursing through the building. Despite it, strong play from Samsonov and a bad retaliatory penalty on Hamilton prevented the Canes from finishing the rally as they fell 4-3.

"Even when we lose, they're hard losses, but we're right there," Brind'Amour said. "You could arguably say we could have won that game. We kept coming at the end and had a lot of opportunities. I like this group. They keep coming to work and they don't quit."

The Canes are now 2-1-0 so far during their seven-game homestand and will continue to try and make the most of it as the Tampa Bay Lightning come to town Sunday, Jan. 5 with puck drop at 5 p.m.

"We are close to a wild card spot or in it, I don't know after tonight," Dzingel said. "These next 10 games before bye week you have to put yourself in a good situation."



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TriangleSportsNetwork

Hurricanes late rally falls short in 4-3 loss to Capitals

Carolina comeback from three-goal deficit not to be

By Peter Koutroumpis

RALEIGH, N.C. – It was a game of momentum that the Carolina Hurricanes never quite got a hold of.

Fueled by the energy of another sold out crowd at PNC Arena, the Hurricanes tried to pull off a third period comeback but couldn't finish the job in a 4-3 loss to the league-leading Washington Capitals.

The loss ended a recent two-game win combo at home and gave the Capitals their first win against Carolina this season.

Captain Jordan Staal, Teuvo Teravainen and Ryan Dzingel all tallied goals in the third period that breathed life into a final-period comeback push.

"First period I thought was pretty good," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

"We deserved better out of our first, and then the second was not good. The power play sucked the life out of us, and then their power play got them goin'. Then, third period we came out really good."

Pucks to the net

While outshooting the Caps by a 41-29 margin, Carolina could not beat starting goaltender Ilya Samsonov during the first 40 minutes of play.

Goaltender Petr Mrazek defended throughout the game against numerous Grade-A chances the Caps were offered up.

A lackluster second period didn't help the situation defensively and the Capitals took a 2-0 lead in the first five minutes on goals from Richard Panik and Evgeny Kuznetsov.

"The second period put us in a hole," Staal said.

"We didn't play our game in the second. They do a good job when you're not on and they make you pay."

However, while Mrazek held strong, the Canes' offensive push during the final period provided hope.

"It's a prideful room," Staal continued.

"We don't like goin' away. We're gonna fight until the horn goes. I thought we did a good job of pushin' and fightin' our way back into that game."

Special teams struggle

With Tervainen's eighth goal of the season, and Dzingel's eighth coming on the power play, it appeared all was well with the man-advantage.

Both goals came during a frenzied third period that had Washington leading 4-1 before Carolina cut it down to one goal with 7:25 remaining.

However, four previous power play opportunities – two apiece in the first and second periods – didn't produce any results and was a contributing factor to the Hurricanes' inability to pull even sooner.

As Dzingel pointed out that although they scored with the man-advantage late, there was work to do.

"It's a game of momentum," he said.

"There are a lot of swings in the NHL and you kinda have to ride those. We can't get ourselves in that spot, what can I say. We were horrendous (on the power play) in the first two periods and we've gotta clean that up."

Notables: Carolina finished 2-6 on the power play, 32-132 (24.2%) overall...On the PK, the Hurricanes went 2-4, 122-150 (81.3%) overall...Staal has posted nine points in his last 13 games after tallying seven points in his first 28 games this season...Carolina sits at 24-15-2 for 50 points. The Hurricanes have recorded their second-most wins and points through 41 games in franchise history, trailing only the 2005-06 season when they posted a 27-10-4 record for 58 points through the halfway point of the season.



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Jake Bean selected to 2020 AHL All-Star Classic

by Nicholas Niedzielski

Jake Bean's strong start has earned him a ticket to California, as the blueliner was selected to the 2020 AHL All-Star Classic.

Bean's 21 points through the first 30 games of the season are tied for the team lead and tied for eighth among all AHL defensemen. The second-year pro's shot has been lethal from Charlotte's blue line, tying him for eighth among league defensemen with five goals and for fourth with three power-

play goals. Bean also leads the Checkers and is tied for 10th among league defensemen with 16 assists.

The 21-year-old is the sixth defensemen in franchise history to earn an All-Star nod and just the second in the last four years.

The 2020 AHL All-Star Classic will take place later this month in Ontario, CA, with the Skills Competition on Jan. 26 and the All-Star Challenge the next night. Bean will represent the Checkers as a part of the Atlantic Division squad, helmed by Hartford's head coach Kris Knoblauch.

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SportScan

Articles from outlets covering the Hurricanes' upcoming opponents and league-wide news

1169222 Carolina Hurricanes

Canes make push in third period, but Samsonov, Capitals hold on for 4-3 victory

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

JANUARY 03, 2020 10:12 PM

For a long time Friday, it appeared the Washington Capitals might take a routine win over the Carolina Hurricanes.

After third-period goals by Lars Eller and Jakub Vrana, the Caps led 4-1. PNC Arena was mostly silent, except for the smattering of Caps fans in the building. Rookie goalie Ilya Samsonov was in control in net for Washington.

But if we have learned anything in the past year, it's that Canes-Caps games can be unpredictable, usually contentious and always physical. So it was again Friday as the Caps won 4-3, but only after the Canes used power-play goals by Teuvo Teravainen and Ryan Dzingel to spur a third-period surge and bring PNC arena alive.

"I thought the guys did a good job of pushing and fighting our way back into that game and making it interesting," said Canes center Jordan Staal, who scored the Canes' first goal in the opening minute of the third.

The third period was punishing, with bodies banging bodies. At one point, the Caps' T.J. Oshie cross-checked the Canes' Warren Foegele, knocking him to the ice, then hit Foegele again as the Foegele tried to regain his balance.

Bad blood? Yes, there's bad blood. It was Foegele's collision with Oshie in the Stanley Cup playoffs last spring that ended Oshie's season.

Late in the game, Canes defenseman Dougie Hamilton, believing Oshie had gotten his stick up high on a check, turned and hit Oshie in the back of the head. The roughing penalty against Hamilton, with 2:44 left in regulation, stymied the Canes' momentum.

"That's what you'd expect," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "It seems like every time we play them that's pretty much how the games go. Pretty tight, lots of scoring chances there, but we just didn't find a way to pull it out."

The Caps (28-9-5) ended a two-game losing streak, both regulation losses, and a four-game overall losing streak to the Canes, including the playoffs. The Canes, in turn, lost their first game of 2020 but ended the first half of their season 24-15-2, holding a wild-card playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

The Canes outscored and generally outthrustled the Caps in their Dec. 28 game at PNC Arena, never trailing in a 6-4 win. Foegele, a who aggressively pestered the Caps in the Canes' seven-game playoff series win, did it again with a goal and two assists in being named the game's first star.

But the Caps countered Friday with Samsonov, who now has won the first eight road games of his career as -- for now -- the backup to veteran goalie Braden Holtby. Samsonov stopped all 18 Carolina shots in the first period, then denied Hamilton on a shorthanded breakaway in the second and was given a 2-0 lead as Richard Panik and Evgeny Kuznetsov scored in the period, Kuznetsov on the power play.

"The first period was pretty good," Brind'Amour said. "We deserved better out of the first. Then, the second was not good. I thought our power play sucked the life out of us and their power play got them going. That second period was where we lost it."

The Canes finally got the puck past Samsonov, who had 38 saves, in the third on a tip by Staal. But 14 seconds later, Canes center Erik Haula was called for slashing and Eller's power-play goal made it a 3-1 game. When Vrana scored at 4:51, it was 4-1.

The Canes, generally listless on their first four power plays, converted on their last two as Teravainen scored his first goal in 17 games and then Dzingel ripped a shot from the slot. The sellout crowd of 18,680 was loud.

"That's how the game is, it's a game of momentum," Dzingel said. "There are a lot of swings in the NHL and you kind of have to ride those. But we can't get ourselves in that hole. That's the bottom line."

The Canes had 15 shots in the third and crowded the crease, but Samsonov made enough stops to improve to 11-2-1 this season.

"Gave up some goals but he was, no doubt, the first star tonight," Caps coach Todd Reirden said.

The Caps, 17-5-1 on the road this season, face the Canes again on Jan. 13 in Washington. It should make for more of the same.

"When you see a team in the playoffs there's always a little added rivalry," Staal said.

News Observer LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169223 Carolina Hurricanes

Finally, Hurricanes and Capitals have a rivalry to savor

BY LUKE DECOCK



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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JANUARY 03, 2020 11:11 PM

It's hard at the exact midpoint of the season to see the possibility of the playoffs somewhere down the line, so take full enjoyment from games like this, the manifestation of a rivalry that took forever to get its feet on the ground.

After years of Southeast Division Showdowns that were more sound than fury, the Carolina Hurricanes and Washington Capitals have a full-blown rivalry now, always the best stuff in hockey, and it produced a furious third period Friday that was as entertaining a spectacle on this ice in January in a long, long time. Even in a 4-3 Hurricanes loss.

There wasn't a ton of calm before the storm -- the Hurricanes peppered Ilya Samsonov with 18 fruitless shots in the first period, punctuated by Nic Dowd throwing Andrei Svechnikov's stick into the crowd at the intermission -- but when Jordan Staal scored in the first minute of the third to make it a one-goal game, everything really broke loose.

The Capitals scored two goals in less than three minutes, followed by a pair of Hurricanes goals thanks in part to T.J. Oshie's indiscretions with Warren Foegele, and the entire third was back-and-forth enough to cause whiplash, with the Hurricanes unable to close the gap but offering every indication they could -- and the Capitals threatening to extend their lead at the same time.

Foegele continues to be the uncomfortable centerpiece of this newborn rivalry, thanks to his goal-scoring exploits in the playoffs and the hit on Oshie that had the unfortunate consequence of a broken collarbone for the Capitals forward. The spotlight, especially a villainous one, doesn't suit his personality, but it's a role cast upon him, for better or worse. (And not merely by the Capitals: The Hurricanes took the opportunity of the first television timeout to display a montage of Foegele goals against Washington, expert trolling.)

That dynamic nearly played a role in the outcome of the game, with Oshie cross-checking Foegele in front of the net in the third, then taking another run at him while Foegele was on one knee. The Hurricanes scored on the ensuing power play, their final goal of the game as it turned out.

There were a few other incidents and flashpoints, with the Hurricanes' chances to get a point out of this dying when Dougie Hamilton retaliated for an Oshie hit into the end boards with a swipe at the back of Oshie's helmet, and on the whole it was far from the ordinary at this time of year, much to the delight of a third straight sellout crowd.

The Hurricanes and Capitals were always supposed to be rivals, thanks to convenient geography, but it wasn't until the seven games last spring that any life was really sparked. Alex Ovechkin's knockout of Svechnikov was the kind of moment that creates feelings that tend to linger, and the resentment over Brock McGinn's double-overtime winner to send the defending Stanley Cup champions home clearly lingers. As it should. Such are the legacies of playoff series won and lost. More often lost.

"When you see a team in the playoffs, usually the next year there's always a little added rivalry I think," Staal said. "Obviously a good team and a good test when they come into the building, and our fans know it."

Throw in the Hurricanes' two wins over the Capitals since and the two-game losing streak upon which the Capitals entered this game (one of those here to the Hurricanes), and there was a ripeness to

Friday that even the first two games lacked, but a welcome one. Such frisson is uncommon in the long slog of the hockey season. There used to be more of it, before expansion, when the NHL was a smaller league and teams more often bumped shoulders with each other.

The Hurricanes have it with the Capitals now, a real and honest rivalry, full of bad blood and scores to settle. The good stuff. There should be more to come.

News Observer LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169224 Carolina Hurricanes

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1169225 Carolina Hurricanes

Civian: If you don't vote Teuvo Teravainen into the All-Star Game you're a coward who hates good passing

By Sara Civian Jan 3, 2020

Teuvo Teravainen stood in the Canadian Tire Centre visitors dressing room after a win over the Senators during a snowstorm last season. It's no rarity that his multi-point effort lifted the Hurricanes to a win, but those points are usually found in the assist column.

That night, a week or so after he signed his steal of a five-year extension, he scored two goals.

"If I saw a good play I might still try to pass it," he said, smirking.

He's got a great shot, actually, and swears he's been trying to use it more. Even former Hurricanes captain Justin Williams once waved him along for a goal in-game, because Williams knew he'd try to pass it to him on their two-on-one. Teravainen made it.

He is who he is, and he knows exactly who that is. He sees the play five times faster than most of his peers, so on most occasions, he passes the puck where he knows it should end up.

"He's so good," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said, pausing for a second after Teravainen's 400th NHL game Tuesday. "He's so good for us. All those little things he does that no one really notices — well you guys do, now, cuz you've been seeing him now for a long time. He doesn't get credit for it. The little defensive plays, the little stick plays. He's just — I can't say enough about him. If he's not one of our most valuable players, I don't know who is."

The nature of his play creeps up on you. Sneaky assist after sneaky assist until you realize he actually leads the Hurricanes in points with 7-33—40 in 40 games played.

Not Sebastian Aho, not Andrei Svechnikov, not extremely worthy All-Star Dougie Hamilton.

It's Teravainen.

That's why, after giving full kudos to Hamilton on his well-deserved All-Star nomination, Brind'Amour mentioned Teravainen could "easily" be in there based on how he seems to keep the team at an even-killter every single night.

But the Metropolitan Division is dark and full of big-named terrors, so the Canes are only sending Hamilton for sure.

Teravainen did make it onto the "Last Men In" ballot, so fans have a chance to vote him in.

If they're being honest with themselves, they should.

Overview of the Metro "Last Men In" ballot:

Teravainen: (7-33—40, plus-14)

Capitals: T.J. Oshie (15-13—28, minus-3)

Islanders: Brock Nelson (14-16—30, plus-4)

Penguins: Kris Letang (10-16—26, plus-7)

Flyers: Claude Giroux (12-16—28, plus-8)

Blue Jackets: Nick Foglino (4-11—15, minus-6)

Rangers: Mika Zibanejad (16-15—31, plus-3)

Devils: Nico Hischier (8-15—23, minus-6)

Teravainen leads the ballot in assists, plus/minus rating and overall points, but more than that he's making passing fun again. That's what All-Star weekend is all about, right? It seems like the best Teravainen highlights come from searching Sebastian Aho highlights — the Finns have connected 17 times this season for a goal.

Aho screamed "Wow!" after this one.

"That was sick. That was unreal," Aho said postgame. "Even I had a hard time putting that in even though it was an empty-netter because I was as surprised as everyone."

What an endorsement from last year's All-Star.

"We get to see him, so we're spoiled, but he makes those plays regularly," Brind'Amour said. "He sees the ice so well."

Hence the passing.



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He makes these plays so regularly that they almost seem ordinary — but they aren't.

The Canes have a 59.94 Corsi for percentage at five-on-five when Teravainen is on the ice. This leads all NHL players with at least 200 minutes logged this season (NaturalStatTrick.com). That's roughly 14 games, so the impressiveness of this stat is enhanced when you realize Teravainen has maintained that level of puck possession through 40 games.

His 24 primary assists are tied with Brad Marchand for No. 4 in the NHL, behind only Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid (aka the 2019-20 Edmonton Oilers) and Florida's Jonathan Huberdeau.

He plays on the penalty kill like it's the power play. He moves the puck on the power play like he's removing all the suck out of last year's man advantage, like snake-bite poison. He loves to pass so much that he literally one-times passes from the circle on the power play.

He's got 16 power play points and three shorthanded points, meaning he's a boss at even strength, meaning he ain't a cheater.

He gives the best interviews of all time.

BRIND'AMOUR HAS TOLD ME HOW PROUD HE IS OF TERAVAINEN'S IMPROVED COMPETE LEVEL SO I ASKED TERAVAINEN WHY IT IMPROVED:

"I KNEW IF IT WASN'T GOOD I WOULD HAVE TO HAVE A LITTLE MEETING WITH HIM. WE DIDN'T REALLY HAVE THAT MEETING...HE SAID SOMETHING NICE ABOUT ME?THAT'S GOOD!"

— SARA CIV (@SARACIVIAN) MAY 20, 2019

TEUVO TERAVAINEN WITH ANOTHER BANGER: "SOMETIMES YOU LOSE, SOMETIMES YOU WIN"

— SARA CIV (@SARACIVIAN) DECEMBER 22, 2019

ME: HAVE YOU EVER HAD SO MUCH CHEMISTRY WITH A TEAMMATE BEFORE

TERAVAINEN: "I DON'T KNOW. MAYBE"

GOD BLESS HIM

— SARA CIV (@SARACIVIAN) DECEMBER 8, 2019

WAIT I'M LISTENING TO MY FAILED PRE-GAME ROUTINE INTERVIEWS AND TEUVO TERAVAINEN'S ANSWER IS ACTUALLY GOLD.

"PLAY SOCCER. NORMAL. HAVE A NAP."

— SARA CIV (@SARACIVIAN) OCTOBER 10, 2019

If you don't vote Teuvo Teravainen into the All-Star Game you're a coward who hates good passing.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169328 Tampa Bay Lightning

How Mikhail Sergachev became 'most improved' Lightning player

By Diana C. Nearhos

Published Yesterday

Updated Earlier today

OTTAWA — The fight was the highlight. The fight and the GIF of Mikhail Sergachev taunting Sabres fans went miniviral.

But neither was the reason the Lightning defenseman should bookmark Tuesday's win against Buffalo. The fight against defenseman Jake McCabe was an exception for Sergachev. As coach Jon Cooper said, Sergachev won't make his career off that moment.

His hit on Sabres captain Jack Eichel that preceded the fight, however, along with his blocked shots and assist are the reasons for Sergachev to save that game. Those are the pieces that make up an all-around, two-way defenseman.

Asked about the Sabres game, Lightning defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk immediately expanded the time frame. He has seen that kind of play from Sergachev for the past few weeks, if not longer. General manager Julien BriseBois called Sergachev the Lightning's most improved player over the past month.

"I'm more physical," Sergachev, 21 and in his third full NHL season, said in summing up the change in his game. "I try to hit people, separate them from the puck. Last year and the year before, I was checking with my stick. I wasn't physical enough."

Sergachev has been showing off his puck skills and his skating for the past couple of years. Small plays such as catching up to and cutting off the Canadiens' Nick Suzuki to retrieve the puck in the defensive zone in Thursday's game aren't new.

Now he's adding more physicality to those plays. On his goal against the Wild on Dec. 5, Sergachev skated end to end, using his free arm to protect the puck on his stick as he moved through and around four Wild players.

Sergachev has also improved his hitting and positioning, raising his defensive game and turning into a two-way defenseman.

This doesn't mean Sergachev's highlight reel is about to overflow with massive hits. Tuesday's hit on Eichel wasn't an incredible one. Sergachev used his 6-foot-3, 215-pound frame to lay out Eichel in open ice. It was the kind of hit that could be routine for a strong defenseman but hadn't been for Sergachev.

His brand of physicality might be knocking the Capitals' Evgeny Kuznetsov off the puck in open ice Dec. 14, a play not officially classified as a hit. It might be boxing out in front of the net, clearing out the low slot.

"I remember seeing him in Windsor (in juniors) a lot in his draft year (2015-16), and he was such a physical force," BriseBois said. "We're seeing that here. We knew he had that in him, and it's nice now to see that flourish."

Cooper has been hesitant to publicly critique Sergachev with specifics, positive or negative. He may not want to add pressure to a young defenseman who already has the pressure of being a ninth overall draft pick.

In the past, the coach has highlighted Sergachev's age and stressed the time it typically takes defensemen to develop in the NHL.

Defensemen often enter the league at an older age than forwards; they come through the AHL (as the Lightning's Erik Cernak and Braydon Coburn did) or college (as McDonagh and Shattenkirk did). Victor Hedman started in the NHL at 19 and didn't look like a second overall pick for the first couple of years.



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"It's taken (Sergachev) some time. It's a tough position to play in this league, especially at such a young age," Cooper said. "His defending down low has improved so much. Now you're seeing him out on the penalty kill, and ... he's earned his ice (time). He's really, really grown in this league and just become a rock back there for us."

Sergachev wanted to earn that penalty kill time. He had been on the power play consistently, but a two-way defenseman plays on the penalty kill, too.

He wanted to shed the "offensive defenseman" moniker. Contributing offensively is an important part of Sergachev's game, but too often that distinction carries the implication of defensive liability. He knows it limits his situational play.

Shattenkirk, another who carries the "offensive defenseman" label, called it a stigma, a term that becomes a highlighter on any defensive mistake.

"(Sergachev has) evolved to a great two-way defenseman," Hedman said. "He's an unbelievable talent offensively, we all know that, but the shot blocks, the hits, the way he plays responsibly in his own end is fun to watch. The sky's the limit for this guy."

Hedman called Sergachev a machine in the game against Buffalo. He had the hit, which turned into his first NHL fight (after which he motioned to the crowd, arms spread wide, a gesture that became a popular GIF image), but Sergachev also made a couple of good offensive plays and blocked two shots at the end.

He made a nice move at the blue line to set up Cedric Paquette, though the shot sailed wide, in the first period. Then he made a simple pass to Tyler Johnson that turned into a goal for Ondrej Palat. In the final minutes of the game, Sergachev blocked two shots, one with an outstretched hand that took him out of the game.

Shattenkirk said that game could be one Sergachev can go back to when things aren't going as well.

"Know you're fully capable of playing like that in this league," Shattenkirk said. "That was always something for me as a young player in this league, there's a lot of ups and downs because you're hard on yourself. You have to remember there are some good things to reference and keep those positive plays."

Sergachev is coming into the role he was projected for when Montreal drafted him in 2016 and when the Lightning traded for him the next summer. That's not to say he is fully developed, but he's progressing on that path.

"(He is a) top four (defenseman) all day long," BriseBois said.

Tampa Bay Times LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169302 Philadelphia Flyers

Flyers and their penalty killers trying to regain mojo in Arizona as 6-game trip continues

by Sam Carchidi,

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. – What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. ... especially a first period in which you allow four goals.

That's the Flyers' mantra as they prepare to face Arizona on Saturday, two nights after they were beaten in Vegas, 5-4. They surrendered four first-period goals for the second straight game.

The Flyers need to shake off their first-period defensive meltdowns, get their penalty kill working again, and regain the momentum they had when they started this six-game road trip.

The Flyers had a four-game winning streak when the trip began; they are 1-3 on the journey, which resumes in Arizona and finishes Tuesday in Carolina, and are just two points ahead of Florida for the last wild-card spot .

"We're not very happy with the last couple," said defenseman Matt Niskanen after Friday's practice. He was referring to the 5-3 loss in Los Angeles, which built a 4-0 first-period lead, followed by the defeat in Vegas. The other loss on the trip was to San Jose, 6-1.

"Missed opportunities, but I think guys recognize that," Niskanen said. "I think we'll have a real desperate effort (Saturday) to kind of right the ship. It's an important couple games for us before we head home. It's about response, and we're going to have it."

In their last two games, the Flyers' penalty kill has allowed four power-play goals on all four of their opponents' chances.

"I think we just have to go back to the basics, being in the attacking lanes, being in the passing lanes, jumping on loose pucks, getting the clears," said center Sean Couturier, who had two goals and an assist in the loss to Vegas, one in which the Flyers squandered a late six-on-three power play. "Once we get back to doing that, we'll be successful again."

Over the last handful of games, the Flyers have fallen from No. 3 to No. 14 in the NHL on the penalty kill.

"It's (been) a tough stretch, but it happens during the year," Couturier said. "We can be a confident group; we know we can be good."

Coach Alain Vigneault said the Flyers have not done a good job with their "trigger points" while on the PK in recent games. "One of the things that has made us really efficient is that when one guy goes (after an offensive player), all four guys go," he said. "We sort of end up with four one-on-one situations, and then one of our guys wins and the puck is down the other end. Lately, we haven't been able to find those trigger points."

Vigneault also said the Flyers (22-14-5) need more production from the bottom-six forwards. The Golden Knights got goals from two bottom-six players in their win on Thursday.

"They found a way to contribute and make a difference in the game," Vigneault said. "We need that from our group, also."

For that reason, fourth-line right winger Nic Aube-Kubel is expected to go back in the lineup Saturday in Arizona (23-16-4). Bruising Chris Stewart, who played sparingly Thursday and had six hits against the physical Knights, figures to be a healthy scratch.

Vigneault said he was leaning that way but wanted to "sleep on it."

Breakaways

The Kings' Kurtis MacDermid was suspended for two games for an illegal hit to Ivan Provorov's head Tuesday, the NHL announced Friday. He was not penalized on the play. ... Vigneault is showing confidence in Carter Hart by playing the goalie Saturday. Hart has lost six straight road decisions. ... The Phantoms' Morgan Frost was named an AHL All-Star. ... The Coyotes, coached by former Flyer Rick Tocchet, have ordered "Oskar Strong" T-shirts to support Flyers



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left winger Oskar Lindblom as he battles a rare bone cancer. They are expected to wear them under their jerseys Saturday.

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169303 Philadelphia Flyers

Flyers at midseason: Lots of improvement, but not yet a Stanley Cup contender | Sam Carchidi

by Sam Carchidi,

GLENDAL, Ariz. — The Flyers reached the halfway point of the season with a 5-4 loss Thursday in Vegas. They are 13 points better than at a corresponding point last season, but they still need a few more pieces to be considered Stanley Cup contenders.

Here are their midterm grades for the first 41 games.

Team: B.

Despite a slew of injuries and Oskar Lindblom's cancer diagnosis, the Flyers enter the weekend in a wild-card spot (barely) with a 22-14-5 record for 49 points and a .598 points percentage, placing them 11th in the 31-team NHL.

At the Wells Fargo Center, they get an A-plus because of their 13-2-4 record and league-best .789 points percentage. But they are dragged down by their road struggles (.432 points percentage, 24th in NHL).

The Flyers' power play (13th in NHL) and penalty kill have struggled recently. In about a week, the PK has fallen from No. 3 to 14.

ON THE FLY NEWSLETTER

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They have made strides on defense from last year (3.41 goals-against per game, 29th in NHL) and are ninth in the league, allowing 2.88 goals per game despite surrendering four goals in each of their last two first periods entering Saturday. Offensively, they have averaged 3.1 goals, a slight improvement from last season and 14th in the league.

Forwards

Travis Konecny: A.

He has been the Flyers' most consistent player and their top forward. His defense has improved, too. He is on pace for 24 goals and 72 points, which would shatter his career high of 49 points.

Oskar Lindblom: A.

Before the diagnosis of a rare form of bone cancer, Lindblom was leading the Flyers with 11 goals and having a breakout season. At the time, he was on pace for 30 goals and was the team's second-best defensive forward.

Sean Couturier: B-plus.

He's on pace for 24 goals and 66 points, a slight dip from his last two seasons. He has excelled in the faceoff circle (fourth in NHL at 59.1%) and has been the Flyers' best two-way player.

Flyers center Sean Couturier is having another outstanding season.

Flyers center Sean Couturier is having another outstanding season.

Kevin Hayes: B.

He is on pace for 24 goals, which would be one shy of his career high, and has helped improve the Flyers' usually weak penalty kill. That said, he needs more consistency in his game.

Claude Giroux: B.

His production (30 points, on pace for 60) has dropped from the last two years (102 points in 2017-18, 85 points last season) but he has still been a solid performer. He paces the Flyers with 13 goals and leads the league in faceoff percentage (61.3%).

Jake Voracek: B.

Voracek has arguably been the Flyers' best forward during the last two weeks, but he went through an up-and-down stretch earlier in the season. His playmaking has been off-the-charts recently, and his defense, rocky in the past, has improved. He is on pace for 16 goals and 66 points.

Scott Laughton: B-minus.

Two injuries have sidelined him for a total of 20 games, but Laughton, who has played with an edge, still might set career highs in goals and points. He has five goals and 10 points in 21 games.

Scott Laughton (right) has missed about half the Flyers' games this season.

Scott Laughton (right) has missed about half the Flyers' games this season.

James van Riemsdyk: C-plus.

He's on pace for 24 goals, but he has been extremely inconsistent. The Flyers especially need him to be more productive on the power play, where he has just two goals.

Tyler Pittlick: C.

Though far from flashy, he has given the Flyers productive minutes in the bottom six and filled in when needed on the penalty kill.

Joel Farabee: C-minus.

The 19-year-old rookie (three goals in 32 games) has shown glimpses of his offensive talent and has displayed some surprising grit. He has been in a massive slump since early November, scoring just one goal in his last 24 games.

Michael Raffl: C-minus.

The versatile Raffl has been strong on the penalty kill and has played primarily on the third and fourth lines. He is goalless in his last 22 games.

Michael Raffl has been in a goal-scoring drought.

Michael Raffl has been in a goal-scoring drought.

Misha Vorobyev: C-minus.

He hasn't scored much (one goal in 18 games) and has been so-so as a fourth-line center, but his game is still developing. If Nolan Patrick (migraine disorder) gets healthy and returns, Vorobyev will



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probably be sent to the Phantoms and the Flyers will be much stronger with Laughton as their fourth-line center.

Nic Aube-Kubel: Incomplete.

He has played just eight games but has given a strong account. Aube-Kubel has played with an edge and has contributed three points.

Chris Stewart: Incomplete.

A good locker-room presence, Stewart has supplied some toughness on the ice but is minus-7 in just 15 games.

Andy Andreoff: Incomplete.

He has played in just 12 games and hasn't been able to get into a flow because he's been in and out of the lineup.

Defense

Ivan Provorov: A.

Without the weight of a new contract hanging over him, Provorov has returned to his form from two years ago and is on pace for 18 goals, 48 points, and a plus-10 rating. Provorov has scored a team-high six of his nine goals on the power play.

Matt Niskanen: B-plus.

Niskanen, acquired for Radko Gudas, has stabilized the defense and the penalty kill, and he has helped elevate the game of Provorov, his defensive partner.

Matt Niskanen has improved the Flyers' defense and penalty kill.

Matt Niskanen has improved the Flyers' defense and penalty kill.

Phil Myers: B-plus.

His game is still evolving, but Myers has had a strong rookie season despite playing just 23 games. He leads the Flyers with a plus-17 rating and has chipped in with 11 points.

Robert Hagg: C-plus.

He is what he is: a dependable, stay-at-home defender who blocks a lot of shots and provides some much-needed physicality. Considering he has been yanked in and out of the lineup, he's done a good job of staying sharp.

Travis Sanheim: C.

The player they call "Sanny" has been up and down and is on pace for eight goals, 24 points, and a plus-4 rating. He got better in the second half last season, and the Flyers hope he repeats that.

Shayne Gostisbehere: C-minus.

He went through a poor stretch but has elevated his play after a three-game benching. He is on pace for 10 goals and 22 points, a far cry from his personal bests (17 goals, 65 points).

Justin Braun: C-minus.

After an awful start to the season, he's been better the last month or so but still has a team-worst minus-11 rating.

Goalies:

Carter Hart: B.

Hart, 21, gets an A-plus for his home play (11-1-2, 1.49 GAA, .947 save percentage), but he has struggled mightily on the road (2-8-1, 3.84, .855). He needs to be much better on the road if the Flyers are

going to be a factor in the playoffs — if they get there. Overall, he is 13-9-3 with a 2.52 GAA and .908 save percentage.

Flyers goaltender Carter Hart, stopping New York Rangers left winger Artemi Panarin on Dec. 23, has had a bizarre half-season.

Flyers goaltender Carter Hart, stopping New York Rangers left winger Artemi Panarin on Dec. 23, has had a bizarre half-season.

Brian Elliott: C-plus.

Elliott (3.06 GAA, .901 save percentage) has been mostly dependable, and his numbers look inflated because of a few poor games.

Coaching

Alain Vigneault: B-plus.

Compared with recent seasons, the new Flyers coach has generally gotten the team to start much better and to play a full 60 minutes (or beyond) in most games, though not so much on the current road trip. He has also held players accountable and has not been afraid to bench or demote players, regardless of their salaries.

On the flip side, he could have used his timeouts better to stem opponents' momentum, and some of his Myers benchings have been puzzling.

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169304 Philadelphia Flyers

At midseason, Flyers aim to be better than mediocre

By Rob Parent

Flyers winger Travis Konecny, front, here being checked nicely from behind by Vegas Golden Knights defenseman Nick Holden Thursday, has drawn ire from opponents and raves from his teammates this season.

Amid the splendor of their annual holiday trip to the west, the Flyers have again turned on a dime at their season halfway point, taking them right back to where they've been so often ... wondering where this bumpy but not altogether unsuccessful ride might be leading to.

A 5-4 setback in Las Vegas Thursday night left them with a second straight loss and third loss on the four-game road trip that continues Saturday at the Arizona Coyotes.

That Vegas bust also put them at 22-14-5 over the 41-game first half, one of the more comfortable halfway positions the Flyers have been in for some time. That doesn't mean the second 41-game stretch won't be all the more difficult, of course.

As they move forward, the Flyers need to find something which for them is usually in short supply: consistency.

They have skipped through the fall winning and losing in little streaks. Three straight wins here, four consecutive losses there, turn and find a four-game win streak, then go on the road and lose four more.

It's been like that all season, a series of highs and lows spread out over three or four-game intervals. They will try to remedy that tendency, or at least the losing part of it, over the next few months.



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Perhaps a review of who was up and who was down over the past three months might prove beneficial to that effort...

Centers

Credit free agent bonus boy Kevin Hayes for a first half in which he managed to live up to his \$7-plus million salary. His 12 goals and 23 points, along with a minus-6 rating may not seem stellar, but Hayes always seems to be around the puck, and rarely does he do something wrong with it.

Similarly, Sean Couturier is enjoying another solid season, also with 12 goals but with 21 assists for 33 points, tied with Jake Voracek for second-most points on the team. Of course, Couturier supplements that with being one of the league's top defensive forwards, and one of the league's better face-off men, too, at 59 percent.

Beyond those two, however, the Flyers' center spot has been uneven, and that's because of the long-term loss of Nolan Patrick. He has yet to play this season due to migraine issues, and though he's been skating there isn't much of a guess as to when he might give playing a try again.

Trying to fill in there on occasion has been the likes of Scott Laughton and Morgan Frost, but injuries limited Laughton to 21 games thus far, and Frost, limited in experience, has only played his way back to the AHL.

Aside from them, the checking line center spot has been a rotating cast, most recently filled by Phantoms grad Misha Vorobyev. Best of luck to him.

Overall position grade: C-plus.

Wingers

If you could name one Flyer who was the most likely player to have a bad first half, Travis Konecny might have been a good guess.

That's primarily because he missed half of training camp as an unsigned restricted free agent. After finally agreeing to a six-year, \$33 million deal, however, Konecny immediately responded with due diligence at practice to get himself ready for the start of the season.

Konecny enters the second half as thus far the Flyers' lone NHL All-Star Game selectee, and also as the club's leading scorer with 36 points (12 goals, 24 assists).

While his rapid development has been a huge plus, the shocking diagnosis of another rapidly blooming winger stopped the Flyers in their tracks. Oskar Lindblom was tied with Konecny for most goals on the team at the time he was diagnosed with the rare bone cancer, Ewing's sarcoma. He'll miss at least the rest of this season, likely needing surgery and chemotherapy. But his story has inspired a heartwarming effort around the league under the banner of #oskarstrong, with "Oskar Strong" t-shirt sales raising in excess of \$110,000 for the Hockey Fights Cancer initiative by Christmas.

On the ice, Lindblom's loss leaves the Flyers less strong, but in benefiting from Couturier's huge presence in the middle, Voracek is having one of his best all-around seasons, contributing 33 points through 41 games and clocking in with a plus-9 rating.

Also on the plus side there is Claude Giroux, who like Voracek seems to be getting more responsible with age. Working off the left wing again, the Flyers' captain remains a solid scorer (13 goals, 17 assists with four game-winning goals), and his plus-10 rating and 60-percent faceoff wins speaks to his commitment to a 200-foot game.

Fellow left wing James van Riemsdyk remains streaky, but he rebounded from an awful start to light up the scoreboard multiple

times in December. JVR is currently tied with Hayes at 12 goals and 23 points.

Rookie winger Joel Farabee has helped, too, with 12 points in 32 games, but like Frost he will need to get involved more offensively to carve more than a temporary niche.

Overall position grade: B

Defense

Another player who took the long road toward a contract as a restricted free agent, Ivan Provorov is making people forget about his so-so performance last season.

Provorov has taken offensive strides to round out his game. Three of his nine goals have been game-winners, and his 24 points off the blue line has helped make up for some stumbles this season by Shayne Gostisbehere.

The Ghost (five goals, 11 points) even lost his top power play quarterback spot to Provorov earlier in the season, though the two essentially share that role now.

From a newcomer standpoint, Provorov has been greatly helped by summer acquisition Matt Niskanen, whose years in both Washington and Pittsburgh left an impression with the Flyers. He continues to be a steady presence with an offensive touch (five goals, 17 points). After a bit of a shaky start the other veteran addition, Justin Braun, is starting to respond, too.

Young defender Travis Sanheim continues to progress, mostly shown by an average on-ice time that has grown to close to 20 minutes. And head coach Alain Vigneault is getting alternating production out of promotee Phil Myers and holdover Robert Hagg as the coach has stuck with a seven-man rotation.

Overall position grade: B-minus.

Goaltending

Carter Hart has been mostly solid through 28 appearances, flashing a 13-9 record with a 2.51 goals-against average and .908 saves percentage. Those numbers should improve as his first full season wears on.

Brian Elliott has done essentially everything the Flyers have asked him to do as the backup, and while his above-3 GAA could be better, his 9-5 record attests to his ability to battle when the game is on the line.

Overall position grade: B-plus

The Flyers still have a long way to go over their final 41. Their 127 goals ranks ninth and 20-percent power play success ratio 10th in the Eastern Conference, troubling numbers indeed.

They're better at the penalty kill, and as long as Hart continues to play to his potential, they should be able to limit teams enough to keep getting their fair share of victories.

Whether it will be enough to make the playoffs remains to be seen.

Delaware County Times LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169305 Philadelphia Flyers

Wayne Simmonds, Devils show support for Flyers' Oskar Lindblom as 'Oskar Strong' shirts expand



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 4, 2020

By Jordan Hall January 03, 2020 7:15 PM

Standing in the Lincoln Financial Field locker room, with eye black still on his face, Oskar Lindblom smiled when asked about Wayne Simmonds.

The Flyers had just finished a 4-3 OT win over the Penguins in an unforgettable Stadium Series game. Simmonds and his teammates shared an emotional moment in the locker room.

Lindblom soaked in the scene.

"That was cool," Lindblom said on Feb. 23 last season. "All those guys, they're the core of the group. To see them talk and just be around them, that's good for all of us. We can learn so much from them and they're good leaders. It was great."

The night turned out to be Simmonds' final game in orange and black as the beloved power forward was traded two days later. Lindblom and Simmonds are no longer teammates, but they're still brothers.

On Friday, Simmonds and his new team the Devils showed their support for Lindblom, the Flyers' 23-year-old forward from Sweden who was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma last month.

The support through "Oskar Strong" shirts continues to expand. The shirts can be purchased at BiscuitTees.com, with all proceeds benefiting the NHL's "Hockey Fights Cancer" initiative.

Kim Parent, co-owner/artist for BiscuitTees.com and the daughter of Flyers great Bernie Parent, told NBCSportsPhiladelphia.com Friday that the company has raised nearly \$200,000.

The Rangers sported the shirts for their game against the Flyers on Dec. 23. Per Parent, the Wild and Coyotes have also purchased them. The Flyers play Arizona on Saturday (8 p.m. ET/NBCSP) and the Coyotes are expected to wear the shirts.

BiscuitTees.com has also shipped shirts to Alex Lyon for the goalie and his AHL affiliate Lehigh Valley teammates to wear.

Incredibly, the shirts have reached Sweden, Switzerland, Australia, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Latvia, Afghanistan and the United Kingdom, per Parent.

"Strong," Flyers head coach Alain Vigneault said of Lindblom. "He's like the hockey community, he's going to have a lot of support and he's going to get through this."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169306 Philadelphia Flyers

NHL Department of Player Safety suspends Kings' Kurtis MacDermid 2 games for hit on Ivan Provorov

By Jordan Hall January 03, 2020 5:35 PM

While the Flyers were frustrated there was no penalty for Kurtis MacDermid's hit on Ivan Provorov Tuesday, they at least saw the league punish the Kings' defenseman Friday.

The NHL Department of Player Safety suspended MacDermid two games for an illegal check to the head, which he delivered on Provorov during the second period of the Flyers' 5-3 loss at STAPLES Center.

MacDermid fell into the Flyers' bench as a result of the check (see video). Shayne Gostisbehere and Robert Hagg kindly helped him back to the ice.

Understandably, the Flyers were not happy with the hit. Somehow, there was no whistle on the play and fortunately for the Flyers, Provorov was not seriously injured. The 22-year-old defenseman leads the Flyers in ice time (24:48 per game) and has never missed a game over four seasons, while he's projected to finish with career highs in goals (18) and points (48).

Here were the major points in the review from the NHL Department of Player Safety:

This is a forceful check that makes the head the main point of contact on a hit where such head contact was avoidable. This is an illegal check to the head.

It is important to note that the illegal check to the head rule looks only at the main point of contact of a hit, not the first point of contact.

Rule 48 (illegal check to the head) does provide situations where head contact on a body check may be excused. None of these exemptions apply on this hit.

While we acknowledge MacDermid's argument that he does not intentionally pick the head as a target, he mistimes this hit and takes an angle of approach that cuts along the front of Provorov's body rather than through Provorov's core.

The NHL Department of Player Safety noted how MacDermid had no history of suspensions or malicious play. The suspension for MacDermid is fair and good for the NHL to provide punitive action after the hit didn't receive a whistle.

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1169307 Philadelphia Flyers

Flyers midseason grades: Travis Konecny, Sean Couturier lead the forwards

By Charlie O'Connor Jan 3, 2020

With Thursday night's back-and-forth spectacle of a game behind them, the Philadelphia Flyers have officially reached the halfway point of the season. Forty-one games are in the books, and the Flyers hold a 22-14-5 record and sit in possession of the Eastern Conference's final wild-card spot.

So, it's perfect time to take stock of the players and where each stands heading into the back half of the season.

Over the next two days at The Athletic Philadelphia, I'll be grading each Flyers player in three categories. The first two grades — even strength play and special teams work — are largely driven by stats (read my two primers for explanations and further context on these metrics), while the final category (eye test/intangibles) accounts for the aspects of a player's first half that are more difficult to quantify



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using metrics available in the public sphere. Then, I'll provide a final grade that accounts for all three (not an average).

Today, the focus is on the 16 forwards who played at least 10 NHL games for the Flyers this season, ranked in letter grade order.

Travis Konecny

It all appears to be coming together for Travis Konecny in 2019-20.

Konecny has been a fantastic even-strength scorer since 2017-18, and that hasn't changed this year. What has, however, is the fact that Konecny is rounding out his game without sacrificing the dynamic style that makes him such a weapon on offense. Konecny's previous career-high in even strength Corsi For Percentage was 49.87 percent — that's jumped all the way up to a team-high 56.10 percent this year, and his results by xG have improved dramatically as well, even though he hasn't been joined to the hip with Claude Giroux and Sean Couturier as he was during the other stretches when his advanced metrics were strong. Suddenly, Konecny isn't merely a scorer — he's a do-it-all winger who can be trusted to drive his line.

He's also one of the few players on the team to thrive on the power play, even as he's bounced from unit to unit and spot to spot in the formation. Konecny's 13 points on the man advantage are tied for the team lead, and in tandem with his team-high 2.64 Points/60 at even strength, it's no shock he sits atop the Flyers' leaderboard in points as well, with 36.

If you're looking for an obvious hole in Konecny's 2019-20 resume, give up now. His All-Star selection is well-deserved, and he's been Philadelphia's most impressive skater through 41 games.

Sean Couturier

Sean Couturier simply does it all.

He scores like a first-liner at even strength (2.15 Points/60). He drives play at elite rates per Evolving Hockey's Regularized-Adjusted Plus/Minus model (22nd among all NHL forwards in xG impact, ninth by Corsi RAPM) while matching up against top lines every night. He chips in on the power play (tied for fifth on the team in points). He anchors the improved penalty kill. And as head coach Alain Vigneault has noted, Couturier seems to be the miracle cure when it comes to getting struggling teammates going on offense. Put a player on Couturier's line, and slumps disappear.

As for intangibles? Couturier played most of November with a shoulder strain, which prevented him from taking regular faceoffs — yet he still found a way to score nine points in nine games during that stretch. Any criticism of Couturier's season feels more like nitpicking than anything else — his scoring pace is a bit down compared to the last two seasons, and he's finishing on chances at a lower of a rate than usual. But to understand Couturier's value, all you need to do is watch a game or two. This is a great player still in the heart of his prime, playing some of his best hockey yet.

Sean Couturier. (Marc DesRosiers / USA Today)

Oskar Lindblom

It's cruel that instead of breaking down what was shaping up to be a breakout season for Oskar Lindblom, we're talking about his on-ice work with the knowledge that it's unclear when, or even if, he'll hit the ice again for the Flyers. But while Lindblom's current fight with Ewing's sarcoma is far more important than any hockey game, it would be a disservice to the young Swede if he wasn't credited for the significant step forward he was in the midst of taking prior to his cancer diagnosis.

Lindblom was scoring like a first-liner at even strength (2.07 Points/60), even without the benefit of any secondary assists (and they surely would have come given time). While his play-driving metrics were down slightly from past seasons, he still ranks fifth among Flyers forwards in RAPM impact on xG differential, and was positive by Corsi as well.

There were still areas for improvement — Lindblom was still getting a handle on the nuances of penalty killing, and his power play results weren't mind-blowing, either. But over the season's first 30 games, Lindblom looked dynamic, dangerous and like one of Philadelphia's best forwards. Hopefully, he'll have an opportunity in the future to build off the strides he made this season.

Claude Giroux

Claude Giroux had a strange first half. He still looks like the post-2017/18 Giroux — he's flying around the ice, consistently setting up linemates for chances and having a positive impact in nearly every game. But then you notice he's on pace for just 60 points, which would be his worst season from a production standpoint since 2016-17, almost certainly his lowest point as a player and the year that had fans truly worried that he was in rapid decline.

The good news is that the best public advanced metrics and models fall more on the side of "Giroux's absolutely fine." By RAPM, Giroux entered Thursday's game against the Golden Knights in the midst of his third-best even-strength play-driving season of his career by impact on Expected Goal differential (+0.191 per 60 minutes), and his best ever when it comes to raw shot differential (+6.09 per 60). Oh, and the Flyers are crushing teams from a goal differential with Giroux on the ice, outscoring opponents 30-21 (58.82 percent Goals For). With Giroux on the ice at even strength, the Flyers tend to be in complete control of the game.

Giroux's raw production has been down for two main reasons — teammates aren't finishing on Giroux's passes as well in past years at even strength (0.90 Assists/60 rate after holding a 1.88 rate the previous two seasons), and the previously stable power play has been in a state of flux all season. The even-strength assist issue should resolve itself over time, but stability on the PP isn't guaranteed, and even though Giroux deserves some of blame for the unit's mediocrity, it's tough to develop chemistry and comfort when personnel and formations are being tweaked each week.

The captain has tried to make up for the power play's struggles in other areas. His penalty killing has been absolutely stellar. The Flyers rarely give up shot attempts (58.92 per 60) with Giroux on the ice at 4-on-5, and have nearly broken even (two goals for, three goals against) from a goals standpoint with Giroux out there as well. Additionally, he graciously moved back to center for nearly a month without complaint despite the fact that he knew his results would take a hit — the 31-year-old Giroux has acknowledged publicly that wing is his ideal position at this stage of his career.

And while in-the-room leadership is impossible to quantify, it's notable that the Flyers sit in a playoff spot, despite a new coaching staff, a ridiculous schedule, a deluge of absences at the forward position and even the devastating news of a teammate's cancer diagnosis. As captain, Giroux at least deserves some credit for keeping the Flyers pointed in the right direction through it all. Expect a big second half from No. 28.

Kevin Hayes

The only people who can claim to be disappointed with Kevin Hayes' first 41 games as a Flyer are those who entered the season with far-too-high expectations.



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Hayes was never going to be a point-per-game scorer. He wasn't going to magically turn into a superstar just because he now has a \$7.14 million cap hit next to his name. But it was perfectly reasonable to assume he would score somewhere in the 40-50 point range, push play in the right direction at even strength, take on a heavy penalty killing load and fill the hole at 2C that has existed in Philadelphia for years. That's exactly what he's done.

Yes, Hayes has had a few offensive slumps. But the points are right around where they should be — 46-point pace, 1.64 Points/60 at evens — and he grades out positively by RAPM impact when it comes to both Corsi and xG. Hayes has also been a monster on the PK, with his ability to bleed precious time off the clock — by lugging the puck into the offensive zone and then back through the neutral zone — quickly becoming one of the low-key most fun parts of watching this team. Hayes' goal-based luck hasn't been great (Philadelphia has been outscored 32-27 at evens so far with him on the ice), but that feels more like a case of bad luck than anything else.

Hayes has seamlessly fit into the mix in Philadelphia, both in the lineup and the locker room. He earned an "A" on his sweater before Game 1, at least in part due to his willingness to help his teammates adjust to Vigneault (Hayes' old coach in New York) and his coaching methods during training camp. Hayes has quickly established himself as one of the roster's most outgoing players, immediately integrating himself into a tight-knit group. It's impossible to know how good of a player Hayes will be in Year 7 of his massive contract. But he's checked all of the necessary boxes for the Flyers in Year 1.

Kevin Hayes. (Jayne Kamin-Oncea / USA Today)

Jakub Voracek

By the numbers and the eye test, a "normal" Jakub Voracek season has a certain look to it. He rarely misses a game. He tends to end up with around 20 goals and a little more than 60 points. And he delivers more than enough highlight-reel plays in the clutch to thrill his biggest fans, while counterbalancing those moments with enough mistakes to frustrate those who have decided he somehow isn't actually a good player.

This season has certainly fit that mold.

Barring a massive second half, it doesn't look like Voracek is in the process of one of his semi-regular "monster" seasons, when he carries the Flyers' offense via point-per-game level production. But as an offensive weapon, Voracek has met expectations — his 2.31 Points/60 at even strength is first-liner quality, and his solid 5.59 Points/60 rate with the man advantage makes him one of the few Flyers forwards not underachieving on the power play.

And those offensive metrics have held up, despite the fact that Voracek has placed a greater emphasis on defense this season, at the behest of the new coaching staff. A justifiably proud player, Voracek could have chafed at the early-season "call outs" by Vigneault, but he has instead said all of the right things and worked on playing the kind of two-way game that satisfies his coaches. While No. 93 will always have to take some risks in order to create his offense, a shift toward a more balanced approach has shown up in the numbers — for the first time since 2015-16, Voracek is in the negatives (remember, when it comes to shot and chance suppression, negative is good) by Expected Goals Against RAPM (-0.044) and Corsi RAPM (-0.54).

Unfortunately, that doesn't mean Voracek's overall play-driving metrics are back to where they were during his best years, as his offensive impact rates have taken a hit as well. Voracek is still more of a break-even play-driver these days, even with the defensive

improvement. Voracek falls in the "B" grade range largely because he's talented enough to play better than he has in 2019-20, but in truth, his work is right in line with what would've been a reasonable preseason projection.

Scott Laughton

The Flyers' most efficient even-strength scorer entering Thursday wouldn't have been difficult to guess — it was Konecny. But second place? It might take even a diehard fan a few guesses to come up with the correct answer: Scott Laughton.

Laughton's injury issues so far in 2019-20 — a broken finger in November and a groin issue in December — have put a damper on his season. But in the games he has played, Laughton has been undeniably impactful, scoring at nearly a half-point-per-game pace despite minimal power play time and just 12:45 minutes per game at even strength. His impact went beyond the numbers — Laughton has been able to switch back and forth between center and wing in response to lineup demands. He stepped into an energy role, and has shown a willingness to take a lead role in the team's committee-based approach when responding to questionable hits, as his eventful day against Ottawa last month proved.

It's not quite accurate to call this a breakout season. After all, Laughton scored 32 points last season, so it's not like his current pace is dramatically higher this time. He's been more of a break-even play-driver at even strength than a true difference-maker by the numbers. Still, Laughton is the kind of versatile, do-anything-for-the-team bottom-sixer that every organization wishes it had under contract.

Tyler Pitlick

Speaking of new acquisitions who've come exactly as advertised, we now come to Tyler Pitlick.

The 28-year-old is never going to score a ton; he holds a 1.18 Points/60 at even strength and is on pace for fewer than 20 points this season. But when it comes to adding a defensive presence to the bottom-six, Pitlick has more than met expectations. He ranks second and third among Flyers forwards, respectively, in defensive RAPM impact on xG and Corsi, and he's the only regular penalty killer (more than 20 minutes of ice time) who has yet to be on the ice for a goal against. Pitlick's shifts have been where other teams' offenses go to die.

Pitlick's October was rough, by his own admission. But he clearly wasn't himself, due to missing the bulk of training camp after wrist surgery. Now, Pitlick is rightfully a nightly lineup staple, and while his speed-and-forecheck style of play might not be flashy, it's undeniably useful in a bottom-of-the-lineup role.

Tyler Pitlick. (Eric Hartline / USA Today)

James van Riemsdyk

James van Riemsdyk has been a fantastic even-strength forward in 2019-20. Yep, you read that right.

The numbers don't lie. He led the team in Goals per 60 at even strength with 1.23 entering Thursday's game. He was third in Points/60 at 2.34, easily first-liner quality. No Flyer has had a more positive impact on Expected Goal differential than JvR (+0.315 per 60 minutes, per RAPM) and he's behind only Giroux, Konecny and Couturier when it comes to Corsi impact. And the Flyers have outscored the opposition 26-17 with him on the ice at even strength, if you were beginning to think that all of this JvR tire-pumping was coming solely from a bunch of nerdy numbers and models.



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So why is van Riemsdyk on pace for fewer than 25 goals, and generally perceived to be having an underwhelming season? Three power play points go a long way toward explaining it.

This season, JvR hasn't been able to provide much of anything on the PP, and those struggles are masking what has quickly turned into a fantastic year at even strength. Van Riemsdyk is actually scoring at a far more efficient rate when the sides are even, as compared to when his team is a man-up (2.34 versus 1.62), and on the PP, he has the advantage of parking himself in the highest-danger region of the ice and waiting for pucks to come his way. Like Voracek, JvR has showcased an increased commitment to defense under the new staff, and he's still racking up scoring chances, both at evens and on the PP. When it comes to the latter, he just hasn't finished on enough of them.

Michael Raffl

Michael Raffl's season is tough to evaluate.

On one hand, he's been far from the stealth borderline-elite even-strength forward that he once was, grading out mildly negative by both Corsi and xG RAPM and posting a 1.29 Points/60 that would look even more underwhelming if it wasn't inflated by three secondary assists. On the other hand, Raffl has spent the bulk of his season playing center rather than his more comfortable wing spot — a sacrifice that he has made for the good of the team due to the depth issues caused by Nolan Patrick's migraine disorder.

Raffl hasn't been amazing as a bottom-six center. But he held his own, which earned him the 4C job by default for an extended period of time, simply because none of the other options even came close to keeping their heads above water. So it's tough to punish Raffl for underwhelming metrics when they were largely produced in a less-than-ideal role. Also, in the one role that does fit Raffl perfectly, penalty killing, he's been stellar, ranking behind only Giroux in on-ice xG Against per 60 minutes. It's probably most fair to grade Raffl's even-strength work on a bit of a curve, considering the circumstances.

Joel Farabee

Joel Farabee is a perfect example of why it helps to balance public stats with first-hand observations.

By the numbers, Farabee's rookie campaign hasn't been stellar. He's surprisingly underwater from a play-driving standpoint (-0.174 by xG RAPM/60, -1.28 by Corsi RAPM/60), and has been fine but not spectacular when it comes to scoring (12 points in 31 games, 1.62 Points/60 at even strength, no power play points). He's in the negative by Evolving Hockey's Goals Above Replacement metric (-0.9).

Yet he's looked impressive. The hockey smarts stand out, like how he was able to rack up scoring chances in the weeks after his call-up, and more recently with his passing creativity. And even though the stats aren't in love with his work, the Flyers coaching staff has come away impressed with Farabee's play without the puck. There's a reason, after all, that Farabee has stayed with the big club despite not having scored a goal since Dec. 3, while Morgan Frost (a year older) returned to the minors after his offense tailed off.

The stats might not reflect all of this yet, and that does deflate his overall grade. But with Farabee, the Flyers have a real player on their hands.

Morgan Frost

Morgan Frost's first NHL stint was something of a mixed bag. Seven points in 18 games is nothing to sneeze at, and his 1.76 Points/60

rate at even strength would have placed him solidly in low-end second-liner territory last season. It's not ridiculous to argue that, if Laughton was playing wing, that Frost qualifies as the third-best available center in the Flyers' organization right now, even if he's no longer with the big club.

That said, the defensive issues are real. His +0.121 RAPM impact on Expected Goals against is second-worst on the team among forwards, making it little surprise that the Flyers were outscored 14-10 with Frost on the ice at 5-on-5. The talent is there, which Frost made clear with a fantastic first few games after his call-up. His willingness to try highly difficult maneuvers with the puck (and often pull them off) is unmatched on this team, and adds an element of flashiness to a club that sometimes lacks it.

But his scoring did dry up after that quick start — no goals since Nov. 21, just four points in 11 December games, no power play points despite almost 40 minutes played in the situation. The Flyers have yet to see the best of Morgan Frost over an extended period.

Carsen Twarynski

Carsen Twarynski had his moments, such as a snipe of a goal in his third NHL game and a number of high-effort forechecks. He's certainly not shy about throwing his weight around, and with Vigneault preaching a dump-in heavy approach, it's not tough to see how a player with Twarynski's skill set might eventually fit as useful fourth liner who can periodically chip in with offense due to his plus-shot.

But he wasn't impactful enough to justify a full-time role on the big club just yet. His goal against the Canucks back in Game 3 proved to be his only point of his 15 games with the Flyers, and his RAPM impacts have been solidly negative as well. The good news is that Twarynski is driving play quite well in the AHL this season, per PhancyStats.com (52.86 percent Corsi For Percentage, +5.19% Corsi Relative), which bodes well for his progression as a prospect. He's not ready to be called a regular NHLer, though.

Andy Andreoff

Andy Andreoff has more or less come as advertised — a depth forward who can check in for games at a time and not kill a team, but not impactful enough to justify an every-night job. Along with Raffl and Pitlick, he helped to form the Flyers' first competent fourth line of the season in early November, but Andreoff's on-ice impacts by RAPM have been right around those of Frost and Farabee without the offense to match theirs (1 point in 12 games).

Had Chris Stewart not been signed, Andreoff would have likely fit well as the team's 13th or 14th forward, able to sit for extended periods of time without complaint but able to hold his own against NHL competition in case of emergencies. Instead, he's turned into an AHL/NHL swingman, and a perfectly acceptable (if unspectacular) one at that.

Chris Stewart

Solely going by the numbers, the signing of Chris Stewart can't be called anything but a failure. Stewart's on-ice metrics have been ghastly, with the Flyers controlling just 32.56 percent of the shot attempts and 21.24 percent of the Expected Goal share during Stewart's 117 minutes at even strength. He has more fights (three) than points (one). As much as on-ice impact can be quantified, it's been ugly with Stewart.

Yet his intangible impact can't be ignored. Stewart's positivity radiates through the locker room, even as he's largely (and justifiably) turned into a consistent healthy scratch. He's taken young players under his wing, opening his house to them on Thanksgiving,



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and repeatedly checking in on Patrick as he works through his migraine issues. If you're a believer in the importance of locker room culture when it comes to team success, then Stewart has absolutely played a role in driving Philadelphia's solid first half. So long as his appearances on the ice are limited, Stewart has a place with this club.

Mikhail Vorobyev

Let's start with the good. Mikhail Vorobyev's point production took another step forward in his third AHL season (14 points in 19 games), leading to three separate recalls back up to the NHL, with the most recent lasting an entire month. He doubled his career NHL goal total, and didn't look out of place in a brief PK stint when the unit was depleted in the middle of December.

Unfortunately, the Flyers have been utterly crushed at even strength, both from a shot differential standpoint (44.23 percent Corsi For) and especially by quality-adjusted metrics (31.51 percent xG share) with Vorobyev on the ice. And with just five points in 33 career NHL games, it's not like he's making up for his advanced stat struggles by producing offense. Vorobyev is getting a long look right now, but so far, he's been unable to make his mark in a positive way this season.

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1169302 Philadelphia Flyers

Flyers and their penalty killers trying to regain mojo in Arizona as 6-game trip continues

by Sam Carchidi,

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. ... especially a first period in which you allow four goals.

That's the Flyers' mantra as they prepare to face Arizona on Saturday, two nights after they were beaten in Vegas, 5-4. They surrendered four first-period goals for the second straight game.

The Flyers need to shake off their first-period defensive meltdowns, get their penalty kill working again, and regain the momentum they had when they started this six-game road trip.

The Flyers had a four-game winning streak when the trip began; they are 1-3 on the journey, which resumes in Arizona and finishes Tuesday in Carolina, and are just two points ahead of Florida for the last wild-card spot.

"We're not very happy with the last couple," said defenseman Matt Niskanen after Friday's practice. He was referring to the 5-3 loss in Los Angeles, which built a 4-0 first-period lead, followed by the defeat in Vegas. The other loss on the trip was to San Jose, 6-1.

"Missed opportunities, but I think guys recognize that," Niskanen said. "I think we'll have a real desperate effort (Saturday) to kind of right the ship. It's an important couple games for us before we head home. It's about response, and we're going to have it."

In their last two games, the Flyers' penalty kill has allowed four power-play goals on all four of their opponents' chances.

"I think we just have to go back to the basics, being in the attacking lanes, being in the passing lanes, jumping on loose pucks, getting the clears," said center Sean Couturier, who had two goals and an

assist in the loss to Vegas, one in which the Flyers squandered a late six-on-three power play. "Once we get back to doing that, we'll be successful again."

Over the last handful of games, the Flyers have fallen from No. 3 to No. 14 in the NHL on the penalty kill.

"It's (been) a tough stretch, but it happens during the year," Couturier said. "We can be a confident group; we know we can be good."

Coach Alain Vigneault said the Flyers have not done a good job with their "trigger points" while on the PK in recent games. "One of the things that has made us really efficient is that when one guy goes (after an offensive player), all four guys go," he said. "We sort of end up with four one-on-one situations, and then one of our guys wins and the puck is down the other end. Lately, we haven't been able to find those trigger points."

Vigneault also said the Flyers (22-14-5) need more production from the bottom-six forwards. The Golden Knights got goals from two bottom-six players in their win on Thursday.

"They found a way to contribute and make a difference in the game," Vigneault said. "We need that from our group, also."

For that reason, fourth-line right winger Nic Aube-Kubel is expected to go back in the lineup Saturday in Arizona (23-16-4). Bruising Chris Stewart, who played sparingly Thursday and had six hits against the physical Knights, figures to be a healthy scratch.

Vigneault said he was leaning that way but wanted to "sleep on it."

Breakaways

The Kings' Kurtis MacDermid was suspended for two games for an illegal hit to Ivan Provorov's head Tuesday, the NHL announced Friday. He was not penalized on the play. ... Vigneault is showing confidence in Carter Hart by playing the goalie Saturday. Hart has lost six straight road decisions. ... The Phantoms' Morgan Frost was named an AHL All-Star. ... The Coyotes, coached by former Flyer Rick Tocchet, have ordered "Oskar Strong" T-shirts to support Flyers left winger Oskar Lindblom as he battles a rare bone cancer. They are expected to wear them under their jerseys Saturday.

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169303 Philadelphia Flyers

Flyers at midseason: Lots of improvement, but not yet a Stanley Cup contender | Sam Carchidi

by Sam Carchidi,

GLENDALE, Ariz. — The Flyers reached the halfway point of the season with a 5-4 loss Thursday in Vegas. They are 13 points better than at a corresponding point last season, but they still need a few more pieces to be considered Stanley Cup contenders.

Here are their midterm grades for the first 41 games.

Team: B.

Despite a slew of injuries and Oskar Lindblom's cancer diagnosis, the Flyers enter the weekend in a wild-card spot (barely) with a 22-14-5 record for 49 points and a .598 points percentage, placing them 11th in the 31-team NHL.



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At the Wells Fargo Center, they get an A-plus because of their 13-2-4 record and league-best .789 points percentage. But they are dragged down by their road struggles (.432 points percentage, 24th in NHL).

The Flyers' power play (13th in NHL) and penalty kill have struggled recently. In about a week, the PK has fallen from No. 3 to 14.

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They have made strides on defense from last year (3.41 goals-against per game, 29th in NHL) and are ninth in the league, allowing 2.88 goals per game despite surrendering four goals in each of their last two first periods entering Saturday. Offensively, they have averaged 3.1 goals, a slight improvement from last season and 14th in the league.

Forwards

Travis Konecny: A.

He has been the Flyers' most consistent player and their top forward. His defense has improved, too. He is on pace for 24 goals and 72 points, which would shatter his career high of 49 points.

Oskar Lindblom: A.

Before the diagnosis of a rare form of bone cancer, Lindblom was leading the Flyers with 11 goals and having a breakout season. At the time, he was on pace for 30 goals and was the team's second-best defensive forward.

Sean Couturier: B-plus.

He's on pace for 24 goals and 66 points, a slight dip from his last two seasons. He has excelled in the faceoff circle (fourth in NHL at 59.1%) and has been the Flyers' best two-way player.

Flyers center Sean Couturier is having another outstanding season.

Flyers center Sean Couturier is having another outstanding season.

Kevin Hayes: B.

He is on pace for 24 goals, which would be one shy of his career high, and has helped improve the Flyers' usually weak penalty kill. That said, he needs more consistency in his game.

Claude Giroux: B.

His production (30 points, on pace for 60) has dropped from the last two years (102 points in 2017-18, 85 points last season) but he has still been a solid performer. He paces the Flyers with 13 goals and leads the league in faceoff percentage (61.3%).

Jake Voracek: B.

Voracek has arguably been the Flyers' best forward during the last two weeks, but he went through an up-and-down stretch earlier in the season. His playmaking has been off-the-charts recently, and his defense, rocky in the past, has improved. He is on pace for 16 goals and 66 points.

Scott Laughton: B-minus.

Two injuries have sidelined him for a total of 20 games, but Laughton, who has played with an edge, still might set career highs in goals and points. He has five goals and 10 points in 21 games.

Scott Laughton (right) has missed about half the Flyers' games this season.

Scott Laughton (right) has missed about half the Flyers' games this season.

James van Riemsdyk: C-plus.

He's on pace for 24 goals, but he has been extremely inconsistent. The Flyers especially need him to be more productive on the power play, where he has just two goals.

Tyler Pitlick: C.

Though far from flashy, he has given the Flyers productive minutes in the bottom six and filled in when needed on the penalty kill.

Joel Farabee: C-minus.

The 19-year-old rookie (three goals in 32 games) has shown glimpses of his offensive talent and has displayed some surprising grit. He has been in a massive slump since early November, scoring just one goal in his last 24 games.

Michael Raffl: C-minus.

The versatile Raffl has been strong on the penalty kill and has played primarily on the third and fourth lines. He is goalless in his last 22 games.

Michael Raffl has been in a goal-scoring drought.

Michael Raffl has been in a goal-scoring drought.

Misha Vorobyev: C-minus.

He hasn't scored much (one goal in 18 games) and has been so-so as a fourth-line center, but his game is still developing. If Nolan Patrick (migraine disorder) gets healthy and returns, Vorobyev will probably be sent to the Phantoms and the Flyers will be much stronger with Laughton as their fourth-line center.

Nic Aube-Kubel: Incomplete.

He has played just eight games but has given a strong account. Aube-Kubel has played with an edge and has contributed three points.

Chris Stewart: Incomplete.

A good locker-room presence, Stewart has supplied some toughness on the ice but is minus-7 in just 15 games.

Andy Andreoff: Incomplete.

He has played in just 12 games and hasn't been able to get into a flow because he's been in and out of the lineup.

Defense

Ivan Provorov: A.

Without the weight of a new contract hanging over him, Provorov has returned to his form from two years ago and is on pace for 18 goals, 48 points, and a plus-10 rating. Provorov has scored a team-high six of his nine goals on the power play.

Matt Niskanen: B-plus.

Niskanen, acquired for Radko Gudas, has stabilized the defense and the penalty kill, and he has helped elevate the game of Provorov, his defensive partner.

Matt Niskanen has improved the Flyers' defense and penalty kill.

Matt Niskanen has improved the Flyers' defense and penalty kill.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Phil Myers: B-plus.

His game is still evolving, but Myers has had a strong rookie season despite playing just 23 games. He leads the Flyers with a plus-17 rating and has chipped in with 11 points.

Robert Hagg: C-plus.

He is what he is: a dependable, stay-at-home defender who blocks a lot of shots and provides some much-needed physicality. Considering he has been yanked in and out of the lineup, he's done a good job of staying sharp.

Travis Sanheim: C.

The player they call "Sanny" has been up and down and is on pace for eight goals, 24 points, and a plus-4 rating. He got better in the second half last season, and the Flyers hope he repeats that.

Shayne Gostisbehere: C-minus.

He went through a poor stretch but has elevated his play after a three-game benching. He is on pace for 10 goals and 22 points, a far cry from his personal bests (17 goals, 65 points).

Justin Braun: C-minus.

After an awful start to the season, he's been better the last month or so but still has a team-worst minus-11 rating.

Goalies:

Carter Hart: B.

Hart, 21, gets an A-plus for his home play (11-1-2, 1.49 GAA, .947 save percentage), but he has struggled mightily on the road (2-8-1, 3.84, .855). He needs to be much better on the road if the Flyers are going to be a factor in the playoffs — if they get there. Overall, he is 13-9-3 with a 2.52 GAA and .908 save percentage.

Flyers goaltender Carter Hart, stopping New York Rangers left winger Artemi Panarin on Dec. 23, has had a bizarre half-season.

Flyers goaltender Carter Hart, stopping New York Rangers left winger Artemi Panarin on Dec. 23, has had a bizarre half-season.

Brian Elliott: C-plus.

Elliott (3.06 GAA, .901 save percentage) has been mostly dependable, and his numbers look inflated because of a few poor games.

Coaching

Alain Vigneault: B-plus.

Compared with recent seasons, the new Flyers coach has generally gotten the team to start much better and to play a full 60 minutes (or beyond) in most games, though not so much on the current road trip. He has also held players accountable and has not been afraid to bench or demote players, regardless of their salaries.

On the flip side, he could have used his timeouts better to stem opponents' momentum, and some of his Myers benchings have been puzzling.

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169304 Philadelphia Flyers

At midseason, Flyers aim to be better than mediocre

By Rob Parent

Flyers winger Travis Konecny, front, here being checked nicely from behind by Vegas Golden Knights defenseman Nick Holden Thursday, has drawn ire from opponents and raves from his teammates this season.

Amid the splendor of their annual holiday trip to the west, the Flyers have again turned on a dime at their season halfway point, taking them right back to where they've been so often ... wondering where this bumpy but not altogether unsuccessful ride might be leading to.

A 5-4 setback in Las Vegas Thursday night left them with a second straight loss and third loss on the four-game road trip that continues Saturday at the Arizona Coyotes.

That Vegas bust also put them at 22-14-5 over the 41-game first half, one of the more comfortable halfway positions the Flyers have been in for some time. That doesn't mean the second 41-game stretch won't be all the more difficult, of course.

As they move forward, the Flyers need to find something which for them is usually in short supply: consistency.

They have skipped through the fall winning and losing in little streaks. Three straight wins here, four consecutive losses there, turn and find a four-game win streak, then go on the road and lose four more.

It's been like that all season, a series of highs and lows spread out over three or four-game intervals. They will try to remedy that tendency, or at least the losing part of it, over the next few months. Perhaps a review of who was up and who was down over the past three months might prove beneficial to that effort...

Centers

Credit free agent bonus boy Kevin Hayes for a first half in which he managed to live up to his \$7-plus million salary. His 12 goals and 23 points, along with a minus-6 rating may not seem stellar, but Hayes always seems to be around the puck, and rarely does he do something wrong with it.

Similarly, Sean Couturier is enjoying another solid season, also with 12 goals but with 21 assists for 33 points, tied with Jake Voracek for second-most points on the team. Of course, Couturier supplements that with being one of the league's top defensive forwards, and one of the league's better face-off men, too, at 59 percent.

Beyond those two, however, the Flyers' center spot has been uneven, and that's because of the long-term loss of Nolan Patrick. He has yet to play this season due to migraine issues, and though he's been skating there isn't much of a guess as to when he might give playing a try again.

Trying to fill in there on occasion has been the likes of Scott Laughton and Morgan Frost, but injuries limited Laughton to 21 games thus far, and Frost, limited in experience, has only played his way back to the AHL.

Aside from them, the checking line center spot has been a rotating cast, most recently filled by Phantoms grad Misha Vorobyev. Best of luck to him.

Overall position grade: C-plus.

Wingers



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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If you could name one Flyer who was the most likely player to have a bad first half, Travis Konecny might have been a good guess.

That's primarily because he missed half of training camp as an unsigned restricted free agent. After finally agreeing to a six-year, \$33 million deal, however, Konecny immediately responded with due diligence at practice to get himself ready for the start of the season.

Konecny enters the second half as thus far the Flyers' lone NHL All-Star Game selectee, and also as the club's leading scorer with 36 points (12 goals, 24 assists).

While his rapid development has been a huge plus, the shocking diagnosis of another rapidly blooming winger stopped the Flyers in their tracks. Oskar Lindblom was tied with Konecny for most goals on the team at the time he was diagnosed with the rare bone cancer, Ewing's sarcoma. He'll miss at least the rest of this season, likely needing surgery and chemotherapy. But his story has inspired a heartwarming effort around the league under the banner of #oskarstrong, with "Oskar Strong" t-shirt sales raising in excess of \$110,000 for the Hockey Fights Cancer initiative by Christmas.

On the ice, Lindblom's loss leaves the Flyers less strong, but in benefiting from Couturier's huge presence in the middle, Voracek is having one of his best all-around seasons, contributing 33 points through 41 games and clocking in with a plus-9 rating.

Also on the plus side there is Claude Giroux, who like Voracek seems to be getting more responsible with age. Working off the left wing again, the Flyers' captain remains a solid scorer (13 goals, 17 assists with four game-winning goals), and his plus-10 rating and 60-percent faceoff wins speaks to his commitment to a 200-foot game.

Fellow left wing James van Riemsdyk remains streaky, but he rebounded from an awful start to light up the scoreboard multiple times in December. JVR is currently tied with Hayes at 12 goals and 23 points.

Rookie winger Joel Farabee has helped, too, with 12 points in 32 games, but like Frost he will need to get involved more offensively to carve more than a temporary niche.

Overall position grade: B

Defense

Another player who took the long road toward a contract as a restricted free agent, Ivan Provorov is making people forget about his so-so performance last season.

Provorov has taken offensive strides to round out his game. Three of his nine goals have been game-winners, and his 24 points off the blue line has helped make up for some stumbles this season by Shayne Gostisbehere.

The Ghost (five goals, 11 points) even lost his top power play quarterback spot to Provorov earlier in the season, though the two essentially share that role now.

From a newcomer standpoint, Provorov has been greatly helped by summer acquisition Matt Niskanen, whose years in both Washington and Pittsburgh left an impression with the Flyers. He continues to be a steady presence with an offensive touch (five goals, 17 points). After a bit of a shaky start the other veteran addition, Justin Braun, is starting to respond, too.

Young defender Travis Sanheim continues to progress, mostly shown by an average on-ice time that has grown to close to 20 minutes. And head coach Alain Vigneault is getting alternating production out of promotee Phil Myers and holdover Robert Hagg as the coach has stuck with a seven-man rotation.

Overall position grade: B-minus.

Goaltending

Carter Hart has been mostly solid through 28 appearances, flashing a 13-9 record with a 2.51 goals-against average and .908 saves percentage. Those numbers should improve as his first full season wears on.

Brian Elliott has done essentially everything the Flyers have asked him to do as the backup, and while his above-3 GAA could be better, his 9-5 record attests to his ability to battle when the game is on the line.

Overall position grade: B-plus

The Flyers still have a long way to go over their final 41. Their 127 goals ranks ninth and 20-percent power play success ratio 10th in the Eastern Conference, troubling numbers indeed.

They're better at the penalty kill, and as long as Hart continues to play to his potential, they should be able to limit teams enough to keep getting their fair share of victories.

Whether it will be enough to make the playoffs remains to be seen.

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1169305 Philadelphia Flyers

Wayne Simmonds, Devils show support for Flyers' Oskar Lindblom as 'Oskar Strong' shirts expand

By Jordan Hall January 03, 2020 7:15 PM

Standing in the Lincoln Financial Field locker room, with eye black still on his face, Oskar Lindblom smiled when asked about Wayne Simmonds.

The Flyers had just finished a 4-3 OT win over the Penguins in an unforgettable Stadium Series game. Simmonds and his teammates shared an emotional moment in the locker room.

Lindblom soaked in the scene.

"That was cool," Lindblom said on Feb. 23 last season. "All those guys, they're the core of the group. To see them talk and just be around them, that's good for all of us. We can learn so much from them and they're good leaders. It was great."

The night turned out to be Simmonds' final game in orange and black as the beloved power forward was traded two days later. Lindblom and Simmonds are no longer teammates, but they're still brothers.

On Friday, Simmonds and his new team the Devils showed their support for Lindblom, the Flyers' 23-year-old forward from Sweden who was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma last month.

The support through "Oskar Strong" shirts continues to expand. The shirts can be purchased at BiscuitTees.com, with all proceeds benefiting the NHL's "Hockey Fights Cancer" initiative.

Kim Parent, co-owner/artist for BiscuitTees.com and the daughter of Flyers great Bernie Parent, told NBCSportsPhiladelphia.com Friday that the company has raised nearly \$200,000.



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The Rangers sported the shirts for their game against the Flyers on Dec. 23. Per Parent, the Wild and Coyotes have also purchased them. The Flyers play Arizona on Saturday (8 p.m. ET/NBCSP) and the Coyotes are expected to wear the shirts.

BiscuitTees.com has also shipped shirts to Alex Lyon for the goalie and his AHL affiliate Lehigh Valley teammates to wear.

Incredibly, the shirts have reached Sweden, Switzerland, Australia, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Latvia, Afghanistan and the United Kingdom, per Parent.

"Strong," Flyers head coach Alain Vigneault said of Lindblom. "He's like the hockey community, he's going to have a lot of support and he's going to get through this."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 01.04.2020

1169306 Philadelphia Flyers

NHL Department of Player Safety suspends Kings' Kurtis MacDermid 2 games for hit on Ivan Provorov

By Jordan Hall January 03, 2020 5:35 PM

While the Flyers were frustrated there was no penalty for Kurtis MacDermid's hit on Ivan Provorov Tuesday, they at least saw the league punish the Kings' defenseman Friday.

The NHL Department of Player Safety suspended MacDermid two games for an illegal check to the head, which he delivered on Provorov during the second period of the Flyers' 5-3 loss at STAPLES Center.

MacDermid fell into the Flyers' bench as a result of the check (see video). Shayne Gostisbehere and Robert Hagg kindly helped him back to the ice.

Understandably, the Flyers were not happy with the hit. Somehow, there was no whistle on the play and fortunately for the Flyers, Provorov was not seriously injured. The 22-year-old defenseman leads the Flyers in ice time (24:48 per game) and has never missed a game over four seasons, while he's projected to finish with career highs in goals (18) and points (48).

Here were the major points in the review from the NHL Department of Player Safety:

This is a forceful check that makes the head the main point of contact on a hit where such head contact was avoidable. This is an illegal check to the head.

It is important to note that the illegal check to the head rule looks only at the main point of contact of a hit, not the first point of contact.

Rule 48 (illegal check to the head) does provide situations where head contact on a body check may be excused. None of these exemptions apply on this hit.

While we acknowledge MacDermid's argument that he does not intentionally pick the head as a target, he mistimes this hit and takes an angle of approach that cuts along the front of Provorov's body rather than through Provorov's core.

The NHL Department of Player Safety noted how MacDermid had no history of suspensions or malicious play. The suspension for

MacDermid is fair and good for the NHL to provide punitive action after the hit didn't receive a whistle.

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1169307 Philadelphia Flyers

Flyers midseason grades: Travis Konecny, Sean Couturier lead the forwards

By Charlie O'Connor Jan 3, 2020

With Thursday night's back-and-forth spectacle of a game behind them, the Philadelphia Flyers have officially reached the halfway point of the season. Forty-one games are in the books, and the Flyers hold a 22-14-5 record and sit in possession of the Eastern Conference's final wild-card spot.

So, it's perfect time to take stock of the players and where each stands heading into the back half of the season.

Over the next two days at The Athletic Philadelphia, I'll be grading each Flyers player in three categories. The first two grades — even strength play and special teams work — are largely driven by stats (read my two primers for explanations and further context on these metrics), while the final category (eye test/intangibles) accounts for the aspects of a player's first half that are more difficult to quantify using metrics available in the public sphere. Then, I'll provide a final grade that accounts for all three (not an average).

Today, the focus is on the 16 forwards who played at least 10 NHL games for the Flyers this season, ranked in letter grade order.

Travis Konecny

It all appears to be coming together for Travis Konecny in 2019-20.

Konecny has been a fantastic even-strength scorer since 2017-18, and that hasn't changed this year. What has, however, is the fact that Konecny is rounding out his game without sacrificing the dynamic style that makes him such a weapon on offense. Konecny's previous career-high in even strength Corsi For Percentage was 49.87 percent — that's jumped all the way up to a team-high 56.10 percent this year, and his results by xG have improved dramatically as well, even though he hasn't been joined to the hip with Claude Giroux and Sean Couturier as he was during the other stretches when his advanced metrics were strong. Suddenly, Konecny isn't merely a scorer — he's a do-it-all winger who can be trusted to drive his line.

He's also one of the few players on the team to thrive on the power play, even as he's bounced from unit to unit and spot to spot in the formation. Konecny's 13 points on the man advantage are tied for the team lead, and in tandem with his team-high 2.64 Points/60 at even strength, it's no shock he sits atop the Flyers' leaderboard in points as well, with 36.

If you're looking for an obvious hole in Konecny's 2019-20 resume, give up now. His All-Star selection is well-deserved, and he's been Philadelphia's most impressive skater through 41 games.

Sean Couturier

Sean Couturier simply does it all.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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He scores like a first-liner at even strength (2.15 Points/60). He drives play at elite rates per Evolving Hockey's Regularized-Adjusted Plus/Minus model (22nd among all NHL forwards in xG impact, ninth by Corsi RAPM) while matching up against top lines every night. He chips in on the power play (tied for fifth on the team in points). He anchors the improved penalty kill. And as head coach Alain Vigneault has noted, Couturier seems to be the miracle cure when it comes to getting struggling teammates going on offense. Put a player on Couturier's line, and slumps disappear.

As for intangibles? Couturier played most of November with a shoulder strain, which prevented him from taking regular faceoffs — yet he still found a way to score nine points in nine games during that stretch. Any criticism of Couturier's season feels more like nitpicking than anything else — his scoring pace is a bit down compared to the last two seasons, and he's finishing on chances at a lower of a rate than usual. But to understand Couturier's value, all you need to do is watch a game or two. This is a great player still in the heart of his prime, playing some of his best hockey yet.

Sean Couturier. (Marc DesRosiers / USA Today)

Oskar Lindblom

It's cruel that instead of breaking down what was shaping up to be a breakout season for Oskar Lindblom, we're talking about his on-ice work with the knowledge that it's unclear when, or even if, he'll hit the ice again for the Flyers. But while Lindblom's current fight with Ewing's sarcoma is far more important than any hockey game, it would be a disservice to the young Swede if he wasn't credited for the significant step forward he was in the midst of taking prior to his cancer diagnosis.

Lindblom was scoring like a first-liner at even strength (2.07 Points/60), even without the benefit of any secondary assists (and they surely would have come given time). While his play-driving metrics were down slightly from past seasons, he still ranks fifth among Flyers forwards in RAPM impact on xG differential, and was positive by Corsi as well.

There were still areas for improvement — Lindblom was still getting a handle on the nuances of penalty killing, and his power play results weren't mind-blowing, either. But over the season's first 30 games, Lindblom looked dynamic, dangerous and like one of Philadelphia's best forwards. Hopefully, he'll have an opportunity in the future to build off the strides he made this season.

Claude Giroux

Claude Giroux had a strange first half. He still looks like the post-2017/18 Giroux — he's flying around the ice, consistently setting up linemates for chances and having a positive impact in nearly every game. But then you notice he's on pace for just 60 points, which would be his worst season from a production standpoint since 2016-17, almost certainly his lowest point as a player and the year that had fans truly worried that he was in rapid decline.

The good news is that the best public advanced metrics and models fall more on the side of "Giroux's absolutely fine." By RAPM, Giroux entered Thursday's game against the Golden Knights in the midst of his third-best even-strength play-driving season of his career by impact on Expected Goal differential (+0.191 per 60 minutes), and his best ever when it comes to raw shot differential (+6.09 per 60). Oh, and the Flyers are crushing teams from a goal differential with Giroux on the ice, outscoring opponents 30-21 (58.82 percent Goals For). With Giroux on the ice at even strength, the Flyers tend to be in complete control of the game.

Giroux's raw production has been down for two main reasons — teammates aren't finishing on Giroux's passes as well in past years at even strength (0.90 Assists/60 rate after holding a 1.88 rate the previous two seasons), and the previously stable power play has been in a state of flux all season. The even-strength assist issue should resolve itself over time, but stability on the PP isn't guaranteed, and even though Giroux deserves some of blame for the unit's mediocrity, it's tough to develop chemistry and comfort when personnel and formations are being tweaked each week.

The captain has tried to make up for the power play's struggles in other areas. His penalty killing has been absolutely stellar. The Flyers rarely give up shot attempts (58.92 per 60) with Giroux on the ice at 4-on-5, and have nearly broken even (two goals for, three goals against) from a goals standpoint with Giroux out there as well. Additionally, he graciously moved back to center for nearly a month without complaint despite the fact that he knew his results would take a hit — the 31-year-old Giroux has acknowledged publicly that wing is his ideal position at this stage of his career.

And while in-the-room leadership is impossible to quantify, it's notable that the Flyers sit in a playoff spot, despite a new coaching staff, a ridiculous schedule, a deluge of absences at the forward position and even the devastating news of a teammate's cancer diagnosis. As captain, Giroux at least deserves some credit for keeping the Flyers pointed in the right direction through it all. Expect a big second half from No. 28.

Kevin Hayes

The only people who can claim to be disappointed with Kevin Hayes' first 41 games as a Flyer are those who entered the season with far-too-high expectations.

Hayes was never going to be a point-per-game scorer. He wasn't going to magically turn into a superstar just because he now has a \$7.14 million cap hit next to his name. But it was perfectly reasonable to assume he would score somewhere in the 40-50 point range, push play in the right direction at even strength, take on a heavy penalty killing load and fill the hole at 2C that has existed in Philadelphia for years. That's exactly what he's done.

Yes, Hayes has had a few offensive slumps. But the points are right around where they should be — 46-point pace, 1.64 Points/60 at evens — and he grades out positively by RAPM impact when it comes to both Corsi and xG. Hayes has also been a monster on the PK, with his ability to bleed precious time off the clock — by lugging the puck into the offensive zone and then back through the neutral zone — quickly becoming one of the low-key most fun parts of watching this team. Hayes' goal-based luck hasn't been great (Philadelphia has been outscored 32-27 at evens so far with him on the ice), but that feels more like a case of bad luck than anything else.

Hayes has seamlessly fit into the mix in Philadelphia, both in the lineup and the locker room. He earned an "A" on his sweater before Game 1, at least in part due to his willingness to help his teammates adjust to Vigneault (Hayes' old coach in New York) and his coaching methods during training camp. Hayes has quickly established himself as one of the roster's most outgoing players, immediately integrating himself into a tight-knit group. It's impossible to know how good of a player Hayes will be in Year 7 of his massive contract. But he's checked all of the necessary boxes for the Flyers in Year 1.

Kevin Hayes. (Jayne Kamin-Oncea / USA Today)

Jakub Voracek



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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By the numbers and the eye test, a “normal” Jakub Voracek season has a certain look to it. He rarely misses a game. He tends to end up with around 20 goals and a little more than 60 points. And he delivers more than enough highlight-reel plays in the clutch to thrill his biggest fans, while counterbalancing those moments with enough mistakes to frustrate those who have decided he somehow isn’t actually a good player.

This season has certainly fit that mold.

Barring a massive second half, it doesn’t look like Voracek is in the process of one of his semi-regular “monster” seasons, when he carries the Flyers’ offense via point-per-game level production. But as an offensive weapon, Voracek has met expectations — his 2.31 Points/60 at even strength is first-liner quality, and his solid 5.59 Points/60 rate with the man advantage makes him one of the few Flyers forwards not underachieving on the power play.

And those offensive metrics have held up, despite the fact that Voracek has placed a greater emphasis on defense this season, at the behest of the new coaching staff. A justifiably proud player, Voracek could have chafed at the early-season “call outs” by Vigneault, but he has instead said all of the right things and worked on playing the kind of two-way game that satisfies his coaches. While No. 93 will always have to take some risks in order to create his offense, a shift toward a more balanced approach has shown up in the numbers — for the first time since 2015-16, Voracek is in the negatives (remember, when it comes to shot and chance suppression, negative is good) by Expected Goals Against RAPM (-0.044) and Corsi RAPM (-0.54).

Unfortunately, that doesn’t mean Voracek’s overall play-driving metrics are back to where they were during his best years, as his offensive impact rates have taken a hit as well. Voracek is still more of a break-even play-driver these days, even with the defensive improvement. Voracek falls in the “B” grade range largely because he’s talented enough to play better than he has in 2019-20, but in truth, his work is right in line with what would’ve been a reasonable preseason projection.

Scott Laughton

The Flyers’ most efficient even-strength scorer entering Thursday wouldn’t have been difficult to guess — it was Konecny. But second place? It might take even a diehard fan a few guesses to come up with the correct answer: Scott Laughton.

Laughton’s injury issues so far in 2019-20 — a broken finger in November and a groin issue in December — have put a damper on his season. But in the games he has played, Laughton has been undeniably impactful, scoring at nearly a half-point-per-game pace despite minimal power play time and just 12:45 minutes per game at even strength. His impact went beyond the numbers — Laughton has been able to switch back and forth between center and wing in response to lineup demands. He stepped into an energy role, and has shown a willingness to take a lead role in the team’s committee-based approach when responding to questionable hits, as his eventful day against Ottawa last month proved.

It’s not quite accurate to call this a breakout season. After all, Laughton scored 32 points last season, so it’s not like his current pace is dramatically higher this time. He’s been more of a break-even play-driver at even strength than a true difference-maker by the numbers. Still, Laughton is the kind of versatile, do-anything-for-the-team bottom-sixer that every organization wishes it had under contract.

Tyler Pitlick

Speaking of new acquisitions who’ve come exactly as advertised, we now come to Tyler Pitlick.

The 28-year-old is never going to score a ton; he holds a 1.18 Points/60 at even strength and is on pace for fewer than 20 points this season. But when it comes to adding a defensive presence to the bottom-six, Pitlick has more than met expectations. He ranks second and third among Flyers forwards, respectively, in defensive RAPM impact on xG and Corsi, and he’s the only regular penalty killer (more than 20 minutes of ice time) who has yet to be on the ice for a goal against. Pitlick’s shifts have been where other teams’ offenses go to die.

Pitlick’s October was rough, by his own admission. But he clearly wasn’t himself, due to missing the bulk of training camp after wrist surgery. Now, Pitlick is rightfully a nightly lineup staple, and while his speed-and-forecheck style of play might not be flashy, it’s undeniably useful in a bottom-of-the-lineup role.

Tyler Pitlick. (Eric Hartline / USA Today)

James van Riemsdyk

James van Riemsdyk has been a fantastic even-strength forward in 2019-20. Yep, you read that right.

The numbers don’t lie. He led the team in Goals per 60 at even strength with 1.23 entering Thursday’s game. He was third in Points/60 at 2.34, easily first-liner quality. No Flyer has had a more positive impact on Expected Goal differential than JvR (+0.315 per 60 minutes, per RAPM) and he’s behind only Giroux, Konecny and Couturier when it comes to Corsi impact. And the Flyers have outscored the opposition 26-17 with him on the ice at even strength, if you were beginning to think that all of this JvR tire-pumping was coming solely from a bunch of nerdy numbers and models.

So why is van Riemsdyk on pace for fewer than 25 goals, and generally perceived to be having an underwhelming season? Three power play points go a long way toward explaining it.

This season, JvR hasn’t been able to provide much of anything on the PP, and those struggles are masking what has quickly turned into a fantastic year at even strength. Van Riemsdyk is actually scoring at a far more efficient rate when the sides are even, as compared to when his team is a man-up (2.34 versus 1.62), and on the PP, he has the advantage of parking himself in the highest-danger region of the ice and waiting for pucks to come his way. Like Voracek, JvR has showcased an increased commitment to defense under the new staff, and he’s still racking up scoring chances, both at evens and on the PP. When it comes to the latter, he just hasn’t finished on enough of them.

Michael Raffl

Michael Raffl’s season is tough to evaluate.

On one hand, he’s been far from the stealth borderline-elite even-strength forward that he once was, grading out mildly negative by both Corsi and xG RAPM and posting a 1.29 Points/60 that would look even more underwhelming if it wasn’t inflated by three secondary assists. On the other hand, Raffl has spent the bulk of his season playing center rather than his more comfortable wing spot — a sacrifice that he has made for the good of the team due to the depth issues caused by Nolan Patrick’s migraine disorder.

Raffl hasn’t been amazing as a bottom-six center. But he held his own, which earned him the 4C job by default for an extended period of time, simply because none of the other options even came close to keeping their heads above water. So it’s tough to punish Raffl for underwhelming metrics when they were largely produced in a less-



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than-ideal role. Also, in the one role that does fit Raffl perfectly, penalty killing, he's been stellar, ranking behind only Giroux in on-ice xG Against per 60 minutes. It's probably most fair to grade Raffl's even-strength work on a bit of a curve, considering the circumstances.

Joel Farabee

Joel Farabee is a perfect example of why it helps to balance public stats with first-hand observations.

By the numbers, Farabee's rookie campaign hasn't been stellar. He's surprisingly underwater from a play-driving standpoint (-0.174 by xG RAPM/60, -1.28 by Corsi RAPM/60), and has been fine but not spectacular when it comes to scoring (12 points in 31 games, 1.62 Points/60 at even strength, no power play points). He's in the negative by Evolving Hockey's Goals Above Replacement metric (-0.9).

Yet he's looked impressive. The hockey smarts stand out, like how he was able to rack up scoring chances in the weeks after his call-up, and more recently with his passing creativity. And even though the stats aren't in love with his work, the Flyers coaching staff has come away impressed with Farabee's play without the puck. There's a reason, after all, that Farabee has stayed with the big club despite not having scored a goal since Dec. 3, while Morgan Frost (a year older) returned to the minors after his offense tailed off.

The stats might not reflect all of this yet, and that does deflate his overall grade. But with Farabee, the Flyers have a real player on their hands.

Morgan Frost

Morgan Frost's first NHL stint was something of a mixed bag. Seven points in 18 games is nothing to sneeze at, and his 1.76 Points/60 rate at even strength would have placed him solidly in low-end second-liner territory last season. It's not ridiculous to argue that, if Laughton was playing wing, that Frost qualifies as the third-best available center in the Flyers' organization right now, even if he's no longer with the big club.

That said, the defensive issues are real. His +0.121 RAPM impact on Expected Goals against is second-worst on the team among forwards, making it little surprise that the Flyers were outscored 14-10 with Frost on the ice at 5-on-5. The talent is there, which Frost made clear with a fantastic first few games after his call-up. His willingness to try highly difficult maneuvers with the puck (and often pull them off) is unmatched on this team, and adds an element of flashiness to a club that sometimes lacks it.

But his scoring did dry up after that quick start — no goals since Nov. 21, just four points in 11 December games, no power play points despite almost 40 minutes played in the situation. The Flyers have yet to see the best of Morgan Frost over an extended period.

Carsen Twarynski

Carsen Twarynski had his moments, such as a snipe of a goal in his third NHL game and a number of high-effort forechecks. He's certainly not shy about throwing his weight around, and with Vigneault preaching a dump-in heavy approach, it's not tough to see how a player with Twarynski's skill set might eventually fit as useful fourth liner who can periodically chip in with offense due to his plus-shot.

But he wasn't impactful enough to justify a full-time role on the big club just yet. His goal against the Canucks back in Game 3 proved to be his only point of his 15 games with the Flyers, and his RAPM impacts have been solidly negative as well. The good news is that

Twarynski is driving play quite well in the AHL this season, per PhancyStats.com (52.86 percent Corsi For Percentage, +5.19% Corsi Relative), which bodes well for his progression as a prospect. He's not ready to be called a regular NHLer, though.

Andy Andreoff

Andy Andreoff has more or less come as advertised — a depth forward who can check in for games at a time and not kill a team, but not impactful enough to justify an every-night job. Along with Raffl and Pitlick, he helped to form the Flyers' first competent fourth line of the season in early November, but Andreoff's on-ice impacts by RAPM have been right around those of Frost and Farabee without the offense to match theirs (1 point in 12 games).

Had Chris Stewart not been signed, Andreoff would have likely fit well as the team's 13th or 14th forward, able to sit for extended periods of time without complaint but able to hold his own against NHL competition in case of emergencies. Instead, he's turned into an AHL/NHL swingman, and a perfectly acceptable (if unspectacular) one at that.

Chris Stewart

Solely going by the numbers, the signing of Chris Stewart can't be called anything but a failure. Stewart's on-ice metrics have been ghastly, with the Flyers controlling just 32.56 percent of the shot attempts and 21.24 percent of the Expected Goal share during Stewart's 117 minutes at even strength. He has more fights (three) than points (one). As much as on-ice impact can be quantified, it's been ugly with Stewart.

Yet his intangible impact can't be ignored. Stewart's positivity radiates through the locker room, even as he's largely (and justifiably) turned into a consistent healthy scratch. He's taken young players under his wing, opening his house to them on Thanksgiving, and repeatedly checking in on Patrick as he works through his migraine issues. If you're a believer in the importance of locker room culture when it comes to team success, then Stewart has absolutely played a role in driving Philadelphia's solid first half. So long as his appearances on the ice are limited, Stewart has a place with this club.

Mikhail Vorobyev

Let's start with the good. Mikhail Vorobyev's point production took another step forward in his third AHL season (14 points in 19 games), leading to three separate recalls back up to the NHL, with the most recent lasting an entire month. He doubled his career NHL goal total, and didn't look out of place in a brief PK stint when the unit was depleted in the middle of December.

Unfortunately, the Flyers have been utterly crushed at even strength, both from a shot differential standpoint (44.23 percent Corsi For) and especially by quality-adjusted metrics (31.51 percent xG share) with Vorobyev on the ice. And with just five points in 33 career NHL games, it's not like he's making up for his advanced stat struggles by producing offense. Vorobyev is getting a long look right now, but so far, he's been unable to make his mark in a positive way this season.

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The Athletic / Projecting The Athletic Cup: Who wins our imaginary best-on-best international tournament?



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By Dom Luszczyzyn Jan 3, 2020 51

The rosters are set and the moment is here: It's time to find out which of the six teams are worthy of hoisting The Athletic Cup, our completely imaginary trophy for a best-on-best tournament that will never exist.

I know some of you like to say that the game is played on the ice, not the spreadsheet, but not this time where math will determine who (likely) wins and who (likely) loses.

Drumroll, please ...

On paper, where this tournament will unfortunately forever reside, it's Canada. It's always Canada and while that may be boring, actually seeing it play out with the best the sport has to offer attempting to dethrone the Great White North likely would've provided riveting hockey (unless Mike Babcock is coaching to win 1-0 every game). The amount of talent in the league would've made for a compelling tournament, and it's a damn shame we won't get to see it happen for the foreseeable future.

In a five-game round robin where the top four advance to the semis followed by a best-of-three final, Canada wins The Athletic Cup 44 percent of the time. That means there's still plenty of room for the other five teams to make their mark with the U.S. the second likeliest at 21 percent while the other four teams jostle for the remaining third. Here's how things shake out.

A five-game round robin coupled with a best-of-three final lowers the margin for error slightly, but in a single hockey game we all know anything can happen. While Canada would be favoured against every team, each of the other five teams still has a decent chance of pulling off an upset, with the U.S. having the greatest chance at 39 percent. Nothing is a slam dunk here with the biggest difference between two nations being Canada having a 75 percent chance over the Finns.

It's pretty tight across the board. Canada is still best with a slight leg up on the rest of the world, but the others have greatly bolstered their programs to the point where it wouldn't be a real shock to see any team hoist The Athletic Cup. Here's how each roster stacks up according to my model (keeping in mind that player values are very much privy to how a player is used, and there's no guarantee that things directly translate when ice time and usage changes).

Canada

Canada's the best of the best and unsurprisingly the team to beat until further notice. They have the best player in the world in Connor McDavid and a few other top 10 players sprinkled throughout like Nathan MacKinnon, Sidney Crosby, Brad Marchand and Patrice Bergeron.

The last two seasons haven't been kind to McDavid's defensive numbers (likely due to his extreme usage) and it's why he doesn't rate as highly as he should, especially on a per-minute basis. On a team with a better supporting cast than the Oilers, though, he would be unstoppable and there's no shortage of winger options that can complement him here. At first glance, MacKinnon's talents may seem wasted on the third line but a team is in a good spot when their second or third best option would be arguably the best option on any other team here.

Canada is deep at every position and ranks as the best or second-best across the board with plenty of reserves that could've entertained a spot in the lineup as well. With a country bursting in

hockey talent, it's hard to make mistakes with roster construction and even those that are made can be forgiven – but with every other team gaining ground, there are still some question marks.

For me, the two biggest ones are the Jets players, Mark Scheifele and Josh Morrissey. There's no doubt both are talented and worthy of consideration, but with how Winnipeg has struggled to control games this year with both of them on the ice, there may be more worthy options. Up front, Jonathan Huberdeau, on pace for 111 points this season, immediately springs to mind. He's a natural winger, which would open a spot on McDavid's right (hello MacKinnon), and allow one of Brayden Point or John Tavares to move up the lineup.

On defence, Morrissey is a tricky one, mostly because Canada's biggest weakness is the left side defence leaving few alternatives if you want to keep handedness in mind (I personally chose Shea Theodore). There's also the argument that Morrissey's numbers this year have tanked mostly because he's spent the majority of the year fighting off tough minutes next to Tucker Poolman. That's not an ideal situation for any player and he may look closer to the player he's been before next to Shea Weber, who's had a strong resurgent season or Alex Pietrangelo, who should've been on my initial roster (apologies to the Pietrangelo family).

Canada's biggest "weakness" is in net where there's no clearcut answer but still some decent options. Both Eric Duhatschek and I went with Marc-Andre Fleury and Braden Holtby (the latter for his big-game acumen) with Fleury as the starter, and while that doesn't appear as solid as years past, Fleury has put up some really strong numbers since moving to Vegas. Even if either falters, there's enough firepower up front to make it work and the very competent defence corps should make things easy for them.

There's no easy way to beat this powerhouse and it's why they're the unsurprising favourites. Canada finishes in the top three 80 percent of the time.

USA

With the emergence of Auston Matthews and Jack Eichel as a lethal one-two punch down the middle, the Americans are set up for greatness and the best threat to Canada's throne. That duo, who have played exceptionally this season, gives the U.S. the second-best centre depth at the tournament. Couple that with a strong group of wingers, excellent depth on defence and the best goaltending tandem and this looks to be the best Team USA on paper in a very long time.

While the U.S. has made great strides over the years, it's worth noting that the percentage chance of beating Canada in a single game of 39 percent is identical to what it was two years ago when we did a similar exercise for the 2018 Olympics (where it was also 39 percent). There's still a lot of ground to gain and it would've been a treat to have the question of how the U.S. stacks up to Canada finally answered on the ice, rather than here in this column.

What's hurting Team USA the most right now is that the team's trio of elite wingers in the top six haven't really looked the part this season, leading to some questions regarding whether the forward group can truly stack up to Canada's attack. Patrick Kane is still posting excellent point totals, but the defensive questions to his game not only linger, they've been exacerbated with Chicago's continued descent toward the NHL's basement. Blake Wheeler was once a puck possession hound, but as he's aged that part of his game has declined. And then there's Johnny Gaudreau, the electrifying left winger who's really struggling to find his game this season, playing at a pedestrian (by his standards) 61-point pace, which would be the lowest of his career.



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That leaves all three players – who can be elite at their peak – with room to improve with regards to these projections. That could potentially bridge some of the gap between the U.S. and Canada. The talent is very obviously there to shine on the world stage, but as they're currently playing though, it's a bit more murky to value them at that level. Essentially, they'll have to prove it. The bottom six wingers are all young and ready to step up if need be and that leaves a bright future for this program. The U.S. could stand to gain some stronger centre depth after the big two, and in time it's likely Jack Hughes can fill that role. That time isn't now, though.

The defence here is very steady from No. 1-6, a necessity for stopping Canada. Ryan Suter and Ryan McDonagh are getting up there in age, but they have been some of the best defensive defenders in the league throughout their careers and are now ready to pass the torch to players like Seth Jones, Jaccob Slavin and Charlie McAvoy. Should the team need more dynamic play, Quinn Hughes is an option that's ready to step in too, but it helps already having John Carlson at the top of the depth chart. He's having an incredible offensive season and should be a huge asset to America's attack as they haven't had a player with his skill set on the back end in a long time.

In a short tournament, though, the biggest X-factor is goaltending and that's where Team USA shines greatly above the rest with three elite options. John Gibson is the starter, arguably the best goalie in the world given how many goals he's saved above expected over the past few years. His 2019-20 hasn't been very great, however, but that's OK when the next two options are Connor Hellebuyck, who's singlehandedly pulling the Jets (with that defence) into a playoff spot, and Ben Bishop, who's stopped 93 percent of shots faced over the last two seasons.

It's an embarrassment of riches and that, more than anything could be the key to winning The Athletic Cup. It's the U.S.'s trump card. The Americans have the talent to do damage, and goaltending can be what puts them over the top. When the top team's greatest asset is a lethal attack, it helps to have a brick wall in your arsenal. The U.S. is the only team other than Canada that finishes top three more than half the time.

Sweden

There's Canada, then there's a big gap, then there's Team USA, then there's another gap, then there's the rest. Sweden was once much closer to the top of the food chain on the back of routinely having the best defence at any best-on-best tournament. I'm not so sure that's the case anymore and losing that competitive advantage might be Sweden's downfall.

Victor Hedman is still very much an elite player, there's no question about that as he's one of the top defensive scorers this season while also earning 56 percent of the goal share with a plus-11 5-on-5 goal differential. By Game Score he's fourth in the league and with a strong second half could be in the mix for another Norris Trophy nomination. The rest of the group, though, has seen their play drop below their sterling reputations.

Erik Karlsson isn't the problem in San Jose, but he's on a sub-60 point pace and is only break-even in expected goal share this year while getting outscored. John Klingberg's season looks even more nightmarish as he isn't even at half a point per game while providing similarly pedestrian 5-on-5 numbers. Mattias Ekholm is getting outchanced and outscored now that P.K. Subban isn't next to him. Ditto for Hampus Lindholm who used to be an analytics darling, but has looked like a shadow of himself this season. Then there's Oliver Ekman-Larsson who is also getting outchanced and isn't putting up any semblance of offence worthy of his price tag or reputation.

It's a dark mark on what was once the backbone of Sweden, with five of the team's six usual stalwarts all seeing a downgrade in their overall value this season. That was the team's most obvious strength and while Sweden looks balanced without many weaknesses, there aren't many obvious strengths here either; nothing that can overwhelm the competition.

Sweden's forwards are usually great and that's no different here, but compared to the others, there still likely isn't enough top-end, game-breaking talent here. There are few weak links, but compared to other rosters here, very few real strong links. The emergence of Elias Pettersson as a big-time force has certainly helped; he's the team's best forward already. In net, Robin Lehner is very strong and a solid heir to the King's throne, but he's not much different than the best starters other teams can offer.

There's depth and balance throughout, but overall there just aren't enough weapons to stack up against the two power-house teams. It's why Sweden has fallen closer to the rest of the pack.

Europe

In what is perhaps the only relatively spicy take of the order of team ability here, it's Europe that appears to have the fourth-best team – not Russia. It's thanks to a trio of elite talents that bolster Europe's chances as David Pastrnak and Leon Draisaitl have taken the league by storm this season with their incredible offensive ability while Roman Josi mans the blueline in a season where he's become a legitimate Norris contender. The Czech-German-Swiss triumvirate wouldn't be possible in a format where each played for their country, but here they can be the core of a very strong team. Pastrnak, in particular, is a player my model has loved more than most and he's proving that this year with exceptional numbers while leading the league in goals.

Given what happened at the last World Cup, where Team Europe found a way to make it to the final, it should be no surprise that Europe finds a way here to compete, this time looking even stronger by adding the Czech Republic's talent to its roster. Pastrnak is the star, but Jakub Voracek, Jakub Vrana, Tomas Tatar, Tomas Hertl and David Krejci provide strong offensive support, giving the team capable depth. With the strong centre depth available compared to the wing, I would've liked to see Draisaitl and/or Tomas Hertl slide over to push Krejci up and bring Nico Hischier in, but in any case, there's still a lot to like here.

The defence isn't anything special outside of Josi, but there are some capable players here with Zdeno Chara and Erik Cernak potentially providing a solid shutdown pair. They'll be tasked with helping out a very strong duo in Philipp Grubauer and Frederik Andersen who will split starts for Europe. Both goalies are among the league's best and if one falters, the other is right there to step up.

It's a good group, one that can make some noise and compete with Sweden, Russia and Finland for the third and fourth seed. It may not be good enough for anything more, though.

Russia

This is probably not where the Russians expect to be, but of all the rosters, theirs happens to be the most fundamentally flawed.

There's no doubt this team has offensive firepower – they always do. Alex Ovechkin, Evgeny Kuznetsov, Artemi Panarin, Evgeni Malkin, Nikita Kucherov, Alex Radulov, Evgeny Dadonov, Vladimir Tarasenko – the gang is all here and they're ready to fill the net with pucks. Add Andrei Svechnikov and Nikita Gusev to that crew and you get an absolutely lethal group that can strike fear into any



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opponent. Some countries struggle to develop game-breakers – in Russia, future stars are practically born with it.

Malkin is especially worth mentioning as he's arguably been one of the league's best players this season, posting an average Game Score of 1.87 thanks not only to his incredible production but also his exceptionally strong two-way game. With Crosby out, he's been a force.

There's a lot of talent here, and yet, here the Russians are: Close to the bottom and it's because of three problems. The first is the big hole down the middle. The Russians have plenty of forward talent, but only two capable centers. It's why I slotted Tarasenko there in my own mock-up, as I'd rather spare a few draws to get him ice time than give too many minutes to one of Ivan Barbashev or Vladislav Namestnikov. Good luck with either against Canada, USA or Sweden down the middle.

The second problem is on defence. Ivan Provorov and Mikhail Sergachev are the start of something great and significantly better options than what the team has had in year's past, but there's still a severe lack of depth. Columbus' Vladislav Gavrikov (who Eric Duhatschek wanted to slide into his roster, but I couldn't accommodate him do to taking some time off – sorry Eric!) is a pleasant surprise in his first season, but the group as a whole still has a lot of issues. That Nikita Zaitsev is the only right-handed option is a big concern.

The third problem is perhaps the biggest: It's in net. Usually, Russia was able to survive its defensive shortcomings because they had elite talent in net. Neither Andrei Vasilevskiy (.906) or Sergei Bobrovsky (.897) exude much confidence on that front this season and while Semyon Varlamov has been better, Russia does not have a Barry Trotzki behind their bench to help with defensive structure.

If the game is a track meet, the Russians might be able to still hang thanks to their firepower, but there's too many issues here to take the team as seriously as the top contenders. Russia only finishes in the top three 40 percent of the time.

Finland

The first thing I told Craig Custance when I saw his Finland roster was how good Finland was looking of late. Aleksander Barkov, Sebastian Aho, Mikko Rantanen, Patrik Laine and Teuvo Teravainen are game-changers up front and on the back end, there's finally a true stud in Miro Heiskanen. With decent depth, this team looks very competitive – a big step up from the last World Cup where half of Finland was angry with my assessment that the team would struggle mightily (they did).

This is a significantly improved group and while it's enough to do some damage, it's still difficult to put the Finns ahead of any other group here. They're close enough to make things interesting in any given game against Sweden, Russia or Europe where their chances are between 40-50 percent, but Finland would still be underdogs in every game.

While the team has formulated some capable depth up front, it's still not enough to match-up well against other countries. The top six can hang, but the bottom six is still mostly full of second-line talent at best, as well as Kaapo Kakko who may not be ready for prime time yet – though it's fair to say he probably looks better in this environment than he does in New York.

The bigger problem is on defence where the team has a full stable of capable support, but no legitimate top pair calibre players outside Heiskanen who's already having a campaign worthy of Norris buzz in his sophomore season. Everyone else is fine, but that's probably

not enough against Canada or the U.S. and despite the clear improvements made, it's still the worst group here. Goaltending appears to be solid at first glance with Tuukka Rask posting a .923 SV% this season and Pekka Rinne's strong reputation, but the former has the benefit of the fifth easiest workload this season – a benefit he won't see behind the Finnish defence – and is actually only average by goals saved above expected, while the latter has seen his numbers tank to an .890 SV% this year.

There are some excellent pieces here and the future is bright, but for now the whole is still not good enough to contend in Finland. In a tournament featuring the best of the best, one nation has to finish last. For now, that's Finland.

What about Canada's 'B' team?

Since readers asked, I ran the simulation using Sean McIndoe's Canada B team and was shocked to discover they would be a hair better than Team USA. Canada has a lot of uncertainty in net and on the back-end and that meant a lot of strong choices leftover.

Thanks to the strength of Dougie Hamilton, Kris Letang, Ryan Ellis, and Shea Theodore, Canada B's backend grades out just as strong as Canada A's already tournament-leading defence corps.

In net, both Jordan Binnington and Darcy Kuemper represent improvements over Canada A's tandem (though there's likely a lot less trust in that with their small samples and the fact they play in front of such stingy defences in the NHL).

Couple that with a still deep forward group with underrated talents like Jonathan Huberdeau, Sean Couturier and Brendan Gallagher and you get a team that would still be favoured over every other team besides Canada's top squad.

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The Athletic / Projecting Team Europe: By adding Czechs to the mix, team of leftovers looks like a contender

By Scott Burnside Jan 3, 2020 29

Once upon a time when the NHL actually had a somewhat viable international plan, part of it looked like this: Have two made-up teams at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey — a team of young stars from North America and a team of stars from nations that couldn't readily field a team of NHL players on their own (Slovakia, Switzerland, Germany, Slovenia, Austria etc.).

As it turned out, it was a pretty good plan and the World Cup was the better for it. Team North America was the most exciting team in the tournament even if it failed to make the elimination round, denied in a tie-breaker. And Team Europe, led by current Buffalo Sabres coach Ralph Krueger, knocked off powerful Sweden in the semifinals and faced Canada in the final. Then, according to the grand plan, when the World Cup returned for the next go-round, presumably in four years' time, it would feature a more traditional Olympic-style tournament made up entirely of national teams.

Of course, that plan was shelved because ... well, because that's the NHL and the NHLPA. But our tournament needs an even number of teams and so, with all due respect to the Czech Republic



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who had their own team at the World Cup, they don't in this arrangement so we're doing our own Team Leftover and it's going to be pretty damned good:

Forwards

Seriously, Leon Draisaitl and David Pastrnak might be the best one-two punch in this tournament. This team is going to be surprisingly deep down the middle with two-time Selke Trophy winner Anze Kopitar and Tomas Hertl rounding out the top three pivots. Team Europe will also feature good speed, size and lots of finish on the wings. We've added Nico Hischier, the 2017 No. 1 overall pick, even if he's struggled along with most of his mates in New Jersey this season.

With Kopitar and Lars Eller there will be good two-way performers, although it hurt us to leave Radek Faksa and Pierre-Edouard Bellemare off this squad, both of whom are top-notch penalty killers; we figured we'd need this team to be built with as much skill as possible to keep up with the other nations. Other notable omissions (or potential injury call-ups if you'd like to look at it that way) include Ondrej Palat, Oliver Bjorkstrand, Filip Zadina, Kevin Fiala and Nino Niederreiter. Told you this team was going to be solid.

Even former Team Europe scout Sean Burke thinks so.

"I really like the team. Hard to argue with that lineup or pick it apart," said Burke, who was GM of Team Canada at the Spengler Cup in Switzerland and is a good bet to earn his first NHL GM job in the coming offseason.

Defense

OK, this is where things get a bit dicey for this team. The group is led by Predators captain Roman Josi but is admittedly a bit thin in terms of being able to produce points. Tough? Yes. This big group won't get pushed around in their own zone. The challenge will be in getting pucks to the talented forward group. We didn't have Capitals defender Jonas Siegenthaler on our list but we could have.

"Defense is the obvious weaker link if we are looking at an area to improve," Burke said. "It is surprising that there are not more top-line European D-men but it is still a solid group, just not spectacular."

We agree.

Goaltenders

Whatever shortcomings the defensive corps might have it should be more than made up for by rock-solid goaltending.

In fact it was a painful decision getting this down to a three-man group because you could have made a case for all of Thomas Greiss, Jaroslav Halak, Frederik Andersen and Philipp Grubauer. In the end, we went with Grubauer, Andersen and Greiss and we'd name Grubauer our starter with Andersen our No. 2 guy based on Grubauer's play in the postseason last year as 8th-seed Colorado ousted Calgary in the first round and then took San Jose to Game 7 in a tight second-round series. Still, it's a tough call to have to make regardless of which way you go in goal. They might not have the profile of other netminders in this collection of the world's best but have no doubt they're going to keep Team Europe in most contests.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens' Ilya Kovalchuk signing a 'no-risk' move that could pay off

Eric Engels | @EricEngels January 3, 2020, 3:13 PM

BROSSARD, Que. — Last time I watched Ilya Kovalchuk play was the last time he appeared in an NHL game, and the impression he left, not only on me but also on one pro scout whose opinion I hold in high regard, wasn't a very good one.

"Any team with actual scouts doesn't touch Kovalchuk," the scout in question said after the Montreal Canadiens beat Kovalchuk and the Los Angeles Kings 3-2 at the Bell Centre on Nov. 9.

"Can't move, doesn't want to move, and his shot, which used to be lethal, is not good anymore," the scout added.

It was in the leadup to Kovalchuk's relationship with the Kings — and his three-year, \$18.75-million contract — being terminated that Sportsnet's Anthony Stewart sent out a series of tweets asking fans of several NHL teams if they were interested in the 36-year-old's services. He photoshopped Kovalchuk into several uniforms and said, "I'll hang up and listen."

Here was my response to Stewart's tweet showing Kovalchuk in a Canadiens jersey:

Can't even keep up with their minor league affiliate.

— Eric Engels (@EricEngels) November 13, 2019

And now, with the news coming down on Friday that Kovalchuk signed a one-year, two-way contract with the Canadiens — a deal that will pay him a prorated \$700,000 salary in the NHL and \$70,000 in the AHL — that theory might actually be put to the test.

In all seriousness, when Marc Bergevin stood in front of reporters some hours after making this move and defended it by saying it was "no-risk," I was nodding my head in agreement.

As Bergevin pointed out, the Canadiens are missing four of their top nine forwards in Jonathan Drouin, Brendan Gallagher, Joel Armia and Paul Byron, and, realistically, only Gallagher has a chance of returning at some point over the next nine games the Canadiens will play before taking their bye week. And after watching them completely outplay the Tampa Bay Lightning in a 2-1 loss on Thursday, watching their all-out effort lead to 70 shot attempts and no more than one goal, Bergevin made a move thinking it can't hurt to try something.

And this move wasn't done with any illusions of Kovalchuk coming to Montreal and suddenly becoming an incarnation of his former self — a two-time 50 goal scorer who topped the 30-goal mark in eight of his 11 NHL seasons — but more with a hope that he can potentially take Jordan Weal's spot next to Jesperi Kotkaniemi and Ryan Poehling, and finish a couple of the chances Weal has missed in not producing more than a goal in his last 22 games.

It's a move made, in concert with the deal Bergevin swung on Thursday to bring in veteran defenceman Marco Scandella from the Buffalo Sabres in exchange for a 2020 fourth-round pick, which could help the Canadiens earn a winning record between now and the bye week. A move that cost close to nothing, but could pay off.

"He has to buy in," said Bergevin of Kovalchuk, who scored three goals and had nine points in 17 games with the Kings this season.

"It's his last chance."



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Canadiens centre Nate Thompson, who played with Kovalchuk before being traded to Montreal at last year's deadline, believes the big Russian might make good on that chance.

"Sometimes you go to a new team, new coaches, new players, and sometimes it can gel," Thompson said after Friday's practice. "I think it could fit. Kovy's a guy who can make plays. He's good offensively, he's a big body. We're a team that skates really well, we make plays, and I think that can bode well for him."

Thompson said Kovalchuk is as hard a worker as he's come across and said he would be extremely motivated.

When Bergevin was asked if he could potentially be disruptive to the team's chemistry, he said there were no red flags about Kovalchuk's character in his due diligence.

"(Canadiens assistant GM) Scott Mellanby had him as a captain in Atlanta, I've never heard anything bad about Kovy," the GM continued. "He's a hard worker, he's a good person. Guys that perform, they want to score ... I get that, and in L.A. it didn't work out. I talked to (Kings GM Rob Blake), he's never caused problems. He's a good person, I did check that out."

Whether or not Kovalchuk can be a good player is highly questionable.

You have to think part of the reason Bergevin had no issue convincing him to take a two-way contract worth such a negligible amount — and he said he had no issue convincing him — is because no one else was really interested in his services.

The hope has to be that Kovalchuk is sparked by that.

For what it's worth, the Canadiens players we spoke to on Friday were encouraged by the news that came down as they were hitting the ice for practice. Nick Suzuki, the 20-year-old rookie, called himself a big fan of Kovalchuk's. Defenceman Victor Mete said he used to regularly choose Kovalchuk as a player he'd use to build a team with in his EA Sports NHL games.

And then top-line centre Phillip Danault got to the root of what Kovalchuk's acquisition means to this Canadiens team at this moment.

"That (Bergevin) helps us like that — I think he believes in us and he wants to give us a little hand," Danault said. "We have so many guys out, Army, Gally, all these guys, and that's two righties right there and two top-two (right wingers), so Kovy's not going to be (a) bad (thing) for us."

If his work visa gets sorted on time, Kovalchuk will make his Canadiens debut at the Bell Centre on Saturday against the Pittsburgh Penguins, though Bergevin did caution that was improbable.

But Scandella will suit up next to Cale Fleury on the team's third defence pairing, and the Canadiens will begin their push to stay alive in the playoff race.

"I've watched our team perform ... they're not giving up," said Bergevin.

It's clear with the moves he made over the last 24 hours that the Canadiens GM isn't giving up, either.

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1169362 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / The lessons that propelled Justin Williams to three Stanley Cups

Chris Johnston | @reporterchris January 3, 2020, 12:04 PM

Long before Justin Williams won three Stanley Cups or played 1,000 games or scored on the first shift of his NHL career as a teenager, they told him he was too small to play for the best junior team in his hometown.

Well before everything stopped dead in Cobourg for a parade on a steamy July afternoon in 2014, Williams faced more than one defining moment where he was forced to decide whether it was worth continuing to chase his hockey dream.

But that steamy July day happened to be the same one they memorialized his biggest professional accomplishments on the town sign. Whether you're driving in from the north on Burnham St. or the east on King St., you're now greeted by the same message: "Welcome to Cobourg. Home of Stanley Cup champions Justin Williams & Steve Smith."

Imagine that?

Williams was bestowed the honour just five weeks after he'd accepted the Conn Smythe Trophy at centre ice in Los Angeles, and it wasn't entirely clear which meant more to him. Instead of 20,000 fans at Staples Center, he stood in front of a couple of hundred locals at Victoria Park. Rather than shaking hands with NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, he watched then Cobourg mayor Gil Brocanier unveil a replica of the new town signpost.

The emotions were different, but even a stoic like Williams couldn't disguise the fact it made him emotional.

"It's pretty overwhelming for me. I'm just like all of you," he told the crowd while standing on stage at the bandshell. "Just from Cobourg, a small town, and doing the best I can with what I'm given."

The more you understand that last sentence, the more you will come to understand a career that defies easy explanation.

Celebrate Our Community. Celebrate Our Game.

Williams was deemed too slight to play a regular shift for the Cobourg Cougars at age 16 and won a job with the rough-and-tumble Philadelphia Flyers before his 19th birthday. He was never an elite skater, never the top scorer or best player on any of his teams during 19 years in the NHL, and yet virtually every teammate he ever had would trade achievements in an instant.

Even the "Mr. Game 7" persona he privately wishes never came into existence can be traced to the way he was raised and supported by a tight-knit family in a town the orders its collars in blue.

There's both an honesty to the way of life in Cobourg and the way Williams approached his existence in the world's top hockey league. He was forever mindful that someone was gunning for his job and believed he continually had to prove himself.

Williams stayed present, did the work, embraced the grind and did the best he could with what he was given. He possessed a will that couldn't be bent. And a passion that was unrelenting.

The kid from Cobourg set a goal of winning the Stanley Cup and achieved it. And then he did it again. And again.

"You can do anything with your life and nobody has the right to tell you that you can't, even though they will," Williams said in an



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address to the hometown crowd after that third Cup win in 2014. "Trust me: People will tell you you can't. I've been told 'no' many times in my life, I've been cut from several teams when I was younger, but I persevered.

"Sometimes the word 'no' — or someone telling you that you can't do something — is exactly what you need to hear to get yourself to the next level. Prove 'em wrong, believe in yourself."

Imagine if Williams had decided to pack it in after the AAA Quinte Red Devils cut him loose? Or if he'd chosen not to go play Jr. C in Colborne when the Jr. A team in Cobourg had no use for him? What if he had stopped pushing when the Ontario Hockey League's Plymouth Whalers sent him away for a stint with a lower-level team in Michigan?

Then there's no parade, no name on the town sign, no "Justin Williams Hockey Camp" in Cobourg every July. There are likely none of the private acts of generosity he's quietly known to perform in the community, either.

There certainly wouldn't have been all of those nights in his childhood basement where his parents, Denise and Craig, performed the same ritual before watching him play more than 1,200 games: Lighting a candle, listening to the broadcast call from his first career NHL goal and linking fingers for good luck.

Most importantly, a town of fewer than 20,000 residents in Southern Ontario might never have come to appreciate one of its most influential homegrown role models.

When Williams paraded the Stanley Cup down King St. a few summers back, an overwhelming number of those lining the sidewalks were kids. After taking the microphone he urged them to "shoot for the moon — and when you get there, grab the stars." He told them to train to be a champion: "The best construction worker, the best doctor, the best veterinarian, the best councilman, policeman, teacher that you can be. And trust me that it will feel real rewarding when you do."

Like many people from small towns, Williams had to go elsewhere to realize his dream. He actually started playing minor hockey in neighbouring Port Hope and commuted to places like Belleville, Colborne and Vaughan while climbing the ranks, before eventually moving in with a billet family in Michigan once he graduated to the OHL.

He's made NHL stops in Philadelphia, Carolina, Los Angeles and Washington, and became a dual U.S. citizen a few years back.

This current hockey season is basically the first one Williams has missed since he could walk. He's kept in contact with the game by coaching his son Jaxon's team in Raleigh, N.C., while also skating three or four mornings per week in case he decides to resume his NHL career after taking a hiatus in September to ponder his future.

That decision could be finalized any day now.

If Williams chooses to come back, he will be coming back for one reason only: To chase another Stanley Cup, to try to climb that mountain again, to give the folks back home another reason to throw a parade in his honour.

There's not a soul in Cobourg who doubts he can make that dream a reality.

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Sportsnet.ca / Five trade candidates for Flames to acquire before deadline

Eric Francis | @EricFrancis January 3, 2020, 2:21 PM

Brad Treliving made no bones about it – the cap space he opened up by trading Michael Frolik will be used by the trade deadline.

The departure of the versatile Czech and his \$4.3 million cap hit will ultimately land the Flames far more than the fourth-round draft pick Buffalo sent their way Thursday.

"We didn't trade to keep it in our pocket," said Treliving of the oh-so-valuable cap space.

"Our intention is to go out and make the team better. This is a big part of it."

The question over the next 52 days in Calgary now revolves around who?

Which lads around the NHL will the Flames target and ultimately close in on by the Feb. 24 trade deadline?

While adding depth to the blue line is on every GM's wish list, the most pressing need the Flames have is scoring.

One year removed from being the league's second-most prolific offensive unit, the Flames now sit 22nd, and could most definitely use another top-six forward capable of filling the net.

There are plenty of players with expiring contracts on borderline teams that fit that bill, setting the stage for the type of rental the Flames are prime candidates to acquire.

With a smidge under \$2 million in projected cap space (\$4.7 million in deadline cap space), the Flames could essentially take on a \$4 million player at this midway point in the season. As the countdown to the deadline draws closer and the amount owing players on their deals diminishes, the Flames can take on even bigger salaries.

In addition to newfound cap space, the Flames also have several attractive young assets they can peddle in a deal.

Most importantly, the GM has an intense desire to up the ante on a team he feels is capable of far more than it has shown this year.

With all that in mind, here are the top five leading candidates:

TYLER TOFFOLI, RW, \$4.6 million

The 27-year-old LA Kings winger may be one of the most coveted targets for the Flames, given he's a right-shooting winger, where the Flames need the most help.

A 31-goal scorer four years ago, whose stock has been dropping ever since, there's no question the six-foot, 197-pound Scarborough, Ont., native will be moved by a Kings club expected to start selling off major assets soon as part of its rebuild.

Toffoli's prolific junior career in Ottawa included spending two seasons on the same team as Sean Monahan, perhaps adding to the allure of completing a line in Calgary with Johnny Gaudreau and Monahan.

CHRIS KREIDER, LW, \$4.65 million

The Rangers are rebuilding and would love to keep the 28-year old power forward in the fold, but at what cost? The American-born lefty



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is a six-foot-three, 217-pound bruiser who has scored 28 goals in two of the last three seasons.

The Flames got an up-close look at Kreider Thursday, when his physical play stood out as he establish a net-front presence the Flames would dearly love to add to their second power play unit, replacing Milan Lucic.

The Boston College star, who is close friends with Cam Talbot, would be a pure rental, as he seems destined to either re-up with the Rangers this summer, or land in some other high-profile U.S. market.

That doesn't mean the Rangers wouldn't like to first cash in on a few assets at the deadline with a trade of the associate captain, before taking another swing at him.

He has a limited no-trade clause, which could stand in the way of him being sent to Calgary, a la Nazem Kadri.

MIKE HOFFMAN, RW, \$5.87 million

Hoffman is one of the most intriguing possibilities as his team's playoff status will dictate whether he's on the move or not.

The Florida Panthers currently sit two points out of a wild card spot, and likely won't be much further ahead or behind that spot by the time the deadline rolls around, meaning his status could hold up some of the dealings.

The 30-year-old would be a great fit in Calgary as the left-handed sniper has thrived on the right wing, where the perennial 20-goal man in Ottawa scored 36 times with the Panthers last season.

Alas, you can cross him off the list of the Panthers surge back into a comfortable playoff spot in the next six weeks, as he's a big part of the top trio with Jonathan Huberdeau and Aleksander Barkov.

Although it's unlikely the Panthers can afford to re-sign him, he, too, has a limited no-trade clause.

ZACK KASSIAN, RW, \$1.95 million

Yes, I know, this one would be a tough one for Flames fans to swallow after years of hating the Oilers tough guy.

But hear me out.

Demand will be high for the gritty winger around the league due to his low cap hit and newfound scoring touch.

Yes, we all know the man with the career-high 15-goal season is on pace to double that this year because he's playing top-line minutes on Connor McDavid's right side.

But that, and his ruggedness, are part of why he might be a good fit in Calgary, as the team would love to add a right-handed shot like who can keep up with the big guns.

Again, the Oilers playoff probabilities will factor in heavily, as they'd never trade him if the playoffs seemed possible.

There's also the possibility he'll realize his future is brightest in Edmonton, where he could be convinced to re-sign before hitting free agency this summer.

EVGENII DADONOV, RW, \$4 million

A two-time 28-goal scorer since returning from the KHL in 2017, the 30-year-old Russian is in the same boat as Hoffman above.

If the Panthers remain in the playoff hunt he's an asset they wouldn't consider moving.

Alas, if things change he'd give the Flames a versatile option to play on any line, as well as the power play, where he moves over to the left side.

He's on pace for yet another 28-goal season despite currently playing on the third line.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' Pearson on pace for career year thanks to remarkable turnaround

Iain MacIntyre | @imacSportsnet January 3, 2020, 4:52 PM

VANCOUVER – If you had three guesses to name the Vancouver Canucks' leading scorer the last eight weeks, you would probably strike out because even Tanner Pearson wouldn't guess Tanner Pearson.

Elias Pettersson is going to the NHL All-Star Game, J.T. Miller has been a revelation on the West Coast and Brock Boeser is quietly constructing another excellent season.

But nobody on the Canucks' 6-40-9 Lotto Line has cashed in as much as Pearson has over the last 23 games, when the 27-year-old has amassed 10 goals and 24 points while continuing to play a two-way game that frequently sees him matched alongside centre Bo Horvat against the opposition's best forwards.

Pettersson has 23 points, including 13 goals, over this period and Miller and Boeser each has 21 points in Vancouver's last 23 games, so the internal scoring race is close.

But what makes Pearson's production especially remarkable is that the winger, who was traded by both the Los Angeles Kings and Pittsburgh Penguins last season, is suddenly on pace for a career year after enduring a 14-game goal drought that saw him collect just two assists from mid-October until mid-November.

After he went pointless on five shots in a 2-1 loss to the New Jersey Devils on Nov. 10, Pearson told Sportsnet: "I'm here to help the team win... and I'm not carrying my weight right now. I'm trying not to get frustrated but, at the same time, there's a tipping point for everything."

Well, things have tipped alright.

Pearson had a goal and two assists in the Canucks' 7-5 win Thursday against the Chicago Blackhawks. It was his second straight three-point game, and Vancouver's sixth consecutive victory.

Pearson, who learned his 200-foot game under former L.A. coach Darryl Sutter and won a Stanley Cup with the Kings in 2014, is on pace to shatter his previous-best of 44 points set during the 2016-17 season.

With 12 goals and 18 assists through 41 games, Pearson projects to tie his career-high of 24 goals. For the season, he is fifth on the Canucks in scoring and Vancouver is one of only two Western Conference teams with five forwards at 30 points or better. The Vegas Golden Knights are the other.



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"Last year, frustration set in for sure," Pearson said. "Even if you look at my 14-game goal-less streak this year, frustration could have crept in really easily there. But I was still getting my looks. I was an inch off on a shot or I hit a post. Eventually they were going to go in, and once one did, they kind of kept going in."

"I think after last year, it's been a bit easier not to get frustrated. I think I've learned to stick with it. When things aren't going your way, eventually they should if you just put your nose to the ground and keep working. I think that's what I took most out of last year."

A 2012 first-round draft pick from Barrie of the Ontario Hockey League, Pearson spent six years in the Kings organization before L.A. traded him to Pittsburgh for Carl Hagelin last Nov. 14. Only 3 1/2 months later, the Penguins forwarded him to the Canucks for Erik Gudbranson on Feb. 25.

Both Hagelin and Gudbranson have since changed teams again.

The Canucks are keeping Pearson.

"He's just a good all-around player who does a lot of grunt work that goes unnoticed," Canucks coach Travis Green said. "He has won. He knows what it takes to win and he knows the areas that are important on the ice. He's a good example for guys that play a 200-foot game and can still score, still get points."

Vancouver looks like a turning point for Pearson, who had nine goals in 19 games playing with Horvat at the end of last season.

"Our first meeting, he said: 'Come here and work. I don't really care about the rest of it,'" Pearson recalled. "That was encouraging because I didn't have to worry about putting up points. Then with hard work, the puck started going in and I finished the year strong. He had confidence in me."

Green explained: "When things haven't gone well for a player where it has gone well before, they can get inside their own head a little bit. There's something to be said, I think, for feeling like the coach believes in you or the team does."

At six-foot-one and 201 pounds – and with a Stanley Cup ring, which are scarce in the Vancouver dressing room – Pearson is built for playoff hockey. Actually, he's built for any hockey, but could be even more important to the Canucks in the second half of the season.

"The way I grew up in this league, if you were getting points but not doing your duty in your own end, you weren't going to play no matter how many points you put up," Pearson said. "I think for me, taking care of those things in D-zone coverage, making plays on the wall and being hard on the forecheck and that kind of stuff, that's where I find my game. And the (scoring) kind of takes care of itself."

The Canucks can match their longest winning streak in nine years when the New York Rangers visit Rogers Arena on Saturday.

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Sportsnet.ca / Senators' Mike Reilly excited to take advantage of new opportunity

Wayne Scanlan January 3, 2020, 4:22 PM

The Life of Reilly, if your name is Mike Reilly the hockey player, means a long end-around to land in Ottawa with the Senators at age 26.

Reilly, a Minnesota native who was a regular healthy scratch with the Montreal Canadiens, was about to head out the door for the Bell Centre Thursday to watch his Habs play the Tampa Bay Lightning – and then his phone rang.

It was Canadiens general manager Marc Bergevin telling Reilly to pack for Ottawa instead. The phone rang again, this time the National Capital welcome wagon represented by Senators GM Pierre Dorion. Oddly enough, the Senators face the same Lightning at the Canadian Tire Centre Saturday and Reilly will be on Ottawa's blueline.

"I'm definitely excited and I don't know if I was shocked or not but when I heard I was coming here – I know they've got a young team that's actually had a pretty good year," Reilly said after his first Senators practice Friday.

"When we played them that one game, we didn't overlook them – a fun group to be a part of it seems like," he says. "I want to take advantage of the opportunity."

There was a chance the six-foot-one, 195-pound defenceman might have joined the Senators years ago. Dorion says he was among those trying to land Reilly when he was a sought-after college free agent defenceman with the University of Minnesota in 2014-15.

As a 21-year-old, Reilly had a pretty big year as a junior with the Gophers – producing 42 points in 39 games to lead the team in scoring.

In the end, Reilly signed with the local Minnesota Wild, no surprise there. Over two seasons, from 2015-17, Reilly played 57 games as a third-pair defenceman, moving on to the Canadiens for a fifth-round pick in February of 2018.

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they've heard and what they think about it.

Reilly did get a chance to play with the Habs, seeing an average time on ice of 18:41 in 57 games last season (three goals and 11 points), but hardly played in the last 20 games of the season and was a regular healthy scratch this season, seeing action in 14 games.

"Something changed," was how Reilly described his altered status, although he took pains to thank everyone in the Canadiens organization for the chance to play there.

The Senators, desperate for help on defence, gave up minor league forward Andrew Sturtz and a fifth-round draft choice in 2021. Reilly is under contract for 2020-21 as well (at \$1.5 million), which is interesting. It means the Senators view him as possible insurance next season with such veterans as Mark Borowiecki, Ron Hainsey, Dylan DeMelo and Cody Golubeff eligible to become unrestricted free agents.

With Hainsey still on injured reserve and DeMelo just back practising with the team after breaking a finger, Reilly couldn't get here soon enough. Nikita Zaitsev is still day-to-day with a leg injury, meaning Ottawa is missing three veteran D-men; four if you include Christian Wolanin, out since training camp after requiring shoulder surgery. He could be back next month.

Senior Writer Ryan Dixon and NHL Editor Rory Boylen always give it 110%, but never rely on clichés when it comes to podcasting.



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Instead, they use a mix of facts, fun and a varied group of hockey voices to cover Canada's most beloved game.

Reilly will get to play in Ottawa, including on the power play now that prospect Erik Brannstrom has been sent back to AHL Belleville – a move made following Thursday's trade.

"Hopefully, I can take advantage of the power play opportunity here," Reilly says. "I think that's a strength of my game. Shoot the puck and be deceptive. And just go out, have fun and play hockey."

Reilly likes to join the rush and can move the puck. His play away from the puck is a work in progress.

"My defensive game has been questioned by a lot of people but I think it's come a long way," Reilly says. In Montreal, head coach Claude Julien helped him be more aggressive as a defender, he says.

Julien's counterpart in Ottawa, Senators head coach D. J. Smith, is pleased to have a warm NHL defenceman, given what has been going on with his roster. After a pretty good month of December, the Senators have been a leaky ship recently, giving up a ton of chances in a 6-3 loss to Florida Thursday, Ottawa's third straight defeat.

"He's certainly going to help us break out of our zone," Smith said of Reilly. "He's a guy that's been at a couple of stops now and I think now might be the time for him — an opportunity to play and see what he can do."

"He's played in the National Hockey League and with our situation in the back end, he's certainly going to help us."

Reilly might end up with DeMelo as a partner, but DeMelo won't be back until Tuesday at the earliest. In the meantime, he could play with Goloubeff, one of the few familiar Senators – the two share the same off-season trainer in Toronto. Reilly also played with veteran Ottawa forward Tyler Ennis briefly with the Wild.

"It's a little nerve-wracking coming in because I don't know too many people but hockey guys are really similar with whatever team it is," Reilly says. "And they understand how the business works."

"Guys get traded, or move up and down. I feel like the guys are a great group in here, I've heard good things."

"Nate Thompson (of the Canadiens) played here a couple of years ago. He texted me and said it was a good group in here. That made me more at ease."

Not a lot of those Thompson-era Senators remain. And more will be gone in the next month or so as the drumbeat sounds toward the Feb. 24 trade deadline. Dorion, whose cell phone broke down in Germany as he was trying to close this deal, has his phone working again. It will be busy.

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1169366 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Q&A: Mike Legg on 'The Michigan Goal,' inspiring an offensive phenomenon

Sonny Sachdeva | @sachdevasonny January 3, 2020, 11:26 AM

TORONTO — For today's NHL crowd, it's been dubbed a 'lacrosse-style goal.' Or maybe 'The Svechnikov.' But for two decades, it was known only by one name: 'The Michigan Goal.'

Before the Hurricanes young gun was stuffing pucks into the top corner from behind the net, fooling the likes of David Rittich and Connor Hellebuyck with that now-signature move, before Nils Hoglander joined the long list of others who've tried it over the years in different leagues and tournaments, before all that, there was only Mike Legg. The original dazzler.

It was Mar. 24, 1996, during a game against the University of Minnesota, when Legg first unleashed the lacrosse-style goal on the hockey world, finding some space to breathe behind the opposing net and leaving the opposition stunned as he whipped the puck onto his stick and whirled around to tuck it uncontested above the netminder's shoulder — a goal like none had ever seen. It was a pivotal moment in that game, a pivotal moment in Michigan's championship run. And, given it spawned 23 years of attempts to replicate it at the NHL level, a pivotal moment in the sport as a whole.

But the on-ice world in which Legg dared to pull off The Michigan Goal barely resembled the dangle-loving one in which Svechnikov recreated it. Back then, choosing to embarrass opponents with such overt displays of skill came at a cost.

"I had my life threatened. I had a bounty on my head," Legg says. "At the start of games, guys would come up to me and say, 'If you're going to try that tonight, we are bench-clearing-brawling you. Like, we will jump you.' I'm like, 'Oh okay, that's nice to know.'"

We've probably all seen the clip — Legg finding the puck on his stick, his head rising to scan the ice in front of him, the move, the goal, the teammates mobbing him in celebration.

What we didn't see was everything that came after, the vitriol from players in the next game and the one after that, from those not keen on being on the receiving end of Legg's offensive innovation.

"If somebody on the other team knew it was me that had scored that goal, somebody would definitely come out and have a little chat with me. 'You try that in the game, you're dead.' Absolutely," Legg says, recalling the bounties offered for stifling his offensive creativity. "I remember — I won't mention any names, because it was a different time back then — but I remember I did it against one team and nothing really happened. And then the next time we went and played in their building, I knew a guy on the team and he gave me a heads up, he said, 'If you try that in the game, whoever's on the ice that doesn't jump you after you attempt it — score or not score — they're not getting paid this week.'"

"So that game of course I tried it," he says with a chuckle. "Actually, I picked it up and instead of going in the short side, I tried to reach around and go all the way around the goalie. I hit his far shoulder, and it dropped down, he covered it up — he kind of knew me, and he looked at me shaking his head, like, 'Look out.'"

If nothing else, the embarrassed opponents were at least true to their word.

"The first guy broke his stick on my shoulder. Luckily I kept my balance and grabbed another guy, went at him. So it was kind of funny — it was just a different time, right?"

More than just a different time, it was the inverse of the game as today's generation knows it, where skill rules all and the pugilists, the brawlers, seem a rare breed appealing to only a certain subset of fan. In Legg's day, a flashy display of stickhandling skill was as much about battling through the haze of physicality, about risking it



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all despite the gruff response sure to come, as it was about simply being able to pull off a move.

But the game's evolved, and with that growth has come room for players like Svechnikov to flex their offensive ability, to get the fans out of their seats without fear of retribution.

"It's pretty neat how it's just going crazy again. I'm blown away by it," Legg says. "I'm excited for the game, for the evolution of that goal and what's going to happen next."

With the phenomenon he started 23 years ago finding renewed life following its recent emergence at the NHL level, Legg caught up with Sportsnet to reflect on how The Michigan Goal came about in the first place, what it was like to see it make it to the big leagues, and what its arrival means for the future of creativity in the NHL.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Sportsnet: Take us through the original Michigan Goal from '96. What do you remember about the actual play and what you were feeling as you scored that goal?

Mike Legg: We had to win that game to go on to the Final Four. It was just practicing it and getting so comfortable with it that in different situations, any situation, you could pretty much pull it off 98 per cent of the time. But leading into the playoffs, I remember telling myself, 'It's playoff time, there's got to be a better option. There has to be a better option. Don't do it.' Because I got so comfortable, I could pick it up forehand, backhand, just at practice. But I'm like, 'Don't think about it. Get it out of your head, get it out of your head.'

And then it just happened. I was centring Johnny Madden and he gets tackled behind the net. I just pulled the puck back in behind the net — where, you know, you have a little bit of protection, you can get your head up — and it was so familiar in that position. I know a lot of people were like, 'What were you thinking?' It was more of a comfort zone, like 'I've done this 100 times. I could do this' — boom, put it up, put it in.

I was more happy that I'd completed something that I'd practiced for so long. I never knew it would grow legs like this and still be talked about today. That's just nuts.

SN: You score and the guys all mob you on the ice — what were they saying to you in that scrum celebrating the goal?

Legg: Oh yeah, 'I can't believe you did that, I can't believe you did that!' In that game too, we were getting outshot like four to one, we were down two to one, and something had to change. We were just getting dominated. I've always said, you've got to change the pace — somebody's got to hammer somebody, run somebody, have a good solid hit on somebody, change the pace of the game somehow.

That was just familiar. It totally flipped after that. And yeah, we went on to win that game of course, and went on and win a national championship, which probably made it even bigger at the time.

SN: What was it like getting back to the bench, seeing the effect it had on the team, and in the room after the game — what was everybody saying to you?

Legg: I remember going back and it was a lot of head-shaking, like, 'I can't believe you did it in a game' type stuff. I know on our team, I wasn't one of the [star players]. Like, Brendan Morrison and John Madden and Jason Botterill and Warren Luhning, these guys had lots of pressure on them leading into the Final Four. Before real social media kicked off, it was the phone calls and the meetings with all those guys all the time for what was going to happen to them in the future.

And it seemed like it was a relief of pressure a little bit for them, and we could all kind of concentrate on different things in our own games a little bit, and get those other guys away from the media just bombarding them a little bit.

SN: You mentioned you had done it so many times in practice it was almost automatic at that point — where did you first see that move and how long did it take you to master it?

Legg: I first saw something like that from a guy named Billy Armstrong — he's a couple of years older than me and he was a part of the New Jersey Devils organization at the time. I remember it was like a summer skate — I didn't know Billy, I didn't talk to him. I was too nervous, I was a bit of a shy guy. I just watched him and watched him, and I remember as soon as we got on the ice, we were doing this warmup. Pucks are on the ice, the goalies are in net and you're just kind of warming them up as you're going in a big circle. You get a shot, a pass across, it's not really structured. I was just keeping an eye on him and down at the other end, I saw him do something with the puck where he picked it up and he was throwing it around. And I was like, 'Oh my goodness, that looks so cool.'

And I just sort of plugged it in my head. I had no clue how he did it, but in my head, I thought 'I'm going to try to do something like that.' I remember I was too nervous to go up and talk to him — that guy's so smooth, what unbelievable hands. But I want to be the cool kid right, not go up like, 'Oh how did you do that, could you sign my stick?' or something. So I never had the gumption to go talk to him. From there, I just had it in my head I was going to do it a certain way.

There's so many different versions, there's so many different ways guys are picking up the puck — like Hoglander does it kind of like I do it, putting my stick on it and pulling it up. Guys are now scooping it up and catching it on their blades, which is unbelievable as well. There's just so many different versions, the backhand version. I know a guy who doesn't get too much press anymore was Robby Schremp — he was like up and over and around.

That's what I was kind of getting into, even at practice against (Michigan teammate) Marty Turco. I remember coming in on a two-on-one, and doing the spin-o-rama move on my off-wing so the shot comes from a different angle at the goalie, and scoring on Turco. He digs the puck out and shoots it at my head, like 'What was that?' But it was all in good fun, and just all coming up with something new, something innovative. I remember thinking about that with Billy Armstrong, watching how he picked it up, and then sort of putting two and two together and thinking, 'How could you use this in a game?' Wraparounds — the wraparounds down low, every time you go to wrap around, the goalie's job is to just beat you to the post. Well, it's wide open up above him, right? Why not put it up above him if you can? So that's how it came about.

... I think when I was doing it, it was still kind of a new thing. I remember before games at Michigan, even before I did it, I would be asking the referees in warmup, 'Could you watch me do something — if I do this in a game, will you call it a goal or is it a high stick? What would you think?' So I'd go and I'd do it and I don't think any referees said no to me. They were like, 'Nope, that's a goal, that's a goal.'

I mean, maybe they were thinking, 'There's no way that's ever going to happen.'

SN: What was the response like off the ice, away from the games — what do you remember about the attention that came your way after that goal? I mean, I read that the stick you scored that goal with went to the Hall of Fame.



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Legg: Yeah, my stick I did it with, they have it in the Hall of Fame somewhere, I think it's in the basement or it comes out every once in a while, I don't know exactly. I haven't been back there in a long time, living out in British Columbia.

But yeah, after that, well I was in college, so with the NCAA rules, I wasn't allowed any of the money or any of that, it was all above board. But they allowed me to go to Sweden for almost a week, and I won, I think it was the 'Goal of the Year,' out of a Swedish magazine, Inside Hockey. And that was pretty interesting, me as a young kid over there, by myself with Nicklas Lidstrom, Anders Eriksson, Peter Forsberg. Lidstrom pretty much took me under his wing there for a little bit, this young kid over there in Sweden.

That was an experience and a half for sure. It was a whole different world for me over there — I think it was a model show slash NHL hockey awards ceremony, in some huge club. It was unbelievable. A huge screen drops down in the middle of this club and everybody goes crazy. They're speaking Swedish. And then I hear my name, they show my goal, and the place goes nuts. I'm like, 'Oh my goodness, all the way over here they know about this?' It was just crazy. Some of those things, I don't know — it's funnier now that I'm older, just thinking about it.

Like, when it first happened, my sister was with her fiancé and they were in an airport flying somewhere. And of course, CNN is on in the airport and they show a clip of me. My sister was standing on her chair like, 'That was my brother! That was my brother!' CNN somewhere in the middle of nowhere in an airport!

It just didn't compute back then. It was just something I practiced that I just was happy I completed, and then it was, 'Okay, let's get on with life, let's do something else now.'

SN: Well fast forward to now, what did you think when you saw Andrei Svechnikov pull it off at the NHL level for the first time and start all this back up again?

Legg: I was just excited about it — I want to see what comes next. Him and Hoglander are unbelievably skilled players — to have that in their bags is definitely going to change the game at the NHL level. I think goalies are going to have to be more aware of who's on the ice. It just ups the ante a little bit.

SN: Where were you when you heard that he did it — did you start getting texts from everybody? How did you find out?

Legg: Oh yeah. Well, I'm a firefighter in Burnaby here, it's a really close department, and it's just been non-stop — New Year's Eve, my phone was blowing up. Any time anybody attempts it or does it, it's just, 'Hey a guy did it in here! A guy tried it in this league! Did you see this?' They'll send me videos of it. It's pretty cool — I just love the evolution of it.

SN: Over the years, even before Svechnikov did it, it had become this phenomenon in the game, with people tracking the number of times it was tried in the NHL each year, waiting for the first player to do it, wondering who that might be. Were you aware of that at all over the years, the different guys that were trying it?

Legg: Yeah, I knew some names that were in there, all talented guys. I'm sure so many guys can do it. So many guys can do it. I'll be looking for more and more now — there's some unbelievably talented players out there, and coming up the ranks. It's going to be awesome.

I hope to see a lot more [styles of it], like the ones from further out, incorporated into shooting. If they can throw this in there, it really changes the angle of where the shot is coming from, even outside —

not from behind the net but from further out a little bit. That could be the next step, maybe.

SN: It seems like it's just continued to grow, with Svechnikov doing it a second time, then we saw Hoglander do it at the world juniors. What do you think about how fans have latched onto that, and what it means for the game to have the skill level ramping up like this?

Legg: I think it's just a step towards where the NHL is going. Like, there aren't too many players that are going to be playing in the league that I think won't be able to do that, at least at some level. They will be picking the puck up and they will be doing more creative things, instead of having a guy come out and threaten my life as soon as I step on the ice because I might do it. Those guys are probably not going to be in the game too much longer, right.

So now it'll be more of a skill game, and it's gone that way in the last couple years. You don't see the bench-clearing brawls and all that kind of stuff, how it used to be. And that's a step in the more-skilled direction. That's the way the game's going.

SN: What does that mean for you, being a guy that played that style in an era where, like you said, it wasn't quite as accepted? Now these kids have more freedom to try things.

Legg: I don't really know that [new] side of the game — yeah, I was a skilled player, I didn't get in too many scraps, but it was a part of the game, where you had to watch out for certain guys on the ice. Are they going to run you through the boards and take your front teeth out, and not think twice about it? You kind of had to deal with that, and the consequences if you were going to embarrass the other team with a goal like that.

I miss that part of it. When I played it was the clutching and grabbing and you had to fight through a little bit more. And hopefully we don't see the more skilled players taking more dives and not battling through as much, or going towards more diving and trying to draw more penalties so they can be on the power play.

I do like letting the play go — I think everyone would agree that the best type of hockey is still playoff hockey. But in saying that, this is going to open up so many more skills and different things in the future, which is also unbelievably good. Everybody loves that skill. These guys are scoring those goals and people are losing their minds for it, just like back in the day when there was a fight, everybody was on their feet, they loved it.

So, it's excitement in the game — I hope both are still going to be there. I don't know if that's possible or not.

SN: How important do you think it is for young players growing up watching this style of NHL hockey to continue to try to push the envelope and bring more of these types of moves into the game?

Legg: I think it would be somewhat on the coaches, too. A lot of the coaches, they probably frown upon it. They might like it but frown upon it. So are the players going to be allowed to be that creative, or is it going to be, 'Dump it in and smash them and push it into dust.'

Take Red Berenson back in Michigan for me, he was a hard-nosed player — skilled, but a hard-nosed player. I only did it in practice, when we weren't working on something. It would be after practice, when we had extra ice, I would goof around as long as I possibly could with different moves and picking it up and throwing it around and breakaways. I was only ever pushed to do it after Red Berenson was out there talking with Billy Powers and Mel Pearson, the assistant coaches, one day — they were at centre ice, we were goofing around — and when they were coming off the ice, coach Berenson came over to me. He looked at me and said, 'Hey, is that



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legal?' I said, 'Yeah, yeah I asked some referees if it was okay, and they said yes.'

And he just looked at me, he blinked a couple times, and he said, 'Well why don't you do it in a game?' And then he skated off the ice, and I was like, 'Oh my God!' That was the green light, right — he saw it ahead of when I did. That was the push to go ahead and do it.

SN: I saw a couple years ago, you were back in Michigan and you pulled off that crazy lacrosse-style goal from the other side of the rink, which might've been even crazier than the original. Tell me about the love the fans out there have showed you over the years.

Legg: It's unbelievable. I'm super lucky to be part of the University of Michigan Wolverines family. You go back and they just welcome you with open arms — that was the 20-year reunion, and I hadn't been back for so long. What happened there, that was crazier than the goal, I think. It was just crazy, people there, they were so excited to see it.

SN: What about the kids you're coaching now — how often do you see them pulling these types of moves, and what did they say to you when they saw Svechnikov pull it off against Calgary?

Legg: Oh yeah, they were all over me at practice, like, 'They did your goal again! They did your goal!' I'm an assistant coach of the junior B team here as well, and a couple of guys there were like, 'You were on Spittin' Chiclets, they were lightin' you up!' I didn't see it but they told me all about it, I guess they were saying, 'You don't call it The Michigan, you call it The Mike Legg. It's like calling it The Colorado — it's not The Colorado, it's The Forsberg.' (laughs)

... I coach on a midget team in Maple Ridge, and there's a bunch of the kids on my team that are like, 'I'm doing it next year, I'm doing it for you coach!' I'm like, 'If you do it, you're all benched.' I'm just kidding, I'm just kidding — 'Go ahead, go ahead. Make sure it's the right time, and no one else is open, and you've got a green light, for sure.'

SN: What does it mean to you to move on to this coaching phase and pass along the things you've learned to these kids?

Legg: I just love seeing kids accomplish things, like 'Hey, try this, try that, maybe we can try this next time,' and then when they do it, they're so happy they did something that they were told to do and they nailed it and success happened and you see their faces.

I just love it, I absolutely love it. I'm coaching from seven-year-olds to 20-year-olds, so you get a bit of every age and every different style and their learning curves. I'm really loving it right now.

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Sportsnet.ca / Truth By Numbers: Can Senators' Anthony Duclair maintain scoring pace?

Andrew Berkshire

Auston Matthews has been on an absolute scoring tear since the beginning of December with 11 goals in just 13 games. It's an impressive level of performance, in fact over that time he's almost leading the league in goals per minute played. He's not though,

because someone else has been even more red hot, legendary goal scorer Anthony Duclair.

Hold on a second, weren't we all told last season that he couldn't play hockey? Well Duclair has already ripped 21 pucks between those red pipes and into the mesh this season, picking up right where he left off last season after the trade to the Ottawa Senators where he scored eight goals in 21 games.

SPOTLIGHT PERFORMANCE

It sort of flew under the radar last season with frequent benchings and public beratings from John Tortorella, but Duclair wasn't really struggling to score last season with Columbus either, he managed to pot 11 goals in 53 games in a depth role; a 17 goal pace.

That's nothing compared to the 40+ goal pace he's on this season, but Duclair has hit 20 goals before and has averaged a pace of 16 goals per 82 games while bouncing up and down lineups and around teams. He isn't a player who has completely come out of nowhere, but he's being given trust and big minutes for the first time in a long time.

The question I have is how likely it is that Duclair can continue to find his footing in the NHL and score at a strong pace. Is he an artifact of Ottawa needing someone, anyone to score goals? Or is he a talented player who finally at the age of 24 is getting the opportunity he's always deserved? Let's look at how much things have changed from last season to justify his goal pace doubling.

Looking specifically at Duclair's shooting, we can see that last season he was easily an above average forward at 5-vs-5, getting more shots from closer to the net than most players, and attacking very effectively off the rush.

This season he's increased his shot volume overall, but the increase to his shots on net from the slot is much more significant than his overall increase to shot attempts from there, which you can look at as Duclair being more accurate with his shot, or he's been luckier this season in getting his attempts on net.

Curiously, while he's still been above average off the rush, Duclair is producing less off the rush this season, and less off the cycle as well, which he seems to be compensating for by just getting in closer to the net overall, and shooting more often.

He has also been one of the league's better players at creating screens for himself this year, so what does all that mean? To me, those are signs of a player who has less help from his team to create offence than he had on a superior offensive team in Columbus last season, so he's working harder and harder to get those chances.

Getting more ice time and working harder has been a nice combination to create this situation for Duclair, but we also have to recognize that the improvements Duclair has made likely aren't enough to bring him into 40-goal territory, at least not as an expectation going forward.

What we can say though, is that Duclair is undoubtedly good enough to be a goal scorer at this level, and he's not one-dimensional either. Only Brady Tkachuk has a better inner slot shot differential on the Senators this year than Duclair's 58.3 per cent, so he's pushing play in the right direction as well.

Maybe it wasn't until this season that Duclair had really figured out how to play, but I doubt that.

THE QUESTION

This week when Steve Dangle asked me his question, the immediate thought that jumped into my head was "thank you!" I had



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been looking for a reason to write about this player for a while now, but hadn't had the time to fit him in yet. So what did Steve ask?

"So... Bryan Rust... What? How? Who is this guy all of a sudden?"

RIGHT? Don't get me wrong, I have lots of respect for Rust as a player, he's been a fixture of the Penguins' middle six for five seasons now on a team where those types of players are continually shipped out in order to save space under the salary cap and adjust their roster on the fly and stay competitive.

Something about Rust has convinced the Penguins to keep him around over others, and while it may have been the affordability of his contract in part, he's in the first year of a relatively rich \$3.5M AAV contract that lasts three years, so that's no longer the case.

So far Rust has more than rewarded the Penguins' willingness to invest in him with a ridiculous 32 points in 25 games, six points shy of his career high in 44 fewer games. But how likely is it that Rust can break out from being a 15 goal, 30-35 point utility player who has spent a not-insignificant amount of time with superstar centres in his career and keep anything close to this level of performance? Let's look at how much his performance has changed year over year.

Rust has been an above team average offensive contributor for the last three seasons, but you can see that a few things have changed for him.

Contrary to what usually happens when a player experiences a hot shooting streak, Rust has been shooting from further out this season than in the previous two seasons, specifically increasing the number of shots he's taken from the high slot.

His scoring chances off the rush and off the cycle have both increased, likely a result of spending most of his ice time this season with Evgeni Malkin and Jake Guentzel, but his slot passes are down.

So what is going on here? Rust's overall performance is definitely better than it has been before by a number of measures, but it looks like the biggest change is that Rust's role on that line is extremely well defined. He is to go to a certain area of the ice, he's to join the rush with an excellent transition player like Malkin, and participate in the cycle by staying in the slot; meaning he's probably not passing into the slot as much.

Having that tightly defined role has played to Rust's strengths and created the best stretch of production in his career, but at the same time the underlying numbers don't show us a player who is shooting the lights out and creating a crazy number of chances that would be indicative of a better than a point per game player.

Rust is a good player, but this is one hell of a hot streak, something that can't be expected to continue.

QUICK HITS

- Speaking of Rust's excellent linemates, over the last month of games, Malkin leads the league in scoring chances created per 20 minutes played at 5-vs-5 with 12.4. It seems like every time Sidney Crosby is hurt; Malkin finds another level.
- Right behind Malkin is a name not many would expect: Columbus's Pierre-Luc Dubois. Dubois has really blossomed into a special player over the last couple of years, but he's still a relative unknown around the league in terms of star players. Dubois's 28 points in 41 games don't jump off the stat sheet as a star player, but the process behind the numbers is elite. How Dubois would respond with Columbus losing Artemi Panarin, and the underlying data shows he's pushing things in the right direction.

• I don't think any team wants to face the Carolina Hurricanes in the first round of the playoffs. The Metro is tight, but the Hurricanes lead the league in both inner slot shots and slot passes per minute at 5-vs-5. They're an incredibly dangerous team to deal with.

• There's lots of reasons why the San Jose Sharks have been such a disappointment this season, but one of the main reasons has been their poor play in the neutral zone. No team turns the puck over more often in the middle of the ice, which is a recipe for disaster on the defensive side, especially if your goaltending is suspect.

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TSN.CA / Disciplined Finns stymied USA, aim to repeat feat against Canada

By Mark Masters

TSN reporter Mark Masters checks in daily with news and notes on Team Canada, which held a media availability at its hotel on Friday ahead of Saturday's semifinal against Finland.

Team USA seemed stunned. After scoring 17 goals in four preliminary round games, the Americans were shut out 1-0 by Finland in the quarter-finals.

"It's tough to take in right now," said American sniper Cole Caufield moments after the buzzer sounded. "I didn't think we gave it our best game. I don't think we brought our 'A' game. We didn't create enough the whole game."

Finland could sense the American annoyance building as the minutes drained from Thursday's elimination encounter.

"After the second period it was easy to see they were frustrated," said Finnish defenceman Toni Utunen, "and they started to play a little by themselves so it was good for us."

Team USA head coach Scott Sandelin summed it up.

"They played to their identity," the Minnesota-Duluth bench boss said, "which we knew would be a hard game. We didn't do enough offensively, we didn't create a lot of time there, a lot of one and done and not a lot of second chances and, obviously, they got the big power-play goal."

"It was a tight game," said Finnish coach Raimo Helminen, "but the game was in our hands almost the whole game. That's what I felt on the bench. We worked hard, big time. They couldn't get into the middle. They didn't get too many chances. Our players were so together. They gave out almost nothing."

"We played so well together and as a group," said Winnipeg Jets prospect Ville Heinola. "That was our strength."

This is what Team Canada is up against on Saturday in the semifinals. The Finns are deep, disciplined, patient and talented.

"A very good team," observed Canada assistant coach Mitch Love. "A team that had an excellent hockey game yesterday. A team that doesn't give you a lot so we got our work cut out for us. We expect their best and we have to be at our best."



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Canada's scorching power play, leading the tournament with a 44 per cent success rate, will face a formidable roadblock in Finland's second ranked penalty kill (86 per cent).

"They're on top of you," said Love, "just like their five-on-five game, so we're going to have to be ready to make plays quickly."

Finland is a team with a capital T and very comfortable against a North American opponent.

"Canada plays pretty similar to USA," noted Heinola, "so we don't have to change anything, we can play just like that game."

Finland also appears to be getting stronger. Just like last year, they finished third in the group stage, but panic never set in. It's all about peaking at the right time.

"Our first couple games, not our best," said defenceman Lassi Thomson, an Ottawa Senators prospect who serves as captain, "but now we had a good game against USA so we're going to play good next game and win a couple more."

"We have more there," vowed Heinola. "We played well, but we can play more. We can play more as a team. And sometimes we lose pucks when we're in a bad position, but we can fix that."

After frustrating USA, feisty Finns look to do the same to Canada

After frustrating the United States in the quarter-finals, Finland says they're looking to do the same in the semi-finals to a Canadian team that plays a similar style to the Americans. The Finns also expect Canada's returnees to be motivated to atone for last year's overtime loss in the quarters.

With a tight, structured affair expected, Canada will rely even more on the game-breaking ability of Alexis Lafreniere, who didn't seem to miss a beat in his return from injury on Thursday. He scored a goal on the power play and also picked up an assist on the opening goal.

But there is actually one tweak the coaching staff wants to see in the Rimouski left winger's game.

"He's an unselfish player and we'd like to see him shoot more sometimes," coach Dale Hunter told TSN's Tessa Bonhomme after Thursday's win.

"He's probably more of a pass-first guy," said Love. "He had a few looks, especially on the power play where he released the puck coming down that flank, and he scored on one of them and hopefully that brings some more confidence into his game."

Even Barrett Hayton, who has seen Lafreniere assist on three of his five goals here, wouldn't mind if his linemate kept the rock every now and then.

"You see his playmaking skills, but you saw last game he has a pretty elite release," Canada's captain said, "so definitely shooting the puck little bit more wouldn't hurt."

What's crazy is how quickly Lafreniere, who has 23 goals in 32 QMJHL games this season, silenced any concern about his left-knee injury (bone bruise and muscle strain). Is he really 100 per cent?

"I believe so," said Love. "He looked it. His first shift he had a pretty nice hit so it looks like his body's physically there."

"It felt really good," Lafreniere said nonchalantly after the game. "It's fun to be back and be with the boys."

"He's a star," said Lethbridge forward Dylan Cozens. "He's unbelievable. Every time he has the puck, he's got his head up and he's looking to make a play. He's a threat."

Lafreniere insists he never once considered leaving Ostrava.

"I was scared a little bit, but it was good recovery with the docs," he said. "My knee twisted a little bit and I went down. It was scary a bit at the start, but after I felt good."

Lafreniere looks no worse for wear as Canada pummels Slovakia in quarters

After what looked like a devastating knee injury to top player Alexis Lafreniere, the surging Canadians have now won three straight. Lafreniere looked great in his return as nearly everything went right for Canada in the win, except for the loss of Nolan Foote, who was ejected from the game in the first minute for what was deemed a hit to the head. Was the ejection warranted? TSN's World Juniors panel weighs in.

A reliable defensive stalwart for Team Canada, Jacob Bernard-Docker has worked hard to improve his shot over the last year.

"Just shooting a lot in the cage and working on forearm strength," the University of North Dakota defenceman explained. "It's always something I'm trying to get better at."

Bernard-Docker is also spending time watching video of elite shooters he admires regardless of position.

"I know he's a forward, but Auston Matthews is the one guy who comes to mind," he said. "You look at him and he just pulls the puck like no one else in the league, it's pretty fun to watch."

Bernard-Docker, who has three goals in 17 NCAA games this season, showed off a slick move in the quarter-finals against Slovakia firing home his first World Juniors goal.

"I saw the winger sliding out a bit so just tried to change the angle a bit and had a screen in front," he recalled.

Jacob Bernard-Docker's first of the tournament makes it 3-0 for ca
pic.twitter.com/ifwhKz16hC

— TSN (@TSN_Sports) January 2, 2020

Hunter liked what he saw from the Senators prospect and the rest of his blueliners, who combined for five points against the Slovaks.

"Our D were getting pucks through and that's a key," Hunter said. "Every team blocks so many shots and we did a good job of moving along the line and getting shots through."

Canada d-man Bernard-Docker improves shot by studying Leafs' Matthews

Jacob Bernard-Docker scored his first goal of the World Juniors in Canada's quarterfinal game against Slovakia on Thursday. He spoke to TSN's Mark Masters to explain how he's been working on his shot and said he takes inspiration from Auston Matthews.

Rasmus Sandin left Sweden's final preliminary-round game after getting slashed on the left wrist. Again, in the quarter-finals, the defenceman took a hack to the same sore spot and was sent to the room prematurely.

Is he playing through pain right now?



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"Yeah, a little, maybe, but it's not too bad, it's getting better," the Toronto Maple Leafs prospect said.

Does Sandin feel like the Czechs were targeting him?

"I'm not trying to think about it too much," he said. "I don't know if they're trying to hit my wrist or not. I'm trying to focus on my stuff."

"It says what kind of character he has," said coach Tomas Montén. "He wants to play."

Sandin plays a top-pair role for the Swedes with teammate David Gustafsson, a Jets prospect, calling him the best defenceman in the tournament.

They will lean on Sandin heavily in the semifinals against Russia.

"The Russians have a good individual team," Sandin noted, "they got some really good individual players. We got a really good team. We've come together really well as a group."

Playing through pain, Sandin believes Sweden's team can beat Russia's individuals

Rasmus Sandin has continued to compete for Team Sweden in the World Juniors despite dealing with a wrist injury. When asked if he believes opponents have been targeting his wrist, Sandin said he's not worried about it and only focused on what he can improve.

What message did the Leafs give Sandin when they loaned him from the AHL to Team Sweden?

"They pretty much said, 'Good luck. Go win silver,'" Sandin said with a chuckle. "That was pretty much it. But, I don't want to listen to that too much."

It was Marlies GM Laurence Gilman and the Marlies coaching staff, who offered the tongue-in-cheek parting shot.

"This is one of the times I'm going to try to not listen to my coaches," said Sandin with a laugh.

Sandin said he hasn't had much contact with folks back home since arriving at the World Juniors although he is still exchanging messages with William Nylander.

Sandin on message from Leafs management: 'Go win silver'

Leafs defenceman Rasmus Sandin spoke to TSN's Mark Masters to share his thoughts on Toronto's fantastic play as of late and an interesting message he received from the team's management as he headed overseas to take part in the World Juniors.

Nils Högländer is putting on a show at the World Juniors. The Vancouver Canucks prospect leads the tournament in scoring with 10 points and he pulled off the lacrosse move in the opening game, one of his five goals.

What stands out the most?

"His creativity in the offensive zone," said Gustafsson. "I mean, sometimes I just give him the puck and just watch, just stand by and watch him doing what he does best."

"He's so fun to watch," marvelled Sandin. "To see his goals, his moves in small areas out on the ice is surreal to see."

Nils Hoglander is changing the game from behind the net, but this time he can't put it home. 🤔 pic.twitter.com/668mw6OKx6

— TSN (@TSN_Sports) December 31, 2019

In the quarter-finals, Högländer scored the opening goal against the host Czechs and then put his finger to his lips.

"He's got kind of his own swagger," said Sandin. "He's a little bit different. He might not be a typical Swede, but he's a guy you like to have on your team. He can do it all. He can do a lacrosse goal as everyone saw this tournament. He can dangle, he can hit, he can skate. He's a huge addition for our team."

"He can do whatever he wants to," said Gustafsson with a smile. "He has confidence in it and he's a skilled player."

'Might not be a typical Swede': Hoglander showing off skill and swagger

Sweden's Nils Hoglander has put on a show at the World Juniors, showcasing unorthodox, high-skill techniques and gaining the attention of many who have watched the tournament with his flamboyant personality. His teammates Rasmus Sandin and David Gustafsson shared their thoughts on Hoglander's game.

Is Utunen ready to break Canadian hearts again?

"Yeah," he said. "I'm excited for tomorrow."

Last year, Utunen scored the overtime winner against Canada in the World Junior quarter-finals in Vancouver. He beat fellow Canucks prospect Mikey DiPietro and silenced the sellout crowd.

"It was a huge goal and I hope to see something similar tomorrow," he said with a smile.

Utunen still has the puck he used to score that goal. He keeps it in a safe spot in his dad's house. And sometimes he'll watch the video of that magical moment. What goes through his mind?

"I don't know," he said. "It's hard to explain that feeling, what happens after the goal."

It was a special moment for Utunen and not just because the magnitude of the game. The fact is Utunen simply doesn't score much. He has just one goal in 71 career games with Tappara Tampere in the SM-liiga.

Utunen, however, did score two goals against Canada back on July 31 in the World Junior Showcase in Plymouth.

What's the deal? Does he only score against Canada?

"Yeah, I guess so," he said with a laugh. "Last four goals, three of them were against Canada."

So, he's feeling good going into this one?

"Yep," he said with a grin.

Toni Utunen isn't known for his scoring, but when he does score, it seems to be at Canada's expense. The Canucks prospect broke Canadian hearts at last year's tournament with his overtime-winner, and also netted a pair against Canada at the World Junior Summer Showcase in July. Ahead of the semi-finals, the Finnish defenceman jokes about his success against the red and white.

Team Canada did not hold a practice on Friday, with only backup Nico Daws and Dawson Mercer skating. It was the first time the team stayed off the ice since Christmas Eve.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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A morning skate is set for at 11 a.m. (5 a.m. ET) on Saturday at Ostrava Arena.

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TSN.CA / Team Canada returnees aiming for revenge against Finland

By Frank Seravalli

OSTRAVA, Czech Republic — Joe Veleno can't help but click on the highlights of Team Canada's stunning quarter-final loss to Finland last year. It's a painful kind of clickbait when it pops up on social media.

"Re-watching that video kind of triggers me a little bit," Veleno said. "Especially with [Noah] Dobson breaking his stick on the empty net."

One year on, it's still shocking. Not the result — there is no shame in losing to a hockey power like Finland. It's the way it happened.

Like how Canada was 46.4 seconds away from the semifinal when an Eeli Tolvanen pass shimmied up Aleksii Heponiemi's shin pad and into the net.

Rogers Arena in Vancouver went silent. Goaltender Mikey DiPietro's eyes were as wide as saucers.

Or how about after captain Maxime Comtois missed his chance to play hero with a penalty shot in overtime and Dobson's stick exploded on a one-timer, leading to an odd-man break that saw Toni Utunen's perfectly placed shot deliver Canada's worst World Juniors finish on home soil?

It's still difficult to process the confluence of two tough bounces — the shin pad and the shattered stick — in a span of minutes to break Canada's hearts.

"I think through a lot of the bad luck that happened for us," Veleno said. "The game, the outcome, it could've [gone] a lot of different ways. Being out there wasn't a good moment for us. I think we were just really disappointed in the locker room."

Veleno said it's something you never really get over.

"If we won that game we could've maybe won the tournament," Veleno said Friday. "We get a chance to play for a gold medal. But that's done with. And for the guys coming back, we've got a whole new shot at redeeming ourselves."

Veleno and Team Canada's four other returnees from last year — captain Barrett Hayton, Ty Smith, Jared McCauley and Alexis Lafreniere — intend to take full advantage against defending gold medalist Finland on Saturday (12:30 p.m. ET on TSN 1/3/4/5).

"We all remember all of it," Hayton said. "But that's last year. We all have a really bitter taste in our mouth about that, but it's a fresh year and a fresh group and we're really excited to get out there."

Standing in the way of Team Canada's date in the gold-medal game is Utunen and a Finnish team eager to break their hearts again.

"I'm excited for tomorrow," said Utunen, the overtime sniper. "It was a huge goal and I hope to see something similar tomorrow."

Utunen, a Vancouver Canucks prospect, is one of three Finland returnees from last year. He has been a certified Canada killer, scoring three of his last four goals against Canada, including two at the Summer Showcase.

Finland has had Canada's number of late. They've knocked out Canada in three straight medal-round games, taking home gold in three of the last six tournaments after not winning one at all in the first 37 years of the World Junior Championship.

This year, Team Finland (3-1-1) ended Team USA's medal hopes with a clinical, 1-0 shutout win in the quarter-finals on Thursday.

It was the perfect reminder — against an American team Canada beat in run-and-gun fashion — that this will be a different style of game.

"We gave them nothing," Winnipeg Jets prospect Ville Heinola said.

That is how Finland wants to play. They are smart, calculated and talented. They don't win by clogging the neutral zone, but they are relentless in taking away time and space, and they are disciplined. They have taken the second fewest penalties at the World Juniors, which is part of their plan to limit Canada's tournament-best (11-for-25) power play.

It will be a chess match. Finland needs only one opening. On Thursday, it came halfway through the third period. Last year, it came with 46.4 seconds remaining in regulation.

Utunen has the puck from his overtime winner on display in his father's house for proof.

"Lucky for us, the guys returning get another shot at it," Veleno said.

Hayton said the five returnees, plus others from the 2000 birth year class in Team Canada's program of excellence, have kept in touch over the months since that loss.

"We're in constant communication, that's just how we are," Hayton said. "We're a tight group."

It's a different year, two mostly different teams, but Team Canada has wanted to get revenge for Dobson, DiPietro, Comtois and all of their other teammates that won't be playing.

This is their moment. They can be sure the rest of the 2019 team will be watching along with the rest of the country.

"We look at ourselves and say, 'You know, this would be a really good group to do this,'" Veleno said. "I think we believe in ourselves and in every one of us. We've got a special group here. I think we can win this ... Our leadership group feels real confident with the team we have."

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USA TODAY / Dallas Stars forward Corey Perry suspended five games for Winter Classic elbow on Nashville Predators' Ryan Ellis

Mike Brehm

Dallas Stars forward Corey Perry, who received a high-profile ejection from the NHL Winter Classic, was suspended for five games



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Friday for elbowing Nashville Predators defenseman Ryan Ellis "with substantial force."

The incident occurred at 2:44 of the first period of the New Year's Day outdoor game at the Cotton Bowl.

Ellis had just released a shot when Perry caught him in the head with a "high, forceful elbow" that dazed the defenseman and caused him to miss the rest of the game. He went on the injured list Friday.

After referees consulted video, they gave Perry a five-minute elbowing penalty, plus a game misconduct. The Stars gave up two goals on the power play, though they rallied to win 4-2.

"While we acknowledge Perry's argument that he did not intend to elbow Ellis in the head, he is control of this hit at all times and is solely responsible for the end result," the league said in a video.

The suspension — the third of Perry's career — will cost him \$40,322.60 in lost pay.

In 2009, Perry received four games for elbowing Philadelphia Flyers forward Claude Giroux. And in 2013, he got four games for a late hit on Jason Zucker of the Minnesota Wild.

Perry's suspension was the second one issued Friday by the NHL's Department of Player Safety.

Los Angeles Kings defenseman Kurtis MacDermid received two games for an illegal hit to the head of Philadelphia Flyers defenseman Ivan Provorov. MacDermid will forfeit \$7,258.06 in pay.

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USA TODAY / Ex-Dallas Stars coach Jim Montgomery enters rehab for alcohol abuse, calls firing 'appropriate'

Chris Bumbaca

Three weeks after the Dallas Stars fired him for "unprofessional conduct," former coach Jim Montgomery will enter an inpatient residential program for alcohol abuse, he told The Dallas Morning News in a statement Friday.

Montgomery called his removal a "wake-up call" and agreed with the team's decision to fire him, calling the move "the appropriate call."

"I let the team's front office, staff and players down. More importantly, I let my wife and my family down. The team's decision to end my role forced me to look into the mirror and decide whether I wanted to continue living a damaging lifestyle or get help. I decided to get help," he said in his first public comments since being fired on Dec. 10.

"I turned to professionals in the field of alcohol abuse for their guidance and counseling. It has been an overwhelming and a very humbling experience knowing that I am not alone."

"Today, with the unconditional support of my wife and family, and many close friends, I took another step forward by admitting myself into an inpatient residential program, where I intend to take the steps to be a better husband, father, friend, coach and mentor — one day at a time. It's a process I am committed to. As I do this, I ask that my family's privacy be respected."

Since the Stars fired him with cause, the Morning News reported, the final 2.5 years on Montgomery's contract were voided. Stars general manager Jim Nill told the Morning News in a statement, "We are supportive of this decision by Jim and we hope that by pursuing this help, he and his family will be stronger for it."

Under Montgomery, the Stars started the season 17-11-3. Rick Bowness has served as interim coach and has led Dallas to a 6-3-1 record since taking over, including a victory over Nashville in the Winter Classic.

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