



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2019

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

McKegg an unexpected star in Canes' 4-2 victory

By Chip Alexander

For more than 35 minutes, the best storyline Friday in the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Columbus Blue Jackets easily was Greg McKegg.

Cool name, of course. And in his first NHL game with the Canes, the forward played well, picking up a goal and assist as Carolina took a three-goal lead in the gritty, tightly contested Metropolitan Division game at PNC Arena.

Then, in 25 seconds late in the second period, the focus shifted quickly. The Blue Jackets scored twice, Oliver Bjorkstrand and Artemi Panarin striking for goals, and suddenly the question was whether the Canes could hold on and win a third straight game, not whether McKegg might be tapped as the game's first star.

The Canes did hold on, taking a 4-2 victory over the Blue Jackets as Sebastian Aho, recently named to the NHL All-Star Game, scored an empty-net goal in the final seconds to seal it. And, yes, McKegg was the first star.

Micheal Ferland and Dougie Hamilton scored for the Canes (18-17-5) in the first period and McKegg in the second. McKegg assisted on Hamilton's goal -- the defenseman's second in two games -- and then scored with a redirection of a pass from Brett Pesce that goalie Sergei Bobrovsky could not handle.

"We came out great and I thought, to a man, were on it," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "Obviously it helped again to get the lead. Every part of our game was pretty solid. But they've got a great team over there and you could see their high-end players took over for a couple of minutes and they got themselves back in the game, but I thought we came back in the third and played pretty well."

It wasn't McKegg's NHL debut. The guy known as "Kegger" has played 91 games with Toronto, Florida, Tampa Bay and then the Pittsburgh Penguins before being traded by the Pens to the Canes for forward Josh Jooris in February 2018.

McKegg, 26, settled in with the Charlotte Checkers, the Canes' AHL affiliate, waiting his turn with the big club. The call finally came Friday, when the Canes made him an emergency recall after an injury to forward Clark Bishop in Thursday's

game against Philadelphia and with center Jordan Staal being placed on NHL injured reserve.

"You just want to put your best foot forward and contribute any way you can," McKegg said. "To cap off the win was pretty awesome."

McKegg played on a line with Saku Maenalanen and Warren Foegle and by game's end Brind'Amour was calling it "probably our best line overall." Maenalanen assisted on Hamilton's goal for his first NHL point and Foegle, coming off the game-winning goal against the Philadelphia Flyers on Thursday, again played with high energy.

"They were the difference, no doubt," Brind'Amour said. "They pretty much dominated every shift they had."

McKegg's goal, his first in the NHL since Nov. 4, 2017 with the Pens, proved to be the game-winner and ended the night for Bobrovsky, who faced 16 shots and made some sparkling saves early in the game.

In came Joonas Korpisalo and the Blue Jackets (23-14-3) began to play with more urgency and pace, hawking the puck and spending more time in the Carolina zone.

Canes goalie Curtis McElhinney was rock-solid until the final five minutes of the third, making sure-handed glove saves on blasts by Cam Atkinson and Zach Werenski. But Bjorkstrand found the net with a shot off the rush through a partial screen. Moments later Panarin jumped in to grab a loose puck in the slot and beat McElhinney for his 13th of the season.

In a flash, the Blue Jackets suddenly looked the part of a team that had won six of its last seven, and they continued to push in the third, especially Panarin. The Canes looked more like a team that played Thursday in Philadelphia, winning 5-3, and finishing up a back-to-back.

But the Canes maintained their poise. McElhinney, calm in net, closed with 22 saves for his ninth win of the season.

Ferland scored his 12th of the season -- and first since Nov. 21 -- with a one-timer just after a Canes power play ended. Hamilton's goal came on a quick wrister from the top of the left circle.



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For Hurricanes, one last chance to get on a run before it's too late

By Luke DeCock

As Sebastian Aho raced down the ice to tap in an empty-net goal that was his anyway, it meant more than merely a win. It was a third straight win for the Carolina Hurricanes, only their third streak of three wins or more this season. It was more progress in a different race, against the inexorable waning of the season.

The Hurricanes have been waiting years for a decent winning streak. With Friday's 4-2 win over the Columbus Blue Jackets, they have put themselves in position to build one, and there's isn't any question about if or when. It's January, and they're running out of time. If this isn't the beginning of a significant winning streak, it's the beginning of the end.

"It has to be," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

One chronic problem with the Hurricanes, because of their perpetual circumstance, is that everyone from management to players to fans is all too easily caught up in the swings and swoons of each game. Every result feels decisive. That's life on the bubble in the three-point-game NHL, where there is neither security nor inevitability. Every game really does matter. Hope comes and goes like a spring breeze, abject despair is always a bad goal away. There is no big picture.

And if the tug and pull of emotion surrounding the Hurricanes has felt all too familiar this season – for every glimmer of promise, two crushing defeats – it's only because so many of the faces have changed and the circumstances have not. For whatever reason, and they change from year to year and even month to month or game to game, this team has been incapable of getting on any kind of a run, incapable of putting a respectable string of wins together.

It's been nine full seasons since the Hurricanes won more than five games in a row; with the exception of 2016-17 when they won five in a row, they have had one four-game winning streak – and exactly one four-game winning streak – in each season since.

That inability to get on a run transcends coaches, captains, owners and the entire roster. It's the leitmotif of a decade of futility. This year, the Hurricanes have had one early four-

game streak, one three-game streak in November and now this.

Now the Hurricanes have given themselves a chance, but they have to follow through. Getting on a run of some length is the only way to salvage their season.

"We've got to get one at some point," Brind'Amour said. "We're running out of time to wait for that run. Every team that's up there we're chasing has done it at some point. If we want to get up there we've got to do it. If you get two, you've got to get three. Get three, you've got to get four."

That's what it would take, would still take, to get this team from the perpetual knife edge of relevance to a position of relative comfort where each and every loss wouldn't feel like the impending end of humanity, where each shot that rings off the post didn't feel like divine confirmation of a dismal fate.

The two wins over the Flyers – one of the few teams in the NHL with a worse record than the Hurricanes – gave them a platform to go forth, a foundation upon which to build a run. But that's all it was: firm, bare, dry ground for construction, not any kind of accomplishment. A loss Friday, and it would all have been as well as wasted.

Instead, thanks to the unlikely contributions of Greg McKegg, the Hurricanes continued to move forward.

Even now, these are merely building blocks, toward something with some permanence, easily toppled with one misstep. The same is true Sunday in Ottawa. And with a win there over the woebegone Senators, it would be true again at the Islanders on Tuesday. And then again at Tampa Bay on Thursday, each step a little tougher than the next.

"We know where we are in the standings," Micheal Ferland said. "We want to get something going. We've put ourselves in a good spot to build some momentum."

This is the chance the Hurricanes have been waiting, desperately, to arrive. This is the time to get on a run and save their season. It's now or never. They streak or they're stuck.



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Canes beat Flyers with power-play goals? Yes, they did

By Chip Alexander

It's never easy beating teams in consecutive games, especially at the pro level.

The Carolina Hurricanes did that to the Philadelphia Flyers, following up a victory on New Year's Eve at PNC Arena with a 5-3 road win Thursday over the Flyers at Wells Fargo Center.

Teuvo Teravainen scored twice and had an assist as the Canes (17-17-5) again turned back the struggling Flyers (15-20-5). His power-play goal gave the Canes a 3-0 lead in a three-goal second period by Carolina, and his second score came after the Flyers had fought back from a 4-0 deficit to within 4-3 in the third.

With Dougie Hamilton adding a goal and assist, Justin Williams scoring on the power play and Warren Foegele picking up a goal off a redirection, the Canes made a winner of goalie Petr Mrazek.

The Flyers' comeback was built on two power-play goals, by Wayne Simmonds and James van Riemsdyk, that were sandwiched around an even-strength goal by Sean Couturier, all in the third period.

"We took the penalties (and) a couple power-play goals just changed the whole complexion of the game," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "We sat back. That's what happens when you get up four, you tell them not to but it's human nature, I've been there many, many times. The other team is playing like they have nothing to lose and we just sat back.

"It's a great lesson. It's a good thing we had a 4-0 lead because obviously they pumped a few in there. We had a good shift, (Foegele) got a great shift to get us a big goal there and I think it turns out to be the game-winning goal."

Before Thursday, the Canes had last scored on a power play in the Dec. 14 game against the Washington Capitals, going

0-for-25 in the next seven games. But Williams ripped a shot past goalie Michal Neuvirth off a Sebastian Aho pass and Teravainen did the same, again on the setup pass from Aho, as the Canes jumped ahead 3-0 in the second after a scoreless first.

"I think they moved the puck a little better, which wasn't pretty," Brind'Amour said of the power plays. "The work ethic was there, had a good couple entries which helps get the zone time, and then pucks went in when they shot them."

Defenseman Calvin de Haan also had a pair of assists for the Canes while being credited with seven hits.

The Canes lost forward Clark Bishop to a lower-body injury during the game. On Friday, they recalled forward Greg McKeeg from the Charlotte Checkers of the AHL while placing center Jordan Staal (concussion symptoms) on injured reserve.

The Canes beat the Flyers 3-1 on New Year's Eve to end 2018, then opened 2019 with another victory against the Metro Division team. The Flyers, in turn, had played and lost 4-0 to the Nashville Predators between the games with Carolina.

The Flyers' Simmonds, in assessing Thursday's game, used many of the same words the Canes players have said after tough losses this season.

"I think we just need to respond better when we get scored against. ... We give one up and things turn and start to snowball," Simmonds said. "We have to do mentally stronger and do a better job."

As for falling further behind in the Eastern Conference standings, Simmonds said, "It's like quicksand right now. We're trying to get out and it feels like it's just getting deeper."

That's the stuff the Canes are trying to avoid.



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THE ATHLETIC

Question of the night in Carolina: 'First of all, where's Kegger?'

By Sara Civian

We don't like game recaps here at The Athletic — we exist to try and dig beyond the surface.

But tonight wasn't some throwaway game up in Rochester.

Tonight the stars aligned. Tonight it honestly felt like We The People willed Greg McKegg's first NHL multi-point game into existence because it was five dollar Bud Light night and his name sounds like keg.

Head coach Rod Brind'Amour's postgame locker room speeches are exactly what you'd expect. It was more of the same after the Canes' 4-2 win over the Blue Jackets, just one new question.

First of all, where's Kegger?

At the same time last night, "Kegger" had been grabbing dinner in Toronto ahead of the Checkers' series at Belleville.

That's where he got the call Checkers head coach Mike Vellucci loves giving. He loves messing with his players, as he recently did with Clark Bishop.

"Hey, where are you right now?"

"Getting a haircut."

"Better make it an NHL haircut. Pack your bags."

There wasn't much time for messing around on Thursday. McKegg flew out of the hockey hub of the world and into a little hockey haven in the American south. Then, somehow, 24 hours later Rod freakin' Brind'Amour was calling him out as a huge contributor in a win over the Blue Jackets.

It's not like he's new to this at all, with 92 NHL games under his belt. He's had his first call up, his first goal, his first assist. He's been here before. He's actually been through the ringer in certain systems I've heard weren't exactly kind to him.

But tonight was a good night.

"Greg McKegg" was a national Twitter trend. Tripp Tracy was wearing a chef hat on the broadcast for reasons I don't know but fully endorse. Sebastian Aho scored his 69th career goal at the buzzer. Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella went full Torts, and it's all on Soundcloud. As "Drops of Jupiter" by Train came on in the Hurricanes' locker room, someone yelled "Yesssss!"

Torts kept calling the Blue Jackets "part-timers" in his post-game interview, like they were summer vacation employees. Well, McKegg doesn't even have a company email address.

A goal, an assist, a damn good name.

In this business we call that a Greg McKegg hat trick.

"Love it," Brind'Amour shook his head. "Love it. You know what? He's a pro. This was an easy call-up, he's obviously trying to stay here. And I love it."

Tonight we're doing a gamer.

• Full disclosure: I didn't expect McKegg to actually deliver on the goal. But I covered him in Pittsburgh and thus fully expected this assist:

God, isn't that just everything you want out of a fourth line?

Do the dirty work along the boards, make the transition, free Dougie Hamilton?

"They were the difference," Brind'Amour said. "No doubt. They were probably our best line overall, I mean, they pretty much dominated every shift they were on. Obviously the goals help, but it's changing the momentum of the game. (Columbus) was on us, then they came in and had shifts in (Columbus') end and did a great job."

• Has Dougie been freed?

• Catch this team on the right shift and everything seems so effortless. Next shift you're wondering if you made it all up. These are the trials and tribulations of a young team, and I know one day the effortless won't be a fluke. You look at Andrei Svechnikov and you know it, too. For now we take all the three-game win streaks and Greg McKegg nights we can get.

• Micheal Ferland told me in New Jersey that he'd struggled with the pace of the game in the first few outings after his concussion. He started to feel like himself again in Washington on Dec. 27, with an assist to show for it. His finishing touch returned tonight, with a goal about a second after the power play expired (no Bojangles biscuits) — his first since Nov. 21.

• Not to detract from First Star of the Game McKegg, but Saku Maenalanen has played exactly as advertised (strong, fast, board-battle guy) in all three of his NHL games. He was noticeable in the Anaheim and Philadelphia games despite hovering around 6:30 TOI. But tonight, on the undisputed best night of our lives, he averaged 11:37 and the fourth line has never looked better.

Does Brind'Amour think he's making a case for an extended stay in Raleigh?

"Yep, yep. ... The one thing I feel like we do have in this organization," Brind'Amour smirked, "are those type of players you can count on if we need them. They did more tonight than just kind of, fill a spot. They contributed. They were noticeable, you guys are talking about them, and if we have any chance to get back in this we need everybody to contribute. Tonight was one of those nights."

• Indeed, tonight was one of those nights. Tonight, a young team survived a second consecutive near-collapse, one that actually mattered because it wasn't in Philadelphia. Last night, Flyers reporters to my right were on a live broadcast spouting stats about how the Flyers are the worst team in the modern stats era of the NHL. Tonight, the coach of the Hurricanes' playoff-contending opponent was going off in the opposite direction.

And Greg McKegg was right there.



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NHL Trends: The unstoppable Bolts, the rising Habs, Jets struggling second line and Johnny Gaudreau's dominance

By Dom Luszczyzyn

The end of every month is a great time to look back and reflect on the previous month of hockey to see which way teams and players are trending. A one month sample is usually obfuscated by hot and cold streaks, so it's valuable to find ways to separate the signal from the noise. Those at the extreme ends of the spectrum also make for some great stories.

The Athletic has a model we use for projections and probabilities that is updated each day and provides a look at how much has changed under the hood on a daily basis. Our season preview series offered a snapshot of how and why each team was rated the way it was and this is an opportunity to provide further context as the season progresses. It'll hopefully be an interesting look into how the model operates and how much perception changes from month-to-month and it's a question many have asked after seeing the daily probabilities operate.

What you're getting is two articles in one. The first looks at the teams and players who've made the biggest changes from where they were last month. The second is a brief run through of each team with accompanying charts looking at how each player's value has changed over the last month – an appendix of sorts for the rest of the league that wasn't mentioned here for those that want to take a deeper dive into every team or simply curious about their own.

Hottest teams

Tampa Bay Lightning

Last Month Strength: .582

Current Strength: .629

There's no surprise which team is the league's hottest: it's the one that lost just once in December and did so in overtime, thereby earning a point in every game for the month. The Lightning have put a stranglehold on the league's top spot and are projected to win the Presidents' Trophy by 11 points which would be the largest gap since 2015-16. That may even be conservative given they're already 12 points up on the second place Maple Leafs. This time last month I said the Leafs were the team to beat due to the impending return of William Nylander, but that looks just plain wrong now, especially after Tampa Bay's dominant month.

The team looks unstoppable and head into the new year with a staggering 27 percent chance at winning it all at the end of this season, a 14.4 percent increase from where my model had the team last month. The Lightning were strong at 5-on-5 for the month, but not as dominant as you might expect given they earned 96.4 percent of points for the month. Where the team earned their keep was an incredible special teams performance, scoring 14 goals-per-60 on the power play (second place was at 11.7) and allowing just 4.3, good for second in the league. The Lightning were plus-16 for the month and 13 of those goals were on special teams.

That's a big part of why Nikita Kucherov, Steven Stamkos and Brayden Point were the biggest gainers last month on the strength of 10, nine and seven power play points respectively, though the trio was still incredible at evens too. All three played at a 110-plus point pace (with Kucherov at a mind-boggling 176-point pace), something no other team did last month. It's not just those players either. The Lightning are insanely deep with 12 skaters projected to be worth at least one win in value – the most in the league. This might finally be their year – who's going to stop them really?

Montreal Canadiens

Last Month Strength: .453

Current Strength: .486

Shea Weber returned to action on Nov. 27 and from that moment everything changed for Montreal. The Canadiens were already a strong possession team, but Weber's return bumped the team up a notch ranking second by Corsi in December behind only San Jose. It's thanks to a relentless offensive pace the team plays at, firing 70 shot attempts per 60 for the month, nearly five more than the next best team. That epic shot volume was enough to give the team a top five goals rate for the month, doing so with a shooting percentage of just 8.6 percent. Only Pittsburgh was in the top 10 with a shooting percentage south of nine percent.

It's a death by a thousand cuts approach that perfectly encapsulates the way the team is structured up front. Outside the perennially underrated Brendan Gallagher, Montreal is devoid of much star talent (Max Domi's recent scoring surge this season aside), but the team is flush with capable talent throughout the lineup. The Habs can run four lines with talent without much trouble, with eight forwards above one win in value and Andrew Shaw close at 0.99. That's comparable to the forward depth of the team above, minus the elite talent. That might be what ultimately holds the team back from a deep run, but it's becoming difficult to find many holes in the roster from top to bottom.

The only question remaining is if Carey Price can find a return to form because then this team might be really scary. After a rough start, it's starting to look he just might. In October and November Carey Price had an .897 save percentage in 18 games. In December that improved to .916 in 12 games and he earned a shutout in his first game of 2019. After many pegged the Canadiens as an unsalvageable mess before the season started (I recall calling them an 85-point team was deemed far too optimistic at the time ... by Habs fans!) they've become a team to watch out for.

Honourable mentions

Pittsburgh Penguins: Not much has changed under the hood, but the Penguins are finally getting some saves and have vaulted towards the top of the standings, right back to where many expected them. My model now projects them to win the Metro division despite being one point back and with one more game played than Washington.



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Vegas Golden Knights: This is one where I'm not sure what the model is seeing. The Golden Knights are surging, going 10-3-3 for the month with a top five Corsi, but only saw a very modest bump in expected win percentage for the month. Weird. Regardless, their playoff chances saw the second biggest increase of the month.

Coldest teams

Carolina Hurricanes

Last Month Strength: .557

Current Strength: .547

I'm running out of things to say about the enigma that is the Carolina Hurricanes. My model (and likely most models for that matter) still believes they are a strong team, but they look anything but in the standings, dropping to 17-17-5 on the season after a rough December where they went 4-8-1, tied for the league's second-worst record ahead of only Ottawa. The team should not be this bad. Not the way they control play in all areas of the ice. It's not just padding Corsi from bad areas of the ice either. For the month, Carolina had a 54 percent Corsi, a 56 percent scoring chance rate and a 58 percent high danger rate at 5-on-5, none of which mattered due to scoring just 39 percent of the goals.

All that led to a massive drop in playoff chances, the largest of any team, going from 77 percent to 35 percent. The team is a bit of a longshot unless they find a way to really turn things around and it's because good teams usually don't play at an 82-point pace for half a season. It is possible, but unlikely. Since 2005-06, 11 teams have made the playoffs playing at an 82-point pace or below as of Jan. 1:

- 2005-06 Sharks (16-16-5, finished with 99 points)
- 2005-06 Devils (17-18-2, finished with 101 points)
- 2006-07 Lightning (18-19-2, finished with 93 points)
- 2007-08 Capitals (15-19-5, finished with 94 points)
- 2007-08 Predators (17-18-2, finished with 91 points)
- 2008-09 Blue Jackets (16-16-4, finished with 92 points)
- 2008-09 Blues (14-20-3, finished with 92 points)
- 2010-11 Sabres (15-18-4, finished with 96 points)
- 2013-14 Blue Jackets (17-18-4, finished with 93 points)
- 2013-14 Rangers (19-19-2, finished with 96 points)
- 2015-16 Ducks (14-15-6, finished with 103 points)

It's possible, but it's probably not happening and it leads to the question of whether this is just bad luck for the Canes or if there's something the current analytics are missing from the equation. Personally, I think it's a little bit of both. As mentioned in 31 Stats, Carolina's shooting percentage at 5-on-5 is currently the worst mark since 2007-08. Furthermore, it's occurring in a year where shooting percentages are higher across the board. It's something that theoretically should regress. Even if the team is the worst shooting team in the

league, it shouldn't be to this degree. Then again, it might not be a coincidence that everyone that leaves Carolina soars to new heights offensively and those that come to Carolina struggle. The Canes probably weren't expecting Dougie Hamilton, one of the league's premier offensive defencemen to play at a 25-point pace (!) after a one-point month.

Nothing here adds up, but then again, nothing ever does for the Hurricanes.

Philadelphia Flyers

Last Month Strength: .511

Current Strength: .486

After a surprising return to form in 2017-18 the Flyers had an entirely unsurprising (by Flyers standards) drop back down to earth in 2018-19. I (and many others) had the team pegged as a difference maker in the Metropolitan division and a team on the rise, but it now looks more likely that the team will languish near the bottom instead. Philadelphia started the season with a 74 percent chance at the playoffs and sat at 28 percent on Dec. 1, a low number to be sure, but one with some hope attached to it. That hope is now gone as the team currently sits at just four percent. Of the top 16 projected teams from the start of the season, the Flyers are the only team with playoff chances south of 20 percent entering 2019 and one of two (Florida) lower than 35. Thirteen teams are above 55 percent. To say the Flyers bombed the first half is an understatement.

Aside from Claude Giroux, who has been his usual excellent self after a return to form last season, the rest of the team's players have been maddeningly inconsistent. Philadelphia is not a team that's deep enough to rely on just a few players going at a time, but that's what they've had to deal with. After a slow start, Sean Couturier is back to playing well, though not to last year's level and Jakub Voracek had a very uncharacteristic awful first two months but seems to have regained some of his form over the last month. Along with Giroux, those three were the only Flyers with an average Game Score above 0.5 for the month as Travis Konecny regressed after a strong start. Wayne Simmonds continues his downward trajectory, James van Riemsdyk struggles at 5-on-5 and the twin young guns on the backend have struggled to replicate last year's magic.

And then there's the team's shaky goaltending, with the Flyers' .883 save percentage ranking dead last in the league for December, something the promising Carter Hart likely won't fix. The team has been without starter Brian Elliott for much of the season, but he likely wouldn't have saved the wreckage either.

Honourable mentions

Arizona Coyotes: With Antti Raanta out for the year it's lights out for the Coyotes who look like they're on their way to another bottom five finish. His absence was a big part of Arizona having the biggest drop last month, falling from 24th to 29th in expected win percentage.

St. Louis Blues: The most overhyped team of the summer went 6-6-1 for the month and haven't looked anything close to what many expected back in September.



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To see more charts for how the value of every player on each team has changed over the last month go [here](#).

Hottest players

Johnny Gaudreau, CGY

Last Month GSVA: 3.33 wins

Current GSVA: 4.18 wins

By Game Score only two players were more impactful in December than Gaudreau who rocked a 1.84 average for the month and added a performance worth 3.7 on Wednesday on the strength of his one goal and three assist performance. To put it mildly, the Flames superstar is on fire and my model is finally starting to give him the credit he deserves.

Before the season Gaudreau was often cited as one of the more under-appreciated players by my model and it was hard not to disagree when watching him. Few players are more electrifying with the puck than Gaudreau and he's parlayed that tantalizing skill into a career-best year, carrying the Flames to a very likely top seed in the Pacific division.

To date, Gaudreau has 61 points in 42 games, a 119-point pace that's currently third in the league. It was a fantastic December that put him in the league's upper echelon where he had 26 points in 14 games, a near two-point per-game pace, all while being a dominant 5-on-5 force.

All of that has been enough to propel Gaudreau to a win projection north of four wins, something only seven other players and three other wingers can attest to. Thanks to a ridiculous month where Gaudreau torched opponents on a nightly basis he now has the statistical profile to grade out as a top-10 player, something that's looked obvious on most nights.

Elias Pettersson, VAN

Last Month GSVA: 2.27 wins

Current GSVA: 3.31 wins

How do you top rookie of the month honours in December after putting up 17 points in 14 games? A hat trick on the first game of the new year of course. That makes for 20 points in his last 15 games for Pettersson (before getting injured Thursday night), arguably the sole reason the Canucks look actually respectable this season. The team is projected for 83 points, a hefty improvement from their past three seasons of futility where they averaged 72 points and never topped 75. The rebuild has been painful, but with Pettersson in the fold, the team has a shining beacon of hope.

In order to be a contender in this league, teams need superstars and Pettersson is entrenching himself as one in his first season with 42 points in 38 games, a 91-point pace that would make Mathew Barzal's terrific rookie season from last year look like child's play. His super December earned him an extra win in value, the largest improvement in the league over the last month.

Sample size is always an issue when it comes to rookies and it makes projections much more volatile, especially for someone scoring on 25 percent of their shots at 5-on-5 (and for someone who doesn't seem to shoot very often). That's likely not something Pettersson can expect to sustain and

gives reason for caution with the above projection. It's likely he slows down from his 90-plus point pace as a result, but what is encouraging is that he is starting to drive play to a better degree. He was one of the better Canucks in that department in December, and some growth in that area should mitigate whatever expected regression is coming from his production.

Bottom line, despite the high efficiency, Pettersson still looks like the real deal and a big piece that should fast track Vancouver's rebuild.

Honourable mentions

Nikita Kucherov: Led all players with 30 points in December in just 14 games, an incredible feat accomplished for the first time since Jaromir Jagr in 2001. To add insult to injury, he had a four-point night on Thursday giving him 17 in his last five games. After briefly slipping, Kucherov is back to being considered a top three player according to my model. The only reason he's an "honourable mention" is that it's harder to rise when you're already so high. Kucherov has done it anyways.

Kevin Hayes: Raise your hand if you knew Hayes had 16 points in 12 games last month and led all Rangers in Corsi (at just under 50 percent mind you). Me neither. Contract years do funny things to players.

Coldest players

Patrik Laine, WPG

Last Month GSVA: 3.16 wins

Current GSVA: 2.67 wins

Kyle Connor, WPG

Last Month GSVA: 2.21 wins

Current GSVA: 1.73 wins

With an 11-4-0 record for the month, Winnipeg was the third hottest team in the standings for the month, but it was no thanks to these two, the pillars manning the wings of the team's second line.

After an explosive November, Laine cooled down considerably with just three goals in 15 games, though he did earn four assists, more than doubling his season total to date. Connor also scored three goals, but just had a single assist for the month. Among Jets forwards, his four points were ahead of only Mason Appleton for the month.

That hurts and it's a direct cause of rarely having the puck. When Laine and Connor were off the ice in December the Jets were their naturally dominant self at 5-on-5, outscoring the opposition 22-14 (61 percent) and out-shooting them 496-391 (56 percent). With them on the ice things took a turn for the worse as the team was outscored 8-4 (33 percent) and outshot 174-126 (42 percent). Laine had the league's worst relative Corsi for the month while Connor was 14th.

It's nice when those two are scoring, but when they're not, they become complete non-factors at best and liabilities at worst as they showed in December. That second line is a big problem for Winnipeg that needs to turn around soon.



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Jonathan Marchessault, VGK

Last Month GSVA: 3.12 wins

Current GSVA: 2.82 wins

After last year's magical season for Vegas and its best player, many in the analytics community used it as confirmation of their beliefs of the skill of an unfairly maligned player – cast aside by a vindictive regime. Marchessault flashed superstar potential in a season where he played at a near point-per-game pace (at just 17:30 per night) while driving play on one of the league's best lines.

That was expected to continue this season, but it seems like the clock has struck midnight on Marchessault who has dropped to just a 57-point pace despite an ice-time increase to 19:02 this season and a bump in power play time. It's regression to the mean after a year when his on-ice shooting percentage was 10.7 percent, but to be fair to Marchessault he probably doesn't deserve his current 1.29 points-per-60 at 5-on-5. His own shooting percentage is at just 5.5 percent and his individual points percentage is just 54 percent, both of which are far off from his usual career marks.

I wouldn't be too concerned with his scoring, these things tend to ebb-and-flow throughout the season (and his resurgence could give Vegas an extra gear in the second half), but his play-driving the last month is a bit concerning. The claim to fame for last year's vaunted first line was their ability to dominate other top lines with much more name-brand value, specifically in the playoffs. Of the 19 regulars that played last month, just five had a below average shot attempt ratio. Marchessault was uncharacteristically one of them.

Honourable mentions

William Nylander, Jeff Carter, Casey Mittelstadt: The first, second, and seventh biggest drops in value belonged to these three who lost roughly half a win each. All three were mentioned in Wednesday's 31 Stats so I figured I'd rather not double dip.

Vladimir Tarasenko:

In 13 games in December Tarasenko had just two goals. That's it! He's on pace for a 24-24 season which would be the worst season of his career since his rookie season.



McKegg leads Hurricanes to third straight win in debut

Journeyman center has a goal and an assist in Carolina's 4-2 win over Columbus

By Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — The Carolina Hurricanes have been looking for more goals all season, and they got some in their two previous games against the spiraling Flyers. Friday's home matchup against the Columbus Blue Jackets figured to require even more firepower.

No one expected it to come from Greg McKegg.

Playing his first game with the Hurricanes since being acquired from Pittsburgh at last season's trade deadline, McKegg had a goal and an assist to lead Carolina to a 4-2 victory and its third straight win in front of 15,346 Friday at PNC Arena.

The Hurricanes got off to a fast start, scoring twice in the first seven minutes. But the Blue Jackets came out strong to start the second period and were threatening to get back in the game. That was until McKegg — who has 23 points in 31 games with the AHL's Charlotte Checkers this season — got his first goal with the Hurricanes.

Defenseman Brett Pesce fired a pass through the slot that McKegg redirected into the net to make it 3-0 at 6:52 of the second period. That goal chased Columbus goalie Sergei Bobrovsky, who was replaced by Joonas Korpisalo, making it the second time in three games Carolina forced its opponent to pull the goalie.

"You never know when it's going to come again, and you've just got to keep grinding away," said McKegg, playing for his fifth NHL team in seven pro seasons after being recalled earlier in the day. "Like I said, to contribute at this level at any point in your career is obviously special."

McKegg was recalled to replace the injured Clark Bishop, centering the fourth line between Saku Maenalanen (playing his third NHL game) and Warren Foegele (a rookie himself). Not only did McKegg and company eat minutes on the back end of back-to-back games, they often wrestled control of the game away from Columbus when the Blue Jackets made a push.

"They were the difference. No doubt," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "They were probably our best line overall. If you look at their shifts, they didn't have too many bad ones. They pretty much dominated every shift they were out. And obviously, the goals help, but (they were) just changing the kind of momentum of the game."

That started early when Foegele drew a penalty by undressing Norris Trophy candidate Seth Jones, leading to Carolina's first power play of the night. At the tail end of the man advantage, Sebastian Aho set up Micheal Ferland in the slot for a one-timer just as the penalty expired to make it 1-0 at 5:16.

Eighty-two seconds later, the fourth line was at it again.



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Dougie Hamilton made it 2-0 with a wrist shot, set up by McKegg, that hit Columbus goalie Bobrovsky's glove and trickled in.

"It helps, I think," Hamilton said of his growing confidence after scoring his fifth goal of the year and second in as many nights. "You just play the same way, but some of them go in, some of them don't, and just try to stick with it."

It was McKegg's first point with Carolina, while Saku Maenalainen got the other assist for his first NHL point.

McKegg's goal then gave Carolina a 3-0 lead for the third straight game.

The Blue Jackets, however, made a game of it with two goals in 25 seconds late in the second.

Oliver Bjorkstrand got Columbus on the board with a wrist shot that seemed to deflect off Carolina defender Jaccob Slavin's stick and flutter into the corner of the net at 15:40 of the middle frame.

Then Artemi Panarin jumped on a loose puck in the Hurricanes zone and buried it to make it 3-2 with less than four minutes remaining in the second.

The Hurricanes held on, however, getting an empty net goal from Aho and 22 saves from Curtis McElhinney to win their

third straight as they attempt to re-enter a playoff race they trail by eight points.

"I notice that when we need a save he gets it," Brind'Amour said of McElhinney, who improved to 9-5-1 on the year. "They had a lot of rush opportunities and they were flying at us. You're kind of like, 'Oh no,' but he calms it down. He makes the big save when he has to, gets a whistle when he has to. ... Whatever we need, he's been great all year."

But the bulk of the praise went to the newly formed fourth line.

"They did more tonight than just kind of fill a spot. They contributed," Brind'Amour said. "And you guys are talking about them, so they were noticeable. And that's what we need. If we have any chance to kind of get back in this, we need everybody to contribute, and tonight was one of those nights."

Notes: McKegg's two points marked his first multipoint game of his 92-game NHL career. Aho had his eighth multipoint game of the season. ... McKegg and Maenalainen are the 23rd and 24th players to earn points for the Hurricanes this season. ... Friday's game was the first since Oct. 26 that Andrei Svechnikov did not record a shot on goal. It is just the third time in his career he has not recorded a shot on goal.



Gold: Canes toast to third straight win

By Adam Gold

It was just one of those nights at PNC Arena.

No, not one of THOSE nights. This was a good one, a very good one. One in which the Hurricanes beat the Columbus Blue Jackets, 4-2, in front of 15,346. One in which the Canes jumped on a good team, a playoff team, a team that had been sitting in Raleigh since Thursday afternoon, and who probably watched Carolina fight off the Flyers in Philadelphia last night. It was also a game in which the Hurricanes were driven -- in part -- by a journeyman pro on an emergency call up.

A lot was stacked against Carolina with the Blue Jackets on the other bench. Columbus came in 7-1-1 in their last nine games, they hadn't played since New Year's Eve and not only had the Canes JUST skated in Philadelphia, they had to expend a lot of energy to hold off a desperate team determined not to be embarrassed on their home ice. And, they did so with a depleted forward group after losing center Clark Bishop to a lower body injury in the first period.

I guess you could say Carolina tapped into their organizational depth and brought up Greg McKegg. 17 times McKegg hopped over the boards, posted 10:17 of ice time (TOI), scored one goal and assisted on another. With the Canes still missing Jordan Staal — he's now been out for six straight and 11 of the last 13 games — and now down another valuable, role-playing center, McKegg was summoned from the Checkers, arrived around lunch time, and helped Carolina

to a third straight win at a time when the season is nearing it's last call for a team still far outside the playoff line.

McKegg, acquired from Pittsburgh last winter in the deal that sent Josh Jooris to the Penguins, is in his 8th professional season and his 5th NHL organization, centered the Canes' fourth line between rookies Saku Maenalainen and Warren Foegele. "They were the difference", head coach Rod Brind'Amour said after the game. "They were great, probably our best line all night."

That McKegg scored his first NHL goal in 14 months on a night when PNC Arena featured low-priced beer offerings just adds to the fun. What happens next for McKegg depends on the health of Staal (placed on injured reserve today) and the status of Bishop who is unlikely to travel with the Hurricanes on their 3-game road trip that begins Sunday afternoon in Ottawa.

For now, he's just happy to get another chance.

"You just kind of want to put your best foot forward and contribute any way you can", McKegg said. "To cap it off with a win was awesome."

* The Hurricanes have won two of the three meetings with the Blue Jackets this year and are 14-4-4 against Columbus in the last 22 in the series.



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* The Hurricanes were 0 for 2 on the power play, but that is a little misleading. Michael Ferland snapped home a feed from Sebastian Aho at 5:16 of the first period, exactly two minutes after Seth Jones was whistled for a slashing penalty. While technically NOT a power play goal, Jones wasn't yet back on the ice when Ferland laced his one-timer past the left pad of Sergei Bobrovsky.

* Ferland's 12th goal of the season was his first since a November 21 win over the Maple Leafs. That's an 18-game span, though Ferland was injured for eight games in the middle of that stretch.

* 82 seconds later, Dougie Hamilton took a drop pass from McKegg and slung a wrist shot off the Bobrovsky's glove and into the net for a 2-0 lead. It was Hamilton's second straight game with a goal, the first time he's registered scoring points in consecutive games for the Hurricanes. Hamilton now has five goals and 13 points, tied with Justin Faulk and Jaccob Slavin on Carolina's blue line.

* It was the second straight home game in which the Hurricanes chased the starting goaltender. Philly's rookie Carter Hart allowed three goals before being pulled for Michael Neuvirth on New Year's Eve, and Bobrovsky yielded three before Columbus head coach John Tortorella went to his bullpen for Jones Korpisalo.

* Aho scored an empty net goal with two seconds left in the game, following a Slavin blocked shot by chipping the puck to center ice and then outracing Blue Jackets D-man Zach Warenski to poke it across the goal line. The 21-year old named to his first All Star team this week has nine goals and 17 points in his last 13 games.

*Maenalanen was thought to have registered his first NHL point Thursday night in the win over the Flyers. But, it was ruled that he did not deflect Justin Faulk's point drive before Foegele redirected the shot past Neuvirth. Tonight, he picked up the secondary assist on the Hamilton goal, so he picked up his first point in his 3rd NHL game.

* Curtis McElhinney stopped 22 shots in the win improving to 9-5-1 in 15 starts for the Hurricanes. He's also 2-0-0 against Columbus having beaten the Jackets on the road in the second game of the season.

* Carolina is now 18-17-5, eight points shy of both Columbus for 3rd place in the Metropolitan Division AND of Montreal for the 2nd wild card spot in the Eastern Conference.

* Carolina will take on the Ottawa Senators Sunday at 1:00, the start of a 3-game road swing with stops on Long Island (Tuesday) and Tampa Bay (Thursday).



Recap: McKegg, Canes Hold Off Blue Jackets

McKegg notches GWG, assist in 4-2 win

by Michael Smith

For the second night in a row, the Carolina Hurricanes staved off another comeback, this time topping the Columbus Blue Jackets, 4-2.

Greg McKegg recorded an assist and the game-winning goal in his debut with the Canes, who recorded their third consecutive victory.

Here are five takeaways from tonight's game.

One

When the Blue Jackets first visited Raleigh in mid-November, the Canes were in the midst of a six-game homestand but were coming off an oddly placed four-day break. The resulting effort was a dominant game for Columbus and what Justin Williams called a "dud" for the Hurricanes.

The script was somewhat reversed tonight.

The Hurricanes had played the night before in Philadelphia, where they topped the Flyers for the second straight game. The Blue Jackets, meanwhile, had been idle since New Year's Eve.

"Let's just say we come out and play great, we'd say 'Oh, we felt good because we're coming off a game and they had a little layoff. If it's the other way, you say, 'Oh, we're tired,'" head coach Rod Brind'Amour mused before the game. "Personally, when I played, I was always better in the back-to-back game. I always felt better."

Sure enough, the Canes emulated their bench boss and looked better, especially early.

"We came out great. I thought the guys, to a man, were on it. It helped again to get the lead," Brind'Amour said. "It's a lot easier to play with that. Every part of our game was pretty solid. They've got a great team over there. You could see their high-end players took over for a couple minutes and got themselves back in the game. I thought we came back in the third and played well."

Two

From the drop of the puck, the Canes were buzzing (and so was the crowd of 15,346 at PNC Arena). Just over three minutes into the game, they were rewarded with the game's first power play, as Seth Jones slashed Warren Foegele, who skated around him with speed.

Though it officially is an even-strength goal, the Hurricanes' first tally was, for all intents and purposes, a power play goal.



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After whiffing on a puck in the slot just about 30 seconds prior, Micheal Ferland took a pass from Sebastian Aho at the near circle and one-timed it into the net, the puck finding twine as soon as the penalty box door opened.

"He's one of the best," Ferland said of Aho. "He's a very special player."

Three

It's a McKegg party, and everyone's invited.

In the absence of Clark Bishop (lower-body injury), McKegg made his regular-season debut with the Canes and tallied a goal and an assist in the first multi-point game of his 92-game NHL career.

"You just want to put your best foot forward and contribute any way you can," said McKegg, who was named the game's first star. "To chip in at this level is obviously special any time you can. To cap it off with a win was pretty awesome."

"Love it. Love it. He's a pro," Brind'Amour said. "We did a nice job getting him in our organization. He had a great training camp and was right there. This was an easy call-up. He's obviously trying to stay here. I love it."

His assist was the primary helper on Dougie Hamilton's second goal in as many games. McKegg skated the puck through the neutral zone and dropped it off at the line for Hamilton, who scored on a wrist shot that Sergei Bobrovsky failed to snag in his glove. That goal, scored 1:22 after Ferland opened the scoring, doubled the Canes' lead.

McKegg's first goal as a Hurricane came in the second period, as he turned the blade of his stick to direct in a pass from Brett Pesce, another shot that bounced off Bobrovsky's glove and in the net (and chased him from the game, as he was replaced with Joonas Korpisalo).

"They were the difference, no doubt. It was probably our best line overall," Brind'Amour said of his team's fourth line. "If you look at their shifts, they didn't have too many bad ones. They pretty much dominated every shift they were out."

Four

Projected Lineup: Blue Jackets vs. Hurricanes

McKegg to make Canes debut

by Michael Smith

On the heels of consecutive victories over the Philadelphia Flyers, the Carolina Hurricanes return home to host the Columbus Blue Jackets.

With Clark Bishop sidelined due to a lower-body injury suffered in the first period on Thursday, Greg McKegg will make his regular-season debut for the Canes. Curtis McElhinney, who made 31 saves in a 3-1 win in Columbus on Oct. 5, will face one of his former squads in net.

Here is the projected lineup for the Hurricanes.

Forwards

McGinn-Aho-Teravainen
Martinook-Wallmark-Williams

On Thursday night, the Flyers scored three straight goals in a span of 4:41 to turn the Canes' four-goal lead into just a one-goal advantage.

Tonight, it took the Blue Jackets just 25 seconds to trim a three-goal deficit into a one-goal game. Oliver Bjorkstrand used Jaccob Slavin as a screen and beat Curtis McElhinney with a glove-side wrist to get the Blue Jackets on the board. Then, Artemi Panarin located a loose puck in the slot and buried it.

"Apparently [they didn't learn] as much as I would have liked. We talked about it. The guys understand. You've got to remember, you're not going to play a perfect game. We're fighting for inches," Brind'Amour said. "You have to give them credit. They made some nice plays. I know we've learned it enough this year that there's one way to play for us. You have to keep your foot on the gas and keep playing in-your-face hockey."

Five

Aho, an All-Star for the first of what's sure to be many times in his career, skated in his 200th career game and recorded an empty-net goal - his 69th career goal - and an assist for back-to-back multi-point efforts.

With the clocking ticking down in the game's waning seconds, Pierre-Luc Dubois' pass from the half wall was blocked by Slavin. Aho picked up the puck, avoided a stick check from Dubois and poked the puck through two defenders at the blue line. He then turned on the jets to beat Zach Werenski to the puck and tap it into the empty net with just two seconds left on the clock.

He didn't need it, but he wanted it. And he got it.

Up Next

The Hurricanes will hit the road for three games, a trip that will take the team through Ottawa, Long Island and Tampa.

"We trying to get back in the standings," Hamilton said. "We need as many wins as we can get right now."

Svechnikov-Rask-Ferland
Foegele-McKegg-Maenalanen

Defense

Slavin-Pesce
de Haan-Faulk
van Riemsdyk-Hamilton

Goalies

McElhinney
Mrazek

Scratches: Bishop (lower body), Staal (upper body; injured reserve)

Note: Lineup subject to change prior to opening faceoff.



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McGinn turns stick into Thor hammer in Hurricanes post-win celebration

Forward leads team in another epic performance after victory against Columbus

by Pat Pickens

Brock McGinn possessed the power of Thor on Friday.

The Carolina Hurricanes forward assisted in another epic post-win celebration, this time using his stick to lay down a Thor-style hammer after their 4-2 victory against the Columbus Blue Jackets.

The Hurricanes circled around McGinn at center ice, and he led them and the crowd in a customary Skol clap. As the clap reached its dramatic climax, McGinn slammed his stick into the center-ice dot, prompting each of his teammates to fall down in unison.

McGinn was about the only thing this week to take down the Hurricanes this week, as Carolina won its third straight game.

You can be the judge whether the McGinn-led Storm Surge is on par with Carolina's other post-win celebrations. But team owner Tom Dundon made his pick.

McKegg helps Hurricanes hold on against Blue Jackets

Emergency call-up has goal, assist; McElhinney makes 22 saves

by Kurt Dusterberg

RALEIGH, N.C. -- Greg McKegg had a goal and an assist in his first game with the Carolina Hurricanes, helping them to a 4-2 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at PNC Arena on Friday.

The forward played as an emergency call-up from Charlotte of the American Hockey League.

"You never know when it's going to come again, so you've got to keep grinding away," McKegg said. "To contribute at this level at any point in your career is obviously special."

Curtis McElhinney made 22 saves, and Sebastian Aho had a goal and an assist for the Hurricanes (18-17-5), who have won three in a row.

Oliver Bjorkstrand and Artemi Panarin scored for the Blue Jackets (23-14-3).

"We [stunk], everybody," Columbus coach John Tortorella said. "A number of guys didn't play well. We chase the game, and we lose. We didn't deserve to win that game."

Micheal Ferland one-timed a pass from Aho to give the Hurricanes a 1-0 lead at 5:16 of the first period.

"[Aho] is one of the best," Ferland said. "He's a special player. You've just got to be ready at all times, have your stick on the ice and get yourself in a shooting position."

Dougie Hamilton made it 2-0 at 6:38 off a pass from McKegg, who last played an NHL game Nov. 27, 2017 for the Pittsburgh Penguins. Saku Maenalanen, playing his third NHL game, got an assist for his first point.

McKegg cut to the slot and redirected a pass from Brett Pesce to extend the lead to 3-0 at 6:52 of the second period. It was McKegg's first multipoint game in 92 NHL games.

Joonas Korpisalo relieved Sergei Bobrovsky, who made 13 saves. Korpisalo did not allow a goal facing 14 shots.

The Blue Jackets scored two goals in 25 seconds to make it 3-2. Bjorkstrand scored on a wrist shot under the crossbar at 15:40 of the second, and Panarin got to a loose puck in the right face-off circle at 16:05.

Columbus had won six of seven but has lost two of three.

"We knew we had better, that's all I want to say about that," Blue Jackets defenseman Seth Jones said. "It was our lack of pace, our lack of decision-making."

Aho scored into an empty net with two seconds remaining to make it 4-2.

"Every part of our game was pretty solid," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "You could see their high-end players took over for a couple minutes and they got themselves back in the game, but I thought we came back in the third and played fairly well."

They said it

"We were 7-2-1 coming into this game. I'm always concerned about the team. I always think a hockey team should get better each and every game. And tonight there were just way too many passengers." -- Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella

"[McKegg] is a pro. We did a nice job getting him in our organization. He had a great training camp and he was right there. This was an easy call-up. He's obviously trying to stay here. I love it." -- Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour

Need to know

The Blue Jackets' 24 shots were their fewest in a loss this season. ... Aho has scored in each of Carolina's three games against Columbus. ... McKegg has 15 points (eight goals, seven assists) in six seasons with the Toronto Maple Leafs, Florida Panthers, Tampa Bay Lightning and Penguins.



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What's next

Blue Jackets: At the Florida Panthers on Saturday (7 p.m. ET; FS-F, FS-O, NHL.TV)

Hurricanes: At the Ottawa Senators on Sunday (1 p.m. ET; RDS2, TSN5, FS-SE, NHL.TV)



McKegg leads Hurricanes past Blue Jackets 4-2

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Greg McKegg made his Carolina debut one to remember.

McKegg had a goal and an assist in his first game with the Hurricanes, and Carolina defeated the Columbus Blue Jackets 4-2 Friday night.

McKegg was recalled from Charlotte of the American Hockey League on an emergency basis earlier Friday after Carolina placed Jordan Staal on injured reserve. Playing in his first NHL game since November 2017, the journeyman center assisted on a goal in the first period and scored the decisive goal in the second to lift the Hurricanes to their third straight win.

"He's a pro," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "We did a nice job getting him in our organization. He had a great training camp and he was right there. This was an easy call-up. He's obviously trying to stay here. I love it."

It was the first multi-point game of McKegg's six-year career. It came after he got word of his call-up late Thursday, made a two-hour drive from Belleville, Ontario, to Toronto, caught an early flight and arrived in Raleigh late Friday morning.

"Obviously it's special," McKegg said. "You never know when (a call-up) is going to come and you just have to keep grinding away. To contribute at this level at any point in your career is special."

Micheal Ferland, Dougie Hamilton and Sebastian Aho added goals for Carolina. Curtis McElhinney stopped 22 shots in his second straight win after four consecutive losses.

Oliver Bjorkstrand and Artemi Panarin scored 25 seconds apart in the second period for the Blue Jackets. Sergei Bobrovsky surrendered three goals on 16 shots before being pulled midway through second period.

"I always think a hockey team should get better each and every game," Columbus coach John Tortorella said. "And tonight there were just way too many passengers."

McKegg, playing for his fifth team in six seasons, helped propel Carolina to an early 3-0 lead.

Ferland's one-timer from the left faceoff circle put Carolina up 5:16 into the first period. Less than 90 seconds later, Hamilton made it 2-0 when his wrist shot from the left point deflected off Bobrovsky's glove and trickled into the net.

After setting up Hamilton's goal with a drop pass, McKegg found the net in the second period.

Brett Pesce fired a pass for McKegg breaking down the middle toward the goal, and McKegg redirected the puck into the net — again off Bobrovsky's glove — to make it 3-0.

"You just kind of want to put your best foot forward and contribute any way you can," McKegg said. "To chip in at this level is obviously special. To cap it off with a win was pretty awesome."

Joonas Korpisalo replaced Bobrovsky shortly after.

"I'm not giving assessment on the goaltending," Tortorella said. "Korpi played well. He was one of the few guys who played well."

Bjorkstrand and Panarin's quick goals late in the period pulled the Blue Jackets within one heading into the third, but McElhinney stopped all seven shots he faced in the final period and Aho scored an empty-netter with two seconds remaining to secure the Carolina victory.

"We came out great. I thought the guys to a man were on it," Brind'Amour said. "Every part of our game was pretty solid."

NOTES: Columbus captain Nick Foligno missed his second straight game to tend to his newborn daughter, Milana, who had heart surgery last week. He remains on indefinite leave. ... Carolina F Saku Maenalanen recorded his first NHL point with an assist on Hamilton's goal. ... McElhinney appeared in 85 games for Columbus from 2013-17.

UP NEXT

Blue Jackets: At Florida on Saturday.

Hurricanes: At Ottawa on Sunday.



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McKegg makes instant impact, Hurricanes survive comeback bid in win over Blue Jackets

Fourth line comes to play as the Canes extend their winning streak to three games.

By Brett Finger

Friday night's tilt against the Columbus Blue Jackets was going to be a big test for the Carolina Hurricanes, who were riding high after two wins over the lowly Philadelphia Flyers.

While the Blue Jackets were in Raleigh waiting for their opponent, the Canes had a late flight last night and had to make a quick turnaround. They had to start on time.

And they did.

The Hurricanes were buzzing from the jump. Warren Foegele jumped in, undressed Norris-candidate defenseman Seth Jones, and was hauled down in the process. That gave the Canes' power play its first chance of the night, and it looked like they were going to waste it.

The first 100 seconds of the man advantage was rather putrid, but a late push from the top unit salvaged things when, right at the expiration of the man advantage, Micheal Ferland slammed a pass from Sebastian Aho right by the pad of Sergei Bobrovsky to give the home team a 1-0 lead.

Less than 90 seconds later, the other piece of the trade with the Flames made it 2-0.

In his own end, Saku Maenalanen dug the puck out of the corner, dealt the puck to Greg McKegg who drove the puck right through the neutral zone and his drop pass to Dougie Hamilton was wired by the glove of Bobrovsky.

It was Hamilton's second goal in as many games and served as another reminder that, when he gets going, he's going to be a big problem for opponents. Perhaps this is the start of that transformation.

Lucas Wallmark got whistled for interference in the latter half of the first period, but the Hurricanes, largely, avoided any problems as their red-hot penalty kill remained red-hot.

At the conclusion of the opening frame, the score stood at 2-0 in favor of Carolina. It was a perfect first period for the Hurricanes, who jumped all over their rested opponent and jumped out to an important early lead.

As expected, the Blue Jackets came out with more urgency in the middle frame. They won more puck battles, played with more speed, and very nearly cut into the Carolina lead, but Curtis McElhinney remained perfect through the swarm.

His effort were rewarded at the 6:52 mark when noted offensive dynamo Greg McKegg tallied his second point of his Hurricanes debut - a deflection that Bobrovsky couldn't keep out of the net.

The goal made it 3-0 and promptly put an end to Bobrovsky's evening. The Canes knocked out their second goalie in as many home games and Joonas Korpisalo was called upon to clean up the mess in goal.

John Tortorella's message was sent. And his club received it.

After a couple of key saves from Korpisalo, the Jackets really started to buzz.

At 15:40 of the second period, Oliver Bjorkstrand took a centering pass from Zach Werenski, used Jaccob Slavin as a screen and beat McElhinney over his glove-side shoulder to break the shut out and give Columbus some life.

All of 25 seconds later, the bread was delivered. Artemi Panarin made a quick decision with a loose puck and beat an out-of-position McElhinney. Just like that, it was groundhog day. The Canes quickly squandered their comfortable lead and were flirting with disaster just like they did in Philadelphia the night before and so many other times to this point in the season.

At the end of 40 minutes, the Canes were just barely hanging onto remains of a lead that they had spent the better part of 30 minutes getting.

The opening moments of the third period were dominated by the Blue Jackets. They had a number of high-danger chances, including a backdoor tap-in chance that McElhinney barely kept out of the net with his outstretched pad.

The Canes looked gassed, until they got one strong push which led to a hooking penalty on Brandon Dubinsky. The ensuing power play was largely disappointing. It was a huge chance for them to put the game away, but they couldn't do more than cycle the puck around the outside of the Columbus zone.

Down the stretch, the Canes did their best to play preventative defense, and they were able to escape with a win in hand after a buzzer-beater empty-net goal from Sebastian Aho.

The final score was 4-2. The Canes are winners of three straight games, all of which have come against divisional rivals.

Carolina has clawed their way back over NHL .500 at 18-17-5. Where they go from here will decide their season. They desperately need to get it going if they want to be in the playoff hunt come February and March. It's an uphill battle, but they're going to give it their best shot.

Postgame Quotes

Greg McKegg

[On trying to make an impact in his first game in Carolina] You just kinda want to put your best foot forward and contribute



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any way you can. To chip in at this level, it's special. To help out (in the win) was pretty awesome.

[On the fourth line's contributions] I think we just tried to focus on getting pucks deep and grinding down low. We were able to wear them down a little bit. Any time we can contribute offensively is obviously key.

[On how he has consistently gotten NHL action with every team he has been with] It's special, I think. You never know when it's going to come again. You just gotta keep grinding away. To be able to contribute at this level, at any point in your career, is special.

Rod Brind'Amour

[On the game] It got a little crazy, yeah. We came out great. I felt the guys, just to a man, were on it. Of course, it helped to get the lead. Every part of our game was pretty solid. (The Blue Jackets) got a great team over there. You could see their high-end players took over for a couple of minutes and they got themselves back into the game. I thought we came back in the third and played fairly well.

[On the strong performance from the fourth line] They were the difference. No doubt. They were, probably, our best line, overall. If you look at the shifts that they had, they didn't have many bad (shifts). They pretty much dominated every shift they were out there. Obviously, the goals help. They kinda changed the momentum of the game.

[On how McKegg keeps working to get his chances in the NHL] I love it. He's a pro. We did a nice job getting him in our

organization. He had a great training camp and he was right there (with regards to making the NHL team). So, it was an easy call-up and, obviously, he's trying to stay here.

[On if Saku Maenalanen is making a case for himself to stick around in the NHL] Yep. Yep. He had a good camp, too. The one thing we do have in this organization, I feel like, is a lot of those type of players that we can count on to come up. They did more, tonight, than just fill a spot. They contributed. They were noticeable. That's what we need. If we want to have a chance to get back into (the playoff picture), they need to contribute.

[On what they learned from their scare in Philadelphia on Thursday] Well, apparently, not as much as I would like. We talked about it, and the guys understand. You have to remember, we're not going to play a perfect game. We're fighting for inches. If we come off of (our game), the other team's getting paid a lot of money to (play), too, so you have to give them credit. They made some nice plays. I know we've learned (how to stay in control when the other team gets back into the game). There's one way to play for us. We gotta keep our foot on the gas and keep playing 'in your face' hockey. The minute you take a breath, most of the time, it's in our net. We have definitely learned our lesson.

[On McElhinney] When we need a save, he gets it. They had a lot of rush opportunities and they were flying at us, and you're kinda like 'oh no', but he calms it down. He makes a big save when he has to. He gets a whistle when he has to. Whatever we need. He's been great all year.

Hurricanes recall McKegg on emergency basis

Josh Jooris' trade partner gets a shot with the Canes as Jordan Staal gets placed on injured reserve.

By Justin Lape

The Carolina Hurricanes announced Friday that they have recalled Charlotte Checkers forward Greg McKegg on an emergency basis and have placed center Jordan Staal on injured reserve.

McKegg has been a high-energy forward on a dominant Charlotte Checkers team this season. He ranks fourth on the team in points with 23 in 31 games and brings speed to a loaded Checkers top-six. McKegg and Checkers forward Andrew Poturalski have been great complimentary pieces to a young Checkers team. McKegg is coming off a two-goal performance in the Checkers 5-4 overtime loss against the Toronto Marlies.

Jordan Staal has now missed the past five games with an upper body injury. He has 11 points in 29 games this season. Staal is in the 6th year of a 10-year, \$60 million contract. He was placed on injured reserve to open a roster spot for McKegg, who will take the place of Clark Bishop in tonight's game against the Blue Jackets. Bishop suffered a lower body injury in the first period of last night's win over the Flyers.

The emergency designation for McKegg's recall indicates that the Hurricanes have fewer than twelve healthy forwards on the roster, and allows for McKegg to be returned to Charlotte without needing to clear waivers when Staal returns to action.

Below is the Hurricanes press release on the move:

Don Waddell, President and General Manager of the National Hockey League's Carolina Hurricanes, today announced that the team has recalled forward Greg McKegg from the Charlotte Checkers of the American Hockey League (AHL) on an emergency basis and placed forward Jordan Staal on injured reserve.

McKegg, 26, has posted 23 points (6g, 17a) in 31 games with the Checkers this season, ranking second on the team in assists and fourth in points. The 6'0", 190-pound forward has appeared in 91 career NHL games with Toronto, Florida, Tampa Bay and Pittsburgh, recording 13 points (7g, 6a). Last season, McKegg tallied four points (2g, 2a) in 26 games with the Penguins, including his first career shorthanded goal.

The St. Thomas, Ont., native was acquired by the Hurricanes from Pittsburgh in exchange for Josh Jooris on Feb. 26, 2018. Since joining the organization, he has registered 46 points (15g, 31a) in 50 games with Charlotte (AHL). He has appeared in 322 career AHL games, tallying 193 points (82g, 111a). McKegg was drafted by the Maple Leafs in the third round, 62nd overall, of the 2010 NHL Draft.

Staal, 30, has missed the last five games with an upper-body injury. The 6'4", 220-pound forward has recorded 11 points (5g, 6a) in 29 games this season and ranks ninth in the NHL in faceoff win percentage (56.6%). The Thunder Bay, Ont., native has registered 493 points (211g, 282a) in 872 career NHL games, including 245 points (91g, 154a) in 441 games



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with Carolina. He was acquired by the Hurricanes from the Penguins in exchange for Brandon Sutter, Brian Dumoulin, and a first-round pick in the 2012 NHL Draft (Derrick Pouliot)

About Last Night: Averting Disaster

Teuvo Teravainen led the Hurricanes to a much needed victory last night over the Flyers

By Cody Hagan

The Carolina Hurricanes managed to hold on and defeat the Philadelphia Flyers last night 5-3 after roaring out to a large lead and almost giving it away. There was some Grit(ty), some grind, and lots of goals to go around, but thanks to Teuvo Teravainen the Hurricanes brought home the two points.

The Good

Maybe it's the fact the Canes have been playing the Flyers who are, amazingly, even worse than the Hurricanes. Maybe they've actually started to turn the corner on something. Regardless of the why, the last two games the Hurricanes have shown something that some thought to be nonexistent: offense.

For the majority of 2018 Carolina's offensive ineptitude directly cost them numerous points and led to the frustration of everyone with even a minor interest in what occurs at 1400 Edwards Mill Road.

Over the last two games that has not been an issue as the Hurricanes have scored 3+ goals in each contest. Last night they put up five, including two power play goals.

It started with a snipe by Dougie Hamilton early in the second period.

It continued shortly thereafter with an extremely rare power play goal by Justin Williams. This PPG broke a streak of 26 straight goalless power plays for the Hurricanes.

Teravainen would get a power play tally himself later in the second to put the Canes up 3-0.

Maybe 2019 is the year of the power play?

Warren Foegele scored on a tip in and Teravainen added the game sealer late in the third for a total of five Hurricanes goals scored on an actual opposing goaltender. That's been an extreme rarity for the Canes this season so it was good to see. Granted, the Flyers goaltending situation is indeed questionable at best, but Carolina has made a habit of making questionable goaltenders look like Vezina nominees. There's no way you can say the Flyers made it easy on the Canes.

Power play goals and timely goals are not the normal game for Carolina, but maybe the team made a New Year's resolution to change that. If so, that means we should see about three weeks of this, a climb in the standings, and false hope, only to be severely let down in about three weeks.

The Bad

The Hurricanes did nearly everything they could to give the game away last night just as they did against the Capitals last month. Up 4-0 in the third period, they allowed the Flyers to

on June 22, 2012. Staal was drafted by Pittsburgh in the first round, second overall, of the 2006 NHL Draft.

storm back when Philadelphia scored three unanswered goals in less than five minutes. Two of the goals were power play goals, for the Flyers including Wayne Simmonds' tap in.

This is a defensive breakdown to allow Simmonds to be alone in front of Petr Mrazek but at the time this made the game 4-1 so not all is lost. But fast forward to what is now a 4-2 game, and the penalty kill unit failed the Hurricanes again. Just as before, they allowed a Flyer to get free in front of Mrazek and James van Riemsdyk made them pay.

Just like that, the Flyers were within one goal and every Canes fan is thinking here we go again. Thankfully Philadelphia was unable to complete the comeback but Carolina almost gave this game away.

The Hurricanes got complacent and truly stopped play their game after going up 4-0 and it's a mystery as to why they would do that. One would think after the Capitals did this to them in December they would know they cannot let their foot off the gas when up big in a game.

Teuvo The Great

The best player from last night was Teuvo Teravainen and it wasn't even close. Scoring two goals including a power play goal, Teuvo surely made his case to be the last man voted in to the NHL All-Star Game (which — shameless plug! — you can do here). Everyone know Turbo has a great shot but is usually reluctant to use it. Even though his second goal was a soft one, it only happens because of his willingness to shoot the puck.

The play was a two on one with Sebastian Aho on the other side and any bettor would have guessed Teuvo would have passed the puck in that situation. Teravainen has some serious Finishing abilities (ed. note:) if he would only use them more the Canes would be better off.

It should be noted that ever since Teravainen and Aho have been consistently used on the penalty kill, both have seemed to show more offensive promise at even strength. They are both continuing to round out their game, and in contract years for both — despite the fact that their price increases by the day — that is a good thing for the Hurricanes. The two Finns are inseparable on and off the ice and should continue to be the faces of this franchise for a very long time.

Moral of the Story

There were some very high moments last night and some very nerve wracking ones as well. Up through the first few minutes of the third period it was a great game for the Hurricanes but it was almost all for naught. If the Canes can continue the scoring pace they've had against the Flyers it could lead to some great things in 2019. If they revert back to their non-scoring ways it'll be another tough year. That test begins tonight with a match up against a much better and well rested Columbus Blue Jackets team.



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Hurricanes hold on late, top Blue Jackets for third straight win

By Andrew Schnittker

So far, so good for the Carolina Hurricanes in 2019. Thanks to a 4-2 win over the Columbus Blue Jackets at PNC Arena Friday night, the Canes have won two straight in the new year and three in a row overall.

Forward Greg McKegg, playing his first game of the season on an emergency recall, scored the game-winning goal and added an assist for the Canes (18-17-5). Forwards Micheal Ferland and Sebastian Aho, along with defenseman Dougie Hamilton, also scored. Goalie Curtis McElhinney stopped 22 of 24 Blue Jackets (23-14-3) shots.

For the second night in a row, the Canes jumped out to a big lead, saw the other team cut it to one and then held on late for the win.

"A little crazy, yeah," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "I thought the guys, to a man, were on it. It obviously helped to get the lead ... it's a lot easier to play with that. Every part of our game was pretty solid. But they've got a great team over there. You could see their high-end players take over for a couple minutes and they got themselves back into the game. But I thought we came back in the third and played fairly well."

Columbus nearly scored the game's first goal shorthanded, but McElhinney came up with a glove stop on Blue Jackets forward Cam Atkinson's slapshot off the rush.

"When we need a save, [McElhinney] gets it," Brind'Amour said. "They had a lot of rush opportunities; they were flying at us. You're kind of like, 'Oh no', but he just calms it down. He makes a big save when he has to, gets a whistle when he has to just to kind of get us the right change. Whatever we need, he's been great all year."

The Canes jumped in front just after the power play expired; Ferland finished off a tic-tac-toe play with Aho and forward Justin Williams, snapping a shot past Bobrovsky from the left circle.

"I think our power play's been obviously better as of late," Ferland said. "We've just had better puck movement. We know our spots and I think it's just bearing down and scoring."

Hamilton made it 2-0 just over a minute later, zipping home a shot off the rush from above the circle. Forward Saku Maenalanen also earned an assist for his first NHL point. The goal was Hamilton's second in the past two games after a prolonged slump.

"It helps," Hamilton said. "You just play the same way but some of them go in, some of them don't. You just try to stick with it."

McKegg followed that up with his first goal as a Cane about seven minutes into the second period, tipping in a pass from defenseman Brett Pesce to put Carolina up 3-0.

"You just want to put your best foot forward and contribute anyway you can," McKegg said. To chip in at this level is obviously special anytime you can and to cap off the win was pretty awesome."

That goal prompted the Blue Jackets to replace Bobrovsky with Joonas Korpisalo, the second time in three games the Canes have chased an opponent's starter.

The Blue Jackets scored twice in a span of 25 seconds late in the middle frame to make it 3-2; forward Oliver Bjorkstrand beat McElhinney over the glove with a quick whistle and forward Artemi Panarin drove through the defense and snapped a shot in with 3:55 left in the period.

"Apparently not as much as I would like," Brind'Amour said of what the team learned from giving up a big lead the night before. "We talked about it. The guys understand. You've got to remember; you're not going to play a perfect game. We're fighting for inches. We come off it a little, but the other team's getting paid a lot of money to do that too. So you have to give them some credit; they made some nice plays."

"I know we've learned it enough this year. There's one way to play for us. You've got to keep your foot on the gas; you've got to keep playing in your face hockey. The minute you take a breath, that's the time that it's in our net. So we've definitely learned our lesson over this year."

Columbus pulled Korpisalo for an extra skater with 1:40 left in the third period, but could not find the equalizer, and Aho put the game away with an empty-net goal with two seconds left, securing the Canes' first three-game winning streak since late November.

"I think we let off the gas a little bit yesterday and a little bit at the second today," Hamilton said. "But other than that, obviously great goaltending is huge. We're playing consistent; we're moving the puck well. The power play's scoring. We just have to keep sticking to our game."

The Canes will be back in action against the Senators in Ottawa Sunday afternoon.



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TriangleSportsNetwork

Recent call-up leads Hurricanes in 4-2 win over Blue Jackets

Greg McKegg understands the reality of being an NHL pro

By Peter Koutroumpis

RALEIGH, N.C. – Hopping on a flight from Toronto early Friday morning, Greg McKegg didn't necessarily expect to be surrounded by a throng of media in the Carolina Hurricanes dressing room in PNC Arena by the end of the day.

His two-point effort, his first-ever multi-point finish in the NHL – a goal and an assist – helped the Hurricanes post their third win in a row, a 4-2 decision over the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Arriving at 11:30 a.m., he had a quick turnaround as he called it in preparing to take to the ice in his first game in Carolina since he was acquired in a trade from the Pittsburgh Penguins last season.

Playing on a line with Warren Foegele and Saku Maenalanen, McKegg and got rave reviews from head coach Rod Brind'Amour afterwards.

"They were the difference, no doubt," Brind'Amour said.

"They were our best line overall. If you look at the shifts that they had, they didn't have too many bad ones. They pretty much dominated every shift that they were out on. Obviously, the goals helped, but just changing the momentum of the game. They came in and had shifts in the other team's end. They did a great job."

Following Michael Ferland's 12th goal of the season at 5:16 into the opening period, McKegg picked up a feed from Maenalanen, carried the puck through the neutral zone and across the Columbus blue line before dropping a pass to defenseman Dougie Hamilton.

The defenseman's quick snap shot came behind McKegg as he crossed from the middle of the slot to the boards and eluded Columbus starting netminder Sergei Bobrovsky, partially stopping the attempt with his trapper, but watching it continue into the net.

Both McKegg and Maenalanen earned their first points with the Hurricanes as a result.

With Carolina carrying the 2-0 lead into the second period, McKegg then made it a two-point night when he redirected Brett Pesce's pass past a lunging Bobrovsky to extend the Hurricanes lead to three goals.

With Joonas Korpisalo soon replacing Bobrovsky in net, finishing with 13 saves, the Blue Jackets responded with consecutive goals from Oliver Bjorkstrand and Artemi Panarin 25 seconds apart to pull within one entering the third period.

Hurricanes netminder Curtis McElhinney responded with a seven-save effort, of 22 total, during the final 20 minutes and earned his ninth win of the season.

Little did McKegg know his first goal with the Hurricanes would become the eventual game-winner. even as Sebastian Aho's empty-netter with two seconds remaining made it a 4-2 finish.

"It was kind of nice, I didn't really have too much time to think about it," McKegg said.

"It was nice to get on the board early and get the win. You always hope you get off to a good start. We built that lead and we were able to finish off in the third."

With a five-year junior playing career history with the OHL's Erie Otters and London Knights, two years in particular during which he posted 85 (37g, 48a) and 92 (49g, 43a) points in 67 and 66 games, respectively showed that he has the talent to score.

Thus, seeing how and what he did against the Blue Jackets shouldn't have come as much of a surprise.

A third-round pick of the Toronto Maple Leafs in 2010, impressive offensive numbers haven't resulted for McKegg in the same way in the NHL or AHL as they did in junior.

He has learned that playing pro does not always equate into assuming the same role.

"There's not too many guys that can step in and score right away at this level, or in pro regardless," McKegg said.

"You gotta find a way to earn ice time when you're young. If that's takin' more draws in the D-zone and things like that, you gotta find a niche for a team. Just tryin' to keep doin' that each day."

In his seventh season as a pro, now with his fifth NHL team, McKegg liked what he saw when he stepped into the Carolina room earlier in the day.

"There's a lot of positive attitudes in here I think," he said.

"It's a fast team, they play with a lot of pace, and just keep buildin' off wins. I walked in and it was real positive right away and it was a nice environment to be a part of."

Even with a memorable night with the First Star accolades that came with it, McKegg knows that it isn't a permanent situation necessarily.

But one that he knows how to work within regardless if he stays in Raleigh for just a cup of coffee, or maybe longer.

"You just wanna put your best foot forward and contribute any way you can," he said.

"To chip it in is obviously special any time you can. To cap it off with a win was pretty awesome. It's special. You never know when it's gonna come again and you just gotta keep grinding away. Anytime you can contribute at this level I think, is obviously special. You know, you just gotta keep playin' and puttin' your best foot forward every time you're out there, and when the opportunity comes, you gotta be ready for it."



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Attitude is everything, and someone who knows that the 26-year-old forward gets 'it' is the Hurricanes head coach.

"He's a pro," Brind'Amour said of McKegg.

"We did a nice job of getting him in our organization. He had a great training camp. He was right there. This was an easy call-up. He's obviously trying to stay here. I love him."

With that, McKegg may be able to sip his coffee a little more slowly.



Checkers start 2019 with 4-1 stomping of Sens

By Nicholas Niedzielski

The Checkers kicked off a three-game Canadian road trip Friday night in Belleville and knocked off the Senators by a final score of 4-1.

Charlotte had only 11 forwards available for the game, but their offense showed no signs of stalling. Captain Patrick Brown got the scoring going early in the first period off a slick feed from Nick Schilkey, then the Checkers continued it in the next frame when Julien Gauthier found the back of the net on the power play.

Belleville would get one back just 5 minutes later, though, and the score stayed at 2-1 until Aleksi Saarela finished off a pretty 2-on-1 feed from Andrew Poturalski past a sprawled Senator defender to double Charlotte's lead with less than 2 minutes remaining in the middle frame. The Checkers would then put the game on ice when Nicolas Roy stuffed home a rebound just 1:15 into the final period, clinching a convincing 4-1 road victory.

Alex Nedeljkovic finished with 30 stops on 31 shots, including two impressive saves in the third period to keep the Senators' offense at bay.

Carolina assigns Haydn Fleury to Charlotte

By Nicholas Niedzielski

Ahead of a busy weekend, the Hurricanes have assigned defenseman Haydn Fleury to Charlotte.

This is the blue liner's second stint with the Checkers this season after logging one assist in four games in late October. Fleury spent the majority of last season in the NHL, save for a three-game stint with Charlotte, but spent the entirety of his rookie campaign in the AHL, ranking second

NOTES

Tonight extended the Checkers' point streak to three games ... The Checkers have now earned at least a point in six of their last seven road contests ... Tonight was the third time this season that Nedeljkovic has made at least 30 saves and the first time since Oct. 13 ... The Checkers exited the first period with a lead for the first time in their last four games ... Patrick Brown notched his fourth multi-point game of the season and extended his point streak to three games ... Jake Bean recorded his third multi-assist game of the season ... Aleksi Saarela and Nicolas Roy both recorded points for the second consecutive game ... Andrew Poturalski extended his scoring streak to three games and is now tied for eighth in the AHL in scoring ... Nick Schilkey scored his 13th point of the season tonight in his 24th game, surpassing his 48-game total as a rookie last season ... The Checkers only dressed 17 skaters (11 forwards, six defensemen) tonight ... Haydn Fleury, Martin Necas and Bobby Sanguinetti, all of whom recently joined the team, were extras tonight ... Janne Kuokkanen missed the game due to sickness ... Spencer Smallman and Josiah Didier missed the game due to injury.

among Checkers defensemen with 26 points (7g, 19a) in 69 games.

The 22-year-old has one assist in 10 games this season for Carolina but was sidelined for all but two games during the month of December with a concussion.

The Checkers kick off a three-in-three weekend tonight in Belleville.



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Canes recall Greg McKegg

By Nicholas Niedzielski

Greg McKegg is headed to the NHL as the Hurricanes have recalled the forward from Charlotte on an emergency basis.

This marks the first NHL recall for McKegg as a member of the Hurricanes. The 26-year-old has logged 91 NHL games over his career with Toronto, Florida, Tampa Bay and Pittsburgh and has appeared in at least one NHL contest in every season since 2013-14.

A third-round pick by Toronto in 2010, McKegg was traded from Pittsburgh to Carolina last February in exchange for Josh Jooris and has since registered 46 points (15g, 31a) in 50 games with the Checkers. McKegg currently ranks fourth on the team with 23 points (6g, 17a) in 31 games.

While the Checkers are losing a key piece ahead of a three-in-three weekend, they're also getting one back as Martin Necas has rejoined the team after representing the Czech Republic at the World Junior Championships.

TODAY'S LINKS

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SportScan

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

1124402 Carolina Hurricanes

For Hurricanes, one last chance to get on a run before it's too late

BY LUKE DECOCK

JANUARY 04, 2019 11:02 PM

As Sebastian Aho raced down the ice to tap in an empty-net goal that was his anyway, it meant more than merely a win. It was a third straight win for the Carolina Hurricanes, only their third streak of three wins or more this season. It was more progress in a different race, against the inexorable waning of the season.

The Hurricanes have been waiting years for a decent winning streak. With Friday's 4-2 win over the Columbus Blue Jackets, they have put themselves in position to build one, and there's isn't any question about if or when. It's January, and they're running out of time. If this isn't the beginning of a significant winning streak, it's the beginning of the end.

"It has to be," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

One chronic problem with the Hurricanes, because of their perpetual circumstance, is that everyone from management to players to fans is all too easily caught up in the swings and swoons of each game. Every result feels decisive. That's life on the bubble in the three-point-game NHL, where there is neither security nor inevitability. Every game really does matter. Hope comes and goes like a spring breeze, abject despair is always a bad goal away. There is no big picture.

And if the tug and pull of emotion surrounding the Hurricanes has felt all too familiar this season – for every glimmer of promise, two crushing defeats – it's only because so many of the faces have changed and the circumstances have not. For whatever reason, and they change from year to year and even month to month or game to game, this team has been incapable of getting on any kind of a run, incapable of putting a respectable string of wins together.

It's been nine full seasons since the Hurricanes won more than five games in a row; with the exception of 2016-17 when they won five in a row, they have had one four-game winning streak – and exactly one four-game winning streak – in each season since.

That inability to get on a run transcends coaches, captains, owners and the entire roster. It's the leitmotif of a decade of futility. This year, the Hurricanes have had one early four-game streak, one three-game streak in November and now this.

Now the Hurricanes have given themselves a chance, but they have to follow through. Getting on a run of some length is the only way to salvage their season.

"We've got to get one at some point," Brind'Amour said. "We're running out of time to wait for that run. Every team that's up there we're chasing has done it at some point. If we want to get up there we've got to do it. If you get two, you've got to get three. Get three, you've got to get four."

That's what it would take, would still take, to get this team from the perpetual knife edge of relevance to a position of relative comfort where

each and every loss wouldn't feel like the impending end of humanity, where each shot that rings off the post didn't feel like divine confirmation of a dismal fate.

The two wins over the Flyers – one of the few teams in the NHL with a worse record than the Hurricanes – gave them a platform to go forth, a foundation upon which to build a run. But that's all it was: firm, bare, dry ground for construction, not any kind of accomplishment. A loss Friday, and it would all have been as well as wasted.

Instead, thanks to the unlikely contributions of Greg McKegg, the Hurricanes continued to move forward.

Even now, these are merely building blocks, toward something with some permanence, easily toppled with one misstep. The same is true Sunday in Ottawa. And with a win there over the woebegone Senators, it would be true again at the Islanders on Tuesday. And then again at Tampa Bay on Thursday, each step a little tougher than the next.

"We know where we are in the standings," Micheal Ferland said. "We want to get something going. We've put ourselves in a good spot to build some momentum."

This is the chance the Hurricanes have been waiting, desperately, to arrive. This is the time to get on a run and save their season. It's now or never. They streak or they're stuck.

News Observer LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124403 Carolina Hurricanes

McKegg an unexpected star in Canes' 4-2 victory

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

JANUARY 04, 2019 10:02 PM

For more than 35 minutes, the best storyline Friday in the Carolina Hurricanes' game against the Columbus Blue Jackets easily was Greg McKegg.

Cool name, of course. And in his first NHL game with the Canes, the forward played well, picking up a goal and assist as Carolina took a three-goal lead in the gritty, tightly contested Metropolitan Division game at PNC Arena.

Then, in 25 seconds late in the second period, the focus shifted quickly. The Blue Jackets scored twice, Oliver Bjorkstrand and Artemi Panarin striking for goals, and suddenly the question was whether the Canes could hold on and win a third straight game, not whether McKegg might be tapped as the game's first star.

The Canes did hold on, taking a 4-2 victory over the Blue Jackets as Sebastian Aho, recently named to the NHL All-Star Game, scored an empty-net goal in the final seconds to seal it. And, yes, McKegg was the first star.

Micheal Ferland and Dougie Hamilton scored for the Canes (18-17-5) in the first period and McKegg in the second. McKegg assisted on Hamilton's goal -- the defenseman's second in two games -- and then



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scored with a redirection of a pass from Brett Pesce that goalie Sergei Bobrovsky could not handle.

"We came out great and I thought, to a man, were on it," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "Obviously it helped again to get the lead. Every part of our game was pretty solid. But they've got a great team over there and you could see their high-end players took over for a couple of minutes and they got themselves back in the game, but I thought we came back in the third and played pretty well."

It wasn't McKegg's NHL debut. The guy known as "Kegger" has played 91 games with Toronto, Florida, Tampa Bay and then the Pittsburgh Penguins before being traded by the Pens to the Canes for forward Josh Jooris in February 2018.

McKegg, 26, settled in with the Charlotte Checkers, the Canes' AHL affiliate, waiting his turn with the big club. The call finally came Friday, when the Canes made him an emergency recall after an injury to forward Clark Bishop in Thursday's game against Philadelphia and with center Jordan Staal being placed on NHL injured reserve.

"You just want to put your best foot forward and contribute any way you can," McKegg said. "To cap off the win was pretty awesome."

McKegg played on a line with Saku Maenalanen and Warren Foegle and by game's end Brind'Amour was calling it "probably our best line overall." Maenalanen assisted on Hamilton's goal for his first NHL point and Foegle, coming off the game-winning goal against the Philadelphia Flyers on Thursday, again played with high energy.

"They were the difference, no doubt," Brind'Amour said. "They pretty much dominated every shift they had."

McKegg's goal, his first in the NHL since Nov. 4, 2017 with the Pens, proved to be the game-winner and ended the night for Bobrovsky, who faced 16 shots and made some sparkling saves early in the game.

Canes goalie Curtis McElhinney was rock-solid until the final five minutes of the third, making sure-handed glove saves on blasts by Cam Atkinson and Zach Werenski. But Bjorkstrand found the net with a shot off the rush through a partial screen. Moments later Panarin jumped in to grab a loose puck in the slot and beat McElhinney for his 13th of the season.

In a flash, the Blue Jackets suddenly looked the part of a team that had won six of its last seven, and they continued to push in the third, especially Panarin. The Canes looked more like a team that played Thursday in Philadelphia, winning 5-3, and finishing up a back-to-back.

But the Canes maintained their poise. McElhinney, calm in net, closed with 22 saves for his ninth win of the season.

Ferland scored his 12th of the season -- and first since Nov. 21 -- with a one-timer just after a Canes power play ended. Hamilton's goal came on a quick wrister from the top of the left circle.

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1124404 Carolina Hurricanes

Canes beat Flyers with power-play goals? Yes, they did

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

JANUARY 04, 2019 01:42 PM

It's never easy beating teams in consecutive games, especially at the pro level.

The Carolina Hurricanes did that to the Philadelphia Flyers, following up a victory on New Year's Eve at PNC Arena with a 5-3 road win Thursday over the Flyers at Wells Fargo Center.

Teuvo Teravainen scored twice and had an assist as the Canes (17-17-5) again turned back the struggling Flyers (15-20-5). His power-play goal gave the Canes a 3-0 lead in a three-goal second period by Carolina, and his second score came after the Flyers had fought back from a 4-0 deficit to within 4-3 in the third.

With Dougie Hamilton adding a goal and assist, Justin Williams scoring on the power play and Warren Foegle picking up a goal off a redirection, the Canes made a winner of goalie Petr Mrazek.

The Flyers' comeback was built on two power-play goals, by Wayne Simmonds and James van Riemsdyk, that were sandwiched around an even-strength goal by Sean Couturier, all in the third period.

"We took the penalties (and) a couple power-play goals just changed the whole complexion of the game," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "We sat back. That's what happens when you get up four, you tell them not to but it's human nature, I've been there many, many times. The other team is playing like they have nothing to lose and we just sat back."

"It's a great lesson. It's a good thing we had a 4-0 lead because obviously they pumped a few in there. We had a good shift, (Foegle) got a great shift to get us a big goal there and I think it turns out to be the game-winning goal."

Before Thursday, the Canes had last scored on a power play in the Dec. 14 game against the Washington Capitals, going 0-for-25 in the next seven games. But Williams ripped a shot past goalie Michal Neuvirth off a Sebastian Aho pass and Teravainen did the same, again on the setup pass from Aho, as the Canes jumped ahead 3-0 in the second after a scoreless first.

"I think they moved the puck a little better, which wasn't pretty," Brind'Amour said of the power plays. "The work ethic was there, had a good couple entries which helps get the zone time, and then pucks went in when they shot them."

Defenseman Calvin de Haan also had a pair of assists for the Canes while being credited with seven hits.

The Canes lost forward Clark Bishop to a lower-body injury during the game. On Friday, they recalled forward Greg McKegg from the Charlotte Checkers of the AHL while placing center Jordan Staal (concussion symptoms) on injured reserve.

The Canes beat the Flyers 3-1 on New Year's Eve to end 2018, then opened 2019 with another victory against the Metro Division team. The Flyers, in turn, had played and lost 4-0 to the Nashville Predators between the games with Carolina.

The Flyers' Simmonds, in assessing Thursday's game, used many of the same words the Canes players have said after tough losses this season.

"I think we just need to respond better when we get scored against. ... We give one up and things turn and start to snowball," Simmonds said. "We have to do mentally stronger and do a better job."

As for falling further behind in the Eastern Conference standings, Simmonds said, "It's like quicksand right now. We're trying to get out and it feels like it's just getting deeper."

That's the stuff the Canes are trying to avoid.

News Observer LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124405 Carolina Hurricanes

Question of the night in Carolina: 'First of all, where's Kegger?'



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2019

By Sara Civian Jan 4, 2019

We don't like game recaps here at The Athletic — we exist to try and dig beyond the surface.

But tonight wasn't some throwaway game up in Rochester.

Tonight the stars aligned. Tonight it honestly felt like We The People willed Greg McKegg's first NHL multi-point game into existence because it was five dollar Bud Light night and his name sounds like keg.

IF GREG MCKEGG SCORES TONIGHT, HIS CANES DEBUT AND \$5 BUD LIGHT NIGHT, THREE PEOPLE GET AN ATHLETIC SUBSCRIPTION. SERENDIPITY IS IN THE AIR MY FRIENDS.

— SARA CIV (@SARACIVIAN) JANUARY 4, 2019

Head coach Rod Brind'Amour's postgame locker room speeches are exactly what you'd expect. It was more of the same after the Canes' 4-2 win over the Blue Jackets, just one new question.

First of all, where's Kegger?

At the same time last night, "Kegger" had been grabbing dinner in Toronto ahead of the Checkers' series at Belleville.

That's where he got the call Checkers head coach Mike Vellucci loves giving. He loves messing with his players, as he recently did with Clark Bishop.

"Hey, where are you right now?"

"Getting a haircut."

"Better make it an NHL haircut. Pack your bags."

There wasn't much time for messing around on Thursday. McKegg flew out of the hockey hub of the world and into a little hockey haven in the American south. Then, somehow, 24 hours later Rod freakin' Brind'Amour was calling him out as a huge contributor in a win over the Blue Jackets.

It's not like he's new to this at all, with 92 NHL games under his belt. He's had his first call up, his first goal, his first assist. He's been here before. He's actually been through the ringer in certain systems I've heard weren't exactly kind to him.

But tonight was a good night.

"Greg McKegg" was a national Twitter trend. Tripp Tracy was wearing a chef hat on the broadcast for reasons I don't know but fully endorse. Sebastian Aho scored his 69th career goal at the buzzer. Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella went full Torts, and it's all on Soundcloud. As "Drops of Jupiter" by Train came on in the Hurricanes' locker room, someone yelled "Yesssss!"

Torts kept calling the Blue Jackets "part-timers" in his post-game interview, like they were summer vacation employees. Well, McKegg doesn't even have a company email address.

A goal, an assist, a damn good name.

In this business we call that a Greg McKegg hat trick.

"Love it," Brind'Amour shook his head. "Love it. You know what? He's a pro. This was an easy call-up, he's obviously trying to stay here. And I love it."

Tonight we're doing a gamer.

ROSES ARE RED

GOALS, HE WAS MAKING [HTTPS://T.CO/VYRHS5XCS](https://t.co/vyrhsa5xcs)

— RYAN FROM CLAYTON (@BENSON4919) JANUARY 5, 2019

• Full disclosure: I didn't expect McKegg to actually deliver on the goal. But I covered him in Pittsburgh and thus fully expected this assist:

God, isn't that just everything you want out of a fourth line?

Do the dirty work along the boards, make the transition, free Dougie Hamilton?

"They were the difference," Brind'Amour said. "No doubt. They were probably our best line overall, I mean, they pretty much dominated every shift they were on. Obviously the goals help, but it's changing the momentum of the game. (Columbus) was on us, then they came in and had shifts in (Columbus') end and did a great job."

• Has Dougie been freed?

• Catch this team on the right shift and everything seems so effortless. Next shift you're wondering if you made it all up. These are the trials and tribulations of a young team, and I know one day the effortlessness won't be a fluke. You look at Andrei Svechnikov and you know it, too. For now we take all the three-game win streaks and Greg McKegg nights we can get.

• Micheal Ferland told me in New Jersey that he'd struggled with the pace of the game in the first few outings after his concussion. He started to feel like himself again in Washington on Dec. 27t, with an assist to show for it. His finishing touch returned tonight, with a goal about a second after the power play expired (no Bojangles biscuits) — his first since Nov. 21.

• Not to detract from First Star of the Game McKegg, but Saku Maenalanen has played exactly as advertised (strong, fast, board-battle guy) in all three of his NHL games. He was noticeable in the Anaheim and Philadelphia games despite hovering around 6:30 TOI. But tonight, on the undisputed best night of our lives, he averaged 11:37 and the fourth line has never looked better.

Does Brind'Amour think he's making a case for an extended stay in Raleigh?

"Yep, yep. ... The one thing I feel like we do have in this organization," Brind'Amour smirked, "are those type of players you can count on if we need them. They did more tonight than just kind of, fill a spot. They contributed. They were noticeable, you guys are talking about them, and if we have any chance to get back in this we need everybody to contribute. Tonight was one of those nights."

• Indeed, tonight was one of those nights. Tonight, a young team survived a second consecutive near-collapse, one that actually mattered because it wasn't in Philadelphia. Last night, Flyers reporters to my right were on a live broadcast spouting stats about how the Flyers are the worst team in the modern stats era of the NHL. Tonight, the coach of the Hurricanes' playoff-contending opponent was going off in the opposite direction.

And Greg McKegg was right there.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124476 Ottawa Senators

It's a miracle, Jean-Gabriel Pageau ready to return Sunday

Bruce Garrioch

The hard work, the dedication, and the long and sometimes lonely hours in the last four months are about to pay dividends for Jean-Gabriel Pageau and the Ottawa Senators.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2019

As Ottawa prepared for back-to-back matinée games against the Minnesota Wild on Saturday and the Carolina Hurricanes on Sunday at the Canadian Tire Centre, the Senators were buoyed by the fact they'll be getting one of their top players back to start the second half.

While Pageau was supposed to be out four to six months when he tore his Achilles tendon on Day 1 of training camp in September, general manager Pierre Dorion and coach Guy Boucher confirmed Friday the feisty centre will suit up against the Hurricanes.

Pageau will be welcomed back with open arms.

"It's terrific news," Boucher said Friday. "This is like a miracle, really. That's not just ahead of time, it's way ahead of time. There's clearance there so we're more than happy."

Boucher was quick to praise the hard work done by Pageau to get back this fast, but also heaped kudos on the club's doctors, the trainers and the conditioning staff because everybody played a big role in making sure he played this season.

When the injury was first happened, the prognosis wasn't good and the Achilles isn't an easy surgery to recover from. Pageau has been at the rink pretty much every day since he had the procedure and has been pushing to get into the lineup for the last couple of weeks.

"How could you not (be excited)? I've been waiting for that first game," said Pageau. "I thought it was going to be the first (game) of the season, but fortunately it's going to be halfway through."

"I'm excited. I'm so grateful to our medical staff, surgeons, doctors, strength coach and all the support I got back from my family and friends. All the messages I got from fans and all the motivation I got from them helped me to go through that process."

"That made it easier for me. It's because of them I'm coming back Sunday."

Make no mistake, being injured hasn't been a vacation for Pageau by any stretch of the imagination. Since the surgery, he was at the rink most days at 8 a.m., started his daily routine with treatment and then went for a workout in the gym.

Since getting clearance to start skating in November, that's been added to the daily work routine. He did it because he wanted to get back, but he noted Friday it wasn't always easy to put in those hours because being injured can be difficult mentally.

"Through all four months, I never felt any setbacks and I always felt like every day was improving," Pageau said. "That was a big thing. You don't like to do one week where it's going well and then another week where it's going bad."

"I felt like it was really good every week. Like I said, without our staff I don't think any of that would have happened or my mind would have been at the same place."

Pageau said the first week was tough and then it became routine.

"It was the hardest mentally just to know that I wasn't the starting the season with the team," he added. "I was excited, I had a good tournament at the world championships (in May) and I was coming in confident."

"My role was getting bigger, my responsibilities were getting bigger and I was ready to take on that role. I've got to say the first week was hard, but after that the support from the teammates, the family and the fans helped me to keep coming in every morning."

"I didn't want to come in every morning; sometimes you wake up in the morning and you're sick of it, but having someone at home pushing you and your teammates around and your friends pushing you, made it way easier."

Having Pageau back will give Boucher options on what to do with the lines. He can contribute offensively, play against other team's top lines

and kill penalties. The Senators rely on a guy like Pageau a lot and he's an important piece in a rebuilding year.

"He's a big part of this team and we've missed him all year. He'll help us in all facets of the game," said centre Matt Duchene.

Pageau skated Friday with Zack Smith on the left and Mikkel Boedker on the right. That's where Pageau might start Sunday.

"I was trying to play for the past 10 games," Pageau said with a smile. "We've been pretty honest on both sides since the start and I'm feeling 100 per cent today as we're talking."

"Sunday will be a good day for me to come back. It's a home game, in front of our fans and I can't wait to play."

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124477 Ottawa Senators

Christian Jaros makes quick comeback from broken finger

Bruce Garrioch

The Ottawa Senators had a surprise waiting for them when they took the ice Friday at the Canadian Tire Centre.

While defenceman Christian Jaros was supposed to be out a month after breaking his finger in a fight Dec. 28 against the New York Islanders in Brooklyn, he'll make his return to the blueline Saturday against the Minnesota Wild at the Canadian Tire Centre.

Jaros was able to hold a stick and shoot the puck during the short skate, which means he's ready to play. As a safety measure, he'll have protection in the glove.

"It looked like the green light (for Jaros), so that's way ahead of schedule to," coach Guy Boucher said Friday. "It's broken, but it's healed enough and it's not dangerous and the guy wants to play."

The Senators have seven defencemen, so Boucher will have to determine what kind of alignment he wants to use.

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124478 Ottawa Senators

Game Day: Minnesota Wild at Ottawa Senators

Bruce Garrioch

MINNESOTA (19-17-3) AT OTTAWA (15-21-5)

Saturday, 1 p.m., Canadian Tire Centre, TSN5, TSN 1200 AM, Unique 94.5 FM

SPECIAL TEAMS

OTT: PP 21.6% (12th); PK 74.4% (28th)

MIN: PP 23% (8th); PK 84.5% (2nd)

THE BIG MATCHUP

Ryan Dzingel vs. Jason Zucker



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • January 5, 2019

The Senators' winger has two goals and two assists for four points in the club's last two games. Set to become an unrestricted free agent on July 1, he's going to want big money, but he has to show consistency to earn it. Now is the time for Dzingel to step up and help get this team back on the winning track. Zucker has been one of Minny's most consistent performers and must be shut down.

FIVE KEYS TO THE GAME

1. GET OFF TO A GOOD START

The Senators were outshot 17-5 in the first by the Canucks on Wednesday and that can't continue. As coach Guy Boucher noted Friday, it hasn't been a trend for this team to have bad starts and it can't become one. The Senators need to get on the Wild early and dictate the play.

2. GIVE NILSSON SOME HELP

Anders Nilsson, acquired from the Canucks on Wednesday, will make his first start in the club's net. The key here is to not put too much pressure on him. The Senators are worst in the league in average shots against per game. Let Nilsson settle into the job and get some saves early, but not too many.

3. SHOW SOME CONSISTENCY

The Senators lost seven straight last season from Nov. 16 until Nov. 29. The club went 0-6-1 in that stretch. The Senators are 0-5-1 in this losing skid and haven't been able to play for a full 60 minutes. They've shown good effort at times, but if this is going to get turned around, then they've got to be consistent start to finish.

4. SCORE ON THE POWER PLAY

Without Thomas Chabot out, the Senators are missing the quarterback of their No. 1 power play unit, but they did score with the man advantage against the Canucks. The club has gone 2-for-11 in its last five games. Those numbers have to improve for the Senators to find a way out of this losing streak.

5. WIN AT HOME

The Senators will play back-to-back afternoon games — this one against the Wild and Sunday's visit by the Carolina Hurricanes — at 1 p.m. The Senators have lost three straight at home. The last win was Dec. 17 against the Nashville Predators. Getting a couple of wins here would be a huge boost of confidence.

ROSTERS

SENATORS FORWARDS

Brady Tkachuk-Colin White Mark Stone

Ryan Dzingel-Matt Duchene-Bobby Ryan

Zack Smith-Chris Tierney-Mikkel Boedker

Ruldolfs Balcers-Nick Paul-Magnus Paajarvi

DEFENCE

Christian Wolanin-Cody Ceci

Ben Harpur-Dylan DeMelo

Mark Borowiecki-Christian Jaros

Max Lajoie

GOALTENDERS

Anders Nilsson

Marcus Hogberg

MINNESOTA WILD

WILD FORWARDS

Jason Zucker-Eric Staal-Mikael Granlund

Zach Parise-Charlie Coyle-Luke Kunin

Jordan Greenway-Mikko Koivu-Nino Niederreiter

Marcus Foligno-Eric Fehr-J.T. Brown

DEFENCE

Ryan Suter-Jared Spurgeon

Jonas Brodin-Greg Pateryn

Nick Seeler-Ryan Murphy

GOALTENDERS

Devan Dubnyk

Alex Stalock

INJURIES

OTT: Craig Anderson, Thomas Chabot, Justin Falk, Jean-Gabriel Pageau

MIN: Mathew Dumba

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124479 Ottawa Senators

Snapshots: Anders Nilsson set to make his debut in club's net

Bruce Garrioch

Anders Nilsson won't have to play the waiting game.

The Ottawa Senators acquired the backup goalie from the Vancouver Canucks on Wednesday because they wanted help, and Saturday afternoon Nilsson will make his debut with his new team against the Minnesota Wild at the Canadian Tire Centre.

Nilsson, 28, who lost eight straight starts with the Canucks and hasn't won a game since Oct. 16, is excited about the chance to play.

"It's always nice to get in there, play a game and get into the rhythm right away," Nilsson said Friday. "I've had a few days here to get settled; it was nice to get a little skills competition with the guys and get familiar with the guys to get to know them a bit better."

"It was good to get out there with the first practice with everyone."

The initial shock of the trade on a game day has worn off.

"It was a little weird, especially in the warmups skating onto the ice and seeing your old teammates on the other side," Nilsson said. "It was very, very special night and special day. As I said, a unique experience."

"I'm very positive about coming here and I'm very excited about being here, and I think it's a good opportunity to play some games and, hopefully, to help the team win some games."

He isn't concerned the Senators allow a lot of shots.

"If you ask any goalie, it's always nice to have a lot of shots," Nilsson said. "It's more where the shots are coming from and if there's a lot of scoring chances."

"As a goalie, I'm trying to look at it like you can only control what you can control, and that's stopping the puck. You can't control what's happening



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in front of you, and my job as a goalie is to stop every puck no matter how it comes to the net or what happens in front.

"I'm going to try to do my best (Saturday)."

ANDERSON TAKES A STEP

There was good news on the Craig Anderson front.

The Senators' No. 1 goaltender was on the ice Friday before the club's practice at the Canadian Tire Centre and, in this case, that's a major step in the right direction.

Anderson has been out since he suffered a concussion Dec. 21 against the New York Islanders and hadn't been doing much in the way of physical activity. No decision has been made on whether he'll accompany the team on the upcoming road trip, but there's a chance.

"It was a good day today from what I hear now," coach Guy Boucher said after the skate.

Defenceman Thomas Chabot, who is out with a shoulder injury and won't accompany the team to California, also skated for the second straight day. He took shots for the first time, so that's also encouraging, but his three-week timetable hasn't changed.

That is a good sign he will be ready to play at the NHL All-Star Game in San Jose, though.

"In our situation, every one of these players makes a big difference for us," Boucher said. "I'm crossing my fingers that we don't get any injuries (Saturday) and then the next day we have (Jean-Gabriel) Pageau available and, hopefully, crossing fingers, soon enough Andy."

The skate for Anderson was a good sign.

"You never know with these things, but it has gone well in the last days, so if it stays on the same path it will be sooner than later," Boucher said.

Goaltender Mike Condon, who has been out with a hip injury, is continuing his rehab in Ottawa, but won't play before February. He is technically on the roster of the club's AHL affiliate in Belleville, but he's allowed to work with the big team while recovering from injury.

MAKING HIS DEBUT

Recalled from the club's AHL affiliate in Belleville on Friday, Rudolf Balcers will make his NHL debut against the Wild.

The 21-year-old forward was one of the pieces acquired in the trade with the San Jose Sharks for Erik Karlsson in September. Balcers has 14 goals and 26 points in 36 games with Belleville.

In the calendar year 2018, Balcers was fourth in the AHL in goals scored with 30. Chris Terry of Laval had 35, Brandon Pirri of Chicago scored 34 and Anthony Greco of Springfield had 32.

Balcers, who was a fifth-round pick of the Sharks in 2015, is excited to get the chance.

"I got the call from our coach in Belleville (Thursday), he told me I'm going up and it's a happy feeling," said Balcers. "I had a couple of those last year (in San Jose) but didn't get the chance."

"Hopefully I get the chance to play (Saturday) and finally step on NHL ice."

Boucher said he wants to see what Balcers can bring.

"He's a straight-line, first-on-puck, drive-and-shoot guy," Boucher said. "He's got the quick hands in close and he's a really good shooter from anywhere — dots, inside, he's lethal."

"We don't have enough of that. We need more guys that pay the price inside and drive and shoot. We don't have enough guys that want to shoot. We'll give this guy a chance for sure."

Forward Jack Rodewald was returned to Belleville.

THE LAST WORDS

Boucher wants his team to be ready to start against the Wild.

"That first period (Wednesday) wasn't a good enough period," Boucher said. "Just not enough. We were kind of waiting for things to happen before we got going. It wasn't the case in other games and first periods haven't been an issue for us."

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124465 New York Islanders

Advice to Isles' Mathew Barzal: Make All-Star Game a joyous occasion

Updated January 4, 2019 9:52 PM

By Andrew Gross

There's a decent chance, given Mathew Barzal's career arc so far, this month's All-Star Game at San Jose will be remembered as his first appearance, not the only time he participated. But there are no guarantees and the advice from others who have experienced the showcase event is to savor the moment.

"I think you really just embrace the whole thing," said Islanders right wing Josh Bailey, who earned his first All-Star selection last season when the game was held in Tampa. "Just try to enjoy every minute of it. That's what I did. It's only a couple of days and it flies by. But the memories last a lifetime."

Barzal, a 21-year-old center who won the Calder Trophy as the NHL's top rookie last season, learned Wednesday of his selection by the league's Hockey Operations Department to the Metropolitan Division squad for the three-on-three game on Jan. 26.

Barzal said it would be a "cool experience for me, being young, my first time. I'll get my family down and they'll enjoy it as well."

Barzal is from Coquitlam, British Columbia and played junior hockey in Seattle so the West Coast setting works well for his family.

Bailey said the "biggest part" of his All-Star experience was sharing it with his family.

"It meant so much, not only to me but to them," Bailey said. "To have them all there — my wife and kids, my mom, dad and brother and his girlfriend and then my wife's side — it was a big family affair. I put them all up in a house. I tried to get over there as much as I could."

Islanders coach Barry Trotz, who led the Capitals the past four seasons, was behind the Metropolitan Division bench in two of the previous three seasons.

"It's a process," Trotz said. "There's a lot of work that goes into those All-Star weekends for the players because of the commitments they do have, from the players' commitment to the sponsors' commitment. It's actually quite taxing on the players. The game is not taxing, for the most part. I told (Barzal) just to make sure to share it with his family."

Bailey said one of the other interesting aspects — he called it a "highlight" — of the All-Star festivities is getting to know the other players.

"There are definitely guys there you already know and some guys you don't really know personally but you've played a long time against," Bailey said. "Just getting to know different guys and their personalities. Getting to chat with them a little bit."



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While the All-Star Game — a tournament, really between the four divisional squads — concludes the weekend's events, the skills competition is very popular among players and fans the day before.

Barzal is excited for that, too.

"I've watched it," Barzal said. "It seems fun. I'm sure I'll be a little nervous but I'm also excited. It will be fun to see all the other guys in the room."

CRAZY TALK

The Islanders had a 22-13-4 record going into Saturday night's game at St. Louis, a very comparable mark to their 39-game record of 20-15-4 last season. The Islanders went on to finish 35-37-10 and out of the playoffs for the second straight season and the sixth time in John Tavares' nine seasons with the team.

Trotz was asked after the Islanders' dominating 4-0 win at Toronto on Dec. 29, in which they snapped their ex-captain's six-game point streak, whether he was ready to say the Islanders were at least as good, if not better, without Tavares, who had 26 goals and 20 assists through Friday.

"No, I'm not," Trotz said, with more than a hint of incredulity in his voice. "You're always better with a player of JT's ability. He's an exceptional talent. Anytime you lose a John Tavares, that's a big piece.

"But we're not looking back," Trotz added. "We've got to look forward. That's what our organization is wanting from our players, wanting from everybody, to try to create a new era."

NOW HE GETS IT

President and general manager Lou Lamoriello and Trotz joined the Islanders adamant in their need to create a culture change within an organization that has won just one playoff series since 1993. Altering the team's identity to this current incarnation of a hard-working, defensively-responsible club was the new management's goal, one further hastened with Tavares' departure.

But Trotz admitted he didn't understand at first how signing ex-Maple Leaf Leo Komarov to a four-year, \$12-million deal and re-acquiring fan favorite Matt Martin from Toronto would contribute to the Islanders' renovation.

Lamoriello, as the Maple Leafs GM the past three seasons, had firsthand knowledge of just how valuable the two could be, both with their off-ice leadership and dressing-room intangibles and on-ice efforts.

"I knew (Martin) a little bit because we had played a lot against him," Trotz said. "I didn't know Leo very well, plus I can't understand him half the time. But I wasn't too sure. Lou explained it to me, the reasons, but I wasn't sure. Now, I'm sure. I understand fully. They've been great for us."

SUPPORTING OVECHKIN

Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin has played in seven All-Star Games, including the last two and three of the last four. This season, he informed the NHL he would not participate because he wanted the rest that comes with the All-Star break.

It's understandable since Ovechkin and the Capitals, coached by Trotz, played into June in winning the franchise's first Stanley Cup.

And Trotz said he supported Ovechkin's decision, even though it means Ovechkin will be forced to miss one regular-season game for opting not to participate in the All-Star Game.

"I get it, totally," Trotz said. "He's been named many times. He's put his time in. He had a full year last year and played deep into it and he's not getting younger and he's been a dominant face of the franchise for a long time. He's done his share of the heavy lifting for the league. He's up front and they were up front in this decision. Ovi has always been a standup guy that way."

Select company

Rookie defenseman Devon Toews, 24, became the 18th player in the NHL and third Islander to have his first career goal be an overtime winner in Thursday's 3-2 victory over the Blackhawks. Here's how the other two fared:

Player (First goal Assists)	Tenure with Islanders	Games	Goals
D Thomas Hickey (Feb. 21, 2013)	2013-Present	441	22
D Radek Martinek (Oct. 18, 2001)	2001-11, 2012-14	479	24

Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124466 New York Islanders

Islanders' Michael Dal Colle is AHL All-Star for Bridgeport

By Andrew Gross

Updated January 4, 2019 8:02 PM

Mathew Barzal is not the Islanders' only All-Star selection, though for Michael Dal Colle, if he is able to play well enough to remain with the Isles, he'll miss the AHL All-Star Classic on Jan. 28 in Springfield, Massachusetts, after being picked for the first time.

Dal Colle, 22, the fifth overall pick in 2014, likely will remain in the streaking Islanders' lineup for the fourth straight game when they face the Blues on Saturday night at Enterprise Center in St. Louis, even though top-line right wing Jordan Eberle is ready to return from an upper-body injury.

"Every time he's come up to the NHL, he's looked more comfortable," Islanders coach Barry Trotz said. "I have a good trust in his game. His wall play and the pace of his game has increased since training camp. He looks like a confident young man."

Eberle was activated off injured reserve Friday and center Valteri Filppula (upper body) was placed on IR retroactive to Monday.

Dal Colle remained on Leo Komarov's left wing at the team's practice in East Meadow. The new third line was completed by Josh Ho-Sang, who had taken Eberle's spot on the top line. Eberle resumed skating with center Brock Nelson and captain Anders Lee.

The Islanders (22-13-4) have won eight of their last nine and are trying to match their longest winning streak since they concluded the 2016-17 season with six straight wins.

Dal Colle, in his second stint with the Islanders this season, has one assist in five games after going without a point in his first four NHL games last season.

He has 16 goals and 12 assists in 28 games for Bridgeport and learned he had been named an AHL All-Star on Thursday.

"Every time you're up here, every shift, you want to prove that you belong, that you can play at this level," Dal Colle said. "Last year wasn't a great year for me. I think I've bounced back really nicely and really developed this year."

Dal Colle, a prolific scorer in juniors with Oshawa and then with Kingston in the Ontario Hockey League, was held to seven goals and 17 assists in 60 games for Bridgeport last season.

"It was a long offseason for me," Dal Colle said. "I got a lot stronger, spent a lot of time in the gym. It's the most time I've ever been in the



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gym. Going into training camp, I felt good and it's gone on into the season."

One knock has been Dal Colle's skating, but Trotz said he can use his strength on the puck to his advantage.

"He can skate in this league," Trotz said. "Guys that aren't necessarily great skaters have got to train a little differently. He's got good strength on the puck."

Notes & quotes: Center Casey Cizikas received a maintenance day off from practice, but Trotz said he will be available against the Blues . . . Defenseman Thomas Hickey (injured reserve, upper body) skated but did not travel with the team.

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1124467 New York Islanders

Asking price for Isles tickets on resale market 84 percent higher at NYCB Live's Nassau Coliseum than Barclays Center

By Neil Best

Updated January 4, 2019 8:03 PM

It will come as no surprise to Islanders fans that during this season in which home games are being split between Barclays Center and NYCB Live's Nassau Coliseum, the latter has been a far more popular venue for ticket-buyers.

TicketIQ.com, which aggregates a number of resale market sites, has the numbers to illustrate it.

Average asking prices for the remaining games at the Coliseum are 84 percent higher than for those in Brooklyn, \$294 to \$160.

TicketIQ said the most expensive remaining game at the Coliseum is for the return of former captain John Tavares, now with the Maple Leafs, on Feb. 28. The least expensive ticket for that night is going for \$105.

The most expensive remaining game in Brooklyn is Jan. 12 against the Rangers, with a starting asking price of \$132 as of Friday morning.

Three days later, the Blues visit Brooklyn. The least expensive ticket was \$9.

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1124514 Tampa Bay Lightning

NHL Trends: The unstoppable Bolts, the rising Habs, Jets struggling second line and Johnny Gaudreau's dominance

By Dom Luszczyszyn Jan 4, 2019 13

The end of every month is a great time to look back and reflect on the previous month of hockey to see which way teams and players are trending. A one month sample is usually obfuscated by hot and cold streaks, so it's valuable to find ways to separate the signal from the noise. Those at the extreme ends of the spectrum also make for some great stories.

The Athletic has a model we use for projections and probabilities that is updated each day and provides a look at how much has changed under the hood on a daily basis. Our season preview series offered a snapshot of how and why each team was rated the way it was and this is an opportunity to provide further context as the season progresses. It'll hopefully be an interesting look into how the model operates and how much perception changes from month-to-month and it's a question many have asked after seeing the daily probabilities operate.

What you're getting is two articles in one. The first looks at the teams and players who've made the biggest changes from where they were last month. The second is a brief run through of each team with accompanying charts looking at how each player's value has changed over the last month – an appendix of sorts for the rest of the league that wasn't mentioned here for those that want to take a deeper dive into every team or simply curious about their own.

Hottest teams

Tampa Bay Lightning

Last Month Strength: .582

Current Strength: .629

There's no surprise which team is the league's hottest: it's the one that lost just once in December and did so in overtime, thereby earning a point in every game for the month. The Lightning have put a stranglehold on the league's top spot and are projected to win the Presidents' Trophy by 11 points which would be the largest gap since 2015-16. That may even be conservative given they're already 12 points up on the second place Maple Leafs. This time last month I said the Leafs were the team to beat due to the impending return of William Nylander, but that looks just plain wrong now, especially after Tampa Bay's dominant month.

The team looks unstoppable and head into the new year with a staggering 27 percent chance at winning it all at the end of this season, a 14.4 percent increase from where my model had the team last month. The Lightning were strong at 5-on-5 for the month, but not as dominant as you might expect given they earned 96.4 percent of points for the month. Where the team earned their keep was an incredible special teams performance, scoring 14 goals-per-60 on the power play (second place was at 11.7) and allowing just 4.3, good for second in the league. The Lightning were plus-16 for the month and 13 of those goals were on special teams.

That's a big part of why Nikita Kucherov, Steven Stamkos and Brayden Point were the biggest gainers last month on the strength of 10, nine and seven power play points respectively, though the trio was still incredible at evens too. All three played at a 110-plus point pace (with Kucherov at a mind-boggling 176-point pace), something no other team did last month. It's not just those players either. The Lightning are insanely deep with 12 skaters projected to be worth at least one win in value – the most in the league. This might finally be their year – who's going to stop them really?

Montreal Canadiens

Last Month Strength: .453

Current Strength: .486

Shea Weber returned to action on Nov. 27 and from that moment everything changed for Montreal. The Canadiens were already a strong possession team, but Weber's return bumped the team up a notch ranking second by Corsi in December behind only San Jose. It's thanks to a relentless offensive pace the team plays at, firing 70 shot attempts per 60 for the month, nearly five more than the next best team. That epic shot volume was enough to give the team a top five goals rate for the month, doing so with a shooting percentage of just 8.6 percent. Only Pittsburgh was in the top 10 with a shooting percentage south of nine percent.

It's a death by a thousand cuts approach that perfectly encapsulates the way the team is structured up front. Outside the perennially underrated



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Brendan Gallagher, Montreal is devoid of much star talent (Max Domi's recent scoring surge this season aside), but the team is flush with capable talent throughout the lineup. The Habs can run four lines with talent without much trouble, with eight forwards above one win in value and Andrew Shaw close at 0.99. That's comparable to the forward depth of the team above, minus the elite talent. That might be what ultimately holds the team back from a deep run, but it's becoming difficult to find many holes in the roster from top to bottom.

The only question remaining is if Carey Price can find a return to form because then this team might be really scary. After a rough start, it's starting to look he just might. In October and November Carey Price had an .897 save percentage in 18 games. In December that improved to .916 in 12 games and he earned a shutout in his first game of 2019. After many pegged the Canadiens as an unsalvageable mess before the season started (I recall calling them an 85-point team was deemed far too optimistic at the time ... by Habs fans!) they've become a team to watch out for.

Honourable mentions

Pittsburgh Penguins: Not much has changed under the hood, but the Penguins are finally getting some saves and have vaulted towards the top of the standings, right back to where many expected them. My model now projects them to win the Metro division despite being one point back and with one more game played than Washington.

Vegas Golden Knights: This is one where I'm not sure what the model is seeing. The Golden Knights are surging, going 10-3-3 for the month with a top five Corsi, but only saw a very modest bump in expected win percentage for the month. Weird. Regardless, their playoff chances saw the second biggest increase of the month.

Coldest teams

Carolina Hurricanes

Last Month Strength: .557

Current Strength: .547

I'm running out of things to say about the enigma that is the Carolina Hurricanes. My model (and likely most models for that matter) still believes they are a strong team, but they look anything but in the standings, dropping to 17-17-5 on the season after a rough December where they went 4-8-1, tied for the league's second-worst record ahead of only Ottawa. The team should not be this bad. Not the way they control play in all areas of the ice. It's not just padding Corsi from bad areas of the ice either. For the month, Carolina had a 54 percent Corsi, a 56 percent scoring chance rate and a 58 percent high danger rate at 5-on-5, none of which mattered due to scoring just 39 percent of the goals.

All that led to a massive drop in playoff chances, the largest of any team, going from 77 percent to 35 percent. The team is a bit of a longshot unless they find a way to really turn things around and it's because good teams usually don't play at an 82-point pace for half a season. It is possible, but unlikely. Since 2005-06, 11 teams have made the playoffs playing at an 82-point pace or below as of Jan. 1:

2005-06 Sharks (16-16-5, finished with 99 points)

2005-06 Devils (17-18-2, finished with 101 points)

2006-07 Lightning (18-19-2, finished with 93 points)

2007-08 Capitals (15-19-5, finished with 94 points)

2007-08 Predators (17-18-2, finished with 91 points)

2008-09 Blue Jackets (16-16-4, finished with 92 points)

2008-09 Blues (14-20-3, finished with 92 points)

2010-11 Sabres (15-18-4, finished with 96 points)

2013-14 Blue Jackets (17-18-4, finished with 93 points)

2013-14 Rangers (19-19-2, finished with 96 points)

2015-16 Ducks (14-15-6, finished with 103 points)

It's possible, but it's probably not happening and it leads to the question of whether this is just bad luck for the Canes or if there's something the current analytics are missing from the equation. Personally, I think it's a little bit of both. As mentioned in 31 Stats, Carolina's shooting percentage at 5-on-5 is currently the worst mark since 2007-08. Furthermore, it's occurring in a year where shooting percentages are higher across the board. It's something that theoretically should regress. Even if the team is the worst shooting team in the league, it shouldn't be to this degree. Then again, it might not be a coincidence that everyone that leaves Carolina soars to new heights offensively and those that come to Carolina struggle. The Canes probably weren't expecting Dougie Hamilton, one of the league's premier offensive defencemen to play at a 25-point pace (!) after a one-point month.

Nothing here adds up, but then again, nothing ever does for the Hurricanes.

Philadelphia Flyers

Last Month Strength: .511

Current Strength: .486

After a surprising return to form in 2017-18 the Flyers had an entirely unsurprising (by Flyers standards) drop back down to earth in 2018-19. I (and many others) had the team pegged as a difference maker in the Metropolitan division and a team on the rise, but it now looks more likely that the team will languish near the bottom instead. Philadelphia started the season with a 74 percent chance at the playoffs and sat at 28 percent on Dec. 1, a low number to be sure, but one with some hope attached to it. That hope is now gone as the team currently sits at just four percent. Of the top 16 projected teams from the start of the season, the Flyers are the only team with playoff chances south of 20 percent entering 2019 and one of two (Florida) lower than 35. Thirteen teams are above 55 percent. To say the Flyers bombed the first half is an understatement.

Aside from Claude Giroux, who has been his usual excellent self after a return to form last season, the rest of the team's players have been maddeningly inconsistent. Philadelphia is not a team that's deep enough to rely on just a few players going at a time, but that's what they've had to deal with. After a slow start, Sean Couturier is back to playing well, though not to last year's level and Jakub Voracek had a very uncharacteristic awful first two months but seems to have regained some of his form over the last month. Along with Giroux, those three were the only Flyers with an average Game Score above 0.5 for the month as Travis Konecny regressed after a strong start. Wayne Simmonds continues his downward trajectory, James van Riemsdyk struggles at 5-on-5 and the twin young guns on the backend have struggled to replicate last year's magic.

And then there's the team's shaky goaltending, with the Flyers' .883 save percentage ranking dead last in the league for December, something the promising Carter Hart likely won't fix. The team has been without starter Brian Elliott for much of the season, but he likely wouldn't have saved the wreckage either.

Honourable mentions

Arizona Coyotes: With Antti Raanta out for the year it's lights out for the Coyotes who look like they're on their way to another bottom five finish. His absence was a big part of Arizona having the biggest drop last month, falling from 24th to 29th in expected win percentage.

St. Louis Blues: The most overhyped team of the summer went 6-6-1 for the month and haven't looked anything close to what many expected back in September.

To see more charts for how the value of every player on each team has changed over the last month go [here](#).

Hottest players



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Johnny Gaudreau, CGY

Last Month GSVA: 3.33 wins

Current GSVA: 4.18 wins

By Game Score only two players were more impactful in December than Gaudreau who rocked a 1.84 average for the month and added a performance worth 3.7 on Wednesday on the strength of his one goal and three assist performance. To put it mildly, the Flames superstar is on fire and my model is finally starting to give him the credit he deserves.

Before the season Gaudreau was often cited as one of the more under-appreciated players by my model and it was hard not to disagree when watching him. Few players are more electrifying with the puck than Gaudreau and he's parlayed that tantalizing skill into a career-best year, carrying the Flames to a very likely top seed in the Pacific division.

To date, Gaudreau has 61 points in 42 games, a 119-point pace that's currently third in the league. It was a fantastic December that put him in the league's upper echelon where he had 26 points in 14 games, a near two-point per-game pace, all while being a dominant 5-on-5 force.

All of that has been enough to propel Gaudreau to a win projection north of four wins, something only seven other players and three other wingers can attest to. Thanks to a ridiculous month where Gaudreau torched opponents on a nightly basis he now has the statistical profile to grade out as a top-10 player, something that's looked obvious on most nights.

Elias Pettersson, VAN

Last Month GSVA: 2.27 wins

Current GSVA: 3.31 wins

How do you top rookie of the month honours in December after putting up 17 points in 14 games? A hat trick on the first game of the new year of course. That makes for 20 points in his last 15 games for Pettersson (before getting injured Thursday night), arguably the sole reason the Canucks look actually respectable this season. The team is projected for 83 points, a hefty improvement from their past three seasons of futility where they averaged 72 points and never topped 75. The rebuild has been painful, but with Pettersson in the fold, the team has a shining beacon of hope.

In order to be a contender in this league, teams need superstars and Pettersson is entrenching himself as one in his first season with 42 points in 38 games, a 91-point pace that would make Mathew Barzal's terrific rookie season from last year look like child's play. His super December earned him an extra win in value, the largest improvement in the league over the last month.

Sample size is always an issue when it comes to rookies and it makes projections much more volatile, especially for someone scoring on 25 percent of their shots at 5-on-5 (and for someone who doesn't seem to shoot very often). That's likely not something Pettersson can expect to sustain and gives reason for caution with the above projection. It's likely he slows down from his 90-plus point pace as a result, but what is encouraging is that he is starting to drive play to a better degree. He was one of the better Canucks in that department in December, and some growth in that area should mitigate whatever expected regression is coming from his production.

Bottom line, despite the high efficiency, Pettersson still looks like the real deal and a big piece that should fast track Vancouver's rebuild.

Honourable mentions

Nikita Kucherov: Led all players with 30 points in December in just 14 games, an incredible feat accomplished for the first time since Jaromir Jagr in 2001. To add insult to injury, he had a four-point night on Thursday giving him 17 in his last five games. After briefly slipping, Kucherov is back to being considered a top three player according to my model. The only reason he's an "honourable mention" is that it's harder to rise when you're already so high. Kucherov has done it anyways.

Kevin Hayes: Raise your hand if you knew Hayes had 16 points in 12 games last month and led all Rangers in Corsi (at just under 50 percent mind you). Me neither. Contract years do funny things to players.

Coldest players

Patrik Laine, WPG

Last Month GSVA: 3.16 wins

Current GSVA: 2.67 wins

Kyle Connor, WPG

Last Month GSVA: 2.21 wins

Current GSVA: 1.73 wins

With an 11-4-0 record for the month, Winnipeg was the third hottest team in the standings for the month, but it was no thanks to these two, the pillars manning the wings of the team's second line.

After an explosive November, Laine cooled down considerably with just three goals in 15 games, though he did earn four assists, more than doubling his season total to date. Connor also scored three goals, but just had a single assist for the month. Among Jets forwards, his four points were ahead of only Mason Appleton for the month.

That hurts and it's a direct cause of rarely having the puck. When Laine and Connor were off the ice in December the Jets were their naturally dominant self at 5-on-5, outscoring the opposition 22-14 (61 percent) and out-shooting them 496-391 (56 percent). With them on the ice things took a turn for the worse as the team was outscored 8-4 (33 percent) and outshot 174-126 (42 percent). Laine had the league's worst relative Corsi for the month while Connor was 14th.

It's nice when those two are scoring, but when they're not, they become complete non-factors at best and liabilities at worst as they showed in December. That second line is a big problem for Winnipeg that needs to turn around soon.

Jonathan Marchessault, VGK

Last Month GSVA: 3.12 wins

Current GSVA: 2.82 wins

After last year's magical season for Vegas and its best player, many in the analytics community used it as confirmation of their beliefs of the skill of an unfairly maligned player – cast aside by a vindictive regime. Marchessault flashed superstar potential in a season where he played at a near point-per-game pace (at just 17:30 per night) while driving play on one of the league's best lines.

That was expected to continue this season, but it seems like the clock has struck midnight on Marchessault who has dropped to just a 57-point pace despite an ice-time increase to 19:02 this season and a bump in power play time. It's regression to the mean after a year when his on-ice shooting percentage was 10.7 percent, but to be fair to Marchessault he probably doesn't deserve his current 1.29 points-per-60 at 5-on-5. His own shooting percentage is at just 5.5 percent and his individual points percentage is just 54 percent, both of which are far off from his usual career marks.

I wouldn't be too concerned with his scoring, these things tend to ebb-and-flow throughout the season (and his resurgence could give Vegas an extra gear in the second half), but his play-driving the last month is a bit concerning. The claim to fame for last year's vaunted first line was their ability to dominate other top lines with much more name-brand value, specifically in the playoffs. Of the 19 regulars that played last month, just five had a below average shot attempt ratio. Marchessault was uncharacteristically one of them.

Honourable mentions

William Nylander, Jeff Carter, Casey Mittelstadt: The first, second, and seventh biggest drops in value belonged to these three who lost roughly



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half a win each. All three were mentioned in Wednesday's 31 Stats so I figured I'd rather not double dip.

Vladimir Tarasenko:

In 13 games in December Tarasenko had just two goals. That's it! He's on pace for a 24-24 season which would be the worst season of his career since his rookie season.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124515 Tampa Bay Lightning

Tampa Bay Lightning midseason report: 41 thoughts after 41 games

By Joe Smith Jan 4, 2019 12

LOS ANGELES — Steven Stamkos said most of the Lightning players have never been through this kind of stretch at the NHL level.

Heck, any level.

Tampa Bay continued its manhandling of the league Thursday with a 6-2 whipping of the Kings at the Staples Center. The Lightning wrapped up the first half of their schedule with a stunning 32-7-2 record.

Think about it. Just seven regulation losses, and none since Nov. 27.

They're 15-0-1 in their last 16. Coach Jon Cooper, who won a record 27 straight with Norfolk in the AHL during their 2011-12 Calder Cup run, said you just have to "ride the wave" and make sure "arrogance doesn't sneak into your game."

"It's a fun group to coach," Cooper said. "I'll tell you that."

The Lightning will enter the second half with a whopping 12-point lead over second-place Toronto in the Atlantic Division, making it the first time in the expansion era and just the eighth time in NHL history that a team has led by at least a dozen points midway through the season.

THIS MARKS THE FIRST TIME IN THE EXPANSION ERA AND JUST THE EIGHTH TIME IN NHL HISTORY THAT A TEAM HAS LED BY AT LEAST 12 POINTS IN THE OVERALL STANDINGS AT THE MID-WAY POINT OF THEIR SEASON. #NHLSTATS
PIC.TWITTER.COM/SLP7RT2ERE

— NHL PUBLIC RELATIONS (@PR_NHL) JANUARY 4, 2019

"I think (opponents) feel that. They're scared when you play a team like that," Kings coach Willie Desjardins said. "You know you have to play well, or they can make you look bad in your own rink."

You don't win Cups in December or January, but this veteran-laden group senses a different vibe around this team, one that could finally get them over the hump. Not only is this the deepest, most complete team of Cooper's tenure, it is also the tightest.

"We have a pretty unique nucleus in terms of guys that have been here for a while, and then you add in the skill set, add in the leadership qualities that are within this room, it's one of the best I've ever played with," said Stamkos, who is in his 10th season.

"You put all those things together, and you just don't get complacent. Especially when you're on a stretch like this, it can be easy to say, 'Oh well, we're not going to win them all, let's go out and see what happens.' (But) we want to win every night. We just have the belief on the bench that no matter what happens — if we're down a goal or two early — we're going to find a way. If we're up a goal, we'll find a way to hang on. We're finding ways to win and we just want to continue it."

With the team hitting the midseason point, here's a collection of 41 thoughts on the first 41 games.

1) Brayden Point getting snubbed from the Atlantic Division's All-Star squad is unfortunate, but it's understandable when it comes to the format the NHL uses to pick the teams.

Does Point deserve to be in this game? Absolutely. He's played better than he did last year when he made the team (24 goals, 54 points in 41 games), and there are many nights when he's the Lightning's best player.

But Point isn't the only player to get snubbed: Mitch Marner and Morgan Rielly of the Maple Leafs both have strong cases as does Panthers captain Sasha Barkov.

If you want Point in the game, give him a boost by voting him in through the "last man in" vote. "I'm going to vote for him," Stamkos said. "I'd definitely have him in there."

2) Stamkos was genuine in his surprise that he made the All-Star team. He got there thanks to his record-setting month of December, during which he scored 14 goals, and he now has 23 tallies and 46 points through 41 games.

"He's making a lot of good reads, and that's what it's all about," Marty St. Louis told me last week. "The best players are the best because they read the game better. Of course, his shot is deadly, but it's not easy to get open like he has in the past month."

Stamkos didn't know if he'd make his sixth All-Star appearance, acknowledging the loaded forward group and tough format. The fact that Stamkos is "very, very excited" to go to San Jose for the event is refreshing, considering Alex Ovechkin backed out of the game to rest and others have wondered whether there should even be All-Star Games anymore.

"You cherish them," Stamkos said. "Because you never know when it's going to be your last."

3) Speaking of reads, it was fascinating to talk to Nikita Kucherov for my piece on his "off the charts" hockey IQ. I learn something new every time we chat. Kucherov isn't one to seek out media attention — he'd rather stick to playing — but he enjoys talking about the game if you ask him. Kucherov comparison of making reads in handball and soccer growing up, and how that translates to hockey, was interesting.

What has struck me about Kucherov in my years covering him is how incredibly driven he is, how he's never satisfied ("Never enough," as agent Dan Milstein said) and how much he remains a student of the game. There's a reason why assistant Jeff Halpern said their power-play meetings are better when Kucherov runs them.

I asked Kucherov who he thought was the best player in the NHL. "I don't know," he said. "I think it's tough to say one guy. On every team, there is a really special guy or two or three. It's hard to pick one. Goalies are unbelievable, too. Maybe a goalie is the best player. You can say (Patrick) Kane is the best, then you have (Evgeni) Malkin and (Sidney) Crosby. So many good players. I don't think there's one best player."

Whatever he might say, Kucherov, who has 20 goals and an eye-popping 69 points, certainly has put himself in the conversation as a top-five or top-10 player in the NHL and is a serious Hart Trophy candidate.

4) Coach Jon Cooper has said this is the most complete and deepest Lightning team he has had since taking over at the end of the 2012-13 season, and that's saying a lot considering this core group has reached the Stanley Cup final and two Eastern Conference finals in that span. But it's hard to argue with the numbers, via Sean Tierney.

TBL

THIS IS TERRIFYING — EVEN IF YOU ADJUST FOR TOI BY LINE, TBL'S FORWARD LINES HAVE FULL-SEASON WARS LIKE THIS:

L1 – 7.55 WAR



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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L2- 7.94

L3 – 6.01

L4 – 2.48

THAT'S A RIDICULOUSLY DEEP GROUP UP FRONT.

CC: @RAHEF_ISSA PIC.TWITTER.COM/1NKNSSUD30

— SEAN TIERNEY (@CHARTINGHOCKEY) JANUARY 1, 2019

5) The Lightning have at least two All-Stars (Stamkos, Kucherov), plus their coach (Jon Cooper), with a potential for a third player (Point). Last year, in Tampa's All-Star Game, the Lightning had five (though Victor Hedman was hurt). My esteemed colleague Pierre LeBrun had an interesting proposal for this year's event in San Jose, with Tampa Bay dominating the league.

WHY DON'T WE HAVE THE TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING PLAY THE REST OF THE NHL ALL-STARS IN SAN JOSE INSTEAD? MIGHT ACTUALLY BE COMPELLING.

— PIERRE LEBRUN (@PIERREVLEBRUN) JANUARY 4, 2019

That's obviously not going to happen. But who wouldn't want to see Point, Stamkos, Kucherov, Hedman and Ryan McDonagh (with Tyler Johnson as a sub) take on some of the league's best?

6) It was a nice touch by Cooper to put Erik Cernak in the starting lineup in his first game against his former team, the Kings. Cernak, a second-round pick by L.A. in 2015, has flourished since he was the supposed "throw-in" in the Ben Bishop trade at the 2017 deadline.

"I was pretty happy when they traded me," Cernak said. "I came to development camp and everyone was friendly to me. It was much different than L.A."

7) Cernak, 21, has forced his way into the Lightning blueline rotation, with GM Julien BriseBois saying the rookie defenseman has been "too good to send down" to AHL Syracuse. Our profile on Cernak — aka "Drago" — explains why he has fit in so well and so quickly. Cernak's emergence fills a potential hole on the right side when three veteran defensemen come off the books after the season (Dan Girardi, Anton Stralman, Braydon Coburn).

8) Cernak also gives the Lightning even more reason to stand pat at the February trade deadline. BriseBois said that going into the season he was considering trying to acquire a right-shot defenseman for depth in case of injury. "But Erik Cernak has taken that role," BriseBois said. "So now it's less of a priority."

As much as the Lightning and Kings were scouting each other earlier this season, L.A. may have already given them what they need in the imposing Slovak.

9) That being said, there's still a chance the Lightning could re-sign one of their veteran defensemen on a short-term deal. BriseBois left the door open depending on the size of their contracts and how much he has to pay Point (who is an RFA due a hefty raise).

I would assume that with more of the need on the right side, it'd be Stralman whom Tampa Bay tries to bring back — though Coburn has had a resurgent season. For now, the Lightning would have Hedman, McDonagh (and Sergachev) under contract on the left side, with Cernak on the right and Koekkoek an RFA. Or you could keep Coburn and put Sergachev on the right with Cernak.

10) Speaking of Point, there's no update so far on contract talks. BriseBois maintained that he and agent Gerry Johannson have agreed to table those negotiations until after the season, and he doesn't anticipate that changing.

Of course, the danger for Tampa Bay is Point exploding for a 40-50-goal season and winning the Conn Smythe and Stanley Cup and further

driving up his value. But it seems to me that the Lightning would accept that tradeoff.

Point, the biggest bargain in the league right now at just under \$700,000 per season, will get paid (handsomely).

The fact that BriseBois is not concerned at all over a potential offer sheet to Point should be comforting to Lightning fans.

"I don't see it happening," BriseBois said. "The way it's set up, there's no point in making an offer sheet unless you think you're going to get the player. And teams match. You're not going to let go of the good young players that are going to be good for your team for many years to come. So I don't see it."

11) Then there's the Koekkoek conundrum. The former first-round pick is in limbo, the eighth defenseman in a seven-defensemen rotation. The Lightning sent Koekkoek to AHL Syracuse for a six-game, 13-day conditioning assignment which ends Jan. 11.

BriseBois said that he feels for Koekkoek, who has handled the frustrating situation with class. BriseBois told Koekkoek he can't ask for anything more from him — it's just that the opportunity isn't here, as others are ahead of him on the depth chart.

While Koekkoek hasn't demanded a trade, the Lightning have discussed him with other teams, but at this point he could probably only net a late-round pick in a trade. And if there were any serious takers, Koekkoek would likely be gone by now. The Lightning can keep Koekkoek as depth (there could be an opening in the top six next season) and play roster gymnastics until they're forced to make a move.

12) The Lightning will have to make another roster decision when J.T. Miller (week-to-week, upper body) is ready to return. He's been on the trip rehabbing and is slated to be re-evaluated soon. Since Koekkoek's conditioning assignment means he's still on the 23-man roster, something will have to give once Miller comes off IR. It doesn't appear that Cernak is going anywhere, so unless there's another injury, someone like Danick Martel may have to be exposed through waivers. Do the Lightning want to let go of the player some have called "the next Yanni Gourde?"

13) The Lightning have now scored four or more goals in 10 of their last 11 games, including five or more in eight of them. Even for them, those are video-game numbers.

14) The blueline rotation has worked pretty well so far, with veterans like Coburn and Girardi (who was a healthy scratch Thursday) buying in. They're not certain how long they will keep this up — in an ideal world, they would have three consistent pairs.

But it still appears the coaching staff is trying to find the right fit with the pairings. Hedman and Stralman have been great together before. Cernak appears to be a fit with McDonagh. Coburn and Sergachev have been solid. It looks like the Coburn, Sergachev, Girardi trio has been rotating in well together.

Still, by playoff time, the Lightning would like to have a stable six.

15) Some have asked if the Lightning should go with a similar forward rotation, allowing guys like Erne and Martel to get more consistent playing time. I think that makes some sense, especially with what Martel has shown in limited playing time and with Erne feeling the best he's felt in the NHL. The Lightning could consider sitting rookie Mathieu Joseph or Ryan Callahan at times, though it's not like they deserve to come out, either. It's a good problem to have.

16) Will this be Callahan's last season with the Lightning? Callahan, 33, has one year left on his contract (at \$5.8 million AAV). He's still an effective fourth-line player and penalty killer, not to mention a leader. But with the Lightning's pending cap crunch, BriseBois admitted the team will have to inevitably make some cost-cutting moves. That makes Callahan a potential trade/buyout candidate next summer.



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Still, Callahan looked like his 24-year-old self with his highlight-reel breakaway goal Thursday.

17) "When is the third jersey coming out?" It's crazy that this is the most popular question I get from Lightning fans in my Twitter feed.

There's no official release date yet, and from what I've heard, they were still tinkering with the design as of a couple of weeks ago.

My sense is that it'll look somewhat similar to the leaked design, though that one was a women's sweater, and the photo they showed did not do it justice. And, come on folks, it's just a third jersey!

18) It was a bold move by the Kings on Thursday to give the Lightning nearly two minutes of 5-on-3 power-play time in the first period. Tampa Bay scored twice.

The first was a beauty — part a set play, part remarkable reads — with Stamkos and Tyler Johnson weaving to trade spots and Kucherov cashing in for his 20th of the season.

And, less than 90 seconds later, Point scored too, finishing at the back post.

POINT SCORES HIS 24TH ON THE SEASON WITH A POWER PLAY GOAL TO GIVE THE #GOBOLTS A 2-0 LEAD, KUCHEROV EARNS HIS SECOND POINT OF THE NIGHT
PIC.TWITTER.COM/7EDJNGSCVG

— SHAYNA (@HAYYYSHAYYY) JANUARY 4, 2019

19) It never ceases to amaze me how everyone knows that Stamkos is going to shoot from his "office," the left-circle on the power play — yet he can't be stopped. No one scores on more slapshots than Stamkos (other than Alex Ovechkin), per Sean Tierney. Eight of Stamkos' 23 goals this season have come on slapshots.

It looks like this.

20) Stamkos is far from a one-trick pony, however. He's been working hard the past several years to evolve into more of a playmaker, hence his career high in assists last season while playing with Kucherov. Stamkos' vision and set-up ability have been fantastic this season.

Stamkos may not be the same player who scored 60 goals and won two Rocket Richard Trophies, but he's continued to be extremely productive. The "new norm," as Stamkos calls it — after undergoing serious injuries to his leg and knee — doesn't look that bad.

21) BriseBois said one area of focus this past season was improving on faceoffs, and the group is 13th in the league at 50.3 percent. Assistant coach Jeff Halpern has been a key reason for the improvement, the long-time centerman helping tutor some of the forwards on the craft.

Halpern was quick to point out, though, that Stamkos' marked improvement, up to 55.4 percent from his career average of 48, was a credit to the All-Star center himself. Halpern said there are times where Stamkos will lead meetings/video sessions on draws, using his experience to help others.

22) Expect Louis Domingue to start Saturday against the Sharks in San Jose.

Andrei Vasilevskiy's injury — for which he missed a month due to a fractured foot — may end up being a blessing in disguise, allowing the Vezina Trophy finalist to be fresher down the stretch. Vasilevskiy has appeared in just 21 of the team's first 41 games, so he'll likely end up at around 50 for the season (below the 55-65-game sweet spot Tampa had targeted).

Domingue, though, has been stellar, going 15-4 in 19 games. And it would make sense for the Lightning to continue playing him once a week (or every four games) to rest Vasilevskiy — and maybe even more if the Lightning further pull away in the Atlantic.

23) The one negative for the Lightning in the first half has been their goals against (2.92 per game, 15th in the NHL). BriseBois said with the caliber of goaltending and players on this team, they should be better than that.

What has gone wrong? Cooper said the team's structure and systems are fine and that it's more about the execution. He speaks a lot about the Lightning having to "grow up" a bit in terms of locking games down when they have a lead. They made it a point of emphasis on this West Coast trip to cut down on scoring chances and goals allowed, and the 2-1 win in Anaheim and Thursday's 6-2 victory in L.A. seem to be encouraging steps forward. Tampa Bay knows it can't win in the spring/summer allowing four or five a game.

"It starts with odd-man rushes," Cooper said. "When you don't give those up, you're probably taking away some scoring chances. They've tightened up defensively. But it all starts in the offensive zone. The way you're tracking back, making sure we've got more numbers than them on the way back. They're working hard, and when you're doing that, usually good things happen."

24) Who will score first, Sergachev or Cernak?

It's stunning that Sergachev, as offensively gifted as he is, has zero goals in 39 games this season, particularly after scoring nine goals (and 40 points) in 79 games as a rookie last year.

Sergachev said it has been frustrating, as he considers himself an offensive defenseman. Coaches have had chats with the 20-year-old Russian to remind him not to worry about the goals — they'll come. It's not like Sergachev's ice time or role (running the second power-play unit) have changed a ton, and his scoring chances are nearly on pace with last season. And, more importantly, Sergachev's Corsi-for percentage (57.89) is nearly identical to last year (58.21).

Meanwhile, Cernak has grown increasingly confident jumping up into the rush and creating offensively. He has seven points, including a slick assist off the rush to Kucherov on Monday in Anaheim.

25) Speaking of rookies, Mathieu Joseph may give Point a run for his money in terms of being the fastest skater on the team. Joseph showed his game-breaking speed on his third-period goal Thursday, beating Drew Doughty to the puck for his 10th goal of the season (the seventh Lightning player to reach double figures).

26) Joseph, a former fourth-round pick, is just the latest example of the incredible drafting and development by the Lightning organization. Anthony Cirelli is a third-rounder. So is Point. Kucherov, taken 58th overall in 2011, became the first in his draft class to rack up 400 career points. And there's more coming, with Syracuse being one of the top teams in the AHL.

27) Syracuse coach Ben Groulx, who will coach in the AHL All-Star Game, will be an NHL coach someday. It's just a matter of time. If you think about it, 18 of the 31 current head coaches have been in their jobs for fewer than 24 months. (Cooper is the longest-tenured NHL coach.) With all that movement, Groulx will get his shot.

28) Cooper is in the final year of his contract, but he's expected to land an extension. BriseBois first told The Athletic in October about plans for the extension, though he isn't sure whether it will be announced during the season or after.

This might be Cooper's best coaching job, taking a Stanley Cup favorite and having them play this well and this hard so consistently. There's been no complacency. BriseBois lauded him as a Jack Adams candidate for coach of the year. "He's been outstanding," BriseBois said.

29) With the league recently announcing plans for an outdoor Winter Classic in Dallas next year, what about Tampa?

Owner Jeff Vinik has been pushing for an outdoor game for years. It will happen. The Lightning have done extensive studies on weather patterns and ice conditions and they are confident they can pull one off (likely in Raymond James Stadium).



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When? Well, with Tampa Bay hosting the All-Star Game last season and being part of the Global Series game in Sweden next November (an announcement is coming soon), an outdoor game is likely still a few years off.

Want some midseason superlatives? You got 'em:

30) Best player: Nikita Kucherov. The league-leader in points is playing at a Hart Trophy level.

31) Co-MVP(s): Ryan McDonagh/Brayden Point. McDonagh, the veteran defenseman, carried the load when Victor Hedman was out and has played the best BriseBois has ever seen a defenseman play. Point isn't flashy, but he's the team's best two-way forward, and he has 24 goals and a Selke in his future the way he can be a shut-down defender.

32) Biggest surprise: Erik Cernak. Not many expected the rookie defenseman to even be in the NHL in the first half of the season, much less playing 22 games. He forced his way onto the roster and into a role as a top-four D-man.

33) Most improved: Anthony Cirelli. It's hard to believe Cirelli is still a rookie, but ever since his late-March call-up, he has made himself a core player who is trusted in all situations. Cirelli has 16 points (nine goals) in 41 games, is one of the league's top forecheckers (according to Cooper) and you just have a feeling he'll score a clutch goal or two in a playoff run.

"He's not the guy with the points or getting the picture in the paper," Cooper said, "but when we get a win, you know he's got his fingerprints somewhere on it, on the defensive side of the puck, big faceoffs. He's been outstanding."

34) Unsung hero: Louis Domingue. When Vasilevskiy was sidelined for a month, who would have thought they'd go 12-2 in his absence? Domingue had 11 of those wins.

35) Best story: It took nearly a decade and 245 pro games (over the AHL and ECHL) for journeyman goalie Eddie Pasquale to make his NHL debut, but it ended up being a "dream come true," a 6-5 shootout victory in Detroit.

36) Best game: The Lightning's 1-0 victory in Colorado on Oct. 24, in which they shut down one of the league's top lines with Nathan MacKinnon, was as close to a clinical, playoff-style victory as they come. It was reminiscent of Tampa Bay's defensive efforts in the 2015 Eastern Conference final against the Rangers.

37) Best play: Ryan McDonagh's game-saving strip to set up the Lightning's 4-3 overtime win in Ottawa on Nov. 4.

38) Best single-game performance: The Lightning's much-anticipated showdown in mid-December with the Leafs was more one-sided than everyone thought (in Toronto's favor). But goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy delivered a Herculean, 48-save performance, including the save of the year on Patrick Marleau.

39) Most exciting game: In what might be a Stanley Cup final preview, the Lightning lost 5-4 in overtime in Winnipeg in an instant classic.

40) Most controversial decision: When the Lightning decided in September to terminate the contract of defenseman Jake Dotchin, it was a move that could set a precedent in the NHL. Dotchin, who filed a grievance against Tampa Bay, later signed with the Ducks.

41) Biggest news: Steve Yzerman shocked the hockey world by stepping down as GM right before training camp. But, as the first half showed, the Lightning haven't skipped a beat.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124547 Websites

The Athletic / Vitriol aimed at Team Canada's Max Comtois crosses line of sports: 'There's nobody that feels worse'

By Eric Stephens Jan 4, 2019 36

Max Comtois missed a penalty shot.

This isn't really accurate. The 19-year-old took a penalty shot. Didn't fan on it. Didn't shoot it wide. Didn't lose the puck. Put it on goal. A save was made.

Waiting for the talented Anaheim Ducks prospect on his Instagram account were many comments. Among them included this post from an account named @aidspharmacy, "I hope you get HIV you French fuck," the anonymous poster typed.

THESE ARE SOME OF THE COMMENTS ON MAX COMTOIS' INSTAGRAM PAGE. DO NOT BE THESE PEOPLE. SERIOUSLY, DO NOT. PIC.TWITTER.COM/QEKC30WVWQ

— FAIZAL KHAMISA (@SNFAIZALKHAMISA) JANUARY 3, 2019

Faizal Khamisa, an anchor with Canadian television network Sportsnet, took to Twitter to post a screenshot of that and other critical comments directed toward Comtois. Khamisa added a follow-up post that was initially tweeted by Peter Roumeliotis with another screenshot.

THIS IS PART OF THE COMMENT SECTION OF MAXIME COMTOIS'S INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT... THESE NEGATIVE COMMENTS TOWARDS HIM ARE ATROCIOUS... THESE ARE KIDS PLAYING HOCKEY FOR THEIR COUNTRY. COME ON... #WORLDJUNIORS PIC.TWITTER.COM/9FYPPPL2069

— PETER ROUMELIOTIS (@PETEYBEATS) JANUARY 3, 2019

This was apparently necessary to do after a game was lost. Mind you, this was a game of high stakes. This was the IIHF World Junior Hockey Championships being played in Vancouver, with Canada facing Finland in the quarterfinals. The defending world junior champion entering the 2019 tournament as the heavy favorite and looking to repeat in front of its proud fans on home soil.

And Comtois was the captain of Team Canada, bestowed that honor by coach Tim Hunter. The only returning player from the 2018 team that claimed gold in Buffalo was given the chance to send his squad into the semifinal. Hunter sent him out to take the penalty shot after Evan Bouchard was taken down on a breakaway.

Comtois skated in from center ice and measured up Finnish goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen. His shot of choice was a low forehand. It wasn't too dissimilar from the kind of shot he made to score on San Jose's Martin Jones, who has 135 career NHL wins and backstopped the Sharks to the 2016 Stanley Cup final.

Back then, Comtois had made the Ducks out of training camp and delivered on his very first shot. He had a breakaway just four seconds into his very first NHL shift, jumping over the boards and getting a pass from Adam Henrique that sent him in from the blue line.

On this one, Comtois aimed for the corner on Luukkonen instead of between the pads as he did on Jones. The other key difference is Luukkonen threw out his right pad to make the do-or-die stop.

☐'S MAXIME COMTOIS IS DENIED BY FR'S UKKO-PEKKA LUUKKONEN ON THE PENALTY SHOT. #CANVSFIN #WORLDJUNIORS #REPRESENT PIC.TWITTER.COM/Q15FGGYF77

— TSN (@TSN_SPORTS) JANUARY 3, 2019

It mattered, obviously, and Finland would later knock out Canada with a 2-1 upset.



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The backlash toward the big left wing on social media was swift and fierce. And, in some cases, unduly harsh and disgustingly vile. A sampling on Twitter:

TWO THINGS I LEARN'T FROM THIS YEARS WORLD JUNIORS. TIM HUNTER IS AN EMBARRASSING COACH AND MAX COMTOIS IS AN EMBARRASSMENT TO CANADIAN HOCKEY.

— TYSON SCOTT (@TYSONSCOTT94) JANUARY 3, 2019

ONE POSITIVE THING ABOUT TEAM CANADA BEING OUT OF THE #WORLDJUNIORS NOW IS THAT WE WON'T GET TO SEE MAX COMTOIS, THE CAPTAIN OF OUR TEAM, CONTINUE TO EMBARRASS OUR COUNTRY ANYMORE WITH THOSE DIVES(AS OUR NOT-SO-SMART COACH ALSO DOESN'T CARE ENOUGH TO TELL HIM TO STOP).🌐 #WJC2019

— ALIYA (@PETTEHRHOFF) JANUARY 3, 2019

IN THE TRAGEDY THAT HAS BEFALLEN MAX COMTOIS, LET'S NOT ALL FORGET THAT BEFORE YESTERDAY HE WAS A FAKE-HURT DIVER WHO WAS RUNNING THE UNDERAGE PLAYERS, AND THAT WE ARE ALL LOOKING FORWARD TO SAM BENNETT DESTROYING HIS DUCK-ASS FOR YEARS TO COME

— CIMS (@SHANGHIGHLANDER) JANUARY 3, 2019

Not surprisingly, most of these comments did not have an individual's given full name attached to them. And this is what leaves Ray Ferraro outraged.

"I think this is where people – they lose sight of what the whole thing is," said Ferraro, an 18-year NHL forward who is currently broadcasting TSN's WJC coverage. "And I'm not talking about the world junior tournament. I'm talking about all of it. It's sport. ... You can not be happy with a guy. You can critique his play. You can prefer that a guy doesn't play for your team. Right? That's part of being a fan. And I think even these kids understand that. And they are kids. Every one of them in this tournament is a teenager.

"What gets lost is – somebody tweeted me I don't hate where he's from. I hate him because of this, this and this. And I sent a note back, and I'm like 'You hate him. You don't know him.' So this is the part that I don't (get). I don't think people quite realize, and this is oh-so-relatively new to us ... when you and I were growing up, if you didn't like somebody, it was because you knew him and you didn't like him."

As he continued to answer an initial question about his takeaway from the vitriol Comtois has received, Ferraro thought back to when he was rooting for the Boston Red Sox to take down the mighty Cincinnati Reds in the 1975 World Series and his disappointment when the Sox lost Game 7.

"I didn't hate Roger Moret because he gave up a base hit to Joe Morgan in the seventh game (Editor's note: Jim Burton gave up the game-winning hit, Moret gave up a hit to Pete Rose that forged a seventh-inning tie)," said Ferraro. "I wish he would have got him out. But I didn't hate him. Now you have this forum where people can just basically throw crap up into the wind and there's no accountability to any of it.

"I know I wouldn't have been able to do it but I'm hoping that these kids who have grown up for most of their lives with social media would be able to rationalize it. That this is crazy, and I don't need to listen to it and I'm just going to look at what goes forward. But it would be impossible. When you're a teenager, you're concerned with what everybody thinks about you. If we remember back to our teenage years, we were all the same. Right?"

Waves of support have also washed toward Comtois in those respective online forums. Multitudes of positive messages have been sent his way, along with words castigating those uttering deplorable comments mixed in.

But the vitriol was enough for Comtois' representation, Roy Sports Group, to issue a statement condemning what it called cyberbullying toward its client.

"Maxime Comtois is the ultimate example of a Hockey Canada athlete who has grown through the ranks to become a selfless leader. No one is prouder to wear the Maple Leaf on his chest and C on his jersey.

"These young men understand and accept the pressure that comes with their roles in the hockey world.

"It is shameful and incomprehensible that a few cowards who can hide behind social media could make such vicious attacks on these young men's character after they have battled their hearts out for their country.

"We will make this one and only statement on this subject, so not to validate anymore the cowardly comments made on social media. It was Maxime's idea to use this as a learning moment for all of the youth of Canada, that cyber bullying is a real problem, and like all bullies, we all need to stand up to them and call them out for what they are. Thank you for shedding a spotlight on a major problem in our society.

"Best of luck to all of the participants still battling in the WJC, still the best tournament in the world."

Allain Roy of Roy Sports Group told The Athletic that he released the statement because, "Max felt it created a platform to address an increasingly common issue in society where many children and young adults are victimized by cyber-bullying because the internet makes it so easy for many to hide their true identity behind their ugly and hurtful comments.

"He saw a way to turn a negative event into something that could maybe help others. The WJC in Canada is like no other event, with mega exposure for teenaged players that comes with a lot of pressure. Good on him to see a way to shine a light on an every day problem that needs to be addressed."

In addition, a Quebec politician responded to the insults hurled toward Comtois – a native of the Montreal suburb of Longueuil – by tweeting in French: "Édifiant. Du racisme anti-francophones."

Organizationally speaking, the Ducks' higher-ups also supported the player and made known how important he is to their success moving forward.

"We do not condone those comments, and we support the manner in which Max handled last night's defeat with class and dignity, as a captain should," general manager Bob Murray said in a statement.

For his part, Comtois himself was reflective and graceful in defeat.

"Canada is never expected to go that early," Comtois told reporters in Vancouver. "But it was a good battle out there. This tournament is about a fine line between winning and losing. Sometimes a game is all about inches and we got our chances and they found a way to get that one."

Of his fateful shot, he said, "It's not the first one that I missed and it's not going to be the last one. It has to hurt, if I get one more chance later in my career, I have to be ready and dig in to get it in."

The loathsome comments are an unseemly reflection of a tournament that carries massive hype and meaning. From the day after Christmas – or Boxing Day, a federal holiday north of the border – until when the gold medals are handed out, the world juniors captures the fancy of millions of Canadians. Especially when the nation plays host.

Canada has won the tournament 17 times. Other countries like Sweden, Finland, Russia and the United States have risen to challenge for junior supremacy and the Canadians do not dominate the competition like before. But they remain a powerhouse, an annual favorite to win. Any finish short of a medal is not accepted. Players who star become part of lore. For instance, Jordan Eberle's last-second goal to tie Russia in the 2009 semifinals and keep their run of five straight gold medals alive is still celebrated.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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All that brings pressure. Immense pressure. It isn't just about winning. The national sport, in the minds of the most intense followers, is at stake.

"There's a lot," said Henrique, who joined Anaheim last season after seven years with New Jersey. "Playing for Team Canada in Canada, wearing the 'C', the expectation is always gold for Canada. No matter what tournament or level or wherever it is, the expectation is always gold. It's unfortunate. I know (goalie) Mikey DiPietro as well. So, it sucks for those guys. It sucks.

"I saw it, I felt it. It just takes a piece of you, really. A lot of those times, you play in that tournament once. Some guys are fortunate enough to have another chance. A lot of those times, it's a one opportunity thing. I was fortunate. We got the silver. It was an experience I'll never forget."

Henrique made the 2010 team but Canada's attempt to stretch its streak of gold to six was denied by the Americans on John Carlson's overtime goal. Much has happened since, and the Ducks' center had his unforgettable moment of scoring the series-clinching goal to send the Devils to the 2012 Cup final. But the feeling of sitting on the bench and coming up short is not forgotten.

The defeat was also on Canadian soil, at Credit Union Centre (now SaskTel Centre) in Saskatoon. Social media was around then but Henrique is thankful that it wasn't as ubiquitous throughout society as it is now. He feels for Comtois, whom he got to know in Anaheim's training camp.

"I think people tend to forget that we're people too," said Henrique, who won consecutive Memorial Cup titles with the Taylor Hall-led Windsor Spitfires. "I'll bet if you ask him, you'd want that chance every time. You'd want to be that guy that's taking that shot. Whether you score or not, it is what it is. And I think a lot of people just hide behind their accounts and their social media. Even just the way society is now, it's changed so much. People are ruthless. They don't care. They're never in those positions. They think it should just be ... he's a kid. At the end of the day, they're all kids. They aren't professionals.

"And that's something that you learn from. Try to grow as a player, as a person. And you just try to be above all that. It's easy to say because it's hard to – like I couldn't imagine getting that. Reading all that. Because I guarantee you, there's nobody that feels worse probably than him after the shot and then after the loss."

Henrique isn't a constant on social media, but he does keep an active presence. That wasn't the case when he came up in the NHL. "That was a Lou Lamoriello thing," he says. The architect of the championship New Jersey teams, who's now GM of the New York Islanders, always looked to keep outside distractions to a minimum. Looking back, Henrique is thankful for the executive's protective nature.

Social media is a tool to connect. And it can be a tool used to harm.

"There are positives with it," Henrique said. "There are negatives with it, like all of this. If you don't have it, you just avoid it all really. But it's come so far. There's so many (outlets). Nothing goes unnoticed. Everybody's got a phone. Everybody's got this and that. Unfortunately, this is the other side of it."

Ferraro said the line is crossed when criticism devolves into personal attacks. He was happy to see Telus, a Canadian telecommunications giant, extend its anti-bullying campaign into the tournament. But he also brings the discussion home. The benefits and drawbacks of social media are a topic he has broached with his younger sons, Riley and Reese.

"When I have random people just carve me or my family – which happens – I'm so offended and so angry," said Ferraro, who is married to former U.S. women's star and Hockey Hall of Famer Cammi Granato. "And sometimes I respond because I think I need to defend myself. But other times, I'm like, 'I just can't believe this.' It's not just kids or younger people sending out this venom. I'll look back at somebody's picture, their avatar, and they've got pictures of their own kids.

"What the hell are these people thinking? It's like a runaway train."

Sidney Crosby, who knows a thing or two about the pressure that comes with playing for your country, is among those that have come out to support the young winger.

"I feel bad," said the Pittsburgh Penguins' superstar Friday in a story written by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's Jason Mackey. "That's immediately what I thought of when I saw that penalty shot – just the amount of pressure that's on a young kid.

"It's too bad that people have to react that way, and social media gives them that opportunity. My advice to him would be to ignore it. He's a great player. He's going to have a great career. That's not going to define who he is – that penalty shot."

Comtois' rough ride as Canada's captain got off to a fine start. He scored four goals in their 14-0 rout of Denmark. But he would get on the bad side of some fans with embellishing on attempts to draw penalties during subsequent games. Added fuel was provided by Russia's Klim Kostin, a St. Louis Blues' prospect.

During an intermission interview with a Russian TV outlet, Kostin said, "In his previous life, he worked at the circus. Didn't you know that? Perhaps he watched the World Cup of soccer. Neymar is probably his best friend."

Ferraro was direct, frankly calling his reaction to a cross-check against him a dive, saying that he "shouldn't have done that" and that he'll later realize he does not need that in his game.

And there was the penalty shot that was stopped.

"But does somebody need to hate him because of it?" he continued. "That's a little ridiculous, isn't it?"

Added Ferraro, "I feel badly that these kids have to go through it. Because this tournament, they dream about playing in this tournament. And it's awesome. The tournament is 95 percent awesome. And it's that other five percent that unfortunately carries a great weight."

John Gibson knows the weight. The star goalie of the Ducks won gold with Team USA in 2013. But he got his first start for the Americans in the 2012 tournament, replacing Jack Campbell for a key group game against Finland. In that 4-1 loss which put them on an embarrassing path toward relegation, Gibson took an interference penalty while the U.S. was on a power play looking to break a 1-1 tie. Finland's Joel Armia would score during 4-on-4 play.

Gibson hasn't forgotten that moment – or the determination to make up for it the next year. He hopes that Comtois takes this experience (and the backlash from it) and turns it into a positive.

"We were on our way to not even competing for a medal and I got a lot of – obviously it wasn't nearly as much, but I had to kind of own up to it," Gibson said. "I think I was 17, 18 at the time. It was the first time I really had to deal with anything like that. It's obviously frustrating for him now and everything like that. But I think when he looks back at it, he can look at it as a stepping stone. Because he's going to have more adversity throughout his career.

"So, I think he can use it and kind of look back on it, that if I did that, I can get through a lot of things in life. I think it was something that he'll be able to take with him and kind of use that going forward."

Gibson also sees that the pressure on Comtois is exponential as a Canadian. A French-Canadian, on top of it. "You're either going to be a hero or you're going to have people mad at you," the goalie said.

The fact is this piece isn't written if Comtois scores on that penalty shot. The ludicrous suggestion that he is the worst captain in Team Canada's long and storied history probably isn't barked out. Perhaps it should end with another tweet sent out after he didn't.

"I wasn't a fan of Max Comtois antics this tournament, but to cyberbully anybody, never mind a 19-year-old kid, is lower than low. I'd love to see how these people deal with massive pressure." tweeted @SamanthaMileto.



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I WASN'T A FAN OF MAX COMTOIS ANTICS THIS TOURNAMENT, BUT TO CYBERBULLY ANYBODY, NEVER MIND A 19-YEAR-OLD KID, IS LOWER THAN LOW. I'D LOVE TO SEE HOW THESE PEOPLE DEAL WITH MASSIVE PRESSURE.

— SAMANTHA MILETO (@SAMANTHAMILETO) JANUARY 3, 2019

Unlike others who stay in hiding, Mileto put her name behind the comment. And there is a picture and short bio on her Twitter profile.

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The Athletic / Duhatschek Notebook: Why Alex Ovechkin shouldn't be punished for skipping the All-Star Game

By Eric Duhatschek Jan 4, 2019 34

The NHL is at the midpoint of its 2018-19 season and what a year it's been already. There was the Jim Lites rant in Dallas. There was a controversial settlement in the concussion lawsuit. William Nylander made more news when he was sitting out in a contract dispute with the Toronto Maple Leafs than he has since returning to the lineup.

Then there was all the stuff that actually happened on the ice, beginning with Alex Ovechkin, who once again, leads the NHL in goalscoring and is on track to win the eighth Rocket Richard trophy of his career. Ovechkin ranks atop my list of first-half surprises because, frankly, I imagined the Stanley Cup hangover would hit him hard, literally and figuratively. Instead, he's been in the midst of another productive goal-scoring season – 30 goals already, reaching that plateau for the 14th time in his career – and now we're at the point where people are pondering the question of whether he can legitimately catch Wayne Gretzky as the NHL's all-time goal-scoring leader.

Ovechkin also made the news this past week when he respectfully declined the opportunity to participate in the 2019 NHL All-Star game, citing a desire to rest and prepare for the Capitals' second-half push. The NHL responded in the usual manner – noting that he will have to serve a one-game suspension, either just before or just after the All-Star break, as the penalty for being a no-show. This is a policy that they'd informally introduced a while back that has ensnared, among others, the Detroit Red Wings' bullet-proof Hall of Famer, Nicklas Lidstrom, who had to sit out a regular-season game during the 2008-09 season (along with teammate Pavel Datsyuk) after they also turned down a chance to play in the All-Star Game, held that year in Montreal.

This never made any sense to me. What exactly is the NHL protecting here by forcing an unwilling veteran player to participate in a glorified trade show?

The "integrity" of the All-Star Game? Good one.

If the NHL were sincerely interested in putting some integrity into the All-Star Game, it would begin by selecting the most deserving players. When the NHL puts three players from the host team, the San Jose Sharks, into the game – Joe Pavelski, plus defencemen Erik Karlsson and Brent Burns – ahead of say, the Calgary Flames' Mark Giordano, a Norris Trophy candidate, they have shown their hand.

It is a marketing exercise – and it helps to market the game in San Jose when three Sharks players are named to the lineup. I get it. I have no problem with it.

But if you are tacitly acknowledging that the All-Star Game is a promotional vehicle designed to entertain sponsors rather than an actual competition, then there should absolutely be an opt-out provision for

veteran players, over the age of 30, who want to put team goals ahead of an NHL sideshow.

In all, Ovechkin has been chosen for the All-Star Game 10 times and played in seven – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2015, 2017 and 2018. He skipped 2012 because he was suspended and dropped out in 2016 because of injury. The other gaps in his resume came because the All-Star Game isn't actually an annual event. There were no All-Star Games in 2010 and 2014 because of the Olympic break, and none in 2013 because of the lockout. That means Ovechkin actually has a distinguished attendance record.

The fact is, once a player passes the age of 30, he should be able to give the All-Star game a pass without any repercussions. Even the NHL kind of gets this because in 2012, both Lidstrom and Teemu Selanne, both 41 at the time, stated publicly that they'd just as soon not go to the All-Star game well ahead of the roster announcements – and the NHL avoided any potentially embarrassing confrontations there by simply not naming them to the roster.

In Ovechkin's case, they didn't have a choice. He won the fan vote, which obliged him to drop out officially. The cost will be one game's worth of salary – small change to him – but here's something you probably know intuitively: Even wealthy pro athletes hate to take a rabbit punch to the wallet.

But in terms of the big picture, hockey is a team sport. The powers that be running the NHL should understand that. In a long season, which puts a ton of wear-and-tear on the body and with the Capitals coming off a deep playoff run, getting an extended break via the bye week and the All-Star weekend will make Ovechkin fresher for the home stretch and better positioned to help his team defend the Stanley Cup.

Nor can I see there being any sort of uprising among the San Jose fan base just because Ovechkin isn't playing.

The reality is, the All-Star Game is far more appealing to a young player that's never been to one than to an old warhorse such as Ovechkin.

This year, the NHL has added a marketing twist to make the selection process even more convoluted. After fans voted in the captains for each division and then the NHL's hockey operations department filled in the next 37 spots, there now remains a single opening on each of the remaining rosters, which will be determined in a 'Last Men In' final round of fan balloting.

Here's how it works: Via the league's website, fans get to choose, from a pre-selected list of candidates, who gets to fill in the last roster spot in each division. In the Pacific Division, for example, Giordano and the Edmonton Oilers' Leon Draisaitl are candidates, though if Sharks' fans are smart, they will stuff the ballot box and put their hometown hero, Logan Couture, in there instead. Why not? It's a show that primarily will interest fans in the San Jose area and allows most of the rest of the hockey world to blithely ignore the thing.

There are no real "snubs" when it comes to all-star selections, only omissions based on the NHL's desire to have every team represented. But if Arizona's Clayton Keller, tied for 87th in league scoring, gets to go, but Edmonton's Leon Draisaitl or Calgary's Sean Monahan, who are both tied for ninth, don't make the team, then let's not pretend that this about showcasing the best of the best.

And if the league can gloss over all the players who earned the right to play and instead, inserts players having just so-so seasons to meet an internal quota, then anyone who wants to skip the show shouldn't be punished for their choice either.

Sports psychology

There are somewhere between one hundred thousand and one million books, articles, scholarly treatments and other offerings in the field of sports psychology about the art of motivating an athlete – and over the past week or so, I read pretty much every one. Just kidding. I only read a few – because it's a rabbit hole. Once you start, it's hard to stop.



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But I wanted to see what, if anything, there was in the literature that might have inspired Dallas Stars CEO Jim Lites to publicly blast two of his star players, Jamie Benn and Tyler Seguin, the week after Christmas. Or to put it another way: Is there any scholarly study to support the value of the sort of public scolding that Lites delivered, just because it was so unprecedented in nature? There is a ton of material on establishing a motivational climate, much of it focused on positive reinforcement.

Even if this kinder, gentler era of supporting rather than criticizing athletes, just about everyone who reaches a reasonably high-performance level has heard their play described to them in negative terms. Coaches go on rants all the time, mostly behind closed doors. Expletives are so common in dressing rooms that often, they completely lose their impact. Mostly they are used to provide emphasis or punctuation – and ultimately, they just become part of the daily noise. Eventually, the majority of athletes achieving an elite standard develop a thick skin over time. The ones that don't, frequently don't survive.

Still ...

What made the Lites rant so unique was that it was so calculated and so public. This wasn't just about blowing off steam because Benn and Seguin were having mediocre first halves – or finding yourself on a radio show, where a host asks a particularly poignant question and all of a sudden, live on the air, you accidentally blurt out a truth that you wanted to keep in-house and immediately regret saying.

No, this was the head of a multi-million-dollar company, saying two of the organization's greatest assets are overpaid and underperforming – and that's gotta change. Only he said it in public and in language too colorful for most publications to print.

What I found particularly puzzling was Benn's response to Lites when he finally held court in Dallas. First, Benn noted that "people have their opinions on the outside and all it really is, is noise." Then he added, in a subsequent answer: "Yeah, I don't play for him."

OK, I think I know what Benn was trying to say there – what matters to him is what goes on internally in the dressing room, nothing else and those are the people he answers to.

But seriously, the president and CEO of the company you work for is not an "outside" voice. He is the boss. An outside voice is a journalist weighing in on what's wrong with the team – or a Stars' fan posting comments online, or on social media. Those can be easily ignored. But Lites runs the show. He's at the top of the organizational chain of command. Coach Jim Montgomery reports to general manager Jim Nill and Nill reports to Lites.

You may not see him every day, but ultimately Lites signs the paychecks on behalf of owner Tom Gaglardi.

Benn's observations got me wandering off on a weird tangent – is direct deposit to blame for a lot of what ails professional sport?

Because, in the old days, players were actually issued paychecks and so they knew who they worked for. Twice a month, starting two weeks into the season, the checks would show up in their lockers. They could physically examine them; they could see the signatures at the bottom; and they had to take them to an actual bank, stand in front of a teller and put the money in their accounts. That's how it was when four decades ago when I first started covering the NHL.

In fact, one of my funniest memories of that era came after bumping into Willie Plett soon after he'd signed a contract extension with the Flames. Plett had the check for his signing bonus with him, and he couldn't wait to pull it out of his suit coat pocket, slip it out of the envelope and show me the amount. He was giggling like a kid at Christmas.

The notion that you were actually working for someone seemed more real then.

Nowadays, an athlete's paycheck gets deposited into an account electronically and is usually whisked away into investment vehicles.

It's far more disconnected – and one suspects that the idea that even a highly paid professional athlete is still an employee, and has a responsibility to carry out the duties of an employee, is completely lost on some of them. Entitlement has never seemed greater. Gratitude – for some, not all – seems a curiously absent sentiment.

Back to Dallas. By now, everyone's batted around the first part of the question: To what end was this done? Lites gave the answer in a one-sentence answer: I hope they shove it up my ass. That, in a nutshell, was the rationale. Let's see if they do.

Eventually, the days and weeks of an NHL season will slip past and the boiling controversy of December will soon recede into memory. The professional grind is like that: It's everyday life and what was a raw wound a little over a week ago will soon become just one more footnote over the larger context of a hockey season.

MVP MVP MVP

Like a lot of others in this profession, I generally do a mid-season review of awards candidates, mostly just to prove that lots can change in the final 41 games of the season and that just because a player put up an excellent first half, doesn't mean he can always sustain it. The NHL's most coveted award is the Hart Trophy, which annually goes to the player adjudged most valuable to his own team – a phrasing that constantly trips up voters and fans because there is a nuanced difference between the best player and the most valuable to his own team.

For example, last year, the Oilers' Connor McDavid was the NHL's best player, and he received the Ted Lindsey award from his peers in the NHL players association as a result. But McDavid wasn't even a finalist for the Hart because the Oilers missed the playoffs and the three top vote getters – Taylor Hall of the New Jersey Devils, Nathan MacKinnon of the Colorado Avalanche and Anze Kopitar of the Los Angeles Kings – were all deemed more valuable to their own teams. Hall and MacKinnon because they were the primary catalysts on teams that underwent massive year-over-year improvements.

And so, here we are again today, potentially facing almost exactly the same Hart trophy conundrum. As of Friday morning, the Oilers were four points out of a wild-card spot in the Western Conference, but 10 points out of third place and have about a 35 percent chance of making the postseason. Accordingly, it's distinctly possible that McDavid could go on his usual second-half run, win a third consecutive scoring title and garner only minimal Hart trophy support because his team missed the playoffs.

Hall and Kopitar are not in consideration at this point for the 2019 Hart trophy. MacKinnon is, though the fact that his linemate Mikko Rantanen is also having such an exceptional season means there's a chance they could divide the Colorado vote. Among the players that are doing for their teams this year what Hall and Kopitar did last are the Buffalo Sabres' Jack Eichel; the Calgary Flames' Johnny Gaudreau; and maybe – because of Auston Matthews' injury – even the Maple Leafs' Mitch Marner.

Two other powerhouses – Tampa and Winnipeg – have multiple candidates, though, in Tampa's case, Nikita Kucherov is starting to pull away from linemate Brayden Point; and he may get lots of consideration, especially if the gap continues to widen. With Winnipeg, it's always hard to choose between Mark Scheifele and Blake Wheeler, both of whom drive that team in different ways.

Eichel, meanwhile, has turned Jeff Skinner from a Carolina afterthought into a contender for the Rocket Richard award; and Gaudreau has turned Elias Lindholm from a Carolina afterthought into a Selke trophy candidate.

Calgary sits atop the Western Conference standings at the moment and Buffalo is nicely in the playoff hunt in the East, where it looks as if the top nine teams have separated themselves from the bottom seven. If the Sabres were to get into the playoffs after finishing last in the Atlantic with 62 points last season, would that trump Gaudreau leading the Flames into the playoffs after Calgary's 84-point season a year ago? Hard to say.



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Last year, my vote went to MacKinnon, just because Colorado surged from 48 points to 95, while New Jersey's rise was more modest – 70 points to 97.

A lot will depend on the hype machine, which seems to be influencing voters more now than ever before. That's my prediction for the second half: That if Eichel, Gaudreau, Marner and Kucherov continue to thrive, the push for their candidacies will echo long and loud around the league – a development that could squeeze McDavid out of the Hart conversation again, even if his remarkable play continues.

And if I were voting today, Kucherov would unequivocally be my choice. I don't care if he has a far better supporting cast than some others. Tampa is in a class by itself this year, 12 points clear of second-place Toronto and Calgary and Kucherov is clearly their most important player right now (a staggering 69 points in 41 games).

Sometimes, it's important not to overthink these things.

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The Athletic / NHL Trends: The unstoppable Bolts, the rising Habs, Jets struggling second line and Johnny Gaudreau's dominance

By Dom Luszczyszyn Jan 4, 2019 12

The end of every month is a great time to look back and reflect on the previous month of hockey to see which way teams and players are trending. A one month sample is usually obfuscated by hot and cold streaks, so it's valuable to find ways to separate the signal from the noise. Those at the extreme ends of the spectrum also make for some great stories.

The Athletic has a model we use for projections and probabilities that is updated each day and provides a look at how much has changed under the hood on a daily basis. Our season preview series offered a snapshot of how and why each team was rated the way it was and this is an opportunity to provide further context as the season progresses. It'll hopefully be an interesting look into how the model operates and how much perception changes from month-to-month and it's a question many have asked after seeing the daily probabilities operate.

What you're getting is two articles in one. The first looks at the teams and players who've made the biggest changes from where they were last month. The second is a brief run through of each team with accompanying charts looking at how each player's value has changed over the last month – an appendix of sorts for the rest of the league that wasn't mentioned here for those that want to take a deeper dive into every team or simply curious about their own.

Hottest teams

Tampa Bay Lightning

Last Month Strength: .582

Current Strength: .629

There's no surprise which team is the league's hottest: it's the one that lost just once in December and did so in overtime, thereby earning a point in every game for the month. The Lightning have put a stranglehold on the league's top spot and are projected to win the Presidents' Trophy by 11 points which would be the largest gap since 2015-16. That may even be conservative given they're already 12 points up on the second place Maple Leafs. This time last month I said the Leafs were the team to beat due to the impending return of William Nylander, but that looks just plain wrong now, especially after Tampa Bay's dominant month.

The team looks unstoppable and head into the new year with a staggering 27 percent chance at winning it all at the end of this season, a 14.4 percent increase from where my model had the team last month. The Lightning were strong at 5-on-5 for the month, but not as dominant as you might expect given they earned 96.4 percent of points for the month. Where the team earned their keep was an incredible special teams performance, scoring 14 goals-per-60 on the power play (second place was at 11.7) and allowing just 4.3, good for second in the league. The Lightning were plus-16 for the month and 13 of those goals were on special teams.

That's a big part of why Nikita Kucherov, Steven Stamkos and Brayden Point were the biggest gainers last month on the strength of 10, nine and seven power play points respectively, though the trio was still incredible at evens too. All three played at a 110-plus point pace (with Kucherov at a mind-boggling 176-point pace), something no other team did last month. It's not just those players either. The Lightning are insanely deep with 12 skaters projected to be worth at least one win in value – the most in the league. This might finally be their year – who's going to stop them really?

Montreal Canadiens

Last Month Strength: .453

Current Strength: .486

Shea Weber returned to action on Nov. 27 and from that moment everything changed for Montreal. The Canadiens were already a strong possession team, but Weber's return bumped the team up a notch ranking second by Corsi in December behind only San Jose. It's thanks to a relentless offensive pace the team plays at, firing 70 shot attempts per 60 for the month, nearly five more than the next best team. That epic shot volume was enough to give the team a top five goals rate for the month, doing so with a shooting percentage of just 8.6 percent. Only Pittsburgh was in the top 10 with a shooting percentage south of nine percent.

It's a death by a thousand cuts approach that perfectly encapsulates the way the team is structured up front. Outside the perennially underrated Brendan Gallagher, Montreal is devoid of much star talent (Max Domi's recent scoring surge this season aside), but the team is flush with capable talent throughout the lineup. The Habs can run four lines with talent without much trouble, with eight forwards above one win in value and Andrew Shaw close at 0.99. That's comparable to the forward depth of the team above, minus the elite talent. That might be what ultimately holds the team back from a deep run, but it's becoming difficult to find many holes in the roster from top to bottom.

The only question remaining is if Carey Price can find a return to form because then this team might be really scary. After a rough start, it's starting to look he just might. In October and November Carey Price had an .897 save percentage in 18 games. In December that improved to .916 in 12 games and he earned a shutout in his first game of 2019. After many pegged the Canadiens as an unsalvageable mess before the season started (I recall calling them an 85-point team was deemed far too optimistic at the time ... by Habs fans!) they've become a team to watch out for.

Honourable mentions

Pittsburgh Penguins: Not much has changed under the hood, but the Penguins are finally getting some saves and have vaulted towards the top of the standings, right back to where many expected them. My model now projects them to win the Metro division despite being one point back and with one more game played than Washington.

Vegas Golden Knights: This is one where I'm not sure what the model is seeing. The Golden Knights are surging, going 10-3-3 for the month with a top five Corsi, but only saw a very modest bump in expected win percentage for the month. Weird. Regardless, their playoff chances saw the second biggest increase of the month.

Coldest teams



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Carolina Hurricanes

Last Month Strength: .557

Current Strength: .547

I'm running out of things to say about the enigma that is the Carolina Hurricanes. My model (and likely most models for that matter) still believes they are a strong team, but they look anything but in the standings, dropping to 17-17-5 on the season after a rough December where they went 4-8-1, tied for the league's second-worst record ahead of only Ottawa. The team should not be this bad. Not the way they control play in all areas of the ice. It's not just padding Corsi from bad areas of the ice either. For the month, Carolina had a 54 percent Corsi, a 56 percent scoring chance rate and a 58 percent high danger rate at 5-on-5, none of which mattered due to scoring just 39 percent of the goals.

All that led to a massive drop in playoff chances, the largest of any team, going from 77 percent to 35 percent. The team is a bit of a longshot unless they find a way to really turn things around and it's because good teams usually don't play at an 82-point pace for half a season. It is possible, but unlikely. Since 2005-06, 11 teams have made the playoffs playing at an 82-point pace or below as of Jan. 1:

2005-06 Sharks (16-16-5, finished with 99 points)

2005-06 Devils (17-18-2, finished with 101 points)

2006-07 Lightning (18-19-2, finished with 93 points)

2007-08 Capitals (15-19-5, finished with 94 points)

2007-08 Predators (17-18-2, finished with 91 points)

2008-09 Blue Jackets (16-16-4, finished with 92 points)

2008-09 Blues (14-20-3, finished with 92 points)

2010-11 Sabres (15-18-4, finished with 96 points)

2013-14 Blue Jackets (17-18-4, finished with 93 points)

2013-14 Rangers (19-19-2, finished with 96 points)

2015-16 Ducks (14-15-6, finished with 103 points)

It's possible, but it's probably not happening and it leads to the question of whether this is just bad luck for the Canes or if there's something the current analytics are missing from the equation. Personally, I think it's a little bit of both. As mentioned in 31 Stats, Carolina's shooting percentage at 5-on-5 is currently the worst mark since 2007-08. Furthermore, it's occurring in a year where shooting percentages are higher across the board. It's something that theoretically should regress. Even if the team is the worst shooting team in the league, it shouldn't be to this degree. Then again, it might not be a coincidence that everyone that leaves Carolina soars to new heights offensively and those that come to Carolina struggle. The Canes probably weren't expecting Dougie Hamilton, one of the league's premier offensive defencemen to play at a 25-point pace (!) after a one-point month.

Nothing here adds up, but then again, nothing ever does for the Hurricanes.

Philadelphia Flyers

Last Month Strength: .511

Current Strength: .486

After a surprising return to form in 2017-18 the Flyers had an entirely unsurprising (by Flyers standards) drop back down to earth in 2018-19. I (and many others) had the team pegged as a difference maker in the Metropolitan division and a team on the rise, but it now looks more likely that the team will languish near the bottom instead. Philadelphia started the season with a 74 percent chance at the playoffs and sat at 28 percent on Dec. 1, a low number to be sure, but one with some hope attached to it. That hope is now gone as the team currently sits at just four percent.

Of the top 16 projected teams from the start of the season, the Flyers are the only team with playoff chances south of 20 percent entering 2019 and one of two (Florida) lower than 35. Thirteen teams are above 55 percent. To say the Flyers bombed the first half is an understatement.

Aside from Claude Giroux, who has been his usual excellent self after a return to form last season, the rest of the team's players have been maddeningly inconsistent. Philadelphia is not a team that's deep enough to rely on just a few players going at a time, but that's what they've had to deal with. After a slow start, Sean Couturier is back to playing well, though not to last year's level and Jakub Voracek had a very uncharacteristic awful first two months but seems to have regained some of his form over the last month. Along with Giroux, those three were the only Flyers with an average Game Score above 0.5 for the month as Travis Konecny regressed after a strong start. Wayne Simmonds continues his downward trajectory, James van Riemsdyk struggles at 5-on-5 and the twin young guns on the backend have struggled to replicate last year's magic.

And then there's the team's shaky goaltending, with the Flyers' .883 save percentage ranking dead last in the league for December, something the promising Carter Hart likely won't fix. The team has been without starter Brian Elliott for much of the season, but he likely wouldn't have saved the wreckage either.

Honourable mentions

Arizona Coyotes: With Antti Raanta out for the year it's lights out for the Coyotes who look like they're on their way to another bottom five finish. His absence was a big part of Arizona having the biggest drop last month, falling from 24th to 29th in expected win percentage.

St. Louis Blues: The most overhyped team of the summer went 6-6-1 for the month and haven't looked anything close to what many expected back in September.

To see more charts for how the value of every player on each team has changed over the last month go [here](#).

Hottest players

Johnny Gaudreau, CGY

Last Month GSVA: 3.33 wins

Current GSVA: 4.18 wins

By Game Score only two players were more impactful in December than Gaudreau who rocked a 1.84 average for the month and added a performance worth 3.7 on Wednesday on the strength of his one goal and three assist performance. To put it mildly, the Flames superstar is on fire and my model is finally starting to give him the credit he deserves.

Before the season Gaudreau was often cited as one of the more under-appreciated players by my model and it was hard not to disagree when watching him. Few players are more electrifying with the puck than Gaudreau and he's parlayed that tantalizing skill into a career-best year, carrying the Flames to a very likely top seed in the Pacific division.

To date, Gaudreau has 61 points in 42 games, a 119-point pace that's currently third in the league. It was a fantastic December that put him in the league's upper echelon where he had 26 points in 14 games, a near two-point per-game pace, all while being a dominant 5-on-5 force.

All of that has been enough to propel Gaudreau to a win projection north of four wins, something only seven other players and three other wingers can attest to. Thanks to a ridiculous month where Gaudreau torched opponents on a nightly basis he now has the statistical profile to grade out as a top-10 player, something that's looked obvious on most nights.

Elias Pettersson, VAN

Last Month GSVA: 2.27 wins

Current GSVA: 3.31 wins



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How do you top rookie of the month honours in December after putting up 17 points in 14 games? A hat trick on the first game of the new year of course. That makes for 20 points in his last 15 games for Pettersson (before getting injured Thursday night), arguably the sole reason the Canucks look actually respectable this season. The team is projected for 83 points, a hefty improvement from their past three seasons of futility where they averaged 72 points and never topped 75. The rebuild has been painful, but with Pettersson in the fold, the team has a shining beacon of hope.

In order to be a contender in this league, teams need superstars and Pettersson is entrenching himself as one in his first season with 42 points in 38 games, a 91-point pace that would make Mathew Barzal's terrific rookie season from last year look like child's play. His super December earned him an extra win in value, the largest improvement in the league over the last month.

Sample size is always an issue when it comes to rookies and it makes projections much more volatile, especially for someone scoring on 25 percent of their shots at 5-on-5 (and for someone who doesn't seem to shoot very often). That's likely not something Pettersson can expect to sustain and gives reason for caution with the above projection. It's likely he slows down from his 90-plus point pace as a result, but what is encouraging is that he is starting to drive play to a better degree. He was one of the better Canucks in that department in December, and some growth in that area should mitigate whatever expected regression is coming from his production.

Bottom line, despite the high efficiency, Pettersson still looks like the real deal and a big piece that should fast track Vancouver's rebuild.

Honourable mentions

Nikita Kucherov: Led all players with 30 points in December in just 14 games, an incredible feat accomplished for the first time since Jaromir Jagr in 2001. To add insult to injury, he had a four-point night on Thursday giving him 17 in his last five games. After briefly slipping, Kucherov is back to being considered a top three player according to my model. The only reason he's an "honourable mention" is that it's harder to rise when you're already so high. Kucherov has done it anyways.

Kevin Hayes: Raise your hand if you knew Hayes had 16 points in 12 games last month and led all Rangers in Corsi (at just under 50 percent mind you). Me neither. Contract years do funny things to players.

Coldest players

Patrik Laine, WPG

Last Month GSVA: 3.16 wins

Current GSVA: 2.67 wins

Kyle Connor, WPG

Last Month GSVA: 2.21 wins

Current GSVA: 1.73 wins

With an 11-4-0 record for the month, Winnipeg was the third hottest team in the standings for the month, but it was no thanks to these two, the pillars manning the wings of the team's second line.

After an explosive November, Laine cooled down considerably with just three goals in 15 games, though he did earn four assists, more than doubling his season total to date. Connor also scored three goals, but just had a single assist for the month. Among Jets forwards, his four points were ahead of only Mason Appleton for the month.

That hurts and it's a direct cause of rarely having the puck. When Laine and Connor were off the ice in December the Jets were their naturally dominant self at 5-on-5, outscoring the opposition 22-14 (61 percent) and out-shooting them 496-391 (56 percent). With them on the ice things took a turn for the worse as the team was outscored 8-4 (33 percent) and outshot 174-126 (42 percent). Laine had the league's worst relative Corsi for the month while Connor was 14th.

It's nice when those two are scoring, but when they're not, they become complete non-factors at best and liabilities at worst as they showed in December. That second line is a big problem for Winnipeg that needs to turn around soon.

Jonathan Marchessault, VGK

Last Month GSVA: 3.12 wins

Current GSVA: 2.82 wins

After last year's magical season for Vegas and its best player, many in the analytics community used it as confirmation of their beliefs of the skill of an unfairly maligned player – cast aside by a vindictive regime. Marchessault flashed superstar potential in a season where he played at a near point-per-game pace (at just 17:30 per night) while driving play on one of the league's best lines.

That was expected to continue this season, but it seems like the clock has struck midnight on Marchessault who has dropped to just a 57-point pace despite an ice-time increase to 19:02 this season and a bump in power play time. It's regression to the mean after a year when his on-ice shooting percentage was 10.7 percent, but to be fair to Marchessault he probably doesn't deserve his current 1.29 points-per-60 at 5-on-5. His own shooting percentage is at just 5.5 percent and his individual points percentage is just 54 percent, both of which are far off from his usual career marks.

I wouldn't be too concerned with his scoring, these things tend to ebb-and-flow throughout the season (and his resurgence could give Vegas an extra gear in the second half), but his play-driving the last month is a bit concerning. The claim to fame for last year's vaunted first line was their ability to dominate other top lines with much more name-brand value, specifically in the playoffs. Of the 19 regulars that played last month, just five had a below average shot attempt ratio. Marchessault was uncharacteristically one of them.

Honourable mentions

William Nylander, Jeff Carter, Casey Mittelstadt: The first, second, and seventh biggest drops in value belonged to these three who lost roughly half a win each. All three were mentioned in Wednesday's 31 Stats so I figured I'd rather not double dip.

Vladimir Tarasenko:

In 13 games in December Tarasenko had just two goals. That's it! He's on pace for a 24-24 season which would be the worst season of his career since his rookie season.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124550 Websites

The Athletic / DGB Grab Bag: An idea to save the All-Star game, Jim Lites' bleeping tirade and the story of the Saska-Who Blues

By Sean McIndoe Jan 4, 2019 98

Outrage of the week

The issue: Alexander Ovechkin has decided to skip the All-Star game despite being voted in as the Metro captain, opting instead to take advantage of the break and bye week to rest up for the stretch run.

The outrage: This is fine and anyone who thinks the All-Star game should actually have, you know, all the stars is just a naïve idiot.

Is it justified: This was yet another week of that fun NHL fan mainstay, "Getting mad at people for getting mad at something nobody's actually all



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that mad at.” Ovechkin’s announcement was only a few minutes old when the backlash to the backlash had already begun, and a consensus quickly formed that of course star players like Ovechkin shouldn’t be expected to go to the All-Star game, and anyone who thinks otherwise is hopelessly lame.

And there’s a lot of truth to that. The basic case being made is that the All-Star game sucks (which it does) and that Ovechkin has already been to seven of them (which he has), so he’s earned the right to skip out on the event and go rest up for another Cup run. It’s hard to argue with any of that. Is it selfish of him to put his own rest ahead of the good of the league? Maybe, but let’s be honest – if this was Sidney Crosby or Steven Stamkos or John Tavares, the narrative would be about the good Canadian boy who cares more about Cup rings than personal glory. Fair’s fair. Ovechkin’s decision makes plenty of sense.

But you can believe all of that while also acknowledging that this isn’t good for the NHL. The All-Star game might be awful, and maybe we’d all be better off just scrapping it entirely. But we haven’t, and it’s still a big deal to younger fans and corporate sponsors. If we’re going to have an All-Star game, it’s not unreasonable to want it to include the best players possible.

Ovechkin is arguably the league’s most interesting star, but he’s still just one guy, so his absence doesn’t ruin the whole weekend. But if this starts a trend, we’re in trouble. What happens if next year, Crosby and Stamkos and Connor McDavid and Auston Matthews and whoever else all decide that resting up for the Cup is more important than floating around the ice in a 3-on-3 game they don’t care about? We already know that Ovechkin isn’t the only star who didn’t want to go to this year’s game. This could become a trend.

If it does, it won’t be anything all that new. We’ve had players skip out on the game for years, including Crosby (for various reasons). The league tried to address the issue by instituting a mandatory one-game suspension for any All-Star who doesn’t show up. But Ovechkin and the Capitals seem to be fine with that; other teams have been too. It feels like we may be close to a tipping point here, one where going to the All-Star game starts getting perceived as a selfish choice while taking the time off is the team-first move. And if so, that’s not good for hockey fans.

Luckily, I think there’s a simple enough solution. The league could do something similar to what TSN’s Ian Mendes is suggesting here:

I THINK PLAYERS WHO HAVE APPEARED IN 5+ ALL-STAR GAMES SHOULD GET A ONE-TIME EXEMPTION TO MISS AN ALL-STAR GAME WITHOUT ANY PENALTIES TO THE PLAYER OR HIS TEAM.
[HTTPS://T.CO/LMNRBG6XNG](https://t.co/LMNRBG6XNG)

&M DASH; IAN MENDES (@IAN_MENDES) JANUARY 2, 2019

You could tweak that – maybe five is the wrong number, or you want to work in some sort of age consideration. Personally, I could live with players earning one free pass for every three all-star appearances, but the exact details aren’t important. The key is that the league acknowledge that the All-Star game is at least a minor burden on players and offer them an olive branch of sorts.

Would it work? Maybe not – it’s possible players would continue to take the suspension and skip the game anyway. But I’m not convinced that would happen. If you give players a chance to earn the weekend off, the key word becomes “earn.” Hockey players respond to that word. They hear it all the time. And it shifts the thinking on All-Star participation. You’d rather rest up at home instead of helping the league promote itself? Ovechkin and Crosby have earned that right. Matthews and Mark Scheifele and David Pastrnak and Nathan MacKinnon or whoever? Not yet. Players would be reluctant to be perceived as jumping the line.

If you look at this year’s rosters, it’s already mostly younger guys – only 10 out of 40 players are on their fourth trip or more – so the league wouldn’t be losing as much star power as you might think. And more importantly, it nips the problem in the bud by pre-emptively changing the conversation, rather than waiting for the situation to get away from us.

If the All-Star game is worth doing at all then it’s worth doing well, or at least as well as possible. That doesn’t mean it has to be mandatory and it should be OK for players to occasionally skip the weekend and rest up. Just make that choice something that they earn, rather than one that becomes a default setting.

The week’s three stars of comedy

The third star: This leprechaun eating it on national television – I don’t know who he is, but he can’t skate backwards so I’m assuming he’s a second-pairing NHL defenseman from the 1980s.

LEPRECHAUN DOWN! 🍀🍀 PIC.TWITTER.COM/F5P3M8RTP0

&M DASH; SPORTSNET (@SPORTSNET) JANUARY 1, 2019

The second star: Brad Marchand – You don’t have to like him, but he at least appears to have achieved self-awareness.

ASKED BRAD MARCHAND WHAT EMOJI HE WOULD PUT ON HIS STICK.

“I WOULD NEVER PUT AN EMOJI ON MY STICK. I HAVE WAY MORE SELF RESPECT THAN THAT. (PAUSE) BUT I’LL LICK A GUY.”

&M DASH; MATT PORTER (@MATTPORTS) DECEMBER 30, 2018

The first star: The Flyers – Modern defensive zone systems are so confusing.

FLYERS HOCKEY. PIC.TWITTER.COM/YJPKUPRNR

&M DASH; TIM RIDAY (@TIMRIDAY) JANUARY 2, 2019

As always when we play the screen cap game, you’re welcome to try to figure out how this happened on your own. Once you’ve worked through your best guess, you can find the answer here.

Hall of Fame voting results: Last week’s run-off for the final Hall of Fame spot was a surprisingly competitive three-way race, but in the end Joe Thornton pulled away from Ryan Reaves and Patrik Laine to earn induction. I think it’s pretty clear that the voters made the right call.

Welcome to the class of 2019, Jumbo Joe. Just, uh, be careful how you celebrate.

Be It Resolved

The biggest story of the last week was Dallas Stars CEO Jim Lites, who went bleeping ape-bleep on Jamie Benn and Tyler Seguin in an epic rant that had the entire hockey world talking. The NHLPA weighed in. Gary Bettman had to address it in his Winter Classic interviews, and it largely overshadowed the announcement of Dallas hosting the 2020 game. Just about everyone agrees that Lites went too far, at least in style if not in substance.

But where others see controversy, I see opportunity. So be it resolved: As penance for his meltdown, Lites now has to record expletive-laden evaluations for hockey fans’ fantasy teams.

Think about it. The league has embraced gambling, in part because of the potential for new revenue streams. Well, here’s one for you. Seriously, how much would you pay for the catharsis of hearing Jim Lites rip into your underachieving roster? Or better yet, how much could you collect from the rest of the office pool to get a recording of Lites tearing apart the roster of that one annoying guy who spams everyone with terrible trade offers? It could be part of the league prize structure. First place gets the money; last place has to listen to Lites drop f-bombs about all their picks until they cry.

Would Lites want to do it? Maybe not, but considering that 90 percent of terrible fantasy hockey rosters these days already have Benn or Seguin on them, he probably wouldn’t be hard to convince. And if he doesn’t like it, well, as a wise man once said: wah-wah.

The league is sitting on a goldmine here. Let’s make it bleeping happen.



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Obscure former player of the week

Elias Pettersson had a hat trick this week, and he capped it off in overtime. That led to the NHL's PR team tweeting out this delightfully weird stat featuring several players you'd recognize from recent history, plus one more:

PETTERSSON BECAME THE SEVENTH NHL ROOKIE, SINCE REGULAR-SEASON OVERTIME WAS REINTRODUCED IN 1983-84, TO SCORE A HAT TRICK THAT INCLUDED AN OVERTIME GOAL. #NHLSTATS #VANVSOTT PIC.TWITTER.COM/FCD3ZFJ21Z

&MDASH; NHL PUBLIC RELATIONS (@PR_NHL) JANUARY 3, 2019

Readers know that I love me a good Stat Spoiler. So today, let's bestow obscure player honors on Ken Hodge Jr.

Hodge was, as you may have guessed, the son of Bruins legend and two-time first-team all-star Ken Hodge. He put up decent numbers in prep school and was drafted by the North Stars in the third round of the 1984 draft, going five picks ahead of Patrick Roy. He went on to a decent three-year career at Boston College, then began his pro career with the IHL's Kalamazoo Wings. He played a few games for the Stars during the 1988-89 season, scoring once, but by this point was viewed as more of a tweener than a legitimate NHL prospect. Late in the 1990 offseason, the North Stars flipped him to Boston for a fourth-round pick.

That move was largely seen as the Bruins acquiring a marketable name for their AHL team, but Hodge Jr. won a spot on the Bruins roster out of camp and eventually earned regular playing time. He didn't do much in the season's first half and by late-January was sitting with just seven goals through 41 games. That's when he found himself playing on a line with Cam Neely and Bobby Carpenter, and he quickly heated up, scoring four times in his next three games and then posting a pair of hat tricks in February – the overtime one referenced above, plus another a few weeks later.

He cooled off a bit after that, but only a bit, and finished the season by scoring twice in the final game to reach the 30-goal mark as a rookie. That was enough to earn him a third-place finish in Calder voting, ahead of future Hall of Famers Rob Blake, Mats Sundin and Jaromir Jagr.

That rookie year is pretty much the end of Hodge Jr.'s NHL story. He followed it up with a disappointing six-goal season in 1991-92, then was traded to the expansion Lightning for tough guy Darrin Kimble. (Tampa's GM was Phil Esposito, who'd been his dad's linemate in Boston and New York.) He only appeared in 25 games in Tampa, scoring twice, and never made it back to the NHL. He'd bounce around the minors and eventually head to Europe before retiring in 1998.

By the way, while Hodge Jr. never got the chance to do much with the North Stars, that trade with the Bruins ended up having an impact. Minnesota used that fourth-round pick on future Selke winner Jere Lehtinen.

Classic YouTube clip breakdown

This week, the NHL made it official by confirming Jeremy Rutherford's report that the 2020 All-Star game will be in St. Louis. They also announced that this year's Heritage Classic will be moving to Saskatchewan.

If you go back far enough into NHL history, those two facts become related.

We're headed back to the 1983 offseason today, for a look back at a story that a surprising number of modern fans don't know about. Spoiler alert: It all eventually ends well for the Blues. But it's going to get weird along the way. Dog food will be prominently involved. Don't say you weren't warned.

We start off in May, with a shot of a sign that tells us we're at the NHL board of governors meeting. You know that kid in your grade 2 class who insisted on dotting their i's even when they were writing in all-caps? That kid apparently worked for the NHL.

Three very confusing things happen in the next few seconds. First, we get a look at a hockey arena called the Saskatchewan Coliseum that doesn't exist and also looks a lot like somebody took one of your mom's old casserole dishes and flipped it upside down on the floor surrounded by some lego. Next, we hear a reference to Ralston Purina, who you may know as the dog food company. And finally, we hear our reporter tell us that the NHL board of governors has voted to turn down a proposal. That's right – something has happened that caused even the early 1980s NHL to say "Yeah, that's a really bad idea, we're not doing it." The mind boggles.

The idea that the league just shot down: Moving the St. Louis Blues to Saskatoon. I'll pause here, because if you're American you may not know what "Saskatoon" is. And if you're Canadian, you're trying to figure out how Saskatoon was ever in the running for an NHL team. Even by Canadian standards, Saskatoon is hardly a booming metropolis, and the idea of a major league franchise settling there seems odd, to say the least. And it was odd. Very odd.

(Also, if you read my book on the weird history of the NHL, you already know all of this. Is it fun being smarter than all your hockey fan friends? I bet it's fun.)

Our news clips jump ahead to June. The board of governors are meeting again, this time to deal with a new problem: That lady who coughs right as we're getting our dramatic door-closing shot. Oh, and also the fact that the Blues may be about to cease to exist. That seems important too.

We get more talk about Ralston Purina, and yes, that would indeed be the dog food company. For a period of time in the late 1970s and early '80s, they were also the company that owned the Blues, although there's some debate over just how much they actually ever wanted to do that. They were a St. Louis-based company and were talked into buying the team in 1977 when the franchise's future was in doubt. But by 1983 they wanted out of the hockey business and they weren't going to be super-picky about how that happened.

So here's the situation: Ralston Purina wants to sell the team and the only buyer wants to put the team in Saskatoon. It's clear to everyone that that won't work, so the NHL has said no to the sale. Ralston Purina's response is basically, "fine, then the team doesn't exist anymore, because we're out."

We get a clip of NHL president John Ziegler, who in an unexpected twist has chosen to respond to a league crisis by actually being around. He quite reasonably points out that Ralston Purina can't actually do that – there's nothing in the rulebook that says a team can just decide to up and go out of business without league approval, as our reporter goes on to explain in detail.

The problem is that Ralston Purina doesn't care and this is where things get especially strange. It's one day before the entry draft and the Blues insist they aren't sending anyone. They don't have much to send; most of the front office has already been laid off or found new jobs. But that's OK, because Ziegler has a plan: He'll just set the Blues to auto-draft in Yahoo and then laugh when they pick a dozen injured players and six goalies.

Wait, no, I'm being told that he actually says they'll be out of luck. If the Blues decline to attend the draft, they just won't pick anyone.

And here's the thing: That's what happened. The Blues skipped an entire draft, one that saw players like Steve Yzerman, Dominik Hasek and Cam Neely up for grabs. They just no-showed, as is made clear by an eerily silent shot of their empty draft table. I'm assuming our clip goes quiet here because they couldn't clear the rights to the song that was written about the Blues' 1983 draft.

We skip ahead again, this time to July, for the happy ending. Harry Ornest and a group of investors have stepped up to buy the team and keep them in St. Louis. He just needs league approval, which he ends up getting; the Blues were saved just days before a league deadline that would have seen them fold.



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"I haven't received one bit of discouragement." Dude, you just bought the St. Louis Blues. Trust me, it's coming.

And after some delightful 1983 game footage, that's it for our clip. And that's it for the story of the Blues, the dog food company, the NHL draft no-show and the tiny Canadian city that briefly thought it was getting an NHL team.

To this day, diehard hockey fans in St. Louis still have their "Where the hell is Sask-a-Who?" bumper stickers. No really – they do.

The Athletic LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124551 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs marvel at 'electrifying' Canucks rookie Elias Pettersson

Chris Johnston | @reporterchris January 4, 2019, 4:34 PM

TORONTO — The growing legend of Elias Pettersson reached the centre of the hockey universe even before the outrageously talented Vancouver Canucks rookie did.

We jest here, of course, but it's clear the 20-year-old Swede had already piqued a considerable amount of interest inside the Toronto dressing room before the first Maple Leafs-Canucks game this season — a game he's not even going to be able to play in because of injury.

"He's been pretty electrifying," said John Tavares, noting that he'll usually stay up to watch a couple periods of the late games on nights the Leafs play. "He's fun to watch and obviously, a tremendous talent. I think he's going to be a pretty special player."

Pettersson is proof that the spotlight is bound to find you when you start your NHL career with an array of eye-popping plays and 22 goals in 38 games, late start times and East Coast bias be damned.

William Nylander called his first half season "amazing." Auston Matthews labelled him "fun to watch." Tavares marveled at how calmly Pettersson is able to control the play in his first year of small-ice hockey, an asset that belies his years and experience level.

"I think it's just his overall awareness. He just knows where to be and has a good sense of where everyone is on the ice with his playmaking," said Tavares. "When he gets [the puck] he's just very smooth. You can just see how controlled, how calm he is with it. He's got a really good shot, too, especially for a guy that's smaller framed and he's younger. He's still probably going to mature a bit.

"His ability to kind of be a dual threat like that is very dangerous."

It's a shame, really, that Pettersson is going to have to watch Saturday's date at Scotiabank Arena from the press box. His right knee twisted awkwardly after getting tangled up with Montreal's Jesperi Kotkaniemi on Thursday night, forcing him to undergo an MRI here on Friday.

No timetable has been provided for his absence.

That uncertainty didn't keep Leafs coach Mike Babcock from zeroing in on Pettersson during his pre-scout of the Canucks, marveling at the hat trick performance the rookie had in Ottawa on Wednesday night.

"I mean he was a dominant, dominant, dominant player," said Babcock. "He had the puck all the time, I don't know why. Some of those guys — you ask Mitch [Marner] why he has the puck all the time, I don't know, they're smarter than everybody."

Pettersson was a prospect the Leafs scouts were very high on in advance of the 2017 draft, prompting Babcock to review tape of his games with Timrå IK in the second-tier Allsvenskan that season.

Toronto owned the 17th pick and didn't make a trade to move up the draft board in Chicago. The Canucks landed Pettersson at No. 5 — a selection that already looks like a steal.

"You can say lots of things about him. He doesn't look like he's that [big or] strong, he just has the puck the whole time and everybody keeps backing off so he has space," said Babcock. "He can shoot and he can pass it and he sees it.

"He looks like a real player to me."

Pettersson has both the boxcar stats and fancy stats to back up the growing hype. He's eighth in 5-on-5 goals per 60 at 1.54 — trailing Tavares (1.89), Jeff Skinner (1.84), Alex Ovechkin (1.8), Matthews (1.61) and a couple others.

He's 11th league-wide in even-strength points per 60 and has a runaway lead in the rookie scoring race, outpacing Ottawa's Colin White 42-25.

But there is also a certain unquantifiable genius to the way he moves around the ice and thinks the game that's helped instantly elevate him to star status.

The only Leafs player who has experienced it firsthand is fourth-liner Par Lindholm, who spent the past four seasons with Skellefteå AIK and was swept in the Swedish league final by Pettersson's Växjö HC team last spring.

Pettersson was named playoff MVP after also earning the regular-season MVP award during his only season in the SHL. After witnessing that, Lindholm expected him to make an immediate impact in North America.

"I think I was more surprised when he did well in the SHL," said Lindholm. "He was a rookie there — like same story — people think he's too small, too weak. But he's got great vision. I was kind of surprised there.

"When he could make it in the Swedish elite league against all players and heavy players it wasn't a surprise he'd make it here. Like the start he's had [with Vancouver] is kind of over the top, I think. I wouldn't have expected that, but I knew he would be good."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 01.05.2019

1124552 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Frederik Andersen: 'Rest can be a blessing in disguise'

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjukebox January 4, 2019, 1:59 PM

TORONTO — Michael Hutchinson resembled a \$50 rent-a-goalie swinging by to pocket a wad of beer money, get a healthy sweat, and help out your friendly neighbourhood men's league Thursday afternoon at Scotiabank Arena.

Sporting Florida Panthers—coloured pads and a plain white mask with a couple of silver-dollar-sized Maple Leafs decals slapped above the ears, Toronto's newest professional hockey player didn't quite look the part as he made his official Leafs debut, a hardworking but disappointing 30-save, 4-3 loss to the Minnesota Wild.

With blue-and-white pads now en route and Montreal designer Dave Leroux working away on a fresh paint job for his next mask, Hutchinson has finally had a moment to exhale, answer a pile of encouraging text



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messages, and wrap his brain around being the starting goaltender for his favourite hockey club.

Yes, Frederik Andersen (groin) participated in his first full practice with Toronto since Dec. 27, but No. 2 Garret Sparks has officially been sidelined with a concussion.

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Zoom out, and the feel-good Hutchinson tale — finding opportunity inside his sixth different sweater in less than two seasons — reads as a sidebar to the grander goaltending concern in Leafland: How ready is Freddy?

Toronto Maple Leafs goaltender Michael Hutchinson takes a drink as Minnesota Wild players celebrate a goal. (Frank Gunn/CP)

Since his arrival in Toronto in 2016, no NHL goalie has started more games, faced more shots or made more saves than Andersen, who is feeling the benefits of what will now be 16 days (minimum) of mid-season rest and was encouraged by Friday's return to the team skate.

"It could be a reset. I've been working through some pain, too. That plays with your mental side a bit. You maybe don't want to go into some specific movements and that could hinder your game and make your game a little bit slower. So it's important to be taking care of that stuff right away," Andersen explained.

"You never know. Sometimes rest can be a blessing in disguise."

Andersen wants to clarify that his groin injury was not the result of a specific incident but rather a lingering issue throughout December, one that needed more time to heal after Christmas.

He also thinks the narrative of his workload being too heavy is "definitely" getting overblown.

"People have been missing a lot of context in that discussion about how many games you're playing," Andersen said. "It's all about between the games and how much rest you're getting, so that's something you gotta take into consideration."

Andersen's brilliant November save percentage of .942 slipped to .903 in December as he battled through his ache.

It was time, he and the organization's sports science department figured, to quit beating around the bush and get the Leafs' No. 1 goalie as close to 100 per cent as possible for what they believe could be a long run into spring.

Consecutive four-goals-against losses? The Sparks concussion? Those cannot be reasons to accelerate a hasty return to action.

"You can't worry too much about other stuff like that. You have to make sure you do your rehab the right way and eventually you'll be fine," Andersen said.

"Push a little too hard and you might make it worse eventually later on. You gotta be smart about it. You can't let that stuff get in your emotions and affect you like that."

Admitting his goaltending wasn't where it needed to be against the Islanders and Wild, head coach Mike Babcock has his sights affixed on the NHL-leading Lightning, knowing full well where the path to a Stanley Cup goes through.

"Tampa had their guy [Andrei Vasilevskiy] out for a long time and didn't miss a beat [with backup Louis Domingue going 15-4], so that's what we gotta do. If you look at our goaltending in the two games since Christmas, I just don't think we've been as good as we're capable of being. We can be better," Babcock said.

Immediately, that task immediately rests with Hutchinson, a Barrie, Ont., native who savoured the chance to go out for dinner with his parents after his Leafs debut.

"It was cool to take a step back and really appreciate the moment I was able to get," Hutchinson said.

"But now it makes you hungry for more. I'm looking forward to getting my first win and helping this team out as best I can."

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Frederik Andersen: 'Rest can be a blessing in disguise'

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjukebox January 4, 2019, 1:59 PM

TORONTO — Michael Hutchinson resembled a \$50 rent-a-goalie swinging by to pocket a wad of beer money, get a healthy sweat, and help out your friendly neighbourhood men's league Thursday afternoon at Scotiabank Arena.

Sporting Florida Panthers—coloured pads and a plain white mask with a couple of silver-dollar-sized Maple Leafs decals slapped above the ears, Toronto's newest professional hockey player didn't quite look the part as he made his official Leafs debut, a hardworking but disappointing 30-save, 4-3 loss to the Minnesota Wild.

With blue-and-white pads now en route and Montreal designer Dave Leroux working away on a fresh paint job for his next mask, Hutchinson has finally had a moment to exhale, answer a pile of encouraging text messages, and wrap his brain around being the starting goaltender for his favourite hockey club.

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Sportsnet.ca / Calgary Flames first half report: Best team since '89 Stanley Cup champs?

Eric Francis | @EricFrancis January 4, 2019, 3:39 PM

CALGARY – Only one team in Flames history has had a better start than the one this year's squad has posted.

The year was 1989, and that team won Calgary's only Stanley Cup.

Pretty good company.

There's plenty of promise in terms of how Bill Peters' team will follow up its 25-12-4 start given the solid footing on which it was built.

On the shoulders of a top line that ranks amongst the league's very best, a Norris Trophy frontrunner and an emerging goaltender who has taken the league by storm, the Calgary Flames hit the halfway point of the season tops in the Western Conference.

They are this year's Winnipeg Jets — a team they've beaten twice.

Few teams can keep up with the Flames' scoring prowess, which has seen them jump from 26th last year to third in the NHL.

Only one team (Tampa) has a better goal differential, which is stunning given the Flames turned their season around (and maybe their franchise) following a 9-1 loss at home to the Penguins.

A breakdown of how a city in deep economic depression can feel so good about its team:

THE GOOD: WHAT'S NOT TO LIKE?

David Rittich has given the team world-class goaltending and Johnny Gaudreau has jumped to another level alongside Sean Monahan and Elias Lindholm, who are also having career years.

Norris Trophy frontrunner Mark Giordano has helped rekindle T.J. Brodie's game, and the conference-leading Flames feel no deficit is insurmountable.

Their power play is vastly improved, their penalty killing unit leads the league with 13 goals, their newfound depth is significant and of all the incredible steps forward various players have taken, no skaters have surged ahead more than Matthew Tkachuk who sits 17th in NHL scoring.

So many things are going Calgary's way these days.

A weekly deep dive into the biggest hockey news in the world with hosts Elliotte Friedman and Jeff Marek. New episodes every Thursday.

THE BAD: AN UNDERPERFORMING UFA AND AN AGEING GOALIE

James Neal has four goals, four assists and a team-low minus-12 to show for the five-year, \$28.75 million deal he signed in the summer. He's been a fixture on the second power play unit and the third line, where he's played with more combinations than a safe-cracker.

Yet, nothing seems to help the man who is sporting a 4.5 shooting percentage and no momentum or bite to his game.

Mike Smith has lost the starting job to Rittich and is now trying to find a way to regain confidence and form as a backup.

A recent 6-0 stretch helped improve his stats, but his 3.09 GAA and .886 save percentage demonstrate how bad his start was while compiling a 12-9-1 record.

Optimists still cling to Neal's track record, which suggests he'll eventually turn things around. Smith's second half could play a big role in how the Flames fare.

TRADE DEADLINE LOOKAHEAD

After decades of hoping simply to challenge for a playoff spot the Flames are now certainly Stanley Cup contenders. GM Brad Treliving will be a buyer on or before Feb. 25 as he looks to add even more depth to a team with as much high-end talent as almost any in the league.

In play:



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Third-pair defenceman: The uncertain status of rookie Juuso Valimäki's high ankle sprain has many figuring the Flames will be in the market for a depth defenceman, particularly on the left side. Think rental.

Michael Frolik: The veteran's agent put him in the trade conversation following a tweet suggesting the coach was trying to run the Czech winger out of town.

Many people in Calgary have been reaching out asking why Michael Frolik is a healthy scratch. Keeping one of the teams most efficient and versatile forwards in the stands marginalizes and devalues a great team player. Head coach's attempt to run a good player out of town?

— Allan Walsh (@walsha) December 30, 2018

That said, his versatility and experience could come in handy for a relatively inexperienced playoff bunch.

Given the newfound depth that has turned Frolik into an 11-minute a night utility player perhaps the team would see merit in relieving itself of the \$4.3 million cap hit attached to Frolik's final year next season. He's slated to make \$3 million in salary next season.

MOST IMPORTANT STORYLINES OF THE SECOND HALF

Can these guys keep it up? The Flames had a solid first-half last year as well, but collapsed in the second half after Smith and several others went down with injury.

Is Rittich for real? Can Gaudreau and his line continue to be amongst the league's most potent?

Can the team with a league-leading seven third period comeback wins continue to defy the odds with late heroics?

Can one of the league's healthiest teams remain that way? And if so, can this team continue its success in the playoffs?

Oh sure, fans will be watching the arena storyline closely as city council and the club continue to work quietly behind the scenes on a building to replace the aging Saddledome. But the focal point in a struggling city like Calgary is now on a group of local heroes people are praying can continue to give the city something to cheer about.

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Sportsnet.ca / Truth By Numbers: Is Johnny Gaudreau becoming more of a sniper?

Andrew Berkshire January 4, 2019, 11:53 AM

As we get ready for the second half of the NHL season, Andrew Berkshire looks into the recent hot streak by Calgary's Johnny Gaudreau who is well on his way to a career high in goals. But has anything changed significantly in the way he's been playing that suggests his overall game is taking another step forward?

Then, Berkshire answers a question about Vladimir Tarasenko's ongoing goal scoring troubles and if this is a factor of decline, bad luck, or something else.

Finally, surprise surprise, Erik Karlsson is getting a pile of points again.

Ryan Dixon and Rory Boylen go deep on pucks with a mix of facts and fun, leaning on a varied group of hockey voices to give their take on the country's most beloved game.

SPOTLIGHT PERFORMANCE

Johnny Gaudreau has 32 points in 16 games since Dec. 1, which is more than he had in all of October and November combined. Maybe he really likes Christmas music? Whatever the case, Johnny Hockey has recently torn the hockey world to shreds.

That onslaught of offence is a bit much for anyone not named Connor McDavid to sustain, but Gaudreau has been one of the NHL's best offensive players for years now. If you go back to 2015 and include this season, only McDavid, Patrick Kane, Nikita Kucherov, Sidney Crosby and Blake Wheeler have more than Gaudreau's 284 points.

Since 2015-16, Gaudreau has finished 13th, 21st, and 10th in scoring chance generating plays per minute and he's one of the league's best transition players as well, so I guess the question is whether he's taken yet another step forward over this hot streak, or if it's more of a random burst for a crazy-talented player whose baseline is just over a point per game.

During this hot streak, Gaudreau's involvement in creating scoring chances for his team has actually gone down slightly, which can happen sometimes. Part of the reason may be that fewer of his scoring chances are being saved, so there are fewer follow up opportunities before he gets off the ice.

That's speculation on my part, but it would make sense when you look at the vast improvement in Gaudreau's own shooting over this stretch. He's seen a 305 per cent increase in high danger chances on a per minute basis, and a 160 per cent increase to his shot attempt numbers from the slot. To put it simply, Gaudreau is shooting significantly more often during his hot streak, and almost all of these extra shots he's taking are from the most dangerous area of the ice, which is why he's scored 13 times in 16 games.

The natural result of Gaudreau shooting more is that his playmaking has suffered a bit, but the most important component to his playmaking — the ability to make passes into the slot — hasn't really changed much.

He is making slightly fewer successful slot passes per minute, but context here is important: he's gone from making more of these than anyone in the NHL, to making more than anyone except Sidney Crosby. That's not bad company.

Obviously Gaudreau isn't going to continue scoring two points per game forever, but this step up in shooting could lead to a career high in goals.

THE QUESTION

After taking a break over the holidays, Steve Dangle and I got back together to figure out a question for this week, and we settled on one that I'm sure is of interest to fans of the St. Louis Blues, and their possible trade partners. Steve asks...

"What is Vladimir Tarasenko doing differently this year, and why isn't he scoring?"

On pace for just 24 goals after hitting at least 30 in each of the previous four seasons and averaging 38 goals per 82 games in his career, Tarasenko is on his worst scoring pace since he was a rookie in 2012-13.

Interestingly, he's already equaled his power play production from last season in terms of goal scoring and is on pace for a career high there, so the problem is exclusively at even strength.

From 2014-15 to the end of last season, the only player in the NHL who scored more than Tarasenko's 149 goals was Alex Ovechkin and no one scored more even strength goals than the Blues sniper. Tarasenko is 27 years old, which seems a little early to be in a steep decline, so let's look into what's going wrong for him this year.

Looking at Tarasenko every year for the positional rankings published on Sportsnet in September, I've had the chance to watch lots of video on him. I've noticed the major keys to his scoring are shot location, shot volume and beating players with dekes to get goalies moving and changing the angle of his shot right before release. He's brilliant at it, so we'll focus on what has made him such a fantastic scorer in the past.



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Probably not what you expected, but by every way we measure goal scoring likelihood, Tarasenko is doing all the right things this year. He's shooting from closer to the net, more often from the slot, he's deking more, failing on those dekes less often, and receiving passes in the slot with greater regularity.

None of that jives with his shooting percentage dipping from nearly 14 per cent the past four years, to 10.8 per cent last year, and now a career low of just eight per cent this year.

The only area where Tarasenko has seen his performance dip is in his shots from the perimeter, where he's seeing about half as many opportunities as usual. Those shots have about a four per cent chance of going in for an average player, and just 11 of Tarasenko's 57 even strength goals have come from outside the slot the past two seasons combined — and four of those were only a hair outside the slot. Nearly 53 per cent of his shot attempts the past two seasons came from the perimeter, though only 19.3 per cent of his goals came from there. Because of that, I'm not buying into the idea fewer perimeter shots has depressed his goal scoring in some way.

The Blues and Tarasenko are clearly under some sort of dark cloud of bad fortune this season, but if St. Louis does panic and decide to trade him, whichever team gets him can expect the vintage version.

This struggle can't last forever.

BUY OR SELL

- In the first edition of this column, Steve asked if Erik Karlsson was playing poorly and I answered with an emphatic no — his underlying numbers were great and the surface stats would turn around. Lo and behold, Karlsson still isn't scoring goals, but he's up to seventh in defence scoring and since November 10, he leads all blueliners in points with 26 in 23 games. By the end of the season his name will be among the Norris candidates, as always.
- Karlsson may not get back to his prime when he was a lock to shoot around seven per cent, but 2.2 per cent this year is absurd. Even if his shooting has taken a hit after a few injuries, scoring on five per cent of his shots this year would net him an extra four goals and have him on pace for 76 points. And he'd still be getting unlucky compared to his career average.
- Speaking of defencemen who are playing great and not getting enough recognition, Jeff Petry has arguably been the best player on the Montreal Canadiens this year and last, admirably eating up Shea Weber's minutes for a year, and now thriving in a second pairing role. He leads the team in scoring since Weber returned to the lineup, tied with Phillip Danault.
- At this point last season, only five players were on pace for 100-point seasons, and one of them was Josh Bailey, who went on to get just 21 points in the second half. This season, 15 players are on pace to hit 100. How many will actually get there is anyone's guess, but I can't be the only one loving the NHL's new normal of goal scoring.

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Sportsnet.ca / Ottawa Senators first half report: Reality hits a rebuilding team

Wayne Scanlan January 4, 2019, 1:44 PM

There was a time, not so long ago, when the Senators were flirting with mediocrity.

This was just after their us-against-the-world training camp, and a decent start that had Ottawa receiving credit for being one of the pleasant surprises of the early NHL season. Remember when people were actually asking the question — which team has a better chance of making the playoffs, the Senators or Montreal Canadiens?

Those were good times, but early became passe and the Senators are a surprise no more. That sound heard just before the ball dropped on New Year's Eve was the thunk of the Senators hitting rock bottom in the Eastern Conference standings. They have found their level.

How different things looked on a brighter day, back on Dec. 2. The previous afternoon, the Senators had just whipped Erik Karlsson and the San Jose Sharks 6-2 in Karlsson's first return to Ottawa. It was an emotional victory and the young Ottawa roster was upbeat. At 12-12-3, two points back of Montreal for the last wild card spot, the organization could at least entertain the notion of being in the hunt. Pretend to contend. What happened next turned the Senators' season around, or perhaps just restored proper order: back-to-back 5-2 losses by Ottawa to Montreal as the scent of a playoff spot disappeared in the early winter wind.

Since those twin defeats to the Habs, the Senators have won just three times, 3-7-2 overall, including five straight losses to close out 2018 and an overtime loss to Vancouver (aka the Elias Pettersson Show) to open 2019.

Sadly, in the latest example of the Senators' brilliant market timing, they recently released an upbeat video narrated by local songwriter Kathleen Edwards in which she actually says, "this year's Senators are better than the pundits predicted." Um, no. Finishing at or near last place was a popular prediction.

The video is good for a laugh. Or a cry.

Let's take a quick look at the first half and the next.

A weekly deep dive into the biggest hockey news in the world with hosts Elliotte Friedman and Jeff Marek. New episodes every Thursday.

GOOD NEWS: THE KIDS ARE DEVELOPING

Head coach Guy Boucher, whose contract expires this spring, would have been fired over the summer had he not agreed to hand his young players key minutes instead of rewarding journeymen. Boucher relented, in some cases grudgingly, and it's paid off in the accelerated development of defencemen Thomas Chabot (Ottawa's all-star), Maxime Lajoie and Christian Jaros, centre Colin White, and rookie winger Brady Tkachuk.

If there has been a positive story from Ottawa in the first half, just one, it is this: there is young talent rising, and more to come in the system with Alex Formenton, Drake Batherson, Filip Gustavsson, etc.

BAD NEWS: INJURIES AND LOSSES PILE UP

The Senators were decent, at least on home ice, while healthy. In December, when they lost Matt Duchene (groin) and then Chabot (shoulder), goaltender Craig Anderson (concussion) and Jaros (broken finger) the facade fell. No team has given up more more shots than the Senators, nearly 40 per game. The Canucks pumped 45 at rookie Marcus Hogberg in his third NHL game, and third loss. Welcome to Ottawa, son.

The Senators are getting bad enough to become notable. After Wednesday's loss to Vancouver, Ottawa became the first team to yield 163 goals or more through 41 games since the 1995-96 season (the Sharks, Senators and Edmonton Oilers surrendered 185, 166 and 163 respectively in the first half of 1995-96). The Sens check in at 163 after 41, to rejoin that dubious list. So there is that.

The Senators have been OK at home (11-7-4), but beyond horrible on the road at 4-14-1, the league's worst record. You get what you pay for — the Senators lack elite talent beyond Mark Stone, Duchene and Chabot.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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TRADE DEADLINE LOOKAHEAD

The Senators would love to recoup a first round pick. Sadly, the one they could really use, as a bottom finisher, is their own lottery pick, which they traded to Colorado to acquire Duchene.

As it is, the Senators are sellers with zero tank incentive. They will look to shed one or more of their journeymen assets to pick up players who might help their rebuild (which many in Ottawa classify as money-saving, not pure reconstruction). If Stone and Duchene are available, teams will be calling from far and wide.

Ottawa can use prospects at all positions, but especially at centre (if Duchene leaves) and on defence, where Chabot needs better support. Anderson has one year left on his contract, and would be a nice pickup for a contending team. Acquiring Anders Nilsson from Vancouver provides some NHL experience in net while Gustavsson and Hogberg compete to become the goaltender of the future.

MOST IMPORTANT STORIES OF THE SECOND HALF

UFAs: The biggest hockey story for Ottawa will emerge early – the fate of pending unrestricted free agents Stone, Duchene and Ryan Dzingel, ranked 1-2-4 in team scoring. It would hurt to lose Duchene plus the first round pick surrendered for him, but losing Stone, the de facto captain and heart of the team, would hurt more. Of the two key forwards, Stone seems the better bet to re-sign with the team that drafted him. But with the clock ticking toward the Feb. 25 trade deadline, confidence is not running high in the fan base that either deal gets done.

Few believe that owner Eugene Melnyk has the financial wherewithal to pay Stone and Duchene 8 X \$8 million deals, let alone the big summer bonuses elite players are getting today. There is a concern that they'll lose Stone and Duchene and sign Dzingel to save face. This scenario will not be well received in Ottawa, where Dzingel is recognized as a nice little player with no grit who can't carry the skates of the two big forwards. If all three are dealt, the rebuild takes a deeper dive.

Arena WATCH: Off ice, few will be happy in Ottawa until there is news of an ownership change. Meanwhile, expect announcements from the National Capital Commission in late January and early February regarding the prospects for a new proposal for LeBreton Flats, just west of Parliament Hill. The concept may or may not include a plan for a new NHL arena. Meantime, Melnyk and John Ruddy are heading to mediation to try and resolve their differences.

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Sportsnet.ca / Sidney Crosby defends Max Comtois following online harassment

Rory Boylen | @RoryBoylen January 4, 2019, 2:41 PM

When Canada loses in any hockey tournament and falls short of a medal, it's always a big deal. And though the competition is getting stiffer at the junior level where Canada is going through a phase of less success than ever before, the expectations remain as high as ever.

And some people take that way too far.

When the Canadians lost to Finland 2-1 in overtime of the WJC quarterfinal a collection of dullards and bad apples felt the need to lash out at Max Comtois via Instagram, in many cases going way too far with profanity-laced and even personal attacks. The 19-year-old failed to convert on a penalty shot in the extra frame and the Finns scored shortly

after. How absurd is it that Comtois' agents had to release a statement condemning this kind of behaviour?

Sidney Crosby played in two WJCs, but experienced the tournament at the height of Canada's powers. He earned a silver and gold medal in 2004 and 2005 so didn't have to face the same kind of disappointed vitriol some are flinging at this year's team. But the Penguins star was asked about his thoughts on the blowback Comtois has had to endure following the loss.

"I feel bad," Crosby told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. "It's too bad that people have to react that way, and social media gives them that opportunity. My advice to him would be to ignore it. He's a great player. He's going to have a great career. That's not going to define who he is — that penalty shot."

By any measure Comtois, an Anaheim Ducks prospect, had a great tournament for Canada. He wore the captain's C and his five goals are tied for first in the tournament to this point. He played 20:30 in the quarterfinal game and was clearly coach Tim Hunter's go-to guy.

His shootout history is even strong in his QMJHL career, going 3-for-7 for a 42.9 per cent success rate and he scored a shootout winner against the Russians in 2017 during the CIBC Canada-Russia series. His first NHL goal came on a breakaway.

He wasn't a bad choice.

So you might notice we haven't used the word "fan" to describe the hit-and-run keyboard cowboys who felt the urge to attack Comtois over the team's loss. Crosby hit on this note when talking to reporters, too, pointing out that true supporters of a team don't just celebrate the highs, but feel and push through the lows with the team they supposedly support.

"The real fans and the players who are behind you ... I think everybody is there to support him," Crosby said. "Anything can happen in hockey in a quarterfinal game like that. You see [Dobson's] stick break, it was one of those things. It's easy to be a good fan when you're winning. It's a little tougher when you're losing. I think everyone should keep that in mind."

It's important to remember Canada was a broken stick away from winning that game. Had Dobson not had his equipment malfunction at precisely the worst moment, it sure looked like he was about to bury the overtime winner. A Finnish stick company poked a little fun at the stroke of bad luck to rub salt in the wound — in an amusing way.

If anything, Comtois should be commended for how he handled everything post-game. Like a stand-up NHL captain would, Comtois faced the media and answered every question directed his way in what must have been one of the worst moments of his NHL career.

He didn't cower the way his attackers did.

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1124558 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Brett Hull critical of Capitals' Ovechkin for skipping All-Star Game

Mike Johnston | @MikeyJ_MMA January 4, 2019, 1:37 PM

Alex Ovechkin's decision to skip the 2019 NHL All-Star Game has been met with some criticism from the hockey community, including a fellow legendary goal scorer.

Brett Hull was in attendance at Enterprise Center in St. Louis Thursday night to watch the Blues host Ovechkin and the Washington Capitals.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The Hall of Famer spoke with Blues reporter Jeremy Rutherford and expressed his disappointment in Ovechkin's choice to rest his body to prepare for another lengthy playoff run.

"I wish a guy like Alex Ovechkin would play," Hull told Rutherford. "I know they get tired and what-not. But still I think he should play. They could make it so he doesn't have to do a whole bunch of things. But the fans deserve to see a superstar like him."

Ovechkin remains as entertaining a star as anyone in the NHL and his bright personality has historically shone at all-star weekend. He also remains the league's preeminent sniper, recording his league-leading 30th goal of the season in Thursday's 5-2 loss to the Blues.

It marked the 14th consecutive season since he entered the league that The Great 8 has hit the 30-goal plateau. Mike Gartner, who did it 15 straight seasons to start his career, is the only other player to record such a streak.

Ovechkin is nearly on pace to match the career-high 65 goals he scored in 2007-08. That 65-goal campaign is considered the second-best era-adjusted goal-scoring season in NHL history.

The only player with a better era-adjusted season to his name? Brett Hull, who recorded an astounding 86 goals in 78 games in 1990-91 en route to winning his lone Hart Trophy.

Hull finished his career with 741 goals, which is good for fourth place all-time behind only Jaromir Jagr (766), Gordie Howe (801) and Wayne Gretzky (894). Ovechkin currently has 637 goals, three tallies behind Dave Andreychuk for 14th place.

Since Ovechkin hasn't slowed down despite turning 33 this past September, the debate on whether or not he has a realistic shot at catching Gretzky has gained some momentum.

"All it depends on does he stay healthy, does he want to continue to play that long?" Hull said via Capitals reporter Isabelle Khurshudyan of the Washington Post. "That's an awful lot of goals. I remember when I hit 700 and I was like, 'I'm still almost 200 away? I mean, it seems like you're close but you're really not. If anyone can, he's the only one.'"

While he was critical of Ovechkin's choice to forgo his way to San Jose, Hull was nothing but complimentary about the Russian skill set.

"The way he shoots it, it can carry him until he decides to hang them up," Hull added. "It's awesome how good he shoots it. You look at these goalies now and how big they are, he still beats them. And it's not just the shot, it's his ability to know where to go to score. ... There's no reason why he can't be scoring forever. I played very similar to him, except I didn't hit anybody like he does."

Coming from Hull, that's a colossal compliment.

Ovechkin, who has now been selected to 10 all-star games in his 14-year career, is by no means the first notable player to miss it in favour of recuperation. In fact, the NHL deemed it a significant-enough issue in recent years it implemented a sanction for those players who refuse to participate in the festivities.

Uninjured players selected to the All-Star Game who choose to skip the showcase must serve an automatic one-game suspension – either the game preceding the all-star break or the first game after the break.

This year's game takes place Jan. 26 in San Jose (random fact: this will be the first time in NHL history that the All-Star Game will take place on Gretzky's birthday). The Capitals' last contest before the break is Jan. 23 on the road against the Maple Leafs. Their first game back sees them host the Flames on Feb. 1. Ovechkin will be forced to miss one of those games.

"If you're injured, you're injured ... but this is to grow the game," said Hull, who played in eight All-Star Games during his career. "I know we have enough great players that as much as he'll be missed, we have

enough to entertain the fans. But still, I know as a fan of Alex Ovechkin, I'd love to see him live in a three-on-three game.

"He just won the Stanley Cup, he had a long summer and I understand that. But I'd still like all the superstars come out and pay their respects to the fans, but you know, it is what it is."

Ovechkin wasn't merely selected as any old all-star either. He was voted in as captain of the Metropolitan Division team by fans.

Sidney Crosby, Claude Giroux, Taylor Hall, Sebastian Aho, Cam Atkinson, Mathew Barzal, John Carlson, Seth Jones, Henrik Lundqvist and Ovechkin's teammate Braden Holtby were the other players selected to the Metropolitan Division squad. It's unclear at this time which player will don the 'C' in Ovechkin's absence.

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TSN.CA / Andersen progressing toward return from groin injury

Kristen Shilton

TSN Toronto reporter Kristen Shilton checks in daily with news and notes on the Maple Leafs. The team held an 11 a.m. practice at MasterCard Centre on Friday.

For the first time since Dec. 27, Frederik Andersen participated in an entire Maple Leafs' practice on Friday.

But the Leafs' starter isn't quite ready to get back into game action as he continues recovering from a groin injury.

"It's getting close. I think this is a good progression over the last few days," Andersen said after the session. "Obviously went through a full practice pretty much today and I'm feeling pretty good, so definitely positive about it."

Andersen had been skating on his own with goaltending coach Steve Briere since Monday, grinding his way up to a team workout. Still, Andersen will miss his third consecutive scheduled start when the Leafs face the Vancouver Canucks on Saturday.

Head coach Mike Babcock maintained he has no further info to share on when Andersen might get the call again.

"When he gets cleared to really practise [at full speed] then we'll know more about what's going on," Babcock said. "But they haven't told me that yet."

The whole process has been a slow one for Andersen, starting with how he got injured in the first place.

"It was something I played through in secret a little bit – had to try to manage it," he said of the ailment. "It wasn't just an incident; it happened slowly. And [during] the Christmas break it didn't really respond the way we hoped and I think we just had to shut it down. That was something we had to be smart about."

It was after not feeling good during the Leafs' morning skate in Columbus on Dec. 28 that Andersen knew it was time to address the problem directly. Now he's trying to use the spell away – which could push as long as two or more weeks without a game – to refresh himself for Toronto's stretch run.

"I think you never know. Sometimes rest can be a blessing in disguise and we'll just see," Andersen said. "It should be a reset. When you're working through some pain too, you maybe don't want to go into specific



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movements and that can hinder your game and make your game a little bit slower. It's important to be taking care of that stuff right away."

Andersen staying positive with progression from injury

A day after the Maple Leafs placed Frederik Andersen on the injured reserve, the goaltender spoke about the progression he has seen over the past few days while Michael Hutchinson spoke about the hardest part about coming into a new team and playing right away.

From the moment Andersen was taken out of the Leafs' rotation, the crease was immediately turned over to Garret Sparks. Then Sparks was quickly knocked out of commission, diagnosed with a concussion after taking a puck off his mask from William Nylander in Wednesday's practice.

That leaves veteran Michael Hutchinson as the organization's only available netminder with NHL experience. He'll start his second straight game for the Leafs on Saturday.

Instability in net isn't exactly encouraging news for a Toronto team that's lost two straight, but there's a sense inconsistent goaltending hasn't been the only problem.

"I think Tampa had their guy [Andrei Vasilevskiy] out for [over a month] and didn't miss a beat, and so that's what we have to do," Babcock said. "Our two games since Christmas, I don't think we've been as good as we're capable of being. We have to be tighter; we have to be better."

Babcock alluded on Thursday to the idea Toronto may have to go out and acquire another goaltender if they want Kasimir Kaskisuo to get playing again in the American Hockey League.

Kaskisuo had been recalled for Toronto's games on Dec. 29 and Jan. 3 without seeing any action, but has since been returned to the Toronto Marlies and was in Binghamton, N.Y., with them Friday.

Whether or not the Leafs bring in another netminder and let Kaskisuo remain in the AHL remains to be seen.

"Well, there's no tree," Babcock said. "You'd like to have a tree in your backyard and you just pick 'em off, but there's none of that. So, we'll see what happens."

Shilton: Paying attention to detail will help Leafs survive goalie injuries

Frederik Andersen took part in his first full practice since December 27th, but will not be available for Saturday's game against the Canucks and neither will Garret Sparks, who was diagnosed with a concussion. TSN Maple Leafs reporter Kristen Shilton sheds light on the team's precarious goalie situation and how they can weather the storm until the return of Andersen and Sparks.

Hutchinson decided not to look at his cell phone before he played his first game for the Leafs on Thursday.

Instead, the Barrie, Ont., native waited until after his 30-save performance in Toronto's 4-3 loss to the Minnesota Wild was over and found many pleasant surprises.

"I've changed numbers quite a bit over the years, so it was neat for some people that you played with throughout your junior career track you down and congratulate you," Hutchinson said. "It was cool to connect with a bunch of guys I hadn't talked to in a while."

Even cooler for the veteran is the chance to start another game for Toronto on Saturday, this time with a little more notice.

"It's weird how your mind works and plays games with you, so I was nervous [Thursday] going into pregame," he admitted. "But once you get your first shot on net, everything goes away and you just focus on hockey."

That's a feeling Hutchinson hopes to carry forward with him however long the Leafs need him to carry the load. Prior to Thursday afternoon, Hutchinson hadn't appeared in the NHL since Oct. 23 for the Florida Panthers, where he was pulled after allowing four goals on 19 shots.

It has been even longer since he's won a start, going back to Feb. 24, 2018 with the Winnipeg Jets.

"Hockey is unpredictable all the time and you never know what situation you're going into," Hutchinson said. "That's why you have routines and there are things you go through...I tried to focus on my routine as much as possible and let all other outside things out of my control not get in the way."

Like the fact the Panthers traded him to the Leafs, swapping a fifth-round pick in 2020 for the goalie in late December. Despite his poor numbers in Florida this season (4.17 goals-against average, .839 save percentage in four appearances), Hutchinson was confident those stats would improve.

Now he'll have to try and jump-start his career in Toronto instead.

"As a goalie, the game is easier the more you play and the more you get comfortable with what the team is doing in front of you," he said. "You have to approach [this] like a pre-season game, where I didn't know too much about [the guys] so I just had to focus on trying to stop the initial stop and control my rebounds as much as possible and make it easier on everyone."

"It was getting a little heavy, so it was nice to get it off for sure."

That's how William Nylander described the relief that came with scoring his first goal of the season on Thursday and getting that pesky, ever-present monkey off his back.

It had been 12 games since Nylander returned to the Leafs' lineup and all he had to show for it on the scoresheet was a pair of assists from Toronto's game on Dec. 11. The puck finally going in against Minnesota was validation for Nylander after a difficult month on the ice.

"I was happy the chances were coming; if they hadn't I would have been more mad," he said. "So that's positive [one went in] and I can build off of last night."

Nylander's teammates had been rallying around him since day one, and none were surprised his work finally paid off.

"He's been playing well; it was just a matter of time," said Morgan Rielly. "I'm sure he's planning on getting on a roll."

Nylander on ending goal drought: Monkey was 'getting a little heavy'

William Nylander finally notched his first goal of the season in the Maple Leafs' loss to the Wild on Thursday and he spoke about his motion to take the monkey off his back during his celebration.

Given the Leafs only face the Canucks twice a year, once at home, it was disappointing for many hockey lovers when news broke that Elias Pettersson won't be suiting up in Toronto.

The early favourite for this year's Calder Trophy has already notched 42 points in 38 games with Vancouver, but will miss Saturday's outing after getting tangled up with Montreal Canadiens rookie Jesperi Kotkaniemi and suffering a knee injury on Thursday.

Pettersson has had the Leafs' attention for some time.

"He's smarter than everybody else so he can stand still and create space," Babcock said. "I saw him quite a bit in junior. Our guys were real interested in him, so we focused on him. You can say lots of things about him – doesn't look like he's that strong – but he just has the puck all the time so everyone keeps backing off and he has space so he can shoot it...dominant, dominant, dominant player."



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Maple Leafs lines at practice:

Brown-Tavares-Marner

Johnsson-Matthews-Nylander

Marleau-Kadri-Kapanen

Lindholm-Gauthier-Moore

Rielly-Hainsey

Gardiner-Zaitsev

Dermott-Ozhiganov

Marincin-Holl

Andersen

Hutchinson

Alex Fotinos (York University goalie)

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USA TODAY / Alex Ovechkin gets to pick which game he's suspended for skipping NHL All-Star Game

Kevin Allen, USA TODAY Published 8:30 a.m. ET Jan. 4, 2019 | Updated 9:59 a.m. ET Jan. 4, 2019

Washington Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin must sit out a game for skipping the Jan. 26 NHL All-Star Game in San Jose, but he has some say in the matter.

NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly confirmed to USA TODAY Sports Friday that the league policy stipulates that a player refusing to play in the All-Star Game must sit out a game adjacent to either side of the All-Star break.

What that means is Ovechkin must sit out the Jan. 23 road game against the star-loaded Toronto Maple Leafs or the Feb. 1 home game against the Pacific Division-leading Calgary Flames.

The reason why there is significant gap between the two dates is that the Capitals have a bye week coming out of the All-Star break.

Ovechkin, 33, announced this week that he is skipping the All-Star game to give him more rest going into the second half of the season. Ovechkin leads the NHL with 30 goals in 39 games, but only has one in his past seven games. That follows a stretch when he posted 17 goals in 14 games.

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