



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 12, 2019



Gold: Mrazek Mrvelous as Hurricanes blank Avs

By Adam Gold

Absolutely Mrvelous!

When a goaltender does what Petr Mrazek did to the Colorado Avalanche Monday night in Denver they say, "he stood on his head". Well, during the Carolina Hurricanes 3-0 win, Mrazek stood on his head, his ear, his left elbow, and his big toe! In the end, it was a 38-save shutout in what had to be the goaltending effort of the season for Carolina as the Canes will fly home to Raleigh with a 4-point cushion on both the Blue Jackets and Canadiens in the playoff chase.

Andrei Svechnikov scored twice and added an assist for his second career 3-point night. Teuvo Teravainen pulled even with his buddy Sebastian Aho for the team lead with his 46th and 47th helpers of the year. And, Dougie Hamilton got it all going with his 13th goal of the season midway through the second period.

But, this game has a different outcome were it not for the 26-year old native of the Czech Republic.

Mrazek made so many top notch saves Monday night, it's hard to know where to start. He robbed Nathan MacKinnon twice in the 1st. Used the shaft of his stick to foil Colin Wilson in the 2nd. Then got Wilson in the 3rd with a pad-stick paddle combination that will be on NHL Network highlight shows the rest of the month.

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Petr was at his acrobatic best in Denver. But, this is really a trend that kicked into high gear coming out of the All Star break/bye week. In 10 starts since the beginning of February, Mrazek is 8-2-0 with a .936 save percentage. He's won six straight starts, five of his last six on the road and tossed three shutouts.

Nine days ago, Mrazek stole a point from the Panthers with a pair of back-to-back overtime saves before Aho won it on an ensuing rush. Saturday, the night after his team was humiliated at home by the Jets, Petr made 31 saves in Nashville. Tonight, well, what happened at Pepsi Center was such thievery that Mrazek's picture should hang in every post office in greater Denver.

And, to think, Petr essentially had to beg for a chance. After rising to the top job in Detroit with a 27-win campaign at the age of 23 it went the other way. Consecutive poor seasons saw Mrazek dealt to Philadelphia and then dumped at the end

of the year. This summer, he placed a bet on himself and he's well on his way to cashing in.

That isn't to say it's a guarantee that he'll collect his winnings in Raleigh — though I would totally understand if that ultimately is the case. In fact, the Hurricanes will have TWO difficult decisions to make at the end of the year when you consider how well Curtis McElhinney has also played. The pair have combined for 35 wins and have the Canes in the top 10 in the NHL in goaltending.

For those who've been around here a while, it's been a long time since the Canes have been able to lean on goaltending. But, Monday, the Hurricanes hopped aboard the Mrazek Express and steamed away with another huge two points.

* Svechnikov had his first 2-goal game since a December 13 loss at Montreal. His 16th goal of the season was a passing clinic, as he finished off a remarkable pass from Teravainen in the middle of the 3rd period to give the Canes a 2-goal lead.

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* Teravainen has 13 points (1 goal, 12 assists) in his last nine games and has consecutive games of at least two helpers for the fourth time this year.

* The Avalanche came in 7th in the league on the power play. But, Carolina's penalty kill was excellent holding Colorado to just two high-danger scoring chances in three tries, according to the web site naturalstattrick.com.

* The Hurricanes were 0 for 1 with the man advantage, but scored the first goal of the game on a delayed penalty when Hamilton took a feed from Justin Williams and ripped a wrist shot over the glove of Philipp Grubauer for the game's first goal in the second period.

* Brett Pesce played a team-high 24:41 in the win. He assisted on the Svechnikov empty net goal, was a plus-3, registered a pair of takeaways and even beat Colorado's J.T. Compher in a face off!

* The Canes are 11-1-2 in their last 14 games on the road.

* Carolina's 83 points match last season's total with 13 games left to play.

* Carolina is back into 3rd place in the Metropolitan Division, and will spend Tuesday night watching the scoreboard. All three of the Penguins, Blue Jackets and Canadiens will be in action. Pittsburgh will host Washington, Columbus entertains Boston and Montreal welcomes Detroit.



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Recap: Mrazek, Hurricanes Shut Out Avalanche

Mrazek makes 38 saves in his fourth shutout of the season

by Michael Smith

DENVER - Petr Mrazek stopped all 38 shots he faced to lead the Carolina Hurricanes past the Colorado Avalanche, 3-0.

Andrei Svechnikov scored a pair of goals, including an empty-net tally late, and added an assist, while Dougie Hamilton's second-period marker was the difference.

Here are five takeaways from Monday night in the Mile High City.

One

It was Feb. 1, 1994, when the Hurricanes franchise last won a road game in regulation against the Avalanche franchise.

It was so long ago, in fact, that it was the Hartford Whalers topping the Quebec Nordiques, 2-1.

Not that any of that matters, but it's been that sort of go-against-the-grain, rewrite-the-record-books type of season for the Hurricanes, who have now equaled last season's point total (83) in just 69 games.

"Everyone is enjoying it. We're winning. Everyone is dialed in. We're all focused. The coaches have us prepared. Everyone is coming to the rink focused," Hamilton said. "The leaders are leading. Everyone is being vocal and energized."

"There's a level, a standard the room expects every night, and that's to win," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "In order to win, you have to play a certain way and compete a certain way. That's what we're getting night in and night out, for the most part."

Two

Colin Wilson is going to be seeing Mrazek in his nightmares.

Mrazek made a trio of big stops on Wilson in the third period alone, just a sampling from his 38-save collection that earned him his fourth shutout of the season.

In the first minute of the third with the Avalanche buzzing, Wilson hit a seam at the blue line and was in alone. Mrazek stoically blockered away the shot to preserve his team's 1-0 lead.

Mrazek's best save of the game - one for the highlight reels, for sure - came in the back half of the period. Wilson had an initial shot saved on a 2-on-1 rush before Carl Soderberg laid off the rebound for him. Mrazek got just enough of the puck with first his right pad and then his stick to swipe the puck out of harm's way, stunning the crowd at Pepsi Center.

"A little bit of an athletic save maybe," Mrazek said. "I just tried to get there with my pad and stick."

Not too long after, Mrazek made a point blank save on Wilson, who found a soft spot in the slot.

Third time is not the charm.

Mrazek made 35 more stops throughout another sparkling performance in between the pipes.

"That was special. I haven't seen some of those saves in a game," Brind'Amour said. "Petr has been solid all year."

This, from the goaltender who signed a one-year deal with the Hurricanes on July 1 in an effort to prove himself in the NHL.

He's certainly done that.

"Mrazek was unbelievable," said Hamilton, who "bowed down" to Mrazek as the horn sounded.

"We wanted this game because of him," Svechnikov said. "He made some great saves and played an amazing game."

Three

In the absence of Micheal Ferland, Svechnikov has taken to the left wing alongside Jordan Staal and Teuvo Teravainen.

It's a big jump for the 18-year-old rookie, and he's responded with a more physical game and a three-point performance on Monday.

"He's been really good the last few games," Brind'Amour said. "He's a competitor, too. He's getting better and better."

Hamilton said he'll take credit for Svechnikov's three-point effort. Why?

"I told him to change his knob on his stick. He changed it, so there you go. What can I say? Right before the game. Before warm-up. I'll take credit for that," Hamilton smiled. "And we hung out yesterday, so we'll have to do it more."

Svechnikov confirmed that he did, indeed, change the tape on the knob of his stick.

"It worked," he laughed.

Svechnikov's first goal was a thing of beauty, the result of a passing sequence that was a thing of beauty. Teuvo Teravainen sent the puck cross-ice to Justin Faulk. He gave it back to Teravainen, who then dished down low to Svechnikov for the backhand finish in the slot.

Four

It took just 29 seconds for Hamilton to extend his NHL-best shot streak to 234 games with a simple wrist shot from the point. His teammates banged their sticks on the boards in amusement.

More important was Hamilton's contribution on the score sheet in the second period. Just past the midway point of the



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game, Hamilton started a breakout in his own zone, joined the rush and finished the sequence with a sniper of a wrist shot, glove-side high on Philipp Grubauer.

"I head-manned it to Svech and just tried to beat my guy up (the ice). He got tripped. I wanted to pick it up, but Willy passed it to me in the middle," Hamilton explained. "I realized I had some time with the forward playing D. ... Their guy kind of backed off, so I just shot it. It's just instinct at that point."

Five

Projected Lineup: Hurricanes at Avalanche

Canes end two-game road trip in Colorado

by Michael Smith

DENVER - It's a battle of two natural forces, as the Carolina Hurricanes meet up with the Colorado Avalanche.

Petr Mrazek is expected to tend to the crease for the Canes, who are facing off against their third consecutive Western Conference opponent prior to finishing the season with an Eastern Conference-heavy schedule.

Here is the projected lineup for the Hurricanes.

Forwards

Niederreiter-Aho-Williams
Svechnikov-Staal-Teravainen

Calvin de Haan has been on the receiving end of two nasty high sticks this season, and the latest is certainly a concern.

Alexander Kerfoot's stick, on a follow through, got under de Haan's visor, catching him in a dangerous place. De Haan left the game and was taken to the hospital for further evaluation.

"We hope he's going to be OK," Brind'Amour said.

Up Next

The Hurricanes will return home before heading to Columbus to square off with the Blue Jackets on Friday.

McGinn-Wallmark-Martinook
Foegele-McKegg-Maenalanen

Defense

Slavin-Hamilton
Pesce-Faulk
de Haan-van Riemsdyk

Goalies

Mrazek
McElhinney

Scratches: Ferland (upper body)

Note: Lineup subject to change prior to opening faceoff.



Hurricanes shut out Avalanche, gain in Metropolitan

Mrazek makes 38 saves, Svechnikov has three points for Carolina

by Rick Sadowski

DENVER -- Petr Mrazek made 38 saves, and the Carolina Hurricanes moved into third place in the Metropolitan Division with a 3-0 win against the Colorado Avalanche at Pepsi Center on Monday.

It was Mrazek's fourth shutout of the season and third in his past eight starts.

"I felt pretty good," Mrazek said. "Two big points on the line. The result, that's what we wanted. Every game means a lot, it's a lot on the line. Doesn't matter where we are right now. We have to keep grinding and keep working hard."

Andrei Svechnikov had two goals and an assist, Dougie Hamilton scored, and Teuvo Teravainen had two assists for the Hurricanes (38-24-7), who are 7-1-1 in their past nine games and are tied in points with the Pittsburgh Penguins.

"That was special," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "I haven't seen some of those saves in a game. We gave up a little too much, obviously, but [Avalanche goalie Philipp Grubauer] made some saves, too. It was a good game, it was back and forth. They've got a good group and talent over there. At the end of the day, [Mrazek] has been solid all year."

Grubauer made 30 saves for the Avalanche (30-28-12), who have lost four of their past six games (2-4-0) and trail the Minnesota Wild by two points for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Western Conference.

"We got to capitalize on our chances," Grubauer said. "Overall, it was a good game. They're a really skilled team, very offensive oriented. We got some chances, too, but we got to keep playing and chip away, chip away. We missed out on two important points."

Hamilton gave Carolina a 1-0 lead at 10:07 of the second period, taking a pass from Justin Williams and scoring glove side from the high slot with a delayed penalty against Avalanche defenseman Erik Johnson.



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"I [passed it ahead] it to [Svechnikov] and tried to beat my guy up," Hamilton said. "He got tripped (by Johnson) and I wanted to pick it up. [Williams] passed it to me in the middle, I realized I had some time and thought I would have to make a pass. Their guy kind of backed up, so just shoot. I think it's instinct at that point and trying to make reads and not think too much."

Svechnikov made it 2-0 at 7:08 of the third period when Teravainen found him in front and he beat Grubauer on a backhand. Svechnikov scored an empty-net goal at 17:33 for a 3-0 lead.

"(I) feel great with those guys," Svechnikov said of linemates Jordan Staal and Teravainen. "We got some chemistry in the last couple of periods and it's amazing playing with those guys."

Mrazek made 13 saves in the third period, including four against Avalanche forward Colin Wilson.

"It's frustrating," Wilson said. "We played a good game, just couldn't put the puck in the net. [Mrazek] did a good job. I think one or two of those, I should have buried them."

Mrazek's best save of the game came when reached back with his stick to stop Wilson from scoring into an open net at 11:00 of the third period.

"A little bit athletic save maybe," Mrazek said. "I tried to get the pad and stick. Sometimes those saves are lucky."

Hurricanes defenseman Calvin de Haan left at 6:47 of the third after he was struck in the face with Alexander Kerfoot's stick on the follow through of a shot.

"We're evaluating him," Brind'Amour said. "We had to take him to the hospital. That's the big downer on the night."

They said it

"There's a level, a standard, the room expects every night and that's to win. In order to win, you have to play a certain way and compete a certain way. That's what we're getting night in and night out for the most part. We've had a little hiccup there, but other than that the group comes ready to play." -- Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour

"I think we should have won the game with the chances we had. You have to bear down on those chances, some of them. Obviously, there's a lot of good goalies in the League and have to give credit to [Mrazek]. He had a great game, but still, with those chances that we had, I'm kind of (upset) that we lost this game." -- Avalanche forward Mikko Rantanen

"We just couldn't beat Mrazek. I thought he was outstanding. I really liked Grubauer, but Mrazek was really good tonight." - Avalanche coach Jared Bednar

Need to know

Mrazek has allowed 10 goals his past six starts (6-0-0). ... The win was the first in regulation on the road for the Hurricanes/Hartford Whalers against the Avalanche/Quebec Nordiques since Feb. 1, 1994.

What's next

Hurricanes: At the Columbus Blue Jackets on Friday (7 p.m. ET; ESPN+, TVAS, FS-O, FS-CR, NHL.TV)

Avalanche: Host the Anaheim Ducks on Friday (9 p.m. ET; ALT, FS-W, NHL.TV)



Svechnikov, Mrazek propel Hurricanes to 3-0 win over Avs

By Pat Graham

DENVER (AP) — Petr Mrazek got a piece of the shot with his pad, felt the puck trickling behind him and swiftly swung his stick around to knock it away.

"Sometimes," the Carolina goaltender said, "those saves are lucky."

Only thing: He was doing that all night.

Andrei Svechnikov had two goals and an assist, Mrazek stopped 38 shots and the Hurricanes earned a rare win at Pepsi Center by beating the Colorado Avalanche 3-0 on Monday.

"We won this game because of him," Svechnikov said of his goalie. "He's playing amazing."

Mrazek's fourth shutout of the season propelled the Hurricanes into a tie with Pittsburgh for third place in the Metropolitan Division. Carolina currently holds the tiebreaker.

"We have to keep grinding and keep working hard," Mrazek said.

Defenseman Dougie Hamilton also scored as the Hurricanes won in Denver for just the second time in 13 games since Colorado moved into its longtime home for the 1999-2000 season. It's the first time Carolina has won in regulation in this building.

"That's crazy. But I don't know how much it means to be honest with you," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "None of those guys in there have probably been in the lineup for any of those, although I've been around for a lot of them. It's a big win for us this time of year."

Colorado remains two points behind Minnesota for the final wild card in the Western Conference. The Wild lost earlier to San Jose.

Philipp Grubauer turned back 30 shots. He was back in net over Semyon Varlamov after shutting out Buffalo on Saturday.

"We've got to capitalize on our chances," Grubauer said. "They're a really skilled team, very offensive oriented."

Hamilton scored his 13th goal of the season on a delayed penalty in the second period. Defenseman Erik Johnson



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tripped Svechnikov near center ice, with Justin Williams sending the puck over to Hamilton, who lined a shot over Grubauer's glove.

The Hurricanes have proven nearly automatic with a lead going into the final period, improving to 28-1-2.

Svechnikov made it 2-0 7:08 into the third, which was plenty of cushion for Mrazek. His biggest save was robbing Colin Wilson of a goal midway through the third. Mrazek stopped Wilson's wrist shot with his pad and then reached behind to bat it away with his stick.

It was that sort of night for Mrazek, who made 13 saves in the final period.

"That was special," Brind'Amour said. "I haven't seen some of those saves in a game."

For his big game, Svechnikov credits taping his stick in a different fashion. That was on the advice of Hamilton, who wanted some of the credit.

"He changed it up and there you go. What can I say?" Hamilton said. "We hung out yesterday so we'll have to do that more."

Nathan MacKinnon had seven shots on goal to bring his total to a league-leading 304 this season. He joins Joe Sakic (339

in '95-96, 332 in '00-01) and Claude Lemieux (315 in '95-96) as the only Avalanche players to eclipse the 300-shot mark.

Carolina withstood two penalties in the first period, including a delay call on defenseman Calvin de Haan for knocking the net off its pegs. The Hurricanes nearly scored the game's first goal at 11:24 when Svechnikov skated in and sent a shot off Grubauer. On the play, he pushed Grubauer into the net as Jordan Staal lined in a rebound. The officials immediately disallowed the goal for incidental contact.

The Avs remain without captain Gabriel Landeskog, who is sidelined for at least a month with an upper-body injury.

"You can't replace him," defenseman Tyson Barrie said. "We owe it to him to get some wins and do everything we can to get in the playoffs and give him a chance to come back."

NOTES: De Haan took a stick to the face at 13:13 of the third period. He appeared to suffer a cut near his right eye. "We had to take him to the hospital. That's the big downer on the night. We hope he's going to be OK," Brind'Amour said. ... Carolina improved to 20-13-3 on the road this season. It's tied for third-most road wins in franchise history.

UP NEXT

Hurricanes: At Columbus on Friday.

Avalanche: Host Anaheim on Friday.



The Buzzer: NHL addresses slur; Tough night for bubble teams

By James O'Brien

NHL addresses outburst from Maple Leafs – Lightning game

The Lightning throttled the Maple Leafs 6-2 on Monday, to the point that the Toronto crowd was booing. But that might not have been the ugliest moment of that loss.

It's unclear who was responsible for the outburst, but Twitter account @TheLeafslIMO pointed out (warning: NSFW language) that a homophobic slur was picked up by a live mic late in the second period of the game.

The NHL released a brief statement on the matter, so we'll see if anything else comes from this.

Bubble blunders

Out East, the Blue Jackets were blanked by the Islanders, while the Hurricanes took care of business. The Wild couldn't muster a goal against the Sharks, which ended up being easier to stomach because the Coyotes and Avalanche didn't fare much better. In a lot of cases, the bubble teams that didn't play had the best experiences on Monday.

Three Stars

1. Petr Mrazek

There were three shutouts on Monday, and two of them were good enough to earn spots in the top three (sorry, Martin Jones, but yours wasn't quite as impressive at 24 saves).

Mrazek continues to be red-hot for the Hurricanes, as he stopped a whopping 38 shots on goal to blank the Avalanche in a matchup between two teams that are fighting for berths in the 2019 Stanley Cup Playoffs in their respective conferences.

Mrazek's now on a six-game winning streak that includes two shutouts. While his full season stats aren't all that impressive, he's putting together the sort of stretch run that should keep him on the radars of NHL teams — probably including his current one in Carolina.

This save could be high on his "resume."

2. Brendan Perlini

OK, I'll admit that, in a vacuum, Leon Draisaitl had the more impressive three-point night. Edmonton needed all three of his points (one goal, two assists) to win in overtime, including his OTGWG. There's also an argument for Andrei Svechnikov, who was part of all three of Carolina's goals (two goals, one assist) with one of those points being an empty-net goal.

Perlini gets the edge because of context.



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For one thing, it's sweet enough to score against your former team after they traded you, but to make it a hat trick? That's downright saucy.

It also greatly increases the Coyotes' chances of missing the playoffs. Gotta respect that level of spite.

3. Thomas Greiss

You may prefer Svechnikov, Draisaitl, or a few other players in this spot, but Greiss generated a 31-save shutout against a desperate Blue Jackets team that – despite recent scoring struggles – boasts quite an arsenal of scorers.

Greiss and Robin Lehner continue to give the Islanders absolutely fantastic goaltending, keeping the door open for a possible division title, or at least a round of home-ice advantage.

Highlight of the Night

As bad as things were for Toronto, this Auston Matthews goal was nifty:

Factoids

- To give you an idea of how long it's been since the Hurricanes' franchise earned a road win against the Avalanche's franchise, realize that when it happened in 1994, it was the Hartford Whalers beating the Quebec Nordiques. Yeah.
- The Lightning keep piling up impressive accolades. The latest is that they became just the seventh team in NHL history to reach 110 standings points in 70 games or fewer. They're also the first to do so since the Red Wings managed 110 in 69 games in 1995-96.
- The Islanders have nine shutouts this season, one goose egg shy of tying the franchise record of 10 from 1975-76.



Recap: "Miraculous" Mrazek, Svechnikov power Hurricanes to 3-0 win

The Hurricanes overcame the Avalanche and questionable calls to move back to third in the Metropolitan Division.

By Zeke Lukow

The Carolina Hurricanes came into Colorado and defeated the Avalanche on Monday night by a score of 3-0. The Canes had huge contributions from Andrei Svechnikov and Petr Mrazek. Svechnikov had the assist on the game-winning goal and went on to score both of the Canes' other goals. Mrazek led the team emotionally with a 38 save shutout.

The game had a playoff atmosphere with both teams heavily vying for playoff positions. The Canes came in and beat a fast, skilled team that they struggled with early in the season to take back the third position in the Metropolitan Division. The Columbus Blue Jackets lost to the New York Islanders 2-0 meaning that the Hurricanes remained in a playoff position regardless of the game's outcome, but they leapfrogged the idle Pittsburgh Penguins back into third place in the Metro.

Both teams came out with a ton of intensity to start the game. The Canes did a great job of killing two early penalties against a lethal powerplay that is tied for seventh in the league with a 22.7% success rate. The penalty kill forced passes and didn't let the Avalanche settle in the zone.

Mrazek made his impact felt on the game immediately. From the opening shot of the game, he really appeared to be in the zone and anticipating shots and positioning well. He was efficient in his moves and his positioning to close down angles and shutdown the Avs. His play allowed the Canes to snag the momentum after multiple penalty kills and sustained pressure in the defensive zone.

With Mrazek this is hugely important. He is aggressive in his positioning and when he is off, he overplays shots leaving

himself vulnerable to late passes and last second dekes. But when he is in the zone, as he was Monday, he frustrates players with his quick movements and efficient rebound control. This quick movement also gets in the head of shooters and will force quick shots on unsettled pucks.

The Hurricanes did appear to break through with eight minutes left in the first period when Jordan Staal beat Philipp Grubauer with a rebound from a Svechnikov shot. However, the goal was waived off controversially after it was deemed that Svechnikov made incidental contact with Grubauer. It is up to debate whether or not he was pushed by a defender, but the officials didn't see it that way and the game remained scoreless.

The second saw more high-intensity play from the Canes. Early in the period it seemed to pay off with the Hurricanes first power play of the game after Brock McGinn was tripped in the defensive zone. While the Canes did not convert on the power play, they had a good effort controlling the puck in the offensive zone for most of the penalty. The Canes generated most of the shots and chances in the second and saw multiple near misses including a Sebastian Aho wraparound chance. They claimed the shot advantage 14-11 to bring the total for the game 23-25.

The Canes finally converted for their first (legal) goal midway through the second period. Svechnikov was taken down illegally in the neutral zone but was able to get the puck forward to Justin Williams who fed Dougie Hamilton. Hamilton broke into the zone on a two-on-one, looked over to pass with his eyes, but lasered in a goal top shelf to let Nino Niederreiter know that he's not the only one that can pick corners. This was Hamilton's 10th goal and 20th point in his last 30 games and now leads all NHL defensemen in goals in



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2019. This was also his 12th goal of the season which is his new career best for a single season.

The Hurricanes struggled out of the gates to start the third. The Canes were getting handled in every zone and looked to be hanging on for dear life, but Mrazek continued to bail the team out time and time again with spectacular saves.

After a possible missed high-sticking call on the Avalanche and a media time out, the Canes won a defensive-zone face off which led to their second goal on a ridiculous play from Teuvo Teravainen and Svechnikov. Svechnikov received a laser beam of a pass in the slot settled and dangled before roofing a shot back-hand to make it 2-0.

The rookie had a massive impact on the game. He stepped into the top-six after Micheal Ferland was injured in the game in Boston. Against the Avalanche he looked like he was fully capable of handling increased minutes and excelling in a larger role. He was involved in all of the Canes goals, with the first two starting in the defensive zone. His final marker came

with an empty net showing that Rod Brind'Amour has the confidence to play him in all situations, including with the game on the line.

There was a piece of bad news in the game. On that missed high-stick call, Calvin de Haan was injured and did not return to the game, ruled out with an upper-body injury.

The Hurricanes recorded their first-ever win against the Avalanche on the road in regulation; they had won twice in overtime in Denver, but the last time they saw a regulation win the Hartford Whalers defeated the Quebec Nordiques in 1994.

With the win tonight, the Hurricanes moved back into third place in the division with the tie break over the Penguins. The Canes now sit four points ahead of the Montreal Canadiens and the Columbus Blue Jackets for the final wild card position. Their next game comes Friday in Columbus against the Blue Jackets, with the standings certain to look different after three days off.

Quick Whistles: Aho's case for the Hart, Mrazek's streak, and the Hurricanes' playoff push

Aho's breakout season has lifted the Hurricanes into favorable positioning in the standings, but is it worthy of a Hart Trophy bid?

By Brett Finger

Last season, the New Jersey Devils emerged as surprising playoff contenders, and while they got quickly booted from the first round by the Tampa Bay Lightning, it was still a fairly remarkable season.

Taylor Hall led that surge. He closed out the year with 39 goals and 93 total points, almost singlehandedly dragging his Devils team into the postseason. That effort earned him the Hart Trophy for the NHL's most valuable player.

Is a similar story in the works with the Carolina Hurricanes and Sebastian Aho?

There are a lot of similarities between the two. Like New Jersey in 2017-18, Carolina is on pace to finish the year in a playoff spot despite the odds being stacked against them. The Canes are being led by Aho, who is on pace for... you guessed it... 93 points (the same number of points Hall had last season).

An interesting way to look at is finding out how much of the team's offense runs through a specific player. Again, Aho and Hall are identical in that regard, at least in point production. Hall had 93 points and the Devils scored 244 goals, meaning he earned a point on 38% of the Devils' goals. As for Aho, 77 points and the Canes have scored 204 goals... That's 38%. The two players' 5-on-5 primary point numbers are also within one percentage point of each other.

If we're playing that game, then Aho is having an almost identical impact, offensively, as Hall had. That game isn't necessarily fair, though, or even the most accurate way to compare them. Simple counting numbers don't always paint a reliable picture.

Aho is a center. Hall is a winger. Aho has also seen nearly a minute more ice time on average, thanks to his usage in every situation - even strength, power play, penalty kill, etc.

I'd go out on a limb and say that Sebastian Aho has been as valuable to the Hurricanes this season as Taylor Hall was to the Devils a season ago, which means Aho should win the Hart.

Right?

Nope.

The 2018-19 season has seen a huge offensive breakout. There are already 12 (!) players with 80+ points and no team has played more than 70 games. Aho is very close to that 80-point mark and could reach it as soon as tonight against the Avalanche.

You have to look at the numbers from this season, and the numbers suggest that Aho won't get much of any consideration for the Hart Trophy, to no fault of his own. Nikita Kucherov probably has that trophy in the bag. He has 110 points (!!!!!) in 69 games played. He has chipped in a point on 41% of Tampa's 266 goals. That's insane. Even factoring in the immense firepower that the Lightning have, Kucherov is, in my eyes, the clear front runner for the Hart.

After Kucherov, you have Patrick Kane. Chicago has made a bit of a run as of late, thanks to Kane and his 97 points. He is second in the league in points, behind only Kucherov. Then, there's Connor McDavid. If this award was given out solely on how valuable he is to his team, it should be renamed the McDavid Trophy. He has factored into 50% of Edmonton's goals this season. That team is nothing without him. That team is probably less than nothing without him. Barring a huge stretch run, the Oilers aren't a playoff team, though, which is something that plays into this.

The list is longer than just those three, too - Johnny Gaudreau, Nathan MacKinnon, Mitch Marner, Blake Wheeler, etc.



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Is Sebastian Aho one of the most valuable players in the league to his team? Absolutely, he is. Unfortunately, it's very hard to envision him getting the Hart Trophy. Though, maybe a strong finish could put him in the conversation to be a nominee - if the Canes make the playoffs. Again, it's just a testament to how great a select number of players have been this season. In a lot of years, Aho could follow in Hall's footsteps, but not in 2018-19.

Better luck next year, Fishy. This is just the beginning for Aho. He'll have more chances to reel in some hardware.

Petr's Magic

When Petr Mrazek is hot, he is really HOT.

The pending UFA has won five consecutive starts and has a .935 save percentage. Over his last 20 starts, he is 13-6-1 with a .911 save percentage and three shutouts. That's pretty outstanding. With his recent breakout, it's becoming more and more obvious that it really was Carolina's putrid penalty kill that sank his numbers early in the season.

I wrote about the Hurricanes' goalie situation a couple of weeks ago, and with how well Mrazek has played and how much energy he brings, I think it's hard to let him walk out the front door on July 1. With every brilliant effort, there's a growing sense of how important he is to the direction of this team. To boot, he doesn't want to leave.

"The organization is content with me," Mrazek told iDNES.cz, a Czech news outlet (translated via google translate with clarifications from myself in parenthesis). "And if it goes on like this, I believe we will agree on (a contract extension). If it (was up to) me, I would stay. The team is young and in a few years it will be better. With (my) girlfriend we like it here, so why change it voluntarily?"

Mrazek just turned 27, he has a good relationship with goalie coach Mike Bales, he is confident and energetic, and he seems like a no-brainer to keep around. Two years in the ballpark of \$2.5-3 million feels about right for him.

Behind Enemy Lines: Previewing the Colorado Avalanche, Columbus Blue Jackets, and Buffalo Sabres

The Canes face a Mile High test before a big showdown in Columbus.

By Andy House

Colorado Avalanche

Monday, 9:00 p.m. at Pepsi Center

The Colorado Avalanche continue to fight for the final wild card spot in the Western Conference with just 13 games remaining on their schedule, but were dealt a significant blow late last week when they announced that captain Gabriel Landeskog will miss the remainder of the regular season due to an upper body injury. Sitting only three points out of a playoff spot, the Avs lose their second-highest goal scorer and a critical member of what has been one of the NHL's best top lines along with Nathan MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen.

The Avalanche will try to overcome the loss of Landeskog by picking up the slack deeper in the lineup, even though the only acquisition of note for Colorado was the addition of Derick

I'm sure Martin Necas wouldn't mind having another Czech-born player in the locker room next year, as well. He's not an elite goalie, but he's a very good fit on this team and in this organization.

Playoffs? You kiddin' me? Playoffs?

Over the next three-and-a-half weeks, the Hurricanes will play 16 games. Those games will decide their season.

Truth be told, you have to really like this team's chances right now. The Canes have been neck-and-neck with Pittsburgh for a couple of weeks now, with both teams leapfrogging over each other on a daily basis. A win tonight for the Canes would put them back into third in the division and push the Pens into a wild card spot.

The second tier of bubble teams in the East consists of Columbus and Montreal. Carolina has two more points than both Columbus and Montreal. Their lead on the Habs is strengthened in that the Canes also have a game in hand. It's a four-team race for three playoff spots, and the Islanders' struggles as of late might just make things more interesting.

Hockey-reference has the Canes at an 85.9% chance of making the playoffs, Sports Club Statshas them at 88.1%, and The Athletic (Dom Luszczyszyn) has them at 88%.

For the first time in almost a decade, the Canes are in the playoff hunt in mid-March AND they're an odds-on favorite to make it in. That's pretty exciting, and you have to give credit to the leadership core of Rod Brind'Amour behind the bench and the likes of Justin Williams and Sebastian Aho on the ice. They've led this Cinderella story.

As it stands now, it looks like the clock won't strike midnight on April 6 for the Canes. This is the Hurricanes we're talking about, though, so take nothing for granted. It's their playoff spot to lose, and they could very easily lose it if they let up off the gas.

Brassard from the Panthers. Nevertheless, the Avs possess a top-10 scoring team that, even without Landeskog, is capable of putting up enough goals to survive in what has become a battle of attrition on the Western Conference.

In goal, the Avs possess a solid tandem of former Washington Capitals, as Semyon Varlamov has put together a solid campaign with a .910 save percentage in 46 starts, while new addition Philipp Grubauer has been a bit of a disappointment in his 23 starts with only a .900 save percentage and a goals against average over three for the season.

For the Hurricanes to leave the Mile High City with two points, they must do a good job against the remaining top-line talent, and get a lead that will allow them to lean heavy on the mediocre blueline of the Avs. Scoring first would be a big boost.

What to Watch For



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- In a league where average shifts last 35-45 seconds at a time, the Avs top line with MacKinnon (1:01) and Rantanen (0:57) continuously stretch the limits of really long shifts. Especially in the altitude of Denver, it will be interesting to see if the Canes can trap that group in their own end some to create some great chances.
- The Avalanche possess a potent powerplay (even without Landeskog) as they sit at eighth-best in the league to date, but their penalty kill has suffered down to 28th. Can the Canes take advantage of that area of struggle and win the special teams battle?

Columbus Blue Jackets

Friday, 7:00 p.m. at Nationwide Arena

The boom or bust Columbus Blue Jackets have pushed all of their chips into the center of the table in the race for the playoffs in the Eastern Conference. Friday night could prove to be a decisive matchup among division rivals that are still vying for the playoff spots that remain up for grabs.

Despite not being firmly in a playoff spot as the deadline approached, General Manager Jarmo Kekalainen elected to retain pending unrestricted free agents Artemi Panarin and goalie Sergei Bobrovsky, despite the fact that each indicated they are likely to go elsewhere over the summer. Instead, Kekalainen doubled down on his bet with his current roster, adding significant reinforcements with the acquisition of Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel from the Senators, and Adam McQuaid from Rangers. In the process, the Blue Jackets 2019 draft was decimated to just a third and seventh round selection. Kekalainen hopes to not only jumpstart his team and vault them into contender status, but to also potentially retain the services of Duchene and Dzingel, as they join the list of pending free agents on this talented, but newly joined roster.

The early results since the deadline have been mixed, as the Jackets continue to hover right at the cut line, tied with the Canadiens, but with a game in hand. While most are aware of the talent level possessed in Columbus, what may well stand in their way is the remaining slate of games. The Blue Jackets close their final 14 games with eight contests against current playoff teams (as well as a battle against the Canadiens, who they are currently tied with). Combine that schedule with a western Canada swing, and the road is not easy for the Jackets. Friday's tilt will be the last home game before a road trip that begins the following night in Boston, then carries the Jackets to the Pacific for a total of four games before they return home. If Carolina can deal the Jackets a blow at home before they embark on that trip, and secure the season tiebreaker, it could go a very long way towards keeping the Canes on top of Columbus in the overall standings.

What to Watch For

- The Blue Jackets have struggled to get comfortable as a group with the two major acquisitions on their forward lines. Seeing where Duchene and Dzingel slot in on Friday will be interesting. Will they have developed any more cohesion in their two games earlier in the week?

- Who starts in net for each team will be interesting. John Tortorella interestingly sat Bobrovsky last week for a loss in Pittsburgh in favor of Joonas Korpisalo. Will Bob get the nod at home against the Canes, or will he play on the road the next night in Boston?

Buffalo Sabres

Saturday, 7:00 p.m. at PNC Arena

After a scorching start that actually saw them leading the Atlantic Division early in the year, the Buffalo Sabres have floundered late and have fallen completely out of the playoff race in the Eastern Conference. Losers of four in a row and six of their past seven, the Sabres now must do without captain Jack Eichel for two games after he was suspended for a hit to the head on Carl Soderberg this past week. Conveniently, he is slated to return on Saturday against the Hurricanes, while missing out on Thursday's battle against the Pittsburgh Penguins at home. So, the Sabres top performer should be rested and ready to go on Saturday as he and his mates look to play spoiler in the Eastern Conference playoff picture.

The struggles of late for Buffalo have been on the defensive side of the puck, as they have given up three or more goals in each of their last seven games, and have not recorded a shutout since before Christmas. Their overall goals against has plummeted to 22nd in the league as a result. Carter Hutton has played admirably in his first season as a starter, posting a .912 save percentage and 2.82 goals against average in 40 starts. The problem has been the high volume of shots (eighth-most in the league) and the quality of those chances. Despite the presence of first overall draft pick Rasmus Dahlin, Rasmus Ristolainen, and the acquisition of Brandon Montour for the blueline at the deadline, the Sabres have been unable to consistently break out of their own zone efficiently, and have continued to have breakdowns in coverage that have led to too many chances from the high-danger spots in front of the net.

For Carolina to emerge victorious again in the second of a back-to-back against a fresher opponent, they must get pucks deep in the offensive zone and work to gain position in front of the net. The more stress they apply on the forecheck, the more likely they are to generate top-notch chances on turnovers. Keep a high-pressure forecheck going, and convert the chances that you create. It sounds simple, but a simple game right now works best against a team having trouble keeping the puck out of their own net.

What to Watch For

- For the whole week, tracking the health of Micheal Ferland is a key for the Canes. His heavy game is a big part of what has made the Canes so tough to play against in the second half of the year. Will he be able to contribute?
- The Canes have fared well in the second part of back-to-backs, and again find themselves up against a fresher team in the second game. Will they have the legs they need?



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SportScan

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

1135456 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes' Svechnikov More Than Draft Hype

BY MARK SHIVER

MARCH 11TH, 2019

In last year's NHL Entry Draft, the Carolina Hurricanes selected Andrei Svechnikov as the second-overall pick. The notoriety that accompanies being the second-overall pick is significant, and along with notoriety has come increasing scrutiny. As the season enters the home stretch, would the Hurricanes have still wanted Svechnikov at number two overall had they seen his first season?

Hurricanes right wing Andrei Svechnikov

Svechnikov Was a Draft Darling

If you can recall the hype going into last year's NHL Entry Draft, Svechnikov was talked about widely as a worthy top-five overall pick. Some scouts even had him at number one overall. He definitely had the hype train rolling pretty good. For example, in The Hockey Writers' Draft Prospect Profile last April, Andrew Forbes quoted Steve Kournianos/The Draft Analyst as saying, "His vision and hands already are at an elite level. Additionally, his upper-body strength is often underestimated, and opponents losing puck battles via a shove become commonplace when Svechnikov is involved in a tight-checking affair. You can use Svechnikov in any situation, and he is a threat to score while shorthanded."

Kournianos echoed a theme that seemed to be prominent among scouts about Svechnikov's size as well as speed and vision. While he has not emerged thus far as the offensive juggernaut he was touted to be, he has proven beyond a doubt that he belongs playing in the NHL. Even at his young age – he will be 19 in a week or so – "Svech," as he is called by his teammates, is not out of place.

Svechnikov Statistically So Far

Through 68 games, Svechnikov has put up numbers some veterans would love to see on their stat line. He has 15 goals and 14 assists for a total of 29 points. At Hockey-Reference, he is shown to be averaging 14:26 of ice-time per game. Compared with another phenom for the Hurricanes in the recent past, Sebastian Aho, who averaged 16:47 per game his rookie season, Svechnikov is not too far off in playing time as a rookie.

Andrei Svechnikov

What about the physical factor that scouts loved? Through 68 games, Svechnikov is fifth among the Hurricanes forwards in total hits at 102. He is averaging 1.5 hits per game, not too shabby for a rookie forward. The book on Svechnikov said that his weakness was on the defensive side of the game.

Where is Svechnikov?

To his credit, Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour has parked "Svech" on the third line, seemingly to give him the defensive experience he needs. With a top line of Aho and Teuvo Teräväinen, Svechnikov's scoring prowess is not needed there. The result is that he has not only put up decent rookie numbers, but is learning to improve his defensive game also playing a lot with Jordan Martinook and Brock McGinn.

Carolina Hurricanes' Brock McGinn Jordan Martinook Andrei Svechnikov

Of course, coaches do make changes, and against the Nashville Predators on Saturday night, Brind'Amour had Svechnikov on the second line with Jordan Staal and Teräväinen.

During the Hurricanes' recent game at home against the St. Louis Blues, I paid particular attention to Svechnikov and his line. Against the Blues, they were rarely in the offensive zone. Time after time they would be on the ice and barely cross the center line. They played well, but there was little, if any, offense. It made one of my media colleagues question, "Is Roddy hiding him on the third line? Is he trying to improve the defensive part of his game?"

Interestingly enough, the whole conversation that night started with one of the Blues' media to whom I was saying, "He's only 18. Cut him some slack." We were talking about what appeared to be a Svechnikov first season lacking the flash that the hype train promised before he was drafted second overall. Another member of the media made this observation about Svechnikov: "He rarely has a superstar in the making moment."

I watched for that moment against the Blues and had to admit that a moment like that did not happen. But, that really is not the point in my opinion. I believe that the Hurricanes were absolutely correct to select Svechnikov second overall. I see a soon-to-be 19-year-old playing nearly a fourth of entire games night in and night out. I see a young player who is not afraid to hit and who is learning what it means to be a two-way player in the NHL.

Nobody expected "Svech" to knock Aho or Teräväinen out of their spots in his first season. But, unlike some, I do see a superstar in the making. The biggest reason I see that is his attitude. He's not complaining and griping about where he plays. He's thankful to be playing and is willing to



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learn. It would not surprise me at all to see Svechnikov blow up in season two or three just like Aho is doing. To me, he's that good.

Hurricanes Andrei Svechnikov

Oliver Thompson wrote about Svechnikov about a month ago at Cardiac Cane. He wrote, "Svech is having a very good first year in the NHL. He's not playing alongside a Brock Boeser (as Elias Pettersson is), or a Mark Stone (as Brady Tkachuk is). He's driving the play himself, improving his teammates, and learning what it takes to compete at the top level from an early age, from one of the very best...Svech has handled the jump from the OHL with considerable ease, and we should all be excited about what the future holds for him."

At number two overall, the Hurricanes selected Svechnikov. A great selection and one that is very likely to pay huge dividends for the team for seasons to come.

LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135457 Carolina Hurricanes

'The belief is the biggest thing': Canes' bounce-back win in Nashville shows how this team is different

By Sara Civian

Mar 11, 2019

NASHVILLE — It was the same exact thing, except it was totally different.

The headlines chronicling the Hurricanes' 5-3 win at Nashville on Saturday will try their best, and they won't be wrong. But they won't really do it justice: Hurricanes Respond to Blowout with Big Win Over Nashville

The Hurricanes followed up their biggest blowout loss of the season, an 8-1 drubbing by the Jets, with the win. They won in Nashville the game after their worst of the season in 2017-18, too, but the similarities stop at opponent and outcome.

This time around there was the new captain, Justin Williams. His unwavering confidence in this team was on peak display via Mark Messier-esque conviction after the Canes' loss Friday.

"We've always answered the bell this year so far, and it's time to do it again," he said post-game. "At this time of the year, a game like that can go one way or the other. We've answered the bell and we're going to do it tomorrow."

It was starkly different than what last season's co-captains had to say after their 8-1 loss to the Leafs on Dec. 19, 2017.

"We just didn't really show up tonight," Justin Faulk offered back then. "We didn't compete as hard as we wanted to. ... we sure hope we can move on fast."

"It was embarrassing, it wasn't a fun game," Jordan Staal added. "We'll have to swallow this one and move on to Nashville. It was embarrassing. It sucks."

Nothing against either co-captain—Faulk and Staal have stepped up this season in ways some might have a hard time acknowledging, maybe subconsciously because of their former joint status leading a less inspired squad.

To their credit, they did bounce back last season. But the difference this season is Williams was confident enough that they'd do so that he put his credibility on the line.

"That's just not us," he said of their performance in the loss. And it wasn't.

He acknowledged how hard it was to conduct the interview in the first place, but there was no lack of eye contact or unassured body language. He faced it head-on, guaranteed a bounce-back win and reaffirmed the team's identity. Then he put some clothes on and greeted fans in the tunnel.

That is him.

Petr Mrazek poke-checks, Nino Niederreiter two-goal nights, Sebastian Aho flexing his speed on insurance empty netters, Williams scoring goals as important as they are underrated, post-game music taking playful jabs at the opponent?

That's them.

There's them now.

And while head coach Rod Brind'Amour is still getting used to the post-game music and all the celebrations, he's well-versed in the standard of on-ice excellence that's returned to the Hurricanes. So just like he would've expected of himself, he knew the bounce back was coming for these Canes.

"I expected it," Brind'Amour told me. "I mean, these guys have been really great all year, their effort. Last night was one of those one-offs, and (the first line) wasn't good. Tonight they were the difference. They came out and asserted themselves. Willy especially."

The Game 68 win crowned Brind'Amour the fastest head coach in franchise history to surpass 80 points. It took him six fewer games than the rest of them.

"A change of scenery sometimes helps," Niederreiter said of his post-trade performance. "But I feel like the most important thing is the trust you get in the coaches and the belief in me. The belief is the biggest thing."

Niederreiter ended Friday's game a franchise-worst minus-six. As useless and irrelevant as that metric arguably is, it's still all over the post-game stat sheets, so of course he saw it. And of course you don't brush off being the franchise-worst at anything, even ping pong.

If you're Brind'Amour, though, you keep Niederreiter on the first line and give him the same minutes as you had been.

If you're Niederreiter, you go out there the next night and score two fierce goals in the first period.

He has more goals (11) with the Hurricanes in 22 games than he did with the Wild (9) in 46 games.

The belief has been the biggest thing. Niederreiter is the most obvious embodiment of it, but look past the surface and you'll see how the body language has changed. It starts with the coach, even and especially after the worst game of the season.

It extends through the star, who scoffed at the notion that he's overachieving.

"Yeah, well I'm 21 years old," Aho told me in Boston. "I expect to be in better shape every year."

He believes in improvement.

Then there's the captain, who called game on the bench in Florida and in the media in Nashville.

"That's all?" Williams expressed playful disappointment that we weren't interrogating him hard enough after the win. "You guys don't have anything else for me?"



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Again, he was right about his team. Again, he led the charge.

And as he reached 20 goals for the seventh time in his career, he seemed as young as the gash on his cheek.

The Athletic LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135477 Columbus Blue Jackets

Islanders 2, Blue Jackets 0 | Jackets can't find offense

Bill Rabinowitz

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — The answers are as elusive as goals have become.

The Blue Jackets have a deep lineup, with three lines perfectly capable of scoring. And Columbus did control play for most of Monday night's game against the New York Islanders.

Coach John Tortorella said that his Blue Jackets had at least 65 shot attempts, 31 of which went on goal. But for the third time in their last six games, none of them went in.

So after the 2-0 loss at Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum, the Blue Jackets were grasping for explanations.

"We do everything but score," captain Nick Foligno said. "The teams that in the thick of it are finding ways to score. It's not a knock on us. We just have to find a way to get the puck in the net."

Center Matt Duchene was expected to give the offense a jolt with his acquisition before the trade deadline. He has only one goal in 10 games with Columbus.

"I think there are times on the rush we can create a little more," he said. "I think we're maybe a little tight sometimes with the puck instead of maybe taking a chance to create something."

Scoring against the Islanders figured to be a challenge. They have allowed the fewest goals in the NHL while becoming one of the league's surprise teams. After the morning skate, Tortorella said a quick start was essential if his team was to avoid losing for the third time in as many games to New York.

That didn't happen. The Islanders scored the only goal they would need 6:11 into the game. Defenseman Ryan Pulock unleashed a slap shot that beat Sergei Bobrovsky high to the stick side after a shot by Cal Clutterbuck deflected off Markus Nutivaara.

After that, Bobrovsky was superb. He had to stop only 18 shots, but several of them were prime chances.

Unfortunately for the Blue Jackets, his teammates couldn't answer. Cam Atkinson twice hit the post. Zach Werenski couldn't convert from close. Artemi Panarin didn't have a shot on goal.

The Blue Jackets pulled Bobrovsky with about two minutes left. Anders Lee scored on a 2-on-1 with 1:30 left to make it 2-0.

"I think you have to give their goaltender some props, but on some of our main chances, we didn't get to the net," Tortorella said. "We're a team that has been able to score goals this year. Since the (trade) deadline, it's been inconsistent.

"It's frustrating, but I liked the way we played. ... We just did not finish."

The Blue Jackets remained above the line for the playoffs in the second wild-card spot by virtue of having more regulation wins than Montreal. But with 13 games left, this was an opportunity lost.

"We're in playoffs (mode) right now," Foligno said. "It is hard to score. You've got to really bear down on your opportunities because they're few and far between. We seem to get tons still. We just have to find a way to either breathe or bear down and put it in the net."

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135478 Columbus Blue Jackets

Matt Duchene, Ryan Dzingel settling in

By Bill Rabinowitz

The Columbus Dispatch

@brdispatch

Posted Mar 11, 2019 at 7:47 PM Updated Mar 11, 2019 at 8:41 PM

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — One game does not necessarily mean a turning point, though for Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel, they hope it does.

Against Pittsburgh on Saturday, Duchene and Dzingel played what Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella described as their best game since they arrived in separate trades with Ottawa before the Feb. 25 deadline.

"You can see the chemistry beginning to work there," Tortorella said after Monday's morning skate preceding Columbus' game against the New York Islanders. "Hopefully, they'll take off."

It would provide a major boost if they did. In nine games with the Blue Jackets entering Monday's game, Duchene has only one goal and three assists. Dzingel, an Ohio State product, has three assists but has yet to score a goal in seven games.

But they were major factors against Pittsburgh. Duchene, who is skilled at making effective, subtle plays in tight spaces, passed to Dzingel, who fed Oliver Bjorkstrand for a nifty goal to make it 3-1 late and allow an anxious Nationwide Arena crowd to exhale.

"We're getting more comfortable every day," Dzingel said. "We're trying to make an impact, and last game we finally did that."

He acknowledged that the transition from Ottawa has been difficult.

"It's harder than you think," Dzingel said. "You're a human being and you're trying to fit in with the group right away."

That the Blue Jackets went into a slump after their arrival added to their burden.

"I think when new players come in and the team starts losing some games and isn't as consistent as it would like to be, I think they feel the pressure," Tortorella said. "They want to make a difference and sometimes try to do a little too much.

"But (Saturday was) the best I've seen Zinger play since he's been here. Duchy has made plays throughout."

Duchene said he was encouraged by the way he and Dzingel played in the 3-0 loss at Pittsburgh on Thursday.

"People seem to just focus on the results sometimes," he said. "We probably had the puck more in Pittsburgh than we did in Columbus, but



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we did some good things. Obviously, it's still a process where we're trying to feel comfortable and keep progressing."

Duchene said he has been guilty of overthinking at times and being overly concerned about making mistakes. Each day, he said, he feels more comfortable and is confident the scoring will come with it.

"I hit a crossbar last game," Duchene said. "I've hit the knobs of sticks. I'm getting chances and they're just not quite going yet, but I know it's right around the corner."

Dubinsky in for Jenner

The Blue Jackets were without center Boone Jenner on Monday. He did not participate in the morning skate because of illness, and Tortorella ruled him out.

Brandon Dubinsky started in his place on a line with Nick Foligno and Josh Anderson, with Foligno moving to wing. Rookie Eric Robinson took Dubinsky's spot on the fourth line.

Robinson was scoreless in 11 games this season entering the game and hadn't played since March 3. But Tortorella likes his speed and believes the scoring will come.

"Though he has goose eggs across the board, he has had a lot of scoring chances," Tortorella said.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135479 Columbus Blue Jackets

Blue Jackets: Eric Robinson will replace ill Boone Jenner against Islanders

By Bill Rabinowitz

The Columbus Dispatch

@brdispatch

Posted Mar 11, 2019 at 12:51 PM Updated Mar 11, 2019 at 1:01 PM

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — The Blue Jackets will be without center Boone Jenner against the New York Islanders on Monday night.

Coach John Tortorella said after the morning skate that Jenner is sick. Tortorella said rookie Eric Robinson will start at wing on a line with Nick Foligno and Josh Anderson.

Foligno will play center. The Jenner-Foligno-Anderson line provides a physical dimension and has been perhaps the Blue Jackets' most consistent lately.

Robinson has not had a goal or an assist in 11 games this season. He hasn't played since March 3. But the 6-foot-2, 200-pound Robinson has size and speed. Tortorella believes the scoring will come.

"Though he has goose eggs across the board, he has had a lot of scoring chances," Tortorella said.

Robinson, 23, is from nearby New Jersey and was signed as a free agent out of Princeton last year.

"It's still pretty close to home, so it'll be nice to get in and have my parents here," Robinson said of Monday's game.

He said he understands his role on the line with Foligno and Anderson.

"It's a high-energy line," Robinson said. "You could see the other night (against Pittsburgh) they were banging bodies and bringing a lot of energy. That's something I need to look to do tonight as well as playing a responsible defensive game because that's something that line is pretty good at, too."

Sergei Bobrovsky will start in goal against the Islanders, who are in second place in the Metropolitan Division, six points ahead of fifth-place Columbus.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135480 Columbus Blue Jackets

Blue Jackets out of answers, excuses on another night when the offense sputters

By Aaron Portzline

Mar 11, 2019

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno will stand by his locker stall and field all manner of questions until the last camera is turned off and the last notebook put away. In times good and times tough, he always faces the music.

On Monday, in an almost empty visitors room, Foligno apologized when his answer to the first question was shorter than usual.

"I don't know how quotable I'm going to be tonight guys, honestly," Foligno said after a frustrating 2-0 loss to the Islanders. "I've said everything I need to say the past couple of weeks here."

There's really not much more to say than this: The Blue Jackets have begun to steady their play over the past three games, but unless they figure out a way to start finishing more of their scoring chances, the offseason is going to arrive early in Columbus.

The Blue Jackets, one of the NHL's top 10 scoring clubs most of the season, were shut out for the sixth time this season, the second time in three games, and for the third time in their past six games.

"You have to give their goaltender a little bit of props," Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella said. "But I think some of our main chances ... we don't get (pucks) to the net. (Zach Werenski) has a chance right down the pipe in the slot (second period) and shoots in wide."

"It's a team that has been able to score goals this year. But since the (NHL trade) deadline, it's been inconsistent. It's frustrating, but I like the way we played. I like the way we forechecked. I like a lot of things about our game, but we just did not finish."

Cam Atkinson hit a post (early first) and the crossbar (early second). Oliver Bjorkstrand, one of the few Blue Jackets who drove hard to the net, also hit a post (second).

On the attempt Tortorella referenced, Werenski was found alone streaking through the right circle, but his one-timer was off target, sailing far wide of the goal and off the end boards.

The Blue Jackets had 62 shot attempts compared with 33 for the Islanders. (When you isolate the third period, those numbers are 23-10.) But 16 shots were blocked by the Islanders and 15 more were shot off the mark by Columbus.

Didn't Jimmy Breslin write a book about this group?



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"We're doing everything but score," Foligno said. "The teams that are in the thick of it, they're finding ways to score. We have to find a way to get the puck in the net.

"We have to stop with the 'We did this well, and we did that well.' We have to get serious about putting some goals in there. We've been shut out a couple of times now this week, and we have to get some run support for our goalie."

The Islanders scored at 6:11 of the first period when Ryan Pulock — making it look easy — sailed a puck through traffic from above the right circle to make it 1-0.

That was the only puck to get behind Sergei Bobrovsky, who had 18 saves and barely broke a sweat in the third period. He was riding the exercise bike for extra work as Tortorella handled his postgame media scrum just a few feet away.

Meanwhile, Islanders' goaltender Thomas Greiss continues to devour the Blue Jackets this season.

He had 17 consecutive saves to close out a 3-2 win over the Blue Jackets here Dec. 1, then pitched a 31-save shutout in Columbus (3-0 Islanders win) on Feb. 14.

Put another way: Greiss has stopped 79 consecutive shots by the Blue Jackets, a staggering figure. He's 3-0 with a .978 save percentage and 0.66 goals-against average versus Columbus.

"We have to find a way ... either breathe, or bear down," Foligno said. "But put them in the net."

Notebook

- The Blue Jackets (79 points) remained in the second wild-card spot despite the loss. Carolina's 3-0 win in Colorado pushed the Hurricanes (83) ahead of Pittsburgh (83) into third place in the Metro. The Jackets have a tie-breaker lead on Montreal (79) for the second wild-card and only a three-point lead over 10th-place Philadelphia (76).

- Center Boone Jenner missed the game with an illness. Brandon Dubinsky moved into his spot on the third line between Foligno and Josh Anderson at the start of the game, with Eric Robinson taking Dubinsky's left wing spot on the fourth line. Tortorella started mixing up his lines in the second period in an attempt to jump-start the Blue Jackets' offense. No word yet whether Jenner will be available for Tuesday's game versus Boston at Nationwide.

- Of course, the Blue Jackets missed Jenner, especially on the dot. Jenner has taken more draws (1,006) and won more draws (547) than any other Jackets player, and his 54.4 percent success rate is second only to Dubinsky's (56.1). The Jackets went 12 of 36 (33 percent) on the night, and nobody was better than 50-50.

- Greiss' numbers versus the Blue Jackets before this season: 5-6-3, 3.36 goals-against average, .885 save percentage.

- Blue Jackets forward prospect Alexandre Texier, a second-round pick (No. 45 overall) in 2017, will see his season in Finland come to an end Thursday. His club, KalPa Kuopio, is not going to make the postseason. That means Texier, 19, could join AHL Cleveland over the weekend or early next week. He has 12-25-37 in 53 games this season.

- The Blue Jackets play Boston twice this week, and it'll be on the second half of a back-to-back set both times. The Blue Jackets flew home to Columbus after last night's game while Boston rested comfortably (one presumes) in hotel beds. On Thursday, the Blue Jackets will play Carolina at Nationwide Arena, then fly to Boston for a game Friday. The Bruins get the worst of it on this occasion, though. They play in Winnipeg on Thursday.

Analytically speaking

The Athletic's hockey data dynamo Alison Lukan provided these insights into the Blue Jackets' loss:

- The Blue Jackets didn't get their desired results, but their play against the Islanders wasn't as concerning as, say, a week ago in New Jersey. For the entire game, according to NaturalStatTrick.com, the Jackets had 63.86 percent of five-on-five shot attempts, 57.14 percent of scoring chances and 58.33 percent of high-danger attempts. Based on shot quality alone, MoneyPuck.com had the expected-goal total at 2.44 to 1.9 in favor of Columbus.

- But where the Jackets failed to control play was converting all that offense to goals. The team's shooting percentage (obviously) was zero, which falls in stark contrast to its season shooting percentage of 9.48 (15th in the league).

- There were three shots that drew iron Monday, including two from Cam Atkinson and one from Oliver Bjorkstrand. The Jackets led the league in those measures earlier this season. Do they still? Currently, the team sits third in shots off the post (48) and 12th in shots off the crossbar (9).

- In a game in which there was a struggle to find offensive finish, the Jackets' strongest performance arguably came from the goaltender when it came to keeping the team in the game. According to evolving-hockey.com, Bobrovsky ended up with a save percentage that was 3.57 percent higher than it was expected to be based on the shots he faced. That translates to one goal saved above and beyond what was expected.

- Unfortunately, Bobrovsky's opponent at the other end of the ice was stronger. Thomas Greiss' final save percentage was 5.61 percent above expectations. That equates to 2.47 goals that should have gone in that did not.

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1135481 Columbus Blue Jackets

Blue Jackets have an 'identity' line, and Josh Anderson might be its lynchpin

By Aaron Portzline

Mar 11, 2019

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — We hesitate to say that Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella has settled on lines, because, well, he is an NHL coach and because lines in the world's best league don't stay together very long. Put another way: Read this quickly.

When Matt Duchene was acquired from Ottawa in advance of the trade deadline, he was installed as the No. 1 center, bumping Pierre-Luc Dubois out of his season-long perch and sending the Jackets' forward lines into disarray.

Nothing made sense. Duchene struggled between Artemi Panarin and Cam Atkinson, Dubois struggled in his new role, and former 59-point scorer Alexander Wennberg ended up a healthy scratch.

Then came a trade for Ryan Dzingel, also from Ottawa, and more switching and scrambling. The Blue Jackets' goal-scoring went through the floor, either the result of the line changes or the cause of it.

In the past two games — a 3-0 loss in Pittsburgh and a 4-1 win versus the Penguins in Columbus — the Blue Jackets' forward configuration has taken shape in a way that now seems so obvious.

Dubois is back between Panarin and Atkinson. Duchene and Dzingel, who played together extensively with the Senators, are on a line together with Oliver Bjorkstrand on the right.



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And the tried and true “identity” line — Boone Jenner between Nick Foligno and Josh Anderson — is in full force, tasked with setting the tone each night.

“I’m pretty comfortable with the line,” Tortorella said. “But I’m not going to sit here and tell you — ‘cause you guys always worry about me changing the lines — that they’ll stay there forever.”

“But in order to try to settle ourselves down, especially when a team doesn’t have a lot of offensive confidence, I have to respect that.”

The Duchene and Dubois lines are full of high-end skill, obviously. Five of the six players have 20-plus goals, four have 50-plus points and the one player with fewer than 20 goals — Bjorkstrand, 14 — is third on the Blue Jackets in scoring (11 goals) since Dec. 23.

But Jenner’s line has a massive impact on the Blue Jackets beyond the scoresheet, and the wild card on the line is Anderson, one of the emerging power forwards in the NHL.

Last Wednesday, Tortorella had one of his frequent meetings with Anderson, who has asked the veteran coach to give him one-on-one updates throughout the season. (As if Tortorella needs to be asked, of course.)

This was more than just a check-in, though.

“He said, ‘You’ve been in the league a couple of years now, you have to take a little bit more of a role here,’ ” Anderson said. “When things aren’t going well (for the team) sometimes you have to step up to the occasion. He just reminded me that I’m a big part of the team.”

It might seem silly that Anderson would need to be reminded or encouraged. He’s 6-foot-3, 225 pounds, skates like the wind and checks like a load of wet cement.

But look around the Blue Jackets’ dressing room these days — Atkinson, Panarin, Duchene, Seth Jones, etc., a collection of star players like never before accumulated in Columbus — and it’s easy to understand how a player like Anderson could settle into a back seat.

“(Anderson) has the ability, the speed and the season to do that, (to) say, ‘Follow me,’ ” Tortorella said.

Anderson got the message.

“I thought that’s what I had to do in Pittsburgh, give our bench some juice,” he said. “I thought our line did that, for the most part. We were banging.”

“When I’m not banging, there are a couple of guys who come up to me and remind me of that, what I need to do.”

One of those guys is obviously Blue Jackets fourth-line center Brandon Dubinsky, right?

“Oh, yeah, absolutely,” Anderson grinned. “He came up to me right before the game (Thursday in Pittsburgh): ‘Make sure you’re hitting tonight. Make sure you’re hitting tonight.’ ”

In the 3-0 loss Thursday to the Penguins, Anderson tied for the team high with four shots on goal and led the way with seven hits.

In the 4-1 win Saturday, he had a monster game: seven shots on goal and seven hits, including two thunderous checks in the opening 15 seconds of the game — poor Dominik Simon — that set the tone for the evening.

Tortorella has started Jenner’s line in each of the past two games, hoping to set a physical tone from the start. He could very well do the same Monday night against the New York Islanders.

“They score an early goal (by Jenner on Saturday), and Andy’s banging everything in sight,” Tortorella said. “It’s who we are. I think they have to keep reminding us how to play. I heard them on the bench reminding guys that this is how you have to play.”

“They certainly lead by example that way. We don’t expect Dutchie and Cam and Bread to be banging like that, but they can take lessons from that line as far as how straight ahead they are. It’s a line that’s really done some really good things for us.”

Notebook

- D Ryan Murray (upper body) has been out since Feb. 18 with an injury. He hasn’t yet begun skating, and GM Jarmo Kekalainen said it’s unclear whether Murray will be able to return before the end of the regular season.

- With Murray out indefinitely, and with the late-season games taking on more importance, look for Seth Jones’ ice time to skyrocket. He played 28:57 on Saturday, his sixth-highest total of the season. (Two for the top-five performances were in overtime games.) Tortorella had a blunt response to the matter: “Yep, it’s part of the game. That’s going to be part of his game.”

- Jones is third in the NHL, averaging 25:57 per game. Only Minnesota’s Ryan Suter (26:54) and Los Angeles’ Drew Doughty (26:50) are ahead for him.

- Duchene and Dzingel played major roles in the Blue Jackets’ 3-1 goal scored by Oliver Bjorkstrand on Saturday versus Pittsburgh, perhaps a good sign that the Ottawa transplants are starting to gain traction in Columbus. The biggest adjustment might belong to Dzingel, who is averaging a whopping five minutes less ice time with the Blue Jackets (12:43) than he did in Ottawa (17:45). The biggest difference is on the power play — Dzingel played on it for the Senators but he’s not for the Blue Jackets.

- Here’s Tortorella on Duchene and Dzingel: “They made a couple plays. It was the first time we’ve kind of seen them work together. I thought Zinger made some good plays in tight coming off the wall. Made a really good play to Andy (but the puck) went on edge and he shot it wide. I think Dutchie and Zinger found one another more last night than the other games.”

- Duchene has mentioned a few times that he took a while to get acclimated in Ottawa when he was traded there by Colorado early last season. His memory is sound. In his first 12 games with the Senators, Duchene had 1-1-2 with a minus-11 rating. So far he has 1-3-4 and a minus-2 rating in nine games with Columbus.

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1135445 Buffalo Sabres

Sabres’ Alex Nylander hopes to stay in NHL beyond Jack Eichel’s suspension

By Jason Wolf

Published Mon, Mar 11, 2019|Updated Mon, Mar 11, 2019

Alex Nylander doesn’t know whether he’ll remain with the Sabres beyond Jack Eichel’s two-game suspension, but the former first-round draft pick intends to make the most of the opportunity.

The forward, drafted eighth overall in 2016, has played just seven NHL games over the last two seasons, recording one goal and one assist.

“I’m just going to play my best and obviously I hope to be here for longer,” Nylander said after joining the Sabres for practice Monday at KeyBank Center. “I’m just trying to play my best and work hard every single day I’m here.”



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Nylander, 21, skated on the second line with center Evan Rodrigues and forward Conor Sheary.

Casey Mittelstadt centered the top line alongside Jeff Skinner and Jason Pominville. Vladimir Sobotka centered the third line featuring Tage Thompson and Sam Reinhart.

Nylander also skated on the second power play unit with Mittelstadt, Skinner, Kyle Okposo and Brandon Montour.

In 49 games this season in Rochester, Nylander has career highs of 12 goals and 31 points, and his 19 assists equal a career high. He scored in each of his last four contests.

"I'd like to see the exact same things that got him an opportunity to come up and play for us," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "I was just talking with (general manager) Jason (Botterill) and (Amerks coach) Chris Taylor. He's playing very well right now. Obviously, he's scoring, he's shooting the puck a lot more, and we want him to attack the game with that same focus that he's had when he's been in Rochester."

Nylander was promoted from the Amerks for the first time this season in the wake of Eichel's suspension for hitting Colorado Avalanche center Carl Soderberg with an illegal check to the head late in the second period of Saturday's 3-0 loss at Colorado.

Eichel will miss the next two home games, against Dallas on Tuesday and Pittsburgh on Thursday, giving Nylander at least a brief opportunity to show he belongs in the NHL.

"It's obviously an unfortunate situation," Sheary said. "Jack's kind of the heartbeat of this team. He makes our team go. To see him get suspended is tough. But these are the opportunities that young guys need to kind of crack this league and solidify a spot in the NHL, so hopefully he can take advantage of his time."

The Sabres have 14 games remaining in the regular season and have faded from playoff contention, going 2-8-2 in their last 12 games.

Nylander is only one of two players drafted in the top 10 in 2016 – the other being Vancouver defenseman Olli Juolevi, who has yet to make his NHL debut – to appear in fewer than 128 NHL regular-season games. He missed the first three months of last season, his second with the Amerks, with a severe groin strain.

"I just want to show that I can be here," Nylander said. "I know I'm ready for this. I'm going to take this opportunity that I get and do the best I can with it."

The Sabres announced that Jeffrey Cutler has been named the recipient of the 2019 J. Michael Duffett Memorial Award, presented each year to the coach or administrator whose contributions to amateur hockey in Western New York "best exemplify the knowledge, teaching, love of the game and gentle humanity of Mike."

Cutler is the 34th recipient of the award, which will be presented Tuesday at the Sabres' game against the Dallas Stars.

A native of Amherst, Cutler has coached youth hockey for 38 years. In 1993, he became one of the first sled hockey coaches in Western New York in hopes he could share his passion for hockey with his son, John, who was born with spina bifida. That same year, Cutler became a board member for WNY Physically Challenged Youth, a position he still holds.

Cutler has coached Brad Emmerson, Chris Manns, Al Salamone and Adam Page, who went on to play with Team USA at the national level and the Winter Paralympics. Cutler has won 22 championships, including the 2015 IPC Sled World Championship.

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1135446 Buffalo Sabres

Sabres' Jack Eichel, coach Phil Housley disagree with NHL suspension

By Jason Wolf

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Sabres center Jack Eichel and coach Phil Housley both said that they disagree with the NHL Department of Player Safety's decision to suspend the Sabres' captain for two games after Eichel hit Colorado Avalanche center Carl Soderberg with an illegal check to the head late in the second period of Saturday's 3-0 loss at Colorado.

Eichel will miss home games against Dallas on Tuesday and Pittsburgh on Thursday. In a corresponding move, the Sabres recalled Alexander Nylander from Rochester.

"It's tough. Obviously, you don't want to miss two games with the team," Eichel said Monday after practice at KeyBank Center. "It's the league's decision. Obviously, we have to stand by it. But I don't agree with it. Obviously, if you look at the hit and you look at their rule book, I just didn't think that it matched up. That's not an illegal hit. I don't move myself to lower it into him.

"If you watch the hit, he actually is at fault for dropping his head down there. It's a 50/50 puck that I'm trying to make a hockey play on. You see me, I had my eyes on the puck the whole time and then I actually make a play on the puck after, so, you know, it's kind of frustrating.

"If they're going to have a rule about head shots, it has to be pretty black and white. If all head shots are suspendable, suspend all head shots. But it's tough to see them picking and choosing what they feel is suspendable. But it's a decision you have to live with."

Housley echoed Eichel's remarks in a brief press conference.

"I don't agree with the decision," Housley said, "but we have to live with it. And that's all I'm going to say about that."

Eichel received a penalty for an "illegal check to the head" at 14:48 of the second period after he and Soderberg were engaged in a puck battle in the neutral zone. Soderberg fell briefly on his stomach before heading to the bench. He played the rest of the game and appeared uninjured.

Eichel had a phone hearing Sunday with the NHL's Department of Player Safety, which issued the first fine or suspension of his four-year NHL career.

"With Soderberg reaching for the puck, Eichel cut sharply in front of him with his upper body hitting Soderberg's head and making it the main point of contact on a hit where such head contact was avoidable," the league said.

"While we acknowledge Eichel's argument that Soderberg is low and reaching for the puck, this hit does not meet any of the criteria for unavoidable head contact under Rule 48."

Under the terms of the Collective Bargaining Agreement and based on his average annual salary, Eichel will forfeit \$107,526.88. The money goes to the Players' Emergency Assistance Fund.

The league absolved Soderberg of contributing to the nature of the hit.

"His head and core move in a consistent manner," the league said, "and do not suddenly and materially change position in a way that changes the nature of this hit from a full body check to one that picks the head."

Eichel had been agitated after taking a late and high hit from former Sabres defenseman Nikita Zadorov in the first period. Zadorov received a minor penalty for roughing on the play, which came after a whistle for offsides. He is not facing supplemental discipline.



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"I think it was a physical game, so that's what it required," Eichel said. "I don't think I was finishing my check. I finished more than just one check, but I don't think I was finishing a check there. It's a hockey play that unfortunately led to me getting suspended for two games."

Eichel is eligible to return Saturday at Carolina. Eichel has 25 goals, 47 assists and 72 points in 65 games this season. He missed three games earlier this season after suffering an upper-body injury.

"No one's going to be able to replace him," Sabres forward Sam Reinhart said. "That's just a fact with the talent he has, so I think either with him in the lineup or out of the lineup, I think at this time when things aren't going well for really anybody you've just got to play your game and take advantage of bounces hopefully and settle yourself down and play with some composure."

Is there anything Eichel can learn from this experience?

"I don't know," Eichel said. "What do you learn from a suspension? Avoid contact? It's tough, you know? It's a physical game and things happen really fast out there, so you're constantly required to make split-second decisions and that one, I'm bracing myself thinking contact's coming and he tries to poke it around me and go into the inside and his head goes off my back."

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1135447 BuffaloSabres

Alex Nylander returns to Buffalo looking to make the offensive impact that few recalls have

By John Vogl

Mar 11, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. — From the moment Alex Nylander walked to the draft stage in the Sabres' arena, his goal was to make the building his home. He's getting his best chance yet.

"I just want to show that I can be here," the winger said Monday. "I know I'm ready for this."

Nylander has never been shy about expressing his NHL desires. The No. 8 overall pick from 2016 is certain he'll follow in the footsteps of his father, Michael, and his brother, William. After returning from injury last month in Rochester, he talked about playing well enough to earn a call-up and "not coming back down here."

The reeling Sabres recalled the prospect over the weekend, and he'll make his season debut Tuesday against Dallas. There are 14 games remaining and it wouldn't be a surprise to see Nylander in all of them.

Buffalo is merely playing out the string — and based on Saturday's no-show in Colorado, "playing" is a relative term — so it makes sense to give the 21-year-old a longer look than his first two seasons. He played in the final three games last year and the last four in 2016-17. A full month in Buffalo would give the organization a better gauge of Nylander's growth.

"I'm just going to play my best and obviously I hope to be here for longer," he said.

Nylander has earned this look. He scored in four straight games for the Amerks, giving him four goals and seven points in the last six outings.

"We want him to attack the game with that same focus that he's had in Rochester," said Sabres coach Phil Housley, who placed Nylander alongside center Evan Rodrigues and left wing Conor Sheary. "He's

shooting the puck a lot more. He's creating a lot more. Obviously, he's scored four goals recently, which is the result of shooting the puck more."

During Nylander's four-game scoring run, he took 12 shots for an average of three per game. During his opening 45 games, he took just 77 shots, an average of 1.7 per game.

"I'm getting more to the scoring areas," Nylander said. "I know I have a good shot, so I've just got to keep shooting and making plays out there."

The winger's season in the American Hockey League can be broken down into three segments: a fine start, a midseason slump and a hot stretch.

Games	Goals	Assists	Points
19	6	11	17
24	2	5	7
6	4	3	7

"Obviously, I wanted to be here," he said. "But I just tried to take it and learn as much as I could down there, be more experienced in my third year to obviously be as ready as possible when I got called back up."

Few players in AHL history have gained as much as experience as Nylander at his age. He just turned 21 on March 2, and here is EliteProspects.com's all-time list of AHL games played by skaters under age 21.

The only forward to carve out a long NHL career was Prospal, who played in 1,108 games for Philadelphia, Ottawa, Florida, Tampa Bay, Anaheim, the Rangers and Columbus. He spent three full seasons in the minors before blossoming in his fourth year at age 21. He became a regular NHL player at age 24 and a 20-goal scorer at age 25.

Nylander hopes it doesn't take that long. The winger has already set career highs in goals (12) and points (31) in the minors, putting him a tie for 15th this season among AHL players under 21.

While Nylander wants to show he's ready for the big leagues, the Sabres need him to show it. During the past eight seasons, they've had only two forwards (Marcus Foligno and Brian Flynn) arrive from Rochester and make an offensive impact. It's been ugly.

In 666 games, the recalls have totaled 71 goals and 65 assists. That's an average of 0.2 points per game. Even excluding Matt Ellis, who was called upon to be a fourth-line role player, the recalls have averaged just 0.22 points per game (66 goals and 128 points in 577 outings).

This season, C.J. Smith, Scott Wilson and Danny O'Regan have combined for two goals and two assists in 20 games.

Games	Goals	Assists	Points	
Smith	11	2	0	2
Wilson	8	0	2	2
O'Regan	1	0	0	0

In 2017-18, Nick Baptiste, Justin Bailey, Kyle Crisculo, Hudson Fasching, Nylander and O'Regan totaled eight goals and three assists in 64 games.

Games	Goals	Assists	Points	
Baptiste	33	4	2	6
Bailey	12	3	1	4
Crisculo	9	0	0	0
Fasching	5	0	0	0
Nylander	3	1	0	1
O'Regan	2	0	0	0



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In 2016-17, William Carrier, Bailey, Rodrigues, Baptiste, Cal O'Reilly, Cole Schneider and Nylander combined for 14 goals and 11 assists in 136 games.

Games	Goals	Assists	Points	
Carrier	41	5	3	8
Bailey	32	2	2	4
Rodrigues	30	4	2	6
Baptiste	14	3	1	4
O'Reilly	11	0	1	1
Schneider	4	0	1	1
Nylander	4	0	1	1

In 2015-16, O'Reilly, Tim Schaller, Dan Catenacci, Bailey, Phil Varone, Schneider and Rodrigues totaled six goals and eight assists in 65 games.

Games	Goals	Assists	Points	
O'Reilly	20	3	4	7
Schaller	17	1	2	3
Catenacci	11	0	0	0
Bailey	8	0	0	0
Varone	5	1	1	2
Schneider	2	0	0	0
Rodrigues	2	1	1	2

In 2014-15, Ellis, Varone, Mikhail Grigorenko, Zac Dalpe, Schaller, Jerry D'Amigo and Joel Armia combined for nine goals and nine assists in 141 games.

Games	Goals	Assists	Points		
Ellis	39	1	1	2	
Varone	28	3	2	5	
Grigorenko		25	3	3	6
Dalpe	21	1	2	3	
Schaller	18	1	1	2	
D'Amigo	9	0	0	0	
Armia	1	0	0	0	

In 2013-14, Ellis, Nicolas Deslauriers, Luke Adam and Varone had seven goals and three assists in 88 games.

Games	Goals	Assists	Points		
Ellis	50	4	2	6	
Deslauriers		17	1	0	1
Adam	12	1	0	1	
Varone	9	1	1	2	

In 2012-13, Kevin Porter, Flynn and Adam totaled 11 goals and 10 assists in 61 games. Flynn led the way with a respectable showing.

Games	Goals	Assists	Points	
Porter	31	4	5	9
Flynn	26	6	5	11
Adam	4	1	0	1

In 2011-12, Corey Tropp, Zack Kassian, Foligno, Paul Szczechura, Travis Turnbull, Colin Stuart and Derek Whitmore combined for 14 goals and 19 assists in 91 games. Foligno caught fire alongside Tyler Ennis and Drew Stafford, cementing a spot in Buffalo for the next five seasons.

Games	Goals	Assists	Points		
Tropp	34	3	5	8	
Kassian	27	3	4	7	
Foligno	14	6	7	13	
Szczechura		9	1	3	4
Turnbull	3	1	0	1	
Stuart	2	0	0	0	
Whitmore	2	0	0	0	

Nylander can make his case to be a full-time NHLer during the next four weeks. He's been waiting for the shot, and it will be his best chance to date.

"I've been up now every single year since I came here," Nylander said. "I've just been waiting for my opportunity. I'm ready to take it now."

The Athletic LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135448 BuffaloSabres

Should the NHL limit draft lottery wins? GMs weigh in on need for a rule change

By Craig Custance

Mar 11, 2019

First, let's start off with a little exercise. An exercise we know the occasional NHL general manager does when killing time. Let's head on over to tankathon.com, the great lottery simulator and time waster.

On Saturday, the Maple Leafs beat the Oilers to end a nice little four-game win streak for Edmonton. The loss meant that the Oilers woke up on Monday with the eighth-best shot at winning the 2019 NHL Draft lottery and the shot at drafting Jack Hughes, the game's next star forward.

That loss, according to tankathon, gave them a six percent chance at the No. 1 pick. So hold on, let's see how many clicks of the simulator it takes to get the Oilers the No. 1 overall pick.

Be right back.

Two.

Honestly. It took two simulations to land the Oilers the No. 1 pick. And really, should we expect anything less this spring when it comes time for the NHL to select the draft order?

Screenshot proof of an Oilers lottery win from Tankathon:

Now, this doesn't take into account the free fall of the Devils. Or just how bad the Red Wings are playing right now. Or that the most chaotic (and likely?) outcome is an Ottawa win and the pick immediately being shipped off to Colorado as part of the (first) Matt Duchene trade. All those factors are going to change the dynamic of the lottery this year.



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But we also have to come to the realization that it's quite possible the Oilers are back in this conversation when it comes time to pick ping pong balls. When presented with this suggestion at their annual GMs meetings in Boca Raton, Florida, last week, general managers typically had two reactions: They laughed, which is completely appropriate. Because what else are you going to do? Or they shook their head with a bit of a pained expression that suggested what many fans of other cities feel – It just wouldn't seem fair.

Since 2010, there have been nine draft lotteries. The Oilers won four of them (2010, 2011, 2012 and 2015). No other team has won it twice.

Their success already contributed to one change in the lottery. In 2014, the NHL announced a two-year transition to the draft lottery system that is currently in place. Starting in the 2015 draft, the odds of landing the top pick were spread more evenly amongst the 14 teams in the lottery. For instance, the chances of the worst team in the league winning the lottery dropped from 25 percent to 20 percent. That change didn't slow the Oilers, with Edmonton landing Connor McDavid in the 2015 draft with the top pick.

In 2016, the current format played out for the first time. There are now three lotteries for each of the top three picks. That means the team that finishes last in the league could, in theory, drop to No. 4 overall. Part of the motivation is to discourage tanking and this lottery change is often cited by general managers as one of the reasons they'd rather not strip their roster down like rebuilding teams in the past. There's even less of a guarantee of a top pick now.

That said, the No. 30 overall team has picked first in the current system in two of the three years since it was implemented (Maple Leafs and Sabres).

So, it's working. There's been an assortment of teams at the top. Some big jumps from teams, like the Stars and Hurricanes getting lucky. It makes for a fun event.

And in some ways, it works to the Oilers' advantage. They probably won't be a No. 31 team as long as McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are around. So there's definitely an appetite among some teams to add one more wrinkle to the process: A cap on how many times a team can win the No. 1 overall pick in a short period of time.

This was on the agenda at the 2016 NHL GM meetings, when it was proposed by Nashville GM David Poile that a rule be made that prevents teams that don't finish last from picking first multiple years in a short window of time. The caveat in this proposal was that the team that finished dead last would always have the same shot at No. 1 overall, regardless of how many times they'd won the lottery.

Did it get a lot of support?

"No," Poile said last week, laughing.

But it's fair to say it's an issue that will be monitored as the current lottery system ages and results start to add up – especially if Hughes is playing in Edmonton at this point next year.

Poile, for one, is in favor of exploring change.

"I'd love to bring that up again," he said. "You actually could get some inequity in the conferences, if the first two or three players, franchise players, end up in the same conference or specifically with the same team. If that topic got brought up, I'd like to discuss that again."

He's not alone among his colleagues who would at least be interested in having the debate.

"I think there's definitely logic behind not having the same teams over and over winning the lottery," said Rangers GM Jeff Gorton. "Maybe if you won a couple times, you can only go to a certain spot in the next few years. Yeah, I think it's definitely something worth talking about."

"I think it should be limited," said an Eastern Conference GM who asked to not be identified. "You shouldn't keep rewarding teams for constantly

being there. There should be some kind of timeframe where you have to show progress ... maybe the odds should change for a team that's been there a certain amount of times."

A few GMs asked about the NBA's system and whether or not that's worth copying. In 2017, the NBA tweaked its lottery system with the changes beginning this year. The NBA's lottery system was similar to the NHL's but will now level the odds at the bottom of the standings so that the teams that finish with the three worst records all have a 14 percent chance of winning the lottery. That eliminates any race to the bottom. There will be lottery drawings for the first four NBA picks and then the remaining picks will be an inverse of the standings. Theoretically, a team could finish last this year in the NBA and still pick fifth. There is no cap on the number of lottery wins in the NBA.

The no-cap system is one that still has plenty of support amongst NHL GMs.

"I think, right now, it's a fair system we have," Sabres GM Jason Botterill said. "I like the balance to it now. You've seen in the last few years teams jumping up."

A Western Conference GM pointed out that the idea of the lottery is to help teams at the bottom of the standings get back to being competitive. So if a team is consistently in the lottery mix, it still needs that assistance.

"If the players they were selecting were helping a team win, they wouldn't be in that lottery," he said. "Something must be happening ... it's an unusual circumstance for a team to have multiple lottery picks – maybe it means the players haven't turned out or they've done something. I don't know if that's a big problem that needs to be solved."

That's the other part of the equation. Sure, there are years in which a generational talent is sitting at the No. 1 pick. But that's not always the case.

The Oilers won the 2011 draft lottery but the Winnipeg Jets certainly wouldn't trade Mark Scheifele, taken at No. 7, for No. 1 pick Ryan Nugent-Hopkins right now. And we all know how the Nail Yakupov picked turned out in 2012. Picking first comes with no guarantees.

Blackhawks GM Stan Bowman agreed that the optics might not look great if the Oilers win the 2019 lottery but resisted the notion that it would be an indictment of the process.

"That doesn't necessarily mean the system doesn't work," he said.

Perhaps it was Kings GM Rob Blake who conveyed the reason why there probably won't be a change anytime soon. When presented with the question as to whether or not the NHL should put a cap on winning the lottery, he never quite offered an opinion.

Instead, he shared a glimpse of the emotional side of the rebuild. The Kings are just now getting a taste for what Oilers fans and management have been feeling for years. It's hard. At times, it's downright miserable.

Maybe it's not the time to pile on with addition draft lottery restrictions.

"I don't know," he said, considering the issue. "Just from my own personal experience in being near the bottom, it's really hard to do this every year. To sit through it and lose and lose. I can't speak for other GMs in other organizations, but to me, if this is an ongoing process year after year – it's not fun."

The Athletic LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135546 Pittsburgh Penguins

With Zach Aston-Reese injured, Penguins call up Joseph Blandisi from Wilkes-Barre



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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JONATHAN BOMBULIE

Monday, March 11, 2019 5:28 p.m

Needing reinforcements after an injury to winger Zach Aston-Reese, the Pittsburgh Penguins called up forward Joseph Blandisi from Wilkes-Barre/Scranton of the AHL on Monday.

Aston-Reese suffered a lower-body injury in the second period of a 4-2 Penguins victory over Boston on Sunday night and did not return. Afterwards, coach Mike Sullivan said Aston-Reese was being evaluated.

Aston-Reese has eight goals and 17 points in 43 games this season. After he was injured, Teddy Blueger took his place on the second line with Evgeni Malkin and Phil Kessel.

Blandisi, 24, was acquired in a Jan. 17 trade with Anaheim. He played one game with the Penguins the next night before being assigned to Wilkes-Barre, where he has seven goals and 15 points in 17 games.

Tribune Review LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135547 Pittsburgh Penguins

Penguins sign college free agent Jake Lucchini

JONATHAN BOMBULIE

Monday, March 11, 2019 1:30 a.m

Having regularly traded away draft picks in pursuit of Stanley Cup championships, it's important for the Pittsburgh Penguins to replenish their prospect pool with undrafted college free agents.

They took a step in that direction Monday, signing Michigan Tech winger Jake Lucchini to a one-year contract that kicks in next season. Lucchini, 23, will report to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton for a taste of pro hockey on an amateur tryout contract.

A productive, high-energy forward, the 5-foot-11, 182-pound Lucchini has led Michigan Tech in scoring each of the past two seasons. This year, he had 11 goals and 26 points in 38 games.

Lucchini attended development camp with the Penguins last June.

Tribune Review LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135548 Pittsburgh Penguins

Penguins leaning on young wingers for playoff push

JONATHAN BOMBULIE

Monday, March 11, 2019 3:23 p.m

Veterans Phil Kessel and Patric Hornqvist are in scoring slumps. Bryan Rust is injured. Carl Hagelin and his replacement, Tanner Pearson, have been traded away.

On the wings, as they battle in a tight Eastern Conference playoff race, the Pittsburgh Penguins have placed their fate in the hands of a handful of players under age 25.

Jake Guentzel, Zach Aston-Reese, Dominik Simon and Teddy Blueger were born within three months of each other in the late summer and early fall of 1994. Jared McCann came along a little less than two years later.

The Penguins will need contributions from all of them, whether large or small, to be serious contenders for a championship in 2019.

Guentzel already is contributing at an extraordinarily high level. This season, among NHL wingers under 25, only Chicago's Alex DeBrincat (37) has more goals than Guentzel (34).

"What he did is pretty crazy, the way he came into the league and the way his playoffs have gone," Aston-Reese said.

Guentzel is a rare breed, of course. Most young wingers have to work at becoming consistent offensive contributors.

Among the Penguins under that umbrella, McCann is probably the furthest along.

McCann was a junior hockey scoring star, but he was cast in a bottom-six center role during most of his first three NHL seasons in Vancouver and Florida. He's now starting to flourish as a top-six winger with the Penguins. He's got five goals in his last seven games.

"Coming from the OHL, I was always the power-play guy," McCann said. "I've had to learn a different role and become a different player. Obviously, that's going to take time. I feel like I'm becoming more of an all-around player. I'm ready to be put in any situation. It's good."

Simon's case is the most confounding. Teammates rave about his skill level and work ethic, but it hasn't translated on the stat sheet. Simon has no goals and five assists in his last 18 games.

"Put a lot of pucks on the net, for sure. That's where it starts," Simon said, outlining his plan to snap out of his drought. "Simplify your game, then you can build up on it. I feel pretty good right now. Let's see how it goes."

As the 2017 NCAA scoring champ, Aston-Reese has the pedigree to produce in the NHL. His career total of 12 goals in 59 games in the league indicates his arrow is pointing in the right direction.

Injuries have stunted his growth, however. For instance, he left Sunday night's 4-2 Penguins win over Boston with a lower-body injury and his status is uncertain heading into a matchup with the Washington Capitals on Tuesday night.

After Aston-Reese left, Blueger moved up into his spot on the second line. Blueger was considered a defensive center as he made his way up the prospect ladder, but a crafty style of play and three goals in his first eight NHL games have given rise to the idea that he might be able to score at the game's highest level.

To coach Mike Sullivan, the fact all five young wingers are at different stages in their development curve as scorers is instructive. The coach believes consistent scoring at the NHL level is a skill a young player can hone and improve upon.

"Some nights, you have your legs and you feel great. Other nights, maybe you don't have your legs and you've got to manage your game," Sullivan said. "How do you play an efficient, smart game so that you still have the ability to have a positive influence to help your team win?"

"Those are things, the only way you can learn those is through experience, by being part of those situations and then watching guys like (Sidney) Crosby and some of our other veteran guys that understand it. I just think that's part of the learning process for all young players."



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Tribune Review LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135549 Pittsburgh Penguins

Penguins announce finalists for new Mike Lange catchphrase

Staff Report

Tribune-ReviewTRIBUNE-REVIEW

Monday, March 11, 2019 12:56 p.m

There will be a lot on the line Tuesday night when the Penguins face off against the Washington Capitals.

The Penguins can inch closer to the Metropolitan Division-leading Capitals.

Evgeni Malkin could reach 1,000 career points.

And the new Mike Lange catchphrase will be announced.

Five finalists of the "Name that Lange" contest to find the latest Lange-ism were announced Monday morning. The five finalists were given tickets to Tuesday's game, and Lange, the Hall of Fame broadcaster, will announce his winner during the contest.

After receiving thousands of entries, Mike Lange has selected five finalists for his new goal call. Which has your vote?

Tribune Review LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135550 Pittsburgh Penguins

Tim Benz, Mark Madden discuss Antonio Brown trade, Penguins' split weekend

TIM BENZ

Monday, March 11, 2019 6:27 a.m

This week's edition of Madden Monday comes to you from the catacombs of PPG Paints Arena.

Mark Madden of 105.9 the X joins me as we exhale after that Penguins win against the Bruins on Sunday night. Man, was that huge for the Penguins after the loss in Columbus Saturday.

Matt Murray certainly had a nice weekend. Maybe he is back to his form of 2016 and 2017. Also, the two Florida guys — Jared McCann and Nick Bjugstad — came up big again. That trade is starting to look better all the time.

Jake Guentzel stays hot, too, with another goal. Will he go down as the best winger of Sidney Crosby's career?

Then we have the swamp that is the Pittsburgh Steelers. The city is depressed over the Antonio Brown trade. And for good reason. We try to find some sort of way that the Steelers can save face out of that debacle.

Also, things might feel even worse soon when Le'Veon Bell finds a new team.

And to really get on Mark's good side, we talk about two of his favorite topics. UFO and soccer.

Tribune Review LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135551 Pittsburgh Penguins

Penguins goalie Matt Murray thriving under heavy workload

JONATHAN BOMBULIE

Monday, March 11, 2019 5:30 a.m

Playing on back-to-back nights for the second time in the past two weeks, Pittsburgh Penguins goalie Matt Murray had one thing going for him Sunday at PPG Paints Arena: Space.

"Columbus is a short flight, which helped," Murray said, referring to the location of his team's game the night before.

He also had one thing working against him: Time.

"We lost an hour too, right?" Murray said, referring to the beginning of daylight saving time.

In the end, none of that mattered.

Little does to Murray these days, who is swatting away potential distractions or complications like unscreened lobs from the point.

He's playing some of his best hockey of the season, and Sunday night's game was no exception. He made 39 saves to lead the Penguins to a 4-2 victory over the Boston Bruins, who were 14-0-5 in their previous 19 games.

He said staying off the ice Sunday morning and going through the recovery regimen prescribed by the team's strength and conditioning staff was all he needed to be fresh for the tail end of a back-to-back.

"Those strength guys, they do a heck of a job giving us what we need to feel good," Murray said. "Physically, I feel really good."

Murray has made eight consecutive starts for the Penguins. He's 5-2-1 with a .931 save percentage during that span.

"It doesn't honestly surprise me at all, said winger Jared McCann, a junior hockey teammate of Murray with the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds. "In the Soo, he was just like this. He was the reason we made it so far down there. He's a great goaltender."

A 36-save performance in a 5-1 Penguins win in Montreal on March 2 — the first time Murray played in back-to-back games this season — may have been the jumping off point for his recent run of fine form, not that the 24-year-old goalie has spent much time pondering the proposition.

"I think every game's a building block," Murray said. "You want to build each and every game and get better and better. At the same time, every game, you reset, too. It's just one at a time."

Murray made a handful of highlight-reel caliber saves on Saturday night in Columbus, but the Penguins dropped a 4-1 decision. On Sunday, the results and performance matched up.

"I think he should have had one and two on the top 10 on SportsCenter last night," center Nick Bjugstad said. "Unbelievable to have him on the back end. His focus, he doesn't get too high on himself when he's doing



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well, which is most of the time. I think that's the main thing I notice. For such a young goaltender, his demeanor is very focused and dialed in."

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1135552 Pittsburgh Penguins

Penguins call up Joseph Blandisi from Wilkes-Barre/Scranton

Jason Mackey Pittsburgh Post-Gazette jmackey@post-gazette.com

Joseph Blandisi is shown earlier this season with the Anaheim Ducks.

With Zach Aston-Reese being evaluated for a lower-body injury, the Penguins on Monday recalled fellow forward Joseph Blandisi on an emergency basis from Wilkes-Barre/Scranton of the American Hockey League.

Aston-Reese was hurt during Sunday's 4-2 victory over the Boston Bruins. He logged 8:25, and Teddy Blueger took Aston-Reese's spot at left wing with Evgeni Malkin and Phil Kessel.

Coach Mike Sullivan said after the game that Aston-Reese was injured and in the process of being evaluated.

Since they've only been carrying 12 forwards, if Aston-Reese can't play Tuesday against the Capitals, the Penguins would have needed to recall someone.

The move also could be made as insurance as they monitor Aston-Reese's status.

Blandisi, 24, has played in 17 games for Wilkes-Barre/Scranton this season, producing seven goals and 15 points.

The Penguins traded for Blandisi on Jan. 17, sending Derek Grant back to the Anaheim Ducks to do it. In 27 games with the San Diego Gulls — Anaheim's AHL affiliate — Blandisi had eight goals and 23 points.

Blandisi has played in 75 NHL games with Anaheim, New Jersey and Pittsburgh, including one with the Penguins on Jan. 18 at Arizona. In that game, he had two shots in 6:47 during the Penguins' 3-2 overtime win.

Post Gazette LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135553 Pittsburgh Penguins

Penguins sign college free agent Jake Lucchini

Jason Mackey

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

jmackey@post-gazette.com

Mar 11, 2019

The Penguins on Monday announced they signed college free agent forward Jake Lucchini to a one-year, entry-level contract.

Lucchini, 23, will report to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton on Tuesday and play the rest of this season on an amateur tryout contract before the actual deal starts next season.

Lucchini is a forward and was Michigan Tech's captain this past season, producing 11 goals and 26 points in 38 games. He's 5-foot-11, 183 pounds and from Trail, British Columbia.

In 164 career games with Michigan Tech, Lucchini had 45 goals and 104 points, including a career-high 16 goals, 26 assists and 39 points in 44 games as a junior.

Post Gazette LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135554 Pittsburgh Penguins

New Capital Carl Hagelin knows Tuesday will be a little weird

Jason Mackey Pittsburgh Post-Gazette jmackey@post-gazette.com

During the first TV timeout of Tuesday's game against the Capitals, the Zamboni entrance will open, the Penguins Ice Crew will scoop up some snow, and heads will turn to the center-ice scoreboard for a tribute video honoring Carl Hagelin.

On the visiting bench, Alex Ovechkin and Tom Wilson will likely clap or tap their sticks in approval during what will surely be a strange scene — one of their teammates being honored at PPG Paints Arena.

Hagelin hasn't thought a ton about that moment. He's been too busy with his new team, which currently occupies first place in the Metropolitan Division and appears poised to make a run at winning the Stanley Cup for a second consecutive season.

But even though Hagelin hasn't processed all the mixed emotions that might be on display, he does grasp how awkward Tuesday will surely be for some Penguins fans.

"I gave my all for the Penguins organization," Hagelin told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette by phone late Saturday night. "Over the three years I was there, I was able to help the team get two Cups.

"At the same time, I understand the team I play for is nothing that fans in Pittsburgh are going to respect."

Hagelin then brought up an important point about the two trades that sent him to Los Angeles and then D.C.

"It wasn't my decision to make any of this happen," he said. "You have to make the most of it. So far, so good with Washington."

Seeing Hagelin in a Capitals sweater might make some fans do a double-take, and Hagelin admitted the first time entering that dressing room was a little weird. But it's also not the first time he's been traded, having previously been dealt by the Rangers and Ducks.

The Penguins played Hagelin's first NHL employer, the New York Rangers, twice in the playoffs before Hagelin changed sides in January 2016 and caused a few awkward feelings among the Manhattan faithful.

"I've battled in that building, being a part of the Penguins, against Washington a lot, the last three playoffs, which made it even more of a rivalry," Hagelin said. "It'll be special. At the same time, I'm kind of used to it."

It will also be weird for Hagelin's closest friend in the NHL, Patrik Hornqvist. After Sunday's game, Hornqvist grabbed his phone and saw a



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clip of Hagelin in a Capitals sweater for the first time, the left wing scoring on a breakaway.

"It doesn't look right on him," Hornqvist joked of seeing Hagelin in a Capitals sweater. "At the same time, he's on a good team with the chance to win.

"We're competitive guys and good friends, but it's going to be a battle when the puck drops."

After the Penguins traded Hagelin for Tanner Pearson this past November, the Kings flipped the speedy Swede to the Capitals on Feb. 23 for draft picks.

Hagelin has scored twice for his new team and helped steady its penalty kill, which has snuffed out 16 straight and 19 of 21 since adding him and defenseman Nick Jensen. Overall, the Capitals have won seven in a row entering Tuesday's game.

"I don't think it was a trade where they just kind of guessed and were hoping to get something that I wasn't," Hagelin said. "They knew what I was all about. They knew this time of year is usually when I play my best hockey.

"They tried to get me to use me on the kill and move me up and down the lineup, hopefully create some offense for them, as well. I guess it was a void they needed to be filled. It's been good so far."

Things really haven't been awkward with his new team, Hagelin said, although it's likely they didn't discuss that 2016 Eastern Conference semifinal series in detail, when Hagelin scored three goals.

More than anything, the Capitals were thrilled to have what Hagelin can bring — the speed, tenacity, team-first attitude and playoff experience.

"I think there was a mutual respect between me and the other players on the team," Hagelin said. "Obviously we battled. We said some things to each other throughout the years, but that goes out the window once you play for the team. Once I got here and played the first game, I really liked being here."

Before Tuesday's game, Hagelin and Hornqvist will still get together for dinner. When Hagelin's wife and daughter make the trip over from Sweden, it'll be just a four-hour drive for Hornqvist and his family.

But on Tuesday, they'll turn into enemies, at least for 60 minutes.

"Our friendship is going to stay for life," Hornqvist said. "When we play against each other, it's going to be a lot of battles. We both love to win and compete."

On Tuesday, after the tribute video plays, Hagelin should received a hearty ovation from the home crowd, even though he's now in enemy territory, on a team many of his former teammates dislike very much.

There's also the outside chance that Hagelin could be booed because of the colors he's now wearing, although he said he hasn't thought that far ahead.

"I haven't really thought about it, but I don't know why I would get booed," Hagelin said. "It wasn't my decision to leave. I'm just doing my job, playing professional hockey.

"In Pittsburgh, I know I did everything there I could."

Post Gazette LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135531 NHL

NHL Seattle to open season-ticket and suites preview center by honoring longtime Totems star Guyle Fielder

Geoff Baker

Inside the NHL

Longtime Seattle Totems legend Guyle Fielder is to be honored by this city's incoming NHL franchise sooner than he or anyone else initially thought.

Now 88 and living in Arizona, Fielder, who captained the Totems to three Western Hockey League minor professional championships in the 1950s and 1960s, had already expressed hope of attending the NHL team's opening game at KeyArena in October 2021. But now, with the NHL Seattle season-ticket and suites preview center set to officially open in three weeks, a replica of Fielder's former locker stall is being built as one of the attractions within the showroom.

Not only that, but "Golden Guyle" himself has been invited by NHL Seattle to appear at the Pacific Science Center-based showroom. Details are being finalized, but Fielder said he's picked out some of his Totems memorabilia — his original game jersey and a customized stick among them — to be used for the locker stall and has been told to expect to travel up here for a few days next month.

"I'd heard for the last month or two that they wanted to plan something, but I didn't think it would ever come about because I was never really involved in the National Hockey League," said Fielder, who played only 15 NHL regular-season and playoff games for the Detroit Red Wings, Chicago Blackhawks and Boston Bruins over 22 professional seasons. "But I was involved in hockey in Seattle for 15, or 16 years, whatever it was. And we had some great years there successfully as a team, and I'm very proud to have been a part of it. So you're darned right I'm happy about this."

Idaho-born, Saskatchewan-raised Fielder finished with 2,037 combined goals and assists for the fourth-highest point total in pro hockey history. His longtime friend, British Columbia-based lawyer Douglas Buchanan, typically handles Fielder's business affairs and has been his go-between with NHL Seattle.

"Everything is still being worked out, but they've told me they want him there," Buchanan said.

The countdown to opening the preview showroom — for now to potential buyers of luxury suites and club-level seating, with season-ticket sales starting in the fall — is part of a busy month for NHL Seattle. On Tuesday, the group holds its quarterly business meeting at which time NHL Seattle president and CEO Tod Leiweke and senior hockey adviser Dave Tippett will ask ownership for approval to hire the new team's general manager this summer rather than next year.

Interviews of candidates would begin early during the NHL playoffs and continue into June. Some potential candidates, such as Vegas Golden Knights assistant GM Kelly McCrimmon, are with playoff-bound squads and won't be interviewed until their clubs are eliminated.

Despite recent rumors, the NHL Seattle group also won't finalize plans for an American Hockey League farm-team location until after its next quarterly business meeting in June.

For now, the group's limited opening of the preview showroom follows the one-year March 1 anniversary of it collecting nearly 33,000 season-ticket deposits from fans. That stunning tally paved the way for the NHL team's official approval in December, though deposit holders have been kept in the dark since then about pricing and seat locations.

And they'll still be largely without those answers until the fall, attributable partly to the NHL-imposed one-year delay from the team's initially intended 2020 franchise launch. The delay means NHL Seattle and the Oak View Group (OVG) arena developer have had to revise the envisioned price point on season-ticket packages due to inflation and other considerations.



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Already, the cost of completely remaking what both groups call the "New Arena at Seattle Center" has shot up by \$150 million from their \$700 million estimates last fall. Some of that will inevitably be recouped through season-ticket pricing once OVG gets a firmer grasp on the venue's final cost.

The vast showroom inside the ticket-preview center, with laser lights and video wall displays, will feature a motorized, high-tech model of the completed arena with its roof lifting off to provide a peek at the new features inside.

Full-sized replica luxury suites for sale have also been built. Future corporate sponsors already have been taken through the showroom to view the suites, even as construction was ongoing.

The Fielder locker replica is one of two planned. His will be permanent, while the other will be interchangeable and honor former NHL greats making appearances at the showroom from time to time.

The showroom contains photographs and information on players and moments in Seattle's hockey past. But Fielder will be the first former player honored in person.

The new team is expected to also honor Fielder in some permanent way at the arena once it reopens.

For now, Fielder, who hates flying and hasn't been on a plane since retiring in 1973, plans to have his longtime companion, Betty, drive them up from Arizona.

"Betty and I like to drive and we go everywhere," he said. "We've been to Alaska – we went out there for a month and drove both ways – and to Minnesota I don't know how many times. We've been back to Saskatchewan as well. We were thinking of what we're going to do this summer because it gets so hot out here in Arizona, so now with this situation it will help some. We'll go to Seattle for some time and have a little visit up there."

And begin their latest journey with a long-awaited commemoration of another that ended decades ago.

Seattle Times LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135605 Websites

The Athletic / Should the NHL limit draft lottery wins? GMs weigh in on need for a rule change

By Craig Custance Mar 11, 2019

First, let's start off with a little exercise. An exercise we know the occasional NHL general manager does when killing time. Let's head on over to tankathon.com, the great lottery simulator and time waster.

On Saturday, the Maple Leafs beat the Oilers to end a nice little four-game win streak for Edmonton. The loss meant that the Oilers woke up on Monday with the eighth-best shot at winning the 2019 NHL Draft lottery and the shot at drafting Jack Hughes, the game's next star forward.

That loss, according to tankathon, gave them a six percent chance at the No. 1 pick. So hold on, let's see how many clicks of the simulator it takes to get the Oilers the No. 1 overall pick.

Be right back.

Two.

Honestly. It took two simulations to land the Oilers the No. 1 pick. And really, should we expect anything less this spring when it comes time for the NHL to select the draft order?

Screenshot proof of an Oilers lottery win from Tankathon:

Now, this doesn't take into account the free fall of the Devils. Or just how bad the Red Wings are playing right now. Or that the most chaotic (and likely?) outcome is an Ottawa win and the pick immediately being shipped off to Colorado as part of the (first) Matt Duchene trade. All those factors are going to change the dynamic of the lottery this year.

But we also have to come to the realization that it's quite possible the Oilers are back in this conversation when it comes time to pick ping pong balls. When presented with this suggestion at their annual GMs meetings in Boca Raton, Florida, last week, general managers typically had two reactions: They laughed, which is completely appropriate. Because what else are you going to do? Or they shook their head with a bit of a pained expression that suggested what many fans of other cities feel – it just wouldn't seem fair.

Since 2010, there have been nine draft lotteries. The Oilers won four of them (2010, 2011, 2012 and 2015). No other team has won it twice.

Their success already contributed to one change in the lottery. In 2014, the NHL announced a two-year transition to the draft lottery system that is currently in place. Starting in the 2015 draft, the odds of landing the top pick were spread more evenly amongst the 14 teams in the lottery. For instance, the chances of the worst team in the league winning the lottery dropped from 25 percent to 20 percent. That change didn't slow the Oilers, with Edmonton landing Connor McDavid in the 2015 draft with the top pick.

In 2016, the current format played out for the first time. There are now three lotteries for each of the top three picks. That means the team that finishes last in the league could, in theory, drop to No. 4 overall. Part of the motivation is to discourage tanking and this lottery change is often cited by general managers as one of the reasons they'd rather not strip their roster down like rebuilding teams in the past. There's even less of a guarantee of a top pick now.

That said, the No. 30 overall team has picked first in the current system in two of the three years since it was implemented (Maple Leafs and Sabres).

So, it's working. There's been an assortment of teams at the top. Some big jumps from teams, like the Stars and Hurricanes getting lucky. It makes for a fun event.

And in some ways, it works to the Oilers' advantage. They probably won't be a No. 31 team as long as McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are around. So there's definitely an appetite among some teams to add one more wrinkle to the process: A cap on how many times a team can win the No. 1 overall pick in a short period of time.

This was on the agenda at the 2016 NHL GM meetings, when it was proposed by Nashville GM David Poile that a rule be made that prevents teams that don't finish last from picking first multiple years in a short window of time. The caveat in this proposal was that the team that finished dead last would always have the same shot at No. 1 overall, regardless of how many times they'd won the lottery.

Did it get a lot of support?

"No," Poile said last week, laughing.

But it's fair to say it's an issue that will be monitored as the current lottery system ages and results start to add up – especially if Hughes is playing in Edmonton at this point next year.

Poile, for one, is in favor of exploring change.

"I'd love to bring that up again," he said. "You actually could get some inequity in the conferences, if the first two or three players, franchise



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players, end up in the same conference or specifically with the same team. If that topic got brought up, I'd like to discuss that again."

He's not alone among his colleagues who would at least be interested in having the debate.

"I think there's definitely logic behind not having the same teams over and over winning the lottery," said Rangers GM Jeff Gorton. "Maybe if you won a couple times, you can only go to a certain spot in the next few years. Yeah, I think it's definitely something worth talking about."

"I think it should be limited," said an Eastern Conference GM who asked to not be identified. "You shouldn't keep rewarding teams for constantly being there. There should be some kind of timeframe where you have to show progress ... maybe the odds should change for a team that's been there a certain amount of times."

A few GMs asked about the NBA's system and whether or not that's worth copying. In 2017, the NBA tweaked its lottery system with the changes beginning this year. The NBA's lottery system was similar to the NHL's but will now level the odds at the bottom of the standings so that the teams that finish with the three worst records all have a 14 percent chance of winning the lottery. That eliminates any race to the bottom. There will be lottery drawings for the first four NBA picks and then the remaining picks will be an inverse of the standings. Theoretically, a team could finish last this year in the NBA and still pick fifth. There is no cap on the number of lottery wins in the NBA.

The no-cap system is one that still has plenty of support amongst NHL GMs.

"I think, right now, it's a fair system we have," Sabres GM Jason Botterill said. "I like the balance to it now. You've seen in the last few years teams jumping up."

A Western Conference GM pointed out that the idea of the lottery is to help teams at the bottom of the standings get back to being competitive. So if a team is consistently in the lottery mix, it still needs that assistance.

"If the players they were selecting were helping a team win, they wouldn't be in that lottery," he said. "Something must be happening ... it's an unusual circumstance for a team to have multiple lottery picks – maybe it means the players haven't turned out or they've done something. I don't know if that's a big problem that needs to be solved."

That's the other part of the equation. Sure, there are years in which a generational talent is sitting at the No. 1 pick. But that's not always the case.

The Oilers won the 2011 draft lottery but the Winnipeg Jets certainly wouldn't trade Mark Scheifele, taken at No. 7, for No. 1 pick Ryan Nugent-Hopkins right now. And we all know how the Nail Yakupov picked turned out in 2012. Picking first comes with no guarantees.

Blackhawks GM Stan Bowman agreed that the optics might not look great if the Oilers win the 2019 lottery but resisted the notion that it would be an indictment of the process.

"That doesn't necessarily mean the system doesn't work," he said.

Perhaps it was Kings GM Rob Blake who conveyed the reason why there probably won't be a change anytime soon. When presented with the question as to whether or not the NHL should put a cap on winning the lottery, he never quite offered an opinion.

Instead, he shared a glimpse of the emotional side of the rebuild. The Kings are just now getting a taste for what Oilers fans and management have been feeling for years. It's hard. At times, it's downright miserable.

Maybe it's not the time to pile on with addition draft lottery restrictions.

"I don't know," he said, considering the issue. "Just from my own personal experience in being near the bottom, it's really hard to do this every year. To sit through it and lose and lose. I can't speak for other GMs in other organizations, but to me, if this is an ongoing process year after year – it's not fun."

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The Athletic / Pronman: Ranking the top free agents from the CHL, college and Europe

By Corey Pronman Mar 11, 2019

This is my first time ranking free agent prospects from major junior, the NCAA and the European professional leagues who are eligible to sign NHL contracts (or already signed). I also included a couple drafted seniors who teams said are interesting if they go to Aug. 15 and become free agents.

I spent more time watching free agents this season and I have seen all the players I ranked. With that said, free agents are not always my top priority, so I relied on trusted scouts in the hockey world to support and enhance my assessments of the players.

As comprehensive as I tried to make this list, I likely will miss some good players who will get signed.

For me, the top three prospects have the best chance to be full-time NHL players and are my top tier. One already signed.

1. Tye Felhaber, LW, Ottawa-OHL

Aug. 5, 1998 | six-foot | 190 pounds

When Felhaber initially started lighting up scoresheets like nobody else in the CHL this season, I was skeptical. I always saw him as a highly skilled, yet small forward without a ton of speed.

However, Felhaber added a step to his skating this season, leading to him becoming one of the top scorers in major junior. He's not the most technically smooth in that area, but he has speed to skate with pros. Despite his incredible goal totals this season, I wouldn't call him a pure sniper, but he has a good shot to go along with great hands and intelligence, and he competes. Felhaber signed with Dallas.

2. Nico Sturm, C, Clarkson-ECAC

May 3, 1995 | 6-foot-3 | 207 pounds

Sturm is a player who could project to the NHL as a fourth-line center due to the fact he's 6-foot-3, skates well for a big man and has decent offensive tools. He's by no means a playmaker, but he moves the puck well and has decent hands in tight.

Sturm competes hard, gets to the net consistently and can kill penalties. He's been one of the best players in the ECAC this season and I could see a quick transition in how he plays to the pro level.

3. Oula Palve, C, TPS-Liiga

Feb. 19, 1992 | six-foot | 176 pounds

I watched a lot of TPS this season due to that being Kaapo Kakko's club team, so I had a lot of opportunity to see what Palve can do as one of the top players in Liiga. He's a high-end playmaker who will be able to move pucks and make plays at the NHL level. He's an average skater who is fine but not great off the puck, so the question for NHL teams is will Palve be a player you slot lower in your lineup. He's 27, so I enter his NHL projection with skepticism, but I do see tools that can translate to the top level.

4. Andrew Shortridge, G, Quinnipiac-ECAC

April 26, 1995 | 6-foot-4 | 185 pounds



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Shortridge was dominant in the ECAC this season. He immediately makes an argument that he projects to the pro level because of his big frame and high-end athleticism. He can make the tough saves to steal a game:

His decision making and positional play give me cause for concern at time, and there may be an adjustment period when he hits the pros and mistakes are exploited more often, but I like his upside.

5. Peter Abbandonato, C, Rouyn-Noranda-QMJHL

March 25, 1998 | 5-foot-11 | 192 pounds

Abbandonato was an important part of one of the best teams in the CHL. He's a very smart puck-mover who can run a power play with his vision and skill. He skates fine, but for a smaller guy Abbandonato lacks a real dangerous gear. He's probably an AHLer, but with his hockey sense I wouldn't write him off from playing games at some point.

6. Oliwer Kaski, D, Pelicans-Liiga

Sept. 4, 1998 | 6-foot-3 | 187 pounds

Kaski is a 6-foot-3 defenseman who skates and moves the puck well for a big guy, and has a hard shot. He has value on the power play. He's been one of the best defensemen in Liiga this season. I don't think his skill is high-end, nor do I think he's that good a defender or all that physical, which may limit his value if he goes to a tougher level.

7. Mat Robson, G, Univ. of Minnesota-Big 10

March 26, 1996 | 6-foot-3 | 196 pounds

Robson was excellent for the Gophers for the past two seasons. He's listed at 6-foot-3 but arguably looks bigger in net with how well he plays his angles. He's not that athletic, but he moves fine and doesn't have much extra movement in his game. He's subtle and squares up a lot of pucks due to his very good hockey sense. He has pro attributes that should translate right away.

8. Justin Brazeau, RW, North Bay-OHL

Feb. 2, 1998 | 6-foot-6 | 225 pounds

Brazeau is a 6-foot-6 winger with a good skill level and very good offensive IQ. At the junior level he showed the ability to create offense and to get to the hard areas. And he was so tough to contain once he was in the offensive zone. What will keep him from the NHL is his skating which is very far removed from being NHL caliber. With his size and skill he doesn't need to get it to NHL average, but he does need to get to at least AHL average.

9. Jimmy Huntington, C, Rimouski-QMJHL

Nov. 18, 1998 | 6-foot-1 | 194 pounds

Huntington played well with Alexis Lafreniere this season but created offense without the help of the elite prospect. Huntington's got very good hockey sense, he makes plays and he skates fine. He was pretty good around the net and scored a lot of goals in the tough areas. He signed with the Tampa Bay Lightning.

10. Connor Mackey, D, Minnesota State-WCHA

Sept. 12, 1996 | 6-foot-2 | 183 pounds

Mackey is a solid two-way defenseman. He's a 6-foot-2 defenseman who moves the puck and is mobile. Mackey jumps up into plays quite often, creating offense with his feet. His skill level is just OK. I don't see him producing that much offense as a pro, but he's a big, hard defender who can transition the puck at the pro level.

11. Joakim Nygard, LW, Farjestad-SHL

Jan. 8, 1993 | six-foot | 193 pounds

Nygard is an older player at age 26, but he's got good skill and speed, and competes well. There are some scouts who don't see him as a real

prospect, but some teams gave him attention, and folks in Sweden think he has the right skill set to produce offense in North America.

12. Taro Hirose, LW, Michigan State University-Big 10

June 30, 1996 | 5-foot-10 | 161 pounds

Hirose is the top scorer in college hockey this season. He's a skilled forward with great hockey sense who moves the puck creatively and can run a power play. He's not that big, though, and his skating is very average, which may limit him at the next level.

13. Max Veronneau, RW, Princeton-ECAC

Dec. 12, 1995 | six-foot | 181 pounds

Veronneau opened eyes last season with his play in the ECAC. This season wasn't as productive, but NHL teams are still very interested. What stands out about Veronneau is his skating; he can lead a rush at the NHL level with his speed. My concern is, outside his speed, there isn't much that screams NHL caliber. He can kill penalties, but he's slight and not physical. His skill is average, but he does see the ice well. The Kings are believed to be the favorite to sign Veronneau.

14. Ilya Mikheyev, RW, Omsk-KHL

Oct. 10, 1994 | 6-foot-2 | 194 pounds

Mikheyev is intriguing because he's a 6-foot-2, strong winger who can get to the net and score goals. He skates fine and has some skill, but I don't love his puck game or vision as plus attributes. He'll compete, score a few for you and had a great season in the KHL with an expiring contract; but for the NHL he's a bottom of the lineup type, if that.

15. Ryan Kuffner, LW, Princeton-ECAC

June 12, 1996 | 6-foot-1 | 194 pounds

Kuffner, like Veronneau, saw his counting numbers take a step back this season. He's a goal-scorer who can snipe from a distance and has good hockey sense. For me his talent level isn't all that amazing. He has some skill and speed, but his pace isn't always the best. I see some offense translating but I don't see him as a driver at the pro level.

16. Vasilii Demchenko, G, Traktor-KHL

March 16, 1994 | 6-foot-2 | 165 pounds

Demchenko put up great numbers in the KHL the past few seasons. He has some qualities that could translate to the NHL. He's 6-foot-2, he moves well, he has good hockey sense, he reads shooters effectively and he plays aggressively. Nothing about his game wows me. He can have a little extra movement in his crease, but his technical base is fine.

17. Otto Leskinen, D, KalPa-Liiga

Feb. 6, 1997 | 5-foot-11 | 187 pounds

I like the way Leskinen plays the game. He's quick and skilled, able to push the pace and lead a rush. He can run a power play with his skill and vision. He's not dynamic but he has traits that could translate to North America. My concerns with him are his size and he's not all that strong of a defender.

18. Tristan Langan, C, Moose Jaw-WHL

Oct. 15, 1998 | six-foot | 205 pounds

Langan was a part of one of the best lines in the WHL this season. He's got good skill and hockey sense, but I wouldn't call him a pure skill guy. Rather Langan plays the hard minutes. He scores a lot of goals around the net and can kill penalties. I don't think he's slow but for a smaller forward his skating doesn't stand out.

19. Kevin Hancock, LW, London-OHL

March 2, 1998 | 5-foot-11 | 181 pounds



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Hancock was good for Owen Sound and London this season. He's smart and skilled with the puck. He flashes top-end skill, but not consistently. I like his shot and compete level, as well. He's not the biggest guy, and while not slow, his speed is only average.

20. Alex Limoges, C, Penn State-Big 10

Sept. 16, 1997 | 6-foot-1 | 201 pounds

Limoges had a huge season on one of the best lines in the NCAA. He's a very smart offensive player who can make plays, is creative with his distributions and gets to the net. With his size and puck game, Limoges looks like a player with a chance, however he has a wonky skating stride that may limit his potential and doesn't have a ton of pace in his game.

21. Alexander Yezesin, D, Yaroslav-KHL

Feb. 7, 1996 | 5-foot-11 | 192 pounds

Yezesin is a solid two-way defenseman. He's not dynamic but he skates well, can move the puck well and has some value on the power play. He's not the biggest guy but he plays hard and doesn't mind engaging in the physical aspects of the game.

22. Grant Hutton, D, Univ. of Miami (Ohio)-NCHC

July 25, 1995 | 6-foot-3 | 205 pounds

Hutton is an interesting prospect because he's a 6-foot-3 defenseman who skates well for a big man and has a cannon of a shot. He can help a pro power play with his trigger man abilities. His puck game is so-so. His hands and vision are not his selling point, but his feet allow him to bring pucks up the ice and dish it off to someone off an entry.

23. Joseph Cecconi, D, Univ. of Michigan-Big 10 (Dallas draft pick)

May 23, 1997 | 6-foot-2 | 209 pounds

Cecconi shouldered the load for Michigan the past two seasons alongside top prospect Quinn Hughes. He moves well for a 6-foot-2 defenseman and has good vision with the puck. He can project to make stops versus men, but scouts question if he will have any offense at the higher levels.

24. Arttu Ruotsalainen, LW, Ilves-Liiga

Oct. 29, 1997 | 5-foot-8 | 181 pounds

Ruotsalainen is one of the better forwards in Finland as a 21-year-old and fared fine at the international men's level, which is intriguing. He has talent, and he's quick, skilled and smart. The question for me for the NHL is whether his skill level is dynamic enough. He has flashes but is not consistent for me, and I don't see him breaking a game open, which is tough to make an NHL bet at for a 5-foot-8 forward.

25. Chase Priskie, D, Quinnipiac-ECAC (Washington draft pick)

March 19, 1996 | six-foot | 192 pounds

Priskie was one of the top defensemen in the ECAC this past season. He's a skilled defender who moves the puck well and could man a power play at the pro level. Priskie joins attacks a lot and plays like a fifth forward at times. I do have questions about how his average pace and defensive play will translate to the higher levels.

26. Lukas Bengtsson, D, Linköping-SHL

April 14, 1994 | 5-foot-10 | 172 pounds

In talking to some scouts Bengtsson's name was thrown around as a potential return to North America. He previously was with the Penguins organization. I see some merit. He's a skilled puck-mover with a decent shot who can help a power play, and his defense showed some improvements. However, I have my doubts. He's looked a little slower from when I watched him earlier, he's not that big and he's had a rough history with his health.

27. Jakob Lilja, LW, Djurgården-SHL

July 23, 1993 | six-foot | 194 pounds

Lilja is a smart forward who competes well and has decent speed. He makes plays in hard areas, but overall I don't see much skill in his game nor any real projectable offense to the NHL level.

28. Jimmy Schuldt, D, St. Cloud State-NCHC

May 11, 1995 | 6-foot-1 | 205 pounds

Schuldt was the top defenseman on the top team in the nation. I like his hockey sense and he has some two-way value. While he has some speed and skill, his game is a bit vanilla for the NHL, though

29. Anton Wedin, LW, Timrå-SHL

March 1, 1993 | 5-foot-11 | 194 pounds

I talked to some Swedish scouts who pumped Wedin's tires. I'm somewhat skeptical of a now breaking out 26-year-old who is small with average feet. But I do appreciate his skill and hockey sense.

30. Dakota Joshua, LW, Ohio State University-Big 10 (Toronto draft pick)

May 15, 1996 | 6-foot-2 | 198 pounds

Joshua is a 6-foot-3 forward with skill, which made him interesting for years. He hasn't produced much in college, though, with scouts citing concerns over his sense and compete level.

31. Josh Teves, D, Princeton-ECAC

Feb. 18, 1995 | six-foot | 170 pounds

Teves is a mobile defenseman with good hockey sense and vision, but for an average sized defender, nothing about his skill set really stands out and I have questions about how much offense he'll produce as a pro.

32. Samuel Asselin, C, Halifax-QMJHL

July 1, 1998 | 5-foot-10 | 185 pounds

Asselin has good hockey sense, skates fine and competes hard, but is small and his skill level is very average.

33. Reese Johnson, RW, Red Deer-WHL

July 10, 1998 | 6-foot-1 | 198 pounds

Johnson didn't kill it in the WHL for an overage player, but he's got more skill than his stat line would suggest. He's got slippery puck skills, good instincts and skates OK with a good compete level and shot. I don't see any aspect of his game that truly jumps out at you. Johnson signed with Chicago.

34. Colton Poolman, D, Univ. of North Dakota-NCHC

Dec. 18, 1995 | 6-foot-1 | 194 pounds

Poolman, the younger brother of Jets defenseman Tucker Poolman, has good hockey sense and moves rather well, but I don't see him making many plays with the puck at the pro level.

35. Lukas Craggs, C, Bowling Green State University-WCHA

May 16, 1996 | six-foot | 196 pounds

Craggs plays a hard style of game with a lot of energy. He makes some plays but his speed and skill are just OK. I don't see him producing much offense at the pro level.

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The Athletic / DGB weekend power rankings: Counting down my worst rankings of the season (so far)



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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By Sean McIndoe Mar 11, 2019

We're getting into that time of year when power rankings start to lock in from week-to-week. A team might still occasionally have an especially good or bad week and move a spot or two, and every now and then a dark horse will make a surprise charge down the homestretch. But generally, once we get past the trade deadline and close in on the 70-game mark, there really isn't much reason to make big changes to what we have. Spoiler alert: The Lightning are in first place again this week.

Before we can start looking at our Stanley Cup and draft lottery hopefuls, let's take a look back with a different kind of top five: My five worst rankings from this season.

I'll pause here so you can all make your "How did you narrow it down?" jokes.

It's true that in one sense, we've got plenty of candidates to choose from. In all, there have been 15 teams that have made at least one appearance in the top five, and 13 that have made an appearance in the bottom (including one team that showed up in both). That's a lot, more than in any previous season I've been doing this. It's been a volatile season. Or maybe some of the picks have just been bad.

To be honest, I don't think anything stands out as an embarrassingly awful call; it's not like there was some week that had Tampa in the bottom five or the Kings as a Cup contender. But that's a low bar and let's just say that some of those picks hold up better than others. Today we're going to take our medicine and own up to five of the worst:

5. Arizona Coyotes ranked No. 1 in the bottom five (Oct. 5) – The Coyotes might end up making the playoffs and at one point I thought they were the odds-on favorite to finish dead last. That's not a great look, although in this case, it comes with a pretty decent excuse: The season was just a few days old. We even called that week's rankings the "way-too-early edition." The Coyotes had started 0-2-0 so they were probably as good a pick as anyone; within a few weeks they'd made their exit from the bottom five to great fanfare, never to return. But for one week at least, I thought they'd be worse than the Senators, Red Wings or Kings. They were not.

4. Colorado Avalanche ranked No. 4 in the top five (Dec. 3) – "I've never fully bought into the Avalanche. I still don't, if I'm being honest." Good for you, past me, but you still let a hot streak mislead you into ranking them as the fourth-best team in the league. This one only lasted a week, but it doesn't hold up well and unlike with the Coyotes, I can't claim the "it was early" excuse.

3. Buffalo Sabres ranked No. 5 in the top five (Nov. 26) – Of all the teams to crack the top five this year, none will finish lower than the Sabres in the final standings. In that sense, no call was more wrong than this one.

If that's the case, why not rank it higher? For one thing, the Sabres only showed up in the top five once, at the tail end of that ten-game winning streak. That stretch had briefly elevated Buffalo to first place overall, and yet I only had them fifth that week. More importantly, my writeup was packed with caveats, like that their top-five case "is far from iron-clad" and that this is "probably the only chance to slide them into the top five" and "Will it last? Maybe not." Reading it all these months later, I half-expected to go back and see that the first letter of every line spelled out "I don't actually believe this ranking." But I still made it, so I'll own it. (But do check out the comments that week from furious Sabres fans who insist I'm short-changing them by ranking them below the Lightning.)

2. St. Louis Blues ranked in the bottom five (five weeks total, as late as Dec. 10) – I have to include this one, especially since it lasted over a month. But the funny thing was that at the time, nobody thought I was wrong. If anything, it became a running joke that Blues fans were mad that I was going easy on them (they dipped as low as No. 3 for a few

weeks). As I wrote on Dec. 10, "something big has to be coming in St. Louis." I was right, just not in the way I thought I was.

1. Minnesota Wild in the top five (for three straight weeks beginning on Nov. 12) – The Wild aren't as bad as the Sabres and might finish ahead of the Avalanche too. But what stands out here is how long I had them listed – three weeks in all, with them drifting as high as third after a big win over the Jets. And I can't even fall back on hedging my bets when I wrote about them, because I was saying things like "Yeah, it's probably time to start taking them seriously" and "Honestly, (fifth spot) is probably too low for the Wild."

They were playing well at the time, going 10-2-0 at one point, but it was a stretch powered largely by red-hot goaltending from Devan Dubnyk. He eventually cooled down and then got hurt to start an extended cold streak. I couldn't have seen an injury coming, but I was too eager to buy into the Wild as a legitimate Central favorite instead of what they were: a decent team that can sometimes look like more than that when the goalie is hot and they're getting some breaks.

OK, I feel better. Now onto this week's ratings, which I assure you are all 100 percent accurate. (Unless they're not, in which case, uh, it was still too early.)

Road to the Cup

The five teams that look like they're headed towards a summer of keg stands and fountain pool parties.

One big story to watch in the final month: The Colorado Avalanche are going to have to make their playoff push without Gabriel Landeskog, who's out four-to-six weeks with an upper-body injury. That timeline means he could be back early in the playoffs and there's a slight chance he could return before the end of the season. But as Ryan Clark wonders, by that point will it still matter?

5. Washington Capitals (41-21-7, +22 true goals differential) – Screw it, I'm back on board.

The Capitals showed up in our very first top five, then vanished for two months before reappearing in December. They hung around for five weeks, reaching as high as the two-spot on New Year's Eve even as I wrote that the ranking "seems a little high." Now, after two weeks of winning pushed them back into top spot in the Metro, they seem like as good a pick as any out of a crowded top-five field.

Or maybe not. You might prefer the Jets, who have a decent case even though they lost in Washington last night. But the Jets look to have a tougher road out of the Central than what the Caps will have in the Metro and that matters too. For the same reason, I can't talk myself into Nashville. The post-Stone trade Golden Knights? They've looked great at times, but the top of the Pacific is very tough and they're locked into third. The Islanders are still at least in the mix, but I'd rather know more about the Robin Lehner injury before I get them back near the top five. And the Leafs somehow haven't shown up here in eight weeks even as they're tied for second in the league in wins.

It's a tough call. But this is about who's going to win the Cup, and when in doubt, deferring to the defending champs doesn't seem like a bad way to break the tie. For this week, at least.

4. Boston Bruins (42-18-9, +35) – Figuring out where to rank the Bruins is really getting interesting. On the one hand, you could make a very strong case that they're the second-best team in the NHL. Last night's loss aside, I'm not even sure you'd get much pushback from anyone. That means they should be ranked second, right?

But this isn't a "best teams" list. It's "most likely to win the Cup," and that means that having the best team in the league in your division is bad news. Without going into the whole playoff format debate again, the Bruins' path out of the Atlantic is brutal, and unlike the next two teams on the list, there's no hope of improving it down the stretch.



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Where do you rank them? We seem to have stalled out at the four-spot, even as they've been virtually unbeatable for over a month. That feels wrong but less wrong than any of the other options.

3. Calgary Flames (42-20-7, +46) – “Just how much should we worry about the Flames” has been an ongoing question for most of the last two weeks, as they dropped four straight games before finally snapping the streak last night against the Knights. In short, they've gone cold at exactly the time of year when you'd hope a legitimate contender was heating up.

Or have they? The underlying numbers have remained decent, suggesting that the last few weeks has been as much about bad luck as any actual flaws. The goaltending is a question mark, but that's been the case all season long and should already be baked into our impressions of how far the Flames can go. And while the slump gave the Sharks a chance to gain ground, it's not like the Pacific race is anywhere near over.

But it is tight again, as the Flames basically gave back almost all the cushion they'd built up. And it remains crucially important to win the Pacific, since the second seed has to deal with Vegas in round one. We're nudging a hot Sharks team ahead of Calgary this week, but beyond that, we're not going to hit the panic button, especially after they beat the Knights. But let's just say our hand was hovering over it, so check back next week.

2. San Jose Sharks (41-19-8, +39) – Like Calgary, the Sharks should feel like winning the Pacific and avoiding the Knights is crucial. Earlier this week, Kevin Kurz wondered about whether any of the potential wildcard opponents should also worry San Jose fans. His conclusion: maybe the Stars, but probably not the Wild, Coyotes or Avs. That sounds about right to me, and even Dallas hasn't quite entered the scary zone for me yet. The path here is pretty clear: Win the division, take care of business as quickly as possible against an underdog in the opening round, and then hope the Flames and Knights pummel each other into a pulp in the other series.

1. Tampa Bay Lightning (52-13-4, +80) – They had a chance to clinch a playoff spot on Thursday, but a loss against the Wild meant they didn't lock down their spot until Friday. Talk about leaving things to the last minute. Slackers.

*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Not ranked: Montreal Canadiens – We've barely mentioned the Habs in this column this year, which is kind of weird. It's not like they haven't had a newsworthy season, with the return of Shea Weber, the emergence of Max Domi, Carey Price looking like his old Vezina self at times, and it all adding up to a surprise playoff contender.

The problem is that by design, these rankings focus on the highs and the lows, and the Canadiens have spent most of the year navigating the middle. That's perfectly fine for some teams, and it's better than most of us expected from Montreal. But it's made them one of just four teams who haven't cracked either the top or bottom five on the season. And other than an extending losing streak in December that was vaguely worrying, they've never been all that close.

Still, we're using this catch-all space as a way to work them in now, because they look like they're in for a frantic finish in the Eastern wildcard race. The Habs are jostling for one of the final spots with the Penguins, Hurricanes and Blue Jackets, and when the music stops one of those teams is going to be on the outside looking in.

Will it be Montreal? I've suggested that it might be, both jokingly and more seriously. Others don't seem as worried. This certainly wasn't a good week for that latter group, as the Canadiens followed a Saturday loss to the Penguins with a 1-for-3 California road trip that included Friday's embarrassing blowout loss in Anaheim. Those west coast swings are tough, but the Ducks are a bad team and Montreal needed those two points. Instead, they got dusted.

The schedule the rest of the way is interesting. The next few weeks look either reasonably good or maybe even very good, depending on your thoughts on an Islander team that the Canadiens get twice. The last week of March brings crucial showdowns with the Hurricanes and Blue Jackets. And then come the last four games of the season, against the Jets, Lightning, Capitals and Leafs. That could be a murderer's row of Stanley Cup favorites. It could also be a group that's already clinched their spots and are resting up for the playoffs.

Either way, the Canadiens first job is to make sure those games still matter. The middle isn't a bad place to spend most of the season, but only when it results in a playoff spot. They went into the weekend holding one down, but left as the outsider. There's lots of time to get that spot back, but they'll need to be a lot better than they looked on Friday.

The bottom five

The five teams that look like they're headed towards hoping the ping-pong balls deliver Jack Hughes.

Hey speaking of Hughes who is going to single-handedly transform a franchise, are we excited for the Quinn Hughes era in Vancouver? Yes. Yes we are. We may see it begin as soon as Wednesday.

5. Anaheim Ducks (27-34-9, -54) – I don't want to kick a guy while he's down, but what does it say about Randy Carlyle when he's fired and replaced by a guy who has literally never done the job before in his life and the team gets better?

4. New Jersey Devils (25-35-9, -38) – You should read the whole post, but I'm not sure I've laughed harder all week than when I read this exchange in which Devils GM Ray Shero is asked whether he considered trading Taylor Hall at the deadline and Craig Custance hits him with the follow-up question.

I'm pretty sure he's saying go ahead and put him down for one percent.

3. Detroit Red Wings (24-35-10, -48) – The hockey world spent much of the week honoring the memory of Ted Lindsay, who passed away on Monday at the age of 93. Fans were given the chance to pay their respects at a public visitation on Friday at Little Caesars Arena, while his funeral was held on Saturday. If you haven't yet, be sure to spend some time on this look back on Lindsay's life and legacy.

Meanwhile, the NHL lost another legend with yesterday's passing of Hall-of-Famer Harry Howell.

2. Los Angeles Kings (25-36-8, -55) – The last few weeks saw the Ducks and Hawks nudge the throttle from “bad” all the way up to “passably mediocre” and left the Kings in their dust, all alone as the West's bottom-feeder.

1. Ottawa Senators (23-40-6, -54) – Maybe I missed it, but I don't think anything truly terrible happened to this team this week. In other words, they may have just had their best week of the season.

Not ranked: Edmonton Oilers – I'd make a joke here about a late-season win streak that's too late to get them back in the playoff hunt but just in time to ruin their lottery odds, if we didn't all know they're winning the lottery anyway. Still, progress is progress, even if the wins have been mostly coming against teams like the Senators and Sabres while teams like the Leafs skate circles around them. When you're in Edmonton, you take your hope where you can find it.

The bigger news is the ongoing GM hunt, which has the potential to turn into one of the most fascinating stories of the year. Some of the names that have leaked out are the traditional, experienced picks who'd make for safe choices. Others have been up-and-coming executives who'd likely represent a higher-risk, higher-reward type of path. Other have been, uh, Dave Nonis. So yeah, there are a few ways this could go. Jonathan Willis had some thoughts on the search and why the Oilers may not be casting their net wide enough.

Or, you know, they could just stick with what they already have. No need to mess with a winning formula, I guess.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The Athletic LOADED: 03.12.2019

1135608 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs unable to step up against powerhouse Lightning

Chris Johnston | March 11, 2019

TORONTO — In search of an explanation for what happened here, we'll turn to a voice from beyond the hockey world, because it wouldn't sound very becoming for a serious hockey observer to trot out anything resembling an excuse for a poor performance.

So here goes: "I think one thing that we're learning is it's just really hard on your body. And mentally."

That was Toronto Raptors general manager Bobby Webster, speaking earlier this year at a business luncheon about the impact of cross-continent travel on athletes and a schedule that includes as many as four games per week.

It seemed prescient while watching the Toronto Maple Leafs sleepwalk through a 6-2 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning — not just the top team in the NHL this season, but arguably the best of the last two decades.

Toronto returned from a swing through Western Canada on Sunday, after seeing the clocks moved ahead an hour for daylight savings. It concluded a stretch which saw them spend 20 days in hotels compared to 10 in their own beds while frequently bouncing between time zones.

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If they looked like they had no legs against the Lightning, it's probably not a coincidence.

"People will tell you if you take a red-eye and you have to go to work the next day you're just bad," Webster said during the January panel discussion with Maple Leafs GM Kyle Dubas. "Vegas has been able to quantify it, the oddsmakers. So if you play back-to-back, the second game of the back-to-back, you automatically get docked two points on the [betting] line. So they're saying 'We just know, over the course of however many games we've studied, that whether you're the Raptors or you're Golden State or you're San Antonio, you're going to start off that next game down two in Vegas.'

"So I think that's just an example probably objectively of why this stuff, we need to look at it."

Now, the NBA is already way ahead in this department. It's routine to see star players in that league, like Toronto's Kawhi Leonard, sit out games in order to lessen their workload and maximize performance.

The Montreal Canadiens did the same with rookie Jesperi Kotkaniemi for two games in California last week, citing "load management," but that's far from the norm. Tampa has already clinched a playoff spot and coach Jon Cooper said Monday he hadn't yet considered resting regulars. Mike Babcock also deflected that question, saying: "We plan on doing everything we can to make the playoffs."

If anyone was ever to introduce it as a regular practice in the NHL, the Leafs are a safe bet. They are at the forefront of the league's use of sports science and performance, and Dubas acknowledged during that talk with Webster that he's thought about it.

"I think it will become something that moves over to hockey in time," he said.

Facing this return home, they did try to maximize sleep and recovery by flying back from Edmonton on Sunday morning rather than immediately after the game on Saturday night.

But over an 82-game regular season, sometimes there's only so much you can do.

We are not yet at a point where Leafs coach Mike Babcock can freely acknowledge as much to reporters — not in a sport where players are celebrated for gutting their way through gruesome injuries, and not while coaching a team that has a less onerous schedule than many of its counterparts.

Still, Babcock did slyly hint they were in tough before the game against the Lightning when he was asked if he bought into the notion of teams struggling when returning from a western road trip: "I would if it was someone else coming off of one, but today I don't at all. I think it's just a great opportunity."

The opportunity went up in smoke when Tyler Johnson and Anthony Cirelli tipped home shots from the high slot and then Johnson was wide open to score again after Frederik Andersen took a shot to the mask. Ondrej Palat made it 4-0 on a pinballing puck that last hit Auston Matthews before going in.

That prompted Babcock to pull Andersen for just the second time all season, granting him an extra 35 minutes of rest while backup Garret Sparks went in.

Matthews did score one highlight-reel goal to briefly spark thoughts of a comeback inside Scotiabank Arena, but it didn't last. He was the most visibly frustrated player in the losing dressing room when the game mercifully ended.

"I consider it a wake-up call for us," he said. "It was a measuring-stick game, that's the best team in the league and we didn't come ready to play and they pretty much just slapped us."

As much as Babcock echoed that sentiment — "we were no good" — he did cancel a scheduled Tuesday practice. There was a time in this league when a coach would be looking to skate his players hard as punishment following a 6-2 loss to a division rival.

Down the hall, the Lightning had their own view on what transpired. They were given two tough games from Toronto earlier this season and saw something different this time around.

"We caught a tired team," said Cooper. "They just came off the West Coast and they've got to play another game at home in a different time zone, and you've got to take advantage of that."

It's an easier observation to share publicly when you come out on the winning end.

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Sportsnet.ca / Lightning's business approach gives Maple Leafs reason to worry

Luke Fox | March 12, 2019

TORONTO — The interesting thing about Jon Cooper making an excuse for the Toronto Maple Leafs' fatigue after trouncing all over them for 60



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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minutes in their own building is that the Tampa Bay Lightning have never felt the need to play that card.

In the losers' dressing room, there were admissions of quit and lethargy as the Leafs — on track for another best regular season in club history and another third-place finish in their own top-heavy division — gave away 21 pucks, mustered all of 14 body checks, and surrendered one of the ugliest shorthanded goals you'll see en route to a 6-2 beatdown by a polished armoured tank of a hockey team that's breaking wills and records.

"The effort kind of just wasn't there at times," Auston Matthews admitted. "I mean, I think in the third period we pretty much just quit. That's on us as players. We got to wake up and do a much better job and hold each other accountable."

Twenty-five minutes into the game it wasn't one anymore.

The mighty Bolts had already scored four times, each puck touching a Tampa skater within spitting distance of Frederik Andersen's crease, and chased the Leafs netminder.

Mike Babcock so rarely pulls his starter, this was the equivalent of waving a white flag in surrender to a program he'd dubbed "the envy of the league right now."

Uncle.

"You get the lead like that, and it's a little deflating to them," reasoned Cooper, citing his opponents' exhausting swing through Western Canada. "I like the fact we kept going. We possessed the puck."

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Thing is, in this ridiculously consistent runaway Year of the Lightning, they never had a so-called "schedule loss" this lopsided.

In October, when the Lightning returned East from a five-game voyage through the Central and Western states, they whooped New Jersey 8-3.

To celebrate their first home date after a four-game roadie in November, they beat up Florida 7-3.

In December, the Lightning were greeted home after long trips by Boston and Philadelphia, who were already in Tampa waiting for them. The Bolts won both of those games, too — one of them after an even longer trek through Western Canada than the Leafs just endured (it also included a stop in Winnipeg).

In January, after their swing through California, the Lightning shut out Columbus 4-0.

This is not to say the Leafs weren't exhausted or depleted. Most certainly they were.

This is to say that pushing through that pain and fatigue requires a roster depth and a desire and a level of perseverance only one of Monday's NHL powers seems to have attained.

"Like today: How good we are when we play the right way," said Victor Hedman, excelling in his top lefty-lefty pairing with young Mikhail Sergachev.

"Our consistency throughout the season has been phenomenal. We're not tapping ourselves on the shoulder. We're looking at the big picture. We've got 12 games here before the fun starts."

The business-as-usual atmosphere in the moments after a such a decisive victory over a potential playoff foe is arresting. No hooting or hollering. Another day, another victory.

"Tonight we really wanted to show them that's why we're the best team in the league," Cedric Paquette said after a two-goal outing. But that's a juicy as things got.

We suppose when you've had your heart snapped in the conference finals twice (2016, 2018), whiffed entirely on the post-season as a consensus Cup contender (2017) and come within two W's of your ultimate goal (2015), perspective digs its blades in.

"We're trying to build a program like Tampa has done. You need some wounds and all that stuff, and you go through that over the years as you build your program," Babcock said.

"They have a real good team, a veteran-laden team. They've done a good job keeping their players and acquiring more players. Obviously, they've scouted real good, so they could trade and get more players."

It's no secret the Kyle Dubas Maple Leafs are following the Tampa blueprint.

Kill your enemies with speed, skill and superior goaltending. Fuel your roster by graduating AHLers as talented as they are cap-friendly. Then splash the pot by adding difference-makers like Ryan McDonagh (two assists, plus-3 Monday) and J.T. Miller via trade.

Construct a powerhouse that can rank first-overall in both power play and penalty kill, that can register its 16th game in which its offence explodes for six or more goals.

Tyler Johnson (two goals) snuffed out the suggestion that the Lightning benefitted from some lucky deflections.

"You can look at it as fluky, but we're in the right spots for those to be able to happen. That's what happens at the end of the season and in the playoffs — a lot of times it is the garbage goals that go in. We've got to try to play more hockey that way," Johnson said. "We've had a good season, but we really haven't done anything."

"We just want to be better tomorrow than what we are today, and I think we've been doing that."

So, is there anything the Lightning can learn about the Leafs on a night where they forecheck, backcheck, penalty-kill and cycle their high-flying rival into submission?

"Honestly, not much," Johnson said. "Playoffs and regular season are completely different. If you ask them, they didn't play a playoff game. If you ask us, we didn't either."

"Both teams still have a lot left in the tank in that regard. We're just trying to work on little things right now."

Toronto still has a few big things to worry about.

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Sportsnet.ca / Quinn Hughes' arrival adds optimism, expectation to Canucks' future

Iain MacIntyre | March 11, 2019, 7:23 PM

VANCOUVER — Quinn Hughes is the shaft of sunlight capable of piercing another perfect spring storm for the Vancouver Canucks.

The dynamic 19-year-old defenceman from the University of Michigan turned pro on Sunday, arrives in Vancouver on Tuesday and could be in the Canucks' lineup Friday when they play the New Jersey Devils. But after blocking a shot on his ankle during college playoffs last weekend, Hughes first must get healthy, which seems appropriate because nearly everyone on the Canucks has been injured this season.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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It was another mass migration to the medical room that torpedoed the team's unexpected playoff bid and started its current 4-10-3 freefall in the National Hockey League standings. The defence, especially, has been a mess since top blue-liners Alex Edler and Chris Tanev were injured, again, nine days apart in February.

The Canucks have one win in six games and two of their worst performances of the season came last week against the Vegas Golden Knights. In its last home game, Saturday, Vancouver surrendered five first-period goals for the first time in 15 years. On national TV.

The optimism that surrounded the team and rookie star Elias Pettersson a short time ago — and the pleasant novelty of a playoff race — has been replaced by the annual sense of despair and outrage in Canucks Nation, whose angriest activists are once again shouting for the head of general manager Jim Benning.

Into this, Quinn Hughes comes.

"When I talked to Quinn, I explained to him there's going to be lots of expectation," Benning told reporters on Monday. "But just come in and do the things you're capable of doing and everyone's going to be happy.

"He's an excellent skater. The transition part of the game, he'll help our group. He'll help us on the power play. I just said: 'Come in, work hard and have fun, and don't be nervous. Just do the things you're capable of doing.'"

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The problem is there's an expectation that Hughes, an American who grew up in the Toronto area, is going to be Pettersson 2.0.

Before this season began, Hughes and Pettersson were considered about equal in terms of skill and potential impact. They were not only the Canucks' best prospects, but Vancouver's most exciting draft picks since Daniel and Henrik Sedin were selected two decades ago.

Partly out of the Canucks' concern over physical strength and the difficulty of incorporating both rookies at the same time, Hughes returned to the University of Michigan while Pettersson, a year older and with an MVP season in Sweden already on his resume, went into the NHL lineup.

Six months later, Pettersson merely leads the Canucks in scoring with 57 points in 57 games and is a heavy favourite to win the Calder Trophy.

Benning admitted he approached Hughes' advisor, agent Pat Brisson, after the world junior championships in Vancouver at Christmas time to see if the 5-foot-10 defenceman had any interest in joining the Canucks then. But there was no way Hughes was abandoning his college teammates in mid-season.

The Canucks could have used Hughes, although by playing fewer than 11 NHL games, he won't be subject to the Seattle expansion draft in 2021 when Vancouver projects to protect defencemen Ben Hutton, Troy Stecher and Olli Juolevi.

"I can assure you that from an organizational standpoint, we're going to look at that and (do) everything to safeguard ourselves," Benning said. "But let's just get (Hughes) in here and see where he's at and see when he starts playing, and we can figure that out as we go.

"Looking back on it, I think we made the right decision. His family and his advisor were part of that decision, too. The reasons for him to go back was to get physically stronger and have another real good year at college. He's done that. So I feel comfortable with the decision we made last summer."

It may be one of the few things Benning can afford to be comfortable about.

With Hughes in the NHL, Benning has a foundation in place. The defence still needs to get better beyond Hughes, and the Canucks will be looking

to add in free agency or trade for a reliable defencemen. Another winger who can score would also help.

But the Canucks' progress is evident in the evolution of Pettersson and forwards Bo Horvat and Brock Boeser, Hutton and Stecher on defence, goalie Jacob Markstrom, the development of centre Adam Gaudette and the slow but noticeable improvement in wingers Jake Virtanen and Nikolay Goldobin.

As Benning said Monday: "It's been hard. But going into our season, our objective was the growth and development of our young players. And I think when you look at how they've developed over the course of the year, how much they've played, how many young players we've been able to get up and get games ... I think if we look at it that way, it's been a successful year."

But it's been an awful month and owner Francesco Aquilini's family, which has given Benning a five-year-long runway to get the Canucks rebuilt, is going to want to see continued progress and, soon, playoff revenue.

The bleakness of the current Vancouver tailspin feels a lot like the periods of disintegration during the last three seasons.

There must be progress. There has to be hope.

"Francesco is right on board with doing things the right way — drafting and developing," Benning said. "Of course, they're not happy if we're not winning games, but all owners are like that."

Playoffs this season were always going to be a bonus for the Canucks. But next year, the Stanley Cup tournament will be the clear goal.

"That's what we're hoping for," Benning said. "Depending on where we pick in the draft (in June), we're going to add another real good player to our group. In free agency, maybe we can add a piece. And we need some luck with our health.

"Our goal from a management side is every year to try to take the next step. And for the most part, until these last five weeks, we were in the hunt. If you look at the standings, we're five wins away from being in a playoff spot. If we can make improvements to our group and win five more games, then you're part of it. That's what we're going to try to do."

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Sportsnet.ca / Weekend Takeaways: Wheeler contract a sound investment for Winnipeg Jets

Ryan Dixon | March 11, 2019, 10:17 AM

Contract extensions that take hold in a player's early 30s often induce a little anxiety on the part of fans and, quite likely, the management types who offered the terms in the first place. But the way Blake Wheeler continues to break new ground, his looming deal looks like money well spent by the Winnipeg Jets.

Wheeler had an eight-game point streak snapped during Sunday's 3-1 loss to the Washington Capitals, a setback that occurred after Wheeler scored for the fourth consecutive game in an 8-1 shellacking of Carolina on Friday.

The goals — Wheeler recently had four of them in Columbus, the first such effort of his career — are great, but it's all about the helpers for the Winnipeg captain. Wheeler has 132 assists in 149 games since the start of last season and the only player in the league with more is ludicrous Tampa Bay Lightning right winger Nikita Kucherov (138).



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The 32-year-old is on pace for an even 100 points this season, meaning he'll set another personal best after establishing a new benchmark last year with 91. Wheeler's four most productive seasons have come at age 32, 31, 29 and 30, a period that — not coincidentally — dovetails with the rise of his centre and running mate, Mark Scheifele.

Wheeler's cap hit will jump from \$5.6 million to \$8.25 million next fall, and that number will be beside his name for five seasons. While a slide is coming eventually, I look at another big man who's always had an assist-heavy stat line — San Jose's Joe Thornton — and wonder if the six-foot-five Wheeler will similarly continue to produce throughout his 30s like the almost-40 Thornton did.

Another relevant Thornton precedent: From age 30 to 37, Thornton never played fewer than 78 games in a season. Wheeler has never suited up for fewer than 79 during his NHL tenure. (A final bit of symmetry: Thornton and Wheeler are both part of a mind-bending pack of talented players who left Boston in their early-to-mid 20s this century, a list that also includes Tyler Seguin and Phil Kessel. Seriously, how have the Bruins stayed so good for so long?)

Of course, there's one major aspect to Wheeler's career Jets fans hope will be different than what's gone on in Cup-less San Jose. Who knows, maybe the best is yet to come in that regard, too.

Other Weekend Takeaways

- Strange, meaningless, kinda fun fact: The first two picks from two separate drafts have all been suspended by the NHL this year. Alex Ovechkin, Evgeni Malkin, Connor McDavid and, now, Jack Eichel have all been told to sit at least one game (Ovie's was for skipping the All-Star Game, but play along).

Related: I guess we know what Jakub Voracek thinks of the two-game sentence he got for reverse-doinking Islanders defenceman Johnny Boychuk.

— Jakub Voracek (@jachobe) March 10, 2019

- Good ol' Scott Hartnell, still stirring the pot in retirement. Hartnell, who was honoured by the Nashville Predators on Saturday night, let it be known he wanted Preds captain Roman Josi and Carolina's Justin Williams to put serious effort into the ceremonial faceoff. Williams, still spunky himself at 37, was happy to oblige.

- It's been a pretty gruesome year in Anaheim, but rapid re-tools have never been more of a reality than they are in today's youth-driven NHL. The Ducks have always drafted well and Troy Terry — a fifth-rounder in 2015 — is the latest example. Following a point-per-game half-season in the AHL as a rookie, Terry joined the Ducks for good in late January. After notching just three points in his first 13 contests, the 21-year-old has found his footing, netting two goals and five assists for seven points in his past three outings, including a 1-2-3 performance during the Ducks' 8-2 waxing of Montreal on Friday night.

- Speaking of the Habs, that horrendous 'L' in Southern California concluded a stretch in which Montreal went 5-8-1 while playing 10 of 14 on the road against some top-level competition. After spending most of the season in a playoff spot, the Canadiens are looking up at the final two wild-card berths from ninth place. The power play — a season-long issue — went three-for-37 in those 14 games (eight per cent) and if that doesn't change in Montreal's final 13 games, it's hard to imagine the team playing beyond early April.

- Michael Grabner scored while his Arizona Coyotes were down a man to the Kings on Saturday, meaning five of his eight goals this year have been of the shorthanded variety.

- There are four weeks left in the 2018-19 NHL season...

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Red and White Power Rankings

1. Toronto Maple Leafs (42-21-5): John Tavares' stat line in four games since the Long Island, uh, lovefest: 2-6-8.

2. Calgary Flames (42-20-7): Matthew Tkachuk's hat trick versus Vegas on Sunday helped push the Flames back into the Pacific lead. Can Calgary hold off San Jose and stay there to get a more favourable wild-card draw rather than seeing the Golden Knights in the 2-3 matchup?

3. Winnipeg Jets (40-24-4): Nathan Beaulieu is logging a serviceable 17:58 per night on the blue line in six games since being picked up at the trade deadline to ease the burden of losing Josh Morrissey.

4. Montreal Canadiens (36-26-7): It's all critical now, but the Habs really, really need to make hay in the next half-dozen games. Four of those six are at home, no back-to-backs and the only playoff squad they'll see in the set is the New York Islanders (once at the Bell Centre, once on the road).

5. Edmonton Oilers (30-31-7): Saturday's loss to Toronto snapped a four-game winning streak that likely had to be twice that long to keep Edmonton truly relevant in the Western Conference playoff chase.

6. Vancouver Canucks (28-32-9): Just one regulation-time win in their past 17 games, but all the talk remains about better days ahead, especially with defence prospect Quinn Hughes — whose NCAA season ended on the weekend — inking his entry-level deal.

7. Ottawa Senators (23-40-6): Four points for Anthony Duclair in seven games as a Senator passes as a positive in this miserable year.

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.

In Your Ear

On the latest edition of the Tape to Tape podcast, co-host Rory Boylen and I went deep on the Eastern Conference playoff race. We both thought Columbus was going to be the odd team out, though neither one of us said it with much confidence. Tune in next Friday for our examination of the Western Conference scene.

The Week Ahead

- The Toronto Maple Leafs get another Lightning litmus test on Monday night at Scotiabank Arena.

- Alex Ovechkin goes for career point No. 1,200 when the Capitals visit Sidney Crosby and the Penguins on Tuesday. We'd probably take another round of this in the playoffs, no?

- Big boy all-Canadian and Western Conference duel on Saturday, when the Flames visit the Jets.

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1135612 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / What to expect from Quinn Hughes when he plays for the Vancouver Canucks

Rory Boylen March 10, 2019, 2:17 PM

For a while now the expectation has been that Quinn Hughes would join the Vancouver Canucks after his season with the NCAA's Michigan Wolverines concluded. He suggested as much in December during an appearance on the FAN 650's Starting Lineup and the Canucks even considered asking Hughes to leave school following the WJC, which was hosted in Vancouver.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 12, 2019

Back in January and even February, there was a hope that when Hughes arrived the Canucks would still be in the thick of a playoff race. But a 5-11-3 stretch now has them nine back of the wild card and just as close to the bottom of the conference as they are to a playoff spot.

A silver lining for the fan base, though, is that they'll now likely get to watch their top prospect — an exciting one at that — take his first NHL steps. Michigan's season ended Saturday night and it's expected Hughes will sign a contract with Vancouver, possibly this week.

"His vision with the puck, he's a play ahead," Wolverines head coach Mel Pearson said about what aspect of Hughes' game he's most excited about translating to the NHL. "He knows where he's going with the puck. He's not one of those guys who needs to look right at a guy to make a pass.

"His skating. Everybody can see his skating, creativity with the puck," Pearson continued. "Hockey sense, vision, poise and patience. Some players have that and some don't."

How confident do you have to be to even try such things? I'm so happy and still can't believe my boy Quinn Hughes dropped to 7th overall.

For those following along, he's somehow climbed to 88% for controlled exits vs. Wisconsin last night. #Canucks pic.twitter.com/jbmrnT07q7

— Darryl Keeping (@dkeeping) November 26, 2018

The 19-year-old is coming off a monster of a season, his second with the Wolverines, in which he recorded 33 points in 30 regular season games. That 1.10 points per game average was the second-highest mark of any under-20 NCAA defenceman in the 21st century, trailing only Adam Fox's 1.14 (40 points in 35 games) in 2016-17. Fox was a freshman for a loaded Harvard Crimson that made it to the Frozen Four that season, while Hughes led the 13-14-7 Wolverines who were swept in the first round of the Big 10 playoffs.

With Elias Pettersson and Brock Boeser in tow, Hughes is another dynamic talent who will be a huge factor when Vancouver finally takes that next step as a playoff team. But for now, expectations need to be tempered as to what his initial impact will be. Even Rasmus Dahlin, the only defenceman taken before Hughes in his draft, had just one goal and four points in his first month in the NHL. Hughes' payoff is all about the long-term contribution.

"He's not going to be the saviour," Pearson cautioned. "He's a very good player who's going to do great things for Vancouver over time, but I'd tell people to have some patience.

"Like Dylan Larkin in Detroit, another Michigan player. Dylan's a hell of a player, but he's not going to get them to the playoffs this year. Somewhere down the line they'll get there and he'll be a big part of that and the same will be true about Quinn."

The area of his game that will need the most tightening is on defence, which isn't uncommon for a teenaged blueliner stepping into the NHL. The biggest challenge for Hughes will be figuring out what he can't get away with in the NHL that he could nightly in the NCAA, while still being fearless with his natural abilities.

This is where Hughes' exposure to professional talent representing USA at the 2018 World Championship will come in handy. Pearson noted how impressed Team USA coach Jeff Blashill was by Hughes' ability to adapt to pro competition in 10 games last summer, over which he accumulated two assists.

The Wolverines coach also calls Hughes a "perfectionist" and that playing at the highest level will push Hughes to thrive and focus on improving at the things that will one day make him a great NHL blueliner. He rises to the level of competition he's against.

He won't overpower you physically, but he can keep up with anyone, which will make it tough to beat him out of a play. That's the more important thing teams look for in a blueliner nowadays as the NHL game

has changed in a way that favours the kind of 5-foot-10, 170-pound puck-mover Hughes is.

Pearson noted that, generally, when he talks to NHL teams about various defencemen, the kind of answers they seek aren't the same that were being sought out years ago.

"When I talk to GMs or scouts they ask 'how are his first three steps' or 'how is his speed?' Pearson said. "Very rarely do they ask about physicality. They might ask you about compete, but speed is so important."

Hughes has that in spades. The Canucks were appointment viewing at the start of the season just to see what Pettersson would do, and now the same could be true with Hughes in the lineup. He's tremendous at transitioning the play, creating and controlling up-ice rushes that should help pick up Vancouver's tempo when he's on the ice.

It'll just take a little time for Hughes to round into his full potential. Not only does he personally have to evolve against top competition, he'll face that challenge on a Canucks team that is likely to lose more often than not down the stretch. One of the marks of a great player, though, is how he responds to personal mistakes or rough team stretches and Pearson believes Hughes is more ready than most to deal with this reality in a hockey-mad market.

"He bounces back from things," Pearson said. "Maybe it's because of how young he is, but he does not dwell on the negativity of a tough outing. He's such a positive person. That's one of his strengths. You have to have thick skin and a short memory."

The bottom line is Hughes wants what Vancouver has to offer and the Canucks need exactly the dimension Hughes can add. The picture may not always be rosy with immediate elite production when Hughes arrives, but at the foundation, he is another dynamic talent setting the table for better days ahead.

"He's really excited about coming to Vancouver," Pearson said. "We've talked about that before. Some kids get drafted by a team and go 'oh shoot' but he's excited. He got a real good feel for (the city) at the WJC. He wants to play for a hockey market."

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1135613 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Scoring slump a reminder that Canadiens' Drouin is still developing

Eric Engels March 11, 2019

BROSSARD, Que.— Jonathan Drouin still sees himself as a work in progress and it would be wise for Montreal Canadiens fans to view him the same way.

At 23 years old, with just 309 games of NHL experience under his belt, it's normal for him to be entrenched in the process of seeking out the type of consistency that defines a good career. It's normal that he'll hit a few bumps along that road. If Canadiens fans can recognize that, they'll have an easier time appreciating the progress he's made as a player over the last six months.

This is as good a time as any, while Drouin is in the midst of a 13-game goal-drought, for them to remind themselves that he's played a vital role in the team's overall success this season. With 17 goals and 33 assists for 50 points through 68 games, Drouin's the second-leading scorer on the Canadiens, currently three points shy of his career-high (set in 2016) and four points past his disappointing totals over 77 games a year ago.



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With his help, the Canadiens have been in a playoff spot for all but 16 days since the beginning of October, and the forward believes he can contribute to them climbing back into one in short order.

Drouin says blocking out the criticism is one key to that.

"If you focus on it, the more you think about it, it's worse for you," he said after Monday's practice. "I've had to learn to stop looking at that kind of thing, just be with my family, be with my friends, and focus on the hockey when I come to games and come here to practise. I think we do a pretty good job of [shutting out the noise] and just focusing on us. At this point of the year that's what we have to do. You look at the standings, we're not that far away, you have to be able to find that groove."

The good news is that Drouin's looking for it. He knows his game isn't just going to magically appear. He knows what type of work he needs to put in to be successful and he's trying to draw on the experience he does have in order to find it.

This is a player who accumulated 102 points in 50 playoff games with the QMJHL's Halifax Mooseheads, a player who had 14 points in 17 playoff games with the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2016, a player who's risen to the occasion when the pressure has ramped up. He's currently looking backwards to move forwards.

"I'm looking at those games," said Drouin. "Those are ones you want to go back to and say to yourself, 'How was I playing in those playoffs and what was I doing that was so different?' I go back to those playoffs and how I was playing and see I was always around the puck. If it wasn't on my stick, I was winning a battle to get it. We always talk about winning battles to create a gap and make a play real quick. You have to go back to that and how intensely I played, and now we're in a battle that's a playoff-like battle."

There's no doubt about that. The Canadiens are currently on the bubble of the Eastern Conference playoff picture and by the time they play the Detroit Red Wings on Tuesday, they could be two points back of the Columbus Blue Jackets for the second wild-card spot. It goes without saying they need Drouin at his best.

Canadiens coach Claude Julien believes he can get there quickly.

"I would say that on this last road trip [1-2-0 through Los Angeles, San Jose and Anaheim], I saw a good effort from a player on both sides of the ice, offensively and defensively. So, a guy who continues to play that way, eventually things will start going his way. I think he's got the right approach and hopefully he starts producing soon. That would certainly help. But I can't criticize his effort in the last three games because it's been there."

It's waned at different points of the season, but Julien sees that as part of the process. The coach says a step forward for Drouin would be approaching practices the same way he does games.

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"It's like everything else when we talk to players: It starts in practice," said Julien. "You practise hard, you build good habits. Those good habits transpire into a game so it becomes second nature instead of maybe not giving it your all in practice and then thinking all of a sudden you can turn the switch on and all of a sudden you're great again. You want to be consistent? You've gotta be consistent every day you step on the ice, and the top players that I've coached in the past have always been that way. They enjoy the game the minute they step on the ice whether it's practice or games. They thrive to be the best, so it becomes second nature and it helps them thrive through the ups and downs of a season."

Drouin isn't lacking the motivation to become the type of player Julien's describing. In his mind, he's on his way there.

"I've made progress and I'm doing everything I can to get better and better," Drouin said. "Sometimes I grab the puck and I know I'm flying out there; I've got my timing and legs. Sometimes the timing's there but your

legs aren't. You have to find that consistency of every game of having that groove, and I'm still looking to find that in my upcoming years."

That the Ste. Agathe, Que., native is still on the upswing of his career is something his detractors should keep in mind.

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1135614 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Flames find relief with monumental effort against Golden Knights

Eric Francis | @EricFrancis March 11, 2019, 2:03 AM

CALGARY – The Calgary Flames are back in the saddle – as in the Dome and atop the west.

Snapping a four-game losing streak against a divisional foe that had won six straight, the Flames leap-frogged the San Jose Sharks to regain Pacific division bragging rights Sunday night.

And they did it the old fashioned way – with their top players.

Oh no, not the first line. While Johnny Gaudreau's nine shots on goal were a refreshing change of pace for the top trio, it still left him, Sean Monahan and Elias Lindholm scoreless.

On this night, with the stakes befitting a return engagement with Vegas, three other top six forwards were the ones who finally answered the bell in a 6-3 win over the Knights.

Yes, the same line the Flames have long counted on to shut down the opposition, turned the tables on a troubling trend in Calgary with a monumental effort.

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Matthew Tkachuk's first NHL hat trick (and assist) highlighted an 11-point effort from Calgary's 3M Line, which included two goals and an assist from Mikael Backlund and four assists for Michael Frolik.

"I don't even know if I should be the one to have it," said Tkachuk when asked about the keepsake puck.

"I should cut it in half and give it to Backs and Fro just for the job they did tonight. They gave me a couple of tap-in birdies there. Couple open nets and they were awesome tonight."

Stewing in a two-game road trip through Vegas and Phoenix that saw the Flames score just one goal, the Flames returned to the Dome feeling the heat of a surging Vegas team that had made up eight points on the Flames since the Feb. 25 trade deadline.

A Knights win Sunday would have cut the lead to six, given the visitors a 3-1 series win this season along with plenty of confidence and momentum should the two collide early in the playoffs.

But the Flames had other ideas, refusing to give up on their pursuit of first in the Pacific division, which they found themselves playing second fiddle in on Saturday for the first time in more than two months.

That's how long things had been going Calgary's way, before the recent four-game slide proved their defensive improvements could no longer overcome their sudden offensive shortcomings.



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"Every time you end a losing streak you feel good, it's a relief," said Backlund, who snapped a 3-3 tie with 22 seconds left in the second period with a net-front redirect that was challenged and cleared, prompting goalie Malcolm Subban to lose his composure at the horn and earn a penalty.

"This stretch can be a little tough on the group but guys approached it the right way this morning. Now we've been No. 1 for a while and it puts a little more pressure on the team and maybe that's part of why we had two losing streaks. Everybody has them, except Tampa I guess. Being through some tough years you really appreciate being in this spot and want to make the most of it for sure."

A veteran's deke by young Andrew Mangiapane opened the scoring in an intense first period the Flames led 3-1. The Knights scored twice in the opening 80 seconds of the second to remind everyone what a tough out they'll be again this spring.

"We know how they play and they know what we're all about – who gets to their game first and stays on it wins," said Flames coach Bill Peters of the potential playoff partner they finished the season series tied 2-2 with.

"We got to our game early, came off it and got rattled, and then got composed again. But in the end, the execution improved."

David Rittich (25 saves) was solid in the third period as the Knight pressed for the tie, before Tkachuk converted a sweet Backlund pass into an open net with four minutes left. His empty-netter two minutes later prompted hundreds of hats and toques to hit the ice from a fan base finally able to exhale.

"We struggled the past week or so, so to get that one at the begging of a home-stand here, we just want to carry the momentum," said Tkachuk, whose club plays two more at home against non-playoff teams before a jaunt to Winnipeg, where they'll definitely need the top guns to continue their rebound.

"(Scoring) is obviously a focal point lately and we know it.

We don't have to get reminded about how we're struggling to put the puck in the net. It was definitely a relief tonight.

"We didn't talk about (losing first place) at all today but would assume if you asked every guy to give their honest answer, we don't want to be trailing anybody. We want to win the division, not finish second or third. We didn't want to be chasing teams and I think it was a little extra motivation."

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1135615 Websites

TSN.CA / Lightning depth players dominate 'lethargic' Leafs in rout

Kristen Shilton

TORONTO – The Maple Leafs have no excuse for what happened on Monday night, nor are they accepting any offers of justification. Their spiritless performance in a 6-2 drubbing by the Tampa Bay Lightning wouldn't be hung on a long albeit successful trip through Western Canada that ended early Sunday, or any seasonal illnesses players may be battling.

In taking on the NHL-leading Lightning, the Leafs were just bad. And there was no way to sugar coat that after the fact.

"The effort just wasn't there at times, and in the third period we pretty much just quit," assessed Auston Matthews, who scored one of Toronto's two goals. "So, that's on us as players. We have to wake up and do a

much better job and hold each other accountable. They were just better than us in every way."

Even before the hits started coming in the first period, after which Toronto trailed its visitors 2-0, the Leafs were dealt an early blow with the loss of top-six winger Kasper Kapanen, held out for precautionary reasons related to illness. That shoved William Nylander up to his old spot alongside Matthews and Andreas Johnsson, but the Leafs stars never played like star players.

Neither, really, did the Lightning's big guns, who courted all the headlines leading into Monday night. In a game Tampa won by four goals, the NHL's points leader Nikita Kucherov, top-line centre Steven Stamkos and top-pairing defenceman Victor Hedman combined for just two assists. It was Tampa's depth that drowned the Leafs on a night the hosts were outshot 42-28.

Tyler Johnson delivered the opening salvo, deflecting a puck off his skate past Andersen for a 1-0 lead. Anthony Cirelli next deflected Mikhail Sergachev's point blast to make it 2-0 before the end of the first. And then Johnson struck again early in the second, burying a puck that ricocheted off Andersen's mask (hard enough to dislodge the strap) and found the winger waiting in the weeds to make it 3-0.

Within 30 seconds, Ondrej Palat put another goal past Andersen, chasing the Leafs' starter for the first time all season in favour of backup Garret Sparks.

"They got some bounces early and I don't think we responded that well," Morgan Rielly said. "No excuses. There's no reason for us not to be ready and [any lingering fatigue] is certainly not an excuse for what happened on the ice tonight."

"We have to find a way to establish our game and grab some of that momentum back," added John Tavares. "As frustrating as it could be, halfway through the game, we have to find a way to get our game going and execute better than we did."

As Andersen took the fall for a poor overall team showing, Matthews came to life with an end-to-end rush and shot that beat Andrei Vasilevskiy, cutting the Leafs' deficit to 4-1.

If Toronto still had hope of a comeback at that point, it was rapidly extinguished by their own egregious error on an ensuing power play, when an inexplicably bad line change created a three-on-one shorthanded chance the other way, and Cedric Paquette delivered a dagger past Sparks to make it 5-1 Lightning.

Rielly thought he'd been hooked prior to that play developing, and Nazem Kadri said he thought a penalty was coming, too, but one didn't materialize.

"I know personally I shouldn't have changed when I changed. Really unacceptable," said Tavares of the mistake. "Our execution and the will to find a way to overcome some of the things they're doing to counter us [has to improve] and that's just by bearing down and executing in certain areas."

Paquette would score again in the third, deflecting a shot up and over Sparks to pad Tampa's total. Connor Brown added a late goal with 4.2 seconds left in regulation, right before Toronto limped off with the loss.

"We were no good," surmised coach Mike Babcock. "They were better than us from start to finish and won more battles, more races and just had more jump. We looked like a lethargic group right from the get-go, didn't have any energy right through our whole group, didn't skate well, didn't execute well, weren't good."

Toronto had already seen Tampa twice this season, and beaten them once, so how well the Lightning play isn't exactly a mystery. It was the Leafs' seeming lack of preparedness to manage their attack that was most bothersome.

"I think it was a good measuring stick for us," Matthews said. "That's a veteran team. They obviously came out hungry...we just didn't come



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ready to play. Despite bad bounces they still beat us in every area of the ice."

Simply flushing the defeat isn't good enough now, either. It's too late in the year, with too few regular season games remaining before playoffs are slated to begin. If Toronto wants to be a better team in the future, there's no shying away from the present.

"We have to learn from today," Tavares stated. "This was a great opportunity for us. Certainly look ourselves in the mirror and look to bounce back and understand we have to be a lot better than we were today."

TAKEAWAYS

NHL investigating alleged use of homophobic slur

During Monday's game, a microphone picked up audio of a homophobic slur being uttered on the ice.

Toronto's general manager Kyle Dubas released the following statement after the game in regards to the alleged incident:

"The Club is aware of the reports surrounding a homophobic slur used during the Maple Leafs vs. Lightning game on Monday night. The issue of homophobia is one the Toronto Maple Leaf Hockey Club strongly condemns and takes very seriously. We are in communication with the NHL and are cooperating fully with their office."

NHL PR released a similar statement and said they will have no further comment until their investigation is complete.

Good, bad and ugly

Matthews had as fraught an outing in Monday's game as any Leaf, punctuating some difficult defensive zone errors with a highlight-reel worthy goal to try and breathe life into his lagging team.

Given the slight skid Matthews had hit offensively prior to Monday's game – with zero goals and two assists in his previous six games – all eyes were on the Leafs centre to deliver. The prospect of being reunited on a line with Nylander could have been the spark Matthews needed to get rolling, and he did have good jump skating throughout the game, but initially the linemate swap did nothing to jog his scoring touch.

In fact, Matthews' first period was altogether forgettable, starting with his giveaway on a backwards pass attempt to Jake Muzzin that was intercepted and eventually shot past Andersen by Johnson to open the scoring.

Matthews' line was out again on Palat's goal, scored off Matthews' lost defensive zone draw. Right after that draw is when Matthews went zone-to-zone for his 31st goal of the season, breaking out of his mini-slump and giving Toronto momentum to cling to.

But they didn't, Matthews included. He did manage the third-highest possession total on the team at 48 per cent (the Leafs finished at 44 per cent overall), but it was clear after the game Matthews had higher expectations for his own game that what he showed against Tampa. Matthews finished with two shots on goal in 17:20 time on ice.

Andersen gets the hook

As soon as Palat's goal went in, Babcock didn't flinch before turning to Sparks on the Leafs bench and sending in his backup to replace Andersen. It was the first time all season Babcock had given Andersen the hook, but with four goals allowed on 19 shots and more than half a game still to play, it was in the Leafs' best interest to make the change.

While Andersen wasn't stellar over his 24:50 in net, the goalie was also victimized by some good deflection work by the Lightning. Both Johnson's first goal and Cirelli's score were re-directed, leaving Andersen with little chance of making a stop. When Palat scored, the puck deflected twice before going past him.

Andersen's teammates came to his defence after, saying they hung the goalie out to dry.

Assessing his own game, Andersen said he "felt pretty good" but sometimes, "you don't get the bounces." And the bottom line for Babcock was Andersen didn't come up with the saves Toronto needed, and jolting his team awake with a goalie change was the right course of action. Andersen ended the night with a .789 save percentage, while Sparks topped out with 21 saves and a .913 save percentage.

Devil in the details

While the Leafs held an overall edge in faceoff wins at 55 per cent over the Lightning, the draws they did lose were a key cog in the final score.

Four of Tampa's six goals were scored nearly the same way, off offensive zone faceoff wins and quick passes that cut right through the reeling Leafs struggling to sort assignments down low.

Blue and White Trending

Tracking Leafs' trends all season long

Monday's loss was the fifth time this season Toronto has given up six goals in a game, and the second time in six games. The four-goal loss was tied for the largest deficit Toronto has endured in a home loss this year.

Next up

Toronto continues its homestand on Wednesday against the Chicago Blackhawks.

Last Word

"We should have showed a better effort tonight, but that being said, you're not going to see that very often from us. We're not quitters. We've never been like that; we always finish it to the end. [But] did we want a better effort? Of course."

- Nazem Kadri, reflecting on the Leafs' 6-2 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning

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TSN.CA / NHL investigating alleged use of homophobic slur in Lightning-Leafs game

Staff

The NHL's communications department issued a statement late Monday night stating that the league is investigating reports of a homophobic slur that was used during Monday's Lightning-Maple Leafs game.

Following the league's statement on the matter, Maple Leafs general manager Kyle Dubas issued a statement as well:

"The Club is aware of the reports surrounding a homophobic slur used during the Maple Leafs versus Lightning game on Monday night. The issue of homophobia is one the Toronto Maple Leaf Hockey Club strongly condemns and takes very seriously. We are in communication with the NHL and are cooperating fully with their office."

The Maple Leafs ultimately lost the contest 6-2.

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TSN.CA / Cooper: Marner 'as smart a player' NHL's 'ever seen'

Mark Masters

TSN Toronto reporter Mark Masters checks in daily with news and notes on the Maple Leafs. The Leafs and Tampa Bay Lightning skated at Scotiabank Arena before tonight's game.

Jon Cooper coached Mitch Marner at the 2017 World Championships and came away incredibly impressed by Maple Leafs winger. And the respect the Tampa Bay Lightning head coach has for Marner only seems to be growing.

"The one thing about Marner is he is as smart a player as this league has not only seen this year, has ever seen," Cooper proclaimed. "And somebody that can elude defenders and do the things he can do with the puck on the offensive side of it, it translates to the defensive side as well."

Brad Marchand, who last week tweeted about his admiration for Marner, continued to troll Leafs Nation on Monday afternoon. The Boston Bruins winger responded to a tweet with the Cooper quote by writing "Told ya." But Cooper was genuine in his praise, even referencing a play Marner made a week ago in Calgary when he intercepted a pass from Flames centre Mikael Backlund before blowing past defenceman Noah Hanifin to get a breakaway chance leading to a Zach Hyman rebound goal.

"He knew that play was happening before the defenceman did, that's how he got the breakaway so when you have a brain like that you can play both sides of the puck," Cooper gushed.

Marner's feel for the game also stands out to linemate John Tavares.

"What's really impressed me most about him, getting to know him and playing with him this year, is just when we talk on the bench and the things he sees and recognizes from opponents when they have the puck and the things they're trying to do," said Tavares. "He picks up on things so well. It's really, really impressive, especially for a guy his age. He just reads the game so well not just with the puck, but without it that he's able to anticipate plays."

"He's [an] unbelievable player," said Lightning winger Nikita Kucherov, "fun to watch and he makes those plays people don't see. I guess he's so much fun to play with and I guess guys like to play with him on same line and PP because he makes plays. He sets up passes and makes other players better and that's what I like about him."

Marner has assisted on 22 of Tavares' 38 goals this season. But the defensive side of the game has been just as important for the dynamic duo and that's why Leafs head coach Mike Babcock will often match the Tavares line against other top lines.

"Growing up in the league now and kind of feeling more mature and getting more responsibilities you got to make sure you're playing both sides of the puck really well," Marner said. "I take the D-zone very serious[ly] and a lot of the guys in this room do. I think we know if we want to win it starts in our D-zone and goes forward."

Cooper: Marner one of the smartest players NHL 'has ever seen'

Lightning head coach Jon Cooper praises Mitch Marner's ability to play both sides of the puck and says he's one of the smartest players the league has ever seen.

Tavares and Marner will face one of their tougher challenges tonight against Kucherov.

"He's got elite edges," said Babcock, "elite hockey sense, knows where he's going with the puck before he gets it. I mean, his skating is second

to none. He's playing with good players as well. So, you add it all together and he's obviously the most dangerous guy in hockey right now."

Kucherov leads the scoring race with 110 points, which is 13 more than his closest pursuer, Chicago's Patrick Kane.

"There's things Kuch does on the ice that you sit back and you leave the seat of being a coach and you become a fan, because you just marvel at what he can do," said Cooper.

What stands out to Marner?

"His skill with the puck and just how he can (make) a lot of plays out of nothing so we got to make sure we're staying above him," the 21-year-old said. "He also finds quiet spots to kind of sit and wait in the weeds and he's not afraid to score goals like that."

"It's just his unpredictability," added Tavares. "His ability to beat you in different ways. He's such a good shooter, but also obviously a tremendous passer. He's so good at finding the late man and being able to slow things down even though he's a guy that can play at a high pace. (He's) able to draw defenders to him and find the open man."

Kucherov was the Hart Trophy favourite midway through last season before fading a bit down the stretch and failing to earn a nomination. This season, he shows no signs of letting up. The 25-year-old Russian was amused when asked why he's reached a new level this season.

"Why? Ha! I don't know," he said. "Try to get better and definitely feel better. I definitely feel better this year than I felt last year at this time. Trying to work on my game and see what happens."

Where has he improved the most?

"Everything, I guess, a little bit, you know."

Teammates can only marvel at the season Kucherov has put together. He has two five-point games, five four-point games and nine three-point games already.

"It's tough to put into words the kind of year he's had," said defenceman Ryan McDonagh. "I've never played with a player putting up these kinds of numbers. Obviously, the consistency speaks to me. You have guys that will have two- or three-point nights once every three games, but he's had multiple three-, four-, five-point games this year."

Tavares, Leafs face big challenge against 'most dangerous guy in hockey'

Nikita Kucherov is having a career year, racking up 110 points in only 69 games thus far, 13 points clear of Blackhawks' Patrick Kane for the Art Ross lead. Facing off against the Maple Leafs on Monday night, Toronto is aware that they have to pay special attention to the Russian star.

The Lightning lead the Leafs by 19 points in the standings, but have just four more regulation and overtime wins (46 to 42). And the teams have split two closely-contested games in Tampa. So, what's the gap between the clubs?

"I don't think there's much," Marner insisted. "I mean, all four lines on both teams can score. We both have a lot of speed and skill and I think it's just trying to out-patient the other team, I think that's the goal of it."

"Both teams have a lot of speed and like to get in on the forecheck," said McDonagh. "It just seems that neutral zone is so key and sometimes it's not even tape-to-tape passes that are the most effective when these two teams go at it. It's just getting that puck up into the zone and letting the forwards get on the up defenceman ... there's so much speed that time just gets taken away in the neutral zone."

Tavares suggested that the biggest difference between the clubs may be maturity.



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"They got off rolling right at the beginning and they just haven't really stopped going downhill," he noted. "They're a team that's been through it for a number of years, gone deep in the playoffs, had some really good regular seasons so I think they probably have a good sense of the overall journey and why you have to play all 82 and you're trying to build something and that's something we're trying to work toward as well."

As for tonight's game, Babcock was asked if there will be any greater challenge because Toronto is coming off a week-long trip through Western Canada. Does he think that the first game back from that type of trip is tough?

"I would if it was someone else coming off of one, but today I don't at all. I think it's just a great opportunity."

Marner doesn't see huge gap between Leafs, Lightning

Two of the top teams in the NHL face off in Toronto on Monday night. While the Lightning are running away with the Presidents' trophy, the Maple Leafs aren't showing any fear of their opposition. The teams have split the season series, and Mitch Marner doesn't see much of a skill gap between the two clubs.

The Leafs have the fifth-most points in the NHL and, because of the current divisional format, are almost certain to start the playoffs against the Bruins, who are currently second overall. Babcock sidestepped a question about the structure of the postseason early in his news conference, but was a bit more expansive when asked about it again.

"It does me no good. He (other reporter) already took a run at me that way and you're going to take a run at me the other way. I mean, come on. You guys all know what everyone thinks, but it doesn't matter, right? I get paid to coach the hockey club, I'm going to do everything I can to get us in the best situation. I really believe, in the end, you've got to be able to beat everybody. That's what we're trying to do. We're trying to build a program like Tampa has done. You need some wounds and all that stuff and you go through that over the years as you build your program. I like the direction we're going, I like the growth for our hockey club, I think our team is getting better. That, to me, is all I control. All this other stuff, I've got lots of time to think about that when I'm retired."

Babcock, Leafs refuse to take the bait on "unusual" playoff format

The NHL's playoff format has been a hot topic in recent weeks, but Toronto Maple Leafs head coach Mike Babcock isn't offering up any solutions on how to fix the current system.

Hyman was absent from Toronto's morning skate, but Babcock expects he'll be able to play tonight. If Hyman can't play then Tyler Ennis will take his spot in the lineup. Ennis, who played Saturday and was projected to be a healthy scratch tonight, will play against the Lightning. Kapanen will not play tonight for precautionary reasons due to illness.

Lines at Leafs morning skate:

Forwards

Petan-Tavares-Marner

Johnsson-Matthews-Kapanen

Marleau-Kadri-Nylander

Moore/Ennis-Gauthier-Brown

Defencemen

Rielly-Hainsey

Muzzin-Zaitsev

Marincin-Ozhiganov

Holl

Goaltenders

Andersen starts

Sparks

Lines at Lightning morning skate:

Forwards

Palat-Stamkos-Miller

Johnson-Point-Kucherov

Killorn-Cirelli-Joseph

Erne-Paquette-Gourde

Defencemen

Hedman-Sergachev

McDonagh-Cernak

Coburn-Rutta

Martel-Stralman

Goaltenders

Vasilevskiy starts

Domingue

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TSN.CA / Tkachuk skates into void left by mentor Stone

Frank Seravalli

PHILADELPHIA — Two weeks have already passed since Mark Stone became a Vegas Golden Knight, but he's kept in touch with at least one former Ottawa Senators teammate.

"We've talked every day," Brady Tkachuk said Monday.

In what's been a long, strange season for Tkachuk — a rookie year with 43 different faces in the Sens' lineup — Stone was the one confidante he could lean on. More than just a mentor, Stone became a close friend.

Trades are life in the NHL. But it hasn't been easy to cut the cord.

"We were always together," Tkachuk said. "It was tough to see him leave. We grew so close."

The connection was made before the Sens drafted Tkachuk fourth overall last June. Stone is a Winnipeg native. Stone's agent, Craig Oster, is Tkachuk's uncle.

That made it natural for Stone to take Tkachuk under his wing, inviting the 19-year-old to live with him and his girlfriend, Hayley.

Tkachuk said he wasn't ready to live on his own yet, so he lived with Stone until the start of the New Year in January.

Stone cracked this weekend on Hockey Night in Canada that Tkachuk was "easy to live with" even if he was "a little bit useless at times."

"We were really close," Stone said. "We hung out together at home, on the road. I had a really good relationship with his mom, Chantal, and his dad, Keith. They raised their kids the right way."



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Keith and older brother Matthew may have given Tkachuk advice, but he was like a sponge around Stone, soaking up any and every tidbit along the way.

"He was tremendous for me. On the ice, he's one of the best players in the NHL. Off the ice, always being around, I saw how he takes care of himself, how well-liked he was by our teammates, staff and community. I learned so much from a guy like Mark," Tkachuk said.

Tkachuk even taught Stone a few new tricks. One of the few things he brought to Stone's house was his Xbox. He plugged it into one of the two TVs that Stone had side-by-side in his basement, turning it into an unexpected gamer's lounge.

Never mind that Stone hadn't picked up a controller in five years.

"I felt like a 19-year-old again," Stone said. "I never thought I'd play a video game again."

Tkachuk said playing those games was "one of those things you'll remember forever."

The chemistry from Fortnite and a little Call of Duty carried over to the ice. Playing on a line together, Stone hit a career-high in goals in Ottawa (28) and has now set a career-best in points (67) with five points in his first seven games for the surging Golden Knights.

With 16 goals and 36 points, Tkachuk is tied for third in the rookie scoring race. Interim Sens coach Marc Crawford marvelled at the "subtle input" that Stone would provide on the bench to Tkachuk.

All of that meant saying goodbye on Feb. 25 was difficult.

Tkachuk said they were at the rink. Stone told him what was happening, but the news hadn't broken yet, so they didn't want to "make a big deal about it."

The transition has been stark on the ice. Crawford said Jean-Gabriel Pageau now is the linemate who might offer a word or two on the bench.

But it's different. Stone passed the torch. Tkachuk is now counted on to be one of the faces of the Senators moving forward.

"I think he's handled it wonderfully," Crawford said of Tkachuk. "You move forward. I think our guys have moved forward. They realize it's them – they're the guys that now have to keep progressing."

Crawford said Tkachuk has come alive again in the last handful of games. He enters Monday night's contest against the Flyers with four points (two goals) in his last five games. He's a certified Flyers Killer, with four of his 16 career goals coming against Philadelphia.

"I think he's really taken a step here in the last couple of weeks," Crawford said. "You can see the adjustment he's making. People know what he plays like. He's made the subtle adjustment of, 'You think you've got me, but I'm going to add this dimension to my game.'"

The added dimension, Crawford said, has been the way he's re-engaged around the net. He is a "handful" for opposing defencemen – or, as Tkachuk says, just being a Tkachuk.

"I'm going to continue to be who I am," Tkachuk said.

It's a brave new world now for Tkachuk. But that doesn't mean he'll lose touch with Stone any time soon.

"He was pretty special to me. I'll forever remember that," Tkachuk said. "I know he's happy. He just signed a great ticket in Vegas. We're already starting to plan out when we'll see each other again."

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TSN.CA / Leafs confident ahead of clash with juggernaut Lightning

Kristen Shilton

TORONTO – There will be no rest yet for the road-weary Maple Leafs, who just returned from their second extended road trip in a month (this time through Western Canada) to step directly into a Monday night matchup with the juggernaut Tampa Bay Lightning.

But that may not be so bad a fate.

Toronto has already faced the NHL-leading Lightning twice this season, pulling a 1-1 record while playing well in both outings. They don't proclaim to hold an answer key on how to solve Tampa, but the Leafs are confident their past positive experience can help them earn a second straight victory over their Atlantic Division rivals.

"We skated well, looked after the puck, we were all dialled in [the last two meetings]. That's what we have to be today," said Mike Babcock after the Leafs' morning skate on Monday. "If you get good goaltending and you have good specialty teams, you can have success. They're a good team, without any question. We like playing them; they're fun to play against. They built a program that's obviously the envy of the league right now."

Tampa is the only team to have clinched a playoff berth so far, amassing a staggering 52 wins and 108 points to date – 15 more than the second-place Boston Bruins.

While the Lightning have been unquestionably dominant, the Leafs have held their own in the previous two meetings. In the first, Toronto outshot Tampa 49-21 but fell 4-1 on the strength of Andrei Vasilevskiy's career-best 48-save performance. A month later, the Leafs overcame an early deficit and took control in the second period to earn a 4-2 win, a blueprint of sorts for how they'd like to play every night.

"[What worked] wasn't a lot different than what you want to do [all the time]," John Tavares explained. "But knowing how potent [the Lightning] attack is and the depth that they have, and the skill sets they bring to the table, the pace they play at, they make it difficult on you. Any time you can make a team defend and work to get the puck, work to get the middle of the ice – it's cliché stuff, but there's extra importance on it when the type of team you're playing is explosive as they are."

No player has been more explosive this season than Lightning sniper Nikita Kucherov. The winger leads the NHL with 110 points, 13 more than his closest competition Patrick Kane. Tavares' unit, with Mitch Marner and Zach Hyman, will likely be tasked with slowing down Kucherov's line (with Brayden Point and Tyler Johnson) on Monday.

"He's a good player. Elite edges, elite hockey sense, knows where he's going with the puck before he gets it," Babcock said of Kucherov. "His skating is second to none and he's playing with good players as well. Add it all together and he's obviously the most dangerous guy in hockey right now."

It's a good time of year for the Leafs' best players to be tested, though, and recently they've been rising to the occasion. One week ago, Tavares' line led the way with a combined six points in a 6-2 win over the Western Conference-leading Calgary Flames, one of the Leafs' most complete wins in weeks.

Recreating a similar performance against the talent-laden Lightning would be another boost for Toronto's top line as they continue fine-tuning their game ahead of the playoffs.

"The way we play without the puck I think is an area where we've developed a lot of chemistry," Tavares said. "And we are just being accountable all over the ice and being tough to play against, not just when we have the puck but when we're defending and playing in our own end."



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"For our group, it's making sure when we get in our zone, we're talking to each other, getting out of our zone quick," added Marner. "Then making sure we're spending as much time as we can in their D-zone and tiring their guys out and not giving them too much space going up the ice."

With so few holes to poke in Tampa's game at this stage – they even boast the best power play in the NHL at 28.6 per cent – the Leafs know their time is better spent paying attention to their own work.

"It's no secret they're having a good year, and we want to measure against them," said Frederik Andersen. "We're confident in our game and we don't want to focus too much on what they're doing, but really be patient and be disciplined in our game."

Maple Leafs projected lineup vs. Tampa:

Hyman-Tavares-Marner

Johnsson-Matthews-Kapanen

Marleau-Kadri-Nylander

Brown-Gauthier-Moore

Rielly-Hainsey

Muzzin-Zaitsev

Marincin-Ozhiganov

Andersen starts

Sparks

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TSN.CA / Surging Bruins raise serious questions for Maple Leafs

Travis Yost

The Toronto Maple Leafs rebuild, by just about every measure, has been a rousing success.

An organization plagued by subpar on-ice results for more than a decade has finally reversed course under the watchful eye of Brendan Shanahan, Kyle Dubas and Mike Babcock. Toronto has again eased into another playoff spot this season, thanks to one of the league's best regular-season records and the NHL's second-best goal differential.

But this year feels different. When the Maple Leafs were bounced out of the first-round in the 2016-17 NHL playoffs by the Washington Capitals, they were a considerable underdog whose Stanley Cup window hadn't yet opened. In the 2017-18 NHL playoffs, the Leafs felt closer to being Stanley Cup calibre. They drew a particularly cruel first-round draw against a very capable Boston Bruins, losing a tough series in seven games.

It's a near-certainty that the Maple Leafs will draw the Bruins in the first round again this April, and it looks like they will be the road team when that matchup is finalized.

Toronto, who had arguably been the league's second-best team for most of the regular season, fell into a bit of a slump (they have played to a 96-point pace since Jan. 1). That's allowed Boston – who has played to a 132-point pace since the New Year – to surge past them in the standings. While you have to give full credit to the Bruins for playing so well down the stretch, you start to wonder what it might mean for the Maple Leafs – particularly if the first round ends with a third consecutive elimination.

Toronto playing relatively poorly of late is one issue. Boston playing relatively well of late is a second issue. The fact that two top-five teams in points are slated to play in the first-round is a third (and uncontrollable) issue. But maybe the most pressing issue is that the Bruins jumping the Maple Leafs in the standings is largely legitimate and unaffected by puck luck, and that the Bruins' biggest gains have come in those critical even-strength minutes.

In this light, consider how Boston and Toronto's play has trended over time at even strength. We will use expected goals (courtesy Evolving Hockey) which considers both shot volume and the quality of those shots, but it's worth mentioning that standard shot rates, scoring chance rates, and actual goal rates look very similar to the below:

The Bruins are surging, carrying about 53 per cent of the expected goals at even strength over the last 20 games. That's a monster number – the type of performance you see in teams as they gear up for deep playoff runs. The Leafs are the opposite end of the spectrum. Over the last 20 games, the Leafs are getting just under 49 per cent of the expected goals – a far cry from their season high at the halfway point of the regular season, which was right around 54 per cent. These are two great hockey teams, but one is trending up and one is trending down.

The issue for the Leafs (and perhaps the Lightning) is that the vast majority of the game is played at even strength, and that is particularly true in the postseason where whistles are rare. Neither team is controlling pace nor tempo the way the Bruins are, and it's the usual suspects who are driving play in Beantown. The Patrice Bergeron line continues to pummel opponents on a nightly basis, but a notable rotation of quality defensive pairings has eased the burden on the aging Zdeno Chara. Charlie McAvoy has been instrumental there, but Brandon Carlo, Torey Krug and Matt Grzelcyk have also played well of late.

I isolated on Boston here for the obvious playoff format-based reasons, but it's worth pointing out that Toronto looks a bit underwhelming at even strength relative to a majority of playoff teams. If you compare expected goal rates carried by Toronto over the full season relative to every other playoff contender right now, they are on the wrong side of the head-to-head in most matchups.

In fact, the only two teams from the East that underwhelm relative to Toronto are Columbus (who is at risk of missing the postseason) and Washington:

The one area the Maple Leafs can hang their hat on is that they have tremendous power-play units that have been productive all season long. Against most teams, that could be a powerful equalizer. However, even that advantage may be null and void within the Atlantic Division. Boston (9.7 goals per 60 minutes; third in the NHL) has carried a top three power-play unit most of the season. The same is true for Tampa Bay (11.7 goals per-60 minutes; first in the NHL). And not only do they convert with a higher frequency, they also draw penalties with more frequency. Tampa Bay and Boston both sit inside of the top 10 in the number of power-play opportunities drawn this regular season, while Toronto sits 30th in the NHL.

No one disputes how talented this Toronto team is. But the reality is they aren't playing well of late relative to divisional peers and that doesn't bode well in a playoff format that will likely require them to eliminate both Boston and Tampa Bay – in that order – to make a serious postseason run. That seemed like a tough ask in October when the Leafs were firing on all cylinders. Now, it seems downright daunting.

The Maple Leafs have about a month to clean up their game. If they don't, they could be staring down the barrel of another first-round exit. At that point, you have to ask: What changes will the organization consider to try to get over the hump?

Another early elimination with no repercussions to the roster or coaching staff, in that light, is hard to imagine.

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