



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019



Preview: Hurricanes at Blue Jackets

Divisional showdown has wild card ramifications

by Michael Smith

COLUMBUS - The Carolina Hurricanes and Columbus Blue Jackets close out their four-game season series in what will be a pivotal Metropolitan Division tilt.

The Hurricanes, who currently occupy the first wild card spot in the Eastern Conference, are coming off consecutive road wins in Nashville and Colorado.

The Next Big Game

Every game is the biggest game of the season for the Hurricanes, and Friday's match with the Blue Jackets is the next in that sequence.

And it is, indeed, a big game.

Columbus sits just two points back of the Hurricanes in the Eastern Conference playoff race heading into a critical, four-point swing game.

"We know what our goal is, and we're not there yet," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said after practice on Thursday. "The guys have pushed hard to try to get into the race, which they've done, and now, we certainly don't want to take any steps backward at this point."

This is the fourth and final match-up between Carolina and Columbus this season, though the Hurricanes will still play seven games within their division to finish the season.

Ferland Returns?

Micheal Ferland, who has missed the last two games with an upper-body injury, practiced with the team on Thursday. Brind'Amour said he is hopeful that Ferland, who has netted 17 goals this season, will be able to return to the lineup in Columbus. He skated on the left wing alongside Lucas Wallmark and Jordan Martinook in practice.

"Unless something changes between now and game time, I think we'll be in good shape with him," Brind'Amour said.

The Last Meeting

These two Metropolitan Division foes last met on Jan. 4 at PNC Arena, and the Hurricanes staved off a Blue Jackets comeback to win, 4-2. Greg McKeeg tallied an assist and what proved to be the game-winning goal - his first goal as a Hurricane - in the first multi-point game of his NHL career.

The win was the Hurricanes' third in a row in the beginning stages of what's been an improbable run since New Year's Eve.

The Opposition

The Blue Jackets, who are 5-5-0 in their last 10 games and stacked their lineup at the trade deadline, are coming off a 7-4 win over the Boston Bruins on Tuesday. Columbus is 19-16-2 at home this season.

"I think when everyone in the hockey world saw the additions they were like, 'Wow, that's pretty impressive.' I think it just took them a little time to get their groove," Brind'Amour said. "Unfortunately, we hit them at the wrong time. It will be a big test for us, for sure."

WORTH A CLICK

News

Tweetmail No. 217: Mindset, Head Coach & Scorers

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Recap: Mrazek, Hurricanes Shut Out Avalanche

Canes Recall Fleury from Charlotte

Podcast

CanesCast, Ep. 80: Gray Area

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Highlights: CAR 3, COL 0

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Listen: 99.9 The Fan, Hurricanes app, Hurricanes.com/Listen



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019



Habs-Hurricanes game to be broadcast in Plain Cree language

By The Associated Press

The Montreal Canadiens' visit to the Carolina Hurricanes later this month is expected to be the first NHL game with a broadcaster calling play-by-play in the Plains Cree language.

The March 24 game will be aired on Rogers Hometown Hockey on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, which will use Sportsnet's production capabilities to air the program featuring Cree commentary and analysis.

Sportsnet vice president Rob Corte called it a "momentous broadcast."

"We are truly honored to have the opportunity to work with APTN to celebrate Canada's indigenous communities and the shared passion for hockey that unites us all," Corte said Thursday, according to The Canadian Press.

Clarence Iron will do the play by play, while musician Earl Wood will host the studio show alongside game analyst and former NHL player John Chabot. Iron works for CFNK radio as a program host and calls local games in the Cree language.



Sportsnet, APTN team up for first Cree-language NHL broadcast

Sportsnet Staff

Sportsnet and APTN are teaming up to deliver the first ever NHL game in Plains Cree. The broadcast will air on Sunday, March 24, as the Montreal Canadiens meet the Carolina Hurricanes on Rogers Hometown Hockey in Cree on APTN at 7 p.m. ET / 4 p.m. PT.

Leveraging Sportsnet's production, APTN – the first national Indigenous broadcaster in the world – will air the program featuring exclusive Cree-language commentary and analysis for fans across the country. Broadcaster Clarence Iron will have the play-by-play call for APTN, while Juno Award-winning musician Earl Wood will host the studio show alongside game analyst and NHL alum John Chabot.

"We are thrilled to partner with APTN on such a unique and momentous broadcast," said Rob Corte, Vice President, Sportsnet & NHL Productions. "Committed to uniting Canadians through the sports they love, we at Sportsnet know that there is no stronger common thread than the country's passion for hockey. We are truly honoured to have the opportunity to work with APTN to celebrate Canada's Indigenous communities and the shared passion for hockey that unites us all."

The historic broadcast on APTN fittingly complements that weekend's Rogers Hometown Hockey stop in Enoch Cree Nation, Alta., where Ron MacLean and Tara Slone will host a live broadcast of the same game on Sportsnet. Enoch Cree Nation is a proud First Nation situated in Treaty No. 6 Territory in central Alberta, bordering the west side of Edmonton.

"This brand-new venture will allow us to pursue our goal of presenting premier hockey programming to APTN audiences in Plains Cree," says Jean La Rose, CEO of APTN. "This initiative also coincides with UNESCO's declaration of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages. Supporting that declaration is incredibly important to us as we continue to serve Indigenous Peoples and work towards reconciliation."

"Canada's hockey fans are among the greatest in the world, and their longstanding tradition of watching games together, across all cultures and generations, is unmatched," said David Proper, Executive Vice President, Media and International Strategy, NHL. "Sportsnet is a best-in-class partner and continues to uphold this important tradition, delivering NHL hockey to Canadians in transformative ways, as evidenced by the first Cree-language NHL broadcast. The NHL commends Sportsnet and APTN for this groundbreaking partnership, which will serve Canada's Indigenous communities and all hockey fans nationwide."

Clarence Iron lives in Pinehouse, Sask., where he works at CFNK 89.9 FM as a program host in his native Plains Cree language. With his experience calling Indigenous hockey tournaments as well as local games, Iron is recognized within the Indigenous hockey community as one of the "Cree Voices of Hockey."

Drafted 40th overall by the Montreal Canadiens in 1980, John Chabot spent eight seasons in the NHL and played more than 500 games with Montreal, Pittsburgh and Detroit, followed by another 11 seasons in Europe. Following his playing career, Chabot went on to coach in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League before spending two seasons



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

as an assistant coach with the New York Islanders from 2007-2009. Chabot also worked as a studio analyst on the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games with APTN and as a coach/instructor on APTN's hockey series, Hit the Ice.

A survivor of residential school and the Sixties Scoop, Earl Wood hails from Saddle Lake, AB, and is one of the original founders of the Northern Cree Singers. Referred to by some as the "Indigenous Rolling Stones," the Northern Cree Singers are a Juno Award-winning group and have been nominated for six GRAMMY Awards.



Playoff Push: A quick guide to the Metropolitan Division standings

By NBC Sports Washington Staff

With the Stanley Cup Playoffs closing in, the Capitals have 12 games remaining in the regular season. They'll try to hang on to the top spot in the Metropolitan Division and will wait for a clearer sense of who their first round opponent is.

As the Metro Division currently stands, the Capitals are in first place with 89 points. Here is how the rest of the division stands:

New York Islanders (40-22-7, 87 points)

The playoff surprise of the season after losing John Tavares in free agency to the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Isles have made a season of proving doubters wrong. With former Caps bench boss Barry Trotz at the helm, the Islanders have traded the Metro Division crown with the Caps all season. They picked up a huge two points over the Columbus Blue Jackets on March 11 drawing two points closer to the Caps and first place in the Metro. Their next matchup is against the Montreal Canadiens, who are fighting for the final wild card spot.

Critically important for Caps fans is the final game of the season at home at Capital One Arena, when the Isles and Caps will face off to likely determine the top seed in the Metro.

Pittsburgh Penguins (38-23-9, 85 points)

The Penguins are perennial playoff contenders. They picked up two crucial standings points against the Capitals Tuesday night with a come-from-behind 5-3 win, and will face the ailing Buffalo Sabres Thursday.

Carolina Hurricanes (38-24-7, 83 points)

If the playoffs started today, the Hurricanes would be the Capitals opponent.

The "Bunch of Jerks" are one of the hottest teams in the NHL, and they've gone 7-2-1 in their last 10 games. Behind a three point night from 2018 second-overall pick Andrei Svechnikov and a 38 save shutout from Petr Mrazek, the Canes dispatched the Wild Card outsider Colorado Avalanche. Two big standings points are on the line when they play the Blue Jackets on Friday.

The Caps will play the Hurricanes twice in a home-and-home over the last 12 games of the season.

Columbus Blue Jackets (39-28-2, 81 points)

The Blue Jackets went all in at the trade deadline, and acquired Matt Duchene, Ryan Dzingel, Keith Kinkaid, and Adam McQuaid. But the returns haven't been stellar, and the Jackets are .500 in their last 10 games.

Every point matters if the Jackets want to fend off the the Canadiens for the final wild card spot, and they pulled off a 7-4 win over Boston Tuesday night and can make more progress with a win over the Hurricanes Friday night.



Hurricanes try to continue road success vs. Blue Jackets

Field Level Media

The Carolina Hurricanes have found some of their best work has come in road games across the past couple of months.

So they shouldn't shy away from the next assignment when they play the Columbus Blue Jackets on Friday night at Nationwide Arena in Columbus, Ohio.

Carolina is 11-1-2 in its last 14 road games.

"In order to win you have to play a certain way," coach Rod Brind'Amour said, pointing to the focus that has been displayed in some difficult road tasks.

The Hurricanes have won consecutive road games since an 8-1 home loss last Friday to the Winnipeg Jets. After this



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

stop in Columbus, the Hurricanes have a five-game homestand.

Carolina has relied on steady goaltending, with Petr Mrazek on a recent roll. In his last six appearances, he's 6-0 with a 1.66 goals against average, including a 3-0 victory Monday night at Colorado.

"A big win for us at this time of year," Brind'Amour said.

If Mrazek is used in the Columbus game, it will mark only the third time this season he appears in three straight games.

Things have been adding up for the Hurricanes. They have 83 team points, matching last season's total -- and yet there are 13 regular-season games remaining.

The Blue Jackets have been shut out three times this month, but then they showed offensive muscle in Tuesday night's 7-4 victory against the Boston Bruins.

"It's funny how it works sometimes," said Blue Jackets center Boone Jenner, who had his first NHL hat trick in the Boston game. "When you go through a little stretch like that when you're not scoring, I think you can get caught up in it and thinking about it too much."

The Blue Jackets realize it takes time for some of the parts to mesh together.

"A little bit snake-bitten, I think we all were," said Columbus center Ryan Dzingel, who arrived a trade from Ottawa a few weeks ago.

It has been seasons of fluctuation for Columbus defenseman Zach Werenski. He said he's trying to find a stable role across the final weeks of the season.

"It was kind of up and down," Werenski said. "I'm finding that balance and it's the right time to find it."

After Friday for Columbus, there's a four-game road trip that begins with Saturday's rematch at Boston. There's a confidence coming from the Blue Jackets that they've had the right approach even if some of the recent results have been out of the norm.

"You just have to play the same way," Jenner said. "The results will come from there."

The Hurricanes had concern about defenseman Calvin de Haan, who suffered a scary injury to his right eye Monday when he was hit by the blade of a stick. He was out of the hospital in time to return home with the team.

"His eye is responding as we would hope," team president and general manager Don Waddell said. "We are optimistic that he will make a normal recovery without restrictions to his ability to play hockey in the near future."

The Hurricanes recalled defenseman Haydn Fleury from Charlotte of the American Hockey League. He has one assist in 14 NHL games this season.

Meanwhile, Carolina winger Micheal Ferland, who has been out for about a week with an upper-body injury, might be ready to return, Brind'Amour said.

--Field Level Media

The Hockey News

Welcome to one of the most crowded Jack Adams Award races in NHL history

Barry Trotz has long been considered the frontrunner for the Jack Adams Award as the NHL's top coach, but the field is deeper than ever and there's a lot to take into consideration as we enter the homestretch.

By Jared Clinton

Jack Adams Award voting appeared to be clear-cut, black and white, cut and dried this season. And at mid-season, make no mistake, it was.

Had you asked just about anyone around the all-star break which bench boss was deserving of the nod as coach of the year, it would have been nearly unanimous. New York Islanders coach Barry Trotz, fresh off winning the Stanley Cup with the Washington Capitals, had worked magic behind the bench. He had taken an Islanders team expected to sink to the bottom of the NHL standings and turned it into not just a wild-card contender, but a team fighting for top spot in the Metropolitan Division. He had pushed all the right buttons, helped put in place systems that had transformed Robin Lehner and Thomas Greiss from second-string caliber keepers to top-tier Vezina Trophy quality goaltenders and

flipped the supposed script New York was supposed to be following.

Thus, it was by no means shocking to see Trotz picked as the mid-season frontrunner by just about every publication of note. He was also voted top coach at the all-star break by the Professional Hockey Writers Association. And while for these honors he received nothing but bragging rights -- the same amount one would expect from winning a three-legged race at a company picnic, but bragging rights, nevertheless. This is all to say that among all NHL bench bosses, Trotz was considered the best of the bunch at mid-season. Of that there was little doubt.

As we enter the homestretch, Trotz remains a frontrunner for the award, too. Arguably, he is alone at the head of the pack. His Islanders are two points off top spot in the division, trailing only the defending Stanley Cup champion Capitals. They have a plus-32 goal differential and have surrendered the fewest goals against in the league, this one season after finishing with the most of any club in the NHL. The offense has been good, if not great. And Trotz has really turned what some viewed as a roster filled with a whole lot of nothing into



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

a whole lot of something, and definitely much more than most would have expected in the aftermath of John Tavares' departure to the Toronto Maple Leafs as an unrestricted free agent.

But to say Trotz is a lock to win the award, to say he's the top candidate with no company around him, would be beyond foolish. As the season has worn on, several bench bosses have thrown their proverbial hats in the ring. Yes, the work Trotz has done borders on brilliant. Undoubtedly, he has spurred this team to greater success than anyone would have imagined. But the same could be said for several others, and it's making for one of the toughest and tightest Jack Adams fields in memory. Just consider the candidates:

Rick Tocchet, Arizona Coyotes

A late and unexpected entrant into coach of the year contention, and a coach whose candidacy is based wholly on his team's ability to cling to one of the final wild-card spots in the Western Conference. Entering action Thursday, Arizona is doing just that, one point clear of the Minnesota Wild for the second wild-card berth with a dozen games remaining in the Coyotes' season. Most impressive about Tocchet's year behind the Arizona bench is the way in which he's helped his team respond to adversity. Faced with injury after injury – including the major, potentially season-sinking loss of goaltender Antti Raanta – Tocchet's Coyotes have not only hung in the playoff race but have managed to leapfrog the Chicago Blackhawks, Colorado Avalanche and Wild in recent weeks.

In order for Tocchet to have a shot at the Jack Adams, though, the Coyotes need to make it to the dance. It would mark Arizona's first playoff berth since the 2011-12 campaign, and doing so during a season in which they've been more black-and-blue than nearly any team in the NHL would likely vault Tocchet into a top-three spot in voting.

Claude Julien, Montreal Canadiens

The Canadiens' coach has only earned passing praise in the face of Trotz's success with the Islanders and the rise of a few other clubs. But Julien deserves to be in the conversation for all the same reasons the Islanders bench boss finds himself arguably atop the list of the league's top coaches this season.

The expectations for Montreal were low, low, low, and not without reason. The Canadiens finished with the fourth-lowest point total in the NHL last season and their off-season adjustments included trading away top-six piece Alex Galchenyuk for then-struggling winger Max Domi, shipping out captain Max Pacioretty in a trade that was initially panned and eating salary in a Steve Mason buyout to acquire Joel Armia from the Winnipeg Jets. That hasn't stopped Julien from coaching this bunch up and turning it into one of the league's top possession teams and an unexpected wild-card contender, though.

Much like Tocchet, Julien will only earn consideration for the Jack Adams if Montreal makes it into the post-season. The Canadiens have a difficult road to hoe, but they're in the fight and certain to stay in the hunt until the final days.

Rod Brind'Amour, Carolina Hurricanes

Put your hand up if you thought it was a troubling hire. And now the few of you who aren't being honest, go ahead and

raise your hands, too. Brind'Amour came aboard in Carolina without any experience in the top job on an NHL bench or anywhere else, for that matter. The concern was he would be a downgrade from Bill Peters, who opted out of the final year of his deal to head for Calgary. Turns out, though, that Brind'Amour went to school on what made the Hurricanes tick under Peters and has brought many of those same tenets to Carolina this season.

The Hurricanes have played a creative possession game, moved the puck well, defended scoring areas and limited opportunities against all season long, and paired with some decent goaltending – "At long last!" cries a long-tormented fanbase – Brind'Amour has Carolina primed to snap the NHL's longest playoff drought. Truly, the only possible knock against Brind'Amour will come if the Hurricanes fail to make the playoffs. If Carolina earns a berth, though, one has to assume he finishes top-three in voting.

Craig Berube, St. Louis Blues

Jack Adams favorites have a tendency to be those who coach teams who had unexpected or surprising success. The evidence can be found in the past 10 winners of the award, more than a few of whom coached clubs that played above their heads en route to a post-season appearance. (Looking at you, Patrick Roy and the 2013-14 Colorado Avalanche.) But in a just world, Berube would deserve a top-three finish – and quite possibly a win – for his work in turning what was a locked-and-loaded yet somehow-floundering Blues team into a legitimate Western Conference contender.

Since Berube took over in St. Louis in November, the Blues are tied for the eighth-most points in the NHL and boast among the most impressive underlying numbers of any team in the league. At the risk of sounding hyperbolic, Berube's work with the Blues has been transformative. And maybe that's exactly the kind of season that should be awarded; truly impressive coaching of a good team that was, before changes, vastly underperforming.

The only possible knock against Berube is that he'll coach only 63 games this season, to which we say: who cares? That's three-quarters of a campaign, and he's had his team operating among the best of the best since he took over.

Bill Peters, Calgary Flames

Franchise point improvement is generally a decent indicator of which coaches will get considered for the Jack Adams. That's to say that if a team has a giant swing from one season to the next, say 20-plus points, that the coach is almost certain to be in the running. Well, turns out the coach on pace to guide his team to the largest season-over-season point improvement is Peters, who arrived in Calgary this summer and has turned the Flames into one of the Western Conference's best clubs.

At their current pace, Peters' Flames would see a 25-point increase from last season, a greater swing than the pace the Canadiens (24) or Islanders (23) find themselves on. More importantly, though, Calgary is playing excellent hockey under Peters. It's not just a win or two here or there. It's an entirely different club. The Flames control the play and have done so will poise all season long, and that can be tied almost directly to Peters' arrival.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

What could hurt Peters' case, especially with all three of the Canadiens, Hurricanes and Coyotes potential post-season clubs, is that he's coaching a star-studded lineup that has a great top-six and solid defense corps. It really shouldn't, though. He's been excellent.

Maybe most remarkable thing about the Jack Adams race this season, though, is that this list could keep going. Peter DeBoer's San Jose Sharks have been exceptional, Gerard Gallant continues to impress with the Vegas Golden Knights,

Bruce Cassidy doesn't get nearly enough attention for the job he's done with the Boston Bruins and Jon Cooper has the Tampa Bay Lightning on pace to flirt with the 130-point plateau.

So, is Trotz the frontrunner? Maybe. Maybe not. What we know for certain, though, is that this field is as deep as it has ever been, and no matter who wins, there will be at least a few coaches who can honestly say this could have been their year.



Carolina Hurricanes vs. Columbus Blue Jackets: Game Preview and Storm Advisory

The Hurricanes take on the Blue Jackets in a game that could go a long way to deciding each team's postseason fate.

By Andrew Ahr

Carolina Hurricanes (38-24-7) vs. Columbus Blue Jackets (39-28-3)

Friday, March 15, 2019 - 7:00 PM ET
Nationwide Arena - Columbus, OH

TV: Fox Sports Carolinas
Radio: 99.9 The Fan

SBN Opponent: The Cannon

The Hurricanes look to keep pace in the playoff race as they take on the Blue Jackets in Columbus without a defensive stalwart in Calvin de Haan.

Vital Statistics

Category	Hurricanes	Blue Jackets
Record	38-24-7	39-28-3
Points	83	81
Division Rank	4 Metro	5 Metro
Conference Rank	7 EC	8 EC
Last 10 Games	7-2-1	5-5-0
Streak	Won 2	Won 1
Goals/Game	3.00	3.07

Category	Hurricanes	Blue Jackets
Goals Against/Game	2.74	2.96
Shots/Game	34.7	31.8
Shots Against/Game	28.4	29.5
Faceoff %	48.8%	50.0%
Power Play % (Rank)	17.4% (20)	15.2% (T26)
Penalty Kill % (Rank)	81.9% (7)	84.8% (T2)
ES Corsi For %	54.76%	50.49%
ES PDO	99.4	99.7
PIM/Game	7:45	6:45
Goaltender #1		
Category	Petr Mrazek	Sergei Bobrovsky
Record	18-12-3	30-22-21
Save %	.908	.906
GAA	2.53	2.76
Goaltender #2		



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

Category	Curtis McElhinney	Joonas Korpisalo
Record	17-8-2	9-6-2
Save %	.914	.899
GAA	2.52	2.97

Game Notes

Tonight's game is the fourth and final meeting between the two teams this season. The Canes lead the season series at 2-1-0.

The Hurricanes took the first matchup in Nationwide Arena on October 5th for their first win of the season. Columbus won the November matchup and the Canes earned the win in the early January game.

After taking a stick blade to the eye, Calvin de Haan is reportedly feeling better but not close to returning to the team. He did not practice yesterday and will not play tonight.

Micheal Ferland, on the other hand, skated with the team in full capacity yesterday and is expected to play tonight against Columbus.

The Hurricanes have posted a record of 23-7-2 in their last 32 games. That's tied with the league leading Tampa Bay Lightning for the most wins and points since New Year's Eve.

Storm Advisory

Watch out: events at PNC Arena are being targeted in a ticket counterfeiting scheme. [TBJ]

Rod Brind'Amour appeared on Sirius XM yesterday morning to talk Hurricanes.

The Hurricanes will take part in what's believed to be the first NHL Broadcast in the Plains Cree Language against the Canadiens on March 24. Canes forward Micheal Ferland is of Cree descent, making it fitting that the Canes are involved. [CBC]

Systems Analyst: Bailed Out

Stellar goaltending is hiding the Hurricanes' defensive flaws.

By Ford Hatchett

The Carolina Hurricanes' horrific 8-1 drubbing at the hands of the Winnipeg Jets last week has been written off as an anomaly. In many ways it was, as the Hurricanes responded to win their next two games, both on the road. But some of the defensive breakdowns that led to those eight goals against have continued.

The biggest difference between the Canes victories in March and their 8-1 humiliation has been goaltending. Earlier this week, our Andrew Schnittker broke down how the tandem of Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney have carried Carolina

A CC community member from England is making the trip across the pond to spend a long weekend in North Carolina and see a Canes game in PNC Arena. Give some good advice regarding what to do during the stay in Raleigh! [CC Fanpost]

The draft lottery date has been moved up by the NHL. This is big news for the scouts who work tirelessly in order to ensure their team gets the best possible player on draft day. [The Hockey News]

Stalking the Standings

The Canadiens lost a big game last night against the Islanders. They now sit two points behind the Hurricanes with two fewer games remaining to play. Tonight is probably the biggest night of the season for the Hurricanes' playoff hopes, so be sure to keep an eye on the game. That said, with only one other game on the schedule that impacts the East playoff race, the Canes will end the night in a playoff spot. Which one, though, is still an open question.

Metro 1: Washington Capitals: 71 GP, 91 points, 105 pt pace, 38 ROW

Metro 2: New York Islanders: 69 GP, 88 points, 104 pt pace, 37 ROW

Metro 3: Pittsburgh Penguins: 71 GP, 87 points, 101 pt pace, 38 ROW

WC 1: Carolina Hurricanes, 69 GP, 83 points, 99 pt pace, 37 ROW

WC 2: Columbus Blue Jackets: 70 GP, 81 points, 95 pt pace, 38 ROW

9th: Montreal Canadiens: 71 GP, 81 points, 94 pt pace, 35 ROW

10th: Philadelphia Flyers: 70 GP, 76 points, 89 pt pace, 32 ROW

Tonight's Rooting Guide

Hurricanes over Blue Jackets, as if you needed us to tell you

Maple Leafs over Flyers

into playoff contention. Against Winnipeg, McElhinney wasn't his sharpest and the scoreboard reflected that.

There have been three main areas of defensive weakness that have plagued the Hurricanes: the allowance of breakaways, over pursuing backchecks, and puck watching.

Breakaways

Mrazek made plenty of timely saves in Colorado on Monday night, including this one. Justin Williams loses Colin Wilson in the neutral zone and Justin Faulk fails to recognize the odd man situation, giving Wilson a clean cut breakaway. Mrazek stands tall, protecting a one goal lead in the third.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

Here, one flip pass beats everyone as Brett Pesce loses an open ice battle with Rocco Grimaldi and Mrazek is forced to use his now patented poke check to save the day.

In Florida on March 2nd, Evgenii Dadonov raced through neutral ice on a breakaway only to be shut down by Mrazek. It's a breakdown that has become too common. The Hurricanes forecheckers give Dadonov too much space early, allowing him to pick up speed. Haydn Fleury miscalculates his step up and is taken out of the play. For his part, Trevor van Riemsdyk is inexplicably stretched outside of the dots in the neutral zone, leaving far too much open ice in the middle and forcing Mrazek to make a breakaway save to preserve a third period tie.

Over Pursuit

One of the things fans have come to love about this particular iteration of Hurricanes hockey has been the work ethic. This is a team that undoubtedly works hard and often times has to in order to keep pace with more skilled opponents. But working hard isn't enough. This team also needs to work smart and too often in recent weeks the Canes have been all effort but no brains, especially on their backchecks.

Mrazek's most miraculous save on Monday night began due to an ill advised pinch by Brett Pesce. Justin Faulk does well to force Colin Wilson to shoot on the two-on-one. Nino Niederreiter does a great job on the backcheck, but instead of stopping in front of the net, he over pursues the play and winds up below the goal line. With Faulk taken out of the play after leaving his feet and Niederreiter behind the net, Wilson has a golden second opportunity after a feed from Carl Soderberg. Mrazek comes up large, and Niederreiter's over pursuit becomes a moot point.

In Boston, Dougie Hamilton is beaten in the neutral zone. As he races back to the net, he gets caught puck watching (more on that in a minute) and Lucas Wallmark checks his man back to the net. Both Hamilton and Wallmark do well to get back, but over pursue and fail to stop at the net, instead winding up below the goal line. This gives the two Bruins they should be covering high quality chances that McElhinney fends off.

Puck Watching

Metropolitan Division Weekly Roundup: Traffic Jam at the Top

Three teams are within six points of the division lead, and potential playoff series are far from set.

By Zeke Lukow

1. Washington Capitals: 89 Points (41-22-7) 70 GP

The Capitals had their seven-game winning streak snapped on Tuesday, but Alex Ovechkin recorded his 1,200th career point in the 5-3 loss. He is now just the 49th player to record 1,200 points and joined rival Sidney Crosby who did it on March 5th. Ovi now ranks 48th of all time and tied on the all-time list with fellow Capital Dino Ciccarelli. Ovi also has 653 goals which is only behind Brett Hull who had 656 when crossing the 1,200-point mark. This is the second year in a

row that he has hit a milestone at game 69, last year he hit the 600-goal mark at the same point in the season.

Despite winning seven in a row before losing to the Penguins, the Caps only have a two-point lead over the Islanders and a four-point lead over the Penguins for first in the division. The Caps are now about to go on the road for a three-game road trip and play the Lightning twice in four games. They will have to avoid a possible trap-game against the tanking Devils in between their bouts with Tampa. This game is tricky since they will most likely rest starting goaltender Braden Holtby so he doesn't have to play back-to-back games. What does work in Washington's favor is that the Devils are, uh, hilariously bad.

One of the most glaring concerns is the tendency of the Canes to puck watch in their defensive end. Too often over the past three weeks, the Hurricanes have been caught too focused on the puck carrier and, as a result, losing their defensive assignments.

It was evident in the loss to the Jets. Here Nino Niederreiter gets mesmerized by the puck carrier in the corner. In the process, Niederreiter's mark, Ben Chiarot, finds open ice in the high slot and makes no mistake with his chance.

Ten minutes later, four Hurricanes defenders were caught watching the puck, letting one pass beat them all for a Nikolaj Ehlers goal. Brett Pesce engages and loses a board battle with Kevin Hayes. Jaccob Slavin and Sebastian Aho each follow Jet forward Kyle Connor behind the net placing two Canes on one Jet. If you're a math major that means there is at least one Jet unmarked. Neither Hurricane communicates the obvious danger, instead opting to stare at Hayes.

Justin Williams is along the wall expecting a breakout pass, but once it is clear the Jets have won possession the board battle, Williams continues to gaze at the play below the goal line and fails to find a defensive assignment. Ehlers, unmarked, blasts one by McElhinney.

On a night where you lose 8-1 those pucks wind up in the back of your net. But three days earlier in Boston, Greg McKegg let his eyes wander to the puck carrier and his mark, Brad Marchand, gets a Grade A scoring chance. Fortunately, McElhinney stopped not only the first attempt, but the follow-up as well.

In Colorado, it was Mrazek's turn to bail out the wandering eyes of Jordan Staal, Dougie Hamilton and Jaccob Slavin. Bonus points if you notice Andrei Svechnikov lose his man while glancing at the puck carrier.

The Hurricanes have gotten away from their normally sound defensive game, but their goaltenders have been bailing them out. These are pucks that could, and probably should, wind up as goals against if not for Mrazek and McElhinney. But if the breakdowns continue and the goalies aren't on their "A" game, there could be more 8-1 embarrassments in store in the final 13 games of the regular season.

2. New York Islanders: 87 Points (40-22-7) 69 GP



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

The Islanders have struggled a bit lately with a 5-4-1 record in their last 10 games, which is the worst of the top four teams in the Metro. Despite this, they are still only two points out of first place behind the Capitals. With the much easier schedule down the stretch, the Islanders are more likely to take the division over Washington. They play five games against teams in a playoff position, where the Caps play seven. The final game of the season will be a showdown between the top two teams which could very well determine the division title.

Robin Lehner, who has missed the last three games with an upper-body injury, may be able to return to play tonight against the Canadiens. Lehner expressed his frustration with Brady Tkachuk and the NHL over the hit that he took that knocked him out of the game against the Senators last Tuesday. Thomas Greiss has been able to hold down the fort with a 2-1-0 record including a shutout against the Blue Jackets on Monday.

3. Pittsburgh Penguins: 85 Points (38-23-9) 70 GP

The Penguins have now won four out of their last five games, making it extremely hard for the Hurricanes to pull away in the standings. Tuesday night's game against the Capitals was also a milestone game for the Penguins. Evgeni Malkin recorded his 1,000th point and is only the 88th player of all time and fifth active player to reach that mark. This was the cherry on top of also ending the Caps' seven game win-streak, putting the rest of the playoff teams in striking distance.

The bigger piece for the success of the Penguins was Phil Kessel snapping his goal drought Thursday night. Kessel scored his first goal in 17 games when he scored on the power play just two minutes into the first period. Kessel has yet to score an even strength goal since the drought began, but he scored another power play goal on Tuesday against the Caps. If Kessel can fully get back into the groove, it will be a tough issue for the rest of the division heading into the playoffs.

4. Carolina Hurricanes: 83 Points (38-24-7) 69 GP

The Carolina Hurricanes had quite the roller coaster weekend, they got blown out at home 8-1 but then won two straight on the road against the Nashville Predators and Colorado Avalanche. One of the big questions going into the weekend is how the Canes would respond without Micheal Ferland in the top six. Finally, Rod Brind'Amour gave the second line nod to rookie Andrei Svechnikov over Warren Foegele.

The plan was always to get Svechnikov a larger role, but the fear was that he was not ready for an expanded role. This season he has looked strong with the puck out performing his normal line mates but struggled with penalties taking 56 PIMS. On Monday he proved that he is ready for a full-time role on the second line. He scored two goals and had the assist on the game winning goal. The game winning goal and his first goal of the game were on plays that started in the Canes own defensive zone.

This shows that Brind'Amour has full trust in him. Throughout the season Svechnikov has been mainly deployed in offensive scenarios with a 58.89% Offensive zone starts. On

Monday, he had zero offensive zone starts, nine neutral zone starts, and three defensive zone starts. All three-defensive zone starts led to a goal. The final goal he was out with the Avs' sixth attacker on the ice. He was not only out when they needed a big defensive stop, he also earned the empty net goal showing that Brind'Amour is not concerned to play him when they need defense.

5. Columbus Blue Jackets: 81 Points (39-28-3) 70 GP

The Blue Jackets followed up a disappointing 2-0 shutout loss to the Islanders with a massive 7-4 win against the Boston Bruins. The Blue Jackets are just 3-4-0 in the month of March and looked to slump their way out of the playoff race until they turned it around and throttled a previously hot Bruins team. The Blue Jackets now play a crucial game against the Hurricanes which could see them get to the first wild card position. More importantly the Blue Jackets are about to go on the road for four straight games including a lengthy Western Canada road trip for three games.

Columbus will be needing to get more out of their deadline acquisitions if they expect to make the playoffs. When they traded for Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel they were hoping that they would have top line production out of a second line, but that hasn't been the case. The two former Senators have been able to drive possession with 53.28% and 52.53% Corsi respectively, but the issue is their production on the scoresheet. They combined for just three goals and eight assists with 20 games played between them (11 for Duchene and 9 for Dzingel).

6. Philadelphia Flyers: 76 Points (34-27-8) 69 GP

The Flyers sit just five-points out of a playoff position and everyone in Philadelphia is still holding out hope that they will be able to sneak into a playoff game. However, they will have to do this without Jakub Voracek for two games. Voracek was suspended on a counter hit on Johnny Boychuk. The suspension is controversial since Boychuk appeared to be the one making a run on Voracek and not the other way around, but the NHL upheld the suspension after an appeal. Voracek already served one game, but now he will have to miss a crucial game against the Washington Capitals tonight.

The Flyers are also kicking off a stretch of four straight games against playoff teams and eight of their next nine opponents currently sit in a playoff position. When they are already trying to make up points against the rest of the division this looks like a herculean task. Only two of these games are against teams they are not competing with in the standings for a playoff position. This has the ability to rocket them up the standings — or end their playoff dreams just as quickly.

7. New York Rangers: 69 Points (28-29-13) 70 GP

The Rangers goaltending refuses to let the team go into a full tank. In their past eight games they have had five overtime losses. These five points have proven critical for the Rangers. Without them they would be in sixth to last, one point ahead of the Anaheim Ducks for the fifth pick. As they stand now they are six points out of the top five draft odds. That amounts to about a 6% change in odds for a top three



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

pick and is as far as they are going to be able to fall in the standings before the end of the year.

In other Rangers news, their top pick in last year's draft, Vitaly Kravtsov, will be unable to sign with the Rangers for the end of the season. His KHL contract runs through April and his current team, Traktor, will not release him from his deal despite their season being over. This isn't the end of the world for the Rangers, he will just have to come over after their season is over if he wants a head start on training and learning English. The good news is that he will now be ineligible for the Seattle expansion draft.

8. New Jersey Devils: 61 Points (26-37-9) 71 GP

There's not too much to be excited about when it comes to the Devils and the last month of the season. They have now lost seven straight games and haven't won consecutive games since February 15-17. From now until the second week in April the only thing that fans can really do is just check Tankathon for draft lottery simulations.

With 10 players out with injuries, New Jersey has had to cycle young players into the NHL lineup. This isn't all bad as it also allows the team to evaluate their talent. Their most recent callup is defenseman Colton White. White was a fourth-round selection in the 2015 NHL draft. This year he has six goals and 19 assists in 61 games in the AHL. He joins Kevin Rooney, Michael McLeod, and Joseph Anderson as players on entry-level deals on the Devils active roster.

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

SportScan

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

1136073 NHL

At 16, Tyrel Bauer uprooted his life to play junior hockey. Can he turn it into a ticket to the NHL?

By Scott Hanson

At nights, Tyrel Bauer performs in front of thousands of fans.

During the day, the 16-year-old is a straight-A student at Kentwood High School, despite living hundreds of miles from home, in a new country and with a new "family."

It's all part of the journey that Bauer hopes will lead to the NHL.

The rookie defenseman for the Kent-based Seattle Thunderbirds knew it would be a challenge as he pursues the same journey so many other young Canadian kids have taken before him.

It is the same path navigated so successfully by Mathew Barzal, last year's NHL Rookie of the Year and a British Columbia native who played four seasons with the T-birds from 2013 to 2017.

Stories like Barzal's provide young players inspiration, not that Bauer has needed much prodding to work hard, whether it be at hockey or in school.

Bauer, who is mature beyond his years, has been a pleasant surprise for the T-birds, more than holding his own against players a few years older. He is just as determined to do well at school.

"It can be a whirlwind for a young kid, living with a new family, new school, new country," said Thunderbirds coach Matt O'Dette, who began his playing career in the same fashion. "That's a lot to absorb for a young kid. Ty's a pretty mature kid for his age and he's handled it pretty smoothly."

Tyrel Bauer, a 16-year-old athlete with NHL prospects, plays defense with the Thunderbirds during practice at Kent Valley Ice Centre Wednesday, March 6, 2019. Bauer, who has a 4.0 GPA in... (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times) More

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Born to play hockey

Bauer, from a Calgary suburb, jokes he was born with skates on and doesn't remember a time when he was not playing hockey and dreaming of playing in the NHL. At 6-3, 206 pounds, Tyrel excelled in baseball, soccer and wrestling, but his passion has always been hockey.

There are two primary paths to an NHL career: college or the junior leagues, where teens leave home, "billet" with new families and often attend local schools.

Not affiliated with an NHL team, the T-birds are in the Western Hockey League, which is for players 15 to 20 years old. As one of three top-tier junior leagues, it has long been a steppingstone to the NHL for Canadian prospects.

Bauer caught the attention of T-birds scouts while playing for the Airdrie Extreme Bantam AAA team in Alberta, and Seattle made Bauer its second-round selection in the 2017 Bantam draft.

The decision still, Bauer's family wrestled with the choice.

"For me, it came down to the fact I felt I could be ready to play pro hockey by the time I was 20 years old as opposed to college where you have some more time," said Bauer. "We looked at the academic part of it and were satisfied with the schooling the Western Hockey League provides. I believe I am a good enough student that I can manage the hardships I encounter."

Bauer receives a small stipend and became ineligible to play for an NCAA team once he signed with the T-birds. The fact that the WHL offers a one-year full college scholarship for each year played in the league also helped sway his family.

It was time to start a new life.

...

A heavy load

After signing with the T-birds, Bauer spent most of last season with the Airdrie Bisons in the Alberta Major Midget Hockey League.

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Despite the upgrade in competition, he has been a solid contributor for the T-birds this year. Teammates' injuries mean he's gotten more playing time than a rookie might expect. Bauer said it's been fun and challenging at the same time.

"Coming from midget hockey, we practiced two to three times a week with two games on the weekend and 36 in all," he said. "You come here and you are practicing every day with a 68-game schedule and it's a challenge just adapting to that."

"Back home, you had your life and you kind of played hockey on the side. Here it is hockey, with your life on the side."

MEET TYREL BAUER

Age: 16



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

GPA: 4.0

Hometown: Calgary, Alberta

Games: 63

Goals: 2

Assists: 12

Points: 14

He's also settled in nicely with Bill and Donna Skubinna of Kent, a billet family arranged by the T-birds, who have welcomed him with open arms. They've also become friendly with his parents, Steve and Raelyn, making it a little easier for them to see their youngest leave home early.

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"Your kid dreams of this his whole life, but when it actually happens, it is like, 'Whoa, wait a minute,' said Raelyn Bauer, Tyrel's mother. "But it's great for him, and he loves it. It's hard for us, but we're following his dream too and that's exciting for all of us."

The two have traveled to Seattle several times to see their son play and, while at home in Cochrane, Alberta, they livestream his games.

The Bauers like the progress their son is making in hockey, but are just as interested in his schooling.

"We don't worry about him too much from that perspective, but at the same time we are his parents and we check in on him just about every day and the subject of school comes up pretty regularly," said Steve Bauer, who grew up as a goalie and still plays recreationally.

The Skubinnas, who have hosted players twice before, are impressed with what they've seen.

"He knows what it takes, what his responsibilities are and he knows there is no playing around," said Bill Skubinna, who said Bauer is unfailingly polite, gracious and humble. "This is something he wants to do and he knows he has to be serious about it. He is a very smart kid, very intelligent and he knows how the world works. He knows you don't get anything unless you work for it."

Jared Crooks, the T-birds' skill development and video coach, gets daily updates on his players' progress at Kentwood. He had as many as 10 players there in the fall, and five now. Those five, including Bauer, will return to their Canadian schools at season's end.

Kentwood counselor Jamie Eager works with the players to make sure the classes they are taking will transfer back to their Canadian schools. But it's on the players to be successful in school while missing a lot of time during road trips to far-off places like Red Deer, Medicine Hat and Kamloops.

"It is tough for the guys, because they do miss a lot of school," Eager said. "So they have to work really hard to get their work ahead of time and make sure they are studying on the road and do a lot of makeup when they come back. Although I communicate with the teachers about when they'll be gone and when they'll be back, the responsibility really is on them. They work really hard."

Bauer is rare in his level of dedication and self-motivation when it comes to school. But it has always been like that for him.

"If you want to be good at something, you can," Bauer said. "It comes down to work ethic. If it's hockey, you practice, shoot pucks and take care of your body. If you want to be good in school, you study. I've learned from my parents that nothing is given to you."

Those who know the mild-mannered Bauer might be surprised to see him on the ice, where he becomes a different person and is not

afraid to fight when needed. Several, including a recent one against a 20-year-old, are on YouTube.

"

He knows what it takes, what his responsibilities are and he knows there is no playing around." — Bill Skubinna, host parent

Bauer, whose missing upper front tooth was the result of a stick to the mouth at his fifth-grade party and not a fight or game wound, laughed when asked if thinks older players are testing him.

"I think it's more me testing them," he said. "My dad used to always say, 'You can be a super nice, very caring, understandable guy off the ice, but as soon as you hit the ice, it's war.' If somebody disrespects me or my teammates on the ice, then I'll fight. ... Once you come off the ice, you are back to who you are, with all your morals and values."

• • •

Bright future

You certainly wouldn't know Bauer is younger than his teammates by watching him on the ice. He has two goals, 11 assists and is tied for third on the team in penalty minutes — a testament to his physical style of play.

"Normally, a 16-year-old kid doesn't have the kind of responsibilities on ice that he has had," says O'Dette, the coach. "But he's diligent as a hockey player, always putting in extra time with the coaches and (watching) video. What makes him special is the professionalism he has at that age. He's the kind of dedicated guy we are looking for, both on the ice and in school."

Scouts are undoubtedly watching, and he will be eligible for the NHL draft next season. He might continue playing with the T-birds even if he is drafted. The Islanders sent Barzal back to the T-birds for two more seasons after drafting him in the first round.

Bauer said he has not given any thought to what he might do if pro hockey does not work out, but knows college and the WHL scholarship money will be there. "It's important to have that to fall back on," he said.

In the meantime, he is dedicated to making his dream come true, hundreds of miles from home.

"It grows you up fast," said O'Dette. "It's important what they are doing on the ice, but it's just as important that their school is where it needs to be and their home life is comfortable."

Said mother Raelyn: "We are so grateful he is in a place where he is happy and can fit right in and that certainly helps with the transition of being away from home."

Seattle Times LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136014 Columbus Blue Jackets

Blue Jackets | Prized prospect Alexandre Texier headed to AHL

Brian Hedger The Columbus Dispatch @BrianHedger

Mar 14, 2019 at 9:54 PM

The French flash is taking another stride toward the Blue Jackets.

After helping KalPa end its season with a win on Thursday in the Finnish League — scoring twice, including the overtime winner — 19-year-old forward Alexandre Texier is heading to North America to finish the season.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

"He's under contract, so he's coming over and we'll see where it goes from that, but he's a top prospect for sure," Blue Jackets general manager Jarmo Kekalainen said. "We're really, really, really excited about him."

If you're keeping track, that's three reallys, from a general manager who prides himself on stoicism and patience, so it's safe to say Kekalainen is fired up.

It's easy to see why.

KalPa didn't qualify for the playoffs, but Texier thrived in his second season with the club. After putting up 13 goals and nine assists as a rookie — and suffering a broken collarbone — Texier flourished this season with 14 goals and 27 assists in 55 games.

"I think he had an unbelievable season," said Kekalainen, who played in the Finnish League and has scouted it for years. "For that age, to do that in that league is special. That's why he was one of those prospects that under no circumstances was going to be moved at the deadline."

Kekalainen mentioned Texier, Swedish forward Emil Bemstrom and Canadian forward Liam Foudy during his news conference after the trade deadline Feb. 25. After adding four players in trades, including center Matt Duchene for two forward prospects sent to Ottawa, Kekalainen made it clear his top prospects were off-limits.

"If it took (Texier) or Bemstrom or Foudy to get what we got, we wouldn't have those (new) players," said Kekalainen, who moved up to the 45th pick in the 2017 draft to get Texier by trading prospect Keegan Kolesar to the Vegas Golden Knights. "We're very eager to see him here now."

Texier is from Grenoble, located in the French Alps. He began his pro career in the French league at 16, playing one season for the same team his father, Fabrice, played for, but he was considered a diamond in the rough.

The Blue Jackets, however, think the gem is no longer hidden.

Texier arrives Friday in Chicago, may warm up with the Cleveland Monsters before a game against the Chicago Wolves and will likely make his American Hockey League debut Saturday in Rockford, Illinois.

"The NHL is still the best league in the world," Kekalainen said. "No need to rush him into anything that he's not ready for, and who knows, maybe he is ready for it. But let's take it one step at a time."

Lucky ducks

The tale of the "lucky duck" is beginning to make its way through the Blue Jackets' locker room.

It involves a plastic, yellow duck that is taking up residence in Zach Werenski's locker — after Ryan Dzingel had him touch it for good luck before a 7-4 victory Tuesday against the Bruins.

Werenski had a goal and three assists, snapping a 30-game goal drought, and Dzingel scored his first goal as a Blue Jacket and added two assists. Now, other Blue Jackets want some duck luck.

"Right before the game, (Dzingel) said, 'Hey, Z, touch my lucky duck,'" Cam Atkinson said. "Next thing you know, they both went off and had a night. So, I'm going to be touching the lucky duck next game."

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136015 Columbus Blue Jackets

Guideposts: Is bad luck all that is affecting the Blue Jackets?

By Alison Lukan

Mar 14, 2019

After a splashy trade deadline, a 4-5-0 record since probably wasn't what Blue Jackets fans — or management, for that matter — had in mind. But of late, there has been belief that the team was playing the right way and had to keep with it.

"It's part of the game, to battle through this," John Tortorella said Tuesday before his team put together a 7-4 win over Boston. "I think our game is there in a lot of areas. Obviously we need to score to win, to get results."

So was Tortorella just being optimistic, or was he on to something with his belief in the quality of the Blue Jackets' play?

Better backstops

Before Tuesday's win, through eight games, the Jackets had been outscored 14 to 24. Even after a seven-goal burst against Boston, the team still sits with a minus-3 goal differential since the trade deadline.

When this kind of performance is happening on paper, often the first place people look is goaltending. But, that's not been an area of growing weakness for the Jackets in this stretch. In fact, it is improving.

The chart below from Sean Tierney shows all the shots that Sergei Bobrovsky has faced in just under 400 minutes of play across eight games. The red shows areas from where a greater amount of shots have come.

In the table to the right, we see that Bobrovsky has allowed 22 goals on 297 shots, which is slightly higher than the number of goals he was expected to allow (19.52) based on shot quality.

On first pass, that doesn't feel like a good thing. But note the graph in the bottom right. This mini-chart tracks how Bobrovsky performed relative to expectations; the higher the line, the better.

What we see is that game over game, Bobrovsky's play is improving. He's been on an upward trajectory in terms of playing as he should against the shots he faces, and, of late he has found ways to not just meet, but exceed expectations.

In terms of the rest of the goaltending lineup, Keith Kincaid has yet to see time in a game, and Joonas Korpisalo has played just 59 minutes across two games. But, the Finn has played competently in that very small sample.

Staying stingy

The goaltenders are meeting expectations, but are they being asked to do too much?

Moving outward from the net, the next question becomes, how is the team playing defensively?

The Jackets haven't been a defensive stalwart this season. According to Evolving-hockey.com, in five-on-five play, they rank ninth in the league in shot attempts against per 60 (54.5), but sixteenth in shot quality against (2.4 expected goals per 60). That's not tops in the league, but it is solid.

The good news is, since the deadline, compared with the bulk of their season, Columbus is actually doing a better job defensively. Using data from NaturalStatTrick.com, the table below looks at how many five-on-five events (rated per 60 minutes of play) are happening against the Jackets comparing the 60 games before the deadline with the nine since.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

In all but goals (which have held steady), there's been a nice bump in terms of reducing what other teams create against the Jackets.

Another improvement? Columbus is reducing the amount of quality looks an opponent gets on the ice.

The chart below from Tierney shows the rolling average of the expected goals against that the Jackets have allowed this season. The black bar marks league average, and the lower a team is below the bar, the better as that means fewer quality chances against. The red line marks the trade deadline.

We can see that since the deadline, Columbus is actually enjoying its longest stretch of being lower (which in this case is better) than league average when it comes quality chances against.

But stopping opponents is one thing. If you can't also turn play around to get going the other way, you're stuck playing defense more than offense, and that's a risky game.

We've seen stretches of late when the Jackets have struggled to get out of their own zone. It bears mention that this is one of the parts of the game where Ryan Murray is missed.

Using tracking data from Corey Sznajder, the chart below measures both how much a player prevents an opponent's zone entry (marked "break-up %" on the y-axis) and how frequently they get out of the defensive zone with possession (marked "possession exit %" on the x-axis). The higher up a player's icon is, the more he prevents zone entries against. The farther to the right, the more times the player gets the puck out of the zone with possession.

We see that Murray ranks second only to Seth Jones in terms of helping his team get the puck going the other way.

Looks and luck

Of course, the final piece of the puzzle is offense. Let's start with the first step, and that's generating chances. Just as we looked at shots and chances against, let's look at shots and chances for.

What we see is that the Jackets are still shooting, but they are getting a few more shots blocked, and a few more misses when the puck gets through.

"Hitting the net is an inconsistency of ours," Tortorella said Tuesday.

On top of all of that, the Jackets are suffering from a spurt of bad luck that has their post-deadline shooting percentage (4.91) cut by almost half compared with the majority of the season (9.11).

How does all this affect overall expected offense? As the chart below shows, shot quality has dipped for the second time this season and at a most inconvenient time.

But lest people think it's time to hit the panic button, the team's expected goal performance is already rebounding, and when a shooting percentage drops that much, that fast, expect it to return to something a little closer to (at least) average sooner than later.

But what does it all mean?

As Tortorella said, results matter, and this time of year, there's little room for moral victories, but is the sky falling? No, it's not.

While the offense has struggled, it is trending up in terms of how it's playing, and the drop in shooting percentage should resolve if not entirely back to its pre-deadline levels, at the very least to league average.

In the meantime, the defensive play has allowed the Jackets to stay fairly close to their pre-deadline advantages in terms of having an edge in shot share and overall scoring chances. They've also managed to grow their margin in terms of shots taken and shots on target, which is impressive when you consider that there's been a drop offensively. There's no doubt that their drop in goal share ties closely to that pesky shooting percentage.

It also bears mention that nine games are an extremely small sample size. Of course this is the time of year when there is not a lot of time to wait for things to balance out, but in the grand scheme of things, we can see in terms of overall expectations, the Jackets are already rebounding in terms of being on the winning side of things in terms of how they are playing.

Is all of this the cost of finding ways for a new offensive lineup to jell? Is it just a blip similar to earlier ones in the season? That we don't know. The team is walking a fine line when it comes to margin of error just as they have all season, but if we believe in what the Jackets have shown on the season as a whole as well as in the law of averages, the team has a good chance to start to get the results of play that is returning to a solid level.

"As we've talked about, our game is improving," Tortorella said. "We just have to keep on playing and trying to get a result."

Visuals via Sean Tierney; data via NaturalStatTrick.com and Evolving-Hockey.com. All numbers represent five-on-five play unless otherwise stated. This post relies heavily on shot-based metrics. Here is a good primer on these numbers.

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1135990 Buffalo Sabres

Sabres shut out for a third consecutive game, the 'definition of inconsistent'

By Lance Lysowski

Published Thu, Mar 14, 2019|Updated Thu, Mar 14, 2019

A 10-game winning streak propelled the Buffalo Sabres to the top of the NHL for one day and offered hope to a fan base that has not experienced playoff hockey since 2011.

Now, the Sabres' second season under coach Phil Housley could be defined by another figure: 197 minutes, 40 seconds. That is where their scoring drought stood after they were shut out for a third consecutive game, losing to the Pittsburgh Penguins, 5-0, Thursday night in KeyBank Center.

The performance caused Jason Pominville to question the Sabres' pride, and Kyle Okposo grimaced while trying to explain how their play has become so unpredictable since the height of their success.

The Sabres (30-31-9) have lost 12 of their last 14 games, including six straight, and own the league's second-worst record since November had the city's fans imagining a playoff run. The team has not won back-to-back games since Dec. 13, and has gone over one week without scoring a goal, despite facing two backup goalies during that span.

"Consistency has been an issue," Okposo lamented. "When was the last time we won back-to-back games? Three months? I don't know. That's the definition of inconsistent. I don't know what else to do. I don't know what to say, but we have to find something. We have to find some jam in our game and our attitude and the way we approach the game, because that can't happen at home."

Buffalo took a different path toward the same result. Okposo described the 3-0 loss Saturday in Colorado as "bad all-around," while Tuesday's 2-0 loss to Dallas at home was partly bad luck. Allowing five goals in two periods to Pittsburgh (39-23-9) was a continuation of a season-long problem.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

The Sabres routinely choose to opt out of the sort of blue-collar work that fuel teams such as the Penguins. Pittsburgh finished with more shots (28-26) and shot attempts (54-50), but it was in jeopardy of facing a deficit on multiple occasions.

However, Buffalo was unable to sustain offensive pressure because it opted for shots from the outside, rather than getting the puck behind the net and forechecking. The Sabres also failed to create traffic in front of Penguins goalie Casey DeSmith, who had a clear look at most of the 26 shots he stopped.

Meanwhile, Penguins center Sidney Crosby set up Phil Kessel for the go-ahead goal at 6:40 into the second period on a play that began with a simple forecheck behind Sabres goalie Carter Hutton. Pittsburgh pushed its lead to 2-0 when Hutton was unable to see Brian Dumoulin's shot because of a screen by Teddy Blueger.

"That's winning hockey," Pominville said. "That's what we have to get back to. We have to have more pride to get to that area, get our nose dirty. It's a tough league to score in. You've got to pay a price to get to the net and we have to get pucks there. Right now, we're definitely not doing enough."

Patric Hornqvist made the Penguins' lead 3-0 at 17:08 into the second period, when he parked himself in front of the net, collected a loose puck that went off a shin pad and fired a backhanded shot for a power-play goal.

Nick Bjugstad and Jake Guentzel also scored, the latter coming on a net-front screen with 1:58 left in regulation, to give the Sabres their most lopsided defeat since a 7-2 loss in Edmonton on Jan. 14.

Meanwhile, the Sabres' only quality chances came from around the net. Conor Sheary, who finished with a team-high six shots on goal, had three shots from the slot stopped by DeSmith. Jeff Skinner's goalless drought stretched to 13 games -- tied for the second-longest of his career -- after he also couldn't score on a power-play chance from in front of the net.

"That's just where we're at as a group right now," Housley said. "We continue to talk about getting to zone one, getting in front of the net. I think we didn't do that, whether it was off the rush we didn't drive and stop there and play a puck. We could have created our own chances more by getting to the net. We have to scrape and claw. We have to get dirty now."

Housley could not explain why his team has a propensity to stray from what makes it successful, while Sheary said there needs to be a "buy-in" to playing the type of hard-nosed style deployed by the league's elite teams.

Entering Thursday, the Sabres had scored the sixth-fewest goals since November, and their issues are magnified without Eichel, who has 25 goals among 72 points in 65 games. He will be eligible to play Saturday night in Carolina, but his teammates don't seem close to a solution.

Buffalo has been formidable at times throughout the season, holding the distinction of being only one of two teams to mount a third-period comeback against the Penguins, and has beaten Washington, Tampa Bay, Winnipeg, the New York Islanders and Calgary Flames.

Yet, their season could be defined by a scoreless drought that has assured they will become only the second team in NHL history to miss the playoffs in the same season they won 10 games in a row.

"It's proven to work earlier this year, so this is a frustrating time for us," Sheary said. "We're obviously not feeling great about ourselves. We just have to come to the rink ready to work each day and hopefully put out a better effort Saturday."

1135991 Buffalo Sabres

Mike Harrington: Firing Housley may be only choice Sabres have

By Mike Harrington

Published Thu, Mar 14, 2019|Updated Fri, Mar 15, 2019

There's no way Terry and Kim Pegula thought they'd be at this point. And Jason Botterill acted in astonishment when the subject was dared to be broached three weeks ago during his impromptu press conference in Tampa.

But here we are. Again.

The Sabres have been shut out three times in a row after Thursday's dreadful 5-0 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins. It's the second year in a row they've sunk to that level, after it never happened in the franchise's first 48 years of existence.

The players have been terrible the last 45 games -- putting up a 13-25-7 record that's second-worst in the NHL in that stretch -- and the general manager is 2 for 2 in putting together flawed rosters, but we all know what happens in these situations.

You can't fire 20 players, although Botterill would do well to dump half of them again this summer. And it's hard to imagine the Pegulas reserve a spot for Botterill at the Osteria 166 bar with the ghosts of Tim Murray and Doug Whaley less than two years after they hired him to undo the damage they blamed Murray for.

So that means the nuclear option is upon us: Phil Housley is in real trouble.

Now, the disclaimer right from the top: Regular readers of this space know I do not believe in firing coaches -- or GMs -- every two years, which is what this franchise seems bent on doing. But it's increasingly apparent that Housley has to go.

Maybe the owners and the GM keep Housley on a short leash and tell him he has to remove all his assistants except perhaps for defense and penalty kill coach Steve Smith.

But if they keep him, what do they have to sell?

The KeyBank Center organist was playing Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow" at one point in the second period and it's clearly been the Pegula mantra. Because we've never gotten to today around here.

There was Sam Reinhart coming. A full tank to land Jack Eichel. A Stanley Cup coach in Dan Bylsma. A 27-point improvement. Then the hiring of Botterill and Housley when the players and fans tired of Bylsma. Then the lottery win of Rasmus Dahlin after last year's 62-point disaster.

What can they possibly do this year to get anyone to keep season tickets? Unless they strike Jack Hughes gold in the lottery, the only card they may have left to play is the coach.

Housley is no dummy. He knows how these things work.

There's little pride left on this team. Too many guys are quitting on him. Housley tried to point out it was scoreless after the first period Thursday and that's true. And so was the Sabres' 9-2 advantage in shots on goal at one point of the second period. But when you haven't scored a goal in three games, that's grasping at straws.

Sabres shut out for a third consecutive game, the 'definition of inconsistent'



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

best scoring chance was a Casey Mittelstadt power-play shot that went off DeSmith's glove midway through the period.

Lineup: Defenseman Zach Bogosian was scratched and remains day-to-day with an upper-body injury suffered during the second period of a 2-0 loss to Dallas on Tuesday night. Winger Zemgus Girgenson was the Sabres' healthy scratch. Additionally, defenseman Jake McCabe remains out with an upper-body injury.

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1135993 Buffalo Sabres

Sabres vs Penguins: Five Things to Know

By Mike Harrington

Published Thu, Mar 14, 2019|Updated Thu, Mar 14, 2019

In a season going nowhere, the Buffalo Sabres can actually complete a season sweep of the Pittsburgh Penguins with a win tonight in KeyBank Center. Faceoff is 7:05 p.m. on MSG and WGR Radio.

The Sabres have not swept Pittsburgh since going 4-0 in 2005-06 – Sidney Crosby's rookie year. They have won both previous meetings in overtime, with a Jack Eichel goal producing a 5-4 win Nov. 19 in PPG Paints Arena and a Conor Sheary tally giving the Sabres a 4-3 win here on March 1.

Of course, this one will be tougher with Eichel serving the second of his two-game suspension for his hit on Colorado's Carl Soderberg last Saturday in Denver.

"The first time we played them we were in a different spot where there was a big belief every time we got down that we were going to have this comeback," coach Phil Housley said today, referring to a game in the middle of Buffalo's 10-game winning streak.

"Last time, guys just kept fighting. I really liked the way we played in the third period. We were aggressive and throwing pucks to the net. ... It was a great game for our guys because they found that they can still do that."

Here are Five Things to Know about tonight's game:

1. Streaks and such: The Sabres have dropped five straight (0-4-1) for the second time this season. The Penguins have won two in a row and are 5-1 since the loss here in their last visit. Pittsburgh is 10-3-2 in its last 15 games – and Buffalo is 3-10-2 in its last 15, which is why the teams are no longer battling each other for playoff position like they were in early February. The Penguins are third in the Metro, four points behind Washington for the division lead but still only four points inside the playoff cut line.

2. Firing blanks: The Sabres have endured back-to-back shutouts for the first time this season. If they don't score tonight, they will have gone three straight games without a goal for just the second time in franchise history. The first time? Last season, in December 2017. And the third straight shutout was a home game against the Penguins. Buffalo finally broke the streak the next night in Pittsburgh on a Jason Pominville goal with less than nine minutes left.

By the numbers, the Sabres have not scored a goal in 137 minutes, 40 seconds. Their last one was Kyle Okposo's goal that gave them a

4-3 lead last Thursday in their shootout loss in Chicago. It came at 7:40 of the third period.

Second consecutive shutout loss leaves Sabres searching for answers

3. Lineup news: Carter Hutton (16-19-5, 2.82/.912) will be in goal for the Sabres tonight against Pittsburgh backup Casey DeSmith (14-11-5, 2.86/.914), who will be making his first start since Feb. 21. Matt Murray has started the last nine games for the Pens, going 6-1-2, 2.30/.930. Hutton is 3-0, 1.36/.956 in five career games against Pittsburgh, with two shutouts.

Casey Nelson returns to the lineup on defense for the Sabres with Zach Bogosian out (upper body). Zemgus Girgenson, who has just three goals on the season and none in his last 33 games, will be a healthy scratch for the second straight contest.

Sabres Casey Nelson on Eichel hit: 'I didn't sleep that night after I saw the video'

4. Malkin Mania: Sidney Crosby continues to lead the Penguins in assists (57) and points (90) and has scored in five straight games against Buffalo, but Evgeni Malkin stole some headlines this week with his 1,000th career point in Tuesday's win over Washington.

Malkin has 21 goals and 49 assists this season and has 12 points in his last eight games against Buffalo. He's just the fifth Russian-born player to reach 1,000 (one of the others was former Sabre Alexander Mogilny), and the fourth Penguin, joining Crosby, Mario Lemieux and Jaromir Jagr.

"He's a big body who moves so well," said Sheary, who won Stanley Cups with the Penguins in 2016 and 2017. "A lot of times with a big guy like that, you don't see the skill he has. It's pretty amazing what he can do when he's 1-on-1. He's so hard to defend. He's one of the most underrated superstars in this league because he plays alongside Sid.

"It's hard to get the puck from him. He's so good at protecting it and finding his linemates. And then when he's 1-on-1, he can beat you. It makes him so dangerous out there."

5. By the numbers: It's 12 games and counting without a goal for Sabres winger Jeff Skinner, who has been stuck on 36 since Feb. 15. ... In 38 career games against the Sabres, Crosby has an incredible 59 points (20-39). He has at least one point in 20 of his 21 career games in Buffalo (13-21-34), and the Penguins are 14-4-3 here in his career. ... Malkin's career vs the Sabres: 15-34-49 in 38 games. ... Jake Guentzel leads the Penguins this year with 35 goals. ... Kris Letang (upper body) will miss his ninth straight game for Pittsburgh. ... The Penguins are 31-0-3 when leading after two periods this year – and two of those three defeats are the games against the Sabres. Buffalo is 7-23-2 when trailing after two. ... The Penguins are fourth on the power play (25.3 percent) while Buffalo is sixth on the penalty kill (82.4 percent). ... Watch out for the middle period: The Penguins lead the NHL with 93 second-period goals and are plus-16 in the frame. Buffalo is minus-19.

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1135994 Buffalo Sabres

Vladimir Sobotka says role with Sabres prevents him from making offensive impact

By Lance Lysowski

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

With the Buffalo Sabres' offensive struggles worsening, coach Phil Housley threw his lines in a blender ahead of Thursday's game against the Pittsburgh Penguins in KeyBank Center and one change drew the ire of the team's fan base.

Jeff Skinner, carrying the third-longest scoring drought of his career, was placed with Vladimir Sobotka, who went 42 games without a goal and entered the day with five in 63 games this season.

Sobotka, a 31-year-old forward, has contributed little offensively since he was acquired from St. Louis as part of the Ryan O'Reilly trade. He has only seven assists and a minus-15 rating, while ranking last among qualified Sabres in 5-on-5 shot differential.

However, Sobotka feels that output is a product of his role, not his talent, and told The Buffalo News following the Sabres' optional morning skate that is the reason why he is unable to show what he is capable of with the puck on his stick.

"For sure," he said, in a voice barely above a whisper. "I've been in the D zone a lot. I'm doing my best. Not too much offensive time for me. It's my role. I'm doing my best."

That role is different from the one he had in St. Louis, where he scored a career-high 11 goals with 20 assists in 81 games last season. Sobotka ranks fourth among all Sabres players by being on the ice for 349 defensive-zone faceoffs and 201 defensive-zone starts, while receiving the second-fewest offensive-zone faceoffs. His offensive-zone start percentage is the third-lowest behind Johan Larsson and Zemgus Girgensons.

Sobotka has posted a team-worst 44.16 percent 5-on-5 shot differential, and the worst expected-goal differential among qualifying Sabres forwards.

Comparatively, Sobotka's offensive-zone start percentage was 14 percent higher in St. Louis last season, and he took nearly twice as many offensive-zone faceoffs. He produced a 49.73 percent 5-on-5 shot differential and was on the ice for the fifth-most scoring chances among Blues players.

In a recent interview with Sport.CZ, a website based in the Czech Republic, Sobotka expressed frustration with his role in Buffalo, saying, "I don't want to complain, but I could have more time on the ice. I'm in a different situation than I'm used to. My job is mostly to win a throw-in in the defensive zone, but I rarely get into an offensive action because I change instantly."

Sobotka's 52.5 faceoff winning percentage is the highest among qualified Sabres, which has led Housley to use him on draws in the defensive zone. However, Sobotka is often told to skate off the ice as soon as they gain possession and move the puck into the neutral zone.

With Jack Eichel serving a two-game suspension, Sobotka was given four offensive-zone faceoffs while skating with Sam Reinhart and Tage Thompson in a 2-0 loss to Dallas on Tuesday. However, Sobotka was one of only three Sabres not to record a shot on goal and he had only one shot attempt.

"You see how I utilize him," Housley said of Sobotka. "He does take a lot of important faceoffs for us in the defensive zone and he does kill penalties. He's very trustworthy in that aspect. I like that he's gotten rewarded with a couple goals chipping in here. I'd like to see more of that. I do think he has it in him. He's getting a great opportunity since Jack's been out."

Entering Thursday, Sobotka had scored twice in eight games. He has helped the Sabres' penalty kill rank sixth in the NHL while averaging 14 minutes, 19 seconds per game and is under contract through next season at an annual cap hit of \$3.5 million, according to CapFriendly.com.

"Like I said, it's my role," he said. "It is what it is."

Luukkonen finalist for award

Sabres goalie prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, a second-round draft pick in 2017, was named a finalist for CHL Goaltender of the Year. Luukkonen helped Sudbury qualify for the Ontario Hockey League playoffs by posting 34 wins with a 2.54 goals against average and .918 save percentage in 47 games.

Luukkonen, who is expected to begin his professional career with Rochester this spring, led Finland to a gold medal at the World Junior Championships.

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1135995 Buffalo Sabres

Sabres Casey Nelson on Eichel hit: 'I didn't sleep that night after I saw the video'

By Mike Harrington

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Casey Nelson wishes things went differently Saturday afternoon in Denver. Most of all, he wishes he had a better view of Nikita Zadorov's high hit on Jack Eichel because he says that would have prompted a different reaction from him.

Nelson has endured a boatload of criticism for his lack of reaction to the play, where he simply skated over and stood next to Zadorov while Eichel was on the ice. Moments later, Marco Scandella and Sam Reinhart jumped the Colorado defenseman and Jeff Skinner tried to get in the fray as well before he was cut off by Avalanche winger Mikko Rantanen.

"I feel totally different after I saw the hit because I didn't know he got hit in the head," Nelson said after the Sabres' optional morning skate today. "I don't have the seven camera angles. I was the only one directly behind him so I didn't actually see that he got hit in the head. That's all I'm going to say there. I didn't sleep that night after I saw the video."

Nelson was a healthy scratch Tuesday against Dallas, with coach Phil Housley saying the lack of reaction on the play was discussed with him.

"That's pretty much all I've thought about the past number of days," Nelson said. "There's not a lot I can do about it other than I can tell you that my response wouldn't have been the same if I knew he got hit in the head."

Nelson said he simply saw Eichel on the ice and had no idea what had transpired. Zadorov came in late after a whistle for offsides and hit Eichel high, pulling the Buffalo center's helmet off his head.

"I was looking through three guys too so it's not like I could see everything. It sucks, you know what I mean? There's not a lot I can do," Nelson said. "There's nothing I can do other than I know it will never happen again. It's something I didn't see."

"Everyone makes mistakes. I didn't see it. It's just what happens. I can tell you've probably made a mistake here and there in your life too. That sucks when you have to deal with it."

Nelson will be back in the lineup for tonight's game against Pittsburgh as Zach Bogosian (upper body) will remain out after not practicing yesterday or taking the optional morning skate today.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

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1135996 BuffaloSabres

As losses pile up, how Rasmus Dahlin is channeling his rookie-year frustrations

By John Vogl

Mar 14, 2019

The only thing between the Sabres and another defeat was 25 meaningless seconds. Most of the fans had left. Buffalo was done.

Rasmus Dahlin wasn't. He threw himself into 6-foot-3, 220-pound Radek Faksa. Despite taking the brunt of the blow, the Sabres defenseman kept the puck in from his knees and tossed it toward the net.

It didn't matter. As the clock expired and Dallas skated to goalie Ben Bishop to celebrate the shutout on Tuesday night, Dahlin turned his back to the scene. He raised his stick above his head and came down with the thunder of Thor.

"Yeah, that was pretty stupid," he said a day later. "You have to get it out of your body, but that was pretty stupid."

Why? People understand that the 18-year-old competitor hates to lose. Why was that stupid?

"I have to learn," Dahlin said. "I just need to handle my frustrations. It's pretty tough to just have it inside, so you just want to get it out of your body. It's a pretty stupid move, like I said, but it helps. It does."

"But it's stupid."

It was a rare indicator that things can get to Dahlin. The No. 1 overall pick has been as mature and composed as advertised. Jeff Skinner laughed when getting word that Dahlin thought he was too emotional.

"To me, I think he's pretty even-keeled," the left winger said. "He's got it pretty under control. But he's a top player and he's going to be a top player. Top players sort of hold themselves to a higher standard. That's sort of what makes them the best players."

"For him, it's good. It's good to see that emotion."

Center Casey Mittelstadt sees most of Dahlin's emotions. As part of a free-falling team, the rookie roommates can't constantly run around slamming sticks to the ground. They find more productive outlets.

"We've gotten pretty lucky to come in at the same time and be so close in age," said the 20-year-old Mittelstadt. "I know a lot of guys don't get that, so I think it's been really good for both of us. Just going home, it's nice to have someone there to help get your mind away from the rink for a little bit and go out to dinner, do stupid things, go grocery shopping and all that stuff together."

"It's been really good for us. It's been nice to have someone help get away from the rink because you're here quite a bit."

When they talk hockey, they're realists. As Skinner said, top players hold themselves to a higher standard. Dahlin is in that category.

"A lot of people expect a lot of him, but nobody expects more from him than himself," Mittelstadt said. "That's part of what makes him

such a great player. Yeah, I think he gets frustrated, but at the same time, he's really good at letting it go.

"Being that good of a player, he's dealt with expectations for a long time, so I think he's gotten used to blocking out the noise. If he had a bad game, he knows he had a bad game. If he played well, he knows he played well."

There's been a little of both. As expected, the Sabres have relied more on Dahlin as the season has progressed. He's playing nearly four minutes more per night now than he did at the start of the year.

Month Ice time

October 18:58

November 19:54

December 22:47

January 21:11

February 22:04

March 22:44

"He's continuing to get better," Skinner said. "As an 18-year-old defenseman in his first season in North America, playing as many games as he's had and as many minutes as he has – and hard minutes, too – I think it's impressive. It's fun to watch."

"He's got a bright future, obviously, and he's only going to continue to get better, which is nice for us and scary for everyone else."

Coach Phil Housley wisely shelters the rookie – no Buffalo defenseman starts in the offensive zone more than Dahlin at 58.3 percent – but it pays off because no one helps produce more goals.

Dahlin is also 24th among NHL defensemen in points per 60 minutes (1.52), ranking just below Shea Weber (1.53) and ahead of Seth Jones (1.51), Jacob Trouba (1.45) and Oliver Ekman-Larsson (1.36).

"The one thing I really like about Rasmus is his battle level," Housley said. "His compete game in and game out has been good. Through an 82-game schedule, you're going to have your ups and downs. But right to the end of the game, he still battled. He's still keeping pucks in, and he's fighting. He's a very competitive player."

The coach also lauded Dahlin's ability to know when to join the rush and stay back. He likes how Dahlin uses inside body-positioning to keep bigger players on the outside.

But like all of the Sabres, there have been rough spots. Of Dahlin's 45 goals allowed at five-on-five, more than half (23) have come since Feb. 1. He felt the sting as the Sabres have dropped from playoff contention.

Aside from Mittelstadt, who does Dahlin turn to for help to ease the sting?

"Whoa," he said, his eyes scanning the dressing room. "Every single guy in here. It's an unreal group of guys. I can talk to everyone about something. It's a great team to be on. It's been a great time."

Aside from the losing, of course.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "It sucks to lose."

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1136091 Pittsburgh Penguins

Penguins' Casey DeSmith answers call with shutout of Sabres



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

JONATHAN BOMBULIE

BUFFALO, N.Y. — While the Pittsburgh Penguins have been putting together a late-season surge the last few weeks, winning five of six games coming into Thursday night, they had a 6-foot-4 insurance policy standing behind them.

Goalie Matt Murray had made nine consecutive starts and was playing some of his best hockey of the season.

Coach Mike Sullivan decided to give Murray the night off as the Penguins faced the Buffalo Sabres, so a new test presented itself.

Would the Penguins be able to keep up their fine form with backup Casey DeSmith in net?

The answer was yes.

Making his first start since Feb. 21, DeSmith made 26 saves to record his third shutout of the season and lead the Penguins to a 5-0 victory over the Buffalo Sabres.

"I think you just gotta go for it," DeSmith said. "That's what I talked about tonight, just going in there and going for it. Don't overthink. Just simplify everything. Play fast. Play my own game. Don't try to do anything different because I haven't played in a while. I think I was able to do that tonight."

The Penguins, who have won three in a row, kept pace with the top teams in the Metropolitan Division, staying four points behind first-place Washington and two points behind the second-place Islanders with 11 games to go.

They moved six points ahead of Montreal and Columbus, who are tied for the last playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

"The team's been playing awesome, obviously, and they didn't do anything different tonight," DeSmith said.

Coming off high-stakes victories over Boston and Washington in their previous two games, the Penguins didn't play an emotionally charged style in the first period-plus Thursday.

That's when DeSmith was at his best. Most notably, about four minutes into the second, he stabbed at a Conor Sheary shot from the doorstep with his glove to keep the game scoreless. The Penguins soon took over the game with three second-period goals.

"He made some big saves at key times for us that gave us a chance to keep the lead and gave us a chance to get our legs going," Sullivan said.

The Penguins seemed to find something on the power play late in Tuesday's win over Washington after Sullivan reunited his team's star-studded top unit. It scored on two of its last three chances in that game.

The Penguins converted on two of their first three power-play chances Thursday, as well.

On the first goal, they made a tic-tac-toe passing play down low — from Jake Guentzel with his back to the goal in the slot to Sidney Crosby in the right faceoff circle to Kessel at the left dot to make it 1-0 less than seven minutes into the second.

On the second goal, Crosby made a cross-ice pass to Kessel at the bottom of the left circle, and Patric Hornqvist backhanded a deflected centering pass over goalie Carter Hutton to make it 3-0.

"When we're playing our best hockey, it's hard to stop us out there," Hornqvist said. "We move the puck really quick. You see the first goal there, Sid and Phil just picked them apart. When those kind of players get that kind of time, they can do that. Right now, it's clicking for us."

In between Kessel and Hornqvist's goals, Evgeni Malkin fed Brian Dumoulin for a goal on a top-corner shot from the slot. Nick Bjugstad and Jake Guentzel scored in the third period.

"I think we knew we needed to pick it up," Dumoulin said. "First period was almost feeling each other out, kind of. The second period, I thought we did a good job of staying focused and ratcheting it up."

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1136092 Pittsburgh Penguins

With Kris Letang out, defensemen take turns leading Penguins in ice time

JONATHAN BOMBULIE

BUFFALO, N.Y. — When Kris Letang went down with an upper-body injury during the outdoor game in Philadelphia on Feb. 23, the remaining healthy defensemen on the Pittsburgh Penguins roster realized it would require a collaborative effort to replace him.

They're taking that concept to the extreme.

The Penguins have had a different defenseman lead the team in ice time in each of their past four games.

It was Erik Gudbranson against Washington (22:43), Brian Dumoulin against Boston (23:13), Marcus Pettersson at home against Columbus (23:36) and Justin Schultz on the road against the Blue Jackets (21:27).

"We're just rolling," Schultz said. "We can put anyone out there and we feel comfortable. Guys are playing great. We just have to continue that."

The Penguins' defense corps lends itself to such a balancing act because it includes players of different skill sets and styles of play.

For a physical matchup against Washington, Gudbranson got the call. For a game when a defenseman with a more offensive mindset is in demand, Schultz might lead the team in minutes.

"That's huge. Having that depth at this time of year is a big advantage, I would say," Gudbranson said. "Certain teams, certain games demand more from different guys. Being able to provide that and the fact that certain guys are ready to do that is huge for this group."

Tribune Review LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136093 Pittsburgh Penguins

Ex-Penguins winger Conor Sheary heating up for Sabres

JONATHAN BOMBULIE

BUFFALO, N.Y. — When the Pittsburgh Penguins visit the Buffalo Sabres on Thursday night, the most dangerous scorer on the other bench might be a familiar face.

With Jack Eichel serving the second game of a two-game suspension Thursday night and Jeff Skinner slumping, Conor Sheary



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

is Buffalo's leading scorer in the month of March with three goals and five points in six games.

Sheary had two goals and an assist when the Penguins dropped a 4-3 overtime decision in Buffalo on March 1.

"He's very dangerous," coach Mike Sullivan said. "He's a good player. He's a real good player. He scored a lot of goals when he played for us. I think Conor's biggest strength is his quickness and his tenacity and his ability to force turnovers. He's got a real good stick. He anticipates well and he has the ability to finish. We've got to certainly be respectful of his speed."

When they're not facing Sheary, the Penguins are rooting for him to do well.

The fourth-round pick the Penguins acquired from the Sabres in the Sheary trade in June will become a third-rounder if he records 20 goals or 40 points this season. Coming into Thursday, he has 12 goals and 31 points.

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1136094 Pittsburgh Penguins

Injury news good for Penguins' Bryan Rust, bad for Zach Aston-Reese

JONATHAN BOMBULIE | Thursday, March 14, 2019 1:02 p.m

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The news was good for Bryan Rust, bad for Zach Aston-Reese and status quo for Kris Letang and Olli Maatta as Pittsburgh Penguins coach Mike Sullivan gave an injury update Thursday afternoon.

Rust made the trip to Buffalo with the team and participated in morning skate in a non-contact capacity Thursday. Rust has been out since suffering a lower-body injury Feb. 26 in Columbus.

"We brought Rusty on the trip because he's getting close and we wanted to get him around the team, get him in the practices," Sullivan said. "He's feeling really good. Obviously he's in a non-contact jersey, but his status is day to day and he's getting close."

Aston-Reese suffered a lower-body injury last Sunday against Boston. Sullivan originally characterized Aston-Reese's status as day to day, but he said Thursday that was a mistake on his part. Aston-Reese won't need surgery and he is expected to return this season, but he'll be out longer term.

Letang and Maatta, meanwhile, stayed home in Pittsburgh to skate with skills coach Ty Hennes.

Letang has been out since Feb. 23 with an upper-body injury and Maatta has been out since Feb. 11 with a shoulder injury.

"They're making progress," Sullivan said.

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1136095 Pittsburgh Penguins

Penguins give Matt Murray night off in Buffalo

JONATHAN BOMBULIE | Thursday, March 14, 2019 12:52 p.m

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Matt Murray's streak of consecutive starts in net for the Pittsburgh Penguins won't hit double digits.

After turning to Murray to start the team's previous nine games, coach Mike Sullivan will use backup Casey DeSmith in goal for Thursday night's game against the Buffalo Sabres.

Murray was outstanding during the run of consecutive starts, going 6-1-2 with a .930 save percentage.

Sullivan said the primary motivation for starting DeSmith on Thursday is to give Murray a break.

"Matt's had a pretty heavy workload and we're trying to watch that," Sullivan said. "We're trying to keep him at his best. We're trying to keep everybody at their best because that's what we're going to need to win each and every game. Casey's been good for us."

DeSmith hasn't played since stopping 29 shots in a 4-0 loss to San Jose on Feb. 21. His numbers were better before Murray returned from a lower-body injury Dec. 15 (10-5-4, .923) than they have been since (4-6-1, .899).

Resting Murray against Buffalo, a team that ranks 23rd in the NHL in offense and will be without leading scorer Jack Eichel due to suspension Thursday night, opens the door for Murray to start both games of a weekend homestand with St. Louis on Saturday afternoon and Philadelphia on Sunday night.

"For a lot of reasons, Matt's overall workload in the big picture isn't that high, but in the short term, his workload has been a lot lately," Sullivan said. "We're trying to find little pockets or windows where we can give him an opportunity to recover so that he can be at his best."

Tribune Review LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136096 Pittsburgh Penguins

Tim Benz: Penguins' speed starting to dominate again

TIM BENZ | Thursday, March 14, 2019 6:11 a.m

The comment from Nick Bjugstad resonated after the Pittsburgh Penguins blanked the Columbus Blue Jackets, 3-0, on March 7.

"It's a little different style than what I was used to," the former Florida Panther forward said. "These guys play ... fast! It's a fun way to play."

Even with Bjugstad's added emphasis, that used to be a common statement about the Penguins the last three years or so. An empty quote. Of course, the Penguins are fast. Who didn't know that?

But recently, that truism became more of a question. Are the Penguins as fast as they used to be?

It seemed as if that concern started to be raised after the loss to Washington in the Metropolitan Division final last year.

The Penguins had beaten the Capitals with their oppressive speed twice in a row in the previous postseasons. But it appeared as if the black-and-gold advantage in that department began to fade not long after the Stanley Cup was paraded through Pittsburgh for a second straight year in June 2017. Piece by piece.

Since that first 2016 Stanley Cup team was constructed, fleet-footed skaters Carl Hagelin, Trevor Daley and Conor Sheary have been traded.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

Justin Schultz, Kris Letang and Bryan Rust have spent at least one extended stretch off the ice with significant injuries.

Add in the natural slowing down of a roster with seven high-leverage players in their 30s (or 40s, Matt Cullen), and the Penguins weren't looking as quick as they used to be.

But that's not how Bjugstad sees it coming in from Florida during the middle of the season.

"Coming to this team, from the get-go, it was noticeable right away," Bjugstad reiterated about the team's speed after a 4-2 win over Boston Sunday. "There's a lot of high-end talent. It's a fast pace. It makes it hard for the opponents."

Bjugstad is more of a long strider than a zippy skater. But he can cover some ground. Certainly, that reach on his 6-foot-6 frame augments whatever speed he has.

His fellow former Panther, Jared McCann, has helped inject some pep since coming on board. He looks to be able to keep up fine as the third wheel on that speedy first line with Sidney Crosby and Jake Guentzel. McCann has nine goals and four assists in 20 games as a Penguin.

"Speed is the name of the game today," McCann said. "The more speed you have, the less time the (opposing) defense has to make plays. The less time they have as a team to make plays."

If you listen to head coach Mike Sullivan, the issue of diminished speed hasn't been as much of a problem as you may think.

The injuries to the likes of Rust, Letang and Schultz have gotten in the way, for sure. But when his full roster is assembled, Sullivan seems to think the perception of a slowing Penguins team is more about optics than foot speed.

"It's not just about physical skating ability," Sullivan said after the victory over Boston. "It's about your ability to transition the puck and change the point of attack. That's when our team shows our best speed game."

Sullivan also contends that the Penguins never actually got slower. He argues the rest of the NHL is speeding up.

"The rest of the league has gotten faster," he said. "Maybe a couple of years ago in 2016, we might have had a significant speed advantage. I think the whole league has tried to get faster. But I believe we are a team that can still play fast."

Sure. That's true. But it also may be a little generous. It's tough to argue that between the injuries and trades listed above, the Penguins haven't slowed a touch. But with the addition of McCann and Teddy Blueger, the increasing confidence and familiarity of Dominik Simon and Bjugstad and the eventual returns of Rust, Letang, and Zach Aston-Reese, the Penguins may soon be well ahead of the rest of the pack in terms of speed. Just as they used to be.

I mean, not Antonio-Brown-on-McKnight-Road fast. But pretty quick.

Tribune Review LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136097 Pittsburgh Penguins

Penguins coast to win over Sabres, 5-0

MATT VENSEL

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The Penguins, so impressive in recent wins over red-hot Boston and Washington, were decidedly not during the first period Thursday in Buffalo.

Thankfully, they didn't need to be on this night, not with the short-handed Sabres, for example, using someone named Evan Rodrigues as their top-line center.

A quick Google search revealed that Rodrigues, filling in for injured Sabres captain Jack Eichel, is indeed a real person, one with a career-high eight goals this season.

The reeling Sabres, missing two regulars on the blue line in Jake McCabe and Zach Bogosian as well, also had little to play for and were subsequently sloppy.

Matt Murray has started the Penguins' past nine games, but Casey DeSmith will get the start in net Thursday night vs. Buffalo.

Sidney Crosby shook his head as the Penguins stomped to the locker room after a scoreless first period. There, they resolved to be better when coming back out.

"The first period was kind of a sleepy period," Jake Guentzel said. "In the second, we really ramped it up and played our style of hockey. The goals came after that."

The Penguins scored three goals, including two on their suddenly-surgingly power play, during the second period to seize control. They would coast to a 5-0 win over the Sabres at KeyBank Center. Casey DeSmith made 26 saves to get the shutout.

"He made some big saves for us," coach Mike Sullivan said. "It took us a little bit to get our legs in this game and he gave us a chance to get our legs under us."

The backup goalie was making his first start in three weeks. Since DeSmith last stood in the crease, Matt Murray played lights-out, going 6-1-2 during his nine starts in a row to help move the Penguins into more comfortable playoff positioning.

Early in the second period, DeSmith made his finest save on the night when the puck squirted out front to Conor Sheary, his Penguins teammate last season.

"I just kind of threw my glove out there," DeSmith said. "It was pure reaction."

Penguins right wing Bryan Rust smiles after scoring against the Wild in the first period Thursday Dec. 20, 2018.

Bryan Rust returns to Penguins practice; Zach Aston-Reese now out 'longer term'

Not long after that, the Penguins got on the board with a power-play goal. After Crosby and Phil Kessel passed up shots and instead played hot potato, Crosby justified it by threading a pass through the Sabres' box to Kessel, who hit the open net.

"Sid and Phil just picked them apart," Patric Hornqvist said. "When those kinds of players get that kind of time, they can do that. Right now it's clicking for us."

That was Kessel's third goal, all on the power play, in five games after 16 without one.

"When he's having success on the power play, I think it carries over to his 5-on-5. It helps his confidence," Sullivan said, adding. "I think Phil scoring tonight on the power play and the last couple of games has ... really helped his overall game."

Evgeni Malkin, one Penguin who had pep in his step from the get-go, made a nice play to set up a Brian Dumoulin goal. Malkin cruised down the left wing, took a pass from Teddy Blueger and blew by a defenseman. The big Russian then looped behind the net and found Dumoulin, who whipped a shot past Carter Hutton's glove.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

The Penguins pushed it 3-0 before the end of the second period. After more snazzy power-play passing, the puck came to Hornqvist, who buried a backhand. Hornqvist, similar to Kessel, looks to be rediscovering his game after a scoring drought.

Thursday was Pittsburgh's second straight game with multiple power-play goals after Sullivan briefly dispersed his top talent through two units. He put them back out there together midway through Tuesday's 5-3 win over the Washington Capitals and they rewarded him twice. Still intact Thursday, they produced again.

During the third period, Nick Bjugstad and Guentzel beat Hutton, too.

The Penguins had been relying heavily on their top line of Crosby, Guentzel and Jared McCann to carry the goal-scoring burden. In the previous eight games, they scored 20 of their 29 goals, including four of five the Penguins netted in Tuesday's 5-3 win over the Capitals. So a few from some other guys were certainly welcome.

"If we want to be where we want to go, we have to have all four lines chipping in offensively and defensively," Hornqvist said. "The first line has been great for us the last two months. The other three lines have to get a little better 5-on-5."

This was Buffalo's sixth straight loss since beating Pittsburgh here on March 1. It was the third game in a row the Sabres got shut out. Afterward, coach Phil Housley was peppered with questions about their lackluster efforts and his job security.

So, yeah, things have been going great here in Buffalo the past couple of months.

But the Penguins will keep the two points on a night when they weren't at their best.

"We're finding ways to win games," Sullivan said. "This was a tough challenge, when you're coming off some of the emotional games that we had this week."

Post Gazette LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136098 Pittsburgh Penguins

Bryan Rust returns to Penguins practice; Zach Aston-Reese now out 'longer term'

MATT VENSEL

BUFFALO, N.Y. — During Thursday's morning skate, when the guy in the red jersey cruised in and snapped a nice shot past Casey DeSmith, some Penguins let out a mock cheer when they realized who had scored.

Bryan Rust, back on the ice, twirled then sheathed his hockey stick.

Thursday was the speedy winger's first practice since he suffered a lower-body injury during a Feb. 26 win in Columbus. Coach Mike Sullivan said Rust, who has a career-high 17 goals, could return soon.

"We brought Rusty on the trip because he's getting close. We wanted to get him around the team, get him in the practices. And he's feeling really good," he said. "His status is still day-to-day. He's getting close."

Buffalo Sabres goalie Carter Hutton (40) is screened by Pittsburgh Penguins forward Patric Hornqvist (72) during the second period of an NHL hockey game Thursday, March 14, 2019, in Buffalo, N.Y.

The next step is not wearing that red non-contact jersey in practice.

Kris Letang did not make the trip to Buffalo. He remained in Pittsburgh, where on Thursday he skated with fellow defenseman Olli Maatta and Ty Hennes, the team's skating and skills development coach.

Letang's absence on the road was curious. He did not travel with the team to Columbus last week because, according to Sullivan, he was sick. Letang was back on the ice with the team for Tuesday's morning skate, though he remained in a non-contact jersey. Then he stayed back Thursday.

Sullivan said that Letang, who suffered his injury on Feb. 23, is "making progress." Ditto for Maatta, who also has an upper-body injury.

Sullivan also updated the status of Zach Aston-Reese, who was hurt in Sunday's win over Boston. He initially listed him as "day-to-day" but clarified that he is out "longer term" with a lower-body injury that will not require surgery. Sullivan is hopeful Aston-Reese will return this season.

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1136099 Pittsburgh Penguins

Matt Murray finally gets a break vs. Sabres Peter Diana/Post-Gazette

MATT VENSEL

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Matt Murray has finally gotten a breather.

He's certainly earned a night off these past couple of weeks.

Casey DeSmith started in goal Thursday against the Buffalo Sabres at KeyBank Center. Murray had started the past nine games, putting the Penguins on firmer footing by going 6-1-2 with a .930 save percentage.

"[Murray] means a lot to us. He's the reason why we're competing right now," Sidney Crosby said. "He's held us in some games, and we've been pretty banged up at different points and he stole games for us."

Penguins coast to win over Sabres, 5-0

Murray stopped 279 of 300 shots during that nine-game stretch, which began the night of the outdoor Stadium Series game in Philadelphia. He played nine games in 18 days, including a pair of back-to-backs.

Mike Sullivan said the Penguins were trying to watch his workload.

"Obviously, for a lot of reasons, Matt's overall workload in the big picture isn't that high," the coach said. "But in the short term, his workload has been a lot lately. So we're trying to find windows where we can give him an opportunity to recover so he can continue to be at his best."

DeSmith last played in the Feb. 21 loss to San Jose. He stopped 29 of 33 shots in a game the Sharks dominated from start to finish. Prior to that, he made just seven starts during this calendar year, winning two.

"Casey's been good for us," Sullivan said of his backup, who is 14-11-5 with a .914 save percentage. "We think this is the right decision."

Spreading it around



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

The Penguins have collectively been getting by without the injured Kris Letang. In their previous four games, a different defenseman led the team in ice time. Tuesday, it was newcomer Erik Gudbranson. In the other games, it was Brian Dumoulin, Justin Schultz or Marcus Pettersson.

Penguins right wing Bryan Rust smiles after scoring against the Wild in the first period Thursday Dec. 20, 2018.

Matt Vensel

Bryan Rust returns to Penguins practice; Zach Aston-Reese now out 'longer term'

"We're just rolling. Put anyone out there and we feel comfortable," Schultz said. "Guys are playing great. We've just got to continue that."

Heads still shaking

With the Penguins leading the Washington Capitals by a couple of goals with about 30 seconds remaining in Tuesday's 5-3 win, Patric Hornqvist lobbed from the neutral zone a shot at the empty net. The Penguins two days later were still shaking their heads at what happened next.

His shot landed a few feet from the top of the crease and somehow bounced off the crossbar and out of play. On the bench, Penguins players lost it. Phil Kessel, who couldn't believe Hornqvist's luck, was doubled over, which made everyone else laugh even harder.

Immediately after that huge win over the Capitals, the fluky bounce was maybe the most popular topic among players in the locker room.

"I couldn't believe it," Crosby said Thursday. "We were talking about it. I don't think we've seen that and we all agreed we won't see it ever again. It's crazy. ... It just tells you how rare it is for that to happen."

He said if you gave him 1,000 tries to do it, he wouldn't like his odds.

Post Gazette LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136100 Pittsburgh Penguins

Jason Mackey's Penguins chat transcript: 03.14.19

JASON MACKEY

Jason Mackey: Hi folks. Welcome to my Thursday chat. Lots of great questions here. Let's get started.

Cole Wight: Hey Jason! With DeSmith getting the start tonight against Buffalo, do you think Murray goes back to back against St Louis and Philadelphia?

Jason Mackey: Hi Cole, yes, I think that's what Mike Sullivan will do. Both St. Louis and Philly have played well the second half of the year. I think you wanna make sure you get a win against Philly and try to knock them out of the race. ... Honestly, I wouldn't be stunned if Sullivan went with Murray again until the Rangers game on March 25.

guest: Tom Wilson is low class, a bully and a coward. he couldn't run from Gudbranson quick enough, wouldn't engage with Garrett Wilson, but targeted and bullied Guentzel the whole game who is about 100 pounds less than him. He will only fight on his terms when he can get a jump on people (Oleksiak). When all defensemen are healthy, there is no doubt Gudbranson needs to still be on the ice.

Jason Mackey: Thank you for the input. I have no problem with what Tom Wilson did the other night, honestly. That's his game. You need a guy to play that way. You don't need a guy taking runs at people, of course, but someone who plays hard and hits the other team's best and hottest players? If I'm the Caps, I want Wilson trying to knock around Guentzel. Will be interesting to see on Gudbranson. I don't disagree.

Adam Smith: Is Gudbranson playing his way into a permanent role with the Penguins? It seemed like this was a "stop the bleeding" move at first, but now I would imagine GMJR will have some tough personnel decisions in the off season.

Jason Mackey: Yeah, I think he certainly has played his way into the conversation. The cap hit makes it tough, though. If he was making \$1.2 million, absolutely. But he's not. GMJR will have some tough decisions. Would imagine he moves Maatta or Gudbranson.

Penguins right wing Bryan Rust smiles after scoring against the Wild in the first period Thursday Dec. 20, 2018.

Matt Vensel

Bryan Rust returns to Penguins practice; Zach Aston-Reese now out 'longer term'

guest: who decides which jerseys the team wears? I think they need to wear their third jerseys the whole playoffs!

Jason Mackey: It's an interesting theory. They're 10-1, I believe. Everything for the regular season is already scheduled, but I don't think there's anything prohibiting them from doing that. Would imagine probably GMJR makes the final call to the league. I don't think they're gonna do it, though.

guest: wow... McCann... awesome!! Nothing further needs said :)

Jason Mackey: Yep, he's been terrific.

Adam Smith: Are the Penguins morphing into real contenders during this stretch, capable of beating teams like the Lightning or the Jets?

Jason Mackey: I think so, at least to the first part of your question. A lot of stuff coming together, and it starts with goaltending. But it's very possible this team is getting hot at the right time ... as I believe I've said on here a few times. ... Knocking off those two? Maybe. Tampa has not overcome a lick of adversity this season. I think it says something when you do that. Penguins are certainly right there.

Bill M.: First off, love your columns and this chat board. It's probably rather obvious but I'd like your take on Gudbranson's effect on Tom Wilson's on-ice behavior during Tuesday's game. It appeared that Wilson was a bit more subdued than in previous games against the Pens. Thoughts?

Jason Mackey: Thanks, Bill. Appreciate the kind words. I don't know if I saw a huge change in Wilson's antics ... although I do think he kept it mostly legal. I think he was a little bit frustrated that he had someone actively giving it back to him. That's not always the case. And I thought Gudbranson approached his role in that game exactly perfect. Didn't fixate on Wilson but definitely knew where he was.

JohnAI: Does the emergence of Petterson make Maatta likely to be traded in the summer, or do you still think Gudbranson is the most likely guy to move?

Jason Mackey: I don't know. I don't think they know, honestly. I think we need to see how it plays out with Gudbranson for the rest of the year and what happens with Maatta's shoulder. I think those two things will make the decision for GMJR.

Brady: Hey Jason - Any updates on the injury front? Thought Letang was close and now that does not seem to be the case and will we even see Rust again this season?

Jason Mackey: Rust is apparently close. He skated this morning in Buffalo. (I'm not on the trip. Matt is.) ... Letang is a weird one. Was



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

back with the team for two days but didn't take contact. Then he "wasn't feeling well." Didn't go to Columbus. Then back with the team, non-contact. Doesn't go to Buffalo. ... Which, in both of those cases, cool, he doesn't go on the road ... given the fact that Rust is getting close and he is on the road ... wouldn't that mean that Letang isn't close? We've also never gotten a solid timetable on Letang. Only that he would be evaluated daily. That's not a timetable. Someone could have two broken legs and still get evaluated daily. That's a long way of saying two things 1. I don't think he's close and 2. This all is a little fishy to me.

Jim: Are you worried about Letang's injury? Normally Pens injured players don't skate by themselves then practice with the team then skate by themselves again. It feels like Letang's injury is more serious than they are letting on.

Jason Mackey: I agree with you, Jim. See my previous answer. Again, he was with the team for two days but didn't take contact. Was sick on a Thursday. Club was off Friday. When he wasn't with the team Saturday, I asked Sullivan if that represented a setback. Mike said no; Letang was sick. He and Olli did individual stuff Monday, Letang was back with the team in a non-contact capacity Tuesday. Travel day Wednesday, not with the club today. Anyway ... I suppose that he's staying home because he can get more done, but I would argue, again, that means he's not close.

Matt Murray has started the Penguins' past nine games, but Casey DeSmith will get the start in net Thursday night vs. Buffalo.

Matt Murray finally gets a break vs. Sabres

Dan Mucy: Hi Jason! Glad to talk again! OK...welcome back playoff-Matt Murray! I think this may sound weird off the top, but did the injuries to Letang and Dumo sort of help stabilize the identity of our defense? Maybe a simpler style of D isn't that bad after all? Johnson has been terrific, and so have the other guys. Also, I think JR has his "mojo" back. We talked last week about the Florida dynamic duo...but how about Gudbranson? Much MUCH better than I dreamed! Great work, my friend, keep it up! Dan

Jason Mackey: Thanks, Dan. ... They honestly might have. And they got the Penguins thinking about playing a simpler style that they needed to play ... but, for whatever reason, wouldn't. They gave guys like Johnson and Gudbranson a chance to play a little more, which helped. And I think the Penguins as a whole have just seemed to have a greater sense of urgency since those injuries. On GMJR: He's not going to be perfect; he's made mistakes. But he's not nearly as bad as someone Penguins fans wanted to make him out to be. Glad it seems like that opinion has shifted.

Guest: How significant has Jim Rutherford's contribution personnel decisions and acquisitions in the success of the penguins.

Jason Mackey: Very significant, honestly. He's the GM. He takes input, sure. And Mike Sullivan has been hugely responsible. But I think with some of the moves that have occurred this year -- McCann, Bjugstad, sending out Brassard, Gudbranson -- GMJR has exerted a little more control than he had previously.

Bobb: Looking ahead, the team looks to be facing a bit of a cap crunch this summer. With the cap projected to be \$83 million they have around \$4 million left to sign Pettersson, ZAR, Riikola, Blueger, and another depth forward or two.

Basically, it looks like they have to shed a decently sized contract (ex: Maatta, Honrqvist, Gudbranson, Bjugstad.). What do you see them doing in the offseason? Is Maatta the odd man out since they have so many D signed? Is he the odd man out this postseason since Pettersson has been really good and the team doesn't want to bench Johnson, who has played ok recently?

Jason Mackey: I wouldn't call that a cap crunch. That's just normal business. Yes, Jim will have to move a defenseman this summer. I think it's too early to tell who that will be. But none of those guys you

mentioned are going to break the bank. Believe they're all RFAs. ... I don't know if I would look for them to sign another forward or two. I think GMJR will also listen on Phil, as he did last year, and it might make sense to do something. In which case, that could change the calculus.

Peter Kadar: Jim Rutherford

Jason Mackey: Jim Rutherford.

Go Pens: I've seen this movie before about Letang.

Jason Mackey: I don't know if I'm there quite yet. But he should be taking contact soon, I would think.

Mike: Is this 2017 all over again for Letang? A day to day neck injury that turns into neck surgery?

Jason Mackey: Again, I think it's fair to wonder those things. But I still think we're in an acceptable range here, before things get too crazy. ... If we're still playing this game in a week to 10 days, then I think we might have a problem.

cindy: Has Kris Letang's status changed, or is he still day to day? Isn't it concerning that he still isn't skating with the team?

Jason Mackey: He was with the team Tuesday. Non-contact. He didn't take the last road trip, either. It could be because he can get more done at home than he can on the road with limited ice time.

Biggus: I loved the dig HCMS got in on that slug Brassard. Brassard reminds me of that Pirates player who went into Operation Shutdown. What excuses is Brassard making now that he is skating on Colorado's top line and still not producing? (nice payday he's going to get haha)

Jason Mackey: Ha. I don't know if that was intentional. It could have just been Sullivan really liking how much those guys enjoy their roles ... because they do. But you're right. Just too many excuses. I like Brassard, too, but man, the guy had a reason for everything not working. Sooner or later you just have to make it work. Jared McCann has sure found a way.

Larry in KY: Do you think Oleksiak would still be a Penguin if he had won that fight with the Capitals Tom Wilson?

Jason Mackey: No, I don't think that had anything to do with it. His contract did. He was an attractive commodity to other teams: club contract, low number, solid player. He was their most transferrable asset. That's why he was traded more than anything.

Brian: So glad for the win Tuesday night but did it seem their were a great deal of odd man scoring chances against the Penguins during game. Also the defense looked somewhat slow. I will chalk that up to not having Letang,

Jason Mackey: That's impressive if they can beat the Capitals -- winners of seven in a row and 14 of 19 -- with a defense that's too slow and too many odd-man rushes allowed. I think you might be a tough grader, Brian. They played well Tuesday. Washington is a good team. Caps are gonna get some chances, too.

Kevin: Any guess on when Rust will return to the line up?

Jason Mackey: My guess would be next week sometime. Probably earliest Tuesday at Carolina. Later in the trip is more likely based on how he progresses from getting back with the group, taking contact, etc.

Tea: How is brassards playing with the avs in your opinion? Certainly I am elated with the return in Mccan! Why do you think he is excelling with the pens but brassard couldn't?

Jason Mackey: Not well, on your first one. Although the team as a whole has struggled. Brassard has two goals and no assists in eight games. He's also a minus-6. Avalanche has lost five of those. ... I think McCann has thrived for a couple reasons. One, attitude. He's



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

excited to be here. Wants to do whatever the team needs. That can go a long way. He's also a tremendous skater with an underrated amount of skill. That has played well with Crosby and Guentzel, especially when you consider McCann is a pretty good two-way player who can force some turnovers.

Kennywood: Your answer on last week's chat about the words players say the most- of and for sure. Can't unhear it now! Getzoff says obviously a lot too! So funny

Jason Mackey: For sure, it's a hockey thing. You obviously hear a lot of words that Mike Tomlin obviously likes to use. You also hear a lot of "moving forward" ... "in that regard" ... and stuff like "difficult to play against" ... "play the right way" ... it's a treat sometimes.

Hornqvist Fan: Jason hope you're doing well. The Pens seem to have found their winning formula having beaten the Bruins and Caps. What additional tweaks to their game do you think they need to make to be more formidable? Separately, what else can be done to get Malkin to stop taking STUPID STUPID penalties that harm the team? Thank you.

Jason Mackey: Ha. Second part first. If they had the answer to the Malkin thing, they would've applied it long ago. He is who he is. You live with it. ... Honestly, not much. Their biggest challenge at this point will be consistency. If they can play like they did against Boston and Washington over and over, this is a very good team. If Matt Murray has truly found this level for good, look out. They need to get more out of Kessel and Hornqvist, maybe Simon, too, but team-game-wise, they just need to be consistent with the type of effort and execution they've had lately.

KJ: I keep reading good things about defensive prospect Niclas Almari, any word if the Pens plan to bring him or Filip Hallander (will be 19 in June, but drafted out of Europe and under contract) over to play in WB/S next season? Thanks.

Jason Mackey: I would think they're getting close to that point. I'm going to check in with director of player development Scott Young this weekend, and I will make a note to ask him. Please ask me next week, and I should have a better, more complete answer for you.

Malkin_theBeast: Hello Jason! Always a pleasure to participate at your weekly chat! Great articles also! ^^

I am amazed how much Schultz is important for that team... I won't say he is better than Letang offensively, but I found Schultz makes better decision about pinching at the right moment than Letang. Also Schultz one timer is much precise and fast, this is why I would let him stay on the 1st PP unit, what your thoughts about it?

Jason Mackey: Thank you for the kind words. I like Schultz on the top unit a lot, and I would still use him there some. I'd like to see him be more aggressive shooting the puck, too. But I also think Letang has earned that spot. No. 1 with him, for now, will be getting healthy and back. When that happens, I'd put him back on the PP1, then use Schultz every so often as a changeup.

OHIO412FAN: Are the Penguins starting to round into playoff form? Pittsburgh is madly hungry for another Stanley Cup!

Jason Mackey: Gotta have something to get excited about sports-wise, right? Ha. I think so. I think they're starting to look how they should look, like one of the top teams in the Eastern Conference. Trick, again, is just keeping it going.

OHIO412FAN: When will Letang return? How do you feel about the current Pen's D-pairs right now? I feel Trotman is doing a solid job. What will it look like when Tanager returns?

Jason Mackey: Not sure on Letang. Hit that a few times earlier. It's a little bit murky. ... Have loved them. Gudbranson has been a pleasant surprise. I really think he's found a nice fit here. Good balance to them. I think Trotman is probably the first to go, which would put you with 8-58 ... 74-4 ... 28-44. When Olli gets back? Not

sure. I think you cross that bridge when you come to it. You guys and girls love asking who the odd-man out when everybody gets healthy, then someone inevitably gets hurt.

OHIO412FAN: Is it me, or is it Simon is just that awful? I never understand why he's slotted to play in the top 3 lines.

Jason Mackey: I don't think he's awful, but he does have three goals in 44 games. That's tough to explain away for someone you're trying to play in the top-nine. Again, I think he could be a very good player one day. Has a lot of good attributes. But, man, sooner or later you gotta put the puck in the net.

Josh: What is the latest on the injuries to Letang, Maata, Rust, ZAR? What are the timetables for their returns at this point? Has there been any rumblings as to concerns w/ Letang not being back yet especially when he went a couple days last week not skating due to "not feeling well?" It starts to be concerning just like for Crosby's concussion issues and Letang's previous neck issues a couple years ago.

Jason Mackey: Let's do this one final time, then I'm skipping the injury questions. Letang -- yes, a little fishy that he was seemingly making progress, then got sick and spent some time away. I don't think it's in alarm-bell territory ... if he starts taking contact soon. ... Rust -- back with the team this morning, non-contact. He's getting pretty close. I'd look for him to be back on the upcoming, four-game road trip. ... ZAR -- longer-term but back before the playoffs. ... Maatta -- pretty much same deal.

Karpo: Who comes out of the lineup if/when Letang and Maatta get healthy? Jack Johnson seemed like the obvious choice for a while, but ever since he's played on his natural side he's been very effective imo.

Jason Mackey: Jack isn't coming out. Nor should he. And, geez, do you folks loving asking this question. First to go, I think, would be Trotman. Then ... maybe Gudbranson, maybe Maatta. I think you cross that bridge when you come to it.

Clementine: The Pens seem to have resurrected an effective aerial pass to clear their zone and generate offense. What is the best way to defend against this variation of the stretch pass?

Jason Mackey: They have. They've done that a little bit more recently. Honestly, if executed perfectly, there really isn't one. But I would say making sure you're with the wide receiver in that sort of setup. Don't let anybody get behind your defense.

SteelCity: Update on JAR?

Jason Mackey: Jack Aston-Reese, Zach's long-lost cousin? ZAR is out longer-term with a lower-body injury.

BBBZ: Do you think we'll see less and less line juggling now that things are coming together for the Pens? When Rust comes back, where do you project he'll land? It's tough to break-up the Guentzel-Crosby-McCann line when it's the top line. Why Simon was promoted to that line for a game or so made no sense.

Jason Mackey: I would not break up the top line right now. When Rust comes back, I think they'll give him a shot with Malkin and Phil. He's clicked with those two before, and they need someone in that spot. Agree with you on the Simon promotion. I think ideally they get to a spot where Phil is going, and they can separate him and Geno. When that happens, maybe you try to get Hornqvist with either Crosby or Malkin.

Chris from DC: Has Phil come back?

Jason Mackey: I think we've definitely seen some signs.

Malkin_theBeast: By the way, how was Geno in the dressing room after the game he scores 1000 points, could you feel he was very elated?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

Jason Mackey: Yeah, definitely. How could he not be? Geno was thrilled. But I also think he was thrilled that he did it at home, with everyone watching, and also now that it happened, he can move on and think about other things.

Chris from DC: It seems historically the Pens as a team have not excelled on faceoffs. Any idea why?

Jason Mackey: Good question. One, I think faceoffs are overrated, but since 2005-06, the Penguins are at just 49.0 percent -- in the bottom fifth of the league. It might be the centers they've employed. It might be, too, that they don't really care all that much. Seriously. The top faceoff team in the NHL this season is the Flyers. The worst? The Capitals.

Jay: How much of an impact does the head coach really make on the team? When they were losing, many people were claiming that the Pens were no longer listening to/responding to Mike Sullivan and he needed to go. Now they're winning again so those voices have quieted. How much credit does the coach deserve?

Jason Mackey: I think Sullivan deserves credit and blame all the same. It's his team. Them not showing up sometimes? Some of it goes on Sullivan. Not all of it. Players need to play. But it's the environment Sullivan has created. That's good and bad. I can't give you a definitive number, but I think the coach should get equal parts blame and praise.

Christian: Hi Jason, what is McCann's ceiling? And is there a current player you would compare him to?

Jason Mackey: Honestly, I don't know. I don't know if they know. I don't even know if he's better at wing or center. He may be a better wing. We'll see.

Pensfaninfl: Would you put matta back in lineup if he comes back healthy? I won't

Jason Mackey: It depends on whether he comes back before Kris Letang.

Peter Kadar: Do writers need to avoid being the least bit critical of players because you need to be liked by them and their peers in order to have access and to make your job more seamless?

Jason Mackey: Not at all. And warning: This answer might be long. One, I'm a beat writer, not a columnist, although I would like to eventually become the latter. But if I criticize a player, it better be fact-based. Two, players know the drill. They're looking for professionalism. There's usually a respect for beat writers -- and the Pens are great about this -- because we're there every damn day just like them. We write the good and the bad. We're just doing our jobs, not trying to stir up crap. But if someone hasn't scored in 16 games and I say he needs to score, guess what? The player already knows that. If I write a story about how Sidney Crosby is a minus-27 and giving up all kinds of stuff (obviously he's not) he knows people are going to be critical, and as long as I'm professional about it, we're gonna have no issue. It's when you start making stuff up or you're wrong that you run into issues. That's why it's important to report stuff out, to rely on sources, to verify, etc. I've written stuff over the years about

Jason Mackey: getting Sheahan, Johnson, trading Sprong ... probably a few others. If I'm wrong, you guys and girls won't believe me. Nor should you. Players also hate when you're wrong. So, to sum it up, be accurate and professional, and there shouldn't be any issues. They know it's my job to cover the team objectively.

Hatrick Pornqvist: Everyone is saying that Sid & Ovie postgame was just some friendly banter, mutual respect... you don't believe that do you? What's the real story - would Sid tell you what was REALLY said?

Jason Mackey: He wouldn't tell me on the record, I'm sure. Players like to keep what's said on the ice on the ice. But honestly, it

wouldn't surprise me if it was friendly banter. Sid's hardly a maniac. He's not going to go up to someone and scream in their ear.

Manhattan Yinzer: Jason, of the teams in the hunt for playoffs, who do you think finishes on the outside? (I'm thinking Montreal is odd man out.) And when the playoffs begin, assuming everyone is healthy for the Pens, who do you think watches from the press box?

Jason Mackey: That second question! ... I agree, I think Montreal misses of the groups currently competing. They look the most flawed. ... Second part: Trotman would be first out on D, then it could depend on performance or opponent. Blandisi first out at forward. When ZAR comes back, I would say either Blueger or Wilson.

JohnAI: Re: KJ asking on the two Euros. Hallander already signed his ELC and will be free to come over next season when his SHL contract expires. Almari's Finnish contract expires this summer too and he's eager to come over (and was very impressive in his ATO games with WBS last year).

Jason Mackey: Right. As I said, I would imagine they'll be over, but I'll check. Thanks for the help.

87 > 8: Jason love reading your work. Where do you rank Guentzel in relation to other LW's in the league?

Jason Mackey: That's a hard one. It's a competitive field. I have to give Ovechkin and Gaudreau the edge. Marchand has nearly 20 more points. Tough to put Guentzel ahead of Marchand. Panarin? That might be tough, too. I don't know if I'd put too many more in front of him, though.

JBJB: Jason, do you have any information about the defenseman the Pens took in the second round a couple of years ago, Zachary Lauzon, I think. I remember hearing he suffered a shoulder injury in juniors but then nothing more. Thanks.

Jason Mackey: I don't believe he's playing anywhere this season. I will check with Scott Young when we talk. Ask next week. Thanks.

pauldia: To the best of your knowledge is Dominik Simon related to Mike Sullivan?

Jason Mackey: Good one. No, they are not related. Although you would think they are based on how Simon has been used.

Andy: What picks do the PENS have this for this years draft? Are they targeting anyone in particular? Goalie, Defence? Can you provide an update on Letang? lol... Kidding!

Jason Mackey: Thank you. Not many. I believe just a first, fourth, five and two sevenths. ... And no, I don't think they have one specific need. Probably best player available for the first pick.

Mike: We need more Vladimir and Natalya in our life

Jason Mackey: Obviously.

Peter Kadar: Do you see more potential in Simon -- maybe he's trying to do things that came easier at the Junior level and that's not working at this level so he needs to play within himself before his role is expanded?

Jason Mackey: Oh, absolutely. I don't think he's a bad hockey player. I just don't understand the insistence on deploying him in a prominent role. I think there's definitely plenty of skill there. Just needs to score more.

Jamie: Do you the Guentzel has replaced Kunitz as 87's Favorite.

Jason Mackey: Yes I do. And I don't think that's recent.

Popa: If you dropped the Canadian Olympic team into the NHL playoffs, what odds would you give them to win the Cup given the randomness, etc. of playoff hockey?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

Jason Mackey: Ha. Interesting question. Ultimately, I think they would win. But I don't think it would be a cakewalk because of the differences in playoff hockey.

Dan: do you think the strategy to sit back against caps pp is the right strategy? I always thought pp units have more trouble against very aggressive penalty killing teams, that force quick decisions and passes and pounce on loose pucks. I think the caps, esp backstrom, was given too much space and time.

Jason Mackey: I don't think their strategy was or ever is to sit back. It's about to find the right times to pressure. I was fine with what they did against Washington, honestly. That's a really good power play. It's gonna get some looks.

Domenic: Was it just me or did the caps have way too much room in the offensive zone the other night? Skaters coming unimpeded, wide open shots, was that by design or breakdowns?

Jason Mackey: This is like the fifth question saying "Is it just me or did the Penguins do _____ wrong against the Capitals." They beat a team on a seven-game winning streak. One of the best in the whole league. I'm pretty sure they did a couple things right.

pauldia: Jason this is a little off topic but I think a competitive advantage can be offered with "lighter than air" inserts sewn into pants near ankles and knees for shock absorption. Imagine being able on the PK to confidently block shots w/o fear of injury.

Jason Mackey: They do use skate guards. I don't think the toughness of the equipment is something that's preventing players from blocking shots, especially not if it's "lighter than air." What could that possible protect against?

Crystal Ball: I think the final standings will end up: 1) Capitals 2) Islanders 3) Penguins 4) Blue Jackets 5) Hurricanes with both wildcards coming out of the Metro. What say you?

Jason Mackey: I agree with 100 percent of that. And I'm sort of excited and sort of not to go to Long Island for a first-round playoff series.

Peter Kadar: COOL -- Thanks for the Candid answer -- You're going places kid. :)

Jason Mackey: Going to dinner with my wife and kids later, I know that much. Went for a run earlier.

One Hundred Ways: Will the Pens get to 100 points this season?

Jason Mackey: I think so, yeah. What, 12 games left? 85 points. So, they need eight wins? I like the way they're playing. I think they get to 100.

Andy: Hagelin an option this offseason if the price is right??? I'm wondering this since they had a deal in place this deadline but they couldn't do it due to the retained money. Also, When will we see Letang Maatta and Rust. Sooner???or later???

Jason Mackey: Answered the injury stuff 47 times earlier. Re: Hagelin. I don't think so. He's gonna get more than they can pay, and I don't know why he would take a discount to come here. Especially if he keeps helping the Capitals. He's really proving his value right now with the impact he's had.

Bob: Why haven't the Pens retired jersey #10-Ron Francis?

Jason Mackey: I think because Francis is probably more commonly associated with Hartford/Carolina, and the Penguins want to keep a tight threshold on which jersey numbers they retire. Don't wanna do it for just anyone.

Looking Ahead: Who sits when Rust comes back? (if everyone stays healthy, which is a big if)

Jason Mackey: When everyone is healthy ... two points. ... Would imagine Blandisi is first off the island. Heck, he's barely on it. When

ZAR comes back, I'd say Blueger. Unless Teddy has gotten really hot by that point or something has changed.

Jack S: Do you have any sense on whether the Pens would accept an invitation to go to the White House if they happen to win the cup again? And do you know of any players who wouldn't go?

Jason Mackey: They would, and they all would go. I don't think the Penguins regretted their decision there at all. I think they regretted how and when they basically reiterated they would go, when all of this stuff was being discussed, but I don't think they regretted the act itself.

Guest: What would be your lineup come playoff time (assuming everyone is healthy including Letang, Maata, Rust, ZAR)

Jason Mackey: When everyone is healthy ... two points. ... McCann-Crosby-Guentzel ... Rust-Malkin-Hornqvist ... Simon-Bjugstad-Kessel ... ZAR-Cullen-Wilson.

Dan: Any more college FA's on the horizon? A goalie would be nice for organizational depth.

Jason Mackey: Not sure, Dan. Will checking on that over the weekend.

Aj: When letang and Matta come back whose are the odd men out?

Jason Mackey: When everyone is healthy ... two points. I would imagine Trotman is first out, then maybe Gudbranson based on matchups. But he also might stay. He's been great. Cross that bridge when you come to it.

Domenic: Murray is admittedly playing well, but does anyone on pens think that his glove hand is still an issue? It seems that so many shots that other goalies bounce off his gl Be

Jason Mackey: No, they don't see it as an issue ... definitely don't see it the same way fans do.

Glenn: Do u think any other team in the pens side of the bracket - Columbus, NYI, Carolina- can beat caps in a 7 game series? I Don't

Jason Mackey: No, I don't. I think the Penguins are the only team that could pull that off.

Geno: I think Pittsburgh plays CBJ in the first round

Jason Mackey: I hope you're right.

Chris from DC: Thanks for the faceoff answer, was very informative!

Jason Mackey: My pleasure, Chris. Thanks for asking a question that doesn't involve "when everyone is healthy."

pauldia: <https://shocktec.com/Key-Benefits/#Shock-Absorption>

Jason Mackey: I see what you're saying, but I don't think that would lead them to change their approach.

guest: I read the article on Malkin on the Pens website about when he had to sneak into the country to play for Pens. I forgot about all of the details but that is so crazy to think about that now and how scary that must have been for him. So happy he has realized his dreams! He is a good guy.

Jason Mackey: He is. P-G did something similar a couple years back. Believe this is the right link: <https://www.post-gazette.com/sports/olympicfeatures/2014/02/09/Evgeni-...>

BBBZ: Do you know if a player gets traded, does he catch up with ex teammates or coaches when they play one another? Ex: Conor Sheary - did you notice if he spoke with HCMS or any of the Pens players the last time they played?

Jason Mackey: They usually catch up, yes. Sometimes you see it, sometimes you don't. But they almost always talk. For instance, Jason Botterill was outside the Penguins dressing room talking to a



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

variety of people. So, yeah, I would imagine that Sheary saw some people. Maybe Sullivan, whose family Sheary married into.

guest: Did you get to talk to Hagelin when he was in town? It has to be weird for the players to see him in that jersey!

Jason Mackey: I did. I said hello. I also talked to Hagelin before he came into town. Here's what he said: <https://www.post-gazette.com/sports/penguins/2019/03/11/Penguins-Capit...>

Bill M.: Jason, thanks for responding to my first question. With back-to-back games this weekend do you believe, given the St. Louis game starts at 1PM, that Murray starts both games?

Jason Mackey: Yes, I think Murray starts both this weekend. DeSmith tonight.

Petro: Jason, why don't people read along with your chats? You must really get a kick out of answering the same question like 10 times each session. Thanks for your patience.

Jason Mackey: I honestly don't know. It baffles me every week, but I have a 5-year-old at home, I'm used to repeating myself.

Jason Mackey: OK, folks. That's it for this week. Thanks so much for participating and making this so much. Talk to yinz next week from lovely Nashville.

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1136101 Pittsburgh Penguins

Dave Molinari: Penguins don't sleep on importance of getting enough rest

DAVE MOLINARI

Jared McCann scored nine goals in his first 20 games with the Penguins after they acquired him from Florida Feb. 1.

He has worked his way onto the No. 1 line and established himself as one of their go-to penalty-killers.

McCann has earned the confidence of the coaching staff to the point that he routinely has played 17-plus minutes per game lately, most in physically and mentally demanding situations.

Considering the effort his role demands, it seems likely that McCann has been sleeping well after games.

Penguins coast to win over Sabres, 5-0

Maybe so, but it does not come easily for him on nights when he has played. And it takes a significant chunk of time before he can bother trying.

"From when I get home, probably an hour, hour and a half to wind down and get the heart rate low," McCann said. "I usually just sit there and watch TV, or get something to eat. It's definitely tough after games to fall asleep."

An unscientific survey suggests that most of his teammates experience the same thing, regardless of the niche they fill or the ice time they log. When a player's adrenaline has been surging for about three hours, there's no switch that can shut it off the moment the final buzzer sounds.

"I actually have a little trouble falling asleep after games," blue-collar winger Garrett Wilson said. "I'm usually pretty wired, and it's tough to lie down. You're thinking about all the plays that happened in the game, and stuff you could have done differently."

Guy Boucher, who has coached in Tampa and Ottawa, is credited with popularizing the mantra that "rest is a weapon" during his days behind the Lightning bench. That hardly is a revelation to the people charged with maximizing the productivity of players by, among other things, steering them toward the right kind of food and suggesting things that can help them shut down after games.

Several players said those recommendations include melatonin, an over-the-counter supplement, and cherry juice. (Montmorency tart cherries are a natural source of melatonin and studies have suggested they can reduce muscle soreness).

McCann added that "calming music" works for him, too.

Bryan Rust returns to Penguins practice; Zach Aston-Reese now out 'longer term'

While some fans — and probably some coaches — might find it tougher to have a restful night at this time of year, given the elevated stakes for so many games, players contend that getting to sleep during the stretch drive and playoffs is no more difficult than it is during the early weeks of a season.

"It's pretty similar throughout the whole year," Wilson said. "Some nights are better than others."

McCann echoed that assessment.

"I don't think it's any harder," he said. "Personally, I take every game seriously, like it's a playoff game. That's the mindset we have to have going forward."

The NHL Players' Association underscored the importance of rest for its members by negotiating a minimum of four off-days — that means no games, practice or travel — for each team per month. Many clubs, including the Penguins, frequently cancel scheduled workouts, especially late in the season, to limit wear and tear on players.

While sleep is the most obvious way to rest, simply relaxing during time away from the rink has benefits, like allowing players to clear their heads and refocus on the challenges ahead.

"It's important to get away from it and have your (personal) time," winger Dominik Simon said.

How they choose to do that varies.

"You just chill at home or watch TV or something," Simon said. "When you're there for too long, you try to get outside, walk a little bit or go to dinner with guys. There are a lot of options."

Including, one would assume, taking a nap.

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1136102 Pittsburgh Penguins

The Penguins are starting to look like a playoff-ready team

By Josh Yohe

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The Penguins have showcased a habit of playing down to their competition and, in fact, lost in KeyBank Center less than two weeks ago.

But just as the Ides of March has arrived, so, too, has a very different version of the Penguins.

The team that plays down to its competition seems to have been replaced. All of those opposing odd-man rushes appear to be a thing



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

of a past. A serious Stanley Cup contender, despite a rash of injuries, seems to be developing.

The professionalism required to win a championship was very much on display in a 5-0 thumping of the Sabres on Thursday.

It must be noted that the Penguins didn't play especially well in the first period and didn't appear to have their legs. Only 48 hours removed from an emotional victory against the Capitals, there was a noticeable decline in energy from the Penguins.

Still, like a pitcher grinding out a victory despite not having his best stuff, they took care of business.

"We have to right now," Jack Johnson said. "The points are too important right now, and we realize that. Coach (Mike Sullivan) said after the (first) period that it was just a vanilla period. And I agree. We didn't play bad. Just didn't have anything going."

They played a rather poised style, though, until their natural superiority took over. The Sabres are all but eliminated from the postseason and were playing without Jack Eichel.

Still, the Penguins have endured their share of bad losses this season and entered the contest with a 0-0-2 mark against Buffalo. Once they took the lead on a Phil Kessel power-play goal, they never looked back.

"I thought it was just a good team effort, which is what you need this time of year," said Jared McCann, who didn't score but was a presence throughout. "It was a little bit of a slow start, but our goalie helped us out a lot early and, as the game went on, we got better and better."

Their goalie did help them out, indeed. If the theme of the night was the Penguins' professionalism, consider that a professional effort needs aid from all parties.

A number of players who haven't always been sharp during the second half are coming to life at the right time:

- Casey DeSmith, getting a start for the first time in three weeks, notched a shutout. He's struggled in recent outings, but was flawless in this one.
- Kessel scored again, his cold streak apparently now a thing of the past.
- Patric Hornqvist scored again and was doing Hornqvist things all game. He's starting to put his game back together after a rough stretch following his concussion in January.

"I got better here during the last three, four weeks and it feels good," Hornqvist said. "I didn't have a good stretch, and I put that behind me now. I feel good, and I look forward to the next game."

It's becoming clear that the Penguins have kicked it into postseason mode. Although they had already begun playing better, perhaps the final lesson they learned happened in Buffalo two weeks ago, when they blew a lead late in the third period for the second time in a week. At that point, the playoffs looked like no sure thing.

Since then, they are 6-1, beating some of the best teams in hockey along the way. No, the Sabres most certainly aren't one of those teams, but it's clear to see that the Penguins are starting to deploy the style that will be needed when the postseason arrives.

They're dumping the puck deep instead of making high-risk passes, with a couple of exceptions. They're blocking shots. They're receiving good goaltending. They've actually gone three games without allowing a shorthanded goal. Meanwhile, their vaunted power play is coming to life.

That they're doing this without the likes of Kris Letang, Olli Maatta, Bryan Rust and Zach Aston-Reese makes it that much more impressive.

They should have beaten the Sabres soundly, and they did, which is what a good team is supposed to do.

"Solid effort from everyone," Hornqvist said.

Ten postgame observations

Sabres goaltender Carter Hutton tries to see the puck as Penguins right winger Patric Hornqvist and Buffalo Sabres defenseman Brandon Montour battle for position in front of the net during the third period Thursday. (Timothy T. Ludwig / USA Today)

- This one felt good for DeSmith, who entered the game with a 2-6 record since signing his new contract in January. DeSmith hasn't been awful in the second half of the season, but his performance has dropped. This was a step in the right direction. The Penguins were not particularly sharp in the game's first 25 minutes, and DeSmith was forced to make a number of good saves. His best of the evening was a glove save on Conor Sheary in the second period.

DeSmith is at his best when his rebound control is good, and it was nearly perfect against the Sabres. Remember, he had not played in 21 games. DeSmith was extremely sharp and, while the Sabres aren't exactly the '85 Oilers, especially with Eichel out of action, this was an encouraging performance for the goalie.

- We've now reached the Sidney Crosby appreciation segment of this article. The Penguins' captain finished with two assists, but could have had five. It was one of those nights when he was a second ahead of the play on every shift. On a couple of occasions, even his teammates weren't ready for some of the passes he made. My favorite Crosby moment of this game, though, came with around nine minutes remaining. The Penguins were ahead 4-0 and the atmosphere in Buffalo was pretty much that of a preseason contest. Crosby executed a backcheck at the Penguins' blue line like it was Game 7 against the Capitals. Just another night at the office.

- This was a difficult game to gauge because the Sabres looked like a team that was trying to get its coach fired. Granted, they don't have a ton in the lineup without Eichel, but this was a truly putrid performance on a night when the Penguins didn't really have much in the way of legs. That said, I think we can all agree on this: Erik Gudbranson, in a Penguins' uniform, has been outstanding so far. He made perhaps his best play with the Penguins in the second period. Sheary was behind him and seemingly gone on a breakaway, but Gudbranson caught him from behind to thwart the scoring chance. It was a terrific play and underscores that Gudbranson isn't a bad skater at all. I believe that perception of him existed when he was traded to Pittsburgh, but it's unfair. It's still a small sample size of games, but so far, he's been all the Penguins could have asked for.

- Brian Dumoulin scored in the second period and, since this doesn't happen often, let's give him some credit.

It was his third goal of the season. While Dumoulin doesn't possess anything resembling a heavy shot, I'm a little surprised that he doesn't score with more regularity. His hands aren't so bad at all, and he's typically on the ice with very good players. That said, Dumoulin is so freakishly good defending and triggering the Penguins' breakout, any offense from him remains something of a bonus.

- Speaking of that goal, it was all created thanks to a brilliant burst of speed from Evgeni Malkin. It's been a curious season for Malkin — more on that in a moment — but I don't feel like his physical tools have yet betrayed him at age 32. In the first period, Malkin was the only member of the visiting squad who seemed to have any jump. You can sense him ramping up the intensity of his game. He was guilty of a bad turnover in the second period and, of course, the turnovers and penalties have been a bit out of control this season. Still, Malkin's legs look better than they have at any point this season. This is a big deal.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

- Malkin, however, lost his mind in the third period when he dropped the gloves with Buffalo's Johan Larsson. It appeared that Malkin immediately thought better of the decision and didn't appear to throw a punch. Still, he's got to be smarter. I appreciate his passion and competitiveness. Really, I do. But it's 4-0 in the third period in Buffalo. No one needs to be dropping the gloves in that set of circumstances, especially someone as important as Malkin. Just not smart at all. At least he thought better of it before he broke a hand.

- Remember the respective funks Kessel and Hornqvist were in last month? Well, they finally seem to have righted themselves, and this is a seriously important development for the Penguins. Scoring depth is an issue right now with Rust and Aston-Reese still out of the lineup. It's hard to imagine Garrett Wilson or Joseph Blandisi adding much offense. It's just not their thing. As a result, the big names must carry the load offensively. Kessel and Hornqvist are big names and need to avoid any more scoring droughts. They both scored on the power play in this game, with both goals coming largely because of fantastic Crosby passes.

- You should be cheering for Sheary to produce some good numbers down the stretch. If Sheary registers nine more points — he needs to reach 40 — the Penguins will receive a third-round pick in this summer's draft because of a stipulation in their trade with the Sabres last year. He was probably Buffalo's most visible offensive player, which isn't saying much.

- The Sabres certainly are a mess. They were the toast of the hockey world in October and November, and for good reason. That was quite a run, and it's too bad it didn't continue because Buffalo is a truly great hockey market. But it wasn't to be, as the Sabres have faded dramatically during the season's second half. This was a really bad performance from the home team.

- The Capitals and Islanders also won Thursday, which means the Penguins remain four points out of first place and two points behind the Islanders. The red hot Hurricanes and the Blue Jackets will still have something to say about all of this, but if the playoffs started today — I think it's OK to start saying that, because the playoffs actually do start in less than a month — the Penguins would be headed to Long Island for Game 1. It's going to be quite a ride down the stretch.

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1136103 Pittsburgh Penguins

Marshall: Sidney Crosby's puck distribution continues to evolve

By Jesse Marshall Mar 14, 2019

Generational talents in the National Hockey League always seem to find ways to collect points regardless of how old they are.

Whether it be vision, control of the game, or strict patience, these generational players continue to defy logic well into the point where you'd expect age-based statistical regression to start affecting them.

Consider Mario Lemieux in his return to the NHL in December of 2000. While Lemieux might've lost some speed and explosiveness courtesy of father time, his hockey faculties never wavered. His ability to see the ice and control the tempo of the game as if he had a remote control remained and was as lethal in the early 2000s as it was in the early 1990s. He tormented multiple generations of NHL players with his ability to draw them in and find an open teammate.

This patience is the hallmark of generational talents, including current Penguins captain Sidney Crosby.

Crosby has led the league in scoring since the start of February, amassing 32 points (11 goals, 21 assists) during that span. His assault on the league has displayed some play-making abilities that have left the hockey world jaw-slacked.

Crosby is, from my perspective, the most innovative player in the National Hockey League. That innovation was on display last week in a 3-2 overtime win against the Florida Panthers when Crosby executed a short lob pass to spring Jake Guentzel for the game-winning goal.

Crosby laid this puck up perfectly, dumping it end over end, so it died when it hit the ice. The puck was placed in an area that optimized Guentzel's ability to grab the puck and break away with it.

These nifty and innovative plays by Crosby shouldn't come as a surprise when you consider all that he's accomplished from a data perspective. Let's check Corey Sznajder's All Three Zones project to get a view of how Crosby contributes to shot-attempts by his passing ability. The visualization here comes from CJ Turturo.

Over a three-year period, Crosby is in the 100th percentile not only in his ability to contribute to shot-attempts himself, but he's also in the 100th percentile in his ability to contribute to shots via his passing game, listed above as Shot Assists per 60 minutes. This makes Crosby a rare dual threat in the league. Not only does he drive shot attempts better than just about anyone in the league, but he also contributes to shot-attempts better than anyone in the league. Crosby is the gold standard in both regards.

Crosby's ability to generate shots via his passing ability is also tied to the fact that he's in the 98th percentile for zone entries with possession. Both of these skills have been on display throughout the course of this run from February to tonight's game in Buffalo.

In the next clip, watch the stages of Crosby's attack develop one at a time. The below play starts with Crosby winning a puck in the defensive zone, juking a Boston forechecker, and then executing a difficult cross-ice pass for a shot attempt. The entire clip is vintage Crosby in a nutshell.

Crosby starts the sequence by assisting Justin Schultz with a puck battle against Patrice Bergeron. After garnering possession, Crosby jukes Brad Marchand with a subtle move of his wrists, and he's off to the races for a clean zone entry. Using this subtle juke move to deke Marchand is so important because it ultimately creates the separation Crosby needs to execute this cross-ice pass to Jared McCann.

So, in this one clip, you have Crosby winning a puck battle defensively that springs him through the neutral zone, around the forecheck, and with a shot-assist within the first minute of the game.

Crosby's ability to generate shots is also tied to the patience we discussed above. Remember the Lemieux clip we watched that saw him draw in all the defenders and then execute a pass when no one was looking? Take a look at the next clip, where Crosby draws the defense in to create a shot attempt in a high-danger area.

I love this clip because it really exemplifies the type of patience I'm talking about. In this clip, the Penguins had been swarming the offensive zone for over a minute as we get to this moment. The tempo was high pace, and there was a lot of chaos on the ice from the Penguins repeated shot attempts. Crosby uses this to his advantage; as he gathers the puck along the wall, notice how he waits until the last possible moment to send this puck to the point, drawing two defenders out of position to create space.

The second pass is slowed down in the clip, as you can get a gauge of how Crosby sees plays developing before everyone else. Notice in the slow motion section of the video that, once again, Crosby has drawn the eyes of all five defenders to him, leaving a wide open space for Schultz to sneak in and get another shot-attempt.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

If you're wondering why Crosby sits atop the league in his ability to contribute to shots via his passing, consider that this clip saw Crosby create two quality shot opportunities within 10 seconds of each other.

If that clip doesn't convince you, take a look at this one from earlier in January against the Anaheim Ducks:

These flurries of activity are always driven by Crosby's vision and ability to keep the shots coming. Shots inherently create defensive chaos. It forces defensemen to be reactive instead of proactive. This is an environment where Crosby does his best work. Remember: a hallmark of Crosby's game is his ability to be anywhere between one to three steps ahead of the rest of the competition. As the Ducks struggle to keep up with the shot attempts coming their way, Crosby is already planning his next move.

Beyond these systematic shot-assists, Crosby has also been dogged on pucks and difficult to deal with in loose puck battles. The next clip exemplifies another reason Crosby is the class of the league in generating shots via his passing. He never gives up uses unconventional methodologies to get the puck to his teammates.

Make no mistake about it, this run is something special. With the Penguins fighting to secure a playoff spot, Crosby has elevated his game to another level, not only in his goal-scoring ability but in his ability to continue to generate shots via his passing ability.

With Crosby averaging 1.6 points per game since the month of February started, it's time to sit back and enjoy the show. This is a special run, and with McCann and Guentzel exhibiting a high level of ability to finish these prime scoring chances, Crosby is showing no signs of slowing down.

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1136158 Websites

The Athletic / Breaking down perception vs. reality when it comes to playing 'heavy hockey'

By Dom Luszczyszyn

Mar 14, 2019

Last week, I wrote an article about the merits of heavy hockey in the playoffs, an article that proved to be one of the most contentious I've ever written.

That's to be expected given the subjectivity of the topic at hand, but the degree of controversy it provoked in the comments sparked a new light towards a deeper understanding of what heavy hockey means to the average fan.

Heavy hockey does not have one set definition, different things are valued by different people whether it be pure physicality, consistent pressure, a relentless forecheck, a strong cycle game, winning battles, recovering pucks, finishing checks and just simply not being pushed around. All those things matter, but matter differently depending on who's watching. To me, heavy hockey means physical hockey: using your body to create pressure, to win battles, to recover pucks, to cycle it, to forecheck – just letting your opponent know you're there and you're not going to give them much breathing room.

Hockey data is very limited at the moment and there isn't public access to the much of what makes up heavy hockey. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist, it just means it's not currently being measured. To circumvent this in my last article, I used hits as a proxy for heavy hockey, figuring that a team that plays a heavy style will usually be a team that plays a physical game.

That idea struck a nerve for some, so out of curiosity, I tested that theory with a poll last Friday asking fans to vote on which team they viewed as the heaviest. I like employing a 'wisdom of the crowd' approach to things like this because it brings together everyone's different perspectives into one collective truth. It may not be perfectly accurate to everyone participating, but as a whole, it paints a passable picture.

As it turns out, my assumption that hits were a decent proxy for heavy hockey was very wrong based on the answers of just over 1,000 fans. Hits-per-60 in all situations had almost no correlation with fan perception of what constitutes a heavy team. The chart below has each team ranked by their poll results and coloured by their hits-per-60 rate this season (blue means a lot of hits, red means not a lot of hits).

It was a bit baffling, but a separate poll showed that the fan results were generally agreeable with room for a few disagreements considering the subjectivity of it all, meaning that when it comes to defining heavy hockey, hitting a lot doesn't matter at all – according to these results anyways. In a way, it sort of makes sense considering that heavy hockey entails not only hitting, but hitting with a purpose. It's about hitting to leave a mark and retrieve the puck.

A few people in the comments suggested just that, noting that I should control a team's hit totals for how often it has the puck (using Corsi as a proxy for puck possession), an idea that made too much sense and I'm a bit ashamed I didn't think of it initially. I also accounted for rink bias by using only 5-on-5 road hits instead and voila, a slight relationship was uncovered.

But there was something else that needed to be accounted for: reputation bias. While hits this season had no correlation, and road hits per time without possession had a slight relationship, an even stronger relationship occurred when using data from the last three seasons rather than just this one, even more so when the playoff data was included. That last wrinkle is extremely important to all of this. Playoffs are on the national stage and the general public starts familiarizing themselves with teams more than they have all season, doing so in an environment that is now known to have 37 percent more hitting (based on data from my previous article on the subject) than the regular season. The farther a team goes, the more lasting their impression is as a heavy team simply due to a newfound familiarity with them in a context that's biased towards increased physicality. Reputations are built in the playoffs when everyone is watching.

With the poll results in hand, I began to look to other factors that did explain what people thought when it comes to heavy hockey and a few things stood out: average weight and pace of play (measured by total shot attempts per 60). The first is laughably obvious: big boy hockey means having big boys to play it and fans seem to have a decent understanding of which teams have a roster of large human beings. The second is interesting philosophically. A big part of heavy hockey is pressure, forechecking and board play – things that tend to slow games down, so it makes sense that teams that fans consider heavier play a much slower game.

Oh, and one more: age. Yes, age. It seems as if the concept of knowing how to win via veteran experience is part of what constitutes heavy hockey in the mind of fans. Not only was it a significant factor in figuring out what inputs channelled the poll results best, but it was actually the most important. If a decent chunk of what constitutes the perception of heavy hockey is reputation, this actually makes sense too – a player and team have to prove they're tough and it takes time to build that sort of credibility.

Based on the poll results, the best explainer for heavy hockey appears to be a combination of age, adjusted hits over the last three seasons, average weight and pace of play – in that order. Those four factors explained 43 percent of the poll results, which means there's plenty of missing pieces that can't be explained with current



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

numbers, but given the dearth of data to account for heavy hockey it's a decent framework of fan perception.

Based on the four factors that proved important to the poll results, and using adjusted hits from this year only (to adjust for reputation bias), here's a look at which teams should be considered the heaviest and lightest this year. The chart is mapped to their poll score to find areas of disconnect between general public perception and whatever numbers we do have to figure out which team is perceived as the heaviest.

Some of the biggest differences: Winnipeg, Boston, Philadelphia, Calgary and Nashville were considered heavier than what the numbers dictate, while teams like Tampa Bay, Edmonton, Dallas, Vegas and Carolina were considered lighter.

Perception comes down to paying close attention, so I asked the people who cover those teams whether they considered them as ones that play heavy hockey.

Leading the poll results was Boston, who are fourth in adjusted hits, top 10 in slowing the game down, middle of the pack by weight, and 10th in age. A heavy team using these criteria, but probably not the heaviest, a notion Fluto Shinzawa agreed with, calling it reputation-based from years past with a heavy fourth line and defenders like Johnny Boychuk, Dennis Seidenberg and Adam McQuaid. "They still have some elements, but it's very much a team built on closing quickly with feet and sticks," Shinzawa said, more akin to calling the Bruins a fast team.

Murat Ates had a similar feeling about the Jets. "They can play a few different ways and absolutely have big people, but I think the guys who drive the bus are more skilled than bruising." Ates then added, "They're a big team and some of their skilled players are strong and don't get pushed around, but they're so far from number two in my books." Maybe the pollsters are big fans of Dustin Byfuglien, though to their credit Blake Wheeler and Kevin Hayes both said the Jets play a fast and heavy style postgame on Friday, so maybe we should just listen to the pros there.

In Philadelphia, Charlie O'Connor figured it was mostly franchise reputation for the former Broad Street Bullies, with only Radko Gudas and Robert Hagg billed as tough customers. For the Predators, Adam Vingan gave Nashville a three and was surprised they landed sixth in the poll, saying they can be heavy and get bigger at the deadline, but wouldn't call them overly physical. As for Calgary – a team that is sixth lightest, fifth youngest, bottom five in adjusted hits, and plays at a fast pace – I was perplexed the team was that high to begin with. Kent Wilson said they weren't a heavy team, with Garnet Hathaway being as close as the team gets to an enforcer or bruiser.

On the other side of the coin, Tampa Bay was deemed deceptively heavy by Joe Smith and that was on full display in Monday's dominant win over the Maple Leafs where they didn't give Toronto any space or time. "They are actually a heavier team than people think – not in a sense of size, but their tenacity in fighting for space and puck on forecheck," Smith said. "They are perceived as a team based solely on speed and skill, but they use both to be effective and heavy at times. As Babcock said you don't have to be big to play a heavy game." Perhaps surprisingly, the Lightning rank first in adjusted hits and may deserve a lot more credit for the edge they play with. They're far from an easy team to play against, that's for sure.

Vegas finished just outside the top 10 in the original poll, but based on the modelled output might be in the running as the league's top heavy-hockey team. The team is one of the heaviest, the players are experienced, their pace is surprisingly slow and they lay the body a lot. But Jesse Granger sees things differently, calling Vegas more of a middle of the pack team, close to where they were on the poll and one that relies on speed more than brawn. "Vegas has one heavy line (The fourth line of Reaves, Bellemare and Carpenter — was

Carrier before he got hurt—) and the rest of the team plays fast, transition hockey. They forecheck hard, but I definitely wouldn't call them heavy."

The three others – Edmonton, Dallas and Carolina – haven't exactly been playoff teams of late and that lowers perception. I was surprised the Oilers showed up so low considering they completely overhauled their team for the purpose of being heavy. "Chiarelli only said it 20 times at his opening press conference – it's still mostly his roster – and Hitchcock personifies heavy hockey," said Jonathan Willis. He figures the lack of heaviness in their star players is a contributing factor. In Dallas, it's a matter of consistency, but they're literally the fourth heaviest team by weight and play at the second slowest pace. As for the Hurricanes, they're seventh in adjusted hits and average by weight, but do play at an uptempo pace. As Sara Civan aptly put it, "it's hard to shake a candy cane reputation." Carolina hasn't been pushed around much this season, but without many people watching and no recent playoff experience to go by, it's not surprising to see them ranked 23rd – even if they have no actual business being that low based on their physicality this season.

A lot of what goes into heavy hockey depends on what you see. Until there's better data to unearth the qualities of what makes up heavy hockey, the answers will depend on what you personally see or who you ask, with the potential of that answer being littered with subjective bias based on reputation and viewing availability. Ask 1,000 fans to grade each team by how heavy they are and you'll most likely get 1,000 different answers.

Heavy hockey is a tricky subject. It's real. You know it when you see it. But when you can't see everything and can't rely on data to fill in those blanks, perception gets muddy which makes analysis difficult. Even the best analysts the game has to offer, the best scouts, the greatest hockey men and women – they don't and can't watch everything, meaning their answers will vary greatly too. They'll be more informed than anyone, but even they'll be missing pieces of the puzzle.

I'm still of the mind that "heavy hockey" doesn't matter as much as it's been made out to be. There's a place for it, just not to the current degree. There's likely more nuance to it than what I showed last week, I'll admit, and we may not know the true answer until there's better data to test it. However, we need to be collectively mindful about the inherent biases that come with the discussion of such a subjective matter. A matter where no one can really agree and answers are mostly mired by reputation and bias. A matter where seemingly every fanbase thinks they need to get heavier without being mindful of where they stand in the league's hierarchy in that domain.

Debate is good and healthy, and I'm not claiming I have all the answers in this one, far from it. But given the current state of the analysis behind the ideology, I remain skeptical of the utility of heavy hockey in determining which teams win or lose a given game.

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1136159 Websites

The Athletic / Off Beat: Need a smack in the face to get you going? Try a smelling salt instead

By Mark Lazerus

Mar 14, 2019



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

This is the fourth edition of Off Beat, an occasional series peeling back the curtain to show the human side of professional sports, and the little quirks of hockey culture. You can find the first three editions here and here and here.

I've never snorted cocaine, but I've watched Goodfellas enough times to get the basic gist. You brace yourself, you inhale sharply, you blink real hard a couple of times, you shake your head violently, and you involuntarily let out some variation of "WHOOO."

I figure that's pretty much what using a smelling salt is like, too. Minus the seriously adverse health effects, of course.

Am I close?

"I don't know how to describe it," Dominik Kahun said. "It's just...strong."

"It's sharp," Brandon Saad said. "Gets your nostrils going."

"It's almost like the feeling when you bite into a lemon, when it shocks you," Connor Murphy said. "It's that, but in your nose? Does that make sense?"

No, Connor. No, it doesn't.

I've been fascinated by smelling salts forever. It's such an old-timey "medical" device, the kind of thing you'd expect to see in a bare-knuckle boxing match from the early 1900s, or a Jane Austen novel when someone gets the vapors. They date back to the Roman Empire, for goodness sake. Yet there's Patrick Kane, waving them around his eyes on the bench during games. There's Murphy, taking a big whiff every period. There's Erik Gustafsson taking a hit. And Gustav Forsling. Kahun, too.

So I felt it was time for some important investigative work. I procured a smelling salt — the exact one the Blackhawks use — and decided to try it out. There's Hunter S. Thompson going on a wild drug-fueled romp through Las Vegas, George Plimpton joining Detroit Lions training camp, and me nervously holding a smelling salt under my nose in my hotel room in Toronto (while wearing a winter glove, because Blackhawks head equipment manager Troy Parchman told me it's made of glass and it's been known to shatter and cut fingers; oh, and in my left hand, because my right hand is more important to me).

Yep. Gonzo journalism at its finest.

A smelling salt is like a glow stick. It's a glass tube, and you have to crack it in the middle to make it work. The label said it was 35 percent alcohol and 15 percent ammonia. The rest, I can only assume, is an amalgam of used hockey equipment and elevator farts. It's unpleasant, is what I'm saying. Once you pop it between your thumb and index finger, it wastes no time going to work. You feel it deep in your nostril, like someone's shoving a letter-opener up there and lodging it in your brain. And yes, you do blink real hard a few times. You do shake your head violently. You do let out an involuntary "WHOOO."

It might be for people who faint, but it's not for the faint of heart.

But you know what? It works. My nose — a little stuffy, because it's always a little stuffy, because I have young children and young children are walking Petri dishes — cleared instantly. Instantly! I could breathe freely (I didn't want to inhale deeply because the smell was so awful, but I could inhale deeply). Much more effective and mildly less disgusting than that staple of the sport, the snot-rocket, which I'm pretty certain they teach at the youth-hockey levels before they even teach skating.

It's like Vicks VapoRub, only on steroids. And with a slightly greater risk of finger laceration.

This is the smelling salt the Blackhawks use. (Mark Lazerus/The Athletic)

I don't know if it made me any more alert — I had just leisurely walked 15 minutes from the rink to the hotel, not played a 90-second shift in my own end — but it certainly had the desired effect of a slap in the face.

That's why Kane uses them. That said, I did not exactly enjoy waving it around my eyes.

"I don't think my girlfriend or my family likes me doing that too much," Kane said with a chuckle. "I try not to do it, but it works. It just burns them for a quick second and makes them water for a bit. You ever have dry eyes? It helps. I don't want to say it loosens up your eyes, but it just kind of gives you a quick jolt."

Now, there's a slogan for Big Ammonia: "Smelling Salts. Loosen up your eyes."

It was Artemi Panarin who turned Kane on to smelling salts. Parchman would snap one for Panarin — Parchman does all the snapping, because it's better to cut the equipment guy than the \$10.5-million winger — and then Panarin would absent-mindedly hand it to Kane. He was hooked. The eye thing is proprietary, though. Nobody else on the team does that.

"I tried that once after I saw Kane did it," Murphy said. "I was like, 'No way.' It'll really mess your eyes up. It does make your eyes all watery. But if you do it too close to when you go back out on the ice, your vision's going to be blurry for a second, because it really waters them a lot."

Parchman was neatening up a neighboring locker in the Anaheim dressing room while Murphy and I had this conversation, and he chimed in: "When you get a good one, and I'm standing way back here, I can feel it in my eyes."

Indeed, the blast radius of one of these things is pretty substantial. I put mine down on the desk when I was done with it, got up and walked away to try to shake the smell out of my nose. Several feet away, it was still lingering in the air. Or maybe it was still lingering in my brain. Who can say for sure?

"I'll get a little whiff of it just by sitting near the guy," backup goalie Cam Ward said. "I'm fascinated by them, too. I never really tried it, so I don't even know if it would work for me. But I can't see that being healthy, doing that every game. Hopefully I never need smelling salts to wake me up and get me ready for a game. The boys should be ready to begin with."

OK, Dad.

Former Erie Otters coach Kris Knoblauch disapproved of using smelling salts, too, so Dylan Strome and Alex DeBrincat stay far away. When Strome was centering Kane, however, and sitting next to him on the bench, he'd frequently get a whiff. That's about the only bad thing about playing with Kane.

"Yeah, I can smell it," Strome said. "And I don't like it."

The Blackhawks burn through about 30 or 40 smelling salts a game, though, so the handful of guys that like them really like them.

Me? I think once was enough. I'm writing this about five hours after cracking that thing open and I think that ammonia smell is permanently seared into my consciousness.

How to describe it? Man, I don't really know. You know what, it really is sort of like biting into a lemon, but for your nose.

Does that make sense?

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NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

The Athletic / Pronman: Who's the most divisive prospect in this year's NHL Draft? Meet Arthur Kaliyev

By Corey Pronman

Mar 14, 2019

Every draft has a divisive prospect.

Last season was Ryan Merkley, other years it was Lawson Crouse, Brandon Saad, Mikhail Grigorenko, Tony DeAngelo, Josh Ho-Sang. Saying those names to a scout would have elicited a strong response: a pound on the table to emphasize how good the player is or an equally fierce rejection of them.

This year's divisive prospect is Arthur Kaliyev.

Kaliyev sits on 50 goals and 100 points in the OHL, making him the first 17-year-old to score 50 in the OHL since Alex DeBrincat. The only other current NHL players to do the same Steven Stamkos, John Tavares and Jeff Skinner. Kaliyev is also one of the leaders in shots on goal across the CHL. Yet there are NHL teams who are hesitant to take him in the top 10, the upper half of the first round, the first round in general and, for some, even at all.

I watched Kaliyev live with Hamilton last season in the playoffs, a few times in the summer at USA's Select Camp and several more times at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup. In a span of about five months, I saw him live about 10 times and did not remember one positive viewing. If anything, it was the exact opposite.

I talked to NHL scouts who were at the same events who echoed the concerns: No compete, doesn't drive play.

When he started scoring a ton this season, it would have been easy to say it's not for real. I watched him a lot already and never saw a real player. There's nothing to get excited about there. However, it's important to combat sample size biases and, if a guy is about to score 50 goals and 100 points at 17, you better look twice and be 100 percent sure.

So, I looked again. I went to several Hamilton games this season and I watched all his point-scoring plays. Truth be told, I still haven't been to a game of Kaliyev's where I was blown away. With that said, I think upon further research and reflection there is more to his game that intrigues.

What immediately stands out about Kaliyev is not his shot, which you would think would be the selling point for a 50-goal scorer. Rather, his hockey sense stands out as his best trait. He's one of the best passers in the OHL.

"You don't get 50 assists without having very good vision," said Hamilton GM Steve Staios.

Hamilton's power play runs through him, not just for his finishing touch, but also for his ability to make plays. Kaliyev often feigns seam passes to his teammates and makes creative feeds through small lanes to create chances. A few examples:

What you see there are passes of a true playmaker. He's putting pucks in the right spots to be tipped in, finding lanes and, on the last play, showing creativity to flip the puck to an open teammate.

Of course, he does have a great shot. I don't think his shot is great in the typical sense. I rarely saw Kaliyev pick a corner and go bar down on a goalie as you typically envision a sniper in the modern day game. Rather, his shot is dangerous because it's a bullet. Here are two examples.

The first one is an 80-grade shot. A cannon of a shot, far corner as a one-timer and one of the few times I saw him pick a corner. Very few players in the world can pull that off. The second one isn't a great angle but it's a slo-mo replay and it's still hard to follow it go in.

Very few of his goals are of the spectacular variety. That doesn't mean they required no skill, scoring is a skill, and Kaliyev did hit the highlight reel. But a lot of Kaliyev's scoring was from finishing off a play. Thus there are concerns about whether Brandon Saigeon (since traded), Matthew Strome and Jan Jenik helped support Kaliyev's numbers. In that sense, there is a bit of a rhyme with DeBrincat where, at the time, scouts wondered whether Connor McDavid and Dylan Strome made him (of course a bit of a difference between the two groups of players). I'm skeptical of this claim.

Critics of Kaliyev point to the prospect's skating and compete level.

Scouts also point to the fact he doesn't drive offense on a line, meaning there are often games where you wonder if he accomplished anything. It was a running joke this season with NHL scouts who said they went to a Hamilton game, didn't notice Kaliyev much, but he scored and got two points. Teams who have invested in getting deeper analytics on CHL players, like Corsi and zone entry numbers, Kaliyev comes out as fine but nothing amazing.

On it's face those are reasonable concerns. There are shifts like these where his forecheck leaves something to be desired:

Or shifts like these where he doesn't show much speed or pace on a zone entry:

I don't think he's slow, though. Kaliyev isn't fast by any means, but I see average speed. And when he wants to turn a corner, he can do it at a fair level:

Despite that, many scouts who have reservations key in on the on-ice compete. Kaliyev is not a perfect player by any stretch. He's not much of a fan of physical play, he's likely not going to be a penalty killer in the NHL, and he's not often asked to be the guy bringing the puck up the ice to break a puck in on a power play. His strengths are fantastic and visible, and his weaknesses are visible too.

I will say this about Kaliyev: I don't believe this is a character issue. With cases like DeAngelo and Merkley, you'd hear negative stories from people who worked with them about the person. With Kaliyev it's been mostly the opposite, as the impressions of him as a person and player are positive. I wouldn't say that is universal, as there are some who have expressed concerns, and scouts can always pick apart a player's personality and background. But in my opinion, this is not a glaring red siren.

When you talk about a winger with average feet, a big shot, great production and so-so compete level, some scouts get flashbacks to Oliver Wahlstrom and his not-so-hot freshman season at Boston College. I see the argument, it's reasonable, but I also see some differences in Kaliyev as a playmaker.

Other scouts say Kaliyev reminds them, in part, of Mikhail Grigorenko. Stylistically there are differences, but in terms of a highly talented, intelligent and productive player with size whose game can lack pace and compete, there is a bit of a rhyme there.

While this might paint a negative picture, there are certainly scouts who are all aboard the Kaliyev bandwagon and see him as a potential impact guy at the NHL level.

The scouts on the more optimistic side of the projection argue the DeBrincat situation as a comparison to Kaliyev. Sure there are major differences in size and compete level, but both didn't have a ton of speed, but have elite brains and shots, and both produced a lot in the OHL. DeBrincat's coach went to bat for him, as well.

"Arthur is one of the most dynamic players I've coached in the OHL in my six years here. I coached Dylan Strome and Alex DeBrincat. In



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

my opinion, Arthur is just as good a player as either of those two," said Vince Laise, the acting coach of the Hamilton Bulldogs.

Laise was formerly an assistant coach with Erie.

"Arthur has the ability to find the back of the net just as those two did at the same age," Laise said. "They differ in play styles but all achieve what NHL organizations look for. Arthur is more than just a power play producer, his underlying value is his ability to produce at even strength and his playmaking. He's been as coachable as they come and a pleasure to work with."

It's possible Kaliyev won't work out. There are signs there. He has limitations in his game. Most prospects have limitations, though.

My job as far as I see it is to do my research, weigh the evidence and give my best attempt at a balanced opinion.

On the pro-Kaliyev side: Elite hockey sense, cannon of a shot, decent frame with some room left to fill out, elite goal, point and shot production. Runs a power play as well as anyone in the CHL.

On the anti-Kaliyev side: Average feet, pace isn't always good, on-ice compete level, consistency.

Those pros are very persuasive and could be indicators of a good, if not a very good NHL player. However, those cons are significant too and must be given significant weight. I don't think those cons are so glaring that it should knock a 50-goal man with his toolkit out of the first round, but I do think they raise reasonable concerns from elevating him to the top tier of the draft. For these reasons, I have Kaliyev in the 8-15 range in this year's NHL Draft.

The Athletic LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136161 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens Takeaways: Andrew Shaw calls out team for lack of fight

Eric Engels

March 14, 2019, 10:44 PM

The Montreal Canadiens were 2:57 away from earning a precious point in the standings and returning to a playoff position when Anders Lee took advantage of a perfect pass from Mathew Barzal to give the New York Islanders a 2-1 lead they never relinquished.

A mix up between Montreal's Max Domi and Brett Kulak at the offensive blue line gave Barzal and Lee the 2-on-1 break that effectively ended the game. It was one of many mistakes from a Canadiens team that came into the game hoping to shore up its defensive play.

"We've definitely got to improve in that area," said assistant captain Brendan Gallagher before the team left for Long Island on Wednesday. "It's not like the effort's not there. It's more maybe a mindset. I think guys are probably thinking you want to contribute a bit too much on the other side of the ice right now and that complete 200-foot game is something that has made us a good team. We've had everyone with that mentality and if we get back to that just a bit... We have Carey Price, it's nice to have him in there making the saves, but to make his life a little bit easier I think we have to have a little bit more commitment to limiting the chances."

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If the intention was there, the follow through wasn't. It didn't hurt the Canadiens early in the game, when Price stood on his head and made several miraculous saves, but it cost them on the two goals they allowed.

Ouch. This one stung—and not just metaphorically. It was a rough-and-tumble, physical affair that left players on both sides bloodied and bruised. A playoff-style game that served as a warmup for what's to come for both teams down the stretch and possibly only one of them beyond.

Here are our takeaways from another costly loss:

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

If not for Price...

The Canadiens would've been cooked early on.

Price made unbelievable saves on almost all 15 shots he faced in the first period, snatching pucks out of the air and not allowing rebound opportunities.

He was beat by Adam Pelech 1:20 into the second period after a mess of a shift by his teammates left him scrambling around his crease to save their bacon again.

Later in the period, the Islanders got a power play and had four chances to take a 2-0 lead. The first two came off Josh Bailey's stick, but Price stood his ground and got his pads on both of them.

Then, as the power play was expiring, Matt Martin came barreling in on the left wing and was stopped by Price's right pad twice.

The Canadiens' netminder made 13 saves in the second and eight more in the third, and he had no chance on the Lee shot that beat him to win the game. He deserved better.

They rebounded from their slow start after Price gave them life, but they did not compete at the same level as the Islanders did.

Forward Andrew Shaw was one of a few Canadiens who showed up from start to finish and he did not mince his words when asked about the difference in the game.

"They came out to win the game from the start. They wanted to win more than we did," Shaw said. "We need to be a team playing hard. Everyone. All lines, all D, goalie; everyone has to be playing their best every night. Lines are taking nights off, players are taking nights off. They don't have that fight."

The Canadiens knew they were skating into hostile territory, with the Islanders going 9-5-2 at the Coliseum since moving from Barclays Center in Brooklyn halfway through the season.

"They make you earn everything. Especially in that building," said Gallagher. "We are playing at Nassau, so I think the energy and the environment will be a bit higher than I think it was at the Barclays Center. It'll probably be a bit more enjoyable game, and I think they'll probably feed off that a little bit."

They did, and it was obvious right off the hop.

"The crowd was amazing, the building was rocking, it was fun to play in, and we played a team that looked like it was ready for the playoffs," said Price.

Their commitment to the team-game has been second to none this season.

You have to think that's a credit to the job Barry Trotz has done as coach since taking over from Doug Weight in the summer months.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

"It's a team that's well structured," said Canadiens coach Claude Julien on Wednesday. "When you watch them play, they play well as a team. They really respect what they need to do and they're consistent because of that. I think they've had good goaltending this year. A lot like us, I think their success is spread out through their lineup and that's given them the opportunity to be where they are right now."

The biggest reason the Islanders are two points out of first place in the Metropolitan Division is their commitment to defence. They've gone from 31st in goals against a season ago to first in the league this year.

Robin Lehner has had a remarkable season in goal. As has Thomas Greiss, who was otherworldly in this game—beaten only by a dipping slapshot from Jordie Benn in the second period.

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.

And they paid immediate dividends.

Jonathan Drouin was removed from a line with Jesperi Kotkaniemi and placed with Max Domi and Shaw. Artturi Lehkonen and Joel Armia were reunited with Kotkaniemi, who found his game immediately after the change.

And on Paul Byron's first shift with Jordan Weal and Nate Thompson, he created the play for Benn to capitalize on for Montreal's only goal.

The Canadiens finished the game by out-shooting the Islanders 25-23 over the final two periods. They were about even in chances, too.

But they lost, and one would expect more change is coming for their showdown with the Chicago Blackhawks at the Bell Centre on Saturday.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136162 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Patrik Laine's overall game improving at right time for Jets

Mark Spector | @sportsnetspec

March 15, 2019, 12:22 AM

WINNIPEG — Patrik Laine had the puck on his blade, cruising down the left edge of the slot like a Jag in the passing lane. Bruins goalie and fellow Finn, Tuukka Rask, shifted over towards the former 44-goal man, stuck at 29 snipes this season and hungry for more.

"All the options are right there, obviously, but when it's one of the best shooters in the league you don't want to cheat," said Rask.

Everyone inside Bell MTS Place was thinking shoot.

"I thought I was going to shoot, too," chuckled Laine. "Yeah, if I don't know what I'm doing, I don't think the goalie's going to know what I'm doing."

Laine would hit for the goalpost cycle Thursday — right post, crossbar and left post — but on the play in question he deftly slipped a pass over to a charging Mark Scheifele, who quietly tapped the biscuit behind Rask for the 2-0 goal midway through the first period.

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"I thought first I was going to shoot it. I was pretty close," Laine said. "But then I saw Scheif backdoor. So, might as well pass it, sometimes."

Might as well pass it, sometimes. Lord help NHL goalies if that becomes a thing for Laine.

This was big boy's hockey, Thursday night in the slow thaw that is Winnipeg, Manitoba. A Bruins team that was damned if they were going to lose a third straight game after their 15-0-4 run, posted up against a sour Jets club that had coughed up the losing goal at the 19:55 mark of the third period Tuesday against San Jose.

Two teams destined for the playoffs, both with warts in their game that needed removing. The third period opened at 2-2, two heavy, playoff-worthy clubs playing such tight hockey that they combined for just three shots on goal in the opening 10:00 of the period.

"What we've wanted to do now is get into that playoff mentality, get ready for the playoffs. Put together a full 60 like we did today," said Nikolaj Ehlers, the speedy Jets winger who sniped the winner in a 4-3 Jets victory. "They're a good team, a playoff team with a lot of skill. We played the game we needed to play.

"You know you're not going to dominate for the full 60 minutes, but you can work hard for the full 60 minutes. We did that tonight."

One night after Nashville lost to woebegone Anaheim, the Jets knocked off an Eastern power in the Bruins. With a dozen games left in their season, their potential first round foe a moving target between Dallas and flagging St. Louis, the Jets are simply trying to piece their own game together.

On Thursday, that started with the first line of Scheifele between Laine and big Blake Wheeler, a unit that stuffed a seven-point night down the throats of the Bruins. Scheifele was driving the net as we would expect him to, while Wheeler had his possession game back, doling out passes like a Vegas dealer.

It was Laine, however, whose well-rounded game may come as a surprise. He has 29 goals this season, which is a dip for him. But the young Finn's overall game is improving.

He's not just standing on the perimeter firing off one-timers, as we've seen in the past. Laine was strong all over the ice, a quality that could make this line a true powerhouse, if each player brings a complete game to the rink come playoff time.

"Playing on that line, against the other team's best every night, you need to be more than just a shooter," said Laine, who is still just 20 years old, and has 109 NHL goals on his resume. "I know that I can pass as well. It's not new to me — I guess it's new to everyone else. There are a lot of ways you can help the team win. Tonight is a passing night."

Imagine if Laine were to round out his game, adding a passing element the way, say, a Leon Draisaitl has complimented his passing skills with a 40-plus goal season? Now, imagine that player on the left side of Scheifele and Wheeler.

Because to play on that line, you can't be simply a one-trick pony. You've got to do it all, because if you don't, head coach Paul Maurice will replace you with someone who will.

"I think what guys realize about me and Wheels is it's never one guy's the passer, one guy's the shooter," Scheifele said. "We all do the work, we all do what needs to be done. When you're the guy to score, you're the guy to score. When you're the guy to pass, you're the guy to pass. That's the way we've always worked."

Laine is finishing his Entry Level Contract this season.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

God help the Jets' salary cap if he ever learns to pass it as lethally as he shoots it.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Timothy Liljegren wants to crack lineup 'as soon as possible'

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjukebox

March 14, 2019, 12:52 PM

TORONTO — Timothy Liljegren needed time to get used to the hollering.

Every hockey coach has his little idiosyncrasies, his own way of communicating with the young men sitting on the bench he stands on.

But Liljegren did notice a difference between the Swedish coaches that had steered him to the point where he was deemed a steal as the 2017 17th-overall draft pick of the Toronto Maple Leafs and the ones in Canada tasked with carrying him from hot, right-shot prospect to bona fide NHL defenceman.

"Coaches here are not afraid to tell you if you're doing something wrong. In Sweden, they're more laid-back. Here, you can get yelled at during the game," Liljegren explains during an interview with Sportsnet.

To survive last season's shift to a different continent and a shrunken ice surface, his skin had to stiffen.

"It's been getting thicker since I've got here, that's for sure. Sometimes when I was younger, I didn't like getting yelled at — especially when it's in a different language. But after a while you get used to it. You learn they're not saying it to make you feel bad; it's just their focus on the game is the same as yours is.

"I don't mind it. You have to have a high ceiling to be good."

Liljegren, a 19-year-old sophomore with the AHL Marlies, is good, getting better, yet the apex of his potential remains a serious question mark for an organization — and fan base — starved for defenders who can patrol the right side.

The Maple Leafs' questionable blueline depth has been exposed down the stretch.

Toss in the fact that current NHL right-side defencemen Ron Hainsey and Igor Ozighanov are impending free agents and righty Nikita Zaitsev has been available for trade, and the intrigue hovering around the how good and how soon of Liljegren intensifies.

Lefty Travis Dermott lifted a Calder Cup with Liljegren last spring, when the then-first-year pro was impressing as the youngest defenceman in the AHL. Dermott has since made a successful and smooth transition to the bigs and sees no reason why the man Mike Babcock calls 'Lily Pad' can't eventually make the same leap.

"Oh, for sure. I don't think there's any ceiling on him yet," Dermott says. "He's got the best mentality, really, for a kid his age and the position he's in. He was always asking me questions last year, which is great to see — especially as a guy who's hopeful to be my D partner or at least to be in the D corps here soon."

Dermott took notice of how rapidly Liljegren, adjusting to a tighter playing surface, learned when to pick his spots to pinch or rush, and the teenager would ask Dermott to go over defensive situations with him.

"Open-minded is the best way to say it. Eager to learn," Dermott says. "His skating is so good. He could keep up with the guys, and especially as a young guy, that's tough, moving up against the faster forwards. So his skating from the big ice surface has translated well here.

"And his skill speaks for itself, what he's able to do out there. Just a really good kid. I've never heard anyone say a bad word about him. He's one of those Euro guys everyone loves."

GM Kyle Dubas was so high on Liljegren, the original plan was to call him up midwinter for an NHL taste, à la Dermott in 2018.

That idea was spoiled when Liljegren, who began the season beside Calle Rosen on the Marlies' top pairing and working both special teams, suffered a high ankle sprain just in time to ruin his participation in the world junior championships.

Marlies bench boss Sheldon Keefe describes the injury as "a huge setback," noting the ankle needed three more weeks to be game-ready than initially projected. A one-game conditioning stint to ECHL Newfoundland actually resulted in another tweak to the joint while skating with the Growlers.

Liljegren says the rehabilitation was gruelling but now believes his stride is back to 100 per cent. Watching Team Sweden, "my best buddies," get eliminated from the couch, however, was painful.

"It was my age group too, so I knew pretty much everyone on the team. I grew up playing on national teams with those guys, and this would've been the last year playing with them," Liljegren laments. "It's a tough thing, but there's nothing you can do about it. You just gotta accept it.

"It hasn't been the season I was hoping for, but lately I've been playing really good and it's fun to be back."

When Liljegren returned healthy in February, Keefe paired him with countryman and fellow first-rounder Rasmus Sandin. Rosen and minor-league lifer Vincent LoVerde, 29, now draw the opponents' toughest offensive lines.

"It was a lot too soon for him," says Keefe, who believes the off-ice work Liljegren invested should have long-term dividends. "We think he's in a really good place, and we've really liked his game since he's been back."

Naturally, there's still plenty of space to grow. Instructions to shout.

Keefe wants to see Liljegren sharpen into a power-play threat, both shooting and distributing. His puck-carrying and breakouts can improve. Eleven points through 31 games is more than respectable, but there's more to untap.

"Overall, he needs to play — and play a lot. And he needs to stay healthy. He needs that to get confidence and find some rhythm. We really like the progress he's made defensively, defending against the rush especially. He kills a lot of plays early," says Keefe, encouraging creativity.

"In the defensive zone, he's done a nice job. For a guy with his skill set, we want to see him blossom offensively. The power play is a big part of that."

Liljegren has received the message, loud and clear.

"[Keefe] can be hard on us, but at the same time he understands that you have to be creative, so he lets us be creative. That's fun. But he can be hard on you, too. You have to push every day. It's a good environment for young guys to be in," Liljegren says.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

"I have a pretty good shot, but I have to get it through traffic. Play more mature. Raise my lowest level. Every part of my game has to get better if you want to play in the NHL."

Liljegren and Sandin have struck up quick chemistry over recent weeks and shout Swedish at each other about a third of the time they're on the ice, predominantly in the D-zone, using English the rest of the time so as to not lose the forwards in translation.

"We have a lot of fun out there when we play," Sandin says. "He reads me, and I read him pretty well."

To escape from the pro grind, Liljegren, like scores of kids his age, turns to Fortnite and a headset. Marlies morning practice concludes around the same time as his brother's workday in Sweden, so the video game wirelessly connects the player to home, to family.

"We get to play three hours every day, so it's fun to chat with him," Liljegren says.

Who's better?

"Me," Liljegren snaps, without a beat.

A smile. A confidence this coach would love.

Liljegren downplays the trade interest his skills have attracted from opposing franchises, although he is encouraged by the knowledge that Dubas ruled both he and Sandin off-limits, steering the L.A. Kings, for instance, instead toward prospects Carl Grundstrom and Sean Durzi in the Jake Muzzin deal.

"It's nice they have trust in me to be a good player for the Leafs. It's good to hear," says Liljegren, whose focus remains on his own improvement, on filtering all those loud Coca-Cola Coliseum critiques into Scotiabank Arena cheers.

"My goal is to play for the Leafs as soon as possible," he says, "but I don't want to rush it."

"I think when I'm playing for the Leafs, I want to be there to stay, not up and down."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136164 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Current NHL playoff format creating season-long rivalries

Mark Spector | @sportsnetspec

March 14, 2019, 4:23 PM

WINNIPEG — Ask Brad Marchand about meeting the Toronto Maple Leafs in Round 1 of the Eastern Conference playoffs, and he'll pump the brakes on you.

"That matchup isn't set in stone by any means," cautions the Boston Bruins winger, always the picture of pragmatism. "You're getting a little ahead of yourself here."

Realistically, with the Bruins trailing Atlantic Division-leading Tampa by 17 points, followed closely by Toronto — which has an eight-point bulge on fourth-place Montreal — a Boston-Toronto Round 1 is not only a lock.

It is, in fact, the only first-round series across the National Hockey League that is as good as set in stone. So, going on that

assumption, we asked Marchand what he thinks about the fact Toronto and Boston will meet in a playoff series for the third time in the past seven post-seasons.

"I don't think it's fair that ... one team would finish second (in the NHL) and have to play a third or fourth place team, compared to a seventh-place team," he said. (Boston is currently the fourth-ranked team in the NHL, while Toronto is fifth). "But, if you're going to get to a Stanley Cup you've got to get through your whole Conference anyway."

The debate is clear-cut: Do you prefer the "one versus eight, two versus seven" system that the league abandoned in 2014? Or is the newer, Division-based system — that has pitted Boston and Toronto against each other twice in six springs — preferable?

"(Playoffs are) where the rivalries are built," he said. "If you're excited about Toronto, it's because we've played them a few years in the playoffs, and there have been some exciting finishes."

"I don't think we're looking forward to playing the Leafs any more than any other team in the East. It's just another team."

Now, this is a player who dipped into Leafs Nation with a couple of complimentary tweets about Mitch Marner recently. He knows the Leafs and Bruins are on a collision course, but with the Bruins trying to right the ship tonight in Winnipeg, it just wasn't the time for Marchand to rock that boat about a series that is almost a month away.

The debate about the two playoff formats, however, is a pertinent one here in Winnipeg, where last season the No. 1 team in the NHL (Nashville) met up with the No. 2 Jets in the second round.

"It was a hell of a series," said Jets head coach Paul Maurice. "Nobody in Nashville or Winnipeg got cheated, if you bought tickets."

Hockey people, almost to the man, will tell you that a team that earns a high placing over the 82-game grind of a regular season deserves to face a lesser opponent in Round 1. There should be a tangible reward for regular-season success, and meeting Toronto, then No. 1 Tampa, does not amount to any kind of reward for the Bruins.

But, consider the entertainment side.

"The first argument is, go one through eight, and the better teams have a better chance. The series are shorter," said Maurice. "Do it the other way and you get some heavy match-ups — in that second round especially — and it's going to increase the number of games."

"If I'm a hockey fan, I want to turn on the TV every night and have a bunch of hockey games on," the Jets coach said. "We are here to put an exciting product in the ice for two straight months. So if the argument is, that's the most exciting product? Then that's absolutely the way it should be."

The theory that the Divisional format produces more first-round games, and thus, more Hockey Related Revenues for the league and the players, sounds logical. However, it does not bear out under scrutiny.

Between 1994 and 2013, in the old 1 vs. 8 system, the average first-round series lasted 5.78 games.

1994-2013 Conference quarter-finals

YEAR	# OF GAMES	# OF SERIES	AVG SERIES LENGTH
1994	48	8	6
1995	49	8	6.13
1996	45	8	5.63
1997	48	8	6



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

1998	46	8	5.75
1999	44	8	5.5
2000	41	8	5.13
2001	44	8	5.5
2002	47	8	5.88
2003	47	8	5.88
2004	47	8	5.88
2006	44	8	5.5
2007	43	8	5.38
2008	48	8	6
2009	44	8	5.5
2010	49	8	6.13
2011	49	8	6.13
2012	48	8	6
2013	47	8	5.88
TOTAL	878	152	5.78

In the six post-seasons since they switched to the Divisional format, the average first-round series was marginally shorter at just 5.68 games.

2014-2018 First Round series

YEAR	# OF GAMES LENGTH	# OF SERIES	AVG SERIES
2014	48	8	6
2015	47	8	5.88
2016	47	8	5.88
2017	42	8	5.25
2018	43	8	5.38
TOTAL	227	40	5.68

So, there are no extra gates to be had, as Maurice's theory proposes. But, what about the theory that, when two teams meet in a playoff series, the rivalry that gets built makes their four or five meetings the following season more entertaining?

"We took eight straight penalties in Nashville in our first game there (this season)," said Maurice. "The two teams both showed up for a street fight. The referees thought they were going to keep it nice? It wasn't a nice game.

"That's happened in our Minnesota games, and in our Vegas games we've played pretty strong," he said of last year's playoff opponents. "For sure, there's way more in the (games the) next season, after a playoff series."

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Boston goalie Tuukka Rask doesn't necessarily agree, however.

"I think those days are gone. It's not going to be like Boston-Montreal," Rask said. "The game has changed, I's not as heavy a game, not as many fights and dirty tricks like there used to be. It's a skill game now, and the best skilled team is going to win."

It's a debate that won't end soon. And one that will produce much howling, if the Maple Leafs get dispatched by Boston in Round 1.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136165 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup Playoff Push: Oilers miss a big opportunity

Rory Boylen | @RoryBoylen

March 14, 2019, 1:35 PM

Wednesday didn't have much in the way of playoff implications, although one Canadian team may have finally played its way out of the race. Thursday, however, offers up a 10-game slate that will change the way we look at the standings Friday morning.

Here is a closer look at the picture in both conferences.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

If the regular season ended today...

(A1) Tampa Bay vs. (WC2) Columbus

(A2) Boston vs. (A3) Toronto

(M1) Washington vs. (WC1) Carolina

(M2) NY Islanders vs. (M3) Pittsburgh

Team in focus: NY Islanders

One of the best stories in the NHL this season. Are things starting to unravel, at least a little, for the Islanders? Don't get us wrong, New York is still 11-8-1 in its past 20, which is about a 94-point pace and Barry Trotz is still the frontrunner for and likely winner of the Jack Adams Award. But that pace is far closer to the level of a wild-card-bubble team than a division winner, and now that the Islanders have given up first place in the Metro with both Pittsburgh and Carolina hot on their heels, are they lining up to head into the playoffs in a lull?

The story behind New York's season has been a vastly improved defence and much stronger goaltending. The team went from averaging a league-high 35.6 shots against per game last season (the third-highest mark of the salary cap era) to 30.7 this season, which today ranks 11th-best in the league. A slightly worrying trend, however, is that their high-danger-chances-against average has been increasing as the season has gone along:

DATE HDCA/G

Oct. 3-Dec. 31 8.8

Jan. 1 to today 9.12

Feb. 1 to today 10.2

Past 10 games 11.8

(Stats from Natural Stat Trick)

Less surprisingly, scoring has also been a recent sore spot for the team. In their past 10 games against teams either in a playoff spot, or still very much alive in the race, the Islanders have 23 goals — including six in one game against the Leafs. They're 5-5-0 against those teams and have won just one of their past four games against still-relevant division rivals. The Islanders have the 20th-ranked offence in the season, averaging 2.84 goals per game, and that's moving down.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

The goalies are still playing well, and that's the great equalizer come playoff time, but, as the finish line draws near and everyone in the division around them is heating up, there is at least some reason to start worrying a bit about the Isles.

Here's what the Eastern Conference standings look like today:

What'd I miss? The Maple Leafs continued to worry their fans Wednesday with a 5-4 loss to Chicago, which, despite a frantic finish, was over after they dug a 4-0 first-period deficit. Two nights after saying their loss to Tampa Bay was a "wake up call" the Leafs players came out with an opening frame that Auston Matthews said was unacceptable.

There's something about this team and bad first periods that will leave them exposed by Boston or Tampa Bay in the first two rounds of the playoffs. Toronto is plus-19 and plus-22 in second- and third-period scoring, but just plus-4 in first periods this season. Over the past two games, they've been outscored 6-0 in the first.

Fun fact: Toronto's Mitch Marner added assists 59 and 60 Wednesday night, becoming the first Maple Leaf to record that many helpers in a season since Doug Gilmour did it in both 1992-93 (95) and 1993-94 (84).

We've already talked about the Islanders, who very well could be tied with the Penguins in points (though with a game in hand) if they lose Thursday. The Canadiens, though, are .500 over their past 10 games and are 3-5-1 against teams currently in a playoff spot since Feb. 1. Montreal's Tuesday win against Detroit was as much a guaranteed two points as can be this time of the season, but the raucous Nassau crowd and the pesky Islanders will give the Habs something much closer to a playoff atmosphere tonight. Columbus and Carolina are both idle, so while Montreal can't fall further back of the wild card, a loss would leave it with more games played than both of those teams and put it at a disadvantage in the coming days.

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.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

If the regular season ended today...

(P1) San Jose vs. (WC2) Arizona

(P2) Calgary vs. (P3) Vegas

(C1) Winnipeg vs. (WC1) Dallas

(C2) Nashville vs. (C3) St. Louis

Team in focus: Minnesota Wild

Last week we had the Wild as a team on the rise, but left it as an open-ended question because, while they had been winning games recently, it followed a horrid stretch. Today, we're back questioning just what the heck this Wild team is all about.

One point out of a wild-card spot held by Arizona, Minnesota hosts Dallas Thursday, a team with a game in hand but that sits just three points ahead in the first wild-card position. The issue is that the Wild have been awful at home recently, and very far off the success they had at Xcel Energy Center in 2017-18.

Minnesota is 1-5-3 in its past nine home games and hasn't won a regulation game in front of its own fans since Jan. 19. Just last year, the Wild went 27-6-8 at Xcel, but this season they've been far better on the road. Making matters worse is that their power play has been shutout six games in a row, and has gone 0-for its past 18 opportunities.

The Wild sold at the trade deadline, followed it with wins against Winnipeg, Calgary, a couple of extra-time losses against Nashville, and then became the first team to earn a shutout regulation win against Tampa Bay this year. But in their past two games they've

been outscored 9-2 in losses to Florida and San Jose. Consistency has been lacking all year for the Wild, which makes it hard to get a handle on just what this team is.

Injuries have also been a factor of late and there was, for a brief moment, seemingly good news on that front as Matt Dumba was seen skating this week. He's been out since mid-December and was the league's highest-scoring defenceman with 12 goals when he went down. He's still top 10 in goals at the position despite all the missed time, so a return would be huge for Minnesota, but still not on the radar. Although he skated, coach Bruce Boudreau said Dumba was "just bored."

Here's what the Western Conference standings look like today:

What'd I miss? If the Edmonton Oilers were still in the race, those hopes were all but dashed with Wednesday's loss to the lowly New Jersey Devils. Edmonton was outscored 4-1 by New Jersey in periods two and three and Mikko Koskinen, who was pretty good of late, got pulled after allowing three goals. It's clear the Oilers will go as far as their inconsistent goaltending will take them and, when you're chasing a playoff spot at this time of year, you just can't have instability in net.

Edmonton remains six points out after this missed opportunity and plays back-to-back road games this weekend, against Arizona on Saturday and Vegas on Sunday. Those will be two much bigger tests than what they faced Wednesday, and though Edmonton isn't mathematically eliminated, dropping two points to the Devils makes the climb back so much harder.

Fun fact: On a positive note for Edmonton, Connor McDavid hit the 100-point plateau for the third season in a row, becoming just the 19th player in league history to accomplish that run. He's also just one of six active players with multiple 100-point seasons in their careers (Joe Thornton, Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Alex Ovechkin, Nikita Kucherov).

Can the Coyotes keep this thing going? While this is a very different team from the one that last tried to chase down a playoff spot, it's worth noting that in 2013-14 the Coyotes went 9-3-1 over a stretch in March that put them in the thick of the race, only to finish with one win in their last nine games and miss out by two points.

Until they get in for the first time since 2012, there is reason to doubt the long-struggling franchise. Of course, it's amazing they're even holding a wild-card spot today considering they have the second-most man-games lost to injury this season, but it's games like last week's 3-1 loss at home to Anaheim that lead to doubts they can finish the job. On Thursday they have a chance to avenge that loss as they host the Ducks again. A win tonight would mean the Coyotes would either be tied in points with Dallas for the first wild-card spot, or three up on Minnesota Friday morning.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136166 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / NHL draft prospect Kaapo Kakko sets Finnish scoring record

Rory Boylen | @RoryBoylan

March 14, 2019, 5:34 PM

Things are getting interesting at the top of the NHL Draft.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

Jack Hughes has long been the top prospect for the NHL's 2019 draft and he hasn't really played his way off that pedestal. Injuries caused him to miss part of the WJC and the entirety of the Five Nations Cup, two big events on the junior international schedule. But as far as his production goes, Hughes is having another monster year and is just four points off of Clayton Keller's all-time USNTDP points record of 189.

But Kaapo Kakko is making a late charge with his production at both the WJC and in the Liiga, Finland's top professional league. On Thursday, he set a new goals record for a first-time draft eligible player, breaking the mark set by Aleksander Barkov in 2012-13.

A key difference here is that Barkov scored 21 goals in 53 games whereas Kakko did it in Game 45. Kakko only has 16 assists so he's still 10 points shy of that record. Kakko's 0.84 points per game mark, however, is fourth all-time for a U18 player, behind just Mikael Granlund (0.93), Barkov (0.91) and Jari Torkki (0.88).

Top U18 goal scorers in Liiga history. (Screen shot via EliteProspects.com)

In Sam Cosentino's draft rankings from Wednesday, Kakko surpassed Hughes as the No. 1 ranked prospect for the first time. And now there is some thought Kakko, who currently plays the wing, may also move to centre, though that depends on which team drafts him. If the team that wins the draft lottery believes Kakko is a centre, that could be the formula for his name to get called first.

"He's not Laine where Laine is kind of a one-trick pony," Cosentino said on the FAN 650's The Playbook. "I look at Puljujarvi and he's still trying to find his way. But I think (Mikko) Rantanen is a good target in that...he might be a guy who's a little more like Kaapo Kakko.

"And maybe the comparison is fair to put him in the same boat as Jesperi Kotkaniemi, who did all these same things last year playing in the men's league. He gets drafted third, Montreal takes a bit of heat over it, and then the next thing you know he's turned out to be a really big piece for them."

Often when a player has been the undisputed top prospect in his draft year for as long as Hughes, late challengers tend to hop into the conversation as the draft gets close. More often than not, though, the first overall pick doesn't change.

It didn't go to plan in 2017 though. Nolan Patrick was ranked No. 1 for more than a year out of his draft, but ended up going second overall behind Nico Hischier, who burst onto the scene at the WJC much like Kakko did.

But with the amount of successful high-end prospects Finland has produced over recent years, perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise that Kakko, legitimately, is making a push for first overall.

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Sportsnet.ca / Former Flame Kristian Huselius 'lucky to be alive' after fireplace accident

Eric Francis | @EricFrancis

March 14, 2019, 10:20 AM

A flash of light, followed by intense pain and confusion, sent Kristian Huselius running for water.

Seconds after adding fuel to the fireplace in his Stockholm apartment, the retired Calgary Flames winger was horrified by what he saw in his bathroom mirror.

"My face was a mess and my shoulder was on fire," said the 40-year-old Swede of a perilous incident Saturday that left the majority of his face, right shoulder and right hand with extensive burns. "My fireplace exploded and I ran to my bathroom to get some water on my face and when I did that I realized my shoulder was burning. I had fire on it. When I got the fire to stop I panicked.

"I called 911 in Sweden and told them my address and that they had to hurry up because I was on fire. I opened my door and I think I passed out because after a while they came and I was lying on the floor."

Huselius was rushed to hospital where he remained in the intensive care unit for several days before returning home for the first time Wednesday.

They wished him well and wanted to know, like the rest of the hockey world, what happened.

"I don't really know how it happened — I was going to put some fuel on it and it just exploded and everything went so fast," said Huselius via cellphone.

"I just came back to my apartment for the day and haven't really talked to anyone about how it could happen."

Huselius said there is fire damage to several couches, a table and carpeting near the fireplace, which has him amazed things weren't worse.

"I'm really lucky because my whole apartment could have a big fire," he said, adding that he feels even more fortunate his injuries weren't more extensive. "The doctor told me I was lucky to be alive. My face is kind of a mess right now. I have a lot of pain — that's a problem too. But they think my face is going to be fine. My shoulder is not as good. I might have to have surgery to get some new skin but I will wait a few weeks to see how much damage it is.

"I'm fortunate. I will have scars, but it could have been worse."

He'll spend the bulk of next few weeks in and out of the hospital, where he'll have his burns dressed and progress monitored.

Huselius was a six-time 20-goal scorer who spent 11 years in the NHL with Florida, Calgary and Columbus, including a 34-goal, 77-point season with the Flames.

One summer later he signed a four-year, \$19-million deal with the Blue Jackets and retired in 2013 due to a frustrating hip injury that has prevented him from playing even recreationally ever since.

Huselius said he keeps busy raising his 12- and 15-year-old daughters, who are elite handball players on a club for which he acts as strength and conditioning coach.

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Sportsnet.ca / The inside story of how Carey Price became a Canadian

by Eric Engels



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

GAINEY As far as our goaltending depth and drafting a goalie — you just presume it's going to be three, four, or five years [after drafting him] before you've got a player on your team, and so many things can happen in that stretch of time. The conflict over already having a lot of depth at the position, for me, didn't really exist. I like to try to picture the player as mature, which is at age 23 or 24, so there's lots of time for you to kind of change your pieces around and get the best player you can.

TIMMINS We just felt, at that time, that Price was the one guy who really had the chance to develop into a franchise player, even though he was a goalie.

GAINEY My role as GM didn't put me deeply in the recruitment/assessment area. I had given Trevor and his right-hand guys that responsibility and felt that I needed to allow them to make their pick. Price was the recommendation of the scouting staff, and that's what we went with.

TIMMINS I had to step up and present the final decision, and I did that with full support of Elmer Benning and Trent McLeary, who were scouting out west for us at the time. They were in full support and really believed in Price. I had Billy Berglund, who worked for us in the U.S., and he was an ex-goalie who worked as a goalie coach in the NCAA and at the pro level, and he really liked Price as well. It's always a group decision, and at the end someone has to step up and put their stamp on it. Bob [Gainey] fully endorsed it. He supported his team.

Many Canadiens fans — and several media members — assumed Brule was the player the Canadiens had targeted with their pick.

DOUG MACLEAN, then-Blue Jackets GM Brule, at the time, was a freaking star. We were nervous Montreal was going to take Brule, and I remember we were sitting there and [former Canadiens scout and current Ottawa Senators GM] Pierre Dorion leaned over to our chief scout, Don Boyd, and said, "We're taking the goalie," and we were so relieved because we were taking Brule.

TIMMINS As soon as we picked Carey Price, the Columbus guys at the table right beside us were throwing pens in the air and all happy, excited we didn't take Brule.

PRICE It seemed to me, after going through the interviews, that Minnesota and Atlanta were two teams that were really interested. I didn't really have an idea that Montreal was a possibility. They were pretty tough at the combine, I remember that. It was definitely the toughest interview that I had. They just gave me the poker face the whole time. I think what they were trying to do was just get a judgment on how I would handle criticism. Apparently, I handled it fairly decently.

TIMMINS Back then, [the pre-draft interview] was really just a personality/character assessment. What we try to do is get the prospect to feel at home and at ease and willing to talk about himself and tell the truth. I think it was the maturity level at the time that really came across with Price. He was calm, patient, poised. Those were the things that stood out; the things that make him who he is today. He's an easygoing guy. Some goaltenders are wound up and full of nervous energy, but he was the opposite of that.

PRICE I guess, at that point, I was pretty green. In interviews, too. I hadn't had any job interviews. I had only worked at the golf course near home. I was just trying to give an honest opinion of what they were asking.

TIMMINS We did what we do with all our targets. We got a lot of information from talking to his coaches, strength coaches, teammates, trainers, and we went to practices and saw his practice habits. When it came to his performance, he was playing with the [WHL's] Tri-City Americans, and he really made a difference at a young age for a goaltender. Their team wasn't very good. He saw a lot of rubber over that time. We saw him at the international level, too.

Price appeared in 63 of 72 games with the Americans in his draft year, going 24-31-8 with eight shutouts, a .920 save percentage and a 2.34 goals-against average. And in April, he had backstopped Team Canada to a silver medal at the Under-18 World Junior Championship.

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1136169 Websites

TSN.CA / Matthews: Leafs 'need to clean up some things'

By Mark Masters

TSN Toronto reporter Mark Masters checks in daily with news and notes on the Maple Leafs who practised at MasterCard Centre on Thursday.

The Maple Leafs fell behind early in home losses to the Tampa Bay Lightning and Chicago Blackhawks this week, but it was only the latest example of slow starts plaguing the team. It's been a recurring issue and Mitch Marner says enough is enough.

"It's something we've talked about all year," Toronto's scoring leader said, "but, we have to start acting like it's meaningful and we got to stop talking about it. We just got to do it."

Toronto has allowed the first goal in six of seven at home getting out-scored 13-3 in the first period of those games.

There's no panic, but a definite sense of urgency around the team.

"We hold each other accountable in this room," said Auston Matthews, "and tomorrow is a big game for us, I think, in terms of really getting back on track and making sure we put our foot down and start on the right foot."

The schedule has been packed of late with lots of travel and Thursday was actually the first time the Leafs practised at their home facility since Feb. 26. What did they work on?

"We tried to focus on our details," said coach Mike Babcock, "and get back skating and skating like we can. We have to play fast in order to have success. We've been slow. We've been slow on defence so other teams have more time on the puck and we just tried to tighten that up."

After allowing 13 goals in the last seven periods, defence is a focal point.

"We can come better prepared to play," goalie Frederik Andersen said in his post-game scrum on Wednesday. "Once we do start playing for each other I think we're doing well. It's definitely something we need to figure out ... By playing for each other I mean communicating (in the D zone) and stuff like that. I think we can do a better job at that and that falls on everyone so something we got to look at."

Staying mentally sharp and maintaining an edge for all 60 minutes is also an issue. Toronto blew a 2-0 lead in the third period against the Canucks in Vancouver last week and nearly saw a three-goal lead vanish to the Oilers in Edmonton on Saturday.

"We need to clean up some things defensively in our own zone," acknowledged Matthews, "and make sure we're communicating, but I think really the purpose of today is just get our energy back up, get our confidence back up."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

Marner on slow starts: 'We got to stop talking about it. We just got to do it'

The Maple Leafs are well aware of their slow starts as of late and know they need to stop talking about what they need to do and just do it. They're hoping this is just a blip on the radar and they'll be able to get back on track with 12 games left in the regular season.

On Wednesday, the Leafs faltered against a desperate Blackhawks team fighting for survival in the Western Conference playoff race. On Friday, they'll face a similar opponent as the Philadelphia Flyers have been surging back into contention. Babcock doesn't believe his players need to be reminded about the intensity level at this time of year.

"I don't think, when you're looking at our group, that we need a lot of that, to be honest with you," he said. "We understand what's at stake for us. We understand our opportunity is here and now. Next year in sport never comes. We play in a real good division with real good teams, you got to be on top of your game."

The Leafs appear destined to play the Boston Bruins again in the first round of the playoffs and have four weeks left to make sure they're ready for the challenge.

"We got some work to do," said centre Nazem Kadri. "Twelve games is a nice body of work in order to prepare yourselves for the postseason."

"You're getting closer to playoff hockey," said alternate captain John Tavares, "the margin for error becomes smaller and smaller and as a group we have to understand that and do a better job in understanding that one, two mistakes mean a lot, especially this time of year."

How close are the Leafs to being ready?

"There's nights where it looks like we're ready for it and there's some nights where it looks like we're not ready for it at all," said Marner. "We got 12 games here so we have to make sure we dial it in and get ready. It's a different beast in the playoffs and we have to make sure we're ready for it ... Our first year we would've been more concerned, we would've been more nervous about this. We're all grown up in here now and we know how to deal with this."

Urgency not an issue; Babcock: 'We understand our opportunity is here and now'

Mike Babcock doesn't believe urgency is an issue for the Maple Leafs right now and they understand the opportunity they have in front of them. The team also talks about getting back on track against a hungry Flyers team on Friday night.

With Kasperii Kapanen out with a concussion, William Nylander has slotted back into his old spot beside Matthews. He was quiet in Monday's shellacking by the Lightning, but looked much, much better against the Blackhawks.

"For me, last night Willie was in on the most he's been in on this year," Babcock noted. "I thought he skated real well. I thought he competed real hard. I thought he was at the net. I thought he tipped pucks. Even before they got any offence to go for them, he had hit the post a couple times and had been in home free. I liked how he tracked, how he worked and how he got to the net."

Nylander, who had just one assist in the previous six games, finished with two assists and five shots against the Blackhawks.

While the Andreas Johansson-Matthews-Nylander line remained together throughout the night, Babcock tinkered with two other lines attempting to fill the void left by the flu-ridden Zach Hyman. Patrick Marleau started with Kadri and Connor Brown, but was elevated to the top line with Tavares and Marner in the second period. Trevor Moore started the game in that slot before replacing Marleau on the third line.

"Moorsey, at the start of the game, it didn't go for him in the first period with that group," Babcock observed. "When we put him with Naz I thought he was good. Now, Moorsey's been good. His job's normally more limited than it was, but he's been real good for us and been a worker, a forechecker, played with speed, made good plays with the puck, has good detail in his game. I thought in the second and the third he had that back."

Leafs Ice Chips: Hyman, Kapanen miss practice

The list of injuries are piling up for the Maple Leafs right now but Mike Babcock refuses to use that as an excuse. Mark Masters has more on who missed practice on Thursday and who might be back in the lineup come Friday.

Hyman missed practice on Thursday. How's he feeling?

"Yeah, he's not here," Babcock said.

Will he miss Friday's game?

"I sure hope not," the coach said.

Hyman is the latest Leaf to go down. Kapanen also didn't take part in practice on Thursday while defencemen Travis Dermott (shoulder) and Jake Gardiner (back) remain sidelined and are listed as week-to-week. Babcock refuses to use that as an excuse for this team's lacklustre losses.

"We're here to discuss the players in the lineup," he said. "I don't buy into any of that. You put our uniform on, you have to be ready to go. Injuries are all part of sport and it doesn't matter who's playing. We expect a lot from our group, doesn't matter if you played three games, five games, 10 games, or you just got called up from the [AHL Toronto] Marlies."

TSN.CA LOADED: 03.15.2019

1136170 Websites

TSN.CA / Leafs at a loss to explain lack of urgency

By Kristen Shilton

TORONTO – It's difficult for the Maple Leafs to explain the first half of this week, where in three days they went from surging towards the postseason to reflecting on terrible losses to Tampa and Chicago.

This last stretch of the regular season is hardly the ideal time for introspection, but it's where the Leafs have put themselves – rattled, but not without faith.

"It's important we look at ourselves and the video and talk about what we can do better because we believe in our group," said defenceman Morgan Rielly after the Leafs' practice on Thursday. "We want to win. We want to play a long time in the spring. We don't want to be one and done. Efforts like last night and the game before aren't acceptable."

The Leafs have been their own worst enemy lately, repeatedly getting in their own way with mistakes that threaten any hope of a deep springtime run.

The team was brutally ineffective in the first period of both Monday's 6-2 loss to the Lightning and Wednesday's 5-4 loss to the Blackhawks, falling behind 4-0 and 5-0 in those respective outings before registering a goal in response.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

Despite how well-prepared the Leafs claim to have been on each night, their flat and careless play early on said otherwise.

So instead of challenging Boston (also losers of their last two) for second place in the Atlantic Division and home-ice advantage in the first round of the playoffs, the Leafs are busy digging for answers for their concerning lack of urgency.

"We keep on saying playoffs are around the corner and we have to get into playoff mode, but we have to show it and we have to start doing it," Rielly said. "There's no reason to not be urgent and prepared and hungry at this point in the year."

"There are nights where it looks like we're ready for [playoffs], and nights where it looks like we're not ready for it at all," added Mitch Marner. "We have 12 games [left] here, have to dial it in and get ready for it. We know how good of a team we can be when we come ready to play. That's just something we have to get better at doing."

Toronto's inability to do something as basic as starting games well remains a mystery, and it's not a new one. The Leafs' opponents have scored first in six of their last seven home games, including five times in the first period. Toronto has been outscored 13-3 overall in the first period during that stretch.

That Toronto managed to come back to win four of those games is of little solace when all four of the teams they beat aren't in the postseason picture.

Somewhat more comforting is the fact that the Leafs' younger stars feel better equipped now to deal with the kind of adversity that might have crushed their confidence in the past.

"Our first year [in 2016-17], we would have been more nervous, more concerned about this," said Marner of his fellow third-year players. "We're all grown up in here now; we know how to deal with this. We talk about it a lot in this locker room, but we have to start really coming to play and acting like we're ready for that [playoff push]."

Two years ago, though, few predicted the Leafs would even make it to the postseason, let alone win a series. Expectations have changed for the team since then. This is the first season since Marner, Auston Matthews and William Nylander became full-time NHLers that Toronto's talent and skill was meant to not only earn a playoff spot, but actually make some noise once they arrived.

Given the league's playoff format, Toronto has basically been locked into a first-round meeting with Boston for weeks, making it easier to view these late-season games as superfluous. But this group of Maple Leafs has no playoff track record to crow about. In reality, they'll need every tune-up game available to change that this year.

"If you look at last year, we got bounced in the first round [by Boston], and that's not a good feeling," Rielly said. "There's really no accomplishments there we can hang our hat on. Guys should be hungrier than ever to prove our team can win in the playoffs and we can win big games and carry momentum and it's important we focus on that."

The Leafs can start on Friday night, when the Philadelphia Flyers pay a visit in hot pursuit of a playoff berth. It's the type of test Toronto failed against Chicago, when a similarly desperate club made the Leafs look vulnerable.

Only they have the power now to prove otherwise.

"We have a confidence in one another, we have to pick each other up and make sure no one's slacking behind," said Matthews.

"Everyone has turned the page. Tomorrow it's a big game for us in terms of really getting back on track and putting our foot down and just trying to bring some energy to the room."

1136171 Websites

TSN.CA / Leafs at a loss to explain lack of urgency

By Kristen Shilton

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"There are nights where it looks like we're ready for [playoffs], and nights where it looks like we're not ready for it at all," added Mitch Marner. "We have 12 games [left] here, have to dial it in and get ready for it. We know how good of a team we can be when we come ready to play. That's just something we have to get better at doing."

Toronto's inability to do something as basic as starting games well remains a mystery, and it's not a new one. The Leafs' opponents have scored first in six of their last seven home games, including five times in the first period. Toronto has been outscored 13-3 overall in the first period during that stretch.

That Toronto managed to come back to win four of those games is of little solace when all four of the teams they beat aren't in the postseason picture.

Somewhat more comforting is the fact that the Leafs' younger stars feel better equipped now to deal with the kind of adversity that might have crushed their confidence in the past.

"Our first year [in 2016-17], we would have been more nervous, more concerned about this," said Marner of his fellow third-year players. "We're all grown up in here now; we know how to deal with this. We talk about it a lot in this locker room, but we have to start really coming to play and acting like we're ready for that [playoff push]."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

Two years ago, though, few predicted the Leafs would even make it to the postseason, let alone win a series. Expectations have changed for the team since then. This is the first season since Marner, Auston Matthews and William Nylander became full-time NHLers that Toronto's talent and skill was meant to not only earn a playoff spot, but actually make some noise once they arrived.

Given the league's playoff format, Toronto has basically been locked into a first-round meeting with Boston for weeks, making it easier to view these late-season games as superfluous. But this group of Maple Leafs has no playoff track record to crow about. In reality, they'll need every tune-up game available to change that this year.

"If you look at last year, we got bounced in the first round [by Boston], and that's not a good feeling," Rielly said. "There's really no accomplishments there we can hang our hat on. Guys should be hungrier than ever to prove our team can win in the playoffs and we can win big games and carry momentum and it's important we focus on that."

The Leafs can start on Friday night, when the Philadelphia Flyers pay a visit in hot pursuit of a playoff berth. It's the type of test Toronto failed against Chicago, when a similarly desperate club made the Leafs look vulnerable.

Only they have the power now to prove otherwise.

"We have a confidence in one another, we have to pick each other up and make sure no one's slacking behind," said Matthews. "Everyone has turned the page. Tomorrow it's a big game for us in terms of really getting back on track and putting our foot down and just trying to bring some energy to the room."

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TSN.CA / Previewing the likely first-round playoff matchups for Canadian teams

By Travis Yost

Three Canadian teams are in. Three Canadian teams are out. One Canadian team sits in playoff purgatory, a coin-flip away from a wild-card berth.

Thanks to the NHL's division-based postseason format, we already have a very strong understanding of the likely first-round opponents for all four teams. It's at this point of the regular season that I like to start assessing potential matchups and understanding more favourable and less favourable draws in the first round.

In that light, let's take a look at all four playoff teams (including those pesky Montreal Canadiens), their likely first-round opponent(s), and how they have performed season-to-date against those respective teams.

Toronto Maple Leafs

- Playoff chances: Greater than 99 per cent

- Likely opponents: Boston Bruins (1-3-0)

Every year we talk about how unkind the playoff format can be when there's talent imbalance at the divisional level, and both the Atlantic and Pacific divisions are impacted by that imbalance this season.

I know I'm screaming into the void at this point, but when the league's fifth-best team is slated to draw the league's fourth-best team in a 16-team bracket, there's something fundamentally wrong.

At any rate, this is a killer draw for the Maple Leafs and they have compounded the issue by ceding ground to their division rival. Not only is Boston playing some of their best hockey of the season right now, but Toronto's performance has slowed. At least some of that can be attributed to critical injuries, with the likes of Jake Gardiner, Nazem Kadri, Travis Dermott, and Kasperii Kapanen all missing time. Gardiner's loss is the most important; Toronto's blueline is relatively thin on talent relative to the rest of their roster and his "week-to-week" status is alarming this deep into the regular season.

Making matters worse, Boston has long been a thorn in the side of Toronto, and the same has been true this season. The Leafs are 1-3-0 and have been outscored 16 to 10 in those four games. But the good news is a lot of the goal differential is strictly related to Bruins goaltenders (generally Tuukka Rask) outplaying Leafs goaltenders (generally Frederik Andersen). In four games against the Bruins this year, Leafs goaltenders have posted an 88.1 save percentage; Bruins goaltenders, meanwhile, stopped 92.6 per cent of shots.

If you divert your eyes from the goal differentials and look more at territorial play, you can see that the Leafs have been much more competitive – they are basically around break-even on shot volume and have actually outchanced the Bruins in the majority of those games, though they were obviously trailing in the majority of those minutes.

Toronto clearly has the talent to skate with any team in the league, but the Bruins are a particularly difficult matchup and it's looking increasingly possible they will hold home-ice advantage, too. Either way, this could be one of the two best first-round matchups we have. (More on the second later!)

Montreal Canadiens

- Playoff chances: 43 per cent

- Likely opponents: Tampa Bay Lightning (0-3-0), Washington Capitals (1-0-1)

If Montreal gets in, it's pretty likely they'll draw the Tampa Bay Lightning, but the Washington Capitals remain an outside shot. Good for Montreal fans, I suspect.

Like every other team in the National Hockey League, no one should want to play Tampa Bay. The Lightning haven't lost to the Canadiens all year and have carried the shot advantage and scoring chance advantage while racking up nearly 70 per cent of the goals in those three games. What's particularly incredible is that Montreal only conceded two power-play goals in those three games – at 5-on-5, goals are 11-5 the way of Tampa Bay.

Washington poses a much more interesting matchup. The Capitals look like they'll grab the top spot in the Metropolitan Division – the weaker of the two divisions in the Eastern Conference – but they haven't looked nearly as strong as they have in prior years, including their Stanley Cup win in 2017-18. It's hard to envision scenarios where an up-and-coming team wants to play the defending champions in Round 1, but avoiding Tampa Bay – and drawing into the Metropolitan Division for the second round in the event that they pull off the upset – is much more appetizing.

And hey, Montreal has been very competitive in the two games this season. They have carried 54 per cent of the shots and scoring chances at 5-on-5, and the goals have married up. So Montreal fans should be rooting for two things down the stretch: consistent winning to ensure they lock up a wild-card berth and degradation in the performance of the Metropolitan wild-card contenders (including Columbus, Carolina, and Pittsburgh) to ensure that those unlucky souls draw the crossover matchup with Tampa Bay.

Winnipeg Jets



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 15, 2019

- Playoff chances: Greater than 99 per cent

- Likely opponents: Dallas Stars (1-2-1), St. Louis Blues (3-1-0), Nashville Predators (2-1-0)

I didn't even cover the full gamut of playoff possibilities here because there's still a non-zero chance they could also draw the likes of the Arizona Coyotes, Minnesota Wild and Colorado Avalanche, depending on how the rest of the season shakes out. Right now Dallas is the slight favourite, but that will likely change a few times over before April comes around.

The interesting aspect of the Dallas matchup is that the Jets have largely outplayed the Stars over their four games, except when it comes to special teams. The Stars have put six power-play goals on the Jets, and that's bad news from a couple of angles – namely that Winnipeg has intermittently had issues staying out of the penalty box and their kill rates (79 per cent; 24th in NHL) have been underwhelming most of the season.

Putting the power-play component aside, it's hard to see Dallas as anything but a favourable matchup for the Jets. Winnipeg is a deeper team with more talent across the roster, and Dallas' top-heaviness has consistently plagued them against superior Western Conference squads for years.

One additional note for Jets fans: The numbers against St. Louis look fantastic but are worth qualifying. All four games against the Blues this season came before Dec. 7, 2018. At that point of the regular season, the Blues were 29th in the NHL and on pace for 73 points.

I think everyone recognized that the win/loss record was a bit cruel for a team that was seemingly playing well on most nights, but there is no doubt that the Blues have been a much better team since the calendar year turned. In fact, the Blues are the fifth-best team in the NHL in 2019, now playing at a 115-point pace. Some of that was finding goaltending in the form of Jordan Binnington, but some of that was about getting healthy, too.

Be careful what you wish for!

Calgary Flames

Playoff chances: Greater than 99 per cent

- Likely opponents: Vegas Golden Knights (2-2-0); multiple other wild card possibilities

Similar qualifiers as the Winnipeg Jets here – there's still a mathematical possibility (contingent on Vegas going in the tank and/or Calgary surging to win the division) that they could draw into a first-round matchup with the Arizona Coyotes, Minnesota Wild, Colorado Avalanche or Dallas Stars. But unlike Winnipeg (where all options are really on the table), Calgary's first-round fate looks appears to involve facing the Vegas Golden Knights. In one of every two simulations of the remainder of the season, these two Pacific Division rivals meet.

Like Toronto, Calgary is staring down the barrel of a brutal first-round draw. The Knights have been an up-and-down team for most of the regular season but there is little doubt that they are a different animal with Mark Stone in the fold. There is a statistical case to be made that no team in the West has played Vegas tougher than Calgary season-to-date, largely because the Flames are one of a very few teams that has been able to slow the Knights down at even strength.

That's good news if you are a Flames fan, but it's simultaneously disappointing considering that Calgary has held the top spot in the West for the majority of the season. San Jose has become a runaway train the division and if they don't slow down, Calgary is likely going to fall into another fatal two-versus-three divisional matchup against an equally game team.

One interesting wrinkle: Calgary's power play has been foundational in their success this season. They get more power-play opportunities than any other team in the league not named Colorado, and convert on 22 per cent of those opportunities (10th in the NHL). But Vegas has notoriously carried an impressive penalty kill for two seasons now (tied for seventh at 82 per cent), and a lot of that has to do with the talent of Marc-Andre Fleury.

From a matchup perspective, these skater groups feel very even. But Fleury is the type of goaltender – especially considering what other matchup possibilities exist – that can single-handedly win a playoff series. Considering how many other playoff-bound teams are carrying weaker goaltenders, it further emphasizes something I argued more than two months ago: the Flames absolutely need to win the Pacific Division.

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USA TODAY / San Jose Sharks' Evander Kane reveals wife's miscarriage in emotional Twitter post

Steve Gardner, USA TODAY

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San Jose Sharks winger Evander Kane has missed the team's past six games because of personal reasons. On Thursday, he revealed why.

In a post on Twitter, Kane announced that the 26-week-old daughter he and his wife were expecting died over the weekend.

"My family and I are heartbroken," Kane said. "Words cannot express how excited we were to welcome our baby girl into the world and watch her grow. Eva, you have been the absolute biggest blessing of our lives and we are so grateful for all the joy you brought us in such a short amount of time."

Kane, 27, is the Sharks' third-leading goal-scorer this season with 27. He also has 24 assists and leads the NHL with 149 penalty minutes.

Kane was the fourth overall pick in the 2009 NHL Draft by the Atlanta Thrashers and moved with the franchise when it relocated to Winnipeg. He also played for the Buffalo Sabres during his nearly 10-year NHL career. He was traded to San Jose in February 2018.

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