



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 14, 2019



Hamilton Finds Home With Hurricanes

Defenseman having career year in second season with Canes
by Michael Smith

CALGARY - The scene was a little different when Dougie Hamilton first went back to Calgary.

In January, some seven months after he was dealt to the Carolina Hurricanes in trade that headlined the weekend of the 2018 NHL Draft, Hamilton made his return to the city where he racked up 137 points (42g, 95a) across three seasons.

There was no shortage of inquisition, with a handful of cameras focused in on him and microphones picking up his every word about what it was like to be back, why things didn't work out, how he was adjusting with his new team and the like.

Eleven months later, after a Friday afternoon practice at the Saddledome, I cozied up beside Hamilton in his locker stall. The bright lights were gone. No prying media presence. Just Dougie and his thoughts.

The scene was a little different, indeed. In fact, Hamilton is a little different this season, not in that he's changed the way he plays or altered his personality, but rather, he's found a comfortability, an opportunity and a home with the Hurricanes.

"When I came back here, I already had started to feel settled in Carolina. Now, for sure I feel settled in," he said. "Opportunity is probably the biggest thing. I'm definitely more comfortable with everything, having friendships and knowing the system."

His head coach echoes that sentiment.

"It takes time sometimes when you come to a new organization to really be yourself. You know what you're capable of, but you're a little bit on your heels, taking everything in and learning a new system," Rod Brind'Amour said when Calgary was in Raleigh in late October. "Once he grasped it in the second half of the year last year, he took off."

Hamilton's meteoric rise hasn't leveled off, either. He's posted two career-best, six-game point streaks this season. He ranks third on the team in goals (11), assists (19) and points (30), marks that are top among team defensemen, of course. In fact, his 30 points are the second-most by a defenseman in franchise history in the first 32 games of a season.

You've probably heard of the streak Hamilton is riding, too. He's recorded at least one shot on goal in 279 consecutive games, the longest active streak in the NHL yet still 81 games away from matching Ray Bourque's record of 360 games.

And, there's this: No defenseman in the NHL - not even John Carlson or Shea Weber - has scored more goals than Hamilton (29) since the start of the 2018-19 season.

"Dougie has been great on the offensive side of the game. That's his game," his defensive partner, Jaccob Slavin, said. "But his defensive side has been really, really good this year."

Hamilton will tell you that he's relishing the opportunity he's been given to play on the Canes' top defensive pair with Slavin, and that commitment is evident in his all-around play. Hamilton is averaging a team-high 23:20 of ice time this season, an increase of nearly four minutes from 2018-19.

"I'm just trying to do my best. It's something I've wanted for a while. I just wanted to get that opportunity, see if I could do it and prove to myself I could do it," he said. "I still want to keep getting better. I'm not satisfied with anything. I want to keep improving all aspects of my game."

After splitting up Slavin and Brett Pesce, the Canes found their workhouse defensive pairing with Slavin and Hamilton. Though, like anything, there was an adjustment period.

"You find out how you need to play together to be successful. Doug and I found that," Slavin said. "Knowing he's jumping into the rush any chance he can, he knows that I'm going to be back there. He trusts me that I'll be covering him when he does jump. There are little things like that you have to get used to. We've definitely found that trust and chemistry."

Aside from Hamilton's elite hockey abilities, which could earn him All-Star honors or even Norris Trophy consideration this season, he's also a unique personality, a fun-loving goofball who revels in everyday joy.

This is, after all, someone who flossed on the ice after being named a star of the game last season. Earlier this season, he blocked an Aleksander Barkov shot with his posterior and then gave a Dikembe Mutombo-esque finger wag in Barkov's direction. Earlier this week, he scoreboard'd an Oilers fan who was jeering him for taking a late-game penalty.

Oh, and speaking of that game, Hamilton also scored a goal from center ice. A quick head fake like he was going to dump the puck in got Mikko Koskinen moving ever so slightly out of his crease, enough so that Hamilton then rifled the puck to the twine.

"Dougie's got those tricks in his bag," Brind'Amour said after the game. "He said it was going to work once this year, so I guess that was it."

"I didn't think I was going to do it ever," Hamilton admitted. "You can't really expect to score from center. It was just one of those plays, and it was cool to see it go in."

It wasn't the farthest distance from which he had beat a goaltender, though. Hamilton said in grade five school hockey, he scored from his own goal line.

And the opposite net wasn't empty. What was the goaltender doing?



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"It was grade 5 school hockey. What do you expect?" Hamilton laughed.

At 26 years of age, Hamilton is playing the best hockey of his career. He's taking advantage of an opportunity. He's having

fun. And he's doing it all with the Hurricanes crest on the chest of his sweater.

"It feels like home," he said.

The Hockey News

Hurricanes' Hamilton at peace after finding the perfect home for his personality

Does Carolina's Norris Trophy-hopeful blueliner really march to the beat of his own drum? Not as much as many believe. But he doesn't waste time trying to bust myths.

By Ken Campbell

The Carolina Hurricanes hold a meet-and-greet with their fans after every home game, win or lose. Nobody on the roster is exempt from the obligation, with a rotation of three players per game fulfilling the duties of chatting up a select group of supporters while posing for pictures and signing autographs. One night after a particularly tough loss early in the season, a team official approached one of the Hurricanes players and reminded him of his meet-and-greet duties that night. Well, let's just say the player had a number of choice words for the beleaguered employee, including the none-too-subtle suggestion that he go forth and multiply.

Dougie Hamilton, who had been lingering in the dressing room after the game, was witness to the exchange. As his teammate stormed off, Hamilton approached the team official and calmly told him he would fulfill his teammate's duties that night, that perhaps the teammate didn't understand the importance of being accessible in a non-traditional hockey market and had allowed the sting of the loss to cause him to lose perspective.

Dougie Hamilton is 6-foot-6 and 229 pounds. Even though he's just 26, he's a veteran on a young Canes team that's finding its way, and he's earned the right to make his presence felt. He could have just as easily grabbed his teammate by the scruff of the neck and gotten all up in his grill, loudly insisting that he go out and fulfill his obligation. Or he could have just done nothing. Instead, without complaint or fanfare, he put his post-game plans on hold and spent the next 60 minutes mingling with fans.

That doesn't really square with what we've been led to believe about Hamilton, does it? At best a quirky guy who doesn't fit the typical Broski persona of a hockey player, at worst a cancer in the dressing room, Hamilton has already been traded twice and had some not-great innuendo follow him with each deal.

It was suggested by one commentator that instead of going for dinner with his teammates in Calgary, he would venture off to a museum. (Not true. He actually never goes to museums.) Before being dealt in Boston, he declined to go on a post-season vacation with the rest of his teammates to Las Vegas.

So were perceptions wrong about him or has Hamilton changed? Probably a little bit of both, but one member of the Hurricanes' inner circle described Hamilton as the most misunderstood person he has ever met.

Hamilton could, if he wanted, dispel a lot of these misconceptions about himself. In fact, he's going a long way toward doing that right now in Carolina, where he emerged as the team's first-quarter MVP, the best defenseman on one of the best defense corps in the NHL and a legitimate contender for the Norris Trophy.

The fans in Raleigh love him, and he loves them back. But aside from letting his actions speak for him, Hamilton chooses to not fight back against the perceptions the hockey world has of him, largely because he doesn't much care. "There are so many people with opinions and wrong opinions," Hamilton said. "You can't think about that stuff too much and read it and listen to it, because you know the truth."

Given the chance to give his perspective on all of it, Hamilton doesn't seem terribly interested in getting anything off his chest. He is asked what he thinks people should know about him. "No, you don't have to say anything," he said. "I'm fine with nothing."

On the ice, things have never been better for Hamilton. First, he's spending more time on it than he ever has in his career, averaging more than 23 minutes per game through the first quarter of the season, which is about three-and-a-half minutes more than he played under coach Rod Brind'Amour last season. Hamilton is logging the heavy-lifting minutes along with Jaccob Slavin, playing on the first power-play unit as well as seeing time on the penalty kill.

With seven-plus seasons in the NHL to his credit, Hamilton is finding the sweet spot in his career. And he's playing freely, without the specter of another trade hanging over his head. "He's learned our system and how we want it and how we're coaching it," Brind'Amour said. "That takes a little bit of time, and I think he's comfortable with it. I think he's comfortable about how we talk to him about stuff. I just think he's in a good place."

And so were the Hurricanes through the first quarter. After dispatching of the defending Stanley Cup champions in the first round of the playoffs en route to an improbable run to the Eastern Conference final last year, the Bunch of Jerks were riding their point-per-game defenseman to the upper reaches of the NHL standings into late November.

Hamilton, meanwhile, has stepped into the breach after the Hurricanes dealt Justin Faulk prior to the season and has progressively turned the all-offense-no-defense narrative on its head. Hamilton has become a mentor to Andrei Svechnikov and Warren Foegele, who live in the same condo development, and is starting to put himself out there a little more. It has been suggested that, because he's so firmly



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rooted and stable, Hamilton is living his best life. It's a notion he's not buying. "Some other people have said that too, where they're like, I wasn't comfortable in places before," Hamilton said. "But I was comfortable in Boston and enjoyed it there, and the same with Calgary, I liked it there. I don't really think that has anything to do with it. I don't think it's different from other cities or places I've been."

A little more than a month after he took over as GM of the Hurricanes in 2018, Don Waddell made his first trade as an NHL GM in more than eight years on the draft floor at the American Airlines Center in Dallas, the day after taking Svechnikov with the second overall pick. Waddell swung for the fences, dealing Elias Lindholm and Noah Hanifin to Calgary in exchange for Hamilton, Micheal Ferland and prospect Adam Fox. Ferland left as a free agent after one season, and Fox was traded because he wasn't going to sign with Carolina, which leaves it as Hamilton for Lindholm and Hanifin. And nobody on either side of that swap is complaining. "When you make a deal like that, you want to get a difference-maker," Waddell said. "And I consider Dougie one of those guys."

But there was a reason he was available. That was when the museum observation came out. Flames GM Brad Treliving made it clear he was changing the dressing-room dynamic as much as he was the players, and you don't just trade a defenseman who scored 17 goals, particularly one you've signed to and is just halfway through a six-year deal, without a reason. "Dougie is a terrific talent on the ice," Treliving cryptically said after the trade.

Hamilton was clearly not pleased when the Flames waived his brother, Freddie, earlier that season, and something had to give. (It should be noted that Freddie was claimed by Arizona, played eight more games that season and has been inactive ever since.) "When you make a trade like this, you do your homework, and we talked to a lot of people, previous coaches and players who knew him," Waddell said. "And they all said

the same thing. I don't want to say he was underappreciated or undervalued, but he always felt he could do more and wasn't given an opportunity. He's a hockey-first guy. He's not a partier, and he doesn't drink, and sometimes that carries with you."

And then perceptions get created. Yes, Hamilton was the OHL's scholastic player of the year in 2011, but that's also an award Connor McDavid (twice), Steven Stamkos, Matt Duchene and Ryan Ellis have won. We're told Hamilton is well read, but he said he doesn't read more than most other people and, in fact, he didn't have a single book on the go at the moment. "I did well in school and I always did my homework and stuff," Hamilton said. "But it's not like I read textbooks in my free time."

Hamilton and the Hurricanes will be in a position this summer to extend his contract and give him more long-term security, a year out from when his current deal expires in the summer of 2021 and he becomes a UFA. He has been in other places longer, but this feels like a ridiculously good fit for him.

Hamilton has found the front-line role that he has always wanted, and he's playing in a market where it's appreciated by the front office and the fan base. You can never take these things for granted, as Hamilton has learned over the years. And for him, it's probably best just to ride the wave while it's high and not get too caught up in what might be. "I just like everything about playing hockey, being at the rink, being with teammates, going through the grind of everything and playing games and trying to get better and all that stuff," he said.

"That's what as a kid you dream of doing, playing in the NHL, and I think I've realized how lucky we are and to not take it for granted. I've realized that over the years and just enjoy it while it's here and while I can. There's going to be a day where you can't do that anymore, so you might as well just have as much fun as you can and do your best while you can."



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About Last Night: We Stayed Up Late For That?

With a little help from the referees, a late night goalie duel left the Hurricanes on the wrong side of the win column.

By Cody Hagan

The Carolina Hurricanes broadcast of their 1-0 overtime loss to the Vancouver Canucks went off air this morning at approximately 1:04 am and it left every Canes fan still awake at that time scratching their heads, wondering why on Earth they stayed up late to watch that game. The contest featured a goaltending duel, essentially no offense, a floating stick that directly led to the only goal of the game, and the NHL referees blatantly costing the Hurricanes the win. Not exactly a thriller in British Columbia.

The Good - At Least There Wasn't A Shootout

For fans on the East Coast, these late night affairs can always be challenging to stay up and watch. You depend on some goal scoring, chippiness, and maybe even a fight to keep you awake. The Oilers contest on Tuesday had most all of that except an actual fight. Last night had...um, none of it.

Petr Mrazek was by far the best player for the Hurricanes and their penalty kill units were the only other thing worth talking about. Beyond that it was a snooze-fest. Both team had occasional opportunities to score including a couple of breakaways for both sides but there weren't even many quality scoring chances for both sides.

Further proof the game was a bore is when the Hurricanes are tweeting out routine glove saves as highlights.

Give all the credit in the world to both goalies, especially Jacob Markstrom who earned every bit of his 43-save shutout. But nobody loves a 0-0 game entering overtime except goalies...and Frank Beamer.

All in all, us late night owls that stayed up to watch this contest just want to say thank you to the Canucks for putting us all out of our misery before this game could get to the shootout and waste another 30 minutes of sleep we could have had.

The Bad - The Fluky Game Winner

Jacob Slavin had an uncharacteristic night last night in the sense that he felt like a regular NHL defenseman, not the super-mega-amazing defenseman that he usually is. That being said, even given an off night, nobody could have predicted exactly how his stick would cost the Hurricanes the game.

After the Canucks entered the zone Slavin made a good play to break up a 2-on-1 and after the puck cycled around Slavin collided with Brock Boeser and lost his stick. That very stick laid flat on the ice, seemingly harmless, as Slavin tried to push the puck out of the zone with his hand while diving down. However, Slavin was unable to get any force on the puck and Boeser picked it up and passed it toward the middle of the ice.

Here's the weird part. That pass from Boeser goes directly into Slavin's stick and rebounds perfectly off of it to Elias Pettersson who then roofs a ridiculous shot to beat Mrazek.

There is absolutely no way you could recreate that play again if you tried. The odds of Slavin, one of the best defensemen in the NHL, losing his stick, not being able to clear the puck with his hand, having said puck go off his driftwood and right to Pettersson who manages to get the puck just barely under the crossbar, simply aren't very high.

But it happened, the Canes got beat by a fluke play and that's what it was going to take last night they way both goalies were playing.

The Ugly - The Win That Was Taken Away

It's hard to blame the referees for a team losing a game. There are a hundred other things that go on in a game that can change the outcome. But occasionally you find a situation where the human error made by a referee directly changes the outcome of a contest and last night we saw one of those instances.

The Carolina Hurricanes won the game last night in regulation 1-0, but yet in the record books they lost 1-0 in overtime.

The incident in question occurred during the second period while the Hurricanes had the puck on a delayed call against Vancouver. With six skaters out, the Hurricanes maintained possession for quite a long time before Sebastian Aho one-timed a puck past Markstrom. Only the refs blew the play dead because the puck very lightly deflected off Antoine Roussel's stick.

Noticed the wording: deflected off his stick. Roussel did not gain possession of the puck in any way. In fact the Canucks had already had the puck deflect off another one of their sticks in the same sequence only for play to continue. There was absolutely zero reason for the ref to blow this play dead and it cost the Hurricanes a goal.

After the game Jordan Staal said the referee apologized but that means nothing. That goal should have counted, the Hurricanes should have won 1-0 in regulation, and yet here we are.

The question here shouldn't be why did the referee blow the play dead? Rather, why is this not a reviewable play? Criticize the NFL all you want, but they make damn sure that a score is a score no matter what the call on the field was. Yes, their replay system has gone too far with the new pass interference stuff, but when we talk about scoring plays they get it right every time. Why can't the NHL do the same?

The league updated the rules after the Blues vs Sharks playoff disaster to allow coaches to challenge missed stoppages in the offensive zone. Depending



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on how you view the term missed, shouldn't this play be reviewable too? The referee clearly missed the call!

Again, it's hard to blame the referees for the outcome of any professional sporting event. But last night was one of the times where they one hundred percent impacted the outcome and cost the Hurricanes a goal that would have won the game. If the NHL really wants a better league, this type of play needs to be reviewable. Period.

Moral of the Story

Last night was a tough game to watch. It was not entertaining and it cost a lot of us valuable sleep. Props to both Mrazek and Markstrom for their outstanding play but Carolina knows they should have won that game. A fluke play may have won the game in the record books, but a bad call cost Carolina the game in reality.



Checkers come back against Syracuse

by Nicholas Niedzielski

The Checkers took their momentum from the road and pulled off an impressive comeback win over the Syracuse Crunch.

Despite finding themselves down by a pair after 20 minutes of play, the Checkers refused to roll over, as Dave Gust put the home team on the board and narrowed the deficit heading into the final frame.

Charlotte's surging power play was called upon in the third when it was handed a two-man advantage midway through the frame. Posted up on the right circle, Chase Priskie crushed a one-time feed from down low and beat Syracuse netminder Spencer Martin to draw the score even.

The Checkers continued to pour on the pressure until Morgan Geekie collected a feed in nearly the identical spot and blasted a shot that found the back of the net, erasing the two-goal deficit and completing Charlotte's comeback.

The Checkers snuffed out Syracuse's last-minute rally attempt as they had all night, holding the Crunch to just 18 shots across the entirety of regulation.

QUOTES

Coach Ryan Warsofsky on the comeback

I think we just stuck with it. We've done that lately even though we haven't got the results maybe. We just stuck with how we have to play. Again a slow start and it's not what you want to have to battle back, but it shows what this team can do when we play the right way.

Warsofsky on scoring on the two-man advantage to tie the game

It's huge. You have to score on those. We talked about how we didn't score on one of those a couple of games ago and we lost the game. I know the percentage is pretty high that if you don't score on a five-on-three you're going to lose the game. I thought it was a big goal by Priskie.

Warsofsky on Morgan Geekie

It's been huge. You saw early in the season when he was kind of carrying our offense, and then he hit a little bit of a speed

bump but he stayed mentally tough to grind through it. We're working with him on certain areas of his game that need to improve to not just play at this level but play at the next level on a consistent basis, and he's done a good job of that.

Warsofsky on keeping momentum moving forward

That mindset that we had in the second and third period has to be in our DNA and it has to be in our DNA for 60 minutes. It's hard really hard work to mentally and physically be focused for it and move your feet and put the effort into it, but if we want to go places in our season, that's how we have to play. I think guys are starting to figure that out.

Morgan Geekie on coming back in this game

I think we just got back to the way we were playing last game. You could tell in the game against Rochester that we figured some things out and beat a good team over there. We started a little slow but it was good to get our feet moving again in the second and third and set the pace.

Chase Priskie on the team gaining momentum

I think the biggest thing of winning on the road was just being able to identify how we need to play on the team and what gives us success. In the first period we weren't great, but we got back to our root values and I think it gave us success in the second and third period. It was just a matter of time until we were able to find the back of the net.

Priskie on the comeback

I think honestly it's just sticking with it. You can't go into every game and score the first goal, however you can choose to respond and just continue to come in waves. Attack in one shift, attack the second shift and after a while you've been dominating for 5, 10 or 15 minutes. That's the attitude we need to bring. We need to be hard to play against every shift and we need to play fast. That's how we'll have success.

NOTES

This is the Checkers' second win streak of the season. They also won two in a row on Oct. 19-25, with one of those games coming against Syracuse ... The team has also won three of four ... This was the Checkers' first win of the season when



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allowing the first goal. They are now 1-8-2 in those games ... The Checkers are 3-0 against Syracuse this season, having out-scored the Crunch by a combined 15-6 margin ... Gust's goal was his second of the season and first since opening night on Oct. 5 ... Jake Bean has six points (1g, 5a) in his last six games ... This was Geekie's third multi-point game of the season and first since his only other three-point night on Oct.

19 at Syracuse ... Geekie's 16th point of the season passed Bean for the team lead ... Forwards Stelio Mattheos and Kerby Rychel missed the game due to injury ... Forward Cedric Lacroix and defensemen Derek Sheppard and Oliwer Kaski, the latter of whom had not yet arrived after joining the team via trade yesterday, were healthy extras.

Checkers team up with partners to surprise veteran with car during game

by Nicholas Niedzielski

For the second year in a row, the Checkers teamed up with a team of partners to present local Navy veteran Ashley Williams with a newly restored car.

Caliber Collision, GEICO, Veterans Bridge Home, Scott Clark Honda and the Checkers all joined forces to surprise Williams with her new care on the ice during the first period.

Williams spent six years in the US. Navy where she earned numerous medals and commendations. A recent transplant to Charlotte, Williams is employed by Goodwill Industries and has already immersed and dedicated herself to volunteer efforts that help empower women going through hardships and looking for a supportive community. She makes monthly trips to Hope Haven Shelter to drop off donations from throughout the community.

"I started paying attention to the homeless veterans we have here," said Williams. "Some of them were my friends. I just wanted to help, honestly."

Williams was doing all this without a vehicle of her own, relying on public transportation or borrowing cars to get to work and her philanthropic efforts.

That didn't hamper William's enthusiasm, though.

"When you really focus on those around you instead of yourself, your situation seems smaller," she said.

Veterans Bridge Home noticed the work she did and nominated Williams to be a part of this national program that donates cars.

"She's been a leader in the short time she's been here," said Tommy Rieman, Director of Philanthropy for Veterans Bridge Home. "She never asks for a thing. It's the least we could do

to get her on her feet and in a ride so she can keep helping the community."

Caliber Collision and Scott Clark Honda then came in to provide the vehicle.

"They came to us and told us Ashley's story," said David White, Service Director for Scott Clark Honda. "They didn't even have to get a sentence completed before we connected with it and wanted to assist in the process and get her back on the road to do what she does best."

"Our company's purpose is to restore you back to the rhythm of your life," said Steve Horton, Regional Vice President of Operations with Caliber. "It starts with doing the right thing."

The number of moving parts that went into making the giveaway happen are impressive, with the companies coming together for a great cause.

"Tonight was a spirit of community," said Rieman. "It took a lot of partners."

In choosing Williams as the recipient, the local Charlotte community is benefitting in turn.

"Being able to reach out to someone who gives so much to the community and never asks for anything in return and make their day, it's going to allow her to provide so much more to the community," said Jason Phelps, Regional Claims Manager for GEICO.

For Williams, it's a testament that her hard work to make Charlotte better isn't going unnoticed.

"This shows that someone really cares as much as I care," she said. "As simple as that sounds, a lot of times it's easy to feel like that's not the case."

TODAY'S LINKS

<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/dougie-hamilton-finds-home-with-canec/c-312555050>

<https://thehockeynews.com/all-access/article/hurricanes-hamilton-at-peace-after-finding-the-perfect-home-for-his-personality>

<https://www.canescountry.com/2019/12/13/21020118/about-last-night-we-stayed-up-late-for-that-carolina-hurricanes-vancouver-canucks-sebastian-aho-goal>

<http://gocheckers.com/game-recaps/checkers-come-back-against-syracuse>

<http://gocheckers.com/articles/features/checkers-team-up-with-partners-to-surprise-veteran-with-car-during-game>



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SportScan

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

1166137 Calgary Flames

Consistent Frolik finding his groove

Kristen Anderson

December 13, 2019 5:02 PM MST

Days come and go, and so do his linemates, but Michael Frolik stays the same.

The 31-year-old Calgary Flames winger and veteran of 825 games remains one of the most consistently hard-working players on the team.

First on the ice. Last to leave. Always sitting in his stall afterwards, a notoriously finicky individual who loves tinkering with his skates, his laces, his sticks, his equipment.

Even during the rollercoaster ride of the 2019-20 season — which has seen highs and lows for himself, personally, and the team — Frolik continues to show up to the office every day with his lunch bucket.

Right now, with three goals and an assist and points in his last three games, he's on a high.

A month ago, he was a healthy scratch for two straight games.

"It's hockey, right," Frolik was saying on Friday as the Flames prepared for a matinee against the Carolina Hurricanes (2 p.m., Sportsnet West, Sportsnet 960 The Fan). "Sometimes you're down. Sometimes it's not going in. Sometimes, it can change pretty quickly. It was definitely a tough start for me with the ice time being low and my role kind of changed here a little bit. I still wish I could play a little more. But right now, we're winning and rolling, so why would we change something?"

"It feels good to be part of the team and to help the guys, it feels good. But, in hockey, things can change pretty quickly."

Frolik, of course, was one third of the now-defunct 3M line of Mikael Backlund and Matthew Tkachuk which hasn't played together since the start of Geoff Ward's tenure as the interim head coach.

In the past seven games, he's been played in a variety of different ways and with a variety of different linemates but, recently, he's been skating with Mark Jankowski and Tobias Rieder which seems to have given him some new-found energy.

That, of course, is just another element of Frolik — doing whatever it takes to contribute to the group's success, according to Ward.

"He's an important member of our team," he said. "He's one of the guys in our room that has won a Stanley Cup. He's been through the

wars. He's a real good pro. So, he comes to the rink every day, he works hard, he's an example for our young players. And, he's all about the team. He gives himself to the team 100 per cent. He's one of the most selfless players I've ever been around. For him to start getting rewarded is nice.

"Guys are happy for him. He does an awful lot of those thankless jobs that no one notices. But at the end of the night, they make a difference."

That includes being part of the Flames' penalty kill, at times. And, lately, taking a backseat to some of the other players when it comes to time on ice. In Thursday's 4-2 win over the Maple Leafs, he was effective in 9:13 of ice time with the go-ahead goal 1:59 into the third period. In his last five games, he's hovered around the eight-to-10-minute mark of ice time, apart from 13:09 he spent against the Arizona Coyotes (which saw him score once and nab an assist).

It might not be his ideal scenario — who doesn't want to play more and log more ice-time? — but Frolik is being a good soldier and contributing when he can, however the team wants him to.

"Playing nine or 10 minutes a game, I still feel like I have the energy to play more," he said. "But, I think, we still have 50 games left and that can change. We were only a couple games (under) the new coach so I just want to make sure I'm working hard and the opportunity or chance is going to come to be bumped up in the lineup and I just have to make sure I'm ready for it."

"As a line, we're doing OK — pretty good. And when you're on a roll, you don't want to change things."

With seven straight wins under their belts, change — at the moment — is not necessary.

The Flames are also rolling with four lines right now and have some new-found scoring depth, thanks to Frolik.

Ward's encouragement to all of the players is simple: get the puck, try to score.

But it's created a sense of freedom for a group that was collectively squeezing their sticks.

Frolik included.

Prior to his goal-scoring streak, he'd been blanked in 11 straight dates and only had one measly assist since being healthy scratched twice on Nov. 7 and Nov. 9.

Ward wouldn't comment on what the usage of Frolik had been prior to his appointment to interim head coach on Nov. 27.

But he just knows things are clicking for Frolik — and everyone else, seemingly — now.

"I don't know exactly how or what the scenarios were to (send Frolik) over the boards," Ward said. "It would just be speculation on my part. But what we've tried to do is just roll four lines, basically. We



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tried to give everybody a role and tried to let them know what that role is.

"And now, we're challenging them to expand that role. So, as a result, I feel like he's committed, and he's invested, and he's accountable, and, as result, he's playing some real good hockey for us."

MUSIC TO THEIR EARS

The music was cranked again at the Scotiabank Saddledome as the Flames hit the ice on Friday.

It's been a rotating playlist as interim head coach Ward has given the iPod over to a different player each game, who relays a handful of songs to equipment manager Mark DePasquale to play over the building's loudspeakers.

While the music selections have ranged from Queen to Elton John to Kenny Chesney, Friday's tunes were a little more ... 'Dad-rock' inspired?

No wonder, considering the team's elder statesman and captain Mark Giordano was the man behind the music on this day, selecting Pearl Jam's Better Man and Alive, and kicked things off with a pair of Linkin Park songs: One Step Closer and In The End.

As of yet, there's no confirmation on when Ward's favourites will hit the airwaves.

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 12.14.2019

1166138 Calgary Flames

Game Day: Hurricanes at Flames

Kristen Anderson

December 13, 2019 4:01 PM MST

SATURDAY

Carolina Hurricanes (19-11-2) at Calgary Flames (18-12-4)

2 p.m. MT, Sportsnet West, Sportsnet 960 The Fan

THE BIG MATCHUP

Flames LW Matthew Tkachuk vs. Hurricanes RW Andrei Svechnikov

These two players made headlines nights apart back in October, both with lacrosse-style highlight reel goals. Andrei Svechnikov did so in the third period of their eventual 2-1 win over the Flames on Oct. 29, picking the puck up behind the net and carrying it to his stick blade only to tuck it over the shoulder of David Rittich. Then, two nights later, Matthew Tkachuk sealed a 6-5 win for the Flames in overtime with a showcase of skill, shooting the puck between his legs. Tkachuk was held off the scoresheet against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Thursday; so was Svechnikov in Vancouver.

FIVE STORYLINES FOR THE GAME

ON THE MEND

It was a full practice on Friday as #Flames LW Sam Bennett was back on the ice skating with the team for the second straight day. His return from a shoulder injury appears imminent while winger Austin

Czarnik was recalled from the American Hockey League on Friday, back from his conditioning stint after suffering a knee injury against the Florida Panthers on Oct. 24. That meant that they needed to send the recently-recalled-Matthew Phillips back to the Stockton Heat. The Flames' depth has been shining during their current seven-game win streak, and there could be some questions where Bennett and Czarnik draw into the lineup. Bennett, by the way, was last seen in action during a 3-0 loss to the Arizona Coyotes on Nov. 16. He's missed 12 games since then.

TALBOT STARTS?

There's a good chance that Cam Talbot starts this one, although Flames interim head coach Geoff Ward hadn't firmly decided on a goalie as of Friday. Given the way the team's schedule is set up, there is some opportunity to give David Rittich some much-needed rest without taking too many days off. Talbot was between the pipes for Tuesday's 5-2 road win over the Arizona Coyotes and Ward has alluded to the need to give him some more playing time. With a day off Sunday, a practice day Monday, and a game against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Tuesday, this would be a perfect game to get the 32-year-old defacto back-up netminder some reps.

MONAHAN ROLLING

Flames forward Sean Monahan is on an eight-game point streak, dating back to Nov. 25 when the team was with the Pittsburgh Penguins. With five goals and five assists in that span, things are cruising in the right direction offensively. But, at the other end of the ice, Flames interim head coach Geoff Ward also sees an improvement in the 25-year-old's game. "Just how much he's invested himself on becoming a more complete player, playing a 200 foot game. I think he's transitioned to that now," Ward said. "I think he's been able to marry his defensive with his offensive game more comfortably. I think it's more natural for him now. As a result, now when he's checking, he's getting his chances more when he's checking which is nice. He's been doing some awful good things."

THIS N' THAT

The Flames are rolling, having won seven straight and picking up points in their last nine games (8-0-1). They're also undefeated since Geoff Ward took over as the interim head coach ... After Saturday's game, the Flames have two more games remaining on this four-game homestand. Next up? The Pittsburgh Penguins on Tuesday and the Montreal Canadiens on Thursday ... The Hurricanes are amid a monster road trip with four games in 10 nights, having beat the Edmonton Oilers 6-3 on Tuesday and the Vancouver Canucks 1-0 in overtime on Thursday. After Saturday's matinee, they'll head to Banff for a few nights before flying to Winnipeg to play the Jets next Tuesday and Colorado on Thursday before heading back to North Carolina ... These teams last met on Oct. 29, a 2-1 Hurricanes victory. This is the final game in the two-game series between the teams.

DOUGIE'S BACK

Former Flame Dougie Hamilton returns for a second time as a member of the Carolina Hurricanes. And, currently, the 26-year-old blueliner is playing some of the best hockey of his life. With 11 goals and 19 assists in 32 games, he's a plus-17 and a top-pairing mainstay on the Hurricanes. Flames interim head coach Geoff Ward is not surprised at his progress, having seen him as a newly drafted defencemen (ninth overall in 2011) when both were in the Boston Bruins organization. "You could see it when he came into the league as a first-year player," Ward said. "He's very very poised with the puck. Skates well. Handles it. You could see right from the beginning that he was going to be a solid, solid real good NHL player. I'm happy for him. He's having some success and he's playing on a



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really good team. At the end of the day, that's what everybody wants when they put their skates on. You could see it right away with him."

FLAMES LINEUP

Forwards

Matthew Tkachuk – Elias Lindholm – Andrew Mangiapane

Mikael Backlund – Sean Monahan – Dillon Dube

Milan Lucic – Derek Ryan – Johnny Gaudreau

Tobias Rieder – Mark Jankowski – Michael Frolik

Defence

Mark Giordano – Rasmus Andersson

Noah Hanifin – Travis Hamonic

TJ Brodie – Michael Stone

Goaltenders

Cam Talbot

David Rittich

HURRICANES LINEUP

Forwards

Andrei Svechnikov — Jordan Staal — Warren Foegele

Nino Niederreiter — Sebastian Aho — Teuvo Teravainen

Ryan Dzingel — Lucas Wallmark — Martin Nenas

Brock McGinn — Jordan Martinook — Julien Gauthier

Defence

Jacob Slavin — Dougie Hamilton

Joel Edmundson — Brett Pesce

Jake Gardiner — Trevor van Riemsdyk

Goaltenders

Petr Mrazek

James Reimer

INJURIES

Hurricanes — LW Erik Haula (knee)

Flames — LW Sam Bennett (shoulder), RW Austin Czarnik (lower body), D Juuso Valimaki (knee)

SPECIAL TEAMS

Power play (prior to Saturday's action)

Hurricanes: 22.8% (23-for-101, 6th)

Flames: 18.3% (19-for-104, 16th)

Penalty kill (prior to Saturday's action)

Hurricanes: 86.0% (2nd)

Flames: 84.1% (7th)

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 12.14.2019

1166139 Calgary Flames

Flames prospect Luke Philp finds offensive groove in Stockton

Wes Gilbertson

December 13, 2019 3:53 PM MST

Calgary Flames farmhand Luke Philp won't have to bend the truth any when some day he's telling his grandkids about his first goal at the professional level.

It was a thing of beauty.

Really. Honestly.

"He scored his first goal in a manner that you don't often see first goals scored," said Cail MacLean, who coaches Philp — and the rest of the Flames' call-up candidates — with the American Hockey League's Stockton Heat. "He went down his off-side, hit the brakes quickly to sort of force the defenceman to lose his gap and then he cut to the middle and scored on a snapshot to the far corner. It hit the twine and came off really fast, and I think everyone in the rink was like, 'Holy cow!' And a couple shifts later, he scored again.

"So I think just the nature of that, of having a young man who has so much stake in all of this and for him to finally break the seal and score in a way that showed that there's a lot inside here, and then to score back-to-back ... I think that was a big moment for him.

"I remember at the time thinking, 'Man, that is a cool first pro goal.' It was no joke. A really nice play. So yeah, he won't have to lie to anyone about that."

That ice-breaking bury turned out to be more like the tip of an iceberg for Philp, who inked an entry-level contract with the Flames last spring after three standout seasons with the University of Alberta Golden Bears.

Including those two tallies in a Remembrance Day/Veterans Day victory over the San Diego Gulls, the rookie forward has piled up 10 goals and 13 points in his past 11 outings. That's quite an offensive splurge for a guy who didn't put even a drop of ink on the scoresheet in his first 10 appearances in the paid-to-play ranks.

Philp is currently riding a four-game goal spree, with six snipes over that superb stretch. Heading into a weekend home-and-home set between the Heat and the San Jose Barracuda, the 24-year-old from Canmore, Alta., is keeping company with Buddy Robinson (11) and Ryan Lomberg (10) as the only gents on Stockton's roster to already reach double digits in goals scored.

"I knew it was going to come but it took a little longer than I would have liked, so I think it was starting to get in my head a little bit," Philp admitted. "So it was a relief, for sure, to get that first one.

"You talk to any hockey player, when you get a goal, it feels like you have that extra bit of jump, especially the next few shifts. So it's really nice to be producing lately, because it gives you that extra boost out there."

Philp averaged close to two points per game last winter with the Canada West-winning Golden Bears, claiming the Senator Joseph A. Sullivan Trophy as Canada's post-secondary player-of-the-year.

Luke Philp, on signing with the Flames:

This first campaign in professional puck has been an education of another sort.



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After climbing the ranks as a centre, the 5-foot-10, 180-lb. right-hander has been skating primarily on the wing and is working to be stronger along the wall and more aware of his defensive duties at the new position. In the attacking zone, he's focused on trying to hang on to pucks a wee bit longer, high on the to-do list for any offensive-minded up-and-comer.

The coaching staff in Stockton never doubted his skill-set or hockey sense, but MacLean has lately noticed a guy who looks more calm, more confident and much more comfortable with the pace of the game.

"It was a bit of an adjustment at first," Philp said of the leap from U Sports to the AHL. "No matter how prepared you feel for pro hockey, which I definitely did feel like I was, it's much faster and a much heavier league, so it took me a few games to kind of get up to speed.

"I think as of late though, I've started to produce more offensively and I feel a lot better in the games."

It shows.

Heading into Friday's slate, Philp was one of just a half-dozen AHL rookies with 10-plus lamp-lightings.

"Like I qualify with everyone — hey, we don't expect Luke to score a goal a game for the rest of the year," MacLean said. "But I don't feel like it's a fluke that he's done so well here in the last span of games. I think this is more what he's all about.

"He's dynamic, in terms of how he can get himself in and out of traffic areas. He's dynamic with his hands. He's really slippery with his stick and deceptive. He has a good shot. So he's explosive in that nature, because he has good tools offensively. When you do skill-work with him, you can see he has a gift there."

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 12.14.2019

1166259 Winnipeg Jets

No more Maurice?

Rumours swirl around coach's future with Jets

Mike McIntyre

12/13/2019 8:36 PM

With the Jets not saying when head coach Paul Maurice's contract expires, and with rumours of Seattle being interested in his services, it's anyone's guess where he'll be next season.

Could the winds of change be blowing when it comes to the Winnipeg Jets and head coach Paul Maurice?

At first blush, it seems like a silly question to ask and even more ludicrous to consider, especially with the team off to a surprisingly strong start to a season many expected to be filled with peril. You could easily make the argument this is among the finest work of Maurice's lengthy coaching career, guiding a team that underwent a major off-season makeover to a 19-11-2 record.

Sure, much could change with 50 games remaining on the docket, including some tough opponents on the horizon. And yes, some of the underlying numbers suggest their lofty status may not be

sustainable, especially if Connor Hellebuyck comes down to Earth just a bit. Show me a good coach and I'll show you a good goalie, as the old saying goes.

But in a "what have you done for me lately" business, the returns have certainly been impressive. And the notoriously stubborn Maurice has shown he is open to change, implementing tweaks to the offensive and defensive systems which better suit the existing roster.

All good signs, for sure. Keep it up, and a Jack Adams nomination at the end of the season is not out of the question. And yet, here we are, with speculation starting to swirl about Maurice's long-term future with the club.

For starters, it's been reported by NHL insider Elliotte Friedman that Maurice is in the final year of his contract. The Jets, for the record, won't confirm or deny that, telling me on Friday it's the organization's policy not to comment on those types of matters. Friedman is as connected as they come, so I have no reason to doubt the validity of his claim.

We know Maurice was given a "multi-year" extension prior to the 2017-18 season, coming off the original contract he signed when he joined the team in the middle of the 2013-14 season. In asking around, the widespread belief was that it was for three years, which would take us to the conclusion of this season.

In any case, it's rather curious that an extension hasn't been announced, especially with the recent body of work. After all, Maurice guided the Jets to several franchise records in 2017-18, including a trip to the Western Conference final. He followed that up last year with another playoff appearance, albeit one in which they started strong, faded down the stretch and ended with a first-round exit to the eventual Stanley Cup champion St. Louis Blues.

Still, add in this year's start and Maurice has coached the Jets to a sparkling 118-61-17 regular-season record since he last put his name to paper. Getting Maurice out of lame-duck status and locked up for the foreseeable future would seem to be a no-brainer move by the organization.

Which takes us to another intriguing part of this story.

Friedman, on his 31 Thoughts podcast this week, dropped a bombshell in reporting a potential link between Maurice and the still-to-be-named Seattle expansion team, set to begin play in the 2021-22 season. Friedman was asked by co-host Jeff Marek when to expect some news about the organizational structure, including naming a head coach.

"I'll tell you this, I've got some guys who think it's going to be Paul Maurice," said Friedman, who later admitted the juicy scuttlebutt he's been hearing was likely going to "throw some gasoline on the fire."

No kidding. Could the delay in getting Maurice extended be less about Winnipeg's desire to take a wait-and-see approach — which, at this point, wouldn't make much sense — and more about the 52-year-old wanting to hold off and perhaps eventually test the waters?

Ron Francis was named general manager of the franchise last summer, and there are all kinds of connections between him and Maurice. The final six years of Francis's playing career were with the Carolina Hurricanes, with Maurice as his coach. Francis later served as associate coach to Maurice in Carolina for two seasons. Maurice speaks as highly of Francis as anyone in the hockey world, and the feelings are definitely mutual.

Throw in the fact Seattle will want to make a big splash in the market, and bringing in the seventh all-time winningest coach in NHL



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history might just qualify. Especially one as charismatic as Maurice, who helps sell the game every time he speaks.

Stability. Continuity. Loyalty. These have been the hallmarks of True North since the NHL returned to Winnipeg in 2011. While other organizations have made a habit of pushing the panic button whenever things go wrong, the Jets subscribe to the theory that slow and steady will ultimately win the race.

That's certainly the case when it comes to the coach. They gave their AHL leader in Claude Noel a chance to shine on a bigger stage, only pulling the plug and bringing in Maurice after 31/2 years, despite plenty of evidence it wasn't working.

Now in his sixth full season, Maurice trails only Tampa's Jon Cooper for longevity with his current club. Consider that five NHL teams have already pulled the plug on their head coaches this season — and that there have been a dozen new coaches since the end of last season — and you get a sense of just how rare it is to have staying power in this league.

Maurice seems to be the exception to the rule. Like any leader, he has his share of faults. He can be hard on young players, and overreliant on certain veterans in the past who were long past their prime. But players such as Jets captain Blake "I'd go through a wall for him" Wheeler swear by Maurice, and there's no evidence to suggest his message has gotten stale. Quite the contrary, in fact.

All of which should have both Maurice and the Jets eager to continue what's been a very beneficial relationship. And yet, here we are.

Until, or unless, a new deal gets announced, the questions about their future together are only going to get louder.

Winnipeg Free Press LOADED 12.14.2019

1166260 Winnipeg Jets

Motor City morass no cause for concern, Jets say

Jason Bell

12/13/2019 2:53 PM

The Winnipeg Jets had no touristy stuff planned anyway, but for all intents and purposes, their 32-hour jaunt to the Motor City was a colossal waste of time.

Not so for the Detroit Red Wings.

Michigan's downtrodden NHL squad used the visit to its own advantage Thursday night, posting a 5-2 victory to earn a full two points for the first time in a month. The Red Wings had gone 12 games without a regulation win until the Jets, gliding smoothly in the upper atmosphere of the Central Division, touched down and experienced all sorts of mechanical trouble.

Heading into the contest, head coach Paul Maurice's crew had gone 3-0-1 in its previous four, including a definitive 5-1 defeat of those same floundering Red Wings Tuesday night at Bell MTS Place. But one of the Western Conference's premier teams couldn't keep pace with the league's doormat, at least for one night.

Yet, there was no evidence of shattered hockey sticks, booted trash cans or even mild hand-wringing in the Jets dressing room at Little Caesars Arena afterward. The tenor of the post-game comments came down to this: (Bad) shifts happen.

"They came out in the first period and wanted the puck more, and they were all over us. They're a pretty desperate team out there, so they had something to prove," said Kyle Connor, a born-and-raised Michiganiaan who injected some zest into the struggling squad with a pair of second-period goals to cut Detroit's lead to one.

"(Trouble) matching their intensity. It seemed like they outworked us. We made a game of it in the second period. In the third, they're protecting a lead. Just one of those games."

Detroit outshot Winnipeg 14-5 after one period and 26-15 after 40 minutes before reverting to a defensive shell in the final frame when the Jets peppered goalie Jonathan Bernier with 13 shots but couldn't capitalize, compared to eight directed the other way at Connor Hellebuyck.

"We couldn't convert on a lot of the stuff we had sitting around (the net). It felt like that, just pucks off our sticks. The legs wanted to but the hands wouldn't keep up to them. That meant you were going in the wrong direction half the time," said Maurice. "We're not winning every game."

Winnipeg has done so many good things the last six weeks — posting a 13-4-2 record since Nov. 1 — that soul-searching really wasn't required during a day away from the rink Friday.

The team's goal differential is a plus-15 (58 goals for, 43 goals against) during that timeframe, and only the Dallas Stars had given up fewer goals (36), as of Friday. Winnipeg's penalty-killing unit is also running at an 81.5 per cent efficiency (14th) since the end of October. The power play, however, remains a model of inconsistency, scoring just 15.5 per cent of the time during that stretch.

Winnipeg hosts a pair of Eastern Conference squads to begin three straight on home ice. The Philadelphia Flyers are in town for a rare 4 p.m. start Sunday and the Carolina Hurricanes are here Tuesday. The Jets wrap up the home stand Thursday against division-rival Chicago Blackhawks.

Winnipeg Jets centre David Gustafsson is going to the Czech Republic for the holiday season.

The NHL club has loaned the 19-year-old rookie to Team Sweden for the upcoming 2020 World Junior Hockey Championship. The annual tournament is set for Ostava and Trinec, Dec. 26 to Jan. 5.

Gustafsson, a second-round draft pick (60th overall) in 2018, scored his first NHL goal on Nov. 27 in San Jose against the Sharks, his only point in 22 games on the fourth line this season. He's been a healthy scratch the last three games since the Jets claimed Nick Shore off waivers from the Toronto Maple Leafs.

He had three assists for Sweden at the last year's world juniors.

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1166261 Winnipeg Jets

Jets have weaknesses, but are playoff bound

Andrew Berkshire



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 14, 2019

12/13/2019 2:44 PM

The Winnipeg Jets are nearly 40 per cent of the way through their 2019-20 regular-season schedule and remain solidly in the playoff picture.

Connor Hellebuyck deservedly gets the lion's share of the credit for that, since the Jets have been outshot, out-chanced, out-passed and outplayed both at even-strength and overall.

That the team keeps gutting out wins and rarely seems to be out of games is a credit to its effort level and mental fortitude, but is there more going on there? Season totals can give us an understanding of how a team has played overall, but it's tough to see trends in them.

The Jets certainly started the season on a relatively poor note when it comes to outplaying their opponents, but since then, how much have things changed? Is this a team that was allowed to get its wobbly legs under itself while Hellebuyck held them up straight and is now improving down the stretch? Let's find out.

The quickest way to see trends is to create a five-game moving average for certain metrics — meaning each point on a graph will include five games of data. As we move through, the oldest game will be dropped for the newest game. This evens out the randomness of single-game performances and gives us an idea of how a team is playing in short stretches and how much that play changes over time.

To measure the Jets, we'll use their inner-slot shots, scoring chances or shot attempts from the slot, shot attempts and slot passes for and against at even-strength only. So what does this look like so far?

The first five games of the season for the Jets were not very good, to say the least. They were controlling less than 45 per cent of the play in scoring chances and slot passes and less than 40 per cent in inner-slot shots — mostly due to lack of defensive coverage.

However as you can see, it didn't really take that long for the Jets to start to flex their muscles in a familiar area; dominating slot passes. Since the seventh game of the season, there has only been one stretch in the entire season where the Jets haven't been controlling 50 per cent or more of the slot passes, with extended periods where they're controlling more than 60 per cent.

That's an area that the Jets have excelled in for many seasons now. It's clearly something the roster is adept at and an area that head coach Paul Maurice focuses on. Controlling those passes gives the Jets the opportunity to score on a higher percentage of their shots than you would normally suspect, while making things a little easier on Hellebuyck by clamping down on the passes in their own end.

The biggest problem area this season has been the inner slot, where the Jets have really struggled to control play — especially during a disastrous period near the end of October and beginning of December. There was a three-game stretch where they were outshot from that area 17-5, with the Jets recording zero inner-slot shots on goal at even-strength in two of those games.

With all that said, things appear to be looking much better from that area, as the Jets are hovering closer to even over the last 10-15 games and they have worked hard to minimize the importance of that area by restricting access to it in their own zone.

In an average NHL game this season, both teams combined produce just over 10 shots on goal from the inner slot at even-strength. The Jets' average game is hovering below nine, with the

only lower-event teams in that area being the Arizona Coyotes and Dallas Stars.

The Jets' strengths as a passing team also lend credence to the strategy of attacking from the high slot instead of the inner slot, as well. There's more space to work with in the inner slot, both to get free and accept a pass, and to get a shot off without a stick, skate or shinpad in the way.

The Jets are still, by no means, a dominant team at controlling scoring chances overall, but being able to hover around an even 50 per cent shot share from the slot overall and add their superior playmaking skills to the mix, it makes sense that they've been able to hang around and beat teams when they aren't expected to.

Their break-even play in scoring chances also isn't a new thing; they've been at or around 50 per cent from the slot since games 4-9 and haven't really had a period of big struggle from the slot since then.

The total numbers may look a little underwhelming, but when you break things down into segments of the season, they look pretty similar to last season. Not necessarily a contender, but a team that can make the playoffs, and maybe keep surprising.

Andrew Berkshire is a hockey writer specializing in data-driven analysis of the game.

Winnipeg Free Press LOADED 12.14.2019

1166262 Winnipeg Jets

Jets loan rookie Gustafsson to Sweden for World Juniors

Scott Billeck

December 13, 2019 12:39 PM CST

David Gustafsson will don the yellow and blue of Sweden later this month at the World Junior Hockey Championships in the Czech Republic beginning on Boxing Day.

The Winnipeg Jets loaned the 19-year-old centre to the country's junior program on Friday, a move that had been expected for some time.

Gustafsson, who was taken 60th overall in the second round of the 2018 NHL Draft, made the Jets out of training camp back in September after an impressive showing. He went on to play in 22 games for the club, scoring his first NHL goal against the San Jose Sharks at the tail end of November.

Gustafsson has been a healthy scratch for the past three games after the Jets claimed Nick Shore off waivers last week.

"We won't make a decision on his year with the World Juniors as the primary factor," Maurice said last week when asked about what the next move was for the Swede. "This will be Winnipeg Jets first, David Gustafsson second in terms of how that fits."

Shore's arrival plus the return of Gabriel Bourque (and perhaps Mason Appleton in the future), and coupled with the poor play of the line eventually pushed Gustafsson out of a spot.

"Positionally, his reads and all of those things are way above a 19-year-old. He doesn't make many mistakes in the defensive zone,"



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Maurice said. "But we're in the defensive zone an awful lot with the grouping. We need to get them out to the end of the ice a little bit more and we also want him touching the puck more. We don't want him burning a year without touching the puck."

What happens after the junior tournament, which runs through Jan. 5, is still up in the air. It would be surprising to see Gustafsson return to Swedish outfit HV71 for the remainder of the SHL season before returning to North America to play for the Manitoba Moose, or if injuries dictate, the Jets.

Meanwhile, Gustafsson's previous international experience includes a gold-medal showing at the 2017 U17 World Hockey Challenge and a bronze medal at the 2018 U18 World Championship.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 12.14.2019

1166263 Winnipeg Jets

Losses to cellar-dwelling teams could haunt Jets down the road

Ted Wyman

December 13, 2019 5:14 PM CST

They are the kinds of losses that could come back to haunt the Winnipeg Jets if they're in a close playoff race in March and April.

When the Jets fell 5-2 to the lowly Detroit Red Wings on Thursday in the Motor City, it marked the fourth time this year they have lost to one of the three worst teams in the NHL.

They've lost twice to the Los Angeles Kings, who occupy last place in the Western Conference, once to the Wings and once, in a shootout, to the New Jersey Devils, who have just four more points than the 8-22-3 Red Wings.

Overall, the Jets are 19-11-2 and are in a playoff position as Christmas approaches but as positive as the season has been so far, it could have been better.

Giving away points against cellar-dwellers isn't normally a good recipe for success.

The Red Wings were a desperate team on Thursday night and the Jets, coming off a 5-1 win over Detroit in Winnipeg on Tuesday night, didn't play with their usual fire.

Sure, the bounces went the Red Wings' way, with two goals caroming in off the leg of Jets defenceman Neal Pionk. There was also the double gaffe by defenceman Nathan Beaulieu that led to a collision with a linesman and a breakaway goal for Darren Helm of the Red Wings.

The Jets couldn't complete a pass for the life of them in the offensive zone. Pucks bounced over sticks, dribbled off tape and found their way into corners instead of the front of the net.

The Red Wings deserved full marks for the win as they ended a woeful 12-game losing streak.

The Jets acknowledged that, calling it "one of those nights" but that doesn't really excuse the fact that they had a terrible first period against a bad team and could never catch up.

What was missing in that opening frame?

"Matching their intensity," said winger Kyle Connor, who scored Winnipeg's only two goals.

"It seemed like they outworked us."

With teams like the St. Louis Blues, Colorado Avalanche and Dallas Stars all contending for the top spots in the Central Division — not to mention the lagging but capable Nashville Predators and Minnesota Wild — the Jets really can't afford to miss any gimmes.

They'll have to be much better come Sunday when the Philadelphia Flyers visit Bell MTS Place and Tuesday against the Carolina Hurricanes.

Both teams are in playoff position in the Eastern Conference and are talented opponents.

For the Jets, a quick bounce-back is imperative. There's simply not much room for error when the standings are so tight.

You get the sense, from the way things have gone so far this season, that this Jets team is pretty good at flushing the losses.

They've only lost two games in a row once this season — which came in a series of three straight losses to Pittsburgh, Arizona and the New York Islanders in mid-October — and they haven't had many truly bad games.

When they have, they've been able to get back in the win column quickly.

If they can do that again on Sunday, Thursday's stinker in Detroit will be soon forgotten.

But with a run of games coming up that includes two matchups with the Stanley Cup champion Blues, and others against Colorado, Minnesota, Chicago and Montreal before the New Year, the arguably overachieving Jets could have a hard time maintaining their standing in the Central.

There will be no room for games in which the Jets can't match the opponent's intensity.

As the Red Wings showed on Thursday, even an inferior team can win when it outworks the opposition.

The good news for the Jets, it would appear, is they only have one game left this season against a team that is currently in last place.

They play the Kings at Bell MTS Place on Feb. 18.

By that time they will be in a full-on push for the playoffs and surely intensity will not be hard to come by.

At least, you would think.

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THE LOW DOWN

Jets games this season against the weakest teams in the NHL

Oct. 4, at Newark — Winnipeg 5 at New Jersey 4 (SO)

Oct. 22 at Winnipeg — Los Angeles 3, Winnipeg 2

Nov. 5 at Winnipeg — New Jersey 2, Winnipeg 1 (SO)

Nov. 30 at Los Angeles — Los Angeles 2, Winnipeg 1

Dec. 10 at Winnipeg — Winnipeg 5, Detroit 1

Dec. 12 at Detroit — Detroit 5, Winnipeg 2



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Winnipeg Sun LOADED 12.14.2019

1166264 Winnipeg Jets

4 observations from an up-and-down 5-game block for the Jets

Ken Wiebe

Dec 13, 2019

DETROIT — It's both impossible and inaccurate to simply dismiss it as a one-off.

But is it too early to suggest that Thursday's 5-2 loss to the Detroit Red Wings represents something that resembles a trend?

The Red Wings were spinning their fabled winged wheels, if you will, caught in the midst of a 12-game winless skid (0-10-2) going into the contest.

They were searching for hope – and possibly a bounce or three.

On the flip side, the Jets seemed to be cruising, putting together a stretch of games where they seemed to be finding their identity and doing a better job of not relying on their goalies to be All-Worldly in order to win.

Just two nights earlier, the Jets had survived a sleepy start and used a three-goal outburst in a two-minute span late in the second period to earn a 5-1 victory over those same Red Wings.

Jets head coach Paul Maurice has made a habit of proclaiming that one of the reasons his team has built a solid record this season is that there hasn't been any arrogance that crept into their game.

For the most part, that has been true.

The number of no-shows or poor efforts has been minimal to date and this loss wouldn't fall into that category either – despite another slow start for the Jets during a sluggish first period.

Nobody is going to confuse Thursday's game with a strong showing for the Jets, who had three own goals (two off the shin pads of Neal Pionk and one off the skate of Luca Sbisa) and allowed a goal on a breakaway after Nathan Beaulieu turned the puck over to St. Andrews product Darren Helm and then bumped into linesman Greg Devorski as he tried to scramble back into the play.

The Jets have done an outstanding job of limiting their trips to the penalty box this season, but an undisciplined roughing minor to defenceman Anthony Bitetto was a factor in the outcome, as Filip Zadina scored a power-play marker with 23.8 seconds to go in the second period.

That restored a two-goal cushion for the Red Wings and seemed to take something out of the Jets after mounting a comeback and trimming a three-goal deficit to one.

Bitetto needs to play with a physical edge to his game, but his retaliatory minor was an example when he would have been better served by taking a number or turning the other cheek.

"I think we're the most disciplined team in the league, so it's not an issue for us," said Maurice. "We were in the box four more times than they were until the end of the game, that was the bigger story. Just how the calls went hurt us a bit. I'd rather take the emotion than

to be screaming at them to bring it or to find the emotion. We're not winning every game."

Nobody is suggesting the Jets should win every game, that's impossible.

But for a team that is going to need to scratch and claw for every point that it gets in order to try and nail down a playoff spot, it's also clear they've left a few important points on the table through 32 games.

Those include a pair of losses to the Los Angeles Kings and a home-ice defeat at the hands of the New Jersey Devils.

The Jets were actually in danger of being swept in the two-game season series with the Devils, had they not overcome a four-goal deficit in the second game of the season.

There was obvious disappointment for the Jets in being the team the Red Wings snapped their slump against, but there was also a sense of calm in the losing dressing room afterward.

That's because the Jets have been a resilient bunch, losing consecutive games just once this season.

It would be natural to wonder if a loss like this one could cause a bit of self-doubt or open the door to a longer losing skid.

"So much about hockey is being mentally strong, we can't let this affect us because we did a lot of good things," said Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck. "We put it behind us and go on another win streak, or at least a point streak, and we'll be happy."

Given how the Jets have responded so far, they deserve the benefit of the doubt when it comes to wondering if they're going to be able to bounce back.

They'll be put to the test on Sunday when they welcome the Philadelphia Flyers to Bell MTS Place to open a three-game homestand.

Here are four other things that caught our attention during this five-game block, which included splits in home-and-home series with the Red Wings and Dallas Stars and a victory over the Anaheim Ducks:

Connor is feeling it

It took him a while to find his offensive groove after missing all of training camp, but Jets left winger Kyle Connor is on a roll. With two goals on Thursday – including a nifty redirection in front and a blistering one-timer from the slot – Connor is up to 13 goals, tied with Nikolaj Ehlers for second on the team and just one behind Mark Scheifele. Up to 29 points in 32 games, Connor is up to a pace that's closing in on a point per game and those are solid numbers for a fourth-year pro. Especially one who signed a lengthy, big-ticket contract just prior to the start of the season.

Morrissey rounding into form

There were times early in the season when the weight of the world seemed to be squarely on the shoulders of the Jets' top defenceman, which was only natural when you consider the massive turnover with the defence corps. The point production was there for Morrissey, but there were a few uncharacteristic turnovers and the additional burden of having so much responsibility heaped on him appeared to be taking a bit of a toll. But Morrissey has settled in, he's continued to produce offensively (up to 19 points in 30 games) and he's meshing well with new defence partner Tucker Poolman on the first pairing. There's a calmness that has returned to Morrissey's game at both ends of the ice.

That looks familiar



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A strange equipment malfunction cost Jets backup Laurent Brossoit his first shutout of the season. Yes indeed, there have been some odd circumstances for Brossoit to deal with – cramps knocked him out of the game against the Columbus Blue Jackets and then forces out of his control led to his temporary removal during the second period on Tuesday.

“I’m used to unusual this year,” Brossoit said after Tuesday’s game. “The little lace that attaches my skate to my pad just completely ripped apart. We tried to get it knotted up and get me back in there but it was a bit trickier than we thought. I thought it was all together and all done and I guess it must have just come undone.”

Brossoit was already back on the bench after getting the issue repaired, but the first stoppage in play came as Christoffer Ehn scored on Hellebuyck, who was forced into relief duty. Hellebuyck is playing at an elite level and loves a heavy workload, but it’s a lot easier getting him a breather when Brossoit’s game is on point. The backup has put together a run of five mostly steady starts in a row and if he can keep that up, it’s only going to help the Jets in the long run. Getting 20-22 starts remains not only a possibility but a necessity.

Fourth line changes

The personnel change is underway with the arrival of Nick Shore and the return to the lineup for Gabriel Bourque. Not surprisingly, the ice time has been on the rise for the fourth line and that number needs to be closer to the 7-9 minute range than the 5-6 minutes it’s been given at times this season. The pending return of right winger Mason Appleton, who was sent to the Manitoba Moose earlier this week to shake off some of the injury-induced rust, should also help. Appleton has no points in nine NHL games this season, but he’s determined to carve out a role for himself this season.

Speaking of the fourth line, rookie centre David Gustafsson has been a healthy scratch in three games since the arrival of Shore and he was loaned to Team Sweden on Friday, so he can suit up in the 2020 World Junior Hockey Championship in the Czech Republic. My feelings on the subject haven’t wavered. Gustafsson is ahead of the development curve and those 22 games are going to help him. But right now, he would be served well by playing in a tournament against his peers while serving as a valuable contributor for his home country. Moving from roughly five minutes per game to 18-20 would provide both a confidence boost and an opportunity to work on his puck skills. Once the tournament is over, the Jets can reassess and decide if he would be better served by returning to Winnipeg or going back to Sweden to finish out his contract with his club team.

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1166265 Winnipeg Jets

Ates: A Jets reporter’s perspective on Blake Wheeler’s recent introspection

Murat Ates

Dec 13, 2019

When Blake Wheeler told TSN’s Sara Orlesky this September that he planned to change his leadership style, it seemed like a noble

idea. When Wheeler told Pierre LeBrun and Scott Burnside why that change was necessary on The Athletic’s Two Man Advantage podcast, it seemed like he had developed some real wisdom on the subject.

And, as you saw in his one-on-one right here this week, Wheeler’s growth as a person and as Winnipeg’s captain is real — earned through honest self-reflection and hard work.

Identifying a need is one thing. Putting in the work to change habits — that is, to modify behaviours developed and reinforced over years of honest living — is something else entirely. It’s always seemed to me that, when adopting a new habit, many of us have an early burst of energy. We will hit the gym before work. We will learn to play guitar. We will cut down on how much we spend on coffee every week.

And, for a while at least, we do those things. It’s just that habits built over a lifetime are hard to shake.

It’s one thing for Wheeler to say he’ll be more easygoing and affable around the rink every day. It’s another altogether to make specific, measurable, achievements with respect to the behaviours which convey his good nature. It’s one thing for Wheeler to say he’ll put the team above his own needs. It’s another altogether for him to become Patrik Laine’s biggest cheerleader as Laine takes his spot on Winnipeg’s top line.

Remember this from October?

“My goal with him is by the time I’m out of here, he’s — if not the best forward in the league, then in that conversation.”

So of course Wheeler’s answers in this week’s Q&A were compelling. Here is a man who has said the right thing and then done it, consistently, as the season has progressed. Development isn’t a straight line, however, so I’m sure the change is a process — an ongoing movement — as opposed to a *fait accompli*. It’s just that Wheeler shows such a high level of self-awareness that it’s tempting to think he’ll succeed with this transformation.

But Winnipeg has done a lot of winning lately. Wheeler’s biggest test will come if (when?) the Jets face a substantial slump or losing streak.

In the meantime, let me share openly that almost every answer he gave in our one-on-one felt, to me, as if it could support its own column. My editor and I went back and forth a little bit about how to best present those answers and, since there’s so much insightful, well-articulated, introspection in Wheeler’s words — and because he was forthcoming enough to share so much of his thought process with us — we decided that the most compelling truth would come from preserving his words in full. Such is the advantage of the Q&A format.

Still, there are a few things Wheeler said that were so interesting to me that I can’t help but delve into them further today.

The first is this concrete example of a perspective he was forced to change:

When Wheeler was 21, as Laine is today, he played his third and final year of NCAA hockey for the University of Minnesota. He spent the next three seasons playing third line minutes in Boston and was 25 before he played top line minutes for Winnipeg. It was five more years before Wheeler put together his back-to-back 91-point seasons.

I sincerely believe that people can only learn the lessons their life presents to them. Wheeler’s life told him that a first-line job is earned



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through multiple, successive years of grinding and it is no surprise to me at all that “earn it” was a driving force behind his thinking.

To learn lessons from outside of your life, it takes self-reflection and conscientious study. It also takes a person setting aside their ego — not necessarily in the colloquial, “cocky” connotation of the word but in the philosophical sense of removing one’s own identity from the issue at hand.

Maybe that comes off as fluffy. Maybe you’re among those who wish that Wheeler and Mark Scheifele anchored two separate lines ages ago.

But I believe Wheeler when he says, “I think I was able, last summer, to remove myself, my emotions, and what I want for myself from the equation.” And the more I try to empathize with his initial perspective, built through a decade of sweat equity in an NHL that prioritized veterans more than it does today, the more difficult I think changing this perspective must be.

It’s why I think this is so impressive. It’s also why I think the biggest test will come should Winnipeg face tough times this season. People often revert to old habits during times of duress.

For now, let’s move on to Wheeler’s vulnerability — his awareness that time is working against him.

Do you remember the day Wheeler signed his five-year contract extension? We dug into aging curves at the time and reflected on players’ peaks — closer to their mid-20s than mid-30s as Wheeler will be through the duration of his contract. Wheeler is a unique player, I reasoned, but time catches up to everyone: “No matter how optimistic you are about Wheeler as a player, the odds are stacked against him.”

Again, it’s one thing for a writer to say that. I’m not the one who has to come to terms with eventually losing a step, recovering more slowly or not being capable of dominating an NHL game. When time is brought into the conversation, it would be easy for a hyper-competitive professional athlete to bristle, put his elbows out, and deny the truth: time catches up to everyone.

Wheeler’s self-awareness on this issue is refreshing, honest, and appears to be a major driver for him. His contract includes this season and four more. He’s 33 and will likely age out of top six, 5-on-5 excellence over the duration of his deal.

And he doesn’t care — as long as Winnipeg wins.

If I seem unusually struck by a sentiment that a cynic might see as good PR on a player’s part, make sure you listen to The Boarding Pass this week, where you can hear Wheeler deliver those words himself. There is a sincerity that felt raw and real to hear in person.

The last element of Wheeler’s interview I’d like to touch on here is his assessment of his leaguewide validation. This time I’ll include my question for better context.

To me, this conversation illustrates one of the great ironies of Wheeler’s career. At 5-on-5, Wheeler was one of the NHL’s very best right wingers for the better part of a decade yet no one outside of Winnipeg seemed to notice.

From 2011-12, Wheeler’s first full season with the Jets organization, to 2016-17, he scored the fourth most even strength points in the NHL and appeared in zero All-Star games. Seriously, the scoring race in that time is Patrick Kane, Sidney Crosby, Jamie Benn, Blake Wheeler, and then John Tavares at No. 5 — a who’s who of franchise players — and Wheeler is ahead of the more celebrated Alexander Ovechkin, Evgeni Malkin, and Jonathan Toews in that time.

Then, in 2017-18, Winnipeg’s power play went off. Wheeler’s even strength production barely changed — in fact, it declined slightly — but he doubled his point production on the power play while setting up Scheifele and Laine for one-timers.

Wheeler didn’t change but perception did. He scored 91 points in back-to-back seasons and was thus selected to All-Star games in back-to-back seasons. It took a massive point total for the general public to realize what close observers would have known all along — at even strength, Wheeler was elite.

And here comes the irony. Now that perception has finally caught up and Wheeler is getting the praise he should have gotten ages ago, we’re likely at the point of his career where he is merely very good and not one of the league’s three or four best 5-on-5 players.

I hold that the general public missed out on just how great Wheeler’s peak was — and might overestimate him now, based on his production on the power play.

Maybe that stuff doesn’t matter. Still, this whole conversation began with Wheeler demonstrating empathy. And when I think about him saying, “It’s not something where it’s ruining my day but it’s like, ‘Come on, are you fucking kidding me?’ A lot of guys get a lot of ink and have gotten a lot of ink in the past and I’m like, ‘Hey, man. The numbers have been there for a long time.’”

I believe him.

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1166147 Colorado Avalanche

Avalanche extends points streak to nine games with 3-1 win over New Jersey

New Jersey’s Taylor Hall was a late scratch but it doesn’t appear he’s coming to Colorado

MIKE CHAMBERS

December 13, 2019 at 10:30 PM

Minus 2018 Hart Trophy winner Taylor Hall, a late scratch for “precautionary” reasons, the struggling New Jersey Devils didn’t figure to have much of a chance against the red-hot Avalanche on Friday night at the Pepsi Center.

Hall, whom the Devils are shopping on the trade market, could be close to being moved — and Colorado is considered a strong suiter because of its salary structure and available prospects and draft picks.

But Hall was a Devil before and after the Avs defeated New Jersey 3-1 to extend their points streak to nine games (8-0-1). And it seemed Colorado’s only focus of the night was that — winning and staying atop the Western Conference with 45 points.

“Not one second did I think he was coming here. I didn’t think he was coming here when he got scratched,” Avs superstar Nathan MacKinnon said of Hall. “Maybe he is. But I think people think we get distracted easier than we do.”

MackKinnon said the rumors that Colorado was the leading candidate to land Hall weren’t accurate.



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"It wasn't true. Or else we'd probably have him," he said. "It's weird that he got pulled off but ... I think it would be great (to add Hall). I'd like to have a lot of players. I'd like to have Sid (Crosby), (Connor) McDavid — all those guys. Obviously (Hall) is a possibility but we like our team."

Forwards Gabe Landeskog, Valeri Nichushkin and MacKinnon (empty-net) scored for the Avs and goalie Pavel Francouz had another strong performance in his fifth straight appearance in net. Francouz (37 saves) allowed a late third-period goal for the second straight game to keep him from his first career NHL shutout. But he held on to improve to 9-2-1 on the season.

Colorado (21-8-3) is an NHL-best 13-3-1 since Nov. 7. But MacKinnon is thrilled about how the Avs have played in finishing their homestand 2-0-1.

Avalanche's Jared Bednar after Jim Montgomery dismissal: "We try to be as tight as we possibly can"

"Obviously, it was good enough to win but it wasn't good enough to our standards," he said of Friday's game. "We gotta get better. If we play like that we're not going to win the Cup. We need to keep getting better and evolve every day. It's up to us leaders to push that and make sure we're better."

Landeskog scored on the power play 11:37 into the first period and Nichushkin struck at even-strength at 7:56 of the second. MacKinnon struck in the final minute on a vacated net.

Landeskog, playing in his fifth game since missing 16 with a broken foot, one-timed a centering pass from MacKinnon past starting goalie Louis Domingue, who was later replaced by Mackenzie Blackwood. Nichushkin beat Domingue with a wrist shot from between the circles.

It was Nichushkin's sixth goal in 10 games since he snapped a 91-game goals drought. Nichushkin, who failed to score a goal in 57 games last season with the Dallas Stars, was tied with MacKinnon with a team-high six goals in the last 10 games — until MacKinnon got his seventh in the final minute.

New Jersey's goal was credited to Mirco Mueller with 4:12 remaining, but Avs defenseman Sam Girard inadvertently redirected Mueller's shot between Francouz's legs.

Footnotes. Avs rookie defenseman Cale Makar missed his third consecutive game with an upper-body injury — believed to be to his left shoulder. Makar is expected to join the team for practice Sunday and travel to St. Louis, where Colorado visits the Blues on Monday to begin a two-game trip. The Avs have Saturday off. ... Goalie Philipp Grubauer returned to the lineup after missing two games with a hamstring ailment. Grubauer backed-up Francouz.

Denver Post: LOADED: 12.14.2019

1166148 Colorado Avalanche

Avalanche's Erik Johnson progressing toward return from injury

Coach Jared Bednar is optimistic Johnson will practice with no contact on Sunday

KYLE FREDRICKSON

December 13, 2019 at 12:44 PM

Erik Johnson has returned to the ice for the first time since suffering an upper-body injury which has held the Avalanche defenseman out for nine games and counting, coach Jared Bednar said Friday.

Johnson wore a red non-contact jersey before morning skate for individual work as Colorado prepared for its game against New Jersey at the Pepsi Center.

"That's the first skate for him, yesterday a little bit and then today, so we're hoping to get him into practice on Sunday in non-contact," Bednar said. "He's making progress. It's been a little bit longer than what we thought it might be. The team is playing well, so no need to rush him back in, but we're going to start dialing him up and getting him ready to play some time here in the near future."

Johnson's injury occurred Nov. 23 when he was cross-checked into the boards by Toronto forward Alex Kerfoot, a former Avalanche player handed a two-game suspension for the dangerous hit. While Colorado has missed Johnson's penalty-killing prowess, it has rolled to a 7-0-1 record in his absence with defensemen Nikita Zadorov and Ryan Graves increasing their workload.

However, Johnson's pending comeback gives the Avalanche further positive momentum.

"It's very exciting to see him coming back," defenseman Sam Girard said.

Footnotes. Avs goalie Pavel Francouz will start in net against the Devils with Philipp Grubauer as his backup. Francouz is 3-0-1 over his last four appearances with a .934 save percentage. ... Injured defenseman Cale Makar (upper body) participated only in gym training Friday and will be held off the ice until practice on Sunday, Bednar said. ... The Devils (9-16-5) are winless in the month of December.

Denver Post: LOADED: 12.14.2019

1166149 Colorado Avalanche

Analysis: Nathan MacKinnon provides unpredictable presence for Avalanche

MacKinnon has had a season-high 29 shifts in each of the Avalanche's last two games

MIKE CHAMBERS

December 13, 2019 at 6:00 am

Kizsla vs. O'Halloran: Why in the world didn't Broncos start quarterback Drew Lock sooner?

University of Colorado to stop funding student-run CU Independent and launch a more faculty-led news outlet

Editorial: The tragic stories of late-term abortion don't support a ban

Avalanche center Nathan MacKinnon on Wednesday had a team-high 29 shifts and logged 20:04 of ice time, tops among forwards, in a 3-1 victory over the visiting Philadelphia Flyers.

He played on all four lines and had the game-winning assist on Mikko Rantanen's first goal. MacKinnon and Rantanen, both 2018-



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19 NHL All-Stars, usually play together but they didn't begin that way against the Flyers, who must have thrown in the towel as far as matchups were concerned midway through the first period.

MacKinnon, the NHL's third-leading scorer, is on pace to shatter his career-best 99-point season of 2018-19. He is the one player opponents try to shut down offensively. But that's becoming harder these days because of his unpredictable presence — just the way Colorado coach Jared Bednar likes it.

"It makes it tough for a team to just check him with certain guys, or a certain D-pair," Bednar said Thursday after an optional skate. "The flip side on our side is, when you spot Mac into a line and juggle things around a little bit, even it's just for a shift or two, those other players are really excited to go out on the ice with him because they know he can help make them better and that they can be difference-makers in the game right then and there on that particular shift."

He added: "Other teams don't know what's coming. Our guys get excited. It's win-win on both sides."

Avalanche's Jared Bednar after Jim Montgomery dismissal: "We try to be as tight as we possibly can"

MacKinnon has had a season-high 29 shifts in each of the last two games. Against Philly, he played at even-strength with Colorado's other three centers and all eight wingers.

Expect that unpredictable versatility to continue.

Footnotes. Bednar said star rookie defenseman Cale Makar will miss his third consecutive game Friday when Colorado plays the New Jersey Devils to conclude a three-game homestand. Makar (upper-body injury) skated on his own for the third consecutive day Thursday and is likely to return Monday at St. Louis or Wednesday at Chicago. ... Only three players skated Thursday — forward Vladislav Kamenev, defenseman Calle Rosen and goalie Philipp Grubauer. Kamenev and Grubauer were scratched Wednesday but Bednar said Grubauer — who is dealing with a hamstring ailment — will be in Friday's lineup and possibly start.

Denver Post: LOADED: 12.14.2019

1166150 Colorado Avalanche

Quite frankly? What Pavel Francouz is doing shows it can never be too late

Ryan S. Clark

Dec 13, 2019

Look, Pavel Francouz knew what was up with Philipp Grubauer that night in Boston long before any television cameras or replays revealed something was wrong with the Colorado Avalanche's No. 1 goaltender.

All because of what he learned in Russia a few years earlier.

There was a point during Francouz's first KHL season with Traktor Chelyabinsk when he sat behind a then-21-year-old goaltender in Vasilii Demchenko for a month. Francouz, who is four years older than Demchenko, used his time on the bench to alter how he approached his job.

He began viewing games through another prism. Francouz was adamant about studying specific in-game situations while taking even more notes on how Demchenko or any starting goaltender operated in certain sequences.

"You can either be pissed," Francouz said, "or take it as a lesson and study the situation."

Francouz learned that one of the critical functions of being a backup goaltender is always to be watching: observe to see what the No. 1 goalie is doing to be successful, but monitor everything else around him in the event something happens and a change needs to be made.

Welcome to what it means to be Pavel Francouz or any NHL backup goaltender who is always on call until they are called upon.

"I saw that Grubi had some issues early in the game, and as a goalie, you watch other goalies. You can see something is wrong," Francouz said. "He was moving differently, and in that moment, I felt like I was going to go in at some point because you don't want it getting worse. I was already mentally preparing for that. Then I saw him make this awkward save, and I knew I was going to go in. It's getting off the bench, going to the hallway and getting my stuff and just trying to focus and calm down.

"All of a sudden, I was on the ice."

Francouz relieved Grubauer, played more than 42 minutes and stopped all 16 shots he faced in helping the Avalanche come away with a 4-1 win last Saturday against the Boston Bruins at TD Garden. Remember: That's after making 38 saves two days earlier in a 3-2 win versus the Montreal Canadiens at Bell Centre.

Grubauer was held out of the previous two games while continuing to recover from a lower-body injury but was available as a backup in a 3-1 win Friday against the New Jersey Devils at Pepsi Center.

In that time, Francouz has filled in and has an overtime loss sandwiched between two victories. His latest conquest came in a 37-save performance over the Devils that sealed the Avalanche's eighth win in their past nine contests.

"That game's all Frankie," Avalanche coach Jared Bednar said Friday. "Maybe the one before that, and maybe even the one before that."

Having Francouz — who entered the weekend with an 8-2-1 mark with a 2.37 goals-against average and a .927 save percentage — has allowed Bednar and his staff not to feel pressured about rushing Grubauer back into the lineup. Possessing an understudy who has gained trust in such a quick amount of time amplifies what Avalanche general manager Joe Sakic and his front office staff did over the summer to reinforce Colorado's depth in all positions.

And it has quickly made Francouz a fan favorite. Fans scream his name and emphasize the "SOOZ" part of his surname as it echoes throughout the arena. It has even reached the point where DJ Triple T, the Pepsi Center DJ, is playing "Relax" by Frankie Goes to Hollywood whenever Francouz makes an easy save in a tense moment.

For those wondering, Francouz has not yet been to Hollywood. But he has been to Southern California, if that helps.

"I don't know how well all of our fans know him or some of our fans know him, (but) this kid is salt to the earth," Bednar said. "He's an extremely humble guy. Unbelievable person. Unselfish. I mean, he's as good a teammate as you can ask for. And to see him perform the way he's been performing, I think it's fantastic."



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Remember when bringing Francouz over from Russia last season was considered a gamble?

Or how having him back up Grubauer to give the Avalanche a tandem was questioned because many believed they were unproven in their respective roles at the NHL level?

Granted, there are still more than 50 games left, but it appears Sakic's decision might be paying dividends.

"I was just hoping that there was one team in the league who would take the risk," Francouz said of the Avalanche being the only team that offered him a contract when he left Russia. "It's pretty risky just to take some guy from the KHL or over in Europe, and I did play in some World Championships, but you never know. You can't really guess what's going to happen. I was 28 at that time already.

"To me, it was just all about the one team that was going to try to offer me a deal, and I wanted to go and try."

A Grubauer-Francouz dynamic was the tentative plan when Sakic acquired both in the summer of 2018. The thought was Grubauer would challenge incumbent starter Semyon Varlamov for the net with Francouz spending the 2018-19 season adapting to the North American game while playing for the Eagles.

Bednar was faced with the constant challenge of picking two goaltenders who wanted to be No. 1 options until Grubauer overtook for good with what he did to help the Avalanche reach the playoffs and come within a win of advancing to the Western Conference finals.

The landscape is vastly different compared to a year ago: Grubauer is the Avalanche's clear-cut No. 1 goaltender, while Francouz is his backup.

"We want to make sure we're not overplaying Grubi and we're giving a guy who's won us a lot of games, enough games to make an impact on our team as well," Bednar said. "That sets us up better. I think you're seeing more teams balance their goaltending as far as number of starts for their starter if they have that luxury. It's worked out well. Grubi, this is the second time he's been out of the lineup for the first part of the year, and Frankie's stepped up and doing great.

"For us, there is no rush to get a guy back in the lineup until he's 100 percent at that position and a lot of other positions as well."

Practically everything the Avalanche are doing has the entire NHL discussing a team that with each win looks more and more like a legitimate Stanley Cup contender.

It is the fact superstar center Nathan MacKinnon is seriously challenging Edmonton Oilers superstar center Connor McDavid and Bruins star right winger David Pastrnak for the Hart Trophy without Gabriel Landeskog and Mikko Rantanen by his side for most of the season.

Or the notion star rookie defenseman Cale Makar could claim the Calder Memorial Trophy while setting a record for the most points by a first-year blueliner.

Yet the refrain that rings the loudest would be the Avalanche's multifaceted depth. The scoring contributions from newcomers Andre Burakovsky, Joonas Donskoi and Nazem Kadri. How adding Pierre-Edouard Bellemare to play with Matt Calvert and Matt Nieto gives the Avs an element they were missing last year. Even how Valeri Nichushkin going from goalless drought to falling out of bed into a pool of goals has become an item of note.

How Grubauer and Francouz are performing is another topic of discussion. It's as serious as scouts discussing how Francouz will be

an unrestricted free agent at season's end to those who play Fantasy Hockey being urged to add the 29-year-old to their teams.

One of the most ironic parts about Francouz generating any sort of discussion is he is actually one of the quietest players on the roster.

"He's pretty quiet. Doesn't speak too much, but he was good with (Martin) Kaut," said Avalanche defenseman Ryan Graves, who spent last season with Francouz in the AHL. "Frankie and him could speak and they lived close by each other, and Frankie kinda took care of him and had him under his wing. There's a big age gap there, and Frankie was still really good to him. That speaks a lot to Frankie's character."

Colorado's dressing room has worked to become one where anyone — especially new players — is instantly made to feel as if he has been with the organization for several years.

Graves said at the start of the season the team would love Francouz because he's so team-oriented. The NHL's plus/minus leader as of Friday said Francouz has gained respect because of his dependability and the fact he always has fun with his teammates at practice and on the road.

"He'll stay out late and take shots and work with guys," Graves said. "I think that speaks volumes, and guys appreciate that and guys notice that type of stuff with him."

That should come as no surprise. Francouz ingratiated himself with the Eagles last season when he took ownership of the team losing a 4-1 lead in the final six minutes to pull out a 5-4 overtime victory. He went into the dressing room after the game and put \$500 into the pot for whoever was named the game's most valuable player or whoever scored the game-winning goal.

Now add the fact he's willing to help his new set of teammates in any way possible.

"I think the thing with Frankie is just he's such a calm presence and he's just so even-keeled," Avalanche veteran defenseman Mark Barberio said. "There's no highs and lows with his personality or in his game. He's given us consistent play, and that just comes from his demeanor. You saw it last year with the Eagles. He was probably the best goalie in the league just judging from his numbers, and if you talked to a lot of guys who played with the Eagles last year, they have nothing but great things to say about him.

"He's proving it at this level, and he's a guy who has played a lot of pro hockey in the KHL, and he may be young in terms of NHL experience but not in professional experience."

Barberio is one of the players on the roster who can best relate to Francouz and the challenges he faces as a backup goaltender.

The 29-year-old Barberio serves in the role of being a seventh defenseman whose playing time is often predicated on what is happening with others in the lineup. Barberio has played 12 times this season, which matches his total from last year when his campaign was hindered by injuries.

Injuries to veteran defenseman and alternate captain Erik Johnson along with Makar have opened the door for Barberio to receive more playing time as of late.

Kinda like Francouz with Grubauer.

"I think it's about staying sharp and making sure your practice habits are really good," Barberio said. "And when you do get a chance, you gotta perform. It's not an easy job, but it's still a job, and you gotta do it. There's plenty of guys that would love that job, and it's important.



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Just make sure your practice habits are good, your off-ice habits are good, and that translates into the game.”

What is it like for Barberio — who has been with the Avalanche for three seasons — to see Francouz perform so well considering goaltending depth has been an issue in years past?

“I think that’s speaking to our depth throughout our lineup, whether it is with the players that are skating or if they’re between the pipes,” he said. “Injuries are just part of hockey and it’s why it’s next-man-up mentality, and that’s what Frankie’s showing.”

Francouz, who fluently speaks English and Russian in addition to his native Czech, operates with a sense of pragmatism, whether it is with his performances or how he views being in the NHL.

The 29-year-old, who just became a first-time father earlier this year, said there are difficulties that come with being an undrafted European player. That the path is much harder to get noticed because little attention exists. It is essentially the driving force as to why annual improvement is vital in order to reach the NHL.

He openly and happily acknowledges how being in the NHL is a lifelong dream that has caused him to reflect on what he experienced earlier in his career.

Part of what made playing in North America appealing to Francouz was getting a chance to see a different part of the world when the Eagles would visit different cities for games. That still remains the case with the Avalanche. He smiles when talking about how he is enjoying playing at nice rinks in front of nice crowds while being appreciative of how the club takes care of its players by having them fly on a nice airplane, stay at top-class hotels and have healthy, quality meals.

“I think you can really appreciate it when you’ve seen something else,” he said. “I think for the guys here, it’s just natural. In the KHL, it’s not like that everywhere. There are some nice cities in Russia, but there are some industrial, small cities with not-good hotels, and when you go through that, you appreciate that even more.”

Nizhnekamsk is an industrial city in southwestern Russia with a little more than 234,000 residents. The city has a KHL club in Neftekhimik Nizhnekamsk, and many of the opposing teams stay at an older hotel Francouz says has gained a bit of notoriety from those who have either played or coached in the KHL.

Francouz said it’s common for teams staying at that hotel to fly in late, stay for the night then play the following day before departing for their next location.

“The hotel is legendary in the league. It’s an old building,” Francouz recalled. “You can ask (Avalanche goaltending coach) Jussi Parkkila. That was the first thing he told me when we arrived at the first hotel I stayed at in this league. He told me, ‘It’s a little bit better than Nizhnekamsk, right?’”

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1166151 Colorado Avalanche

Francouz shines as Avalanche increase point streak to nine games

Arif Deen

December 13, 2019

On a night where the Avalanche struggled defensively, goaltender Pavel Francouz picked up the slack to help the Avs to a 3-1 victory over the New Jersey Devils on Friday at the Pepsi Center.

Francouz stopped 37 shots, including 15 in the third period to secure Colorado’s 21st win of the season. The 29-year-old has appeared in each of the last five games (4-0-1).

“That game is all Frankie,” Avs coach Jared Bednar said. “We get a really nice power-play goal, great execution. We score a couple of tap-in goals but that game is all Frankie. And maybe the last one before that and the one before that.”

Francouz improved his personal record to 9-2-1. His .932 save percentage leads the Avs and is tied for fourth in the NHL and his 2.26 goals-against average is tied for sixth with former Avalanche netminder Semyon Varlamov.

Not bad for a player that came over from Russia just 18 months ago.

“I don’t know how well all our fans know him but this kid is salt of the earth,” Bednar said. “He’s an extremely humble guy, unbelievable person, unselfish. He’s as good a teammate as you can ask for.”

The Avs took a 1-0 lead in the first period after captain Gabe Landeskog one-timed a feed from center Nathan MacKinnon. Despite surrendering the only goal of the period, New Jersey outshot Colorado 13-6, but Francouz was perfect in the first, just as he was in the second.

Forward Valeri Nichushkin scored the only goal in the second—his sixth in ten games after going scoreless in 91—to give Colorado a two-goal cushion.

The Avalanche were unable to stop the Devils offense in the third, eventually giving up a goal with under five minutes remaining. MacKinnon added an empty-net tally in the final minute.

“We found a way to win,” Bednar said. “I’m not going to be upset after wins. It’s a perfect day for a day off tomorrow. Get the guys away from the rink and reset for next week.”

Takeaways

Francouz’s personal point streak reaches eight games. To go along with the Avalanche’s nine-game point streak, Francouz is 7-0-1 in his past eight decisions. After starting the season 2-2, Francouz has won every game he’s completed except for the overtime loss to the Calgary Flames on Monday.

“Playing every other day you kind of get into a rhythm,” Francouz said. “We have plenty of time to rest now.”

MacKinnon reaches 50 points. And he’s the third player in the NHL to reach the half-century mark. MacKinnon’s 20 goals are tied with Oilers forwards Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, the only two players with more points than him. He trails the duo by seven and five assists, respectively, and has played in two fewer games.

The highest-scoring team in the league is now a top-10 defensive team. After surrendering just two goals over the past two games, Colorado is eighth in goals against per game, at 2.69. Its offense continues to lead the league in both total goals (117) and goals per game (3.66).

Stat of the Night

The Avalanche were 34-for-55 in the faceoff circle, winning 62 percent of their draws. It was their second-best performance in the circle this season after going 64% against the Oilers two weeks ago.



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Avs Game 32 Grades: Sloppy Victory

EVAN RAWAL

DECEMBER 13, 2019

Mark Barberio – B

I think you have to give credit to Barbs. It's not easy to come out of the press box like he does. A lot of players are not built for that mentally. He's come in and been steady when the team has needed too. Picked up an assist on the Nichushkin goal and nearly had his own in the second period on a pinch.

Pierre Edouard Bellemare – C

For as poor as Bellemare was to start the year in the face-off circle, he's really turned it around and now sits above 50%, with another strong night tonight. This game had very little intensity, which is what this guy and his line feed off of. Took a penalty late but I didn't like that call.

Andre Burakovsky – D

I'm not liking the setup of the top two lines right now. It just hasn't worked in either of the games they've played, and the Avs are still so good they've won in spite of it. Burakovsky did get a few shots on net in this one but it was an underwhelming night. He was not alone in that.

Matt Calvert – B-

Like Bellemare, he's going to feed off intensity and tonight just wasn't having any of that. Had a chance to basically seal the game shorthanded in the third period but was stopped on a breakaway. Even with all that, Calvert's line controlled a lot of the play.

Ian Cole – C-

That pairing was the only pair to end up on the negative in shot differentials at even strength, and it was by a decent amount. I did like Cole on the PK tonight, although I'm not sure that New Jersey power play is all that powerful.

J.T. Compher – C+

Compher was solid on the PK most of the night, including a dive late to get a puck out of the zone. That line did create some good opportunities at even strength but just was not able to finish any.

Joonas Donskoi – D

Tonight was not the mess that it was the other night for Donny, but it wasn't that great either. It was capped off by a shot to the head from Blake Coleman. Donskoi did return late, luckily.

Pavel Francouz – A+

The Avs basically slept through that game, and Francouz was one of the redeeming parts of this one. You can still see the rebounds are out there to get, but he made some big saves, including a few breakaways and two on one's. The only goal to beat him was off Girard's stick and in.

Samuel Girard – D

Girard did pick up a power-play assist but still doesn't look very comfortable there. He took a penalty in the second period on a very uncharacteristic play by him. I didn't like a lot of his decisions with the puck in this one. At one point he went back to get the puck and had Z on a reverse, but just didn't do anything and the Devils player took it away from him really easily.

Ryan Graves – C

He didn't get a "+", so he's a complete failure. Kidding, obviously. Graves' PK work was solid tonight, but spending that much time in your own end against a Devils team that is un-good isn't ideal.

Nazem Kadri – D

The makeup of this line right now just isn't working. They're getting beat down at even strength in terms of shot metrics as well. Kadri took a pretty bad penalty in this one but also got kneed at the end of the game, which went uncalled. Hopefully he's OK moving forward.

Tyson Jost – B+

I felt like Jost was the Avs most consistent forward, shift to shift, in this one. He's a controversial player right now, but he's doing a lot of things right. At some point, however, there needs to be a little more production. You can't hate on a guy, who in only nine minutes of even-strength time, registers six shot attempts.

Gabriel Landeskog – D

The Captain has looked pretty rough with the puck since returning, and yet, he has three goals in five games, so not too bad. Took another penalty in this one, and that's kind of been an issue all year with him.

Nathan MacKinnon – B

Another two points for MacKinnon, and he still didn't look like he was flying the way he normally does. The pass on Landeskog's goal, where he was opened up to shoot the puck, was all world.

Valeri Nichushkin – B+

The dude is feeling it right now, and now everything is going in. I really don't know how you explain it at this point. We're now sitting at six goals in his last 10 games, and he's picked up a few assists in there as well. My prediction is that a contract extension is almost certain.

Matt Nieto – B

Another game where Nieto does a lot of things right, most of them very small to keep the game moving, and picks up another point. Another member of the strong penalty kill.

Mikko Rantanen – D

Very quiet game from Rantanen. He registered two shot attempts at even strength, which is double what his line mates did, but was relatively quiet overall.

Calle Rosen – C+

Since being taken out of the lineup, he's come back and played well. He's starting to shoot the puck more in this one, and had a nice one-timer in the second period. He has not, however, taken advantage of any of the power play time the staff is giving him, and that may hurt him.

Nikita Zadorov – D+



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Z's shot metrics were solid, and he had a few solid rushes up the ice, one of which was shorthanded and another where MacKinnon's shot was blocked. I felt like he struggled to move the puck out of his own end though, and in a game with very little hitting at all, he was very quiet.

BSN DENVER LOADED: 12.14.2019

1166153 Colorado Avalanche

Francouz brilliant again as Avs claw past Devils

AJ HAEFELE

DECEMBER 13, 2019

While the Avs certainly didn't play their best tonight, they definitely played and when you have a game that counts in the standings, you just hope to walk out with the two points.

That's exactly what the Avs did tonight in a 3-1 win over the New Jersey Devils in a game beset by lethargic play on the ice and frenzied speculation off it.

As the Devils have traversed the continent on their current road trip, star wing and soon-to-be-former Devil Taylor Hall has played continued doing his thing. That ended tonight when Hall, despite participating in warm-ups, was a late scratch from the action and kicked off a whirlwind of trade talk.

With Colorado frequently mentioned as a major contender for Hall's future services, it was natural to wonder if the Avs had pulled the same trick they did with Derick Brassard last year when they traded for him with his current team in town so all he had to do was switch locker rooms.

That ultimately did not happen as the game came and went with no resolution to Hall's situation. It wouldn't be a surprise to see that resolved before the holiday roster freeze next week but, for tonight, it appears everyone can sleep peacefully.

What happened on the ice was nothing short of a showcase of Pavel Francouz's ability to frustrate and shut a team's offense down. Two nights after going 55 minutes until giving up the only goal against, Francouz followed it up with another 55 minutes of shutout hockey.

That goal against made it 2-1 in favor of Colorado as the Avs got goals from Gabe Landeskog in the first period and Valeri Nichushkin in the second period.

It won't count as a high-event game but it certainly didn't have the same intensity of a regular NHL game. It most definitely did not feel like the kind of game the top team in the western conference would be involved in but here we are.

One of the measures of good teams in the NHL is their ability to win without playing their best game. The Avs pulled that trick again tonight but it will very likely not fly next week as they take on the St. Louis Blues in an early-season clash of the titans.

For tonight, though, the only deal completed was Colorado getting two points against a bad New Jersey team. Aesthetics aside, sometimes that's all that matters. And goaltending.

Goaltending always matters.

GAME TAKEAWAYS

When Taylor Hall participated in warm-ups and was then announced as a scratch just minutes before the game began, the entire feeling of the game changed. Was Hall being traded to the Avs? To ANYONE? What was going on? Where was Hall? He wasn't in the press box with the rest of the New Jersey scratches. Where was he? Why was his equipment bag sitting outside of the NJ locker room? I repeat, WHAT WAS GOING ON?

It felt very much like everyone in the building, the two teams included, was distracted from that point on. The press box was buzzing with everyone checking phones, firing off texts, and trying to get ahead of what could be a huge breaking story. The players engaged in an extremely disjointed, half-hearted affair that lacked focus and all intensity. It was mentioned by several people that it felt like a men's league game and it's hard to argue. It was a slog.

The Avs finished this week 2-0-1 on their three-game homestand and you can't argue they played anything more than a "B" game all week. Even their best effort against Philadelphia included a lengthy stretch of Flyers domination in which the Avs just had to survive the surge.

The Avs survived that Flyers surge and tonight's very lethargic overall effort thanks in part to Pavel Francouz's exceptional play. He was nothing short of awesome in denying a New Jersey team that seemed significantly more invested in grabbing two points tonight than the Avs did for most of the game. I don't think we're in the neighborhood of a goalie controversy yet but Francouz certainly has had a strong recent run (even counting the five he gave up against the Flames) and Grubauer has had more of a slow drip of mediocrity after the first month of the season followed by injury issues. We aren't there but if it continues we might get there eventually. Frankie has been awesome.

The Avs got through a week of subpar play but accumulated five of six possible points. The old Avs used to have play near a perfect game to walk out with a win. That a mediocre effort from them beat two NHL clubs this week is a testament to the kind of talented roster they've built.

Mediocre play doesn't win you games in St. Louis against the champs, however, and now that this is behind them, they can begin focusing entirely on a big-time matchup. Well, as big as it gets for December.

Nathan MacKinnon finished with two more points and you barely noticed him tonight. He already has 20 goals and 50 points on the season. It is December 13.

This isn't a space you're reading for personal life stuff but I'm taking advantage of the platform to wish my mom a happy birthday today! She is one of the best people on the face of the planet and has always encouraged me to chase my dreams as passionately as possible. I was extremely lucky to be born her son and I hope she enjoyed an excellent day celebrating how awesome she is.

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1166269 Websites

The Athletic / Flyers' Oskar Lindblom diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma, expected to miss rest of the season



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Charlie O'Connor

Dec 13, 2019

Just two days ago, the talk surrounding the Philadelphia Flyers was their recent run of strong play and whether the winning ways could continue even with multiple key contributors out of the lineup.

On Friday, both the team and the hockey community at large received a devastating reminder that there are far more important things in this world than wins, losses and lineup decisions.

Around 4:30 p.m. ET, Flyers general manager Chuck Fletcher announced that winger Oskar Lindblom, who missed Wednesday's game against the Avalanche with an undisclosed upper-body injury, was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma, a rare form of cancer that usually affects bones.

"Philadelphia Flyers forward Oskar Lindblom has been diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma by leading specialists at the University of Pennsylvania," Fletcher said in a statement. "He will undergo further testing and evaluation next week and begin treatment immediately thereafter. He is not expected to return to play for the remainder of the season. The Flyers will do everything possible to support Oskar and assist him in securing the best care available. Out of respect for Oskar and his family, the team will have no further comment at this time and asks that Oskar be afforded a period of privacy so that he may focus his efforts on his treatment and a return to full health."

Lindblom sat out Monday's practice in Voorhees, N.J., in what the team called a "maintenance day," though he was back on the ice Tuesday and skated with Claude Giroux's power-play unit. However, he did not accompany the Flyers on their trip to Denver, presumably because he was being examined by the doctors in Philadelphia who ultimately made his diagnosis.

As recently as 2:30 p.m. ET on Friday, when the Flyers were finishing up their practice session at the University of Denver before flying to Minneapolis for a game against the Minnesota Wild on Saturday, players and coaches were seemingly not yet aware of the news. In fact, head coach Alain Vigneault was asked after Friday's practice which of his players had surprised him most in his first season coaching in Philadelphia, relative to what he previously knew.

Vigneault's answer, which seems especially heartbreaking in retrospect: Oskar Lindblom.

"A player that I didn't know at all, or very little, was Oskar," he said. "Oskar's turned out to be a tremendous player for us. Power play, penalty killing, five-on-five — it seems guys want to play with him. He plays the right way."

According to the National Cancer Institute, Ewing's sarcoma is most common in children and young adults between the ages of 10 and 25 (Lindblom is 23) and tends to be discovered in a person's bones or in the soft tissue surrounding bones. Lindblom's specific prognosis is impossible to determine absent detailed information regarding the nature of his diagnosis. Understandably, the Flyers have requested privacy for Lindblom as he embarks on treatment options. At the very least, per the team's statement, Lindblom isn't expected to play again this season.

TOGETHER WE ARE #OSKARSTRONG. ❤️
PIC.TWITTER.COM/HX1FVRJQTS

— PHILADELPHIA FLYERS (@NHLFLYERS) DECEMBER 13, 2019

In an increasingly boisterous locker room, Lindblom is more of a quiet presence, but he is immensely popular among his teammates. Surely, the news will strike a group that veteran Kevin Hayes recently called "the tightest team I've ever played with" very hard.

And while the primary focus should remain on Lindblom's health and his path to hopefully achieving remission, the impact of his absence from the ice can't be ignored, either. Lindblom is tied for the team lead with 11 goals and was on pace for a career-best 49-point season. Among Flyers forwards, only Sean Couturier, Giroux and Hayes have averaged more minutes per game this season than Lindblom, which speaks to the immense trust he'd already earned from an experienced NHL coaching staff.

As Vigneault noted, Lindblom is the type of cerebral, hardworking forward who tends to make for an ideal linemate. He had thrived on a line with Couturier this season, driving play at five-on-five to the tune of a 55.67 percent Corsi For percentage and a 55.27 percent expected goals share alongside the Flyers' top center. And among forwards on the team, he ranks fourth in goals above replacement, per Evolving Hockey's metric.

Behind Couturier, Lindblom has arguably turned himself into Philadelphia's most responsible two-way forward, a player who could be expected to improve the results of anyone who skates with him. This season, Lindblom was establishing himself as a key part of the Flyers' future up front. He's not a player who can be fully replaced, though the Flyers will be forced to try. Presumably, youngsters like Joel Farabee and Morgan Frost will now have to take on even larger roles in their rookie seasons.

For now, however, hockey has to be viewed as an afterthought. Hopefully, in time, Lindblom will be able to resume his career and play the game he was born to play. But in the short term, the focus is on a young man now facing the toughest fight of his life, and the impact that fight will have on him and his family.

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1166270 Websites

The Athletic / Bourne: Amid the busy prep life of a hockey coach, there is a rare and special moment of tranquility

Justin Bourne

Dec 13, 2019

The hockey season is a grind. You've heard it before, I've typed it before, that's not exactly new information. But it bears repeating because it shapes so much of how and why hockey teams operate the way they do.

I felt it as a player, but far more as a part of a coaching staff. During my time as a video coach with Sheldon Keefe and the Toronto Marlies, my job involved taking care of the many preparation-based details for our staff, which meant constantly looking ahead at the schedule.

What's tough is, you can never get too far ahead, which means you can never really relax. Yes, I could put together player and systems scout sheets for our Friday opponent early in the week, but that team almost certainly plays once or twice that week, and on Friday you'll want to know what they're doing now, not what they did a few games



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ago. You'll want to know their most recent lines, power play units, penalty kill forecheck, and all those other fine details.

There are just so many facets of your opponent's game to worry about, and that's before you even get to your own team. With your own group, it's: Who's hot and who's cold, who needs to see extra video, who needs extra skills work, what off-ice personnel issues need sorting out? How do we like our lines and pairs? How about planning practice each day, what's that going to look like? And all of that is divorced from the other things the head coach and GM would worry about — call-ups and send downs, injuries, contracts and opportunities and so much more. Travel, well, that takes time too.

Rare are there moments between 6 a.m. and at least 2 p.m. on practice days where much relaxation is found, and rarer it still on game day outside the midday nap window, which some coaches work through. It's not that preparing a team for a game is that hard. It's that the situations, internal and external, change daily and you're constantly steaming toward the next puck drop with the last result barely in the rearview. You're a hamster in the wheel.

These are not complaints, or to hold those up within the game as some sort of wizards, it's just ... that's the reality of the life. What's next, what's next, what's next. Nobody's sitting around playing Candy Crush on their phone just waiting for the game to begin. That's why I wrote this, a couple years back, about why making major systems changes can be so hard. When exactly is that supposed to be decided on, then taught, and taught well enough to have everyone on the same page?

But there is a window, a very special window when coaches get to look up from the mayhem and exhale. It's on game day, after the team goes out for warmup and before the final pre-game meetings. And what a glorious time it is.

I was reminded of this a few days ago when I saw Keefe being interviewed by Shawn McKenzie before a game, which ran somewhere during what would have been that precious window. A chat with McKenzie confirmed that, yes, that interview did take place outside the coach's special exhale window (which would be preferred by all), and that it was taped. It would be hard for a coach to give up those valued pre-game breaths, though sometimes necessity dictates it happen.

The busiest time of day for pro coaches is between 3 and 5:10 p.m. (or so) on game day. With the Marlies, I'd have written up the times in the dressing room of our final meetings that day (for the players), which are more or less the daily final exams for the coaches. Teams break this up differently (in terms of what is done when), but you'll want to look at your team at 5v5 and what your group is focused on, you'll want to look at their team, you'll want a PP meeting, and a PK meeting. Good form from coaches dictates that these meetings don't happen all at once — players are shown clips and talked to in chunks throughout the lead-up to the game, so they don't gloss over and tune out.

So that final rush is the culmination of everything the staff has worked on since the previous final buzzer sounded. What's important to show them about us and them, what changes are we making, do we have the right clips and concepts to give them a winning plan tonight?

When those meetings end, usually somewhere in the mid 5 p.m. hour (before a 7 p.m. puck drop), there's often some work to clean up. Sometimes a final presentation after warmup, sometimes getting a bite in before the game, but at some point — some strange, special point — the coaches can all finally look around and exhale.

For those of you who've taken exams of any kind that meant a great deal to you, you understand the feeling of — at some point, you've done all you can do, and all that's left is to wait for the test to come and the results will fall as they will. The scope of big tests, like athletic competitions, is too vast to cram for. If you haven't put in the work well early, you'll be wildly underprepared, and for those who have, there's no point in some last-minute grind. You've done what you can.

In my experience, that was the coolest part of the whole process. The reminder that, oh yeah, this is actually just a hockey game, and that game will be decided between the players in the room. It's out of our hands now (at least, for the video coach it is). You can take a moment to appreciate all you've done, where you are, and you sit there with hope most nights. It's exciting.

So the next time you see a coach doing a pre-game interview, know you're either seeing someone in the midst of their busiest window (if it's taped), or about to get their purest moment of relaxation of the day. They are few and far between, which means in the midst of a pro hockey schedule, those minutes are precious, and valued dearly.

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The Athletic / Duhatschek Notebook: What's behind NHL defencemen scoring woes, why DeBoer to Seattle makes sense

Eric Duhatschek

Dec 13, 2019

We here at The Athletic love making predictions — and no, it isn't just because we also enjoy delivering constant mea culpas for the ones we get wrong (even if once in a while we do).

So, for example, at the start of the season, we made a lot of picks involving team placement and individual award winners, and some of us even weighed in on how we saw the world of fantasy hockey unfold.

One question we didn't discuss, however, was: Which NHL defencemen will score the most goals this season?

But if we did, I can guarantee you my answer would have been either the Sharks' Brent Burns or the Wild's Matt Dumba. The rationale would have been this: Burns led NHL defencemen in scoring last season with 83 points, which included 16 goals. In all, Burns had scored 57 goals over a three-year span and has a blazing shot which he gets to the net better than anyone else. Last year, 300 of them got to the net.

Dumba, meanwhile, was limited by injury to only 32 games a year ago, but in that span, he still cracked double digits in goals (12), which prorated over the course of a full season, would have given him 30 and made him the runaway league leader. (As it was, the Maple Leafs' Morgan Rielly topped the defensive goal-scoring charts a year ago with 20).

Though he didn't crack the top 30 in overall points a season ago, the Hurricanes' Dougie Hamilton was No. 2 in goals with 18, followed by the Flames' Mark Giordano and the Blackhawks' Erik Gustafsson next at 17 apiece.



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The 2019-20 NHL season has featured its usual surprises and disappointments, but one of the more puzzling developments is how few of the game's usually reliable goal-scoring defencemen have met their expected production.

Currently, the league leader is the Capitals' John Carlson, who is leading the league in both goals (12) and points (45) by a defenceman. Two others are in double digits – Hamilton (11) and the Canadiens' Shea Weber (10), while Avalanche rookie sensation Cale Makar is at eight goals in 28 games.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have this:

Rielly has three in his first 33 games, and is on pace for single digits. Tyson Barrie, his defence partner for the moment, who had 59 points in 78 games for the Avalanche last season, isn't even in the top 30 of defensive scorers at the moment. He has three goals and 13 points in 33 games.

Gustafsson also has just three. Giordano has four.

The Coyotes' Oliver Ekman-Larsson, who had 14 goals last season, has just two right now. PK Subban, who had nine goals in 63 games for the Predators last season, and 16 the year before, also has just two in 30 games – and five points.

Over a three-year span between the 2015 and 2017 seasons, Justin Faulk – then with Carolina – scored 15, 16 and 17 goals respectively. This year, playing for the Blues, he has just one goal in 33 games (and eight points overall).

Dumba, who even spoke in the preseason about possibly getting to 30 goals, has three in 32 games, and nine points overall.

But Burns may be the most puzzling case study of all.

He was a point-a-game player through 21 games, but is immersed in a deathly slump in which he's now gone 10 games without registering a single point. His struggles, and those of fellow defenceman Erik Karlsson, contributed to the Sharks' decision to part ways with coach Peter DeBoer Wednesday night.

Instructively, when the Sharks issued their statement about why DeBoer was out and Bob Boughner was coming in as his replacement, they noted how Burns scored 29 goals back when Boughner was on staff as an assistant coach. Clearly, they think he can be the Brent Burns whisperer – someone who can him back on track. It's worth noting that on Thursday night, in Boughner's debut behind the Sharks' bench, Burns received a whopping 27 minutes and 23 seconds of ice time – way up from the minutes he received in his three previous games, in one of which he slipped below 20 minutes (19:57 versus the Tampa Bay Lightning). That's obviously Priority No. 1 as the Sharks try to salvage a season that's gone badly off the rails.

Burns has occasionally slipped into these funks before, but with him, if he isn't producing offence, he probably isn't going to help you with his defensive awareness (currently a plus-minus rating of -23).

So, as Marvin Gaye once sang, what's going on?

Giordano, the reigning Norris Trophy winner, said he'd actually been crunching the goal-scoring numbers himself to see if he could detect a pattern – because he too was aware of how many of his peers are not finding the back of the net with the usual frequency.

"To be honest, the looks off the rush aren't there as much as they were because of the way teams back pressure," said Giordano.

"Teams are really pushing for their forwards to get back and work on transition going the other way. Guys will get assists.

"But when I thought that, then I looked at Carlson in Washington and he's scoring all the time."

Giordano started reviewing tape of the Capitals' games specifically to try and see what Carlson was doing offensively that was leading to so much success.

"Watching Carlson, it's hard to tell because he's scoring in all different ways, not just one way," Giordano said. "I just feel the Grade-A chances off the rush aren't there anymore. Hopefully, it'll change and we'll all start putting the puck in the net a little more. But playing defence is still the No. 1 priority for all of us – and then hopefully, we can just go from there."

Giordano also noted that sometimes, a defenceman's goal-scoring production is tied to a team's power-play performance – and whether the team was "feeling" it with the man advantage.

This year's league leaders in power-play goals by a defenceman are the Kings' Drew Doughty and the Flyers' Ivan Provorov, with four apiece. There are three others with three power-play goals and a large group with two. Overall, Victor Hedman is tops in defensive PP points with 16.

Carlson, astonishingly, has just 14 – meaning 31 of his 45 points have come at even-strength.

"A lot of offensive production depends upon the power play," said Giordano. "When your power play is feeling it, then it rolls into your five-on-five game. Even if you don't score, but you're feeling it, it helps (your confidence). But this year, we haven't really been feeling it on the power play, so it hasn't rolled over. But that can be a big part of it."

The (possibly) unprecedented Calder Trophy race

Now, some of what we're seeing may simply be a changing of the defensive guard, as three rookie defencemen (Makar, Quinn Hughes in Vancouver and Adam Fox in New York) have come into the league and produced eye-popping numbers.

Currently, all three are in the top five in rookie scoring – Makar at 28 points, Hughes at 24 and Fox at 16 – a statistic that led me to do a little digging to see if, in the post-expansion NHL, there was ever a year in which all three Calder finalists were defencemen.

The answer is no.

Bobby Orr won the 1967 Calder in the last year of the Original Six. Since then, only eight defencemen have earned rookie of the year honours – Aaron Ekblad in 2015, the most recent. Only twice since 1950 have defencemen finished 1-2 in the Calder balloting. In Orr's year, Ed Van Impe was the runner-up and in 1963, Kent Douglas edged Doug Barkley for the award.

And it isn't just those three rookies putting up big offensive numbers. Among the defensive goal-scoring leaders this season are five youngsters, all tied with seven goals: Provorov, Miro Heiskanen (Dallas), Filip Hronek (Detroit), Jakob Chychrun (Arizona) and Tony DeAngelo (Rangers).

Maple Leafs veteran forward Jason Spezza came into the NHL in 2002, back when bigger was still considered better on defence.

Last season, Spezza played for Dallas during Heiskanen's rookie year, where the Finn put up 12 goals and 33 points and averaged 23:06 minutes per night. This year, Heiskanen is the Stars' ice-time leader at 24:50 per night. He just turned 20 this past July.

"I don't think they would even trust a young defender to play those types of minutes back in the day," said Spezza. "Now, I played with



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Miro Heiskanen last year and he can be your first defenceman. And these kids are doing the same thing. I haven't seen Fox yet, but Makar and Hughes, they're special players."

"The evolution of the defenceman now is crazy – from what it was 10 years ago to what it is today," Giordano added. "It's a small, speedy skilled guy – and if you can't move the puck, it's hard to play now. Because forwards are so quick, they want the puck right away and they want you to be able to get it to them quick and jump in the rush.

"I look at Colorado's D. They're one of the best and their top two guys are probably (Samuel) Girard and Makar. They literally play on the offensive blue line like Johnny (Gaudreau) plays all over the ice with the puck. That's how they handle it. It's impressive to see. And it's definitely changed."

Barrie played with Makar last year in Colorado and said he could attest to his off-the-charts skill set and vision.

"I can speak first-hand to Cale. He was my (Calder) pick before the season. He's a special player," Barrie said. "And we saw Hughes last game and he seems kind of the same sort of deal. It might just be a coincidence that there's three of them this year – but it's good to see, young offensive defencemen having success.

"Fans like to see goals. They pay to see offence. So sometimes defencemen go a bit under the radar, but right now these young guys are getting some attention and that's great for the game and great for young kids growing up playing defence."

But Giordano also interjected a cautionary note, suggesting that you couldn't rely exclusively on small and fleet players on your blue line because the evidence suggests when you get to the playoffs, you need a little size and muscle there too.

"St. Louis, the team that's won most recently, if you look at their D – and I was looking at it the other day – they have some big, heavy, guys that can skate and move the puck, but they don't take high risks," said Giordano. "So, there's a balance you want. You still need the hard, heavy D-man. As good as Washington is, they're a heavy team. I think Boston's a heavy team. And I think they're the best teams and there's a balance that you need. Even Colorado has (Ian) Cole and (Erik) Johnson back there. You really need that mix still."

Spezza, who is 36 now, has had to evolve his own game in order to keep up in the NHL's rapidly changing world.

Does he use his size (6-foot-3, 220 pounds) more nowadays, to outmuscle the new defensive guard?

"I try to outthink them," Spezza said with a laugh, "because you can't beat 'em in a foot race."

What next for Peter?

My first thought after the Sharks dismissed Peter DeBoer went immediately to Seattle and the new expansion franchise set to begin play in 2021. Could DeBoer be their answer behind the bench to Gerard Gallant, who was the Vegas Golden Knights' first coaching hire?

You remember how all that played out. The year before Vegas came into the league, the Panthers controversially fired Gallant in December 2016 after he'd overseen the best regular-season result in franchise history (103 points). Vegas said thank you very much and scooped up Gallant the following April.

From there, the Golden Knights went all the way to the Stanley Cup final in their first season and Gallant was the runaway winner of the Jack Adams Award as the NHL's coach of the year.

Now Seattle isn't set to start play until the fall of 2021, and so getting a coach in place soon is probably a low priority.

On the other hand, getting the right coach in place may well be their next most significant hire, after bringing aboard Ron Francis as the team's general manager this past July.

At the time, Francis said he would wait on the coaching search because coaching was a volatile profession and that ultimately, the first coach employed by Seattle might be someone who was currently under contract to someone else.

That could end up being a prophetic observation.

What a stretch it has been for the NHL's coaching fraternity – five gone in a 21-day span that began when the Maple Leafs fired Mike Babcock back on Nov. 20.

Babcock was the first coaching domino to fall. Since then, the Devils fired John Hynes; the Flames accepted the resignation of Bill Peters; the Stars fired Jim Montgomery, and now the Sharks have parted ways with DeBoer.

It's a sad sign of the times that the Sharks had to stress that the DeBoer dismissal was for hockey reasons only.

Nor did San Jose get the usual first-night bump associated with putting a new face behind the bench. In their first game under Boughner, the Sharks held a 3-2 third-period lead at home to the Rangers and then gave up four consecutive goals to lose the game. So, there's still work to be done.

DeBoer, meanwhile, was in his 12th season as an NHL head coach – three with the Panthers, four with the Devils, and he was two months into his fifth season with San Jose. In the arc of his NHL career, DeBoer got two teams to the Stanley Cup final – the Devils in 2012 and the Sharks in 2016 – but ended up on the losing side both times.

Organizationally, the Sharks have been a model of stability since Doug Wilson took over as general manager in 2003. Wilson had never made an in-season coaching change before this one, a noteworthy shift in his usual operating approach. But Wilson said he felt the team needed to hear a new voice.

Once upon a time, I didn't believe in the theory that every coach has a shelf life that eventually expires, but my thinking has changed on that.

No matter how well-spoken you may be, there are only so many different ways to frame the same essential coaching principles. Eventually, players tune out. Eventually, they need to hear a different voice – even if that different voice isn't really shifting things around all that much.

It doesn't change the fact that DeBoer is an accomplished coach. Of the five that have been handed their walking papers this year, he is the one I believe is most suited to go to Seattle and run an expansion team.

For starters, DeBoer has an excellent record when he is the new voice that players are hearing. In Florida, for example, the Panthers went 41-30-11 in his first year behind the bench. In that long stretch of playoff futility, it was the closest they came to making the postseason. They finished ninth. In New Jersey, the Devils were 48-28-6 in DeBoer's first season and made it to the Stanley Cup final. In San Jose, the Sharks were 46-30-6 in his first season, also making it to the final.



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Usually, when trying to predict a team's possible hiring practices, you look for threads that might link an unemployed coach to a new front office.

Though I can't see a direct connection to Francis, DeBoer's best friend in hockey is the Jets coach Paul Maurice. Maurice and Francis overlapped for years in Carolina. In fact, Francis's very limited time behind an NHL bench began in December 2008 when he joined Maurice's staff as an associate coach after spending the first two years of his post-retirement career as the Hurricanes' director of player development and assistant GM. Some are connecting the dots there, anticipating that if Maurice was looking for a new opportunity down the road, Francis would positively leap at the opportunity to hire him for Seattle. And while that may be really logical, at this stage, that's too speculative for me.

But one thing is for certain.

Due diligence will become increasingly important with every coaching hire going forward – and the good news for Francis is that he'll be able to do a thorough vetting of DeBoer's credentials through people he knows and trusts. So that's where I'll put my money: That once things settle down for DeBoer and he's ready to work again, Seattle could be a great opportunity – and maybe the sort of intriguing professional challenge he'll seek to cap his career.

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The Athletic / Inside Tim Thomas' complicated return to the spotlight: 'There was a time period, yeah, where I hated the game'

Craig Custance

Dec 13, 2019

WASHINGTON D.C. – It's 3:40 p.m. on Thursday afternoon and Tim Thomas is sitting on a chair, surrounded by his family for a quick photo shoot. His wife, Melissa, is behind him. Their three kids are next to her.

He makes a joke about how it feels like sitting on a throne, and laughs. The photographer starts snapping pictures while he holds a plaque listing all the accomplishments that led him to this honor. Winning the Conn Smythe at the age of 37 after his incredible performance in the 2011 playoffs, the oldest player in NHL history to earn that award. Leading Vermont to its first trip to the NCAA Frozen Four in 1996. A silver medal for Team USA in the 2010 Winter Olympics.

With the pictures finished, he's asked to autograph a few jerseys on a nearby table. And soon, for a few minutes, he leaves his family behind, walks down a hallway at the Marriott Marquis, toward another room filled with media, waiting to talk to him in person for the first time since he retired. In that moment, there aren't many people in the world who truly understand the depths of the pain he's suffered through in the past five years. Some close friends. The family members a few feet away.

That would change. Thomas walked into a line of cameras, a group of reporters moving out of the way to clear space for him. One simple question began to unearth the story he wasn't sure he was ready to tell. And maybe he wasn't.

Had you been to a game since you retired? An NHL game?

"No," Thomas answered.

And then he shared why.

It's 6:47 p.m. on Wednesday and Tim Thomas is standing quietly by himself, his arms crossed in front of him. He's wearing a gray suit, a blue dress shirt and black shoes. He's at a reception in his honor, along with the rest of the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame Class of 2019 that includes Neal Henderson, Brian Gionta, Krissy Wendell and Gary Bettman. The Washington Wizards practice court at Capital One Arena has been converted into a reception area, filled with tables that each contain a single candle, hockey puck and bottle of wine.

Thomas is asked to wait for a photo with the group and patiently obliges. Quietly, by himself. Eventually, Gionta wanders over, shakes his hand and asks the question we've all been wondering: "What are you up to these days?"

On April 25, 2014, Thomas played in his last game in the NHL, a playoff loss with the Dallas Stars to the Anaheim Ducks. With 5:22 remaining in that game, he made the final save of his NHL career, stopping a slapshot from Ducks defenseman Mark Fistric. Knowing what we know now, it's pretty amazing that he kept going after that. He agreed to play for Team USA at the World Championships in Belarus where he was the starting goalie for the Americans. It didn't go particularly well, with Team USA finishing sixth and Thomas finishing with an .869 save percentage.

And then he disappeared.

Teammates didn't hear from him. Phone numbers that he had during his playing career didn't work. You'd hear rumors but people were mostly just guessing. Maybe he had some land in Colorado. Maybe he returned to rural Michigan. There always seemed to be a bunker joke that went along with it because of the well-publicized political views that famously led to him skipping a White House visit with the Bruins in 2012. But mostly, it was just people filling in the blanks with their imagination.

Nobody knew he had to leave Colorado because the altitude was too high for his symptoms. That he had to leave Idaho because it wasn't a fit for his family. That he found his time in Florida positive because he could walk barefoot on the beach, quiet solitude that helped his recovery. That he was now in Arizona, still searching for answers.

When he was gathered outside the Capital One ice with his fellow Hall inductees on Wednesday night, it was the closest he'd come to NHL ice since he left. In this hallway, the bass of pregame music was felt. You could hear the crowd noise. When a couple trainers with the Bruins spotted him, they came over and gave a big hug.

There were smiles all around when the Capitals visiting dressing room attendants spotted Thomas. These are the guys who know everybody on opposing teams. They're the ones who hustle to get the room cleared out, the bags packed and everything taken care of in those short windows before and after games.

Thomas greets them with a huge smile. One jokingly invites him to play on his beer league men's team. It needs a goalie. Thomas smiles.

Eventually, Thomas and his fellow inductees are lined up against the wall and given the drill for the ceremonial puck drop. They're each handed a puck to drop after they walk out onto the ice along the red carpet.



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Thomas flips his around in his hand, kind of like you see a goalie do in his glove after making a save. If it's the first time he's touched a puck in years, it wouldn't be surprising. The group is asked if they've ever dropped a puck before a game like this. The others share a story or two but Thomas just shakes his head. He doesn't think he has.

"Come on my lovely Hall of Famers," the woman coordinating the puck drop announces, and they follow her to the ice.

The group is introduced to the Capitals fans eagerly waiting this showdown with the Bruins. There are cheers when Thomas is introduced, with at least one Bruins fans heard over the cheer shouting a loud, "Tiiimmmmy."

The Bruins bench tap their sticks when Thomas is introduced. Brad Marchand skates over for a quick word.

"Just (to) tell him, happy for him and congrats," Marchand said after the game. "It was good to see him again. It's been a long time. He deserves it. He was a great player, had a great career. It's always fun to see guys you've played with before. He looks like he's lost a little weight. So he's looking good. Good to see him again."

Patrice Bergeron is asked about Thomas.

"I haven't seen him in a long, long time," Bergeron said. "It was great to see him. Obviously, congratulated him on a well-deserved honor. The impact that he's had for us with the Bruins in that Cup run is something that's going to be remembered for a long, long time."

In the stands, a Bruins fan from Longmeadow, Massachusetts, in a Tim Thomas Winter Classic jersey was pleasantly surprised to see Thomas back in public. Alec Walt had no idea Thomas was going to be in the building.

His dad was at that 2010 Winter Classic game in Fenway Park and bought the jersey Walt is wearing now. In that outdoor game, the Bruins rallied to beat the Flyers with late goals from Mark Recchi and Marco Sturm. Thomas was nearly perfect, stopping 24 of 25 shots to get the win. After the game, Thomas was named to the U.S. Olympic team.

It seems like a lifetime ago.

Walt has nothing but positive memories about Thomas, even if it ended less than perfectly between the Bruins and their star goalie. Thomas won a ton of huge games for the Bruins but one of the first things Walt mentions is the time the 5-foot-11 Thomas challenged the 6-foot-3 Carey Price to a fight at center ice. Fans loved Thomas because he fought for everything he got. He was a competitor. He was scrappy. Maybe that moment with Price captured it more than any.

That Thomas disappeared from public view after playing didn't diminish those memories for Walt.

"I don't really care. He won us a Cup," he said during a break in play of the game. "He's funny. He fought a goalie at center ice. If he wanted a couple years to hide out, I don't really care. I love seeing Tim Thomas."

Tim Thomas waits behind the scenes with the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame Class of 2019 before dropping the puck at Wednesday's Capitals game against the Bruins. (Craig Custance/The Athletic)

Thomas remembers vividly the moment it happened. When his life changed forever. It was 2013 during warmups of an early December game for the Florida Panthers when he got hit and, now knows, suffered a concussion. Until then, his comeback after a year off from hockey was going pretty well. Well enough that scouts for USA

Hockey were in attendance that game to get a viewing for a potential roster spot in the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, a roster Thomas really wanted to make.

But the morning after that game, everything was off.

"I couldn't decide what I wanted to eat, where I wanted to go," he said. "I couldn't plan a schedule. I survived following the team schedule the rest of the year and just made it through the season."

One year after he stopped playing he got a CereScan on his brain, an analysis people receive when they're dealing with symptoms of traumatic brain injury. When the results came back both Thomas' wife and daughter wept. According to these test results, two-thirds of his brain was getting less than five percent blood flow. The other third was averaging 50 percent.

He had a hard time processing it. He had a hard time processing anything. Even now, the first couple hours of his mornings consist of him taking time to reorder everything in his head, making a list of what he has to do that day and try to work through it.

"You're seeing your family suffer because you're suffering but you can't do anything about it and you can't even communicate – I couldn't communicate with anybody for a few years," Thomas said. "I didn't call my dad. I didn't talk to anybody. There was a time period, yeah, where I hated the game."

In those moments all the glory that comes with hockey – the name etched into the Stanley Cup, the Olympic medal, the cheering crowds – it didn't seem worth it. Not if he couldn't communicate with his family.

Too often for former hockey players, the thoughts get dark. The most tragic part of these brain injuries are the lives that end too soon. Some get addicted to pain killers or other drugs. Others look for any way out.

Those suicidal thoughts entered Thomas' mind. But there was always a barrier there when things got too dark. Something stopping him. He didn't have the hockey world by his side. He'd removed himself. But he had his family and he leaned on them.

"My wife, a lot," Thomas said. "My brother stepped up. My mom. My kids. That's what kept me going."

Reading Ken Dryden's book, "Game Change," helped him and his family process what he was going through. The life and death of Steve Montador, who was diagnosed with CTE after he died, is told in those pages. It helped explain a lot for Thomas.

He continued to dive into research. That relentless competitive drive that carried him from Flint, Michigan, to hockey's highest peaks, was now being funneled into finding a solution. He'd text with his former goalie coach in Dallas and friend Mike Valley, one of the few people in the hockey world who knew what was going on. When Thomas found an interesting article on brain injuries or a clue on how to deal with the symptoms, he'd text it over to Valley. Valley would do the same back.

"All I've done is try to support him as a friend and offer him any resources I could," Valley said. "It's nice that he's sharing his story. Tim Thomas was a fantastic goalie and now a USA Hockey Hall of Famer. People deserve to hear his story."

Valley adds one more thought.

"I tell you what, he is an incredible, intelligent human being," Valley said. "This guy thinks at a level that is so far deeper than I know. It's awesome to have conversations with him."



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During his conversation with the media on Thursday, you got a hint of that. You could almost see him working through the contradictions of his emotions that came with his return to the spotlight. Yes, hockey took a lot away from him during the darkest moments. But it gave him so much too. He saw the world. He formed lifetime friendships.

"I've struggled mightily with how do I process the experience that I've been through and rectify with the love of the game that I had my whole life until I crashed," he said. "My rebound effect was like, this wasn't worth it. That's where I was then. Where I am today is past that. I ended up learning so many lessons out of the experience. It brought me tighter with my family. It taught me a value for life and a value for my brain that I've never had before. And I have appreciation for everything that I never had before. I don't regret anything."

It's 9:50 p.m. on Thursday and Tim Thomas is on stage. Highlights of his career have been shown. The diving saves. The unorthodox style that no goalie coach would ever try to teach. A video of Martin St. Louis, Thomas' teammate at Vermont and opponent in the NHL, is shown and it captures so much of Thomas' personality from his playing days. A personality many of the people in this ballroom haven't seen in years.

St. Louis explains there would be times in games where Thomas would make a save, an incredible save, and behind that mask you'd see a huge smile. He loved it out there. He loved that competition.

There's a standing ovation for Thomas when his name is called and it's clear fairly quickly his speech isn't going to be as lengthy as the others. A night like this is a chance for the person being honored to take time and walk through the memories. To share stories of teammates, coaches and those special accomplishments that led them to this stage.

For Thomas, it's all a little more complicated. If he hadn't received this honor, chances are we wouldn't be hearing from him. The spotlight was back on him and you get the sense he still needed time to work through all this.

"Um. I don't have a lot to say in comparison to some of the other people that talked tonight. It was great listening to you guys and your stories," Thomas says, turning to the others on stage with him. "I've had a hard time coming up with what I'm going to say for this, so I'm just going to get through it."

He uses this time mostly to say thanks. He doesn't share details of his struggles with the people in that room. He doesn't relive the glory days either. He pauses for a second when addressing his family, the only hint in this speech of what he's been dealing with.

"Special thanks for being there for me, over the last few years too," he said.

Without naming names, he runs through all the people who helped him along the way. Teammates, coaches, trainers, support staff, everybody at the rink. Then he stops and it goes quiet. Ten seconds of silence tick away. He apologizes and explains this isn't much fun for him but he'll get through it because he wants this to be a celebration. For him, for everyone else being honored.

So he cuts right to the finish.

"I guess, I'm going to end with thank you," Thomas said. "Because that's all I got."

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The Athletic / History Lesson: Can Alex Ovechkin name the top 20 goalies he's scored on the most?

Craig Custance

Dec 13, 2019

WASHINGTON D.C. – At the moment the conversation took place, Alex Ovechkin was sitting at 679 career regular season goals. He's got another 65 in the playoffs and the numbers are only going to get more impressive from here.

Along the way, he's scored on 139 different goalies. Just looking at that list in itself is a reminder of just how long his dominance as a goal scorer has lasted. Names like Rick DiPietro, Nikolai Khabibulin, Ed Belfour and Dominik Hasek are among the many, many victims.

But there's a group of goalies at the top of the list that he's been terrorizing for a long time. Great goalies, at that.

So the pitch was made to put him to the test: How many of the top 20 goalies he's scored on could he name? Turns out, a lot. With a little help from his good friends.

On Wednesday morning, we chatted by his locker. I had the full list in my hand and shared the challenge with him.

Here's the transcript:

Custance: Alright, let's see. How many of these 20 can you name?

Ovechkin: Lehtonen.

Custance: Yup. Kari Lehtonen is No. 4 overall (22 goals). Man, you haven't played Kari in years. That's crazy.

Ovechkin: Lehtonen. Lundqvist.

Custance: Check. Check. Henrik Lundqvist is tied for No. 1 (37 goals).

Ovechkin: Lundqvist is No. 1. Lehtonen is No. 4.

Custance: I'll start checking the boxes.

Ovechkin: Third one, I think, who (did I) play most? Tampa. Florida. Luongo? No, not Luongo.

Custance: Hold on. Roberto Luongo is on there. He's on the list. Nine goals on Luongo.

Ovechkin: I'm thinking about, OK, so the teams we played. Atlanta is over there. Pavelec?

Custance: Yup. 18 goals on Ondrej Pavelec. He's No. 7. Man, you lit up the Thrashers for a long time.

Ovechkin: Yeah. Winnipeg and Thrashers. Who was the Tampa Bay goalie?

Custance: You're thinking through this the right way.

Ovechkin: What's the guy from – he got traded to Dallas.

Custance: I'll give you that one. Ben Bishop. Check. You scored 10 goals on him.

Ovechkin: Ummmm. Who else? I don't think (Martin) Brodeur, that I've scored lots of goals on Brodeur.



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Custance: No.

Ovechkin: Tim Thomas.

Custance: Check. Ten goals on Tim. He's going into the Hall tomorrow. The USA Hockey Hall of Fame.

Ovechkin: Oh, really?

Custance: Yeah.

Ovechkin: Nice. Oh yeah, that's true. Yeah. So much stuff is going on.

Custance: There's a lot going on right now.

Ovechkin: Ummm, OK. Tampa Bay. Done. Florida, ummm ...

Custance: I wouldn't say you're done with Tampa Bay.

Ovechkin: Vasilevskiy?

Custance: Andrei Vasilevskiy. He's No. 10. You have 13 goals on him.

Ovechkin: Atlanta. Done. Buffalo, no. Not really ...

Custance: Hmmm. Maybe?

Ovechkin: Lehner? Miller! Miller. Ryan Miller.

Custance: Ryan Miller. He's high on the list. Ryan Miller is at No. 6 with 19 goals on him.

Ovechkin: Ummm. Who else?

Evgeny Kuznetsov listens in as he starts taking off equipment at his dressing room stall. He says a few words to Ovechkin in Russian, sparking his memory.

Ovechkin: Fleury. Yeah. He's up there.

Custance: Yes. Marc-Andre Fleury is tied at No. 1 with Henrik Lundqvist. Lots of goals on Marc-Andre (37).

Ovechkin: Lundqvist, done. Fleury, done. Thomas, done.

Unidentified Caps teammate from other side of the room: Who has been in the league a long time?

Kuznetsov: Kari Lehtonen?

Custance: Yeah, Kari was four overall.

Kuznetsov: Four overall.

Teammate: Good goalie, too.

Custance: I love Kari. He's a great dude, too. You used to own him though. You ever talk to him about it?

Ovechkin: No. (Asks Kuznetsov a question in Russian)

Custance: I might need you to translate.

Kuznetsov: Capitals VP of communications Sergey Kocharov: He's asking him for help.

Custance: Stay in the division. I'll give you a hint. Think of the old Southeast days.

Ovechkin: Ward. Carolina.

Custance: Yup. Cam Ward. 19 goals against him. He was No. 5.

Ovechkin: (thinking) Hmmmm, buh, buh, buh ...

Tom Wilson: What's going on here?

Custance: We're seeing if he can name the top 20 goalies he's scored on in his career. He's halfway there.

Ovechkin: Halfway there.

Custance: You can help out.

Kuznetsov: Is Evgeni Nabokov on there?

Ovechkin: No.

Custance: He's tied for 20th. We'll count it. There's a huge group of guys you've scored eight times on. We'll give you that one. He's been out of the league a while.

Ovechkin: He was in San Jose.

Custance: How did you score so many on him?

Kuznetsov: And Islanders. Islanders.

Ovechkin: He was on the Islanders, as well. And Tampa Bay, as well.

Kuznetsov: Is Vokoun on there? Tomas Vokoun.

Custance: No.

Ovechkin: Yeah, Vokoun. No?'

Custance: He's tied with that group at the bottom. I can only give you one of them.

Ovechkin: Oh, OK.

Kocharov: You're missing a big one there.

Ovechkin: Missing a big one?

Custance: And there's a Russian missing.

Kocharov: All-Star. Olympian.

Ovechkin: Olympian? Hasek?

Kuznetsov: Carey Price!

Ovechkin: Carey Price. He's there?

Kocharov: No. 3.

Custance: Carey Price – you had 24 goals against. No. 3 overall.

Ovechkin: Hmmmm. What's the goalie – oh, (Jaroslav) Halak?

Custance: No. Oh wait, you're right. He's there. No. 14.

Ovechkin: Yeah!

Custance: Nice.

Ovechkin: See? I think I'm done. Show me the list.

Kuznetsov: Give me a chance, I'll finish.

Custance: You can get one more, there's a Russian. In Florida now.

Kuznetsov: Bob! Bob!

Ovechkin: (Sergei) Bobrovsky.

(Ovechkin gets up to look at the goalies left on the list)

Custance: Alright. You missed Devan Dubnyk.

Ovechkin: Duby. Yeah. Minnesota. I scored lots of goals.

Custance: Steve Mason.

Ovechkin: Oh my, yeah. Long time ago.



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Custance: A lot of these guys are.

Custance: Brian Elliott.

Ovechkin: Craig Anderson.

Custance: Was Elliott from his Ottawa days, maybe?

Ovechkin: Elliott? No. St. Louis.

Custance: Craig Anderson (nine goals). Frederik Andersen (nine goals). Matt Murray (nine goals).

Ovechkin: Oh yeah, Matt Murray.

Custance: You could have gotten there.

Ovechkin: Yeah, I would have gotten it.

The Athletic LOADED: 12.14.2019

1166274 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Gauthier deals with life on the bubble: 'It sucks not playing'

Luke Fox

December 13, 2019, 6:04 PM

EDMONTON — In a competitive arena, every feel-good redemption story has its sad shadow.

Such is life in the NHL, where roster spots and salary allotment are finite. There's only so much ice to be shared.

One man's opportunity comes at another's expense.

So, when we stopped Frederik Gauthier walking out of the Toronto Maple Leafs dressing room after a skate at the Saddledome Thursday — last man off the ice, last man out the showers — the player told us how he really felt about sitting out four consecutive games after excelling in the first 29.

"Honestly, it sucks to be scratched," Gauthier said. "I felt like things were going well, things were going my way."

Indeed, they were.

As Mike Babcock's only fixture on the fourth line, the 24-year-old Gauthier — a late-blooming organizational project since being drafted late in the first round of 2013 — had been on pace for career highs in games played, ice time, shots and goals.

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After finding the twine twice in the club's opening four contests, Gauthier posted a photo of himself in gleeful celebration on Instagram, hashtagging the pic with the self-deprecating "#ontheroadto50."

Shoot for the stars.

The eye test revealed a faster, smarter, more aggressive pivot, one confident in his simple, blue-collar assignments: win D-zone draws, drive hard on the forecheck, finish your shift in the bad guys' end, and please don't get scored on.

The underlying numbers shaped nice, too. Gauthier's Corsi had never been higher (47%) despite the fact his offensive-zone starts had never been scarcer (21.2%).

Tasked with naming the Leafs' most-improved player for our quarter-mark report, we seriously considered Gauthier before naming Justin Holl.

Everything was coming up Goat... until, suddenly, he got led back to the barn.

Once Sheldon Keefe took the helm, the more vocal and versatile Jason Spezza became the club's go-to 4C.

Called-up Marlies Pontus Aberg, Nic Petan and Pierre Engvall all, temporarily, jumped Gauthier in the pecking order.

Once Trevor Moore (possible to return Saturday) and Andreas Johnsson (out till at least Dec. 27) come off injured reserve, more bodies will parade to the waiver wire.

Thirty-three games in, competition and experimentation continue to bubble in the Leafs' bottom six.

Thursday, we asked Keefe what Gauthier needed to do to get back in the lineup.

"There's not a lot that he can do, frankly," Keefe said. "He was playing fine before; we're just getting looks at different things. Fred has been here, and he's been kind of a staple on that fourth line. We're pretty comfortable with what he can provide.

"We're trying to see what the other possibilities might be for our group. And when the time comes, and he goes back in, we expect him to just keep doing what he was doing."

Whereas key pieces like Tyson Barrie, Spezza and Holl have enjoyed elevated roles since the coaching switch, Gauthier is among those who've been nudged back a notch during this transitional phase.

A steady stream of injuries and chemistry experiments — Keefe juggled three of four lines between Tuesday's win in Vancouver and Thursday's loss in Calgary — has put several role players in a state of flux.

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they've heard and what they think about it.

"The whole team went through a big change when the new coach came in, and I think there was a few things I got to adjust to, a few things I'm still trying to figure out with the systems and everything," Gauthier says. "When he got here, it was a new energy. I think it's all alive.

"But on my part, it's just you want to be in the lineup. It sucks not playing."

An NHL body with AHL hands, the affable Gauthier was performing well within Babcock's chip-and-chase approach. He admits there is a learning curve with Keefe's more possession-based philosophy but is eager to prove he can still be effective.

"I don't know if one [system] suits me better than the other, but, honestly, I was playing in the other," Gauthier said. "The only thing



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[Keefe] said to me is, I was playing well, but we're going to sit you. I don't know why.

"I asked him if I'm doing something wrong, if there's something I should do better. And there was really no answer. He was just like, 'You played well. You're doing things well.'"

Both things can be true. Gauthier has poured in the work to develop into a dependable fourth-line pro, and he may not be a slam-dunk fit for the best version of these Maple Leafs, as envisioned by Keefe.

According to the Goat Tracker, the affable big man will draw back into the lineup Saturday evening in Edmonton and see his first action of the western swing. He'll be rested and eager.

"We don't like to see any of our guys have to sit for too long," Keefe said, "because when you need them, of course, they're not as prepared as you'd like them to be."

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1166275 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Jets' Wheeler on being under-appreciated: 'I've done it for a long time'

Staff Writer

December 13, 2019, 7:03 PM

You have to admit, Blake Wheeler has a point.

With his Winnipeg Jets surging a third of the way through a season in which they were supposed to crater in the Western Conference, there's a fair chance Wheeler hasn't been too surprised with the doubt aimed at his squad early on in 2019-20. It's the same doubt that's followed him throughout his career.

The Jets captain reflected on that lack of faith in a recent wide-ranging interview with The Athletic's Murat Ates published Wednesday.

"The numbers, consistently, are there. I play in games and I feel like, 'Man, I dominated that game.' And then nobody's talking about me. Nobody's putting me in the category of player that I believe that I'm in," Wheeler told Ates. "...It's not something where it's ruining my day but it's like, 'Come on, are you [expletive] kidding me?' A lot of guys get a lot of ink and have gotten a lot of ink in the past and I'm like, 'Hey, man. The numbers have been there for a long time.'"

"And even now, the past — I don't even know how many years — there's three or four players in the league that have had better numbers than me and those are Hall of Fame-type players and people laugh when they see me on that list.

"It's like, 'Yeah, I've done it for a long time. You can show me a little love, too.'"

It's a fair critique. The veteran winger has been among the best playmakers in the game for the past handful of years, routinely ranking near or at the top of the league's assists pile.

And it's been that way for a fair while.

The winger's first breakout campaign came in 2011-12 — his first year in Winnipeg (after a brief stint in Atlanta before the team

transitioned to Manitoba), and the first year he topped the 60-point plateau. Since that season, Wheeler's ranked among the top 10 scorers in the game, sitting eighth over those eight seasons with 569 points, behind only Patrick Kane, Sidney Crosby, Claude Giroux, Alex Ovechkin, Evgeni Malkin and Phil Kessel.

Cut out the noise and whittle that down to even-strength points, and Wheeler's even higher on the list, with only Kane, Crosby, John Tavares and Brad Marchand above his 388 points — a crew of names most hockey fans would likely view as on another level than the longtime Jet.

In 2015-16, the Plymouth, Minn., native took another step into the league's upper echelon, nearly touching 80 points for two seasons before posting a pair of dominant 91-point efforts last season and the one prior.

Over the four-year span since then, there's no question Wheeler's been among the most potent scorers in the game. He's seen just four NHLers — all bona fide, undeniable superstars — rack up more points, with only Kane, Nikita Kucherov, Connor McDavid and Crosby besting Wheeler's 334 points through 327 tilts.

He also hit those marks in a period of his career that most would assume would bring a decline — the Jets captain was 29 years old when that 2015-16 breakout came. He was 31 and 32 years old for each of those 91-point seasons. The next highest scorer over 30 years old last season? Ovechkin, who finished just below Wheeler with 89.

The wily veteran's most significant offensive contributions have come in the playmaking department, however. Since that 2015-16 campaign, only one NHLer has posted more assists than Wheeler, and it's arguably most dominant offensive force in the sport: McDavid.

Taking it down to primary assists to strip out the secondary helpers, Wheeler ranks as the gold standard over these past few seasons in Winnipeg. Since 2015-16, he's led the league with 118 primary helpers, topping even the game's best facilitators.

For perspective, the player who's best kept pace with him over that span, in terms of directly setting up teammates for success, is Kane, who sits with 10 fewer primary helpers since 2015-16, having played one more game.

The award cabinet might be more bare than the company he keeps on the league's scoring charts, but all things considered, there's no denying Wheeler's place among the game's best.

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1166276 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Akim Aliu continues his push for inclusiveness in hockey

Gare Joyce

December 13, 2019, 8:02 PM

Akim Aliu said he was feeling "super-positive" about developments within the NHL offices following his disclosure of a racist incident in the minor leagues that led to the resignation of Bill Peters from his position as coach of the Calgary Flames.



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Aliu met with NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and deputy Bill Daly last week in Toronto to discuss Peters's use of a racist epithet when he coached the second-round draft pick with the Chicago Blackhawks' AHL affiliate in Rockford in the 2009-10 season. Bettman subsequently issued a statement that pronounced Peters's "conduct ... unacceptable, whether it happened 10 years ago or last week." At the Board of Governors meeting, the commissioner said the league was creating "a mandatory annual program on counseling, consciousness-raising, education and training on diversity and inclusion."

Aliu spoke to the media before he skated with and spoke to a group of boys and girls, all visible minorities in the Hockey 4 Youth program at Angela James Arena in Flemington Park in North York, Ont.

"It's unfortunate that it took this long to shed light on [racism in hockey]," Aliu said. "The last couple of weeks, things have been looked at very quickly. Hockey is a beautiful game. We should make it as inclusive as possible."

When Aliu's former teammates in Rockford came forward to not only vouch for his account of the incident but also detail how they had confronted Peters about their disapproval, it set off a chain of events that overshadowed games in the news cycle.

Shortly thereafter, former Carolina Hurricanes defenceman Michal Jordan revealed how a few seasons ago, Peters had kicked him on the bench during a game. It was reported to ex-general manager Ron Francis. Then-majority owner Peter Karmanos said he would have fired Peters if he had known but Francis, now the GM of the incoming expansion franchise in Seattle, maintains that he had made Karmanos aware of Peters's physically violent transgressions.

"The [abuse from] coaches and the racial stuff are two different things but we have to deal with both of them," Aliu said.

Aliu's revelations about Peters and a blackface incident with a minor-league team in Colorado have been the catalyst for more players of colour speaking out and reaching out to him. Aliu says he has spoken to players from all levels of the game.

"I had a good call with [the Detroit Red Wings'] Trevor Daley probably an hour ago," Aliu said. "We had a good talk about his situation with [John] Vanbiesbrouck."

A former Vezina Trophy winner and first team all-star, Vanbiesbrouck had been the GM and coach of the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds in the OHL in 2003 when he directed a racial slur at Daley, who was the team captain. Vanbiesbrouck resigned from his positions and has not coached or managed since.

Aliu said young people in minor hockey have contacted him to tell him their stories, too.

"Last night I had a good call with a kid named Logan from Nova Scotia," Aliu said before going on the ice with Hockey 4 Youth. "He's dealt with some issues. We're all facing different kinds of issues. I just want to be a role model [showing] these kids they can be who they want to be."

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1166277 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' Brandon Sutter still chasing confidence in his health

Iain MacIntyre

December 13, 2019, 1:57 PM

VANCOUVER – One hundred per cent has become an impossibility for Brandon Sutter.

There are no absolutes when it comes to the health of the player who has missed 153 of 360 National Hockey League games since he was traded to the Vancouver Canucks 4½ years ago, especially since most of Sutter's injuries have originated in his abdominal "core."

Physical testing and medical examination may show that the checking centre is fully healed, but with so many U-turns from the lineup since he left the Pittsburgh Penguins, it is impossible to be 100 per cent confident in his health until Sutter survives a full season.

As he and the Canucks travelled Friday to San Jose for difficult back-to-back games this weekend against the Sharks and Vegas Golden Knights, Sutter was still chasing his health.

Out a month with another "lower-body" injury, Sutter felt great after a practice on Monday and thought he'd play Tuesday against the Toronto Maple Leafs. But he didn't skate as well Tuesday morning and sat out the Canucks' 4-1 loss to the Leafs.

He practised again Wednesday and planned to play Thursday. Then, facing the prospect of three games in four nights, Sutter and the medical staff agreed to further delay his return.

The Canucks beat the Carolina Hurricanes 1-0 without him.

Sutter hopes to play Saturday in San Jose. He hopes to play.

"It sucks sitting out, especially after last year, missing a lot of hockey," Sutter said this week. "I've been through enough in that area of my body to know what's what. It's just something we wanted to make sure it felt 100 per cent before we did anything, and it's feeling pretty good. It wasn't anything... to worry about from last year. It was kind of a different thing."

After last season ended for Sutter with sports hernia surgery, his second in four years in Vancouver, the veteran suffered another injury while skating untouched on a forecheck early in a Nov. 12 game against the Nashville Predators.

Despite a summer of core-specific rehab and training, Sutter lasted only 19 games before getting injured again. Including time missed for a dislocated shoulder, he logged only 26 games all of last season.

No wonder he is being so careful now.

"When it happened, it was really frustrating because I felt I'd been taking care of things and everything felt good leading up to it," Sutter said. "But things happen, and I'm just happy to feel good again now."

"For me, I've had the hernias and the pelvis stuff and it's always kind of been the same area of my body. I've learned a lot about it and how to manage it with day-to-day maintenance. I just have to focus off the ice to keep that area strong. When you do everything you can to put yourself in a good position, you feel confident."

And, yet, it will probably take a pile of games in a row, or months of good health, for Sutter to fully regain his confidence.



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The only thing as unlucky as his health in Vancouver is his career timing.

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Sutter came to the Canucks just as the team was accelerating its steep descent during the early, confusing stages of its rebuild.

It didn't help that general manager Jim Benning handed Sutter an anvil when he called him a "foundational player" after sending the Penguins Nick Bonino and an upgraded draft pick to acquire him in July, 2015.

Expectations spiked, and Sutter was doomed to fail them. Still, he is an important player for the Canucks.

He excels on the penalty kill — which has been erratic since he left the lineup — and in some defensive situations. When Sutter plays, two-way centre Bo Horvat stays fresher and gets more offensive starts, and second-year Canuck Adam Gaudette (33.3 per cent faceoff win rate) isn't as exposed on defensive-zone draws. Sutter's loss was exacerbated by a concurrent injury to fourth-line centre and faceoff master Jay Beagle, who returned from his undisclosed problem three games ago and is trying to find his form.

Sutter is a calming presence on the Canucks and also contributes to secondary scoring. He had five goals, eight points and 42 shots on net in 19 games before before his injury.

The Canucks initially hoped Sutter would be back within two weeks, and he rejoined the team for a Nov. 25 morning skate in Philadelphia. But when he didn't feel right at practice the next day in Pittsburgh, his comeback was delayed. That was 18 days ago.

The Canucks are 6-6-1 without Sutter, but still just one point out of a playoff spot with two games in-hand on Vegas, which holds the final wildcard position in the National Hockey League's Western Conference.

"That's what's so exciting about it — getting back to a competitive environment," Sutter said. "The previous years, it's tough when you're not in the playoffs. When you're out on Feb. 1, that's not a lot of fun. Just being in a playoff hunt is what it's all about. I'm pretty excited to be part of it."

Soon, he hopes.

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Sportsnet.ca / Truth By Numbers: Where Nathan MacKinnon fits in world's best player debate

Andrew Berkshire

After the 2017-18 season when Taylor Hall took home the Hart Trophy, some voters decided Connor McDavid wasn't worthy of it because his team missed the playoffs. But in giving it to Hall, voters also had to overlook another player: Nathan MacKinnon.

Overall, MacKinnon had slightly bigger overall impacts than Hall did that year, and like Hall his team made the playoffs. Without canvassing the voters, the prevailing thought at the time was that Hall had to carry the Devils to the post-season because they were a supremely underwhelming team, whereas MacKinnon was able to work with good-to-great linemates in Gabriel Landeskog and Mikko Rantanen.

Two years later, MacKinnon has had to carry the Avalanche through a stretch where both his regular linemates were hurt, so just as you would expect his production went up...

Wait, what?

That's right, MacKinnon managed to be even better without his talented linemates. It probably wasn't sustainable, but as of right now MacKinnon is on pace for easily the best season of his career. He trails only the dynamic duo in Edmonton that's struggling to keep their team afloat after their great start.

SPOTLIGHT PERFORMANCE

Over the past three seasons, the only NHL players with more points than MacKinnon's 244 are Connor McDavid and Nikita Kucherov, while the only players with more than MacKinnon's 99 goals are McDavid and the king of lighting the lamp: Alex Ovechkin.

MacKinnon's 797 shots on goal over that time trail only Ovechkin as well, so offensively I think it's fair to say MacKinnon is among the league's most elite, but how close is MacKinnon to being the best player in the world right now? It's clearly McDavid, but how far behind is MacKinnon this year?

McDavid plays more often, but luckily both players get a similar proportion of ice time; barely any shorthanded time, but tons at even strength and with the man advantage. So let's do this rough and compare the two players in all situations on a per-20-minute basis.

In terms of shooting, MacKinnon generates more shots and more scoring chances overall, but McDavid's shots come from in tighter and they're off the rush slightly more often. MacKinnon gets more chances off the cycle, which is probably more a function of his team being slightly better than McDavid's. That would allow the Avalanche to create more offensive zone time, supplying MacKinnon's superior linemates with more chances to find him in the slot while cycling.

Both players are phenomenal shooters, but despite MacKinnon's advantage in volume, I'd have a hard time saying he's the better shooter.

Moving to playmaking, McDavid blows MacKinnon out of the water, ranking first league-wide in rush passes and second in slot passes after Evgeni Malkin. Once again MacKinnon's numbers are excellent, but McDavid is on another level.

Switching to on-ice numbers to see how each player controls high quality plays, once again MacKinnon is dominant. While he's on the ice the Avalanche control 62.2 per cent of the inner slot shots and 65.7 per cent of the slot passes. Those are incredible numbers, but McDavid's are even crazier.

Despite playing on a team that is much worse overall, McDavid's Oilers control 61.7 per cent of the inner slot shots while he's on the ice, and a ridiculous 71.9 per cent of the slot passes.

As great as MacKinnon is — and he might be the second-best player in the world right now — the level of play McDavid achieves remains the NHL's gold standard.

THE QUESTION



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 14, 2019

Steve Dangle kept things simple this week and got right to it:

"The Detroit Red Wings are having a disaster season, which is probably part of the plan, but is there anything good to talk about with them this year? Is there anything salvageable on that roster?"

The poor Red Wings are having one of those seasons where incredibly bad play is combining with disastrously bad luck, so it's not all quite as terrible as it looks.

But, oh man, is it ever bad anyway.

There is one bright spot though. It all comes together on one line, which unfortunately is currently not intact because Anthony Mantha is injured.

The top line of Tyler Bertuzzi, Dylan Larkin, and Anthony Mantha isn't just the only trio of Red Wings this season who have managed to stay above 50 per cent across all differentials, they've been absolutely dominant while grouped together.

It's a difficult proposition to be positive right now if you're a Red Wings fan or probably even if you're in the organization as a whole, but this line has the makings of an excellent top unit, which is arguably the most difficult thing to put together, and a key component to building a contender.

Even better news for the Red Wings is that this isn't a line carried by an older player who will age out of their good play by the time the younger prospects are ready. Mantha is the elder statesman of the line at just 25 years old, while Larkin is the key player in the group and also the youngest at 23.

Building a solid team to complement your top line is far from a given (just ask the Edmonton Oilers) but this is one glowing positive for the Wings to go forward with.

Senior Writer Ryan Dixon and NHL Editor Rory Boylen always give it 110%, but never rely on clichés when it comes to podcasting. Instead, they use a mix of facts, fun and a varied group of hockey voices to cover Canada's most beloved game.

BUY OR SELL

- Kris Letang had a rough game this week and faced some criticism for it, but one game doesn't tell the story. Since Nov. 1, when Letang is on the ice at 5-on-5 the Penguins are controlling 75 per cent of the inner slot shots (a league-high for any player), 62 per cent of the shot attempts, and 68.3 per cent of the slot passes. Absurd.
- Speaking of Letang, guess who has the best puck battle win rate of any player this season? That's right, Letang. He's won 45.2 per cent of his attempted puck battles, two per cent better than anyone else.
- Take a wild guess at which player has been on the ice for the most inner slot shots for his team at 5-on-5 in total this season. Somehow, it's Ben Chiarot. He's having a great year and no one has seen more high danger chances for their team than his 91.
- The player who has been on the ice for the most inner slot shots against is Mark Scheifele with 83, tied with Dmitry Orlov who has played more minutes.
- The two players who have iced the puck more than anyone this season: Morgan Rielly and Brent Burns. Last season? Morgan Rielly and Brent Burns. The season before that? Brent Burns and Oliver Ekman-Larsson. The season before that? Brent Seabrook and Brent Burns. Burns really likes to ice the puck, and as he ages, I wonder if that's taking a toll on the team this year.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 12.14.2019

1166279 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / 3 stats that put Canadiens' Cayden Primeau's first win in context

Staff Writer

December 13, 2019, 10:46 AM

Two pucks got by Cayden Primeau during the 20-year-old's second appearance in the big leagues, but the 35 shots he stopped earned the Montreal Canadiens' young gun his first career win at the NHL level on Wednesday.

The Voorhees, N.J., native has spent the 2019-20 campaign with AHL Laval up until this week, after two seasons with Northeastern University and one year in the USHL before that.

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Though his first crack at facing NHL scorers ended with a 3-2 loss to Colorado, the 2017 seventh-round pick said Wednesday he's just glad to get the first 'W' on the board, even if it came in Game 2.

"You know you want to get your first win during your first game, but it's a learning experience," Primeau said after Montreal's win over the Senators. "I took that over the weekend and really worked towards it.

"It's been a roller coaster, being able to be called up, especially to a team like this, an organization like this. It's crazy."

Crazier still if you look at where Primeau's first win fits into the wider context of Canadiens and NHL history. Let's take a closer look.

Through the lengthy history of the storied Canadiens franchise, and the number of talented netminders they've seen earn Ws in Montreal's cage, only a handful have done it earlier in their careers than Primeau.

A quick look at the names on that list and the heights they wound up reaching in Montreal paints a promising picture of the young netminder's potential.

While Len Broderick's win was in fact the only NHL game he ever appeared in, Patrick Roy's inaugural win at 19 years and 141 days kicked off a sterling career that brought a Stanley Cup to Montreal just one year later.

The Quebec City native played only one NHL game the year he got that win at 19 years old, but returned the next season for his rookie campaign. The regular season numbers that first year were fairly pedestrian, but a dominant post-season — good for a .923 save percentage and 1.93 goals-against average — earned Roy the Conn Smythe Trophy for the Canadiens' run in '86.

It was a similar story for the next name on that list — Jose Theodore's first win came at age 20 (and 54 days) in '96 during a regular season that saw him post an .896 save percentage and a 3.87 goals-against average. He followed that up with .935 and a 2.51 through his two post-season appearances. It took Theodore longer to truly hit his stride, but by his mid-20s he was a bona fide



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starter, earning the Hart Trophy and Vezina Trophy for his standout 2001-02 campaign.

Carey Price, the man sharing the crease with Primeau in Montreal, earned his first win at 20 years and 55 days old. It came as part of a golden rookie year in which Price shot out of the big-league gates with a .920 save percentage and 2.56 goals-against average — good enough to allow the 20-year-old to finish among the top 10 vote-getters for that season's Vezina Trophy.

Much like Theodore, it took Price a couple years to truly show his best — by his mid-20s he was dominating the awards circuit and considered the best netminder in the game.

Not bad company for the young 'tender to be a part of. And, for what it's worth, Price says there's more similarities between the two than simply the quirky age stats.

"He's definitely got a quiet demeanour about himself, and he works hard," Price told Sportsnet's Eric Engels Wednesday. "He definitely reminds me a bit of my younger self."

He's the second netminder in as many seasons to get his first win before age 21

The young 'tenders are going back-to-back. The other sub-21-year-old to get his first NHL win as of late was Philadelphia's 20-year-old goaltender Carter Hart, who got his in late 2018 and emerged as a game-changer for the Flyers in 2018-19.

Cayden Primeau is the second goaltender in as many seasons to record his first NHL win at age 21 or younger after Carter Hart (20 years, 127 days) did so with the Flyers on Dec. 18, 2018. #NHLStats pic.twitter.com/zgpDt0tnTM

— NHL Public Relations (@PR_NHL) December 12, 2019

Hart went on to earn 16 wins through 30 games last season, posting a .917 save percentage and 2.83 goals-against average for Philly.

The Sherwood Park, Alta., native was thrown into a very different situation than the Canadiens' young gun. Hart took over as the sixth goalie to suit up for the Flyers in 2018-19, the pressure of turning around the franchise's well-documented goaltending issues on his shoulders.

He performed well in that role, becoming the youngest netminder since Price to win his NHL debut, and proving himself as the Flyers' goalie of the future.

Primeau's got a much stronger safety net in place, with Price only 32 years old with plenty of strong hockey as a starter still left in him. There aren't many better mentors a young netminder could ask for as he learns the ropes against the high-flying offences of the Eastern Conference.

He and his father, Keith, rank as just the third father-son, goalie-skater duo to be drafted and play in the NHL

Primeau's surname is well-known among hockey fans of recent generations, with father Keith and uncle Wayne both enjoying long careers at the sport's highest level.

Keith logged 15 years in the league, posting 619 through 909 games as a centreman for Detroit, Philadelphia, Carolina and Hartford. His son takes the family's total games played to 1,685, with Cayden adding two to the pile and Wayne throwing 774 into the mix.

Father-son duos who were both drafted and played at least one regular-season NHL game as either a goalie or skater:

Keith Primeau (909 GP) & @cpreems29 (2 GP)

Gilles Meloche (788 GP) & Eric Meloche (74 GP)

Gaetan Duchesne (1,028 GP) & Jeremy Duchesne (1 GP) #NHLStats pic.twitter.com/2GIqvbTAgv

— NHL Public Relations (@PR_NHL) December 12, 2019

Keith and Cayden rank as only the third father-son duo ever to both make it to the big leagues with one playing net and one roaming the ice as a skater.

Goalie Gilles Meloche and winger Eric Meloche also completed the feat, earning 788 and 74 career NHL games, respectively. As did left winger Gaetan Duchesne and netminder Jeremy Duchesne, who logged 1,028 and one NHL appearance, respectively.

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Sportsnet.ca / Kings' Drew Doughty: 'We need fighting' in NHL

Emily Sadler

December 13, 2019, 12:54 PM

The NHL has taken measures to reduce fighting around the league, but Drew Doughty doesn't want to see it eliminated from the game altogether.

When giving his assessment of the Los Angeles Kings' 2-1 win over the Anaheim Ducks Thursday night, Doughty pointed to the mid-game scrap between Kings defenceman Kurtis MacDermid and Ducks winger Nick Deslauriers that served as the spark the Kings needed to eventually close out the victory.

"I think the highlight for me is [MacDermid] chuckin' 'em with Deslauriers — that was a great fight," Doughty told L.A. Kings Live reporter Carrlyn Bathe during a post-game interview. "Got us really pumped up and we were able to get the win."

It was quite the fight — evenly matched, with both players consenting to the scrap and both also serving five-minute fighting majors after officials eventually intervened. When asked about the momentum swing brought in by the fight, Doughty said "we need fighting" in the game.

"It can't make its way out of the league," Doughty told Bathe. "We need fighting. I know people don't like it, some of you, but then you're just going to have all those meatheads running around, little guys being rats out there, and that's just the way it's going to go."

"So we need fighting. People need to be able to protect their teammates and themselves," he continued. "When it's safe like that and no one gets hurt, that's the best way."

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Sportsnet.ca / Saturday NHL odds: Maple Leafs betting favourites at Oilers



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OddsShark Staff

December 13, 2019, 7:45 PM

The Toronto Maple Leafs will be looking to continue their recent domination of the Edmonton Oilers when they wrap up their four-game road trip in Edmonton on Saturday as -125 betting favourites on the NHL odds at sportsbooks monitored by OddsShark.com.

Toronto is coming off its first defeat on its current trip, a 4-2 loss in Calgary as -125 road chalk that extended a stretch of mediocrity that has featured just six wins in 16 outings going into Saturday night's matchup at Rogers Place.

The Maple Leafs have owned the Oilers in recent years, though, posting wins in six straight meetings including three on the road, and have suffered just one loss in eight visits to Edmonton since December 2009 according to the OddsShark NHL Database.

That's bad news for the Oilers, who take their first three-game losing streak of the season into Saturday's matchup. The Oilers are coming off a 6-5 loss in Minnesota as a -105 wager on Thursday, and have now fallen to defeat in six of their past eight games. Edmonton's slide has cost the team its perch atop the Pacific Division standings, where they now lag two points back of Arizona, and sit deadlocked with the red-hot Flames in second place.

And after posting consecutive wins on just one occasion over their past 15 games, the Oilers have also taken a tumble on the NHL futures, dropping to third on the Pacific Division odds as a +350 wager, but have remained largely steady on the Stanley Cup odds at +1500.

Elsewhere, the Flames will be aiming to win eight in a row for the first time since March 2017 when they host the Carolina Hurricanes on Saturday afternoon as -115 betting favourites. Calgary has responded well to its recent coach change, going undefeated under interim bench boss Geoff Ward. The Flames have also rediscovered their scoring touch, averaging four goals per game during their current tear, fueling a 4-0-1 run for the OVER on the totals.

The Hurricanes continue a five-game Western swing in Calgary after dropping a 1-0 decision in Vancouver on Thursday, ending a three-game win streak during which they potted 15 goals.

Also on the Saturday NHL odds at online betting sites, the Montreal Canadiens vie for a fourth straight win as they host the last-place Detroit Red Wings as -235 betting favourites. The Canucks try to shake off a scoring drought that has produced just two total goals in their past two outings as they visit San Jose as -105 underdogs, while the Ottawa Senators host the Columbus Blue Jackets at -110 on the NHL moneyline.

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Sportsnet.ca / From the Newsletter: Re-ranking Canada's seven NHL teams

Rory Boylen

December 13, 2019, 2:54 PM

It's fair to say the first two-plus months of the NHL season have been tumultuous for Canada's seven NHL teams.

There's been a lot of good. Both Vancouver and Edmonton have led the Pacific Division at one point or another; the Connor McDavid-Leon Draisaitl combo is 1-2 in NHL scoring; the Jets have been on an absolute tear of late; Ottawa has shown positive signs and holds non-playoff San Jose's first-rounder; and at one point Montreal was making a case as Canada's best.

There's been a lot of bad as well. The unfolding Bill Peters story in Calgary; Toronto's struggling backup situation and the fact they've been chasing a playoff spot all year, resulting in a coaching change; lack of depth being exposed in Edmonton; Montreal's recent eight-game losing skid; Vancouver slowing from a positive start.

In Sportsnet's NHL newsletter, we have twice ranked Canada's NHL teams this year, first on Nov. 7 and then again this Thursday and it's become clear how much can change in one month. Where the Jets ranked sixth in early-November, their amazing stretch since then — as most others have been inconsistent — suddenly makes Winnipeg look like one of Canada's best bets for a Stanley Cup again.

But, still, we've got more than half a season in front of us.

Here is our current ranking of Canada's NHL teams, taking into consideration their play over the past month and the general overall outlook moving forward.

1. Winnipeg Jets

Record since Nov. 7: 11-4-1

Previous ranking: 6

Thursday's loss to Detroit, which snapped a 12-game losing streak for Wings, was a bad look but the Jets have been Canada's most successful team over the past month record-wise by far. It didn't start so well. After having their blue line decimated by off-season departures, the Jets won six of their first 13 games and it seemed as though their window had quickly slammed shut. And, maybe, it has because those departures have certainly been felt — even through this good run.

Two years ago, Winnipeg allowed the third-fewest high danger chances at 5-on-5 in the league. Last year, they were middle of the pack. So far this season they've allowed the third-most, better than only the Rangers and Blackhawks. And in their last 16 games? Winnipeg's still allowed the eighth-most high-danger chances at 5-on-5. They don't generate a ton for themselves either, so their 41.09 high danger chances for percentage ranks dead last since Nov. 7.

This is why Connor Hellebuyck is making a strong case for Vezina consideration. He really is the only reason why Winnipeg has been able to stay so high up in the standings. As Sportsnet's Sean Reynolds told us on the Tape to Tape Podcast this week, it seems like the Jets give up clearcut breakaways every game.

There have been some other, positive changes. Blake Wheeler's playing centre and that's worked very well. Patrik Laine got the promotion to Line 1 he wanted and, curiously, has 12 more assists than goals. The Jets aren't doing it the same way they have in recent seasons, but you can't argue with the results.

2. Calgary Flames

Record since Nov. 7: 9-5-2

Previous ranking: 5



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Considering all this team has gone through over the past month, it's incredible how the players have responded. Early in November they went on a six-game losing streak and, shortly after that was snapped, the accusations against Bill Peters became public and he coached his last game for the team on Nov. 27. But now the Flames have won eight of their past nine games, interim head coach Geoff Ward is undefeated and the team has been much more loose since the change was made.

Sean Monahan scored a goal in four straight games. Johnny Gaudreau has started scoring as the lines have been shuffled, and his two goals against Toronto on Thursday led the comeback. David Rittich has yet to show any signs that he is not capable of being a solid No. 1 goalie.

And then there's the unforeseen goodness. Sandpaper players Zac Rinaldo and Milan Lucic have been providing recent offence.

There are only three "minus" players since Peters left the team — Matthew Tkachuk, Andrew Mangiapane and Elias Lindholm — and they're all just minus-two. Calgary was one of the best third period teams last season and again are tied for the league lead in wins when trailing after the second period.

3. Montreal Canadiens

Record since Nov. 7: 7-6-4

Previous ranking: 4

The Habs lost eight in a row at one point — three of which were in extra time. That had some wondering if head coach Claude Julien was on the hot seat, or if GM Marc Bergevin would spring into action and try to improve things via trade. But as we explored on Sportsnet.ca this week, in-season trades aren't exactly how Bergevin conducts business. And things have gotten rosier again without a major move.

Montreal has won four of its past five now, including wins over the Islanders and Penguins. Shea Weber has been dominant of late and Phillip Danault continues to have a career year that will maybe garner some Selke attention. But it all comes back to Carey Price with this team — and he has a .942 save percentage in December so far.

Senior Writer Ryan Dixon and NHL Editor Rory Boylen always give it 110%, but never rely on clichés when it comes to podcasting. Instead, they use a mix of facts, fun and a varied group of hockey voices to cover Canada's most beloved game.

4. Toronto Maple Leafs

Record since Nov. 7: 7-9-1

Previous ranking: 2

The Leafs have gone through their own coaching change since we ranked Canada's teams in November, switching from Mike Babcock to Sheldon Keefe on Nov. 20. And since then, we have seen marked change in Toronto including Frederik Andersen in both games of a back-to-back situation — something Babcock never would have done. There have been new line combinations and defence pairs, and generally more creativity. The team has generated more high danger chances than before, but also given up more. The most obvious difference, though, can be seen on special teams. Under Babcock this season, Toronto's power play ranked 19th and penalty kill 31st. But since the change, the Leafs have the No. 4-ranked PP (29.4 per cent) and No. 1-ranked PK (91.3 per cent).

In Thursday's newsletter, the Leafs ranked ahead of Montreal, but the follow-up loss to Calgary was yet another concerning one. While

there have been some positive trends since Keefe became head coach, the one carry-over from Babcock's time has been Toronto's inability to play a full 60 minutes consistently. Under Babcock, the team received a lot of heat for its slow starts. Under Keefe, there have been some late-game concerns. Against Calgary, the Leafs played two solid periods and then allowed three goals in under three minutes at the start of the third. That was the difference. Earlier in the week in a 4-1 win over Vancouver, they had another bad third period in which they were outshot by a 2:1 rate. Sure, you could say that was the result of playing with a lead and being a mid-week game on the opposite coast, but given this has been an ongoing problem for the team, excuses shouldn't be allowed to get explained away so easily any more.

Under Keefe, Toronto has won six of its 10 games. That's not bad at all, but it's also not fantastic. Continuing on like that may not be enough to get to the playoffs.

5. Edmonton Oilers

Record since Nov. 7: 8-7-2

Previous ranking: 3

It may seem odd to have a team that held its division lead on Thursday morning all the way down to fifth in these rankings, but we're starting to see some cracks in the Oilers that could spell trouble. First of all, the secondary scoring that has been a problem for the entire season has become even more so with James Neal's production drying up after his quick start. He has just four goals in his past 20 games, and only one of those came at 5-on-5. Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, meanwhile, has just three 5-on-5 points in his past 11 games.

Even more worrisome is that despite Leon Draisaitl scoring eight points in his past nine games, he's also managed to be a minus-10 in that stretch. Since Nov. 7, Edmonton has the league's sixth-worst shots for percentage at 5-on-5 (47.77) and the sixth-worst goals for percentage at 5-on-5, being outscored by 12.

The Oilers don't have an easy upcoming schedule, facing Toronto, Dallas, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and Montreal in the next week. They are right now in their first slump of the season, so the next eight days will show us exactly what this year's Oilers are all about. Will they sink into an extended losing streak, the kind of which we've gotten used to seeing? Or will they pick themselves up by the bootstraps and nip this thing in the bud?

6. Vancouver Canucks

Record since Nov. 7: 7-9-1

Previous ranking: 1

It was tempting to rank the Canucks ahead of the Oilers here. While they've gone through a difficult stretch of their own, they've also dealt with a bunch of injuries and been without starter Jacob Markstrom, who took time away from the team following the death of his father. And positive signs are there. Would you believe that since Nov. 7 J.T. Miller has more points than Elias Pettersson, and Tanner Pearson is tied with the reigning rookie of the year? And it's not as though the Swede has been slacking with 14 points in 17 games. The fact is that while players such as Antoine Roussel, Micheal Ferland and Brandon Sutter won't ever offer eye-popping offensive totals, they do provide a certain physical, tough style the Canucks want to complement their skill with. And when that's ripped out of the lineup, there will be a bigger hole left behind than it would seem.

The Miller trade this past off-season defined a window in which Vancouver needed to get back to the playoffs — if they don't get



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there either this season or next, Tampa Bay will walk into a lottery pick. GM Jim Benning told Sportsnet's Iain MacIntyre this week that, if the price is right, he's in the market to add another top-six winger who can score.

They'll play a back-to-back road series in San Jose and Vegas this weekend and then will play seven of eight games at home over the holiday season. That should provide a soft landing.

7. Ottawa Senators

Record since Nov. 7: 9-8-1

Previous ranking: 7

With a .500 winning percentage in this stretch, the Senators have been surprisingly good of late and are one of only three Canadian teams that has won at least half their games since Nov. 7. They won seven of nine games in mid-November, but that was a relatively light stretch that included games (and wins) over New Jersey, Los Angeles, Detroit and the Rangers — all but one of those teams sit behind Ottawa in the season-long standings.

Ultimately, tough decisions will need to be made by GM Pierre Dorion as to who gets moved at the deadline, and who stays to be part of the future. The name at the top of that list is Jean-Gabriel Pageau, a 27-year-old pending UFA who has a team-leading 16 goals — already just three shy of his career high. The other silver lining for Ottawa? They hold San Jose's first-round pick from the Erik Karlsson trade, and that team is 24th in the league, outside of a playoff spot, and just fired their coach.

The Senators have not been a bad on-ice story this season. Expectations were already low, but there have been positive developments and their record isn't all that atrocious. But they're still seventh because, really, they're the only team here that doesn't have a shot at the post-season.

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Sportsnet.ca / How Chiarot, Kulak have changed Canadiens' trade outlook

Eric Engels

December 13, 2019, 3:53 PM

BROSSARD, Que. — It was impossible to imagine that an injury suffered to Victor Mete on Nov. 30 would alleviate some concerns the Montreal Canadiens had about the left side of their defence, but that's exactly what has happened since the smooth-skating 21-year-old went down in the first period of the team's 4-3 overtime loss to the Philadelphia Flyers.

It's a bizarro-world reality, but an undeniable one that will have considerable impact on how Marc Bergevin navigates the trade market in the coming weeks.

Suddenly, Brett Kulak has proven to be an upgrade on the Brett Kulak we saw from the beginning of October through the end of November. And what's happened with Ben Chiarot had one member of the Canadiens senior management group telling Sportsnet last week that the six-foot-four, 225-pounder is a better fit in this system

than he was in the one he was groomed in with the Winnipeg Jets over six seasons.

In Winnipeg, Chiarot was used at times on the top pair with Dustin Byfuglien. But he most often found himself on the bottom pair when the team, which was loaded on defence, was at full health.

In Montreal, not only is Chiarot proving he can handle more responsibility — he's gone from topping 23 minutes per game just twice in his first 11 games to doing it 17 times in his last 21 — he is proving he can be a better option on the top pair next to Shea Weber than just about anyone else that could potentially be available on the trade market.

That the 28-year-old played the best he ever has over a stretch of four consecutive games that saw him beat his previous career-high in ice-time (he played 27:11, 29:26, 30:47 and 28:54 from Nov. 30-Dec. 5) has made it obvious he's a better player than anyone realized when he signed a three-year, \$10.5-million contract with the Canadiens on July 1.

"He's even surpassing our expectations," said the Canadiens executive. "We knew he was an upgrade on what we had last year, but it would have been hard to predict he'd play this well."

It was easy to see that Chiarot had the size and the physicality — and the experience — to supplant what was lost when Jordie Benn left for Vancouver. But no one realized how mobile the big man would prove to be.

Well, no one except for Chiarot himself.

"I think my best asset is my combination of being a bigger guy and being a guy who moves pretty well," the Hamilton, Ont., native said after the Canadiens practised on Friday.

"I can move with smaller guys or I can play heavy against the big guys. I can play against both styles of game. My combination of size and skating is what helps me out the most.

"I'm not the fastest guy, but I'm not slow. I'm quick in small spaces. My first three steps are pretty good. I can move in any direction pretty good. That's what helps me keep up with smaller guys who are quick. They don't gain a step on me because I can move pretty good side to side."

If you watched Chiarot burn up the ice to score the overtime winner against the Ottawa Senators on Wednesday, it's fairly obvious he moves well up and down, too.

That's a huge development for the Canadiens. In watching Chiarot thrive in a bigger role, they realized he can handle it.

Ditto for Kulak, who proved to be a capable top-four defenceman last season but suffered a lapse in confidence when Chiarot's acquisition bumped him down to a lesser role.

Kulak had been in and out of the lineup prior to Mete's injury, but, with no one else to turn to, Canadiens coach Claude Julien was forced to elevate Kulak to a No. 4 role next to Jeff Petry.

Since then, the 25-year-old has played over 18 minutes in four of six games and over 20 in two, and he's looked very much like the guy who was consistently reliable a season ago.

"I got back in more of a rhythm," said Kulak on Friday. "I'm just playing right now, not thinking too much. Just instincts taking over and I'm just playing better hockey."

And with Mete on the mend and approaching a return — Julien said on Friday that Mete is trending in the right direction and that he's hoping the team's medical staff will clear him to travel with the



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Canadiens to Western Canada next week — Kulak feels he'll be in a better frame of mind if he gets bumped to a lesser role.

"I think it's just focus on what's working for me in these minutes," he said. "And even if the minutes go back down, the shifts are the same. It's the same thing when you step on the ice and you're called upon, so remember what you use and what works for you and work to my own strengths."

Jeff Marek and Elliotte Friedman talk to a lot of people around the hockey world, and then they tell listeners all about what they've heard and what they think about it.

If (and when) that change comes, it's only going to help Kulak that 20-year-old rookie and third-pairing staple Cale Fleury is a better player now than he was two months ago.

"I think (Fleury) has (progressed) and the only thing I can tell you is that's based on experience," said Julien. "The more games he plays, the more comfortable he gets. A couple of times he got himself in trouble going to his backhand and you've seen him correct that. And right now we're working with him on his gap and having a little bit more confidence in a tighter gap. But those are all things that I think a first-year player goes through and the improvement he's making is just based on confidence and experience."

That Fleury and Kulak have gained confidence allows them to be a pair Julien employs more regularly once Mete returns.

That Chiarot has proven he can be a legitimate top-pairing defenceman has to influence how Bergevin will approach trade possibilities for Montreal's back end.

He was already at a disadvantage trying to find a top-four defenceman — especially one that plays on the left side — to begin with. Historically, they're rarely available in-season.

The best ones to have moved over the last two seasons were Jake Muzzin (from Los Angeles to Toronto in on Jan. 28, 2019) and Ryan McDonagh (from New York to Tampa Bay on Feb. 26, 2018). Both were a year away from unrestricted free agency and acquired by bona fide Stanley Cup contenders who were willing to pay exorbitant prices.

It's not to say Bergevin won't try to bolster the Canadiens' depth on the left side of the defence, but the idea that he'll give up first-round picks and top prospects to pry Andy Greene out of New Jersey, Brenden Dillon out of San Jose, or Marco Scandella out of Buffalo seems far-fetched.

It also seems ill-advised to do it for a player who is under contract for years to come when the club feels confident Alexander Romanov, the 19-year-old chosen 38th overall by the Canadiens in 2018, will leave the KHL at the end of this season and become a mainstay on the Montreal blue line by next season.

Perhaps Bergevin will look at pending unrestricted free agents Ron Hainsey (Ottawa) and Ben Hutton (L.A.) as depth acquisitions worth making. It would be logical given that the cost wouldn't be too prohibitive and that neither player would have much effect on the team's long-term plans.

Either way, he and the Canadiens have to be somewhat relieved that Chiarot and Kulak have upgraded themselves. That it took Mete getting injured to magnify the fact isn't what they were hoping for, but the picture looks much different now than it did two weeks ago — or even two months ago.

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Sportsnet.ca / How undersized Devon Toews beat the odds to thrive with Islanders

Mike Shulman

December 13, 2019, 11:07 AM

Devon Toews is a hockey scout's worst nightmare.

For every Victor Hedman and Drew Doughty — who had the "look" of a top defenceman from an early age — there are dozens of prospects who check off some boxes but not others, and get passed over by talent evaluators time and time again only to haunt them down the road.

Toews was one such prospect.

Standing just five-foot-two and weighing in at 102 pounds during his bantam year, the native of Abbotsford, B.C., — where Rogers Hometown Hockey makes a stop this weekend — didn't look much like a potential major junior rearguard, let alone one at the NHL level.

And scouts in that season's WHL draft agreed.

"You're at school and your buddies are getting picked and you're so happy for them, and you're just kind of hoping your name gets called.... (But) mine didn't get called," said the New York Islanders defenceman, who's now listed at six-foot-one and 191 pounds.

"Now when I look at it, I'm very fortunate for it. It can be very frustrating, but I think it's good to see guys that don't get picked in the draft and make it (anyway). Even if it's just they have a great college career and play a little bit of pro — even that is a big success for a lot of guys."

The Islanders were fortunate, too. In a quintessential late-bloomer story, the now 25-year-old Toews is flourishing in the NHL. He has 13 points across 30 games in his second season for the defence-first Islanders (21-7-2), and is averaging a career-high in ice time as coach Barry Trotz has placed more faith in him.

That said, the journey to this point wasn't always easy.

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While smaller defencemen have become commonplace in the NHL and appear to have lost some of the stigma attached to selecting them in the draft (see: Quinn Hughes seventh overall in 2018), Toews says views hadn't shifted yet when he was coming up.

"People just didn't think I was big enough to be able to handle bigger and stronger players," he said. "And I can't really blame them. I was pretty small, but I was still putting up points and playing really well. So it was definitely a little bit frustrating for me."

While Toews was often overlooked, one person who had faith in his talent was Brad Bowen.

Bowen, who is the director of hockey operations at the Yale Hockey Academy in Abbotsford, coached Toews at various levels since he was about six years old, and recalls talking to him after he was passed over in the WHL draft.

"I just kept saying that, 'It's not your time, bud. As good as you are, it's not your time,'" said Bowen.



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"So there are going to be guys that get drafted that are bigger than you and stronger than you and don't work hard and then fall off the map. And there are going to be guys like you that don't get drafted, that will work harder and continue to improve, and you will grow and then you will slingshot at the back-half."

During his second year in bantam with the Abbotsford A1 Hawks in 2008–09, he helped carry the underdog club to a provincial title and a second-place finish at the Western Canadian championships. It was also his second year playing defence in the face of continued pressure that he was too small and should switch back to forward.

But it didn't matter — he was the "best player on the ice" on a team stocked with other WHL draft picks.

"We had, I think, about four or five guys who were drafted in the first round, and he's the only one still playing," said Bowen, whose son was also on the team.

Then Toews started growing, and he kept on scoring.

In 2010 — at the age of 16, when many NHL prospects would already be playing in major junior — he sprouted up to five-foot-10 and was the top-scoring defenceman in the B.C. Major Midget League. The following season, he had 29 points in 54 games with the Surrey Eagles of the BCHL.

Luckily, his assistant coach, Matt Erhart had played at Quinnipiac University. Erhart got Toews a foot in the door at the small program in Connecticut, and he eventually earned a scholarship.

"The college game was something that appealed to me," Toews reflected. "When I had that opportunity to go and get my college degree while playing hockey, it was something I really wanted to do."

The college game helped along his NHL dream as well. Toews had been passed over by NHL teams twice already. But after scoring 17 points in 37 games in his freshman season at Quinnipiac, the Islanders finally snapped him up in the draft at age 20.

Toews spent two more years in college, racking up 50 points in 71 games, before the Islanders sent him to their AHL affiliate, the Bridgeport Sound Tigers. There, he put up 67 points in 106 games before getting shelved for surgery to repair a torn labrum in his left shoulder.

It was another bump in the road for Toews, as the big club had been planning on giving him his first taste of NHL action shortly thereafter.

But in his return, Toews notched 19 points across 24 AHL games to start 2018-19. The Islanders had seen enough, and he got another shot at The Show in December.

Toews finished the campaign with 18 points in 48 games, adding five more — including his first post-season goal — in eight games as the Islanders made a surprising run to the second round.

He didn't take anything for granted ahead of this season as the Islanders boast a deep blue line, but he has continued to show he belongs.

Toews currently boasts the fourth-best Corsi For percentage on the team (52.72) and fifth-best expected goals percentage (52.52), and is proving to be a quality offensive defenceman in the NHL.

That said, to the people who saw past his size, he has always looked the part — even if others didn't recognize it.

"I think the biggest thing with him is his perseverance. I mean, he's had the opportunity to quit hockey 15 times: people saying, 'You're too small, you should play forward, you should just do this, you should do that,'" reflected Bowen.

"But the fact of the matter is, he was just determined and his work ethic was through the roof and (he) just said, 'I'm just playing for fun and if I don't go any further, I don't go any further,' and he just kept proving everybody wrong. So I mean he's one of those stories (where) people in the hockey world didn't want him to succeed and he found a way to do it."

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks reward Jacob Markstrom's all-time performance with OT win

Iain MacIntyre

December 13, 2019, 2:12 AM

VANCOUVER – With his mother in the stands and an angel on his shoulder, Jacob Markstrom played Thursday one of the greatest games in net in Vancouver Canucks history.

It may not be remembered that way, considering it was a mid-week game in December against the Carolina Hurricanes. But considering that only one week earlier Markstrom was home in Sweden for his father's funeral after his dad's agonizing battle with cancer, what the 29-year-old goalie did was truly astounding.

He stopped all 43 shots he faced and the Canucks, who should have trailed by three or four goals heading into the third period, somehow won 1-0 on Elias Pettersson's world-class finish 40 seconds into overtime.

There have been a lot of wins for Vancouver in the last three decades, although not nearly enough the last four years, but precious few to celebrate since they entered the National Hockey League in 1970.

This was worth celebrating – if not for the hockey performance, then at least the human one.

"That was a pretty special night for Marky," veteran defenceman Tyler Myers said. "He made some unbelievable saves the whole game. We gave up some chances we don't want to give up. But he kept us in it."

Canucks captain Bo Horvat said: "I've seen him play some unbelievable games, but this one definitely stands out tonight. To actually reward him (with the win) for the tremendous game he played hits home a little better. He made some spectacular saves tonight."

Markstrom made 22 saves in the second period alone when the Hurricanes outskated, outshot and out-everythinged the Canucks. Carolina was especially dangerous on its three power plays, which included an uninterrupted advantage of 4:34 early in the period.

Markstrom snared a one-timer from Dougie Hamilton, made a pair of point-blank saves on Ryan Dzingel and benefitted from a questionable, quick whistle that nullified what appeared to be a Sebastian Aho goal while the Hurricanes skated six-on-five during a delayed penalty.

The goalie was swallowing so many pucks that at one point late in the period, the disc actually disappeared down the back of



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Markstrom's jersey, which led to a comical search for the puck while some disbelieving Carolina players started looking in the Vancouver net for it until shooed away by Canucks' Jay Beagle.

In the third period, Markstrom made a brilliant glove save on Aho's open shot from the slot, and two more on Warren Foegele from the edge of the crease.

And Markstrom did all this the day Canucks coach Travis Green announced that backup Thatcher Demko, vital to Vancouver during Markstrom's two leaves of absence this fall, suffered a concussion during an optional practice on Wednesday.

Markstrom may need to carry the team now.

With back-to-back weekend road games in San Jose and Las Vegas, and the Canucks coming off a 4-1 Tuesday loss to the Toronto Maple Leafs, Thursday's game was one Vancouver absolutely needed to have.

"It's a great win," Markstrom said. "We talked about how important this game was. We're going on a couple-of-games road trip here and you don't want to be in the hole when you get to the road. So a huge win. Just to stick to it and don't get derailed and lose our purpose and how we should play ... it was a great game."

"I feel like I corrected the stuff I didn't like in the Toronto game. I didn't play a game for about a week before that, so I was a little too excited and little tense for that Toronto game. I just wanted to be a little loose and relaxed, and I thought we did that."

The Canucks were too loose and relaxed in front of Markstrom, but won it when Pettersson skated off the bench and on to a centring pass from Brock Boeser, correctly adjusted his line to the net to collect the puck's ricochet off a fallen stick, and zipped a backhand under the cross bar behind Hurricane goalie Petr Mrazek.

This wasn't a playoff game, like Roberto Luongo's brilliant 56-save performance in 2007 when the overmatched Canucks lost an elimination game 2-1 to the Anaheim Ducks. And it wasn't quite Kirk McLean's 45-save shutout against the Montreal Canadiens in 1991, when fans at the old Forum actually stood and applauded for the Canucks goalie at the end.

But you'd be lucky to find a handful of individual goaltending performances in Canuck history any better than what Markstrom produced on Thursday.

"They've got a lot of skilled players, a lot of fast players, and we kind of got in a track meet a little bit," Canuck winger J.T. Miller said of the Hurricanes. "Sometimes that's going to happen. But we found a way to get two; that's really all we care about right now. Marky was unreal."

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TSN.CA / No rest in the cards for Maple Leafs goalie Andersen

Kristen Shilton

TSN Toronto reporter Kristen Shilton checks in daily with news and notes on the Maple Leafs, who held a 12:30 p.m. MT practice at

Rogers Place in Edmonton on Friday ahead of Saturday's game against the Oilers.

Maple Leafs head coach Sheldon Keefe maintains that he didn't intend to ride goaltender Frederik Andersen into a seventh consecutive start against Edmonton on Saturday. But Andersen has played so well, it forced Keefe to change course, and deny backup Michael Hutchinson a planned start during the team's current four-game road trip.

"To be honest, the Calgary start [on Thursday] was the one that we were looking at for Hutch," Keefe said after the Leafs' practice on Friday at Rogers Place in Edmonton. "And then the way the Vancouver game went [with Andersen's 38-save performance], we felt we needed to go back with Freddie, and [will] again in this one here [on Saturday]."

Throughout the week, Keefe has referenced Toronto's recent favourable schedule – with no back-to-backs and days off between games – as incentive to stick with Andersen. He doubled-down on that again Friday, pointing out the Leafs won't play again after Saturday until Tuesday at home, when they host Buffalo.

Michael Hutchinson appeared to be set to start for the Maple Leafs on Saturday against the Oilers but those plans may have changed following the team's third period collapse in Calgary on Thursday. Kristen Shilton has more on Sheldon Keefe's decision to stick with Frederik Andersen.

The Leafs also brought in a third goalie for Friday's practice, Edmonton local Marc-Oliver Daigle from the MacEwan University Griffins, to shoulder some of the reps and keep Andersen fresh.

"We've got time between this game and our next," Keefe insisted. "Today is a lighter day and his workload hasn't been that great this week as a whole so we just feel like going back with him here is important."

It did seem like if Keefe wanted an opening to rest Andersen, Saturday's game would be the one to do it in. Andersen wasn't at his best on Thursday, allowing three goals in 2:30 of the third period and posting an .833 save percentage in the 4-2 loss, which is enough of a dip from his previously strong play to consider a break.

But that's not where Keefe's head is at, even if Andersen is now on pace to make over 65 starts this season.

"I think really you just want to have your best guy in as often as you can," Keefe said. "But without a doubt we want to be a team that eventually gets to a point where it doesn't matter who's in net."

Part of the reason Toronto isn't at that stage yet is the number of high-quality chances they're giving up every night.

According to Natural Stat Trick, the Leafs have allowed 68 high-danger scoring chances in their last six games, compared to generating 48 of their own. On top of that, the Leafs have been struggling under Keefe in the third period, posting the NHL's third-worst goal-differential (-10) in that frame since he took over the bench on Nov. 21.

Be that as it may though, Keefe sees the Leafs' issues as running further than any 20-minute segment.

"For me, it's not just the third period," he said. "I think third periods are where things catch up to you and the puck ends up going in your net but there's spurts of the game yesterday in the second period, and then of course in the Vancouver game as well [that weren't good], so those are the things we need to get out of our game."



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Since Sheldon Keefe took over as Leafs' head coach, Toronto has the NHL's third-worst goal difference in the third period, being outscored 17-7 by opponents, but according to Kristen Shilton, the team's issues go beyond keeping the puck out of the net.

It's not necessarily puck management that's burning Toronto either, but also an inability to stick to their structure when it matters most.

"It's more just the transitions, when the puck is free, when nobody really has it," Keefe explained. "But maybe the opposition has the upper hand and they're about to get it and [for us it's about] how quickly we get ourselves into some defensive structure, so that we get the puck back quicker. Those are the pieces I think we're struggling with the most and that's what's opening up the game a little bit."

When that happens, Auston Matthews thinks the Leafs would be better served through just making simpler decisions.

"I think we still have to find that happy medium where we're up a couple goals, or we're up a goal in the third period, and maybe not try to make a perfect play," he said. "I think sometimes you just have to live to fight another day and chip the puck in and get in on the forecheck or something like that. So I think there's still something that we're kind of going through and learning through."

The other part of the equation for Toronto to tighten up things in their own end is accepting that adversity will come, and approaching it with the right amount of mental toughness.

"It's not always going to go your way," said John Tavares. "It's unfortunate we gave up one really early in the third [against Calgary] and it's really just regrouping as quick as we can, focusing on the next shift and trying to grab that momentum back and not let things get away from us like they did. It's no question something we talk about and we focus on. But we have to really dig in even more than we think we are and just continue to stick together and understand how important the next shift is."

Keefe has tried to get the Leafs' focus onto consistent defensive zone play since he took over, and he isn't shy about admitting they have a long way to go as a team in that respect.

"Part of being a great possession team is being an elite defensive team," said Keefe. "If you're not an elite defensive team, you don't have the puck enough to be the possession team you want to be, so that's all part of it for us and that's where we have to have our greatest growth."

When the Leafs and Oilers clash on Saturday, there will be four former No. 1 picks between the two lineups: Tavares, Matthews, Connor McDavid and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins.

It's not often so many highly-touted former prospects face off in a single game, and it's not something the players themselves put much stock into. For Tavares, sharing a place in NHL draft history with Matthews has been a jumping off point to a different kind of conversation.

"I don't think specifically we talked about being the first pick, but I think we try to learn from each other in just how we play the game, how you approach it, how you try to be effective and how we continue to just try to get better," Tavares said.

At 29 years old, and the first overall choice from the 2009 NHL draft, Tavares is the oldest of the top picks that will play in Edmonton. He was actually a coach for a camp McDavid participated in prior to becoming an NHL draftee himself, but Tavares knew the now-Oilers'

captain well before that, having both come up through the Greater Toronto Hockey League's Toronto Marlboros.

"I met him when he was really young, when he was first entering junior and had a lot of attention on him," Tavares said. "I don't know who was teaching him then how to skate but would have been nice if that was around when I was playing."

The Oilers have been sliding a bit of late, losing three straight but still producing offensively with 10 goals in that stretch. Regardless of what the recent record shows, when McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are on the ice, they'll have the Leafs' full attention.

The Maple Leafs will continue their road trip in Edmonton on Saturday night and they know that a serious challenge awaits them, specifically with Connor McDavid. The team had high praise for the Oilers' captain and John Tavares spoke about how he has seen McDavid's path, which was similar to his own.

"We know who we're up against and they don't need much, if really any room, to make something happen," said Tavares. "So there's no reason to make it any easier for them. They're very dynamic; they're going to find ways to get the puck. We just have to defend well and really make them work for their opportunities and make sure we're not making it tough on our defence and our goaltending to have to deal with a lot of their time and space."

"They obviously have a lot of good skill so it's important that we manage the puck and limit turnovers and try to take away from their transition game," added Morgan Rielly. "They play with a lot of speed, so I think it's just really important that everyone is responsible with it, so we're not creating turnovers in our own zone and making sure that we're not giving up chances against."

Trevor Moore took a regular line rush in Leafs practice on Friday for the first time since injuring his shoulder on Nov. 15, flanking Frederik Gauthier and Jason Spezza on the Leafs' fourth line and looking primed to return from his 12-game absence.

Keefe wouldn't confirm Moore's status for Saturday, saying there were still some questions to be answered on a few players. But late Friday afternoon, the Leafs returned Nic Petan to the American Hockey League's Toronto Marlies, opening the door for Moore's return off Long Term Injured Reserve.

If Moore is still technically a game-time decision, Gauthier getting back in the lineup has been all but assured by Keefe. Gauthier has been a healthy scratch for the Leafs' last four games while Keefe said he was assessing some of Toronto's other depth forwards to determine what the club might have in them moving ahead.

Maple Leafs lines at practice:

Nylander-Matthews-Kapanen

Hyman-Tavares-Marner

Engvall-Kerfoot-Mikheyev

Moore-Gauthier-Spezza

Extras: Petan, Timashov, Aberg

Rielly-Barrie

Marincin-Holl

Dermott-Ceci



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Absent: Jake Muzzin (maintenance day)

Andersen

Hutchinson

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TSN.CA / Friday Five: After Brady Tkachuk's theft, Chris Pronger dishes on stolen 2010 Final puck

Frank Seravalli

Welcome back to the Friday Five, where we're pointing out quirks, quips and questions that pop up throughout each week of the NHL season.

1. Brady Tkachuk, puck thief

Chris Pronger had a nice chuckle when he saw Ottawa Senators pest Brady Tkachuk scoop up the game puck seconds after Cayden Primeau picked up his first NHL win on Wednesday night for the Montreal Canadiens.

Tkachuk told reporters that he was simply grabbing the puck to give to a young fan.

"Hey, maybe Brady's just trying to be a good NHL player cultivating fans in the community," Pronger said with his usual dose of sarcasm on Friday. "It's nice to see there's some passion is still in the game, that there are players still trying to get under the opposition's skin in the NHL."

Primeau said Friday that Tkachuk messaged him before the game and told him that he was going to take the puck.

"Nothing can surprise you with Brady," Primeau told reporters. "When people don't like him that's what he's supposed to do."

Tkachuk may have learned from one of the best in Pronger, a fellow St. Louisan.

It's coming up on a decade since Pronger, then with the Flyers, infamously rankled the Chicago Blackhawks during the 2010 Stanley Cup Final when he stole the pucks after Games 1 and 2 at United Center. Pronger said the sinister idea popped into his head after reading Blackhawks coverage in the newspaper.

"The media picks up on certain things and I knew that Chicago was into keeping pucks on the wall in their dressing room," Pronger said. "I was trying to piss 'em off. I think it worked. We're still talking about it!"

A Chicago restaurant, Harry Caray's, publicly offered \$50,000 for the puck's safe return. The side benefit to Pronger's puck theft was that once Ben Eager went after him at the end of Game 2, that was all anyone wanted to ask about, not that the Flyers lost both games to open the series.

His Flyers ended up one overtime goal away from a Game 7.

So where is the Game 2 puck now?

"It's a paperweight," Pronger said, laughing. "I have it sitting in my office somewhere here at home. Whenever we have people over, I like to show it off every now and again."

2. Tynan's 'freak accident'

The hockey world is breathing a sigh of relief with Niagara IceDogs goaltender Tucker Tynan in recovery following a severe skate laceration in an Ontario Hockey League game on Thursday night.

Tynan, a 17-year-old from Chicago, was on the receiving end of an inadvertent, skates-first collision with a London Knights forward driving the net. He lost a significant amount of blood before team trainers were able to temporarily halt the bleeding.

Tynan underwent surgery at Niagara Health System in St. Catharines, Ont., according to the IceDogs, and is listed in stable condition. The IceDogs postponed the remainder of Thursday's game, plus both games this weekend as "the team continues to recover from unfortunate events on Thursday."

The collision was a total accident, but is there any way to better protect goaltenders from skate cuts in the future?

"That is the first thing I thought of, with my 15-year-old son who is also a goaltender," said former NHL goalie Martin Biron, who is an analyst across the border from Niagara with the Sabres. "In this case, I think Tucker was really lucky that there was so much help around him at an OHL game with trainers and an ambulance and medical professionals."

Both Biron and resident TSN goalie guru Jamie McLennan referred to Tynan's injury as a "freak thing," not unlike the gruesome skate cut to Clint Malarchuk's throat in 1989.

After Malarchuk's injury, throat protection became more common for goaltenders, with both the dangling plastic shield that Biron wore and Kevlar-reinforced collars.

In Tynan's case, the skate blade appeared to catch him just between the top of his pad and the bottom of his hockey pants.

"Goalies are already wearing knee pads under their leg pads, so it had to even be above that, which we're talking is a really small area," McLennan said. "It's difficult to think how small of an area that is to hit. You probably couldn't do it again if you tried."

McLennan said he was never cut by a skate in his 18 years of pro hockey. Biron wore hockey socks that were Kevlar-reinforced in the calf area to make them cut-proof.

"It's really scary," Biron said. "The only thing I can think to do would be to find the technology to produce cut-proof undergarments [leggings] to wear underneath your equipment. I think we're always trying to make sure everyone is well protected, from youth hockey all the way up to the NHL."

— Vancouver #Canucks (@Canucks) December 13, 2019

3. NHL scoring is tapering off

There were two scoreless games in the NHL through regulation on Thursday night, the first time that's happened on the same day in the salary cap era. The last time it happened was on Oct. 15, 2003, when the Thrashers/Rangers and Flyers/Sharks both ended in scoreless ties.

(Remember when ties were a thing? Most of today's NHL players didn't grow up watching them.)

Two scoreless games through three periods helped contribute to a dip in scoring recent weeks. This season started at a record 6.2



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goals per game, right up there with that first penalty-filled season out of the lockout in 2005-06. In the last 253 games played since Nov. 7 – almost exactly half of all games played this season – there have been an average of 5.74 goals per game.

This most recent stretch of 5.74 goals per game is right about the average for each of the last 10 seasons, as illustrated by HockeyViz.com's Micah Blake McCurdy.

Scoring continues to fall. pic.twitter.com/2WLZLkHlkb

— Micah Blake McCurdy (@IneffectiveMath) December 12, 2019

4. Jack Eichel: MVP or MIP?

Is Jack Eichel the NHL's most valuable player ... or simply the most improved player? The answer is Eichel might be both.

If the season ended today, Eichel would certainly be on this voter's Hart Trophy ballot. Eichel, 23, has 22 goals and 24 assists for 46 points in 33 games. He's second league-wide in goals to David Pastrnak and sixth in points.

Eichel is just six goals away from his career-high of 28, set last season in 77 games. He is riding a 15-game point streak for the Buffalo Sabres, who sit in second place in the Atlantic.

It's a campaign that is reminiscent of Taylor Hall's Hart bid in New Jersey in 2017-18, when he compiled a 25-game point streak and helped the Devils sneak into the postseason. Hall finished 41 points clear of his next closest teammate; Eichel already has 17 more points than the guy (Victor Olofsson) he's fed for six goals with the primary assist.

"The biggest difference I've seen with Jack is in his shot quality," said Biron, who has seen every Sabres game this season. "It used to be that he would come into the zone and look to see who was behind him, coming with him to make a play. Now he's going for it, he's taking it to the net, and it's leading to better opportunities for both him and his linemates."

5. Coaching volatility

Coaching in the NHL is generally a two or three-year walk on a tight rope. Never more has that feeling been amplified than the last three weeks, with five coaching changes since Mike Babcock was axed by the Maple Leafs on Nov. 20 – including two for inappropriate or unprofessional conduct (Bill Peters and Jim Montgomery). All five coaching changes were made during a span in which Jeff Blashill's Detroit Red Wings didn't win a single game.

There were seven in-season coaching changes last year, which tied an NHL record. Every franchise in the NHL has turned over its coach at least twice in the salary cap era, except for Nashville and Detroit.

We might not be done this season. There has been speculation on the job status of Jon Cooper, Peter Laviolette and Blashill this season, all of whom appear to be safe for now.

That's left us with some incredible stats on job status, including this one: Carolina's Rod Brind'Amour is now the 14th longest-tenured coach in the NHL. He's been on the job 19 months, four days longer than Montgomery lasted in Dallas.

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