



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2019



Tweetmail No. 217: Mindset, Head Coach & Scorers

by Michael Smith

Hello and welcome to Tweetmail, a weekly feature on CarolinaHurricanes.com in which I take your Twitter questions about the Carolina Hurricanes or other assorted topics and answer them in mailbag form. Hopefully the final product is insightful to some degree, and maybe we have some fun along the way.

Let's get to it.

Because of how volatile the standings are in the Eastern Conference with each passing game, the Hurricanes can't afford to coast into the last few weeks of the season.

Is there some breathing room? Considering the team's point pace and the likely playoff cut line, yes, the team has earned itself some leeway in the final 13 games.

But they can't take that approach. They haven't. And they won't.

The mindset of the Hurricanes really hasn't changed much all season. It's the old cliché of one game at a time. Do they peek at the standings? Of course. It's human nature to be curious, to look, to see how you stack up against the competition. But is it a talking point with the team? Not exactly. It's a laser-focused mindset of one 60-minute segment and then the next, and so on.

Head coach Rod Brind'Amour offered this great soundbite after the team moved into a playoff spot following a win over Dallas on Feb. 16, and it holds true even a month later when the team has essentially held onto that spot: "At what point does it matter? It matters by the end of the year. That's when it matters. We've got a long way to go, and we're certainly not going to be satisfied because we're in now."

Without a doubt: Naming Rod Brind'Amour head coach of the Hurricanes.

From the moment it was made official on Tuesday, May 8, 2018, the culture of the Hurricanes shifted, just as it did on Thursday, Aug. 25, 2005, the day Brind'Amour was tabbed captain of the team.

That move in early May set the tone for everything that has followed.

Speaking of ...

At the very least, Brind'Amour should be one of the three finalists for the Jack Adams award.

This crux of this answer will depend on where his team ultimately ends up in just over three weeks, but right now,

there's a convincing, yet largely ignored argument to be made.

Brind'Amour, in overseeing a team that owns the lowest payroll and one of the youngest rosters, needed just 68 games behind the bench to surpass 80 points, becoming the fastest coach in franchise history to do so (Peter Laviolette, the previous franchise leader, accomplished it in 74 games). It's a team that continues to set franchise-bests or near-franchise-bests, such as the mark of 83 points in 69 games, the second-best record through 69 games in franchise history.

Through the culture he's bred in the organization, the message he's set forth in the room and the leadership he's displayed behind the bench, Brind'Amour guided a team from being two points from the basement on the morning of New Year's Eve to a 10th place rank in the league and the mathematical likelihood of qualifying for the Stanley Cup Playoffs for the first time since 2009.

That's a Jack Adams conversation starter in my eyes.

There was some confusion, to say the least, late in regulation in Nashville on Saturday.

TV's Mike Maniscalco and I dove head first into it on this week's episode of CanesCast, but here's a rundown of what happened. The bottom line: It was all correct, the gray area of goaltender interference notwithstanding.

When the initial whistle blew following the play in question, there was no call on the ice. The official was on the other side of the play and could not see that the puck had gone into the net. The initial review determined that the puck indeed did cross the line, which was plainly visible on the overhead view. The official then informed the Situation Room in Toronto that he had no goal on the ice due to what he deemed to be goaltender interference. He then announced that, "after review," there was goaltender interference and no goal.

The thing is, the initial review wasn't looking for goaltender interference - that's why the coach's challenge exists - but rather if the puck went in the net, and it did, indeed.

Nashville then challenged the call of goaltender interference, which they are entitled to do per Rule 78.7 (ii) (b), and the opinion of the ensuing review was that there is no interference.

Whether there was goaltender interference can be debated ad nauseum, but the process to arrive at the call that was



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made was indeed correct, if not confusing and somewhat convoluted.

This is an interesting question, one I'll ponder in the paragraphs below and one we also considered on this week's episode of CanesCast.

Currently, the Canes have three players on their roster who have scored 20 goals this season: Sebastian Aho (30), Justin Williams (20) and Nino Niederreiter (20: 11 with the Canes, 9 with the Wild).

Knocking on the door are Teuvo Teravainen (18), Micheal Ferland (17) and Andrei Svechnikov (17).

It's certainly conceivable that the Hurricanes end the season with six players who score at least 20 goals. If that happens, it will be the first time since 2007-08, when Williams, Ray Whitney, Eric Staal, Erik Cole, Brind'Amour and Scott Walker each did so.

In the years since, the Canes haven't had more than four players on their roster score at least 20 goals, a number that seems likely to be eclipsed this season.

Teravainen should get to 20 for the second straight season. If Ferland's health improves and he returns to the lineup, there's a good chance he'll also get to 20 for the second straight season. And Svechnikov? I don't see why not. Maybe he can keep finding those empty nets - so far, he's got four empty-netters on the season, bested only by Zach Hyman (5) and his teammate Aho (5).

Four players with 20 goals is practically a lock. Five still seems somewhat safe. Six seems doable.

Assumptions can be bad, but we'll allow it for the sake of this question. So, assuming Adam Fox signs with the Hurricanes at the conclusion of his season with Harvard, there are two options.

One is that he joins the Hurricanes and burns the first year of his three-year, entry-level contract, regardless of whether he plays a game. (And, that's something entirely different to consider, especially with how tight the playoff race is currently in the Eastern Conference.)

The second option is that he signs his three-year, entry-level contract (which, in this instance, wouldn't kick in until the 2019-20 season), along with an American League try-out contract so that he can play with the Charlotte Checkers down the stretch of their regular season and into the Calder Cup Playoffs. This was the case with Justin Faulk in April 2011, as he inked his three-year, entry-level deal with the Canes (which kicked in during the 2011-12 season) and reported to Charlotte after winning the national title with the University of Minnesota-Duluth.

The situation with Fox will be one to watch, for sure, in the coming weeks.

Join me next week for more questions and more answers!

If you have a question you'd like answered or you know what goaltender interference is, you can find me on Twitter at @MSmithCanes, or you can drop me an email.



Super 16: Sharks climb power rankings

Use six-game winning streak to reach No. 2; Predators drop three spots

by Dan Rosen

Super 16 Power Rankings

See which one of your favorite teams moved in or out of this week's Super 16 Power Rankings

The San Jose Sharks are winning and moving up the NHL.com Super 16 power rankings despite not having two of their most important players in the lineup.

The Sharks have won six games in a row without injured defenseman Erik Karlsson (groin) and forward Evander Kane (undisclosed). San Jose jumped the Boston Bruins and

Calgary Flames to move up to No. 2 this week after ranking No. 4 last week.

The Pittsburgh Penguins, 6-1-2 in their past nine games, and Nashville Predators, who haven't won in regulation since Feb. 21, swapped spots. The Penguins moved up three to No. 7 and the Predators dropped to No. 10.

The 16 teams ranked this week are the same 16 that were ranked last week.

To create the power rankings, each of the 13 participating staff members puts together his or her version of what they think the Super 16 should look like. Those are submitted and a point total is assigned to each.



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The team picked first is given 16 points, second gets 15, third gets 14 and so on down to No. 16, which gets one point.

Here is the latest Super 16:

1. Tampa Bay Lightning (53-13-4)

Total points: 208

Last week: No. 1

Hit: The Lightning need four points in their final 12 games to set a Tampa Bay record for most points in a season. They have 110 in 70 games, a 129-point pace. They set the record last season when they finished with 113 points.

Miss: Defensemen Anton Stralman and Dan Girardi missed the past two games, each with a lower-body injury. Neither is considered serious.

2. San Jose Sharks (43-19-8)

Total points: 190

Last week: No. 4

Hit: The Sharks lead the Calgary Flames by one point for first place in the Pacific Division and Western Conference.

Miss: It's unknown when Karlsson and Kane will return to the lineup.

3. Boston Bruins (42-19-9)

Total points: 182

Last week: No. 2

Hit: Patrice Bergeron has scored three shorthanded goals in his past five games, giving him an NHL career-high four this season. The center needs one point to reach 800 in the NHL. He's scored 315 goals with 484 assists in 1,017 games.

Miss: The Bruins have trailed in five consecutive games, including giving up the first two goals in three of them.

4. Calgary Flames (43-20-7)

Total points: 170

Last week: No. 3

Hit: The Flames lead the NHL with 103 goals in the third period, 11 more than the Winnipeg Jets. Calgary is plus-47 in third-period goal differential. The Toronto Maple Leafs are next at plus-22.

Miss: Goalie David Rittich has an .879 save percentage in his past four starts (15 goals against on 124 shots).

5. Washington Capitals (41-22-7)

Total points: 153

Last week: No. 6

Hit: The Capitals have a five-game home winning streak but play their next three games on the road before playing six of their final nine at home. They have a two-point lead on the New York Islanders for first in the Metropolitan Division.

Miss: They have to play the Lightning three times, including twice at Tampa Bay.

6. Toronto Maple Leafs (42-23-5)

Total points: 132

Last week: No. 5

Hit: Seven of Toronto's next eight games are against teams not in a Stanley Cup Playoff position, including two against the Ottawa Senators, who are last in the NHL with 52 points.

Miss: Kasper Kapanen missed the game against the Chicago Blackhawks on Wednesday with a concussion and there is no timetable for his return. The forward didn't play in a 6-2 loss to Tampa Bay on Monday because of precautionary reasons.

7. Pittsburgh Penguins (38-23-9)

Total points: 119

Last week: No. 10

Hit: Sidney Crosby has 64 points at even strength this season (22 goals, 42 assists), tied for third-most in his NHL career (2016-17). The center needs eight even-strength points to tie his NHL career high of 72 (36 goals, 36 assists) from the 2009-10 season. Crosby has 90 points (33 goals, 57 assists) in 67 games, giving him 1.34 points per game, fourth in the NHL.

Miss: Defenseman Kris Letang has missed eight games with an upper-body injury sustained in the first period of the 2019 Coors Light NHL Stadium Series against the Philadelphia Flyers on Feb. 23.

8. Winnipeg Jets (40-25-4)

Total points: 116

Last week: No. 8

Hit: The Jets have scored 10 power-play goals on 35 chances in 10 games since Feb. 20 (28.6 percent). Only the Florida Panthers (13 in 11 games) have scored more power-play goals in that time.

Miss: They are 6-9-2 in 17 games since Feb. 5. Their 14 points in that span are tied for 24th with the Anaheim Ducks.

9. New York Islanders (40-22-7)

Total points: 109

Last week: No. 9

Hit: The Islanders have been shorthanded six times in their past five games; they're 6-for-6 killing them. They have been shorthanded 189 times this season, tied with the Senators for fourth-fewest in the NHL.

Miss: They are 0-for-20 on the power play in nine games since Feb. 23.

10. Nashville Predators (39-27-5)

Total points: 97

Last week: No. 7

Hit: The Predators are 3-0 in games that have gone to the shootout since Feb. 25.



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Miss: The Predators have trailed 2-0 and lost in regulation in four of their past eight games. They also gave up a 2-0 lead in a 5-3 loss to the Jets on March 1.

11. Vegas Golden Knights (38-27-5)

Total points: 79

Last week: No. 13

Hit: Center Paul Stastny has nine points (two goals, seven assists) in eight games since Feb. 22.

Miss: Jonathan Marchessault has scored one goal in 14 games since Feb. 9. After scoring at least one goal in eight of Vegas' first 21 games this season, the right wing has scored in seven of 49 games since Nov. 19.

12. Carolina Hurricanes (38-24-7)

Total points: 76

Last week: No. 11

Hit: The Hurricanes have 83 points in 69 games, the second-most points they've had in a season through 69 games in Carolina/Hartford Whalers history (98 points, 46-17-6, 2005-06).

Miss: Calvin de Haan sustained a right eye injury a 3-0 win against the Colorado Avalanche on Monday. General manager Don Waddell said the defenseman is expected to make a full recovery.

13. St. Louis Blues (36-26-7)

Total points: 42

Last week: No. 12

Hit: Brayden Schenn has five points (two goals, three assists) in four games since returning from an injury that kept the forward out of the lineup for six games.

Miss: Vladimir Tarasenko has missed two games with an upper-body injury that could keep the forward out for at least four more. The Blues announced Sunday he would be re-evaluated in 10 days, which goes to next Tuesday, when they're home against the Edmonton Oilers. St. Louis is 0-1-1 without Tarasenko, who leads the Blues and is tied for seventh in the NHL with 36 points (17 goals, 19 assists) since Jan. 5.

14. Columbus Blue Jackets (39-28-3)

Total points: 35

Last week: No. 15

Hit: Boone Jenner has scored four goals on six shots in his past two games. He had a hat trick on three shots in a 7-4 win against the Bruins on Tuesday. The forward didn't play in a 2-0 loss to the Islanders on Monday because of an illness.

Miss: The Blue Jackets play eight of their final 12 games on the road with three as the second half of a back-to-back set.

15. Montreal Canadiens (37-26-7)

Total points: 25

Last week: No. 14

Hit: Montreal is 87.0 percent on the penalty kill (40-for-46) in 17 games since Feb. 5.

Miss: The Canadiens have scored 11 goals in their past five games, including an empty-net goal. Their power play is 2-for-34 in 14 games since Feb. 14; Montreal is 6-8-0 in those games.

16. Dallas Stars (36-28-5)

Total points: 24

Last week: No. 16

Hit: Ben Bishop has three consecutive shutouts with 94 saves and an active NHL career-long shutout streak of 204:20.

Miss: Valeri Nichushkin has no goals in 49 games this season. It's the forward's first season in the NHL since 2015-16, when he scored nine goals in 79 games. He played the past two seasons in the Kontinental Hockey League.

Others receiving points: Arizona Coyotes 16, Philadelphia Flyers 2

Dropped out: None

HERE'S HOW WE RANKED 'EM

AMALIE BENJAMIN

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. Boston Bruins; 3. San Jose Sharks; 4. Calgary Flames; 5. Toronto Maple Leafs; 6. Washington Capitals; 7. New York Islanders; 8. Winnipeg Jets; 9. Carolina Hurricanes; 10. Pittsburgh Penguins; 11. Nashville Predators; 12. Vegas Golden Knights; 13. Montreal Canadiens; 14. Dallas Stars; 15. St. Louis Blues; 16. Columbus Blue Jackets

TIM CAMPBELL

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. Calgary Flames; 3. San Jose Sharks; 4. Boston Bruins; 5. Washington Capitals; 6. Pittsburgh Penguins; 7. Toronto Maple Leafs; 8. Winnipeg Jets; 9. New York Islanders; 10. Nashville Predators; 11. Carolina Hurricanes; 12. Vegas Golden Knights; 13. Montreal Canadiens; 14. Columbus Blue Jackets; 15. St. Louis Blues; 16. Dallas Stars

BRIAN COMPTON

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. San Jose Sharks; 3. Boston Bruins; 4. Calgary Flames; 5. Washington Capitals; 6. Toronto Maple Leafs; 7. New York Islanders; 8. Carolina Hurricanes; 9. Pittsburgh Penguins; 10. Vegas Golden Knights; 11. Winnipeg Jets; 12. Nashville Predators; 13. Columbus Blue Jackets; 14. Dallas Stars; 15. Montreal Canadiens; 16. St. Louis Blues

NICHOLAS J. COTSONIKA

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. San Jose Sharks; 3. Boston Bruins; 4. Calgary Flames; 5. Washington Capitals; 6. Pittsburgh Penguins; 7. Toronto Maple Leafs; 8. New York Islanders; 9. Winnipeg Jets; 10. Nashville Predators; 11. Vegas Golden Knights; 12. Carolina Hurricanes; 13. Columbus Blue Jackets; 14. Montreal Canadiens; 15. St. Louis Blues; 16. Dallas Stars



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TOM GULITTI

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. San Jose Sharks; 3. Boston Bruins; 4. Calgary Flames; 5. Toronto Maple Leafs; 6. Washington Capitals; 7. New York Islanders; 8. Pittsburgh Penguins; 9. Winnipeg Jets; 10. Carolina Hurricanes; 11. Nashville Predators; 12. Vegas Golden Knights; 13. Columbus Blue Jackets; 14. Montreal Canadiens; 15. St. Louis Blues; 16. Dallas Stars

ADAM KIMELMAN

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. Boston Bruins; 3. San Jose Sharks; 4. Calgary Flames; 5. Washington Capitals; 6. Toronto Maple Leafs; 7. Winnipeg Jets; 8. Nashville Predators; 9. Pittsburgh Penguins; 10. New York Islanders; 11. Vegas Golden Knights; 12. Carolina Hurricanes; 13. St. Louis Blues; 14. Dallas Stars; 15. Columbus Blue Jackets; 16. Arizona Coyotes

ROBERT LAFLAMME

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. San Jose Sharks; 3. Calgary Flames; 4. Boston Bruins; 5. Washington Capitals; 6. Winnipeg Jets; 7. New York Islanders; 8. Nashville Predators; 9. Toronto Maple Leafs; 10. Pittsburgh Penguins; 11. Vegas Golden Knights; 12. Carolina Hurricanes; 13. St. Louis Blues; 14. Columbus Blue Jackets; 15. Montreal Canadiens; 16. Dallas Stars

MIKE G. MORREALE

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. Boston Bruins; 3. San Jose Sharks; 4. Washington Capitals; 5. Calgary Flames; 6. Vegas Golden Knights; 7. Winnipeg Jets; 8. Pittsburgh Penguins; 9. Nashville Predators; 10. Toronto Maple Leafs; 11. New York Islanders; 12. Columbus Blue Jackets; 13. Carolina Hurricanes; 14. St. Louis Blues; 15. Montreal Canadiens; 16. Dallas Stars

TRACEY MYERS

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. San Jose Sharks; 3. Calgary Flames; 4. Boston Bruins; 5. Toronto Maple Leafs; 6. Washington Capitals; 7. New York Islanders; 8. Winnipeg

Jets; 9. Nashville Predators; 10. Pittsburgh Penguins; 11. St. Louis Blues; 12. Carolina Hurricanes; 13. Vegas Golden Knights; 14. Columbus Blue Jackets; 15. Dallas Stars; 16. Arizona Coyotes

BILL PRICE

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. San Jose Sharks; 3. Calgary Flames; 4. Boston Bruins; 5. Winnipeg Jets; 6. Nashville Predators; 7. Washington Capitals; 8. Toronto Maple Leafs; 9. Pittsburgh Penguins; 10. New York Islanders; 11. Vegas Golden Knights; 12. St. Louis Blues; 13. Carolina Hurricanes; 14. Arizona Coyotes; 15. Dallas Stars; 16. Columbus Blue Jackets

SHAWN P. ROARKE

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. San Jose Sharks; 3. Boston Bruins; 4. Washington Capitals; 5. Pittsburgh Penguins; 6. Toronto Maple Leafs; 7. Calgary Flames; 8. Carolina Hurricanes; 9. New York Islanders; 10. Nashville Predators; 11. St. Louis Blues; 12. Winnipeg Jets; 13. Vegas Golden Knights; 14. Arizona Coyotes; 15. Philadelphia Flyers; 16. Dallas Stars

DAN ROSEN

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. San Jose Sharks; 3. Boston Bruins; 4. Calgary Flames; 5. Washington Capitals; 6. Pittsburgh Penguins; 7. Winnipeg Jets; 8. Toronto Maple Leafs; 9. Vegas Golden Knights; 10. Nashville Predators; 11. New York Islanders; 12. Carolina Hurricanes; 13. St. Louis Blues; 14. Dallas Stars; 15. Columbus Blue Jackets; 16. Arizona Coyotes

MIKE ZEISBERGER

1. Tampa Bay Lightning; 2. Boston Bruins; 3. San Jose Sharks; 4. Calgary Flames; 5. Washington Capitals; 6. Pittsburgh Penguins; 7. Toronto Maple Leafs; 8. Winnipeg Jets; 9. New York Islanders; 10. Nashville Predators; 11. Vegas Golden Knights; 12. Montreal Canadiens; 13. Carolina Hurricanes; 14. Columbus Blue Jackets; 15. Dallas Stars; 16. St. Louis Blues

Mailbag: Hurricanes' playoff chances, Binnington's case for Calder Trophy

NHL.com's Dan Rosen answers weekly questions

by Dan Rosen

Here is the March 13 edition of Dan Rosen's weekly mailbag, which runs every Wednesday. If you have a question, tweet it to @drosennhl and use #OvertheBoards.

Do the Carolina Hurricanes get into the Stanley Cup Playoffs? Sub question: How much love can Sebastian Aho get for the Hart Trophy or Selke Trophy? -- @everytimeidavid

My answers are yes and some.

The Hurricanes are legit. They're tied with the Tampa Bay Lightning for the most wins (23) and points (48) in the NHL since Dec. 31, and have the second-most goals in the League (117) since then. Carolina lost 8-1 to the Winnipeg

Jets on Friday, but bounced back with impressive road wins, 5-3 against the Nashville Predators on Saturday and 3-0 against the Colorado Avalanche on Monday. They haven't lost two in a row in regulation since Jan. 15 and 18. I don't see any let up, any signs that would indicate the Hurricanes are going to go into a late-season swoon. Their goaltending with Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney is holding up well and their offense continues to produce at a winning rate. They've scored at least three goals in 18 of their past 22 games, going 16-1-1 in those games. I'd be surprised if they let up.

Aho might get some fourth- or fifth-place votes for the Hart Trophy. He won't top Tampa Bay Lightning forward Nikita Kucherov or Chicago Blackhawks forward Patrick Kane. He probably shouldn't finish ahead of Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby or Calgary Flames forward Johnny Gaudreau either. However, Aho's role in Carolina's season



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with 77 points (30 goals, 47 assists) in 69 games demands attention from the voters. He deserves votes for the Selke Trophy too. He faces some of the best lines in the League, kills penalties and entering play Tuesday, his 56.49 shot-attempts percentage is ninth among forwards who have played in at least 60 games. Aho also is plus-25.

What are your words of comfort to Buffalo Sabres fans for how our season has fallen apart? -- @EternalRhino15

It's one word. I don't think you want to hear it. You've probably heard it too often in the past six or seven years.

Patience.

Don't shoot the messenger, but it's all I've got. The Sabres are doing a rebuild of a rebuild, but they're closer to being contenders today than they were a year ago. They have core pieces in forwards Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart, and defensemen Rasmus Dahlin, Rasmus Ristolainen and Brandon Montour. It'll be even better if and when they re-sign forward Jeff Skinner. They have a foundation on the NHL roster, not just prospects who may or may not pan out. They've had some success too, like their 10-game winning streak in November that left them at 17-6-2 on the season. They were alone atop the League standings with 36 points on Nov. 27. That they've fallen out of the race is disappointing to them even if to many it was the expectation. That's actually a good thing. For too long it seemed like the Sabres were playing to their critically low expectations. This season, I think they've played to their reasonable expectations. They entered play Tuesday, their 69th game of the season, with five more wins and seven more points than they had all of last season. That's progress even if it's hard to see through the fog of what will be their eighth straight season missing the playoffs. It will be the longest drought in the NHL if the Hurricanes make it. That's hard to swallow, I know, but you've got to see the progress as a reason to believe next season will be better.

I was fooled by the Sabres' 10-game winning streak. I thought then that they were for real, a playoff team. I was wrong. It was too early. This season was too early for them. Next season should be better. It has to be or their problems go way deeper than I think.

Is Jordan Binnington a serious contender for the Calder Trophy? -- @STLBluesChirp

Vancouver Canucks center Elias Pettersson is still the favorite and the likely winner. He has 58 points (26 goals, 28 assists) in 58 games. He needs two points to tie the Canucks record for most points by a rookie, shared by Pavel Bure and Ivan Hlinka. Pettersson has slowed down lately and the Canucks have fallen out of the race, but he single-handedly changed the feeling about their future by the impact he had made this season. I also think Dahlin and Dallas Stars defenseman Miro Heiskanen deserve attention in the Calder Trophy race, but St. Louis Blues goalie Jordan Binnington would get my second-place vote if I had a vote.

Binnington's impact on the Blues this season should outweigh the fact that he was in the American Hockey League for most of the first three months of the season. St. Louis was 29th in the League standings (16-19-4) before Binnington made his first start. Since then, the Blues have

the second-best record in the League (20-7-3). Binnington has won 16 of those games with a .928 save percentage, 1.81 goals-against average and five shutouts. Pettersson has been the best rookie all season, which matters in the voting, but Binnington's impact in the second half is enough for me to think of him as No. 2.

Best assessment on how long it will take the Ottawa Senators to be a contender with players like Brady Tkachuk, Colin White, Thomas Chabot, Drake Batherson, Logan Brown, Rudolfs Balcers, etc.? -- @NDeOreos

The hope in Ottawa is that the Senators will be ready to contend for a playoff spot again by the 2021-22 season. That's what owner Eugene Melnyk essentially promised last month, when he pledged in front of a group of mostly corporate sponsors and partners in Toronto that the Senators would spend close to the salary cap every season from 2021-25. That sounds terrific, but so much has to go right for the Senators to even get to the 2021-22 season with a belief that it's time to start contending again. It's an optimistic assessment right now. Don't be shocked if it takes longer.

Many of the draft picks the Senators received in trades for defenseman Erik Karlsson and forwards Mark Stone, Ryan Dzingel and Matt Duchene are not until the 2020 NHL Draft. That includes the likelihood of two picks in the first round and two more in the second round. Selections made in the 2020 draft can't reasonably be considered to be impact players for at least two or three seasons. That means the Senators must build a culture of accountability and winning before any of those future draft picks can turn into impact players. They'll have to do it knowing they're not going to be a top destination for unrestricted free agents until they can sell a promising direction to the players in the UFA market. They might not have enough evidence of that by the summer of 2021, which could push the rebuild into the 2021-22 season.

The good news is the players you mentioned in your question look like they should make up a chunk of the Senators' next core. Chabot (team-high 49 points) and Tkachuk (36 points) look like the real deal. That gives the Senators a defenseman (Chabot) and a winger (Tkachuk) to build around. White (35 points), a center, looks like he should be a significant part of it too. Batherson, a right wing, leads the Belleville Senators of the American Hockey League with 55 points (21 goals, 34 assists). He also has nine points (three goals, six assists) in 20 games with Ottawa this season. Those are good indications that Batherson could be an impact player too. Erik Brannstrom, the top defensive prospect the Senators acquired from the Vegas Golden Knights, should have a bright future too. The 19-year-old was the No. 15 pick in the 2017 NHL Draft. It's great that the Senators were able to get him in the trade that sent Stone to Vegas, but he could still be a year or two away from being an impact player. He had 28 points (seven goals, 21 assists) in 41 games with the Chicago Wolves of the AHL before the trade. He has one assist in five games with Belleville.

With Chicago and Arizona playing Monday for the first time since the Dylan Strome-Nick Schmaltz trade, what are your thoughts on who won the trade right now/in the long term? -- @hawkeystix88



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It's unfair to judge the trade now. Schmalz, who went from the Blackhawks to the Arizona Coyotes for Strome and forward Brendan Perlini, is out for the season with a lower-body injury. He was impactful in his 17 games with the Coyotes after the trade on Nov. 25, scoring 14 points (five goals, nine assists), but he hasn't played since Dec. 30. Strome has played in all 45 games with the Blackhawks since the trade and has been terrific with 41 points (14 goals, 27 assists). Perlini (don't forget him) has played in 34 games with the Blackhawks and has 10 points (nine goals, one assist), including a hat trick in the 7-1 win against Arizona on Monday, which gave him six goals in five games this month.

My long-term assessment of this trade has not changed since it was made. I thought it was good for each team in late November and I still think the same. Schmalz is the type of center the Coyotes didn't have; an up-tempo, high-octane, speedy distributor and scorer who could thrive playing on the half-wall on the power play. I can see him playing with Alex Galchenyuk and Clayton Keller on his wings, creating a dynamic top line and top power-play unit. Strome is different. He's not as fast, not as good of a skater as Schmalz, but he's an intelligent playmaker who thrives in a puck possession game and is excellent at going to the net. That's

why he works with the Blackhawks, with either Patrick Kane or Alex DeBrincat. You don't need to be the fastest 200-foot player when playing with those guys because most of the time you're playing in the offensive zone. Strome has the skillset to play with them and help them. Schmalz does too, but the Coyotes wanted a certain type of center, which is why they made the trade.

Do you think the New York Islanders will be involved in the Artemi Panarin sweepstakes in the summer? -- @ScottyPecs

I expect general manager Lou Lamoriello to put on the full-court press to get Panarin. He can entice him with cap space, the right coach in Barry Trotz, a dynamic center in Mathew Barzal, a winning culture and the New York market. The Islanders can also sell Panarin on being a package deal with goalie Sergei Bobrovsky. Even though goalies Robin Lehner and Thomas Greiss have been fantastic this season, Bobrovsky would give the Islanders more certainty in net for years to come. It will come at a significant cost, but the Islanders are one of the few teams that could realistically sign each. The Florida Panthers have the goods to do it too.



Who has the toughest schedule heading into the NHL season's home stretch?

Sonny Sachdeva

We're down to the final month before the 2018-19 regular season gives way to the real one. The final few weeks before we break out the magnifying glasses and inspect every pass, snipe, check and skirmish that flashes across our screen.

For some clubs, this final slate of games is simply an opportunity to fine-tune, the larger goal being to simply stay healthy and pick up some momentum heading into the home stretch. For others, it's a mad dash, with the post-season pressure already hanging low as borderline clubs fight to secure a spot in the dance.

With a number of teams still in the mix heading into the final handful of tilts, Sportsnet's statisticians crunched the numbers to tell us who's set to enjoy the most favourable schedule over the coming weeks, and who's simply in cruise control.

Let's dive in. First up, the East, where the Metro looks intent on stuffing in as many of its squads as it can.

The Lightning have run away with the conference and a meeting with a wild-card squad, while the Metro remains in flux, still sorting out where the tightly-packed Capitals, Penguins, Islanders, Hurricanes and Blue Jackets will fall.

Here's how the conference playoff hopefuls' schedules break down for the rest of 2018-19:

Eastern Conference

Team	Strength of Schedule	Total Games	Home	Away	Back-to-Backs	vs. Playoff Teams
Washington Capitals	0.612	12	6	6	1	6
Montreal Canadiens*	0.599	12	6	6	1	8
Philadelphia Flyers*	0.593	13	6	7	3	10
Carolina Hurricanes*	0.587	13	8	5	3	7
Tampa Bay Lightning	0.579	12	4	8	2	9
Boston Bruins	0.573	12	4	8	1	6
New York Islanders	0.565	13	5	8	2	6



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Team	Strength of Schedule	Total Games	Home	Away	Back-to-Backs	vs. Playoff Teams
Columbus Blue Jackets*	0.561	12	4	8	3	6
Florida Panthers*	0.558	13	5	8	2	8
Toronto Maple Leafs	0.546	12	5	7	3	4
Pittsburgh Penguins	0.532	12	6	6	1	6

* = in a wild-card spot or on the bubble

Metro Shuffle

The defending Stanley Cup champs draw the toughest schedule over the final month of the regular season, highlighted by three tests against the high-flying Lightning. There's little worry about that stretch throwing too weighty a wrench into Washington's playoff hopes, but it is closer than most would assume. Only eight points separate the division-leading Capitals from the second wild-card spot, and a tough stretch could lead to some key re-seeding in the East.

The Islanders remain just two points back of the Metro lead, and sitting only four points back of the division title is Pittsburgh — who, incidentally, has the most favourable upcoming schedule of all Eastern playoff hopefuls, and seems to be picking up steam. The race is on to see who finishes in the top two divisional slots and earns home-ice advantage before the likely assignment of lining up against a familiar Metro opponent in Round 1.

On the Bubble

Eastern clubs on the outside looking in aren't set to get any favours from the schedule down the stretch. Montreal finds itself just outside the crop, but level points-wise with Columbus. However, the Canadiens are staring down a tough 12 games that will see them meet strong opponents eight times — particularly their final five tilts of the season, which consists of matchups with Columbus, Winnipeg, Tampa Bay, Washington and Toronto. Piling up as many points as possible before heading into that closing run seems a necessity.

Philadelphia's hill might be the toughest to climb — five points out of a playoff spot ahead of a 13-game stretch that includes 10 against playoff squads, and three back-to-backs. And the first two in that stretch will come without Jakub Voracek. That should help the Hurricanes' chances of sticking in a wild-card spot, despite having a decently difficult workload on their hands, too.

Home-Ice Advantage

The Atlantic side of this equation seems more set in stone, given the Bolts' season-long penchant for rolling through the opposition. Tampa Bay and Boston find themselves in the middle of the pack in terms of the strength of the coming opponents. Both clubs do have to battle through a final slate that'll see them play eight of 12 games on the road. That won't be an issue for the Lightning, who are 24-7-2 outside of Amalie Arena, but it could affect the Bruins, who are 15-12-6 on the road.

A slide from the B's could allow Toronto — four points back — to move up to second in the division, especially with the Maple Leafs on track for one of the less-daunting workloads over the next few weeks. The Maple Leafs' final 12 tilts feature just four playoff-bound teams, though they will have three back-to-backs to contend with.

Considering the Leafs' last two series against Boston have both stretched to seven games — and both resulted in Game 7 losses on the road — securing that home-ice advantage over the coming weeks, positioning a potential Game 7 at Scotiabank Arena, could be a welcome bonus.

And then we have the West, which is chock-full of powerhouses and still has a genuine conference title on the line.

Two of the Western behemoths look set to cruise to the finish line while two others get battle-tested before the post-season begins. Here's how the schedule breaks down over the rest of the season:

Western Conference

Team	Strength of Schedule	Total Games	Home	Away	Back-to-Backs	vs. Playoff Teams
Minnesota Wild*	0.581	12	7	5	2	10
Nashville Predators	0.558	11	5	6	1	6
Winnipeg Jets	0.555	13	6	7	2	7
Chicago Blackhawks*	0.549	12	6	6	2	6
Dallas Stars*	0.542	13	7	6	3	4
Edmonton Oilers*	0.542	12	6	6	2	8
Vegas Golden Knights	0.541	12	6	6	2	6



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Team	Strength of Schedule	Total Games	Home	Away	Back-to-Backs	vs. Playoff Teams
Arizona Coyotes*	0.539	12	6	6	1	4
Colorado Avalanche*	0.536	12	7	5	2	6
San Jose Sharks	0.517	12	8	4	2	4
St. Louis Blues	0.517	13	7	6	3	3
Calgary Flames	0.501	12	7	5	2	4

* = in a wild-card spot or on the bubble

Cruise Control

The Calgary Flames head into the final few weeks with the most favourable schedule of any club in the league, with just four of their final 12 games against playoff squads, and only five coming on the road. After a slide that allowed some doubt to creep into the minds of the Flames faithful after an unexpectedly dominant campaign, a confidence-building finish could be a game-changer for the Flames' hopes of going on a deep post-season run.

Unfortunately, the schedule will do little to affect the Flames' chances of climbing into the conference's No. 1 spot, as the San Jose Sharks — who have just one more point at the moment — find themselves with a similar test over the final 13 games of the year. Considering who's waiting in the Pacific Division's No. 3 spot, the home stretch will be key for Calgary and San Jose.

Vegas has lost just once since acquiring Mark Stone to beef up its forward corps at the trade deadline, and figures to be a tough first-round test. Calgary was the lone club to halt that streak, but it's worth noting they did so against backup netminder Malcolm Subban. A few days earlier, with Marc-

Andre Fleury in net, the Flames managed just one goal and fell in a 2-1 loss.

Under Pressure

Separated by just a point in the Central Division, the Winnipeg Jets and Nashville Predators are in a similar situation. As it currently stands, Nashville gets St. Louis and Winnipeg draws a weaker wild-card squad. The prospective schedule figures to put some pressure on that arrangement, though. The Blues have the easiest road to the end of the season among the top Central squads, facing only three playoff-bound teams in their final 13 games.

Nashville and Winnipeg, however, have two of the hardest coming schedules, meaning there's a not-so-unlikely possibility of the Blues jumping them both, which would force the Jets and Predators into the unenviable position of facing one of the conference's toughest opponents in the very first round.

Uphill Climb

The West's on-the-bubble squads all find themselves in different situations for their final weeks. Minnesota, who sits just one point out, has a gargantuan task ahead — 10 of its final 12 games come against playoff teams, mostly on the road, with a couple back-to-backs thrown in. The Wild meet Winnipeg and Boston in two of their final three games, for what could wind up being two very tough make-or-break matches.

Edmonton, meanwhile, sits in the middle of the pack of playoff hopefuls, still only six points out as it continues to hang around. Late-season slides from Minnesota and Dallas — both currently above Edmonton in the standings and both with tougher schedules down the stretch — could help the Oilers slowly climb back into the post-season picture.

But eight meetings with playoff-bound teams won't make it easy for Connor McDavid's squad. Much like Minnesota, it'll be the final week that'll provide the biggest test, if they're still in it, as they'll face Vegas, Colorado, San Jose and Calgary (at the Saddledome) to close it out.

Even if that season finale winds up meaning next to nothing for the Flames' playoff path, you can bet they get up and offer a stiff test for their Albertan neighbours if given the chance to quash Edmonton's playoff dreams — a potential Battle of Alberta classic.



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NHL Power Rankings: The puck luck edition

Greg Wyshynski/ESPN

To paraphrase Billy Zane in "Titanic," some teams just seem to "make their own luck," through their given style of play or the skill of their players. But "puck luck" is very much a thing in the NHL: Sometimes teams and players benefit from it, and other times the puck was just bound to hit the crossbar, like that big blue necklace was destined to end up inside the coat pocket of Rose DeWitt Bukater.

This week in the power rankings, a look at good and bad fortune in the NHL.

How we rank: The ESPN hockey editorial staff submits polls ranking teams 1-31, and those results are tabulated to the list featured here. Teams are rated through Tuesday night's games, taking into account overall record, recent success and other factors such as injuries.

1. Tampa Bay Lightning

Previous ranking: 1 ↔

Cedric Paquette has been a lot of things for the Lightning: grinder, pest, player the French-language media requests during the playoffs for interviews. Now we can add "efficient," because with a little puck luck he has a 16.7 shooting percentage with 12 goals on 72 shots -- by far the best rate of his career.

2. San Jose Sharks

Previous ranking: 4 ▲

Everything's coming up Joe Pavelski this season, with a career-best 17.2 shooting percentage on 122 even-strength shots. My, it's almost like it's a contract year!

3. Boston Bruins

Previous ranking: 3 ↔

Jake DeBrusk with David Krejci as his center, for 592 even-strength minutes, has a goals-for percentage of 60.53. Without him, in 120 minutes, it's at 44.44 percent. So, it goes without saying, but we'll say it anyway: DeBrusk has been lucky to have him.

4. Calgary Flames

Previous ranking: 2 ▼

A good penalty kill requires skilled players, smart positioning and, yeah, a bounce or two going your way. The Flames have had all of this on their PK, generating 16 short-handed goals, the second highest total for an NHL team in the last decade.

5. Toronto Maple Leafs

Previous ranking: 5 ↔

The Leafs lead the NHL in PDO, a stat that's a combination of on-ice shooting percentage and save percentage. Their PDO is 1.028, which is the highest they've had in the last three seasons. Who had Andreas Johnsson (17.9) having a higher shooting percentage than Auston Matthews (16.8)?

6. Winnipeg Jets

Previous ranking: 6 ↔

What if I told you there was a player who had shooting percentages of 17.6 and 18.3 in his first two years in the NHL, but just 13.1 this season? You would probably say that Patrik Laine has been seriously unlucky this season.

7. Washington Capitals

Previous ranking: 8 ▲

Jakub Vrana's 5-on-5 shooting percentage this season is 16.53, best on the Capitals, with 20 goals on 121 shots. Last season on 126 shots, it was 8.73 percent.

8. New York Islanders

Previous ranking: 9 ▲

Every season, there's an unexpected team that's "riding the PDO train." While the Islanders' PDO hasn't been above unsustainable standards, it stands at 1.025, which is an indication that they're getting stellar goaltending while also getting a little lucky at the other end.

9. Nashville Predators

Previous ranking: 7 ▼

Since 2016-17, no Predator has clanged the post more times than Viktor Arvidsson (19), including five times in 47 games this season.

10. Pittsburgh Penguins

Previous ranking: 10 ↔

Jake Guentzel's 5-on-5 shooting percentage is 18.54. So, um, thanks Sidney.

11. Carolina Hurricanes

Previous ranking: 11 ↔

For all the great things the Hurricanes have done this season, a little puck luck would have made it better. Consider they have the most high-danger shot attempts, and yet have the lowest high-danger goals out of the top 11 teams in high-danger attempts.

12. Vegas Golden Knights



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Previous ranking: 12 ↔

The Knights have an actual goal differential of minus-22, a stat that subtracts expected goals from actual goals. One way of looking at this: Vegas is generating a ton of good chances but hasn't converted enough of them.

13. St. Louis Blues

Previous ranking: 14 ▲

Since Jan. 1, 2016, no player in the NHL has dinged the crossbar more than Vladimir Tarasenko (10 times).

14. Columbus Blue Jackets

Previous ranking: 15 ▲

Tarasenko's countryman Artemi Panarin has hit the crossbar five times this season. No one on the Jackets has hit it more than once.

15. Montreal Canadiens

Previous ranking: 13 ▼

Max Domi has shown offensive spark in the past. But there has to be at least a little puck luck when a player goes from a 3.88 shooting percentage at even strength to a 15.75, which is what he has done this season.

16. Dallas Stars

Previous ranking: 17 ▲

Tyler Seguin's monthly shooting percentages from October through December, at which point his team president called him "horse bleep": 5.2, 9.4, 6.8. In the two months that followed it: 16.3, 16.4. Guess he was super motivated to stop hitting so many posts and crossbars. Or, and hear me out: He suddenly stopped hitting as many posts and crossbars.

17. Arizona Coyotes

Previous ranking: 20 ▲

For a long period this season, the Coyotes were at the bottom of the NHL in shooting percentage. In October, it was at an astounding 1.7 percent. Now? They're up to 8.5 percent as they rise up the standings. The tide has turned.

18. Philadelphia Flyers

Previous ranking: 18 ↔

Sean Couturier has seen 71 of his 80 missed shot attempts sail wide. Last season, it was just 66 times on 83 misses.

19. Minnesota Wild

Previous ranking: 16 ▼

Jason Zucker is starting to heat up, with six of his 20 goals this season coming in the last eight games. The puck luck has not been with him, as he has a 10.7 shooting percentage in 69 games. Last season, it was at 14.9 percent, which was pretty great timing for a guy who signed a five-year extension in July.

20. Colorado Avalanche

Previous ranking: 19 ▼

The Senators currently have an 18.5 percent chance of winning the draft lottery. OK, that's not exactly "puck luck," but we just felt the need to restate this for the benefit of our friends in Colorado.

21. Florida Panthers

Previous ranking: 23 ▲

If we believe that PDO is a measure of luck, well, the Panthers are a black cat walking under a ladder into a broken mirror: They're at 0.985, lowest in the NHL at 5-on-5.

22. Chicago Blackhawks

Previous ranking: 22 ↔

Brandon Saad is tied with Tyler Seguin in hitting the crossbar six times this season, the difference of course being that his team president never called him "horse bleep" for doing so.

23. Buffalo Sabres

Previous ranking: 21 ▼

Jeff Skinner has a shooting percentage of 16.1 this season, which would be a new career high. Which, again, seems to happen to these guys in contract years, huh?

24. Edmonton Oilers

Previous ranking: 24 ↔

Connor McDavid has 34 goals this season in 65 games. That number could be even higher if he hadn't hit the goalposts 11 times. Last season, on more shots, he hit it only seven times.

25. Vancouver Canucks

Previous ranking: 25 ↔

Nikolay Goldobin has 100 shots on goal. He also has 53 shots that have missed the net, including six that have gone off the post, tied with Jake Virtanen for most on the team.

26. New York Rangers

Previous ranking: 26 ↔

Mika Zibanejad is tied with Connor McDavid, having hit the posts with shots 11 times this season.

27. Anaheim Ducks

Previous ranking: 28 ▲

The Ducks have allowed 712 shot attempts from high-danger areas but have an .847 high-danger save percentage, fifth best in the NHL.

28. New Jersey Devils

Previous ranking: 27 ▼

While it has been a disastrous season on many levels for the Devils, one bright spot has been Travis Zajac. The 33-year-old center might produce his best goal-scoring season on average, with a career-best 15.1 shooting percentage.

29. Los Angeles Kings



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Previous ranking: 29 ↔

Jeff Carter hadn't had a shooting percentage under 9.9 since 2006-07. This season, through 63 games? It's a putrid 7.1 percent. Two seasons ago, he averaged over three shots per game. This season? It's at 2.24.

30. Detroit Red Wings

Previous ranking: 30 ↔

There has to be some level of horrible "puck luck" to not have scored a goal since Dec. 8, 2018. Right, Justin Abdelkader?

31. Ottawa Senators

Previous ranking: 31 ↔

As you can see on the Left Wing Lock "Pluck" chart, the Senators are like Pluto in the NHL puck luck universe.

The Hockey News

Mrazek's miraculous run gives Hurricanes hope in wild-card race

Petr Mrazek has been unbeatable as of late, but he'll need to be nearly perfect to solidify Carolina's spot in the Eastern Conference playoff race.

By Steven Ellis

The Carolina Hurricanes have been a fun team this year, even if they are all just a bunch of jerks. And nobody is having as much fun as Petr Mrazek, who simply can't be beat right now.

With his 38-save shutout against the Colorado Avalanche on Monday, Mrazek has won his past six starts, a streak that began midway through February. His fourth shutout of the year was nothing short of incredible. These are the types of game-stealing victories he has been capable of in his career, and in a season full of ups and down, Mrazek has given the Hurricanes some life between the pipes.

Mrazek was seen as a reclamation project of sorts when he joined the Hurricanes last summer. Once regarded as a top young goaltending prospect with the Detroit Red Wings, Mrazek wasn't able to steal the starting job away from Jimmy Howard and was traded to Philadelphia last season for two conditional draft picks, where he went on to finish with a 6-6-3 record in 17 games. As a result, he wasn't tendered a qualifying offer by the Flyers (who, of course, have used eight goalies this season).

But on a low-risk, high-reward deal with Carolina, Mrazek has played some of his best hockey to date, sporting an 18-12-3 record and doing a nice job of taking over the starting role for the Hurricanes, likely playing well enough to have set a new career high for wins had he not missed time due to injury. He has had help in the crease, too, as journeyman backup goaltender Curtis McElhinney has also stepped up when called upon. The Hurricanes pay just \$2.35 million for the pair of Mrazek and McElhinney, giving them the best value between the pipes of any team in the league.

It didn't look like Mrazek was going to be the go-to guy for Carolina, though. Scott Darling was expected to be the

starting goalie, but that was before a pre-season injury and inconsistent play resulted in his demotion to the AHL's Charlotte Checkers. Mrazek's play at the start of the season made the decision easy: the Hurricanes needed him to be their guy if they wanted to make the playoffs. And with the wild-card battle starting to heat up, it appears as though he was the right choice. During his current six-game run, Mrazek has shut out Dallas and Colorado, two teams vying for a post-season spot in the Western Conference and with a lot to lose late in the year.

Though not as tight as the Western Conference, the wild-card race in the Eastern Conference is shaping up to be a thriller. The Hurricanes sit in the first wild-card spot with 83 points, with the Columbus Blue Jackets and Montreal Canadiens breathing down their neck with 81 points apiece. Carolina still has to deal with Columbus, Pittsburgh, Tampa Bay, Montreal, Washington and Toronto before the season ends, though, so nothing about the stretch run will be easy for them, not with one of the toughest remaining schedules of any team still in the hunt.

But that's why Mrazek's run is so important. He's getting hot when it matters most. He can't peak too early, though. His run has been one of the biggest reasons why the Hurricanes overcame a mid-season slump to become a true wild-card contender, winning 12 of the 17 games he has played since Jan. 1, and if it wasn't for the combined efforts of Mrazek, Sebastian Aho and Nino Niederreiter, the Hurricanes wouldn't be in this situation right now.

The wild-card race will be a true dogfight going forward, and if the Hurricanes are going to make the playoffs, they need Mrazek to remain razor-sharp down the stretch. He has shown flashes of brilliance during his career, and right now, he's as hot as any goalie in the league. If Carolina is going to be a serious contender, they'll need Mrazek to be near perfect in some of the toughest matchups he has had to deal with all season.

No pressure or anything.



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SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

By The Numbers: The Underrated Offensive Talent of Dougie Hamilton

Dougie Hamilton is one of the most talented offensive defensemen in the NHL. For some reason, he still isn't treated as such.

By Andrew Ahr

The score is tied at zero in the Mile High City at the halfway point in the second period. Dougie Hamilton snaps a pass into the neutral zone to Andrei Svechnikov and instinctively skates up ice to join the rush. As Svechnikov is taken down just over the red line, Justin Williams reclaims the loose puck and taps it over to Hamilton as he enters the offensive zone.

At this point, Carl Soderberg is hung out with a poor gap on Hamilton as he carries the puck into the high slot with Jordan Staal streaking towards the back door. Soderberg's first move is to get his stick into the lane to protect the pass, but quickly corrects as he sees Dougie winding up. It was too late. The offensive D-man snaps one over Philipp Grubauer's shoulder for his 13th goal of the season and his 12th at even strength — a personal best.

That sequence was just another example of why Dougie Hamilton is arguably the most offensively gifted defenseman in Carolina Hurricanes history. Since the 2015-16 season, Hamilton is 4th in the NHL in goals and 21st in total points. And he remains on track this season — his 13 goals are tied for fifth best in the league among defensemen.

Yet despite his elite offensive nature, he still remains fourth on the team in time on ice per game played among defensemen. The fact that he's not coming in at first on the blue line in time on ice isn't really shocking considering the shutdown strength of Jaccob Slavin and Brett Pesce. However, it's difficult to rationalize why he's receiving three fewer minutes of ice time per game and over a minute less on the power play per game than Justin Faulk when all signs point to Hamilton being one of the best offensive defensemen in the NHL.

Hamilton is third in the league among defensemen in Scoring Chances For percentage at 60.17%*, indicating that the team is generating scoring chances a lot more often than they're conceding them when he's on the ice. That's not very surprising considering the fact that the team outshoots the crap out of opponents during his shifts — his Shots For percentage is also third in the league amongst defensemen at 59.48%.

Much of his offensive success in Calgary was downplayed by naysayers as a product of playing alongside one of the best defensemen in the league in Mark Giordano. But there's evidence to support the notion that Hamilton is driving a lot of the Hurricanes' positive play while he's on the ice this season. He's third in the league among blue liners in shots, Individual Corsi For, and Individual Scoring Chances For. The two defensemen above him in all of three those categories? Brent Burns and Roman Josi. That's pretty good company to be keeping as a 25-year-old defenseman.

Despite his elite offensive presence, the coaching staff clearly doesn't trust his defensive game. He's tallied by far the least shorthanded ice time of the top six defensemen at just 17 seconds per game, and he starts shifts in the defensive zone at a lower rate than all of his teammates. But though he shoulders significantly less defensive responsibility than his teammates, Hamilton still isn't leading the team in power play time or offensive zone starts.

This isn't about bashing Justin Faulk, he's part of the leadership group as a career Hurricane and is a very talented offensive D-man in his own right — he's top 20 or better among defensemen in most of the metrics that I've cited above. It's easy to lose sight of that in his eighth season as a top four defenseman on a playoff-less team. But Faulk is no longer the best offensive defenseman on the roster, and there's no reason why he should continue to see significantly more power play time than Hamilton.

Long live the platoon: Mrazek, McElhinney backstop Canes to verge of playoffs

At long last, the Hurricanes have gotten the league-average goaltending the team has needed to surge into playoff contention. And they've gotten it from a platoon, with Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney sharing the load.

By Andrew Schnitker

"If they could just get league average goaltending, they'd be a playoff team."

For years, that's been the mantra for the Carolina Hurricanes, as sub-par netminding has frequently kept the team from the postseason during a nine-year drought. With the Canes sitting third in the Metropolitan Division and four

points above the playoff cut line with 13 games to go, that drought appears on the verge of ending.

And, lo and behold, getting said league average goaltending has been a major factor in the Canes' strong season. The duo of Curtis McElhinney and Petr Mrazek have a .914 and .908 save percentage, respectively, this season. The league average is .905. The Canes' .904 team save percentage is tied for 12th in the league, and rises to .911 (seventh) when one removes Scott Darling's .884 mark in eight starts.

The Canes, as has become a theme for this team, have gotten this strong goaltending in a bit of an unconventional manner. Rather than one goalie grabbing the reins, it's been



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a mostly even platoon. Mrazek has started 33 games, and McElhinney 27.

And that's just fine with both of them, who have enjoyed the friendly competition for starts, rest and being able to say fresh to give the team a chance when their name is called.

"I think both guys have given the team an opportunity to win with the chances and stuff," McElhinney said. "It's a luxury to have. I think it's nice that you're not grinding one guy into the ground like is commonplace, I think, throughout the league. So it's good flexibility to have for the organization right now."

Both goalies have had the added motivation of a chance to prove themselves in contract years. McElhinney was added via waivers from Toronto days before training camp after an injury to Darling.

Mrazek is an even more interesting case. Despite entering free agency coming off a down season in Detroit and Philadelphia, Mrazek might have landed a two-year deal in free agency, and likely more than the \$1.5 million he got from the Canes on a one-year deal. The Czech goalie, however; called Waddell and said he wanted a one-year deal to prove himself.

With 18 wins, a .908 save percentage, 2.53 goals-against average and four shutouts in 33 starts, he's more than done that.

"That was the reason I came here to prove that I can be the starting goalie one day in this league," Mrazek said. "I always say I could be better but I can't complain. Everything I asked for here and from myself, so far, so good."

Another help to the Canes managing the platoon has been the work of goalie coach Mike Bales, who has worked with the goalies to fit their unique needs and get them each to play a style that maximizes their abilities.

"I think his greatest skill is probably his ability to listen," McElhinney said. "To allow each goalie to kind of make their own decisions. Petr's been in the league for a bunch of years now and I've been around forever it seems like. So I would say that's his greatest attribute that I've noticed about him so far, his ability to listen to each guy and to come up with drills, video, whatever it is that each guy needs."

So, is this whole platoon thing becoming a trend? Head coach Rod Brind'Amour isn't sure about that, but he's enjoyed being able to rely on two different goalies.

"It kind of depends on who you have," Brind'Amour said. "I think if you have a Carey Price, you certainly don't want to be platooning that. But I think coming into this year we weren't really sure how this goaltending thing was going to shake out. Both guys have been excellent. It's a real treat to be able to just say 'Next up, go ahead' and they go out and perform. Was it a trend? I think that kind of depends on your situation."

The interesting point will be to see what happens with the Canes' platoon going forward, particularly if the team does reach the postseason.

Conventional logic is that you don't platoon goalies in the playoffs, but the Canes have pretty much gone with a "conventional logic be damned" approach to much of this season.

If the team does decide to anoint one starter for the playoffs, I'd go with Mrazek. With a 38-save shutout against the Avalanche Monday, Mrazek has won six straight starts, with two shutouts in that span.

What happens after this season is anyone's best guess, as Waddell has said he won't discuss contract extensions with anyone during the remainder to avoid distracting from the playoff push.

Both goalies have expressed a willingness to return, and have earned a second contract in Raleigh. The free agent goalie options also aren't exactly enticing. Sergei Bobrovsky is going to get a big-money, eight-year deal that is likely outside the Canes' range (and overpriced for a goalie coming off a down year that hasn't won a playoff series).

Putting on the GM hat for a minute, I'd offer Mrazek three to four years at \$3-4 million per season, and McElhinney a one-year deal at \$1-2 million. Both goalies have been instrumental in the Canes' success this year.

If this duo is indeed the one that gets Carolina over the playoff hump, the team should keep them in the fold for at least another season. As the old saying goes, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."



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Shaya's 10 Thoughts: March 13, 2019

Written by Nicholas Niedzielski

During the season, Checkers broadcaster Jason Shaya checks in each week with his 10 Thoughts - a series of observations about the team and the hockey world in general.

1. Two years ago, Charlotte made the playoffs but I realized that even if they won in the first round, no team in the league was beating Grand Rapids – who would go on to win it all. Last season, I said the same thing in the second round with a potential matchup against the Marlies – they also won it all. This season, there is no unflappable team like those mentioned above standing in the path of Charlotte. If the Checkers can make it out of the first round – which is tricky with a best of five series – they have the best chance in team history to go all the way. Having said that, while there are no juggernaut-type teams, there are no easy opponents either. Anyone could come out of the Atlantic Division and it wouldn't be a surprise. It's going to be a fight to the very end.

2. With Charlotte sitting at a winning percentage of .697, it's not hard to imagine finishing above .700. That would be the best mark in AHL team history. I doubt many could've imagined that before the season started.

3. Janne Kuokkanen continues to sit out due to an injury that caused him to miss the AHL All-Star Game. As of now, there is no timetable for his return.

4. Former Charlotte Checkers captain Brett Sutter played his 800th game Tuesday night for the Ontario Reign. With the playoffs coming up, I remember how crucial he was to our run to the Conference Finals in 2011. Players like Brett are how you win not just playoff games, but series. He helped put the team on his back and we were better for it. What else but exceptional leadership and hockey sense can you expect from a Sutter? Brett will always be highly regarded in this town. Congratulations to Brett and let's hope we see him on the trail again soon.

5. Right before longtime Hurricanes TV commentator Tripp Tracy did his pre-game bench interview in Colorado on Tuesday night, Jordan Martinook sent a hefty snow shower towards Tripp, who laughed it off immediately. I asked Tripp the next day if something like that bothered him. His response was in typical Tripp style, "Gotta have fun and not take ourselves seriously." Tripp is a happy warrior and always in a great mood on every occasion I've worked with him. He went on to tell me guys like Martinook have completely changed the Canes identity and the results are evident on the ice every night.

6. The games on Friday and Saturday are against the team closest to the Checkers in the standings. The point differential is only four at this moment. These games could be a preview of the Eastern Conference Finals. The Checkers beat Rochester twice at the very beginning of the season but October was a lifetime ago.

7. The Checkers player who received the most praise from head coach Mike Vellucci this past weekend was Morgan Geekie. With nine points (1g, 8a) in his last nine games, he is also +8 in that time. Geekie continues to impress the coaching staff. I think the one thing that gets overlooked is his vision and playmaking ability. For instance, his setup of Nick Schilkey's first goal on Sunday afternoon was remarkable.

8. There are scouts at every single AHL game and one of the reasons they are there is to assess the league's talent. Well, I hope these teams are taking a close look at Schilkey. No player has done more to earn an NHL contract next season than him. He has 12 points (6g, 6a) in his last 10 games and is one of the best stories of the year. I talked to Charlotte's Sr. VP of Hockey Ops Derek Wilkinson about Nick and he told me that with a summer of training he can prepare himself to play in the NHL. But, like everyone in life, you just need an opportunity.

9. In an interview with Vellucci this past weekend, he said he's happy with the performance of his team but still feels that there is more in the tank. No matter how locked into a playoff spot they are, if they don't play to their potential, the outcome won't be favorable. There are still players on this squad – in particular some forwards – who aren't where they were earlier this season and need to figure things out.

10. I'll take this final thought to wish a very good friend of mine the best of luck as he moves from Charlotte to Philadelphia for a new job. Adam Solomon, born exactly 10 years after me in the city of Detroit, became a chemical engineer after leaving MSU. He is amongst the most brilliant people I've met in my life. Adam, a hockey player, quickly became my top defenseman and we went on to form a beer-league dynasty whose dominance will never be matched again. He also helped create part of an elite group of players known as Team Rebound – imagine if the Navy Seals were hockey players. Adam is one of the few skaters who could finish a game with seven points and still end up -5 on the scoresheet. All joking aside, I can write without hesitation that I won't handle his departure well. I have no idea what I am supposed to do on Sundays now. Goodbye and good luck to Adam and his beautiful wife Mia.



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Carolina Hurricanes surging late: Who's ready for the NHL playoffs and who isn't?

Kevin Allen, USA TODAY

Goalie Petr Mrazek's best job reference last summer came from the man who decided he wasn't the right answer for the Detroit Red Wings.

"I remember calling (Detroit GM) Ken Holland and he said, 'When Petr gets on a roll, he can carry your team for five or six games,'" Carolina Hurricanes general manager Don Waddell said.

Waddell signed Mrazek as a free agent last summer, and the goalie has won seven of his last eight starts (.946 save percentage, three shutouts during that span) to help the Hurricanes strengthen their hopes of qualifying for the playoffs for first time since 2009.

"I give Petr a lot of credit, because when we talked last year, he said, 'Don, it's not about the money – it's about being in the right spot to have the opportunity to compete for playing time,'" Waddell recalled. That's what you want to hear."

Mrazek volunteered to take a one-year contract for \$1.5 million if Waddell would give him a chance to be a No. 1 goalie.

The Hurricanes are 13-3-1 in their past 17 games and have been a spirited group, leading to a 12 percent jump in attendance.

"The way the league is now, you know things aren't always going to go your way," Waddell said. "The key is how you bounce back when that happens. And that's where we've been good the last 30 games. We got spanked in Winnipeg when we played our worst game of the year and then we bounced in Nashville in a pretty tough environment with one of their better games of the year."

Carolina boasts many contributors. Dougie Hamilton's 10 goals since Jan. 1 are the most by any league defenseman. With 77 points in 69 games, Sebastian Aho might be one of the league's most anonymous superstars. Rod Brind'Amour will get Coach of the Year votes.

The Hurricanes' path to the playoffs doesn't get easier. From March 19 to April 2, they play Washington twice, Pittsburgh twice and Tampa Bay and Toronto once.

"That will be a test," Waddell said.

Other teams ready for the playoffs and some that are not:

Ready for the playoffs

Tampa Bay Lightning: Coach Jon Cooper's 53-13-4 team has a +89 goal-differential. The Lightning could easily be +100 before the season is over. Down the stretch, they only need to guard against boredom.

Washington Capitals: The Caps have won seven of eight since adding defenseman Nick Jensen to the lineup from the Red Wings. He might be the 2019 version of defenseman Michal Kempny. Last season, Kempny's acquisition was a key factor in Washington winning the Stanley Cup. This season, defensive-minded Jensen has been an equally positive fit.

San Jose Sharks: They've won six in a row and eight out of 10 to move atop the Western Conference standings. They rank second in the league in goals and have scoring depth. Five players have 20 or more goals, including two who top 30, led by Joe Pavelski with 37 (six game-winners). Newcomer Gustav Nyquist scored two goals Tuesday night to give him 19 for the season.

Boston Bruins: This is a team nobody should want to face in the playoffs. The Bruins rank third in the league with a 2.53 goals-against average and are 15-2-2 in their last 19 games. Imagine how dangerous they will be when David Pastrnak returns from injury.

Not ready for the playoffs

Nashville Predators: They haven't been able to find the consistency they will need in the playoffs. They are 8-9-1 since Feb. 2. They have given up five goals five times in that stretch. Filip Forsberg has three goals with a -8 plus-minus in his past eight games.

Toronto Maple Leafs: They played listlessly in a 6-2 loss to Tampa Bay Monday night and have given up three or more goals 11 times in their last 17 games. Even with adding Jake Muzzin, the Toronto defense doesn't seem proficient enough for playoff competition.

Winnipeg Jets: The Jets are 6-9-2 in their last 17 games, including two losses to the last-place Ottawa Senators. The Jets have the talent to be considered a favorite in the West, but they haven't been as formidable as expected.

Columbus Blue Jackets: After multiple trades, the Blue Jackets haven't come together as management hoped. The team is 6-5 — with a 7-4 win against Bruins on Tuesday) — since Matt Duchene was acquired. It's far from guaranteed they will even qualify for the playoffs.



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1135841 Columbus Blue Jackets

Defensive pairs start to jell without injured Ryan Murray

Brian Hedger

The Blue Jackets are adjusting to life without Ryan Murray.

Their best puck-moving defenseman is out "week-to-week" because of an undisclosed upper body injury — he missed his 12th straight game Tuesday in a 7-4 victory over the Boston Bruins — but his teammates are settling into defined roles now.

Zach Werenski and Seth Jones have gotten some of their old magic back, Markus Nutivaara and David Savard are clicking, and the third unit is coming along too — as Scott Harrington and Adam McQuaid learn each other's tendencies.

"I think they're playing much better," Tortorella said of his defensemen. "We've really stressed on just getting the puck up to the forwards, just advance the puck. We don't have to look for a better play. ... I think that's helped them."

It has helped ease some of the burden on Jones' legs too.

Before logging just 22:37 against Boston, Jones had topped 27 minutes in six of 11 games after Murray's injury Feb. 18 against the Tampa Bay Lightning, including the previous four in a row.

Assistant coach Brad Shaw sets the defensive pairings with help from Tortorella, and their comfort level with the current setup is starting to show, especially in regard to Harrington and McQuaid, one of four players acquired before last month's trade deadline.

"I think Quaid has relaxed a little bit and he's played much better," Tortorella said after McQuaid posted three straight plus/minus ratings of zero after going minus-5 in his first four games. "So, the six (defensemen) have played well, have found their game and hopefully will stay consistent."

That consistency also paid off with Werenski's game against the Bruins. He had a career-high four points on three assists and a late power-play goal that ended a 30-game goal-less streak that stretched to Dec. 31.

"We're just trying to grow as players together," Jones said of Werenski. "We've switched the pairs around a little bit this year, but we want to be a dominant force."

One sick night

Boone Jenner got the puck off a Bruins turnover inside the Blue Jackets' blue line and shot it down the ice, straight into an empty net.

It was the game's final goal, his third of the game and Jenner's first NHL hat trick. Even more impressive was the fact he missed a 2-0 loss on Monday at the New York Islanders because of illness.

"The biggest thing was we just didn't want him giving it to anybody else," said Tortorella, who was informed Tuesday morning by head athletic trainer Mike Vogt that Jenner's fever had subsided. "It's a huge boost for

us. Jenns is just a guy that you pull for, and he just doesn't know how to do it any other way than simply work hard. I really respect how he's handled himself."

The Blue Jackets didn't practice Wednesday, giving the team a day to rest.

Tough on the draw

Since adding face-off winning center Matt Duchene in a trade Feb. 22 with the Ottawa Senators, the Blue Jackets' success rate has skyrocketed.

Before the trade, they were ranked 20th in the NHL with a 49.4 percent success rate. Since the trade, they have ranked second by winning 54 percent of their draws in 11 games, including 64 percent against the Bruins (38 of 59).

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1135842 Columbus Blue Jackets

Josh Anderson's fast, furious play provides spark

Brian Hedger

As games dwindle and pressure mounts, the Blue Jackets' most effective forward has emerged in two-plus weeks since the trade deadline.

It's not Artemi Panarin or Cam Atkinson, although they both are threats. It's not Pierre-Luc Dubois, Matt Duchene or Ryan Dzingel, either.

It's Josh Anderson, and it's not even close.

"I'd like to see him lead the way, as far as how you play," coach John Tortorella said last weekend, before Anderson did exactly that in a demon-exorcising, 4-1 trouncing of the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday at Nationwide Arena. "We're waiting for someone to lead the way, and Andy certainly has the ability, the speed and the season to do that and say, 'Follow me.'"

Anderson's play the past three weeks has gotten that message across to his teammates, loud and clear. They are following Anderson, even if most have no prayer of actually catching him on skates.

Anderson not only is the Jackets' biggest, baddest dude up front — a guy who stood toe-to-toe with Boston's towering Zdeno Chara last season and lived to tell about it — he also is their fastest forward, with breathtaking speed at 6 feet 3 and 221 pounds.

That size/speed combination has been on display the past four games, including Anderson's career-best effort Tuesday, leading the Blue Jackets to a 7-4 victory at home against the Boston Bruins, who had a 15-0-4 stretch end Sunday in Pittsburgh and sit comfortably in second place in the Atlantic Division.

Anderson pushed his goal total to a career-best 23 and finished with career-highs in assists (three) and points (four). He also impressed in



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three previous games, despite adding only one assist during a frustrating offensive slog for the team.

His lines, however, have been the Jackets' most effective, led by Anderson's hard-nosed forechecking.

In two games against Pittsburgh last week, Anderson helped the Jackets' "identity" line — which included captain Nick Foligno and Boone Jenner — hem the Penguins into their zone for long stretches and also take a 1-0 lead on Jenner's goal 2:31 into the game.

Tortorella broke them up Monday during a frustrating 2-0 loss at the New York Islanders, but it didn't affect Anderson, who immediately helped Duchene and Dzingel get traction. Those three stayed together against Boston and the results were even better.

Anderson's read of a play while backchecking, and then speed after a turnover created by Dzingel, sparked his goal and a big night for their line. Dzingel and Duchene also scored, with Dzingel adding two assists for the first three-point game in his NHL career.

"This is the time of the year when you've got to step it up and kind of lead by example on the ice," said Anderson, who also leads the Jackets with 185 hits. "I want to be that guy, too. I want to lead by example on the ice and I've got to continue to do that with my play."

It hasn't gone unnoticed, either. The Jackets have climbed aboard the No. 77 train and hope to keep chugging right into the Stanley Cup playoffs.

"If he doesn't have the puck on his stick, he's going to forecheck somebody and get it back," said Jenner, whose first of three goals against the Bruins was scored off Anderson's rebound. "He's dangerous out there, and I think that brings a lot of guys with him into the fight."

Tortorella agrees.

"Andy is having a hell of a year," he said. "Everywhere we put him, he seems to help. He's a very important guy for us right now."

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1135843 Columbus Blue Jackets

Blue Jackets 7, Bruins 4: Five takeaways

Brian Hedger

There were a lot of eyes looking at Columbus on Tuesday night.

After another stumble Monday at the New York Islanders, losing 2-0 in a Metropolitan Division game, the Blue Jackets knew a lot of people wanted to see how they would respond against the Boston Bruins — a team that just had a 15-0-4 stretch halted Sunday in Pittsburgh.

The Jackets' answer was rooted in resilience, refusing to let the Bruins knock them out of a playoff spot. Despite allowing the game's first goal again, a dangerous recent trend, they stormed back to take a 5-1 lead on Boston midway through the second period.

And allowing three straight goals late in the second, Columbus steadied themselves in the third, holding off the Bruins for a big 7-4 win at Nationwide Arena.

Boone Jenner had a hat trick, Josh Anderson and Zach Werenski each had a goal and three assists — career-highs — and even the new guys, Matt Duchene (goal) and Ryan Dzingel (goal, two assists), got into the act. It was exactly what the Blue Jackets (39-28-3) needed after being shut out 24 hours earlier for the sixth time this season and third time in a six-game span.

"My dad and my brothers are baseball guys and it's just the law of averages, you know?" said Dzingel, who hadn't scored a goal since the Blue Jackets acquired him Feb. 23 from the Ottawa Senators. "You can either stay in the dumps or you can keep playing the way you know you can play and eventually they're going to go in somehow."

His went in after banking off goalie Tuukka Rask's right elbow, after an impressive second effort off his own shot from near the left post.

"If you're a .300 hitter, you're a .300 hitter," said Dzingel, who scored his 23rd goal of the season. "That's what you're going to do."

Are the Blue Jackets a .300-hitting playoff team?

They looked like it against the Bruins, but we'll find out over the final 12 games of the regular season. Until then, here are five takeaways from their win Tuesday:

What it meant

Columbus maintained its position as the Eastern Conference's second wild-card team, tied with the Montreal Canadiens at 81 points.

Montreal, which beat the Detroit Red Wings 3-1 on Tuesday, remains on the outside of the postseason with three less regulation/overtime wins than Columbus (38-35). The Blue Jackets next play Friday, hosting the Carolina Hurricanes in a huge divisional matchup to start another tough back-to-back that concludes Saturday in Boston.

The Canadiens will play Thursday at the New York Islanders with a chance to unseat Columbus from the second wild-card spot.

Raining goals

The Blue Jackets hadn't scored seven goals in a game since Jan. 13 in a 7-5 win here against the New York Rangers.

They hadn't scored six since Feb. 2, winning 6-3 at the Colorado Avalanche. It was also the Jackets' first game with five-or-more goals since Feb. 16 in Chicago, a 5-2 victory against the Blackhawks.

The trend here is that when the Blue Jackets score a lot, they win — improving to 17-1-1 when scoring four-or-more goals.

Unfortunately for them, the opposite is also true. When the Jackets are muted, held to two-or-less goals, they're 5-24-2. For a comparison, Boston is 9-13-7 in games they've scored two-or-fewer goals — a difference of 13 points.

Add those 13 points to the Blue Jackets' tally and they'd be leading the Metro with 94 and have a five-point cushion over the Washington Capitals.

Career bests abound

There were career-highs and career-bests splashed around Tuesday night like free cars being given out by Oprah.

Jenner scored three goals in an NHL game for the first time, notching his first hattie. Anderson was credited with his first three-assist game, not to mention his first four-point NHL game. He also scored the Jackets' first goal, which pushed his career-high to 23 — four more than his previous career-high last year (19).

Not to be outdone, Werenski and Dzingel also had career-best nights.

Like Anderson, Werenski finished with four points — the most in his NHL career — and broke a drought of 30 straight games without a goal by scoring a key one late in the third for a 6-4 lead. His dry spell had stretched back to New Year's Eve, when the Blue Jackets routed Dzingel and Matt Duchene's Ottawa Senators 6-3.

"Just seeing (Werenski) after he scored the goal, he was pretty excited," Tortorella said. "Players judge themselves. A guy like that judges himself on that. Sometimes coaches don't. I think he's worked at his defensive part of his game. I think he's improved there, but as we're trying to fight to score some goals it's nice to get him to chip in. It's a big goal."



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Dzingel finished with three points for the first time in his career and his 23rd goal tied his career-high for a season.

'Bread' boxed

Artemi Panarin finished with an assist, a fighting major, seven penalty minutes and a wild finish in the second period.

His fight started with a face-off win by Boston's Sean Kuraly, an alum of the Ohio AAA Blue Jackets program, after Brad Marchand's first of two goals to cut the Blue Jackets' lead to 5-2 with 6:53 left in the second.

Panarin chased the puck, which McAvoy quickly played before knocking Panarin off kilter with a forearm shove to his face. The Jackets' Russian star didn't appreciate it and they came together again seconds later in the Boston zone, where McAvoy threw a shoulder at Panarin and then whacked him across the back of the legs with a two-handed slash – drawing a minor penalty.

Panarin immediately turned around and they dropped the gloves in the neutral zone. It was the second official fight for each and McAvoy got the better of it, landing several right crosses that led to Panarin's nose bleeding from the bridge – likely cut by his plastic visor.

Panarin stayed on his feet, though, and landed a couple shots of his own. The Blue Jackets rapped their sticks on the boards in approval, while captain Nick Foligno skated across the ice to give Panarin an "atta boy" as he sat in the penalty box.

The Bruins scored the next two goals – the first 15 seconds after McAvoy's slashing minor ended and the second a couple seconds after Panarin and McAvoy were released – but Panarin's willingness to defend himself didn't go unnoticed.

"It's great for the bench," Tortorella said. "You could see everybody was excited and he threw both hands. It's good for our team. I think it's good for 'Bread,' with his teammates. That stuff really helps as far as the camaraderie. He's a competitor. He stood right in there. He took a couple of shots and he gave a couple of shots."

Panarin's only previous fight was Nov. 9, 2016 in St. Louis, his second season with the Chicago Blackhawks. He fought Blues forward Scottie Upshall, a former Blue Jacket, and got the "Gordie Howe Hat Trick" with a goal, assist and fight – scoring in overtime to end the game.

This time, despite assisting on Werenski's goal, he didn't get the goal for the "Gordie" – which he lamented through a team spokesman when asked to speak with reporters.

The fight likely dashed any chance Panarin had to win the Lady Byng Memorial Trophy, awarded annually for "sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct," and he added another two minutes in the third for good measure – slashing Bruins defenseman Torey Krug.

Close call

Marchand's second goal, scored late in the second, cut the Jackets' lead to 5-4 with 1:23 left in the period. It wasn't a power-play goal, officially, but the Bruins did have one extra skater for the face-off that preceded it.

Following a stoppage, the Blue Jackets only sent four players onto the ice during a full-strength situation and paid for it dearly after Patrice Bergeron won a face-off against Jenner at the left-wing circle. Marchand got the puck off the draw and fired it past goalie Sergei Bobrovsky on the short side.

Defensemen Zach Werenski and Seth Jones were on the ice for Columbus along with Jenner and Riley Nash – who had two assists against his former team. Captain Nick Foligno had been shifting with them throughout the game, but it's unknown if he was the missing forward.

Tortorella, who had a look of disbelief after the goal, declined to talk about the play after the game. Had the Bruins completed the comeback, it would've been a much bigger deal.

Instead, the Jackets got to the second intermission with the lead and reset themselves for a strong third period.

"We just played," Tortorella said. "We moved right by it in between periods. We didn't talk about anything. We just wanted to get back attacking."

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1135826 Buffalo Sabres

As Sabres' slide continues, Jeff Skinner trying to 'work through' recent slump

By Lance Lysowski

When the Buffalo Sabres' season reached its apex, Zoom Copy in downtown Buffalo placed a sign outside its Main Street storefront that read, "Jeff Skinner for Mayor."

At the time, the 26-year-old winger was the toast of Buffalo, captivating the Sabres' long-frustrated fan base by scoring 10 goals during their 10-game winning streak in November. He was the leading goal scorer on the best team in the NHL through the season's first 25 games.

Now, Skinner is only three weeks away from continuing his run as the league's longest-tenured player yet to appear in a Stanley Cup playoff game and will carry a 12-game goalless drought into Thursday night's game against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

The talk of his pending unrestricted free agency, and a possible long-term contract extension, has been replaced by questions about his unprecedented bad luck and the Sabres' historic slide.

"We're not where we want to be," Skinner said following practice Wednesday in KeyBank Center. "That's not a great feeling. Again, we can only control what we do from here on."

Despite the recent slump, Skinner's 36 goals in 69 games are 10 behind Washington's Alex Ovechkin for the league lead and rank ninth overall. Skinner became the fifth player in franchise history to score at least 35 goals in his first season with the Sabres and his next goal will match his previous career high, which was set in 2016-17.

Additionally, his 28 even-strength goals are already the most ever recorded by a player in his first season with the team, and he is on pace to become the first Sabre to score at least 40 goals since Thomas Vanek had 40 in 2008-09.

This is the third-longest slump of his career – Skinner was held scoreless in the final 18 games of 2014-15 – an unprecedented statistical regression considering he had not gone more than four games without a goal this season.

Still, Skinner has been everything General Manager Jason Botterill could have hoped for when the Sabres acquired him from Carolina for prospect Cliff Pu and three draft picks in August. Skinner, who will turn 27 in May, has 58 points while posting the Sabres' best 5-on-5 shot differential.

While puck luck remains elusive, Skinner has continued to generate scoring chances during the Sabres' offensive drought. He hit the post twice Tuesday in a 2-0 loss to Dallas, using his skating ability to drive to the net through a group of defenders before firing off a backhanded shot.

"When he's at his best he's stripping pucks from behind, he's reloading well, turning pucks over and he's getting opportunities," coach Phil Housley explained. "He's getting a lot of looks. It's going to come for him."



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At this point, since he hasn't scored in a long time it gets elevated, but he's still getting the looks. ... He just needs to continue to find ways to create."

While Skinner has only five points over the past 12 games, he has 37 shots on goal during that span, including 21 over a four-game stretch, to rank second on the team behind Jack Eichel. He scored twice in a 6-2 loss to the New York Rangers on Feb. 15, only to post a minus-2 rating in the two games that followed.

Skinner then suffered what appeared to be a devastating knee injury when he was tripped by Washington's Carl Hagelin during the second period, only to return for the third period of a 5-2 Buffalo win on Feb. 23. He has played at least 20 minutes in four of the past eight games and has been held without a shot only once.

"You're going to go through stretches where things aren't going your way or you're not finishing as many chances as you'd like, but you want to create as much as you can," Skinner added. "If you keep creating, odds are that over the course of time it will even out and things will start to go in. As a line, as a team, I think we've created a little more than we've gotten over the last few games and we've got to keep doing that."

With the Sabres' goalless drought at 137 minutes, 40 seconds, Housley shuffled his lines during practice Wednesday and has Skinner skating with Vladimir Sobotka and Jason Pominville since Eichel has one game left on a suspension.

Skinner's regression did not come at an inopportune time. His agent, Don Meehan, is actively negotiating a contract extension with Botterill, and the market has been set with Vegas signing recently acquired winger Mark Stone to an eight-year, \$76 million extension.

Skinner has said all along his focus is on the season, leaving all contract talks up to Meehan. While a deal is not complete, Skinner has not hid his desire to remain in Buffalo. He beamed Wednesday when asked of Rasmus Dahlin's progress, saying, "He's only going to continue to get better, which is nice for us and scary for everyone else."

On the team's growth and chemistry since his arrival, Skinner said, "There's a really good group of guys, which is big. When you're going out there and playing as many games as you are, going through ups and downs, it's a lot more enjoyable when you like the guys that you're sort of doing it with."

While the Sabres are 13 games away from likely becoming only the second team in NHL history to miss the playoffs in the same season in which they won 10 games in a row, Skinner's focus is on gathering points, for himself and the team.

"Everyone is competitive," he said. "Everyone in here wants to win. Everyone in here wants to produce. During times those things aren't happening you sort of have to bear down and work through it. It happens to everyone. It happens to every team and every player in the league. You have to work through it and get through it as quick as you can."

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1135902 Pittsburgh Penguins

Kevin Gorman: Pros and cons to Penguins playing playoff hockey in March

KEVIN GORMAN

Wednesday, March 13, 2019 7:57 p.m

The Pittsburgh Penguins are providing a treat typically reserved for April and beyond, playing a brand of hockey over a seven-game stretch this month that has positioned them for the Stanley Cup playoffs.

The Penguins are 5-1-1 since March 1, with back-to-back wins over two of the NHL's hottest teams that has them looking like Cup contenders.

Not to, you know, get ahead of ourselves.

The Penguins are no closer to making the playoffs than they are winning their third Cup in four years, but following a 4-2 victory over the Boston Bruins on Sunday with a 5-3 victory over the Washington Capitals on Tuesday was impressive. The Bruins were riding a 19-game point streak and hadn't lost in regulation since Jan. 19; the Capitals had won seven straight.

"That's what happens in this room," Penguins winger Patric Hornqvist said. "That's why we've been successful in the playoffs for many years. We have a veteran group in here who knows what it takes to play our best hockey when the stakes are the highest. It's time for it now."

Mike Sullivan knows playing high-stakes hockey has its risks and rewards, so the Penguins coach doesn't subscribe to the practice of saving your best hockey for the playoffs. He's counting on this not being so much a streak but rather developing into a pattern of play-the-right-way for the Penguins.

"I've never been a believer that you can just flip the switch when you want to and think you're going to turn on your A-game," Sullivan said. "My experience of being around the game is we're all creatures of habit. We are what we repeatedly do if we get in a certain mindset or mode, play the game a certain way, make a certain commitment and do it game-in, game-out, it can only help us become a better team."

"That's the way I see it. We're trying to dig in here and do everything we can to win that one right in front of us. If we do that, it will continue to push us to be at our best."

Surely, playing playoff hockey in March has to have its pros and cons, even if Sullivan seems so focused on the positives for the Penguins that he's "not sure there is" a negative to their sudden surge.

"I've never been one to think you can put it in cruise control and think you're going to turn it on when all of a sudden it really means something," Sullivan said. "Right now, every game means something to us. We're fighting for a playoff spot. We're well aware of where we sit, and we're going to fight every night to control what we can."

I don't disagree but do see pros and cons to premature playoff hockey:

Pro: Sidney Crosby and Jake Guentzel are playing at a high level, as both have scored six goals in the past seven games. Crosby has 13 points and is plus-4, and Guentzel has 10 points and is plus-6.

Con: It's hard to believe that the duo can continue scoring at nearly a goal-a-game pace for the entire month on a team so top-heavy.

On the flip side...

Con: Evgeni Malkin and Phil Kessel have struggled lately, scoring a combined three goals and 12 points in the past seven games. Malkin is a minus-7 in that stretch, Kessel a minus-5.

Pro: Kessel ended a career-worst 16-game goal-scoring drought last week against Columbus and scored a power-play goal for Malkin's 1,000th career point. Malkin and Kessel could be breaking out of their slumps together and at just the right time.

Pro: Matt Murray has been great in goal this month, with a .938 save percentage in seven games and a shutout at home against the Blue Jackets. He even played outstanding in loss at Columbus.

Con: The question is whether Murray can continue shining in net, given he has started nine consecutive games. There isn't much room for rest with a game Thursday at Buffalo followed by back-to-backs against St.



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Louis and Philadelphia over the weekend before a critical game Tuesday at Carolina.

Pro: By beating the Bruins and Capitals, the Penguins have become one of the NHL's hottest teams at the right time. They are 6-2-2 in their last 10 games and, with 89 points, are sixth in the Eastern Conference and third in the Metropolitan Division.

Con: Their slow start allowed little margin for error. Every game is critical. That's especially true for the two against Carolina, which is only two points behind the Penguins in the Metro standings.

Then again, the Penguins are only two points behind the N.Y. Islanders and four points behind the Capitals for first place in the Metropolitan Division. But you have to wonder what type of toll playing at such a high level could take on a team in the postseason, when the grind of the Cup playoffs already makes it such a grueling championship to win.

That brings us to the most important positives and negatives of the Penguins playing playoff hockey in March: If they don't, they might not be playing in any in April. So enjoy this brand, for as long as you can.

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1135903 Pittsburgh Penguins

5 fun facts about Evgeni Malkin's 1,000-point milestone

JONATHAN BOMBULIE

Wednesday, March 13, 2019 12:38 p.m

Considering the only 88 players have reached the 1,000-point milestone in the 102-year history of the NHL, it's pretty remarkable that PPG Paints Arena has hosted two such celebrations in the span of a little more than two years.

Evgeni Malkin hit 1,000 with a third-period assist on a Phil Kessel goal in a 5-3 Pittsburgh Penguins win over the Washington Capitals on Tuesday night.

Sidney Crosby moved into quadruple digits with an assist on a Chris Kunitz overtime goal in a 4-3 Penguins win over the Winnipeg Jets on Feb. 16, 2017.

"I just feel honored to play with some of these guys," goalie Matt Murray said. "These guys are legends. Sid, Geno, Phil, we're very lucky to get to play with those guys. I got to see Sid get his 1,000th, and I got to see G get his 1,000th, too. It's fun to be a part of."

In a stark reminder of how quickly rosters turn over in the NHL in general and with the Penguins in particular, it's interesting to note only six players other than Crosby and Malkin appeared in both 1,000-point games. They are Kessel, Matt Cullen, Patric Hornqvist, Jake Guentzel, Brian Dumoulin and Justin Schultz.

Murray dressed for both games, but he was backing up Marc-Andre Fleury during Crosby's milestone moment.

Here are five other fun facts about Malkin's 1,000-point accomplishment.

1. Thanks, Geno

In the moments after Malkin hit 1,000 points, the Penguins released a list of 110 players who have figured in the scoring on a goal scored or assisted by Malkin. Crosby topped the list with 303. Kessel was next with 151.

Only one player on the list can thank a Malkin goal for the only point of his NHL career.

In December 2011, with the Penguins racked by injuries on the blue line, Carl Sneepe, a second-round draft pick out of Boston College, was called up from Wilkes-Barre/Scranton.

Late in the first period of his NHL debut, an 8-3 Penguins win over Buffalo, Sneepe took a pass from defense partner Alexandre Picard below the goal line and banked a clearing pass off the right-wing boards. Malkin picked up the puck in the neutral zone, flew up the right wing and beat goalie Jhonas Enroth for his second of three goals in the game.

Sneepe returned to the AHL shortly thereafter. He retired in 2014 and became a technical consultant for a computer services company in his native Minnesota. Thanks to Malkin, his NHL points-per-game average will always be 1.0.

2. Not Nick

An odd omission from the list: During two regular seasons with the Penguins from 2015-17, Nick Bonino scored 27 goals and assisted on 39 others. Neither Malkin nor Crosby figured in on the scoring of any of those 66 goals.

3. Closer race

Thanks to the one-year, 102-point head start Crosby got as a rookie before Malkin came to the NHL, there never really has been a career scoring race between the Penguins superstars. Crosby is 206 points ahead.

When it comes to professional points, including games played outside of the NHL, the gap is 66 points. Malkin recorded a total of 140 points in parts of four seasons with his hometown team in Magnitogorsk in Russia's top pro league early in his career and during the 2012-13 lockout.

4. Tormenting Philly

There are dozens of reasons Crosby and Malkin are beloved by Penguins fans, and one of them is the way they have tortured the Philadelphia Flyers over the years.

Crosby and Malkin both count 16 goals at Wells Fargo Center among their first 1,000 career points. Outside of PPG Paints Arena and Mellon Arena, it's the building where both have done the most scoring.

5. What's next?

Four other major milestones could be coming up for the Penguins superstar duo of Crosby and Malkin in the next few years.

Both are within shouting distance of their 1,000th career games. Crosby has played 931 and Malkin 848. They also are closing in on their 500th NHL goals. Crosby has 444 and Malkin 391.

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1135904 Pittsburgh Penguins

Crosby, Ovechkin share tender moment after Penguins beat Capitals

MATT ROSENBERG

Wednesday, March 13, 2019 11:13 a.m

Talk about respect.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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While Evgeni Malkin was showered with congratulations for notching his 1,000th point during the Pittsburgh Penguins' 5-3 win Tuesday, the other Russian-born superstar in the game hit a milestone of his own.

Washington Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin earned his 1,200th point with an assist on John Carlson's third-period goal.

When the dust settled at the end of the game, Penguins captain Sidney Crosby, who hit the 1,200-point milestone March 5, had a brief chat with Ovechkin.

Though initially, it appeared it might be more of a scrap than a conversation.

Ovechkin said Crosby told him "congrats, man" during the brief rendezvous.

For his part in the festivities, Crosby didn't hit any new milestones, but he deposited a couple of beauties en route to the victory.

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1135905 Pittsburgh Penguins

Penguins players past, present honor Evgeni Malkin on his 1,000th point

CHRIS PASTRICK | Wednesday, March 13, 2019 9:38 a.m

One thousand is quite a number.

But in the NHL, when it comes to points scored ... it's beyond outstanding.

Evgeni Malkin reached that elite goal Tuesday night in Pittsburgh, scoring his 1,000th point — something only 87 other players in the history of the league have done.

Not that Malkin hasn't already done some amazing things. In his 13 seasons, he's picked up three Stanley Cups, two Art Ross Trophies, a Hart Trophy, a Calder Trophy, a Ted Lindsay Award and a Conn Smythe Trophy. Oh, and there's the seven-time NHL All-Star appearances, three First All-Star Team picks and four Penguins team MVP titles.

The Penguins are celebrating his accomplishment in an interactive webpage, and through a series video posts from players past and present.

We salute you, Geno.

Kunitz on Malkin: "I think everybody realizes that he doesn't back down. He has that fire and I think that drives him to be a better player."

From Russia with love.

Letang on Malkin: "He's one-of-a-kind. He's a rare and raw talent. He does things that nobody else has the courage to do on the ice. He makes you

Malkin ranks 5th among active NHL players when it comes to points.

And when it comes to all-time players ...

The team is encouraging fans to share their feelings through the hashtag #Ma1Kin.

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1135906 Pittsburgh Penguins

Another big game for Jared McCann sparks Penguins

JONATHAN BOMBULIE

Wednesday, March 13, 2019 6:00 a.m

In 20 games since being acquired from the Florida Panthers in a Feb. 1 trade, Jared McCann has made a significant impact with the Pittsburgh Penguins.

He's scored nine goals. He's given the team's top-line duo of Sidney Crosby and Jake Guentzel a formidable running mate. He's been an effective penalty killer, even scoring twice shorthanded.

His biggest play to date, however, may have come in the second period of a 5-3 Penguins win over the Washington Capitals on Tuesday night.

The Penguins trailed 2-0 to a Washington team that had won its previous seven games. All their closest rivals in the Eastern Conference playoff chase were winning. It looked like it was going to be one of those nights where it was perfectly reasonable to wonder if the Penguins would qualify for the postseason at all.

Instead, as Capitals center Evgeny Kuznetsov carried the puck in his own zone a little too casually while looking for an outlet pass, McCann crept up from behind and stole it off his stick.

That started a two-on-one that Jake Guentzel finished at the left post. The PPG Paints Arena crowd roared. The momentum had shifted.

"I feel like we talked about it after the first period, getting hard on the forecheck and pressuring their D," McCann said. "I had to get my feet moving after the first period there. It was a good play and Jake made a good play backdoor there."

Forty-seven seconds later, Sidney Crosby tracked down a Justin Schultz lob and tied the score. Sixty-one seconds after that, Crosby scored on a power-play one-timer from the right circle. The Penguins never trailed again.

"It was a huge goal," coach Mike Sullivan said. "It was a turning point in the game, I think, the way we grabbed a hold of the momentum right after it. Our bench got a foot taller after we scored that goal and you could see it in our play with the energy that we came with with the subsequent shifts after that goal. It was a huge point in that game."

The Penguins have been known to score goals in bunches, especially at home, when they're playing at their best. It was the first such frenzy McCann was in the middle of.

He liked it.

"It was a great atmosphere," he said. "Obviously we didn't have a great start to the game, but our fans stayed with us."

One of the reasons the Penguins ended their season with a second-round playoff loss to the Capitals last year was a lack of scoring by forwards not named Guentzel or Crosby.

McCann's recent performance gives them hope that the same scene won't play out this spring.

"I feel like we're just clicking," McCann said. "Sometimes you just have guys that you just click with, and I feel like we have that chemistry. We're continuing to get better each and every game. Obviously we didn't have the best start, but we battled back. It was a good way to finish."

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1135907 Pittsburgh Penguins

The Penguins' new top line has a familiar feel

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

For much of this season, the third spot on Sidney Crosby's line has been a revolving door.

Early on, it was believed that maybe Daniel Sprong could fit there. When that idea petered out within the first couple days of training camp, coach Mike Sullivan tried a few different things. Bryan Rust, Dominik Simon and Patric Hornqvist all got shots, with Jake Guentzel, Crosby and Rust getting the most five-on-five ice time (371:58) of those combinations.

What has happened lately, though, has turned into one of the story lines of the season for the Penguins. Jared McCann has thrived at left wing with Crosby and new right wing Guentzel, the three piling up points in a hurry.

McCann, who has nine goals and 13 points in the 20 games he's played with the Penguins since that Feb. 1 trade, has turned into the steal of the season around the league, and Crosby has seemingly enjoyed the key element the 22-year-old has brought to that line.

"He uses his speed," Crosby said of McCann. "He's played center a bit, so he's comfortable taking faceoffs sometimes. He just looks comfortable out there for a guy who started playing center when he came to us and now he's on the wing.

"He has a great shot. He's playing to his strengths."

McCann, Crosby and Guentzel started playing together March 2 in Montreal and helped the Penguins to a 5-1 victory that night. Just 21 seconds into the game, McCann took advantage of a turnover by defenseman Jordie Benn and saw an opportunity ahead, getting the puck off his stick quickly enough to afford Crosby and Guentzel the chance for a pretty passing sequence.

On March 5 against the Panthers, Crosby created a turnover, and McCann one-touched the puck back to Guentzel, who was able to convert a terrific opportunity from the slot.

McCann, whose strip of Washington's Evgeny Kuznetsov keyed a second-period avalanche Tuesday, has also made a habit of scoring short-handed and hitting empty nets — six of his nine thus far have come that way — while the trio has produced a ton of offense five-on-five.

Although they've only spent 52:46 together, they have a goals-for percentage of 83.3 and a goals-for per 60 minutes of ice time mark — probably the most valuable available metric given the small sample size — of 5.7.

Guentzel-Crosby-Simon ranks second among the four combinations in goals-for per 60 at 5.2 in 196:49 together. Guentzel-Crosby-Hornqvist is third at 4.0 (in 104:40), while those two with Rust rank fourth at 3.7.

"We've liked it," Sullivan answered Tuesday when asked about his top line with McCann, Crosby and Guentzel.

"[McCann] is complementary to those guys. I think his speed has really helped them. He can get to loose pucks. When he gets there, he has the instincts to make a play. We like him there. That's one of the reasons why we've kept him there."

McCann was asked about the line's chemistry, too, but it's sort of defied any explanation for him. In basically four games together, they've combined for 14 goals and 26 points — absolutely absurd numbers.

Meanwhile, Guentzel continues toward the impressive mark of scoring 40-plus goals, and Crosby has a very realistic shot of his third 100-point season and first since 2013-14. McCann has already crushed his career high in goals (17) and could easily get 20 at this pace.

The line actually harkens back to something Crosby had earlier in his career, when he thrived with Chris Kunitz and Pascal Dupuis. Injuries made keeping that combination together tricky at times, but when they were healthy, there probably wasn't a more dominant line in the NHL.

Kunitz was adept at going to the front of the net. In his prime, he was those Penguins' version of Patric Hornqvist. Dupuis' speed caused problems, and he was willing to dig for pucks in the corner, doing the dirty work that let Crosby focus on offense.

Take the elements that made that line great and put them into a blender. Now do it with McCann, Crosby and Guentzel. It should look similar with Guentzel's ability around the net and McCann's speed and offensive instincts.

"I feel like we're just clicking," McCann said. "Sometimes you just have those guys that you click with. I feel like we have that chemistry, and we're continuing to get better each and every game."

The crazy thing about the Penguins' new top line is that general manager Jim Rutherford did not acquire McCann to get Crosby an additional winger. The Penguins targeted McCann because they liked his speed and shooting ability, and they thought he was being undervalued and underutilized. Get him to fit somewhere, and who knows?

It also doesn't hurt that McCann is young, he's already under contract for next season at a reasonable number (\$1.25 million) and will be a restricted free agent after that. Having that cost certainty is huge for a cap team like the Penguins, and having a versatile player like McCann — he might be their most malleable outside of Rust — helps any club.

Especially when that player has the right attitude — relentlessly positive and in awe of Crosby, willing to do whatever the captain needs — and enough chemistry to make it all work.

"We think he's been really good," Sullivan said of McCann. "He brings an element of speed to that line. He's shown an ability to score. He can really shoot the puck.

"We've really liked that line. That's why we've kept it together as long as we have."

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1135908 Pittsburgh Penguins

They said it: The Penguins react to Evgeni Malkin getting his 1,000th NHL point

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

The following is a collection of quotes from Penguins teammates talking about Evgeni Malkin reaching an important milestone:

"It's cool. I just feel honored to play with some of these guys, honestly. These guys are legends — [Sidney Crosby], Geno, Phil [Kessel]. We're lucky to get to play with those guys. Really cool to see Sid get his 1,000th and get to see 'G' get his 1,000th, it's fun to be a part of." — Matt Murray

"His body of work speaks for itself with what he's accomplished. Tonight he reaches 1,000 points, but he's a three-time Stanley Cup champion, he's a Conn Smythe winner. The list goes on and on. We certainly have



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an appreciation for what he brings to this organization. And he's a great person. He's a good teammate. He cares about the Penguins. He cares about his teammates, and he cares about this team winning. That's what we love about him." — Mike Sullivan

"Happy for him. It was only a matter of time when he's this close. It's a great milestone. He's done so much over the years. Been a part of winning teams, highlight-reel goals, dominated games. Did a lot for the organization. It's just been fun to be a part of that, watch that. You're always happy for your teammates when they do well, but a guy you've played this long with, it's pretty special, pretty unique. It doesn't happen very often. Just really happy he got it. It's a big point, too, in a big game for us." — Sidney Crosby

"It was awesome. He's such a good guy. He's been great to me ever since I've been here. I'm so happy for the guy. It's a milestone, obviously. Hopefully many more to come." — Jared McCann

"Growing up in a small city [Magnitogorsk, Russia], I never would believe I'd play in the NHL and score 1,000 points. It's probably a special day for my hometown, too. I'm probably the first guy who got 1,000 points and won the Stanley Cup." — Malkin

"We were all thrilled. His teammates were so excited for him. Coaches as well. He's been anxious to reach the milestone. When he was finally able to get it, everyone was excited and thrilled for him. You could see the raw emotion on the ice with the players but also on the bench. It's pretty cool to be part of that." — Sullivan

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1135909 Pittsburgh Penguins

The stories you don't know about Evgeni Malkin's journey to 1,000 points

By Rob Rossi

Mar 13, 2019

Evgeni Malkin is not one to take for granted having scored 1,000 points in the NHL. However, but he does have more lofty goals on his mind.

"I know what (Sergei) Fedorov did," Malkin said, referring to his childhood idol. "I want to have more than him." Goals? Points? Games? "More goals. More points. Of course. And Fedorov has three Cups, same as me. So I need one more. Maybe two. I don't know. At least one."

Despite his omission from the NHL 100 a couple of years ago, Malkin remains a star with few peers regarding achievements. He is one of only a handful of players to claim the Stanley Cup, and the Art Ross, Calder, Conn Smythe and Hart trophies. He is also one of only five Russians to join the Millennium Club among scorers.

Those who know Malkin best shared their memorable stories from his run to 1,000 points.

Geno pulls rank

Sidney Crosby thought he knew "the rules." He was wrong. And even though Malkin spoke few words of English during his earliest days with the Penguins, he knew enough to pull rank on the other young superstar center in Pittsburgh.

Prior to Malkin's first regular-season game at the old Civic Arena in 2006, he and Crosby instinctively remained behind as Penguins teammates took to the ice for the opening period. As it came down to Malkin and

Crosby, each player looked at each other wondering which one should go next.

"And we couldn't really say it, right?" Crosby said, smiling. "And I'm, like, 'Geno, you can go.' I mean, like, 'You. Can. Go.' And he's, like, 'Oh no, you go.' You know? And that's, like, the most he would hear at that point."

Again, Crosby insisted that Malkin be the penultimate Penguin to take the ice. Malkin held firm.

Crosby suggested they play Rock, Paper, Scissors to break the stalemate.

"And then I'm, like, 'Wait a second, he's not going to know what Rock, Paper, Scissors are,'" Crosby said.

Crosby next tried cutting to the chase. He explained that Malkin should go next so that Crosby could go last. Again, Malkin held firm.

"He goes, 'No, three years (in) Super League,'" Crosby said. "I go, 'This is the NHL, I went last year.' He goes, 'Super League (is) best league in the world.' And I'm, like, 'What?!'"

"What he just said was more than I heard him say up to that point."

And at that point, Crosby experienced Malkin's preference to make a point in a roundabout way.

"He was basically trying to say, 'Hey, I'm older, you're younger — I'm going (last).' But he couldn't say that in English. So I said, 'OK.' And so I ended up going second, and that's how it goes.

"That's the story of why Geno goes last, you know? To this day, we still go in that order."

Geno gets a crush

Max Talbot had no idea how he would handle rooming with Malkin on the road during the 2007-08 season. Between them, they spoke three languages but didn't have one in common.

After the first couple of road trips, Talbot realized that he and Malkin did have something in common: the "Transformers" movies. During his second NHL season, Malkin became obsessed with the original "Transformers" film after Talbot purchased it on their hotel room's television the night before a game.

"Oh, Geno watched it, like, every night," Talbot said. "I mean, it's not a great movie, you know? You can see it once or twice. But Geno ... he always wanted to watch that 'Transformers' movie. You could say it got a little bit annoying."

One night, Talbot attempted to coax Malkin into going out for dinner. Malkin declined. He invited Talbot to order room service and join him for a viewing of his favorite movie. It became the last straw.

"I said, 'Geno, why do you always watch that movie?'" Talbot said. "He said, 'Look (at) girl, learn English.' And, honest to God, I probably laughed for the next five minutes.

"He had a crush on that actress (Megan Fox). He watched the movie because she was in it, right? And I guess (Sergei) Gonchar had told Geno to learn English by watching the same movie over and over. So, Geno watched that 'Transformers' movie because he liked that girl."

A few weeks later, during his first group interview with Pittsburgh media, the ice was broken when Malkin recognized the word "Transformers" during a question I asked. The next day, when reading my story to Malkin, Gonchar did Talbot a favor.

"Gonchar said to Geno, 'You know, there is a second movie,'" Talbot said. "And all I could think was 'Why didn't I think of that?' At least it wasn't the same movie the rest of the year."

Geno learns to lie



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Technically, these next anecdotes are not from Malkin's days with the Penguins. However, they were provided by his parents Vladimir and Natalia, who almost as beloved in Pittsburgh as their son.

As a 4-year-old in his native Magnitogorsk, Malkin and his father played 1-on-1 hockey outside the apartment complex where the family lived. Evgeni was behind the net one day when Vladimir shot a puck that deflected and hit Evgeni in the eye.

"I said to him, 'What do we do? Your mom will surely be upset,'" Vladimir said. "He said, 'Let's not tell mom, she won't let us play anymore.'"

Later that night, during supper, Natalia never asked her youngest son or his father about a mark near Evgeni's eye. She did not say a word about anything during dinner.

"You could tell she knew," Vladimir said. "We never have talked about it."

About seven years after that incident, Evgeni was again injured — this time during an off-ice training session. He landed wrong while jumping. His leg was broken, and Evgeni was forced into a cast and to use crutches.

"This was before a tournament," Natalia said. "We let him go with his teammates, but insisted, of course, that he could not play."

Natalia and Vladimir were unaware that Evgeni's coach had seen him playing tennis — the sport was a favorite pastime for Evgeni and elder brother, Denis — while on the crutches. The coach was convinced Evgeni could still help their team win the tournament even though Evgeni could not walk.

At the rink, Evgeni's teammates helped him cut the cast off his leg with a rusty saw and then cram his foot into a skate boot. Evgeni returned home without a cast, still using crutches and also carrying a trophy awarded to the tournament MVP.

"I was not happy with him; but, yes, I was happy for him," Natalia said. "It was never easy to keep him from hockey. I blame his father."

Geno sees his future

The day before Game 7 of the 2009 Stanley Cup final — so, the day before the biggest game of his life — Malkin walked into the players' lounge at Civic Arena and spotted me sitting against a doorway's wall. During a 20-minute conversation, he discussed the many differences from the previous postseason, which ended with the Penguins watching the Detroit Red Wings skate with the Cup in Pittsburgh.

Malkin, who played injured during that 2008 Cup final, was healthy this time around. He had the postseason lead in scoring to prove it. But he wanted more than the Conn Smythe Trophy he would ultimately claim.

He pointed to a picture on the wall that showed Mario Lemieux and Jaromir Jagr each holding up the Stanley Cup from the Penguins' championship win in 1992.

"Me and Sid," Malkin said. "We get our picture. It's time."

On the page of my notebook, I scribbled Malkin's words and marked the time he said them into my digital recorder. I asked if I could write that part in my story advancing Game 7 at Detroit.

"Yes, you write (it), Rossi," Malkin said. "Because we (will) win."

The Penguins won the 2009 final. The Red Wings watched them take laps with the Cup on Joe Louis Arena's ice. It was Malkin's first team title at any level as a professional.

He needed another couple of Cup wins by the Penguins to finally get that picture with Crosby, though.

It was taken after the Penguins finished off the Predators at Nashville in Game 6 of the 2017 final. As he had in 2009, Malkin was the top scorer in the 2017 postseason. On the ice, he and Crosby recreated the Lemieux-Jagr pose from 1992.

That picture hangs in Malkin's condominium on Fisher Island in Florida.

Geno gives props

Gonchar had been gone from Pittsburgh for a couple of seasons when Malkin headed to Las Vegas for the NHL awards show in June 2012. Though their bond had strengthened in Gonchar's absence, Malkin's big night was not on Gonchar's mind the evening of the broadcast.

"We were just sitting down at the table for dinner, and I turned on the TV with (eldest daughter) Natalie to watch cartoons," Gonchar said. "I start getting all these text messages: 'Great job.' 'Such wonderful things for Evgeni to say.' And I didn't get it — like, 'What are they talking about?'"

Gonchar and his family had not planned to watch the televised broadcast of the NHL awards show. "I knew he would win," Gonchar said. "I knew he would tell me about it."

Malkin had already given one acceptance speech at the ceremony, so he was somewhat unprepared when taking the stage to accept the Hart Trophy. And in a callback to his first couple of seasons with the Penguins, when Malkin lived with the Gonchar family, he turned his MVP moment into a tribute to his best friend.

Thankfully, that best friend's daughter showed Gonchar a video replay of the speech — after the cartoons, though.

"You know, I wanted to talk to him right away — after those text messages," Gonchar said. "I called and left him a message. He never called me back."

Instead, Malkin showed up the next afternoon at Gonchar's house. He had a miniature Hart Trophy with him. And a fishing rod.

"He spent, like, the next 10 days with us," Gonchar said. "It was a lot of time fishing and swimming. It was not different from any other time he was with us."

Well, it was different one afternoon. Gonchar asked Malkin about the dedication.

"He said, 'Why talk, just watch (the) video,'" Gonchar said, laughing.

"But Evgeni was saying that he had to give a speech if he won and how he thinks everything's been said when he won the other awards. He was telling me he just felt like he wanted to say something else. But he did not really prepare another speech. He wasn't thinking. He was feeling emotions. It just came out."

And that is as far as Gonchar allowed Malkin to go with the conversation about the Hart Trophy dedication.

"He was getting very emotional," Gonchar said. "I was emotional, too. So we started talking about something else."

"We're still Russian, I guess."

Geno finds a friend

One afternoon in August 2012, Evgeni and I walked through the Kremlin's grounds with a photographer. The idea was to get some photographs of Malkin walking near historic sites that were a quick hop from his Moscow apartment. We would consider these for photos for the cover of his authorized biography.

During those couple of hours, Malkin started feeling his sweet tooth and stopped by a street vendor's ice cream cart. A boy approached. Malkin offered to buy him a cone. The boy accepted.

As Malkin and the boy chatted, a woman hurried to the reigning MVP of the NHL. She appeared to scold the boy, then Malkin. In an attempt to calm her — or at least explain himself — Malkin motioned as though he would pose for a ceremonial faceoff. He then mimicked shooting a puck with an imaginary stick. As he did this, the boy pointed and repeatedly shouted "Malkin!" but the woman remained defiant.



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She grabbed the boy's ice cream cone and handed it to Malkin. She left with the child's hand in hers.

Malkin smiled as he rejoined our group. I asked what had happened. He explained that the woman did not want to spoil her son's dinner. I suggested he track them down and explain who he was.

"I did," Malkin said. "I say, 'I'm Evgeni Malkin!' She (did) not care. Maybe if I was Sid."

Malkin waited a beat. His timing revealing the comedian he could have become had he not been born to do this hockey job.

"Sid (does) not eat ice cream," Malkin said. "It's why he's (the) best player."

The Athletic LOADED: 03.14.2019

1135910 Pittsburgh Penguins

Suddenly, Mike Sullivan has the Penguins sniffing a division title

By Josh Yohe

Mar 13, 2019

Sometimes the players deserve the credit, and there was no shortage of star power on display in the Penguins' 5-3 victory against the Washington Capitals on Tuesday at PPG Paints Arena.

The guy standing behind the bench is a star, too.

Mike Sullivan is pushing all the right buttons and, while the Penguins are still only four points from being out of the playoff picture in the outrageously competitive Eastern Conference, they've also moved within four points of the Capitals for first place in the Metropolitan Division.

Sullivan's decisions — and the work of his staff during the injury-ravaged past few weeks — simply can't be ignored.

Perhaps the season's turning point came 10 days ago on a flight from Buffalo to Montreal. The Penguins had just lost in overtime and were out of the playoff picture. Sullivan's initial plan was to start Casey DeSmith in Buffalo. For all of Matt Murray's undeniable success, he has been injury-prone, and the coaching staff is often hesitant to play him in consecutive games.

Sullivan played him anyway, and the results have been magnificent. Murray, despite allowing a couple of shaky goals on Tuesday, still stopped 38 of 41 shots and is playing his best goal of the season. It's pretty clear that Sullivan's decision to play Murray in Montreal injected some much-needed confidence into the 24-year-old goaltender.

There have been other decisions that deserve praise, one of which occurred in the second period on Tuesday. Sullivan opted to use two power-play units with two defensemen each during this game, splitting Sidney Crosby from Phil Kessel and Evgeni Malkin. The Penguins lead the league in short-handed goals against. Kessel and Malkin have been the biggest culprits by a mile, and Sullivan essentially felt like he had no choice but to separate them.

Then he changed his mind. The Penguins were down 2-0, but goals from Jake Guentzel and Crosby sent the building into a frenzy. Then Malkin drew a penalty.

Sensing the momentum, Sullivan went with the big guys together.

"Obviously those guys are some of the best talents in the world," Justin Schultz said. "To have them all on the power play makes my job pretty easy. Those guys did a great job."

The top power-play unit, reunited at a crucial moment, came through with a characteristically pretty goal. Kessel sent a perfect pass from behind the net to Crosby, who made no mistake, burying a shot over Braden Holtby's right shoulder.

Sullivan provided some eloquent reasoning for his decision.

"I keep going back to them because I believe in them," he said. "In my time here, they've been one of the best power plays, if not the best power play, in the league. We've had our ups and downs this year. They've always shown the ability to score. Sometimes, when we split them up, it's a short-term decision. But within the big picture, the coaching staff has in the back of their mind, that at some point, they're going to go back together because we just believe they're that good when they're on the ice together."

The coaching staff has been dealing with many significant challenges.

- Kris Letang remains out with a neck injury though he appears to be getting close to returning.
- Olli Maatta has been out for about a month with a shoulder injury.
- Bryan Rust, among the Penguins' most consistent performers since December, remains out with a lower-body injury.
- Zach Aston-Reese missed Tuesday's game with a hip pointer.
- Malkin and Kessel have been erratic for months, and they aren't players who are easily coached.
- The Penguins showcased a number of players who haven't had much time with Sullivan and his staff against the Capitals, including the likes of Jared McCann, Nick Bjugstad, Erik Gudbranson, Marcus Pettersson, Teddy Blueger, Joseph Blandisi and Zach Trotman.

These all represent significant challenges for a coaching staff. Through it all, the Penguins are playing their best hockey of the season, sporting a most impressive 6-1-1 record with Letang out of the lineup, turning a potentially unstable situation into a possible run at the division title.

"We're aware that we have a chance to catch Washington," Pettersson said. "It's not the biggest goal, but it is a goal. And I'm sure it would give us some confidence going into the playoffs."

Sullivan knows all about the biggest goal. He's won it twice. The Penguins are 9-1 in his 10 postseason series as their head coach.

This win against the Capitals brought back memories of the 2016 team, which steamrolled the Capitals late in the regular season on a couple of occasions. Down 2-0, the Penguins erupted for five of the game's final six goals.

They played with a certain pace and conviction that hasn't always been evident this season. There is a sense that, when the Penguins listen to Sullivan, they remain among the NHL's very elite.

Perhaps they should start listening more. A playoff berth at this point feels like a given, even if the standings look perilous. Now, a division title — and perhaps more — suddenly appears possible. This has been a trying, difficult season for Sullivan, who has been plenty frustrated with his team at times. Sullivan, though, never seems to give up on this team, always have the perfect sense of what direction is required.

Injuries and all, here they come. While the Capitals still face two games in Tampa Bay and a relatively difficult schedule — the Islanders are in between the Penguins and Capitals in the standings — the Penguins will have it much easier during the final couple of weeks of the season. They play the Red Wings and Rangers twice each late in the season, and neither team will be alive for postseason play when they meet.



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The Penguins sometimes play down to their competition, but won't if Sullivan's message is accepted. He isn't wrong very often.

We knew this was a big opportunity for us to get within striking distance of these guys," Schultz said. "Now we have (a) chance."

Ten postgame observations

Penguins center Sidney Crosby (left) celebrates with center Evgeni Malkin after scoring a goal against the Capitals during the second period of Tuesday's game at PPG Paints Arena. (Charles LeClaire/USA Today)

- Malkin picked up his second assist of the evening on Kessel's goal in the third period, giving him 1,000 career points.

Following the game, Sullivan launched a very passionate endorsement of Malkin's greatness, explaining that the 32-year-old center has been greatly under-appreciated around the NHL during his career. I don't disagree. When this generation is recalled decades from now, it will be the generation of "Sid and Ovi." That's just the way it will be. Crosby's accomplishments are unparalleled, and Ovechkin has a charisma that's just a little different than anyone else's. That said, there is only one Malkin, and he is an all-time great, most certainly one of the 100 greatest players in NHL history and, in my view, easily one of the 50 best players in NHL history. And like I've said many times, Malkin isn't at his best as often as Crosby or Ovechkin, but when he is, there isn't a better player in the NHL. It's been a difficult season for Malkin, given his gaudy standards, but he's showing flashes of his typical form. That his parents are in town won't hurt his cause.

- Ovechkin hit the 1,200-point mark with an assist on John Carlson's goal in the third period, an accomplishment that also deserves recognition.

In general, the Penguins did a fairly good job against Ovechkin, especially in the final two periods. Still, it was fitting that Malkin and Ovechkin, two of the greatest players of all time — and two of the greatest Russian players of all time, obviously — reached such significant milestones on the same evening. One thing I appreciate about Ovechkin, Malkin and Crosby is that, with few exceptions, they always seem to rise to the occasion in this particular rivalry.

- Speaking of Ovechkin, Schultz did some terrific work against him all evening. The Penguins rely very heavily on Letang in this matchup because Letang and Ovechkin play on the same side of the ice. While Ovechkin has obviously had his moments against the Penguins, Letang does well against him in 5-on-5 situations because, frankly, Letang is a superior skater. Arriving in Pittsburgh three years ago with the reputation of being a horrible defensive player, Schultz has continually gotten better in that regard and enjoyed some fine moments in this game. Schultz robbed Carlson of a goal in the first period by blocking his shot, which was headed toward an empty cage.

Enough can't be said of the job he has done with Letang out of the lineup. Schultz recorded two assists and is playing well over 20 minutes per night on a regular basis after missing four months this season. Not bad. And his assist on Crosby's goal was an absolute thing of beauty, as a floated a pass into the air with precision, connecting with Crosby at the perfect moment.

- Jared McCann ... I'm not sure what else to add. He has now scored nine goals in 20 games with the Penguins and, while four of them were empty-netters, those count too. Also, it's a pretty good indication that a coach trusts a player when he's on the ice for that many empty-net opportunities. He made the game's most important play in the second period. With the Penguins trailing 2-0 and looking pretty lethargic, McCann swooped from behind and picked Evgeny Kuznetsov's pocket before setting up Guentzel for his 35th goal of the season.

McCann, who is only 22, appears to be the real deal.

- I appreciate what Nikita Kucherov is doing in Tampa. Connor McDavid is a real, live superstar. Patrick Kane is truly great. Ovechkin is still Ovechkin. But there is not a better hockey player in the world than Crosby. There just isn't. He was simply dominant all game, scoring after

taking the brilliant feed from Schultz to even the game and send the PPG Paints Arena crowd into a frenzy. Then he scored again on the power play. He is spectacular on almost every evening right now.

- Carl Hagelin received quite the ovation following his tribute video early in the first period. It should also be noted that Hagelin was one of the more popular teammates in which I've covered. Players don't get angry about trades very often, as they realize it's part of the business. Many of the Penguins were legitimately angry when Jim Rutherford traded Hagelin to Los Angeles in November. He was a highly respected man in that locker room and has a history of playing well in the playoffs. I believe his addition was a wise one by the Capitals.

- An interesting game for Murray. I didn't like the first goal he allowed, even though Jakub Vrana did unleash a shot that was on edge with plenty of velocity.

Murray still had a good look and should have stopped it. The second Vrana goal, in the second period, was much worse.

Murray has endured a rough habit of allowing bad goals this season, and that was a bad one. From that point on, however, he was lights out. If you stop 38 of 41 shots against the Capitals, it's a job well done. Washington made a surge in the third period when the Penguins' only led by a goal, and Murray was at his best during that stretch.

- Erik Gudbranson continues to excel with the Penguins. I thought he was really, really sound against the Capitals and, yes, he had his eyes on Tom Wilson all night. Gudbranson appeared to challenge him to an altercation on a couple of occasions in the first period and, later, they did engage in something of a wrestling match.

Early in the first period, Gudbranson hammered Wilson with a big hit. I asked him if he was targeting Wilson in any way. "He just happened to be there," Gudbranson said. "If it was anybody else, I would have done the exact same thing." But it was Wilson, so that was fun, right? "Maybe for you guys," Gudbranson continued. "And for the people of Pittsburgh, for sure." It's early in Gudbranson's time in Pittsburgh and the sample size is small, but he's been everything the Penguins were hoping for and more.

- What a great crowd at PPG Paints Arena, the best crowd of the season. It was definitely a playoff atmosphere. Wilson's presence helped. So did Ovechkin's. Lots of Capitals fans, too. But what really helps is that this is an educated hockey crowd that realizes the Penguins are starting to get hot. It made for a great atmosphere.

- I'd be pretty surprised if these teams don't meet in the playoffs for a fourth consecutive season. Anything can happen, of course. They could meet in the first round, in fact. That's totally in play. I just don't know that I see the Islanders, Blue Jackets or Hurricanes beating these teams in a playoff series. It's possible, sure. But I wouldn't bet on it. They feel destined to meet one more time. I don't think hockey fans anywhere would complain.

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The Athletic / Down Goes Brown: I haven't watched a shootout in two years and I highly recommend it

By Sean McIndoe Mar 13, 2019 218

I'd like to go on the record as being against league-mandated team-wide extinction. But allowing for a little bit of hyperbole to make his point, I'm



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with Tortorella on the broader issue. I'm not a shootout guy. I wouldn't mind if the league got rid of it altogether, or at least figured out a way to drastically reduce how often they occur. Tyler Dellow has been on the case and he makes a convincing argument that expanding overtime by even a few more minutes would mean far fewer shootouts. Sounds good. Let's make that happen.

But in the meantime, I've come up with a slightly more straightforward way to reduce the number of shootouts I'm subjected to: I just stopped watching them. Literally. I haven't sat through an NHL shootout in almost two years.

Yes, I know. Great job, Einstein, figuring out that you can avoid something by, uh, avoiding it. And I realize that this doesn't exactly qualify as some sort of scandalous confession. But it's a bit of a strange thing to say given that, you know, my entire job is to watch hockey.

But that's the thing: I like hockey. I've spent huge chunks of my life watching hockey. It's pretty much my favorite thing to do short of making my children smile and it's possible that I only said that last part because my wife might be reading. Hockey is great.

But here's the thing, shootouts are only kind of hockey. They're closer to being hockey than they are to being, say, backgammon or competitive Rubik's cubing. But only barely. And when the game you're watching finishes up overtime without a winner, there's a good chance that there's still real hockey being played on some other channel. Why wouldn't you want to watch that instead?

A couple of years ago, that's what I started doing. The shootout starts, I reach for the remote and find another game.

You know what? It's way better this way. I highly recommend it.

I can't remember the last shootout that I sat through, although I'd assume it came late in the 2016-17 season. But when opening night arrived in 2017, I made an impulse decision to bail on any shootouts and go looking for a game where they were still playing actual hockey instead.

NEW POLICY FOR BUSY NHL NIGHTS: WATCH THE CRAP OUT OF 3-ON-3. FIND ANOTHER GAME WHEN SHOOTOUT STARTS. CAN CATCH UP ON COIN-FLIPPING LATER.

— DOWN GOES BROWN (@DOWNGOESBROWN) OCTOBER 6, 2017

At first, switching away from a game right before it ended seemed odd, like walking out of a movie right at the big finale. But it turns out that it doesn't feel that way. I'd already seen the big climax – two teams had played real hockey for 65 minutes without finding a winner and now they were going to flip a glorified coin to award an extra point. Skipping the shootout turned out to be more like walking out of the movie before the long, boring credits sequence that you don't really need to see anyway.

Back then, I figured my no-shootout experiment would last a week before I'd go back to watching hockey the way everyone else did. But a week turned into a month, which turned into a year and now two. And I can tell you: I don't miss those things at all. There's a good chance you wouldn't either.

It turns out that you don't actually miss all that much when you decide to just stop watching shootouts. You still find out who got the extra point within minutes, and somebody on Twitter will almost certainly be live-tweeting every attempt, so you don't miss any important information. In the rare cases where somebody does something creative or there's a spectacular save or a controversy or whatever, you'll see that somewhere too, almost immediately. You're not actually gaining anything by watching, other than a head start of a few seconds and maybe some vague sense of closure. Those things are worth something, I guess. They're just not as much fun as watching actual hockey.

And here's the weird part: I say that as someone who's come to accept that the shootout is probably here to stay. I'm old school, and I never had a problem with ties. But I get that many fans don't agree and that the NHL felt like it was an unsatisfying way to end a game. If Gary Bettman retired tomorrow and I was named as commissioner, we'd switch over to

playing ten minutes of 3-on-3 overtime, accept a small number of games ending in ties and be done with shootouts forever. But until that happens, we've got a league that feels strongly that they don't want any ties at all. If that's your stance, and you know that you can't just play endless overtime in the regular season, then your only other option is a shootout.

I can live with that. I'm not here to rail against the existence of the shootout, if only because I know that ship has sailed. The NHL is going to be a league with shootouts, and that's OK. I just don't feel like watching them.

So I stopped. Admittedly, there's been some luck involved. I have the dual advantage of having access to the league's streaming package and living in a country where there's usually a game on another channel. My favorite team is the Maple Leafs and they haven't had a single shootout so far this year. I haven't found myself faced with a shootout where the two points were absolutely crucial to a playoff race; if something like last season's Blues/Avalanche finale had gone to the shootout, I'd have had no choice. And I also haven't had a game I was actually attending go to a shootout, because I'm obviously not going to drag my kids home or cover my eyes in the press box just to make a point.

Eventually, I'll end up watching one again. Knowing how my luck works, now that I've written about this for the first time, it will probably happen within days. But in the meantime, bring on the real hockey.

And sure, I can hear the argument that some of you are making at your screens: "But 3-on-3 overtime isn't real hockey either!" And that's at least a little bit true. The endless odd-man rushes and back-and-forth action doesn't look much like your typical 5-on-5 game. It's a different rhythm, and yes, even a little gimmicky. Maybe a lot.

It's also all sorts of fun. At its best, when two teams are going end-to-end at top speed and trading chances and ignoring their stodgy defensive-minded coaches tearing their hair out on the bench, overtime can pack as much entertainment into five minutes as some 60-minute regulations. There's no way I'm turning that off. I'm here for the fun and 3-on-3 overtime is almost always crazy fun.

Shootouts were fun too, once. For the first few years, there was a sense of novelty and a chance that you'd get something you'd never seen before. The first time you saw a shootout stretch into a dozen rounds, or watched a guy do that big swooping slow-motion entry, or laughed at somebody fanning on a shot, it was its own sort of fun. But after over a decade of these things, we've pretty much seen it all. We get it. At this point, they're almost all the same.

Now, maybe you disagree. I'm told that there are fans out there that enjoy shootouts. And if you're one of them, that's cool. As I said, this isn't meant to be some sprawling anti-shootout manifesto. Hockey fans should watch what they like to watch and if you're still enjoying shootouts after all these years then more power to you.

But if you're like me and you're kind of done with the shootout, you can just stop watching. It really is that simple. Lots of fans do it already and you can too. You won't regret it, you almost certainly won't miss anything cool and you'll get to watch more actual hockey.

That's about as good as it's going to get. At least until Dellow and Tortorella are done killing everyone.

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1135958 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Loss to Blackhawks highlights just how fragile Leafs can be

Chris Johnston | @reporterchris March 13, 2019, 9:51 PM



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TORONTO — The line between horrible and overpowering may be thinner than we thought.

The Toronto Maple Leafs hit both ends of the spectrum in what was supposed to be a bounce-back effort against the Chicago Blackhawks — a game that underlined just how fragile one of the NHL's best teams can be.

"That first period was just unacceptable," said Auston Matthews, who has emerged as a strong voice amid some March struggles. "It's pretty much playoff hockey now so we've got to step up our game, especially to start games in general. That's two in a row for us that we haven't got off to a good start and it's cost us big time and we've had to crawl our way back."

On some level, Monday's 6-2 loss to Tampa was understandable, given the Lightning's position atop the NHL standings and Toronto's late return from a West Coast road trip. But Chicago is not Tampa, despite boasting some serious offensive weapons, and the Leafs were given Tuesday off to rest before spending Wednesday morning reviewing defensive zone coverages.

"We talk about it every day," said John Tavares. "So, no question, we have to go out there and execute. It's definitely something that has to be a priority for us."

There could be no other conclusion after getting completely caved in for 20 minutes and falling behind 4-0.

Frederik Andersen played a role in the immolation — his season save percentage has dropped from .924 to .920 after allowing eight goals on the last 33 shots and getting hooked in back-to-back games — but the goaltender's teammates did a lousy job of covering for him, too.

At one point, four of them rushed towards Dylan Sikura in the corner, while Frederik Gauthier failed to get a body or stick on Brandon Saad in the slot. Tavares was caught with no defensive support when he turned the puck over to Patrick Kane at the offensive blue line and couldn't get back to disrupt the ensuing 2-on-1.

It was bad, plain and simple, the kind of period that has to alarm a team carrying weighty expectations and is just four weeks away from the start of the playoffs.

"We turned the puck over a little bit, we didn't play hard enough, we weren't quick enough in our own zone, we didn't skate good enough or compete at a high enough level," said coach Mike Babcock, perhaps keeping the list of offences even shorter than he could have.

The Leafs were not at full strength — seeing Zach Hyman join the wounded list because of illness, stuck in the press box alongside Kasperii Kapanen (concussion), Jake Gardiner (back) and Travis Dermott (shoulder) — but perfect isn't walking through the door at Scotiabank Arena any time soon.

That's simply not how things go in this sport, especially once the playoffs start to take their toll.

Toronto is going to have to get by with a third defensive pairing of Martin Marincin and Igor Ozhiganov (or Justin Holl) for the foreseeable future. It needs the forwards to play with structure and not be so cavalier in the neutral zone.

Even a team with this much skill can't usually skill its way through tight games that tend to feature only a small handful of power plays.

"We've got guys that can play, we've got four lines," said Matthews. "Everybody's got to show up and everybody's got to do their job. No excuses."

"Everything kind of feeds off one another," said Tavares, in explaining the defensive shortcomings. "When one part of the chain isn't working it kind of affects everything else. When we're doing things right and we're executing — we're in good spots and we're not turning pucks over — that

allows us to get above people in the neutral zone and not let other teams get easy entries, easy forechecks."

The Leafs have to be discouraged not just with the back-to-back losses following a 2-0-1 road trip, but also that both came immediately after Boston dropped a game. The Bruins had points in 19 straight before that and continue to hold a four-point lead for home ice in their eventual first-round series.

There was only so much hope that could be found in the fact Toronto managed to roar back with four goals in a span of 20:02 against Chicago, nearly tying the game in the final minute while Garret Sparks was pulled for an extra attacker.

If anything, the ferocious finish only served as a reminder of what could have been had they started with any real will or structure.

"We were just on them, on top of them all third, getting the puck back, taking care of it, not turning it over and just playing the game that we can play," said Matthews. "We were fast and we were above 'em, checking the puck back, playing in their end below the dots and creating havoc."

"That's the way we need to start the game."

But that didn't happen.

Again.

"Two games starting like that, I think that's enough for this group," said Matthews. "I think we've got to turn the page and make sure this doesn't happen again."

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1135959 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / John Tavares calls for net-off challenge after desperate finish

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjukebox March 14, 2019, 12:17 AM

TORONTO — The goalie's stick was lost, the puck went in, but the net was off.

Had the cage stayed in place and the referee not blown the play dead with 19.8 seconds remaining in the Toronto Maple Leafs' wild near-comeback against the Chicago Blackhawks Wednesday, John Tavares might just have registered the first 40-goal campaign of his career.

And a roof that had ricocheted boos from the fed-up locals would have blown clear off.

Heck, it's not every day you see a team sleep in through the first 35 minutes of a hockey game, dig itself a 5-0 hole, then explode with vengeance and tie the thing up.

But had under-siege Chicago backup Collin Delia not pushed his — pre-loosened? — net off its moorings after he'd already lost his stick during the Leafs' desperate 6-on-5 attack, Tavares could well have completed the turnaround.

"We probably should have tied it with the amount of shots, amount of chances we had," Tavares said, post-loss.

"I didn't see what happened there with the net coming off and whatnot but, you know, if that's on purpose by them, especially in the last couple minutes in big situations, I would love to see that being a challenge at some point.



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"You got that kind of pressure, that's kind of a free out if that's what happened."

Here's what happened:

What the above highlight doesn't catch is Maple Leafs forward Trevor Moore tumbling into the net in a tussle for position earlier in the sequence.

Perhaps Moore loosened Delia's right post enough that the goalie was able to nudge it off with much of a push-off. There's certainly an argument.

Perhaps if you're not cheatin', you're not tryin'. And a stick-less goalie relieving pressure by any means possible and giving his windblown defence a breather as his club claws for a wild-card berth? Well, that's a savvy move for an undrafted kid with all of 18 NHL appearances.

"The net was already off when I slid into it. That's why it came off so easily. I don't know how it got that way," Delia said.

After the whistle, the officials deliberated. Morgan Rielly argued. Coach Jeremy Colliton wasn't worried a delay-of-game penalty was coming.

"Not really, no. I didn't see anything where they would call one," Colliton said.

The net was dislodged at the 24-second mark. The clock was reset with 19.8 seconds left.

In an every-millisecond-matters full-court press, Delia hung on to win, weathering a third-period storm of 29(!) shots, 50 attempts, three goals allowed, and a sudden tidal wave of hope.

"That's a playoff game right there," said Delia, who was forced into the game when starter Corey Crawford left ill after two periods, entrusting the backup with a 5-1 lead.

"It felt like an eternity, y'know? Those final seconds feel like half an hour, especially with the chances they had in front of the net, and then they go to deliberate about whatever they saw in front of the net. It just took a lot longer than 19 seconds.

"I was sweating pretty heavily after the game. After skating heavily this morning, it definitely felt like a full game."

Sportsnet NOW gives you access to over 500 NHL games this season, blackout-free, including Hockey Night in Canada, Rogers Hometown Hockey, Scotiabank Wednesday Night Hockey, the entire 2019 Stanley Cup Playoffs and more.

This, when the Maple Leafs are hungry and swarming and Auston Matthews' face looks like Hulk Hogan's right before he tears his tanktop off, is how they can make their opponents quake.

"It felt like they were coming and coming, and we couldn't stop them in the neutral zone," said Marcus Kruger. "They had a lot of possession down low and a lot of speed."

The Leafs' four (almost five) unanswered goals in a 20-minute frenzy were all driven by the big guns: Matthews, Tavares, Rielly, Mitch Marner, and William Nylander.

It's a crystallization of what makes the group simultaneously so infuriating and so exhilarating to a fanbase driven to a state of manic-depression, that can boo their local heroes off the ice and give them a standing ovation over the course of the same night.

We're certainly not saying the Maple Leafs were robbed of a win Wednesday because a net popped off, or that narrowing the gap on the scoreboard is some form of moral victory.

They weren't. It isn't.

Chicago was better. Toronto's defence had a worse day than Facebook, and Leafs coach Mike Babcock pulled a suddenly leaky Frederik Andersen for the second consecutive outing.

We are saying that these flashes of desperation, these periods of focused pressure, this crash-the-net-and-stuff-it-in-at-all-costs mentality show us what these Maple Leafs can be when they choose to engage fully.

And what they better do for more than just 20 minutes a night starting exactly four weeks from today so they don't need a challenge or a controversial bounce to squeak by.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' win over Rangers quickly dimmed by grim post-game news

Iain MacIntyre | @imacSportsnet March 14, 2019, 2:05 AM

VANCOUVER – The Vancouver Canucks' game began Wednesday with people talking about \$36-million man Loui Eriksson getting scratched from the lineup, and when it was over the discussion was about Antoine Roussel and Quinn Hughes being injured.

And Hughes hasn't even played a National Hockey League game!

Yes, once again, these are the Canucks.

A 4-1 win over the New York Rangers – just Vancouver's second regulation victory in 18 games – was quickly dimmed by post-game news from Canucks coach Travis Green that Roussel suffered a season-ending knee injury during the incident-filled second period, and that uber-prospect Hughes arrived from the University of Michigan with a foot injured more seriously than thought.

"He's got a pretty good bone bruise, so he's in a walking boot for a week and then we'll re-evaluate him next week," Green told reporters of Hughes, the 19-year-old dynamo on defence who signed with the Canucks after the end of his college season on the weekend.

Hughes blocked a shot in Friday's playoff loss against the University of Minnesota, then played the next night in Michigan's elimination game.

Asked if Wednesday's MRI revealed conclusively that Hughes has only a bone bruise and not a fracture, which could end his NHL season literally before it begins, Green said: "That's my understanding, yeah. It didn't just happen a day or two ago but I'm not a doctor. It's disappointing for sure. I'd like to have seen him in sooner and he still might play. We'll see how he is next week."

As we know, things can always be worse. The Canucks, whose season has been undermined by two avalanches of injuries that led to long losing skids, looked like they'd also lost Calder Trophy favourite Elias Pettersson Wednesday.

The Canucks rookie was injured in the second period when elbowed in the face by Ranger Chris Kreider, who was assessed a major penalty and game misconduct at 4:23. Pettersson, who missed six games with a concussion in October after being slammed to the ice by Florida defenceman Mike Matheson, went directly to the medical room under the NHL's concussion protocol.

But the 20-year-old returned to the bench late in the second period. By then, Roussel had also left the game and, it turned out, the season.

A controversial free-agent acquisition when the Canucks signed him to a four-year, \$12-million contract on July 1, Roussel delivered on expectations and became one of Green's most dependable players.



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The 29-year-old had a career-best 31 points in 65 games when he was hammered by Ranger Brendan Lemieux – yes, Claude’s son – at 9:45 of the second period. The major and game misconduct Lemieux was assessed for a check to the head on Roussel was a lot more debatable than Kreider’s penalty.

But it was Roussel’s knee that buckled under him on the hit in front of the Rangers’ net.

“He loves to win and competes hard,” Green said. “His engine runs hot all the time. Coaches like players whose compete level is high every day. Even in practice, he works and works. I think young guys should really look at that because, man, when you watch the good hockey teams, they play that way. Even if they’re skilled, they’re working and they’re competing and they’re playing to win all the time. Rouse does that.”

So does Pettersson, who missed the 10 minutes of power-play time the Canucks used to help build a 3-0 lead after a scoreless first period between two non-playoff teams that felt like a pre-season game.

“I saw (Kreider) was coming, so I jumped away and he lifted, I don’t know, his arm or elbow,” Pettersson said. “Intentional? I don’t know, but I don’t think he’s a dirty player. I started bleeding from my nose. . . but my head was feeling fine all the time. But of course, there’s protocol that you have to do if they suspect it’s a concussion.”

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Having missed Pettersson with his body on the forecheck, Kreider spun and threw his right elbow backwards, striking the Canuck on the nose.

Pettersson may not think Kreider’s a dirty player, but his flying elbow was no more “accidental” than the his notorious crease cannonball that injured Montreal Canadiens goalie Carey Price in the playoffs four years ago.

“Two hits to the head on two of our key guys,” Vancouver defenceman Chris Tanev said after his first game since missing 11 with a sprained ankle. “We got one goal on the power play. It would have been nice to get two or three more, but overall it was a good win.

“When Petey came by the bench, he seemed fine. Just hit him in the nose and riled him up a little bit. The Rouse one looked a little more scary.”

With Pettersson out and Roussel still playing, the long-dormant Canucks power play actually made it 1-0 at 6:07 of the middle period when some rare, quick puck movement left Brock Boeser with an open shot that he buried over Rangers goalie Henrik Lundqvist’s catching glove.

Fourth-liner Tyler Motte then scored twice in 11 seconds for Vancouver, converting Alex Edler’s breakaway stretch pass at 9:34 before blasting a slapshot past Lundqvist on the next shift after Lemieux had dropped the hammer on Roussel.

Ranger Pavel Buchnevich and Canuck Jake Virtanen, in an empty net, traded third-period goals.

With Roussel’s injury, at least there is a path back to the lineup for Eriksson, who has been paid about \$22 million of his front-loaded contract but given the Canucks just 31 goals in 184 games over nearly three seasons. Until Wednesday, however, he had not been a healthy scratch in Vancouver.

“We’ve got a lot of guys playing for contracts and for jobs next year,” Motte said. “Everyone wants to play in this league as long as they can, and to continue to work hard as a group is the best way to find that success individually.”

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Sportsnet.ca / Who has the toughest schedule heading into the NHL season’s home stretch?

Sonny Sachdeva | @sachdevasonny March 13, 2019, 8:55 PM

We’re down to the final month before the 2018-19 regular season gives way to the real one. The final few weeks before we break out the magnifying glasses and inspect every pass, snipe, check and skirmish that flashes across our screen.

For some clubs, this final slate of games is simply an opportunity to fine-tune, the larger goal being to simply stay healthy and pick up some momentum heading into the home stretch. For others, it’s a mad dash, with the post-season pressure already hanging low as borderline clubs fight to secure a spot in the dance.

With a number of teams still in the mix heading into the final handful of tilts, Sportsnet’s statisticians crunched the numbers to tell us who’s set to enjoy the most favourable schedule over the coming weeks, and who’s simply in cruise control.

Let’s dive in. First up, the East, where the Metro looks intent on stuffing in as many of its squads as it can.

The Lightning have run away with the conference and a meeting with a wild-card squad, while the Metro remains in flux, still sorting out where the tightly-packed Capitals, Penguins, Islanders, Hurricanes and Blue Jackets will fall.

Here’s how the conference playoff hopefuls’ schedules break down for the rest of 2018-19:

Eastern Conference

Team	Strength of Schedule	Total Games vs. Playoff Teams	Home
	Away Back-to-Backs		
Washington Capitals	0.612 12	6 6	1
Montreal Canadiens*	0.599 12	6 6	6
Philadelphia Flyers*	0.593 13	6 7	3
Carolina Hurricanes*	0.587 13	8 5	3
Tampa Bay Lightning	0.579 12	4 4	8
Boston Bruins	0.573 12	4 8	1
New York Islanders	0.565 13	5 8	2
Columbus Blue Jackets*	0.561 12	4 4	8
Florida Panthers*	0.558 13	5 8	2
Toronto Maple Leafs	0.546 12	5 7	3
Pittsburgh Penguins	0.532 12	6 6	1

* = in a wild-card spot or on the bubble



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Metro Shuffle

The defending Stanley Cup champs draw the toughest schedule over the final month of the regular season, highlighted by three tests against the high-flying Lightning. There's little worry about that stretch throwing too weighty a wrench into Washington's playoff hopes, but it is closer than most would assume. Only eight points separate the division-leading Capitals from the second wild-card spot, and a tough stretch could lead to some key re-seeding in the East.

The Islanders remain just two points back of the Metro lead, and sitting only four points back of the division title is Pittsburgh — who, incidentally, has the most favourable upcoming schedule of all Eastern playoff hopefuls, and seems to be picking up steam. The race is on to see who finishes in the top two divisional slots and earns home-ice advantage before the likely assignment of lining up against a familiar Metro opponent in Round 1.

On the Bubble

Eastern clubs on the outside looking in aren't set to get any favours from the schedule down the stretch. Montreal finds itself just outside the crop, but level points-wise with Columbus. However, the Canadiens are staring down a tough 12 games that will see them meet strong opponents eight times — particularly their final five tilts of the season, which consists of matchups with Columbus, Winnipeg, Tampa Bay, Washington and Toronto. Piling up as many points as possible before heading into that closing run seems a necessity.

Philadelphia's hill might be the toughest to climb — five points out of a playoff spot ahead of a 13-game stretch that includes 10 against playoff squads, and three back-to-backs. And the first two in that stretch will come without Jakub Voracek. That should help the Hurricanes' chances of sticking in a wild-card spot, despite having a decently difficult workload on their hands, too.

Home-Ice Advantage

The Atlantic side of this equation seems more set in stone, given the Bolts' season-long penchant for rolling through the opposition. Tampa Bay and Boston find themselves in the middle of the pack in terms of the strength of the coming opponents. Both clubs do have to battle through a final slate that'll see them play eight of 12 games on the road. That won't be an issue for the Lightning, who are 24-7-2 outside of Amalie Arena, but it could affect the Bruins, who are 15-12-6 on the road.

A slide from the B's could allow Toronto — four points back — to move up to second in the division, especially with the Maple Leafs on track for one of the less-daunting workloads over the next few weeks. The Maple Leafs' final 12 tilts feature just four playoff-bound teams, though they will have three back-to-backs to contend with.

Considering the Leafs' last two series against Boston have both stretched to seven games — and both resulted in Game 7 losses on the road — securing that home-ice advantage over the coming weeks, positioning a potential Game 7 at Scotiabank Arena, could be a welcome bonus.

A weekly deep dive into the biggest hockey news in the world with hosts Elliott Friedman and Jeff Marek. New episodes every Thursday.

And then we have the West, which is chock-full of powerhouses and still has a genuine conference title on the line.

Two of the Western behemoths look set to cruise to the finish line while two others get battle-tested before the post-season begins. Here's how the schedule breaks down over the rest of the season:

Western Conference

Team	Strength of Schedule Away	Back-to-Backs	Total Games vs. Playoff Teams	Home
Minnesota Wild*	0.581	12	7 5	2
	10			

Nashville Predators	0.558	11	5	6	1
	6				
Winnipeg Jets	0.555	13	6	7	2
	7				
Chicago Blackhawks*	0.549	12	6	6	6
	2 6				
Dallas Stars*	0.542	13	7	6	3
	4				
Edmonton Oilers*	0.542	12	6	6	2
	8				
Vegas Golden Knights	0.541	12	6	6	6
	2 6				
Arizona Coyotes*	0.539	12	6	6	1
	4				
Colorado Avalanche*	0.536	12	7	5	5
	2 6				
San Jose Sharks	0.517	12	8	4	2
	4				
St. Louis Blues	0.517	13	7	6	3
	3				
Calgary Flames	0.501	12	7	5	2
	4				

* = in a wild-card spot or on the bubble

Cruise Control

The Calgary Flames head into the final few weeks with the most favourable schedule of any club in the league, with just four of their final 12 games against playoff squads, and only five coming on the road. After a slide that allowed some doubt to creep into the minds of the Flames faithful after an unexpectedly dominant campaign, a confidence-building finish could be a game-changer for the Flames' hopes of going on a deep post-season run.

Unfortunately, the schedule will do little to affect the Flames' chances of climbing into the conference's No. 1 spot, as the San Jose Sharks — who have just one more point at the moment — find themselves with a similar test over the final 13 games of the year. Considering who's waiting in the Pacific Division's No. 3 spot, the home stretch will be key for Calgary and San Jose.

Vegas has lost just once since acquiring Mark Stone to beef up its forward corps at the trade deadline, and figures to be a tough first-round test. Calgary was the lone club to halt that streak, but it's worth noting they did so against backup netminder Malcolm Subban. A few days earlier, with Marc-Andre Fleury in net, the Flames managed just one goal and fell in a 2-1 loss.

Under Pressure

Separated by just a point in the Central Division, the Winnipeg Jets and Nashville Predators are in a similar situation. As it currently stands, Nashville gets St. Louis and Winnipeg draws a weaker wild-card squad. The prospective schedule figures to put some pressure on that arrangement, though. The Blues have the easiest road to the end of the season among the top Central squads, facing only three playoff-bound teams in their final 13 games.

Nashville and Winnipeg, however, have two of the hardest coming schedules, meaning there's a not-so-unlikely possibility of the Blues jumping them both, which would force the Jets and Predators into the unenviable position of facing one of the conference's toughest opponents in the very first round.

Uphill Climb



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The West's on-the-bubble squads all find themselves in different situations for their final weeks. Minnesota, who sits just one point out, has a gargantuan task ahead — 10 of its final 12 games come against playoff teams, mostly on the road, with a couple back-to-backs thrown in. The Wild meet Winnipeg and Boston in two of their final three games, for what could wind up being two very tough make-or-break matches.

Edmonton, meanwhile, sits in the middle of the pack of playoff hopefuls, still only six points out as it continues to hang around. Late-season slides from Minnesota and Dallas — both currently above Edmonton in the standings and both with tougher schedules down the stretch — could help the Oilers slowly climb back into the post-season picture.

But eight meetings with playoff-bound teams won't make it easy for Connor McDavid's squad. Much like Minnesota, it'll be the final week that'll provide the biggest test, if they're still in it, as they'll face Vegas, Colorado, San Jose and Calgary (at the Saddledome) to close it out.

Even if that season finale winds up meaning next to nothing for the Flames' playoff path, you can bet they get up and offer a stiff test for their Albertan neighbours if given the chance to quash Edmonton's playoff dreams — a potential Battle of Alberta classic.

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1135962 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks looking to keep expectations realistic for Hughes

Iain MacIntyre | @imacSportsnet March 13, 2019, 4:44 PM

VANCOUVER — As superheroes go, Quinn Hughes isn't the most physically imposing. Luckily, he doesn't have to be Superman or merely Bobby Orr to help save the Vancouver Canucks.

"Bobby Orr? I'm not really sure about that one," Hughes said Wednesday when asked about a year-old reference from former college assistant coach Jeff Tambellini. "Tamby's a nice guy and I'll thank him for that, but I think that's really far-fetched. I'm just going to try to play my game and make my teammates better and help my team get better."

"Good for him," Jim Hughes, Quinn's dad, said after asking about his son's first press conference as a professional. "Listen, there's going to be a learning curve and the hype is a little off the charts for my liking. I think it's a little bit silly. But I understand it's a Canadian market; we lived in Toronto. People are passionate about hockey and that's what makes a Canadian market special."

And, at times, harder to play in.

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The biggest challenge for Hughes ahead of his debut for the Canucks is not the bruised foot that must clear an MRI exam before Vancouver lets the University of Michigan star on to the ice, but expectations that the dynamic defenceman is going to be the next Bobby Orr, or at least Brian Leetch or Scott Niedermayer, and that he will be one of those guys sometime this month.

The Canucks, of course, are desperate for help. They've had one regulation win in 17 games going into Wednesday night's match against the New York Rangers, and are going to finish hopelessly out of the playoffs for a fourth straight season. You may have also heard the franchise has never won the Stanley Cup and next year celebrates its 50th anniversary in the NHL.

This piles a lot of pressure on Hughes, the five-foot-10 offensive defenceman who grew up an American in Toronto, where his father worked in player development for the Maple Leafs.

Pressure is further heightened by Elias Petterson's remarkable rookie season, where the skilled, slight centre has soared past expectations that were already dauntingly high.

Hughes is one of the most exciting prospects in Canucks' history, and may turn out to be a great NHL player perfectly suited to an evolving game that puts a premium on speed and puck movement.

But it's extraordinarily unrealistic to believe he's going to be that player now, as a 19-year-old thrown into the intensity of an NHL regular season's stretch drive.

Canucks' general manager Jim Benning told Hughes after signing him to an entry-level contract on Sunday, one day after Michigan's disappointingly early elimination in the NCAA playoffs, that he should just be himself.

"I think you always get advice just to be you and stuff like that," Hughes told reporters on Wednesday. "Until you go in there and figure it out for yourself, it's pretty hard. I've just got to kind of get my feet wet here and figure out for myself what I can do and what I can't do and try to play my game. I don't need to be a hero or anything like that. There are a lot of really good players here and I'm just going to try to get them the puck."

He'll be a hero with the coaching staff if he does.

"I'm not going to put sky-high expectations on this guy," Canucks' head coach Travis Green said. "Is he going to be a power-play guy in the NHL? Yes, he is. But I don't need him to have expectations where he has to come in and run the power play and be this guy who's just going to turn it around all of a sudden overnight. It takes some time. My job is to make sure we just put the brakes on expectations. He's got enough pressure on him as it is."

As an 18-year-old, before the Canucks were elated to discover him still available with the seventh-overall pick of the draft last June, Hughes played for the United States at the senior world championships in May.

He was on Team USA at the world junior tournament this winter in Victoria and Vancouver, and at Michigan was a nightly target for college opponents. Hughes isn't intimidated by a big stage.

If cleared medically, he'll practise with the Canucks on Thursday and could be in their lineup Friday night against the New Jersey Devils at Rogers Arena.

"I'd like to see him for five or six weeks and then try to get him in," Green joked about Hughes' preparation. "I'm going to play him as soon as he can play. As soon as he's healthy and ready to go, he'll play. Let's just get him on the ice, find out how his foot is and take it from there."

Given how this season has gone for Vancouver and Michigan, there were probably times when both the Canucks and Hughes regretted the joint decision last summer that the blueliner should return for a second season of college hockey in order to get stronger and more mature.

"I think it's been really good for me, not only on the ice but off the ice," Hughes insisted. "Maturity, getting stronger, heavier, stuff like that. My game has gotten better, too. I probably could have started (in the NHL) in September, but there's nothing wrong with my decision. It ended up being a good one."

Quinn said he weighs about 175 pounds — five pounds more than when he was drafted — and Jim Hughes said his son is "1,000 per cent" mentally ready for this challenge.

"He is so excited for this and I think it's a perfect fit," Jim said. "It's a dream of every kid, right? But we lived in the moment. Our kids were playing because they loved the sport. The motive was never the NHL; the motive was to keep getting better every day and keep loving the game. I



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always preached to our kids the value of hard work. So, Quinn has an opportunity now.”

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Sportsnet.ca / Shared appetite for greatness fuels friendly Matthews-Kane rivalry

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjukebox March 13, 2019, 3:39 PM

TORONTO – Patrick Kane and Alex DeBrincat were sitting on a plane from Tampa to Detroit last year when Auston Matthews approached the Chicago Blackhawks stars and joined them for the duration of the up-north trip.

“He just came up and talked to us for like two-and-a-half, three hours, just talking about hockey and things that had happened in the past. Anything about hockey,” Kane recalled after Wednesday’s morning skate.

“He obviously has a great interest in the game. Those are the kind of guys — who really love the game, really are passionate about it — that have a lot of success.”

That shared appetite for greatness, the one that has Kane (0.60) and Matthews (0.56) ranked one-two in goals per game among Americans this season, is what propelled the most entertaining and emotional early-October NHL game in recent memory.

“A lot of firepower in that game,” Chicago captain Jonathan Toews smiled. “People were waiting to see what happens, and the big players showed up.”

Back and forth they went, these superstars, trading clutch highlight-reel goals (two apiece) and Hulk Hogan-inspired celebrations in a river hockey affair for the ages, Matthews ultimately out-duelling his American idol on a four-point rip as his Maple Leafs escaped with a thrilling 7-6 overtime victory in Kane’s house.

“A headache for the coaches, but fans love it,” Matthews said ahead of Wednesday’s long-awaited rematch.

“For me, I think it was pretty fun that night. Something you’ll always remember, I guess. Go head-to-head and have that kind of exchange with a guy like that, a guy I’ve looked up to since I was a kid. It was pretty cool.”

Though heated after that loss, and possibly feeling a touched showed-up in his own barn, Kane gets the significance of that clash. Just as he understands the importance of Wednesday night’s rematch, a “must-win,” he says, for his bubble-team ‘Hawks, and a rare Canadian-based tilt being televised nationally in the U.S. by NBC. (Doc Emerick in the house!)

“Those are the kind of things that help grow the game, to be honest with you. You’ve got a young American player coming up who’s the face of the franchise, probably one of the faces of the NHL, and a guy who’s had success in his career,” Kane said.

“So for us to go at it like that, then have the celebrations like that, it was nothing planned. Just raw emotion out on the ice. That’s when the best stuff comes out. Pretty cool moment. I don’t think it was a moment either of us will forget.”

Having grown up in Buffalo, Kane, now a mature student of the game, thinks fondly of outsmarting one of his heroes, Dominik Hasek (then with

Detroit), in a victorious shootout back during his home NHL debut in 2007.

Second only to Nikita Kucherov in the Art Ross race and entrenched as “an absolute superstar” (Mike Babcock’s words), the 30-year-old cherishes those nights he battled face-to-face with idols Joe Sakic and Pavel Datsyuk, the magician Kane studied in his later teen years.

“When you’re going up against those guys, you’re kinda nervous. You don’t want to get embarrassed,” Kane said. “It’s still a great challenge and pretty eye-opening, too, that you’re at that level playing against those guys.”

It is with that exact reverence that Matthews speaks of Kane.

“He’s deceptive. You never know what he’s going to do when he’s got the puck on his stick. He draws so much attention, guys don’t know what to do, really. They don’t want to end up on [sports] highlights the next day,” Matthews said. “Then he’s making a back-door pass over two sticks.”

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.

The two first spent time together a couple summers back, when they trained alongside a group of NHL elite at a skills camp run by development guru Daryl Belfry in Southwest Florida.

“I just remember he was a pretty respectful kid, pretty quiet,” Kane said. “Then you see him on the ice, he’s the hardest worker out there. He’s always working on his shot, working on his skating. Never stops working. It makes you better as a player too.”

Blessed is the word Matthews chooses to describe how Kane can throw up a 20-game point streak or make toe-dragging look as casual as a yawning.

Still, the 21-year-old knows that a duck cruising smoothly on the surface is paddling like mad underneath. He pushes himself with that same hunger and inner drive. Game recognize game.

“Everything he does on the ice is so smooth, but you see all the work he does on the ice [and] off the ice after practices,” Matthews said. “He’s the hardest-working guy out there. That’s a testament to his drive and how great he wants to be.”

No one is predicting another 13-goal shinny spectacle Wednesday.

Systems tighten as the snow thaws.

The dynasty that was Chicago now sits last in the Central Division and is buckling down defensively in a fight for its wild-card life. Toronto was humbled hard by Monday’s 6-2 and has vowed a stingier effort.

But with Matthews and Kane on the sheet, the fireworks are in place.

Anybody got a light?

“Both teams have some pretty high-powered offence,” Blackhawks coach Jeremy Colliton said, “So it’ll be interesting today.”

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TSN.CA / Leafs' comeback against Blackhawks too little, too late

Kristen Shilton

TORONTO – The Maple Leafs didn’t quit in the third period on Wednesday. In fact, the final frame in their 5-4 loss to the Chicago



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Blackhawks was the best they played all game. The problem was it took overcoming an atrocious first period for Toronto to reach the point where too little, too late was even an option.

It was defensive mistakes that piled up early, putting the Leafs down 4-0 to Chicago after 20 minutes, and 5-0 by midway through the second frame. Toronto didn't even score its first goal until 93 seconds remained in the middle period, and while the comeback bid came tantalizingly close to fruition in the Leafs' 29-shot third period, it wasn't enough to undo those prior inadequacies.

"We hold each other accountable in this room, and we have to look across the room and obviously step it up. It's unacceptable," said Auston Matthews, who skated in his 200th career game. "We can't be doing that at this point in the season with these important points on the line. We're fighting for home ice [in the playoffs] and we have to step it up. It starts with that first period; we have to be ready from the get-go."

Toronto knows all about bad starts, having most recently turned one in during Monday's 6-2 loss to Tampa Bay. And yet, the problem continues to resurface, forcing the Leafs to battle back at a time in the season when it's increasingly difficult to do so, especially against teams like Chicago that are fighting for their playoff lives.

"If I had the answer right now, it wouldn't be an issue because we would address it," said Morgan Rielly of the team's slow beginnings. "It's just a blip; that's the goal anyway. We don't want it to last. We didn't put ourselves in good position with the way we started but we have to be happy with how we battled back. Moving forward, it's not a start we want to repeat."

On paper at least, the Leafs should have been in control of Wednesday's matchup. Only the Ottawa Senators had averaged more goals-against per game than the Blackhawks (3.70) going into the tilt, while the Leafs were averaging the third-most goals per game (3.57). But Chicago appeared practically impenetrable for most of two periods, while the Leafs were careless and unfocused defensively.

It didn't help that Toronto's list of unavailable parties increased right before the game, with Zach Hyman (flu) joining Jake Gardiner (back), Travis Dermott (shoulder) and Kasperii Kapanen (concussion) among the Leafs' walking wounded. Touting their depth has been a standby for Toronto all season, though, and they made it clear on Wednesday the loss didn't reflect who wasn't playing, but the execution of those who were.

"We didn't play hard enough, we weren't quick enough leaving our own zone, didn't skate good enough, didn't compete at a high enough level," said Mike Babcock. "The reality is, you can all stand in the right spots, but you have to compete at a high enough level. I just didn't think we started good enough."

The Leafs weren't really in bad position until halfway through the first, when Duncan Keith's shot had already dribbled through Frederik Andersen's five-hole but before Brendan Perlini's wrist shot through Andersen made it 2-0 Chicago. The dominos kept falling from there, first with Dominik Kahun scoring on a two-on-one with Patrick Kane, and then when Toronto's fourth line got caught against Chicago's top unit and a wide-open Brandon Saad made it 4-0 Blackhawks.

Andersen didn't return to his net after the first, pulled for the second straight game in favour of Garret Sparks. And while Toronto still couldn't generate any offence before Alex DeBrincat went in alone on Sparks to make it 5-0, the team refused to count itself out.

"You don't have a choice," Rielly said. "You look at each other and you expect more from one another and you push each other to be better. It's important you make it clear you have to bring more work ethic, win more battles, do all the little things we talk about and make sure when you go out, it's clear we're not going to roll over."

And the Leafs did not. Two days after Matthews said his team "pretty much quit" while facing a four-goal deficit against Tampa, Toronto left it all on the ice this time around.

Andreas Johnsson got the ball rolling with a goal late in the second period, followed up by Matthews' goal early in the third. Chicago had pulled Corey Crawford due to illness by that point, replacing him with Collin Delia for a true battle of the back-ups in net. Rielly kept the Leafs' momentum going with a power play goal, and Tavares had them within one when only 89 seconds remained in regulation.

But not even firing 29 shots on goal in the final 20 minutes could get Toronto over the hump, not with so much on the line as clubs inch towards the postseason.

"It's the end of the season now, stuff is ramping up, it's pretty much playoff hockey," said Matthews. "That's two games in a row where we haven't started well and it's cost us big time. Guys came in pretty pissed off [after the first] and motivated to get back out there... we crawled our way back but it wasn't enough."

"I thought we came out and worked hard [in the third]," added Rielly. "We put ourselves in a hole, and it was too little too late. Last period is great, [but] you look at the start and the position we put ourselves in after the first period, that's the problem."

Now all Toronto has left to do is find a solution.

"We have to worry about what we're going to do on a daily basis," Tavares said. "How we're going to execute and play the way we're going to play, the identity we're going to play with. If we do that, that will allow us to get to where we want to get to and get the results we need."

Takeaways

Here's your chance, kid

Even before Babcock knew Hyman wouldn't be available Wednesday, he talked in his morning press conference about taking hold of opportunities when they come. For William Nylander, that meant making good on yet another chance to skate on Auston Matthews' wing, and the winger put together one of his best games in weeks against Chicago.

Nylander had Crawford beat with two shots before Toronto even got on the board, hitting the post on both but not halting his search for a goal. When the Leafs' comeback got into full swing, he was in the thick of it, winning puck battles, lifting sticks at both ends of the ice and ultimately registering two assists, on goals by Johnsson and Matthews. It was Nylander's first multi-point game since Feb. 27, a much-needed boost after he registered only one assist in his previous six games.

Trevor Moore didn't have quite the same success grabbing his opportunity, and it was a big one at that. With Hyman out, Moore took his spot on Tavares' flank with Mitch Marner on the other, but it was quickly apparent that matching up against some of the Blackhawks' top players was a jarring adjustment for Moore after skating primarily with Leafs' fourth liners Frederik Gauthier and Tyler Ennis.

On that unit, Moore could use his speed and relative heaviness to hound out pucks, hold onto them and create scoring chances. But the tougher assignment put Moore on his heels a bit more, with less time to make plays and transition. He swapped spots with Patrick Marleau onto Nazem Kadri's line after the first period, and finished minus-one, with four shots on goal, in a career-high 14:08 time on ice.

Andersen hooked (again)

Before Monday, Andersen hadn't been pulled from a game all season. After 20 minutes of action on Tuesday, he had been pulled twice in two games. That hasn't happened since Andersen joined the Leafs in 2016-17.

In both instances, Andersen allowed four early goals, and Babcock made the quick decision to give the net to Sparks. In Wednesday's outing, Andersen was left hanging by poor defensive play and bad coverage from his teammates as Chicago scored three of its first four goals off the rush. But the goalie wasn't without fault, particularly on Keith's shot that squirted out behind him, and on Perlini's wrist shot that he had a good look on.



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At this stage of the season, extra rest can't hurt Andersen, even if racking up the goals against isn't how he'd like it to come. He finished Wednesday's game with 10 saves and a .714 save percentage.

Johnsson breaks the ice

It's been Vancouver Canucks rookie Elias Pettersson courting the headlines among NHL freshmen this season, but Johnsson has quietly put together a strong second half to his own rookie campaign as well. Johnsson's second period goal not only broke a six-game goalless slump for the winger, it was his 20th of the season, second only to Pettersson among first-years around the league.

Despite a slow start to the year, where Johnsson had zero goals in his first 10 games and spent time as a healthy scratch, his overall success has made the 24-year-old a feel-good story of sorts. Selected in the seventh-round, 202nd overall, in 2013 by Toronto, Johnsson has battled his way through injuries and tough American Hockey League seasons to be a solid 20-goal contributor for Toronto. And Johnsson is only the 14th seventh-round choice to ever score 20 as a rookie.

While it's unlikely he'll challenge Pettersson for the Calder Trophy, Johnsson's stats show how well he has progressed to date.

"We talk about it every day. No question, we have to go out there and execute. It's definitely something that has to be a priority for us. We address it every single day, it's an important focus. The margin for error becomes smaller and smaller and as a group we have to understand that, and that one or two mistakes can mean a lot."

- John Tavares, on the Leafs' recurring defensive struggles in the first period of games

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TSN.CA / Kane, Matthews reflect on memorable duel

Mark Masters

TSN Toronto reporter Mark Masters checks in daily with news and notes on the Maple Leafs. The Leafs and Blackhawks skated at Scotiabank Arena ahead of Wednesday's game.

During the summer, Patrick Kane and Auston Matthews were on the same flight from Detroit to Tampa.

"He's a guy that, once you get to know him, he's really fun to talk to about hockey," the 30-year-old Blackhawks winger said. "I was actually sitting next to [Chicago teammate Alex] DeBrincat, but he just came up and talked to us for two and a half, three hours, just about hockey and certain things in the past, just anything about hockey. He obviously has a great interest in the game and those are the kind of guys that really love the game, that really have passion about it, that have a lot of success."

In Tampa, the pair took part in a skills camp. A little more than a month later, on Oct. 7, the superstars were on the ice together again, wowing fans at the United Center during a 7-6 overtime win by the Leafs.

Kane tied the game 5-5 with 1:24 left in the third period before Matthews quieted the Madhouse on Madison 22 seconds later lifting his hand to his ear in Hulk Hogan fashion to celebrate. Then, with 29 seconds left, Kane again tied it putting his hand to his ear to mimic Matthews.

"It was pretty fun that night," recalled the 21-year-old Leafs centre, "something you can always remember. Pretty cool to go head to head and have that kind of exchange with a guy like him who I've looked up to since I was a younger kid."

"Those are the kind of things that help grow the game," said Kane. "For us to go at it like that and have the celebrations like that, I mean, it was nothing planned, just raw emotion out on the ice and I think that's when the best stuff comes out so it was a pretty cool moment. I don't think it's a moment either of us will forget."

Since then both Matthews and Kane have had great seasons. Despite being slowed by a shoulder injury that forced him to miss 14 games, Matthews has 31 goals and 30 assists. Kane, meanwhile, is carrying his team on an unlikely playoff push with 41 goals and 57 assists.

"He's deceptive," Matthews observed. "You never really know what he's going to do. He's got the puck on his stick and draws so much attention to him that guys, they don't want to play him too hard because they don't want to end up on TSN highlights the next day and then he's making a back-door pass over two sticks ... He's an incredible player and makes stuff happen every time he's on the ice. He puts you on the edge of your seat every time he's out there and it doesn't matter who he's playing with or what the situation is, he competes every night and he's always hungry for more."

Duelling celebrations with Kane something Matthews will always remember

The Maple Leafs and Blackhawks played a 7-6 OT-thriller in October that featured dueling celebrations from Auston Matthews and Patrick Kane. Matthews talked about the early-season game calling it "something he'll always remember."

Matthews is certainly hungry for more after a rough performance on Monday night. The Lightning walked into Scotiabank Arena and humbled the Leafs 6-2. Afterwards Matthews offered up perhaps the harshest criticism we've heard from him since he became a Leaf noting that his team was "slapped" and "quit" in the third period.

Following Wednesday's skate, Matthews didn't back away from those words, but was also eager to turn the page.

"I mean, you never want to lose and you never want to lose like that," he said. "I think everybody was frustrated. It was pretty normal, especially after a game, so I think we learned from it ... There's no excuse. We're just going to put that behind us and move on and try to put together a couple games here where we really play well, utilize yesterday's day off and re-energize."

Tampa Bay struck on a number of set plays off offensive-zone faceoffs and that was a focus during Toronto's skate.

"It's a big part of the centre's job, but I think all guys need to jump and win those 50-50 battles," said Matthews, "and that was a big issue with our game last game, we weren't winning faceoffs, we weren't winning battles and then they kept it simple, got to the puck to our net and then it's going off three guys and it's in the back of our net."

"Certainly, there was a sense of disappointment," said alternate captain John Tavares. "Knowing who we were up against and kind of that challenge and wanting to rise to that challenge and we didn't come close and we just didn't play very well. But, I think in the big picture, it's one game of 82 and I think we've been a pretty good team all year."

There's a sense of urgency in Chicago's room as they try to cling to life in the playoff race. The Blackhawks trail the Arizona Coyotes by six points for the final wild-card spot with Minnesota and Colorado also ahead of them in the race.

A big issue all season has been defence with Chicago ranking 30th in goals allowed (3.7 per game), but there is some sign of improvement of late with just two goals allowed in the last two games.

"Our back pressure has been really good," Kane noted. "We're being a little bit smarter with the puck, not as many turnovers or giving up those odd-man rushes. And I think everyone's bought into the team game the



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last couple games, especially when you know how much is on the line. They're must-win games and you've seen that come to life a little bit."

Corey Crawford has also played a big role posting a 4-1-0 record since returning from a concussion on Feb. 27.

Leafs Ice Chips: Will strong words lead to big response?

Following the Maple Leafs 6-2 loss to the Lightning Auston Matthews didn't mince words when discussing his team's poor effort. Matthews didn't back away from his comments ahead of the matchup with the Blackhawks, but it was clear that he wanted to turn the page. Mark Masters has more.

Often an eternal optimist, even Mike Babcock admitted it wasn't easy to get over what happened on Monday night.

"I'm usually the sun gets up the next day and I bounce back like you can't believe. Yesterday was a little harder," the Leafs head coach said.

There will be no lineup changes for Toronto tonight, but Babcock was certainly tempted.

"There were lots of volunteers after last game to come out, right?"

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TSN.CA / Leafs seek bounce-back effort against Blackhawks

Kristen Shilton

TORONTO – When the Maple Leafs and Chicago Blackhawks last met, it was just the third game of Toronto's season and the team's respective stars – namely Auston Matthews and Patrick Kane – stole the show with a stunning offensive performance.

It was back in October that Toronto topped Chicago 7-6 in an overtime thriller punctuated by theatrics from the two snipers as they traded goals and celebrations late in regulation. The rematch on Wednesday may not have quite the same drama, but memories of that finish five months ago are still fresh.

"[That game] is something you can always remember," Matthews said after the Leafs' morning skate. "It was pretty cool to go head-to-head and have that kind of exchange with a guy like him that I've looked up to since I was a younger kid. I don't know what to really expect from tonight. They've changed a lot, we've changed a lot. But they've been a dynamic force in the league for a long time."

The two teams have taken divergent paths in the time since Toronto snuck out of Chicago with a victory. The Leafs have climbed to fifth-place overall in the NHL standings, firmly in the postseason picture, while the Blackhawks sit 22nd overall and six points out of a playoff spot with 13 games to play.

The lacklustre season already cost Chicago its head coach when three-time Stanley Cup winner Joe Quenneville was replaced by Jeremy Colliton in November. But despite the team's struggles, Kane has emerged more sensational than ever in amassing the second-most points in the NHL (98) and showing a consistency that's thoroughly impressed Matthews.

"Seems like there was a point in time where he was going to score every game," Matthews said of Kane. "He's an incredible player; he just makes stuff happen every time he's on the ice. He puts you on the edge of your seat every time he's out there – doesn't matter who he's playing with or

what the situation is. He competes every night and he's always hungry for more."

The Leafs will look to steal a page from Kane's playbook in that respect on Wednesday, given how anemic their effort was in a 6-2 drubbing by the Tampa Bay Lightning on Monday.

Matthews was his team's harshest critic afterwards, claiming Toronto "pretty much quit" in the third period while trailing Tampa by four goals.

The Leafs were without top-six winger Kasper Kapanen for that outing, held back for "precautionary reasons related to illness." On Wednesday it was revealed that Kapanen has a concussion.

He joins Jake Gardiner (back) and Travis Dermott (shoulder) on the Leafs' list of walking wounded, with no timetable set for a return.

In the meantime, William Nylander will once again join Matthews' line with Andreas Johnsson as Toronto weathers its spate of injuries against a Blackhawks team that beat the Arizona Coyotes 7-1 on Monday.

"Kappy has great speed, tremendous work ethic. He's a real good penalty killer. It affects you," said head coach Mike Babcock of Kapanen's absence. "But it's opportunity for someone else, too. He was playing with Matty. Now Willy is playing with Matty. Grab a hold of it. When you get the opportunity, you do something with it."

The chance now for Nylander is to re-establish himself as a top-line winger for the Leafs. Since returning from his contract holdout in December, Nylander has tried unsuccessfully to stick again on Matthews' line, eventually finding more of a groove playing with Nazem Kadri and Patrick Marleau.

The 22-year-old has only one assist in his last six games and intends to heed Babcock's advice in trying to re-ignite his spark with Matthews.

"I think I've been better playing with the puck and holding onto the puck and getting back to my game," Nylander said. "Maybe not so much the last couple of games but I'm looking to get back to how I was playing last week. [Our line is] hungry and we want to show that we're better than what we showed last game."

That shouldn't be hard; the Leafs were out of Monday's game well before the end of the first period. Babcock reiterated on Wednesday he thought Toronto had "no energy" for that matchup and gave the team an unscheduled day off Tuesday because of it.

On the out-of-town scoreboard, the Boston Bruins also did the Leafs a favour on Tuesday with their 7-4 loss to the Columbus Blue Jackets. The Leafs now sit four points back of Boston for second in the Atlantic Division, where they'd hold home-ice advantage in the first round of the playoffs.

To achieve that goal, there's not much room for error on the Leafs' part. While Kane may be undeniably explosive on the ice, Toronto has its own stable of talented forwards and they have a lot to make up for after Monday's debacle.

"We have to take steps forward," Matthews said. "Make sure we're dialling things in in [all phases]. Make sure we're eliminating our mistakes every night – especially against the other team's top players. You never want to lose, you never want to lose like [we did Monday]. I think everyone was frustrated. I think we learned from it. Tonight will be a good test."

Maple Leafs projected lineup vs. Chicago

Hyman-Tavares-Marner

Johnsson-Matthews-Nylander

Marleau-Kadri-Brown

Ennis-Gauthier-Moore

Rielly-Hainsey



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Muzzin-Zaitsev

Marincin-Ozhiganov

Andersen starts

Sparks

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USA TODAY / Blackhawks goalie Collin Delia says he didn't dislodge net against Maple Leafs

Mike Brehm, USA TODAY Published 12:25 a.m. ET March 14, 2019 | Updated 12:33 a.m. ET March 14, 2019

The final minutes of the Chicago Blackhawks' game against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Wednesday night were chaotic.

The Maple Leafs, who were being blown out early for the second game in a row, had rallied from a 5-0 deficit to pull within 5-4.

And Blackhawks backup goalie Collin Delia, who entered the game unexpectedly at the start of the third period because of an illness to Corey Crawford and had to face 29 shots, lost his stick during a scramble and couldn't reach it.

And then with the Maple Leafs pressing for the tying goal, the Blackhawks' net came loose, stopping play with about 20 seconds left.

Turn the sound up, and listen to this sequence called by Doc!

We're out of breath too. pic.twitter.com/iuVoj37Op8

— NHL on NBC (@NHLonNBCSports) March 14, 2019

Maple Leafs fans, who had booed their team after it was outscored 4-0 in the first period, booed loudly when replays showed how the net got off its moorings.

Under NHL rules, if Delia had knocked the net off intentionally, the Maple Leafs would have had a penalty shot.

But Delia said he had not.

"The net was already off when I slid into it," he told reporters. "That's why it came off so easily. I don't know how it got that way."

Another view shows possibly why.

Watch the net when Delia grazes it with his foot prior to digging in. It moves a little, meaning it was already loose.

[#blackhawks#LeafsForeverpic.twitter.com/JYXgOfTnML](https://twitter.com/JYXgOfTnML)

— Luke Stanbery (@lukestanbery) March 14, 2019

COLUMN: Who's ready for the NHL playoffs and who isn't?

GAFFE: Team allows goal because it was missing a player

Maple Leafs center John Tavares, who was closest to the play, didn't see what happened, but thought a review should be allowed in that situation.

"If that's on purpose by them, especially in the last couple minutes in big situations, I would love to see that being a challenge at some point," he told reporters. "You got that kind of pressure, that's kind of a free out, if that's what happened."

The Maple Leafs lost 5-4, and Toronto's Auston Matthews, who said Monday night that the team appeared to quit during a 6-2 loss to the

Tampa Bay Lightning, thought the issue Wednesday was the team's poor start.

"We crawled our way back, it just wasn't enough, but ... that first period was just unacceptable," he said.

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USA TODAY / Carolina Hurricanes surging late: Who's ready for the NHL playoffs and who isn't?

Kevin Allen, USA TODAY Published 6:31 a.m. ET March 13, 2019

Goalie Petr Mrazek's best job reference last summer came from the man who decided he wasn't the right answer for the Detroit Red Wings.

"I remember calling (Detroit GM) Ken Holland and he said, 'When Petr gets on a roll, he can carry your team for five or six games,'" Carolina Hurricanes general manager Don Waddell said.

Waddell signed Mrazek as a free agent last summer, and the goalie has won seven of his last eight starts (.946 save percentage, three shutouts during that span) to help the Hurricanes strengthen their hopes of qualifying for the playoffs for first time since 2009.

"I give Petr a lot of credit, because when we talked last year, he said, 'Don, it's not about the money – it's about being in the right spot to have the opportunity to compete for playing time,'" Waddell recalled. That's what you want to hear."

Mrazek volunteered to take a one-year contract for \$1.5 million if Waddell would give him a chance to be a No. 1 goalie.

The Hurricanes are 13-3-1 in their past 17 games and have been a spirited group, leading to a 12 percent jump in attendance.

"The way the league is now, you know things aren't always going to go your way," Waddell said. "The key is how you bounce back when that happens. And that's where we've been good the last 30 games. We got spanked in Winnipeg when we played our worst game of the year and then we bounced in Nashville in a pretty tough environment with one of their better games of the year."

Carolina boasts many contributors. Dougie Hamilton's 10 goals since Jan. 1 are the most by any league defenseman. With 77 points in 69 games, Sebastian Aho might be one of the league's most anonymous superstars. Rod Brind'Amour will get Coach of the Year votes.

The Hurricanes' path to the playoffs doesn't get easier. From March 19 to April 2, they play Washington twice, Pittsburgh twice and Tampa Bay and Toronto once.

"That will be a test," Waddell said.

Other teams ready for the playoffs and some that are not:

Ready for the playoffs

► Tampa Bay Lightning: Coach Jon Cooper's 53-13-4 team has a +89 goal-differential. The Lightning could easily be +100 before the season is over. Down the stretch, they only need to guard against boredom.

► Washington Capitals: The Caps have won seven of eight since adding defenseman Nick Jensen to the lineup from the Red Wings. He might be the 2019 version of defenseman Michal Kempny. Last season, Kempny's acquisition was a key factor in Washington winning the Stanley Cup. This season, defensive-minded Jensen has been an equally positive fit.



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► San Jose Sharks: They've won six in a row and eight out of 10 to move atop the Western Conference standings. They rank second in the league in goals and have scoring depth. Five players have 20 or more goals, including two who top 30, led by Joe Pavelski with 37 (six game-winners). Newcomer Gustav Nyquist scored two goals Tuesday night to give him 19 for the season.

► Boston Bruins: This is a team nobody should want to face in the playoffs. The Bruins rank third in the league with a 2.53 goals-against average and are 15-2-2 in their last 19 games. Imagine how dangerous they will be when David Pastrnak returns from injury.

Not ready for the playoffs

► Nashville Predators: They haven't been able to find the consistency they will need in the playoffs. They are 8-9-1 since Feb. 2. They have given up five goals five times in that stretch. Filip Forsberg has three goals with a -8 plus-minus in his past eight games.

Toronto Maple Leafs goalie Garret Sparks comes into the game during a 6-2 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Toronto Maple Leafs goalie Garret Sparks comes into the game during a 6-2 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning. (Photo: Tom Szczerbowski, USA TODAY Sports)

► Toronto Maple Leafs: They played listlessly in a 6-2 loss to Tampa Bay Monday night and have given up three or more goals 11 times in their last 17 games. Even with adding Jake Muzzin, the Toronto defense doesn't seem proficient enough for playoff competition.

► Winnipeg Jets: The Jets are 6-9-2 in their last 17 games, including two losses to the last-place Ottawa Senators. The Jets have the talent to be considered a favorite in the West, but they haven't been as formidable as expected.

GAFFE: Blue Jackets don't send enough players onto ice on Bruins goal

► Columbus Blue Jackets: After multiple trades, the Blue Jackets haven't come together as management hoped. The team is 6-5 — with a 7-4 win against Bruins on Tuesday) — since Matt Duchene was acquired. It's far from guaranteed they will even qualify for the playoffs.

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1135827 Buffalo Sabres

Sabres Notebook: Defenseman Zach Bogosian day to day with upper-body injury

By Lance Lysowski|

Zach Bogosian's availability is in question after an upper-body injury prevented the Buffalo Sabres defenseman from practicing Wednesday in KeyBank Center.

Bogosian did not return for the third period of the Sabres' 2-0 loss to Dallas on Tuesday and finished with only 13 minutes, 32 seconds of ice time. Coach Phil Housley told reporters following practice that the team expected to receive more information about Bogosian's status Wednesday afternoon.

Casey Nelson will draw back into the lineup if Bogosian is unavailable to play Thursday night against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

"We'll know more later on today but it's still a day-to-day situation," Housley said.

Bogosian, 28, has three goals among 17 points with a minus-2 rating in 61 games this season. He has missed eight games because of injury,

including the Sabres' 4-3 loss to Edmonton on March 4, and was one of three Sabres to not record a shot on goal against Dallas.

Nelson, 26, has appeared in only three games since Dec. 4, spending more than a month as a healthy scratch after his conditioning assignment in Rochester. He played three consecutive games -- including only 13 minutes, 21 seconds during a 3-0 loss in Colorado on Saturday -- before Housley scratched him Tuesday for "mainly" performance reasons.

Housley acknowledged there was a conversation about how Nelson responded immediately after Colorado's Nikita Zadorov's hit to the head on Jack Eichel. Nelson was paired with Marco Scandella during practice Wednesday, while Brandon Montour skated with Rasmus Dahlin and Rasmus Ristolainen remained with Matt Hunwick.

Dahlin, an 18-year-old rookie, played 24 minutes, 50 seconds against the Stars with Bogosian out and has seen his ice time gradually increase throughout the season. He averaged 18 minutes, 41 seconds during October, compared to 22 minutes, 18 seconds over the past 49 games.

"The one thing I really like about Rasmus is his battle level," Housley said of Dahlin. "His compete, game in and game out, has been good.

Throughout an 82-game season you're going to have your ups and downs. Right to the end, in the game last night, he's still battling. He's keeping pucks in and he's fighting, and he's a very competitive player."

Youth movement

Consecutive shutout losses led Housley to place Tage Thompson, Casey Mittelstadt and Alex Nylander on the same line during Wednesday's practice.

All three are former first-round draft picks and are 21 years old or younger. They also combined for eight shots on goal against Dallas, including four from Thompson.

"I've really liked what they brought," Housley said. "They're creating. They used their speed and were attacking the game and we need more of it."

Additionally, Sam Reinhart skated with Evan Rodrigues and Conor Sheary, while Jeff Skinner was placed with Vladimir Sobotka and Jason Pominville.

Amerks sign defenseman

Sabres assistant general manager Randy Sexton announced Wednesday that Rochester signed defenseman Kurt Gosselin, a college free agent from the University of Alabama-Huntsville, to a two-way, AHL contract for 2019-20.

Gosselin, 24, will join the Cincinnati Cyclones on an amateur tryout for the rest of this season. He played in 118 career college games, scoring 20 goals with 38 assists.

Mittelstadt's brother

Luke Mittelstadt, the 16-year-old brother of Casey, is among the 52 players born in 2003 to be considered for the 2019-20 U.S. National Under-17 Team. A defenseman for Eden Prairie High School near Minneapolis, Luke will compete in a four-day evaluation camp this month, which will determine the roster for next year.

Buffalo News LOADED: 03.14.2019