



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Canes' Sebastian Aho becomes Raleigh's most talked-about elf

By Chip Alexander

Sebastian Aho wasn't the game's first star Saturday as the Carolina Hurricanes faced the Florida Panthers at PNC Arena.

But Aho had a starring role.

The Canes center didn't have a point or assist as the Canes lost 4-2. But he seemingly had everyone's attention when the massive scoreboard showed "The Elf on the Shelf" Christmas production with, yes, Aho as the elf.

"You think the fans liked it?" Aho asked Sunday.

Told it might have been the highlight of the game for many in the near-sellout crowd, young and old, Aho beamed.

"If the fans liked it that's the whole point of the video," he said. "I'm happy it went over well."

Talk about perfect casting. Aho looked the part and while he did not have a word of dialogue, his facial expressions were perfectly posed as he jotted down the names of those who were being naughty to report back to the North Pole — general manager Don Waddell, for example, for opening a Christmas gift too early.

Aho said the filming by a Hurricanes crew took him about a half-hour or so Friday and it was strictly one and done, with no second-takes. The rub: it came on the day after the Canes returned from their long, five-game road trip.

"They asked me about a month ahead of time to do it," Aho said. "Then we get back and it was on an off-day for us. But it was fine. They had it all set up for me and it was a quick in and out."

Aho said he did not remember being in any big plays or have any acting parts as a kid in Finland. This might have been his acting debut. If so, he nailed it.

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said he did not get a glimpse of the Aho video during the game.

"Was it good?" Brind'Amour said. "I'm oblivious to that. Maybe I need to get more dialed in."

Told he looked like an elf, Aho said, "Is that a good thing or bad?"

At Christmas, always a good thing.

"Then it was a good thing to do," he said, smiling.

THE ATHLETIC

Forever the Optimus: Catching up with James Reimer about life in the NHL crease, as a Leaf and a Hurricane

By James Mirtle

It was New Year's Day, nine years ago, that James Reimer made his first NHL start for the Maple Leafs, a win in Ottawa.

The Leafs were then a team in turmoil, with their goaltending a mess, and he was a long shot to be the solution. Yet somehow the 22-year-old kid from tiny Morweena, Manitoba, who was fourth or fifth on the organizational depth chart, proved a lot of people wrong.

He somehow took that team on a run that fell just shy of the postseason.

And his own personal run is still going, this time with the Carolina Hurricanes, who he has a sparkling .927 save percentage with through 14 appearances.

My guess is he'll be in the crease come Monday afternoon in Toronto, too, making a very rare start back where he got his start.

James and I had a strong relationship when he played here, for whatever reason. We had a lot of good conversations, and even when the team (and he) struggled, there was an understanding that we were both there to do our jobs. Honestly, some of my favourite stories I wrote on the beat in

the early years were about his improbable rise, from [his origin story](#) to how [his faith helped him play](#) in the NHL.

So when I knew Reimer was calling this week, I didn't prepare a whole bunch of canned questions like you might for some interviews. I knew we'd land on an interesting topic. What I didn't realize was we would talk about getting old... but I guess that's a good landing point for anyone over 30 in the NHL these days.

Our conversation has been lightly edited.

So what's new with James Reimer?

Not much. Not much. Just hanging out. Got a bunch of kids now. Just trying to stay sane.

How many's a bunch?

We've got two girls.

Hey, I've got two kids. I know what that's about.

You know the circus. How old are they?

My son is almost 5 and he's in kindergarten. Actually he's singing in the Christmas play here in about a half hour. That's what we're getting ready for. As soon as we get off the phone,



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I'm running over to the school. And my daughter's a year and a half. We're still in the thick of the craziness. What about you? I remember Nevaeh was born a few years ago.

Yeah she's almost 3. And the youngest is eight months old. Hope.

That's nice.

Oh we're elbows deep. Yeah, no, but it's good. They play together.

Two's enough for us. I'm getting old man. At least you had your kids pretty young. That's good.

I don't know. Yeah it's good. It's funny – I don't know about you, but you always wonder how many kids you want to have and all of a sudden you have a couple and it's like 'Well, you know what... two might be good enough!'

I tell you, the people that have four, you wonder, what's happening? What is your life? I don't understand. I don't understand how you're doing this?

Do you hate yourself? You're signing up for this. This is your fault. Are you crazy? But no. It's good.

How's Carolina?

Good. Yeah. Honestly Carolina's been awesome. City's great. It's kind of our pace. Slower paced. And you know full of southern hospitality, so it's been a really good place to live.

What about in terms of on the ice? Your numbers are excellent so far this year. Is there an explanation for the start you're having so far?

Uh yeah. I don't know. I mean like every summer you work hard and you tweak a few things and whatnot but I think it's honestly just we have a pretty solid team here and I don't hate to use this word but I need to come up with a different word because I'm overusing it but you know I think we have an honest team. So you play the game the right way every night or if you take a period off – you know because you're human – you get back on it for the rest of the game. Guys' work ethic is there every night. So, you know, when you're playing the game the right way, usually everybody looks good.

So you went to Florida. You signed the five-year deal, with a different management group in place. It didn't really go down the path that you wanted it to. Was there some uncertainty for you last year about what was going to happen?

Yeah definitely. I mean towards the end of last year you didn't know what was... I mean obviously I knew I wasn't coming back but, I mean, you didn't know what was going to happen. If there was going to be a buyout or if you're going to get traded or you know what was going to happen. It was a weird summer of not knowing what was going to happen. It feels like the goalie market is always super weird or volatile or whatever you want to call it. Especially this summer with the cap not going up as much. It made for a really interesting summer for a lot of guys. Yeah I mean we just kind of sat around and just kept preparing like you're going to do something in the fall. And then obviously when Carolina traded for me (in late June), had some conversations with them and whatnot and it seemed like it would be a good fit. And so far things have gone well.

So you're 31 now, you're going to be 32 in March. Does it feel a lot different than earlier in your career?

Yes and no. I think so. I think you just have a better understanding about how things play out. I get jealous of all the young guys on the team, how fresh they feel all the time. (Laughs). No, but I always joke (about it). People sometimes ask 'How does it feel?' because I think I'm actually the oldest guy on the team by a few months. And so...

Wow.

Yeah who would have thought!? But I feel just as good as I did when I was 23 or 24 years old. But you've just got to work a little harder before you get on the ice to get that feeling. Yeah no I feel in comparison pretty much the same.

So I'm looking it up (on HockeyDB). It says Brian Gibbons is older than you by about two weeks.

Oh yeah that's right Gibby's on the squad now! That's right. (laughs)

There you go!

When he's not around, I'm a couple months older than Jordo (Staal).

You're six months older than Jordan. Well, it shows how young the NHL is now. It's amazing. I remember going into the dressing room when I started, 12 years ago or whatever, and it was way different. I felt young in there and I was, whatever, 26. And now, everybody's so young. Now I'm closer in age to guys' parents it feels like.

I know. It's crazy. It's crazy you know? But yeah I mean the skill level is crazy. I mean you see Svech the other night again (with the lacrosse goal). It's just not even fair. So, you know. Good for them.

Did you learn something about watching Luongo play into his late 30s that maybe you can take with you in your career?

Uhhh you know honestly just the preparation I think. Honestly I learned a lot of things (from him). I could talk a long time about the way he played and prepared and whatnot, but just everyday was Groundhog Day, in a really good way. You know what I mean? He just brought a high level of preparation and play/compete every day. In a way, it's kind of funny, only in the last year or two would, as a young guy you think you're invincible and you don't really have to warm up or whatever before you get on the ice. If you're on the road or something and guys want to get out early it's like okay I'll just jump out early, you don't have to worry about pulling a groin or getting warmed up or whatever. And as you get older, you've just got to take care of your body better and better to keep playing at a high level. What I learned from him is what I said earlier. You're more cognizant and aware of what you need to do to be at your best and so that was something that he did really well. He had his routines that he did on the ice and whatnot and obviously when you're a goalie late in the years like he was it's even more important. He stuck with it and was the ultimate pro. That's one thing I took for myself.

I'm just looking here... have you played a game at the Air Canada Centre recently? You haven't had a start there in quite a while now.



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Not for a while. I think it was my second year in Florida...

Looks like '16-17.

Really? I thought was one... I got schmucked in my head my last start there. I came out halfway through the second. I don't know what year that was.

Anyway, it's been a long time. When you come to Toronto, is there still... how does that feel for you? Is there a lot of nostalgia?

Yeah. I mean it's funny you know, as the years go on, it's time passes and things get less and less (that way). But still you land and you're driving and you see where I lived – I lived right off the Gardiner (Expressway) for most of my time there – and then you walk into the rink, there's a lot of memories. There's still some of the same support staff there and you definitely get that nostalgia. But I think also what lessens it a lot, too, is there's been so much turnover of guys. I think Rielly might be the only guy left there? You know. And so I think also changes a lot of things, too. You see the Toronto Maple Leafs and it's a totally different team than the one you suited up for. There's nostalgia when you play against guys that are now on different teams that you played with during that era, too. Whether it's JVR or Bozak or Gards – now he's on our team. A lot of those feelings are connected to the players you played with. But the other half is obviously the city and the fans and the rink itself.

Do you still run into Leafs fans around the league? Do you still get them coming up and talking to you about those years?

Yeah. I would say so. Even in the summer. Honestly Leafs fans are everywhere. They've got a massive following, right? You still run into the odd fan here and there.

Do they still call you Optimus Reim?

Yeah some of them do! Thanks to them. That's a [nickname](#) that's stuck with me. It's given me a theme for my masks for my career.

You still have that on your mask?

Yeah. Still every mask has some form of Optimus Reim on there.

So that's like the beginning of your career sticking with you. I mean it's been almost 10 years since you broke into the league. Hard to believe.

Yeah I know time flies. It's crazy.

What are some of your goals for this season and for your career going forward? How are you looking at things?

Obviously the ultimate goal is to win a Cup right? That's pretty standard. You know, I think just win. Honestly, you look at my career, and when you're just starting off, the world's your oyster. All things are possible. And as you play longer and longer, the window to win, it shortens. So to have a team like the 'Canes, I think we have a great chance to do some damage. In the playoffs, every team is dangerous. So it's by no means a given or nothing like that, but I think we have the group to be able to come together and do something special. That doesn't come around very often. For me, it's do my part and try to win games when I get the nod and give these guys the best chance.

Do you still feel like you have something to prove? You have a tough year in Florida and... it must be as a goalie that you've got to prove yourself every year unless you're Carey Price or something? It's all based on your last start and your last month and all of that. It feels like it's never-ending pressure being a goalie.

Yeah. I mean there is no taking your foot off the gas. It's what have you done for me lately? How are your last five starts? The league's too good. Goalies are too good. Players are too good to sit back and pat yourself on the back. When the season's over, then you can take a couple months to congratulate yourself – or the opposite – but yeah no. It's every year. You're pushing yourself and trying to make yourself the best you can be. Because even if you play for 15 years, it's a short career, so you've got to try to make the most of it.

Do you know how many career NHL games you've played now?

I want to say like 340-ish. That's my guess.

Yeah so your last game was 350. That was kind of like a milestone game. 400's coming for you. I remember when you started, the year you made the Leafs, you were like fourth or fifth in their system, no one in the organization was talking about you, and you were a fourth-round pick. And then you get called up and you play as well as you do and, well, you've had a really unique, remarkable journey in hockey since then. Does it feel that way to you?

Yeah. I mean it feels like, yeah, maybe unique is the best way to put it. Obviously, I feel like every year, it's another experience. Whether it's a high or a low or whatnot. It's just another treat, another gift. Another gift from the Good Lord, right? It's been a very interesting career and some really cool experiences. It's funny. When you're coming up through junior or even playing in the Coast and the AHL, it's, you always have this, for myself, this deep-down belief, that you can do it. I don't know where that comes from. But it's deep down. Yet superficially you're always like I don't know. It just seems so far away. The NHL seems so far away. It seemed like it was impossible. But you just stuck with it and believed like I said deep down and lucky for me things worked out. It's been a fun career so far.

I've got a few Carolina questions. What's it been like playing for Rod Brind'Amour?

Great. Really good. I talk about the identity of our team and we've got a bunch of great guys who work hard and have a lot of integrity and honesty and approach the game the right way and that stems down from his leadership. The way he approaches the game. The way he carries himself. You can tell the way he coaches and the way he treats us is just the way he lives his life so there's nothing fake. There's nothing dressed up. It's just straight from the heart. For that reason, makes it pretty easy to get behind him.

What's it been like playing on a team with Jake Gardiner again? Do you guys ever talk about your days with the Leafs together?

The good ol' days?

In some ways.



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No, we reminisce for sure. We talk about back in the day, guys we played with, coaches, scenarios, situations, whatnot. It's fun. Often it's funny too because the young guys will ask us because they hear the stories or they play against Toronto and they ask what was it like? This and that. It's been fun playing with him.

Jake [says](#) it's night and day, Toronto and Carolina, just like a lot of it. It's completely different.

It's funny seeing him in that scenario. I mean I was him three years ago when I went to Florida. Obviously I had a short stopover in San Jose, which was a lot of fun and learnt a lot. That kind of was maybe a nice in-between. But definitely night and day. It's interesting when you play for a non-hockey market team. It's good. You're just playing hockey. You're going out with the guys, having fun playing hockey. Even still the fans in Carolina are awesome. It's loud in our rink. It's been a really fun place to play.

Does Svechnikov do that move in practice? Do you ever have to try and stop that?

Yeah. The funny thing is that it doesn't work in practice. But it works in games.

It doesn't work?

I don't know why. Maybe there's too much snow on the ice or whatnot. But usually it doesn't work in practice. But it works in games, so that's all that matters.

Would you have a plan for that move if it came to it and you had to stop that? What are you supposed to do – like stand up if you see that happening?

Yeah I don't know. I don't know if I want to say. Maybe people will know then! Honestly I think you do what Helly did (earlier in the week against the Jets) – you try and meet it with your hand. And it just found a way in. But I think the main thing is you have to see it coming and if you see it coming then you maybe kind of prepare for it. But yeah I mean it's one of those things where it's obviously just a high talent, high skill move. And hopefully you have what it takes to stop it.

The kids in the league are just incredible now aren't they? We see it with Marner and Matthews – the puck skills that guys have is just unreal.

Yeah. And you know what it is, too, that I find? These kids – I don't know, whatever – they just love playing the game. Svech is always the last guy off the ice with our team. He's always just playing with the puck and playing little games after practice and always just working on different things. Same with Turbo (Teravainen). He's always just playing around. Just having fun after practice and it maybe doesn't look like much when you're just watching then all of a sudden you see him

doing some of that stuff in games and it just translates. When you're having fun then the game's maybe a little easier.

What was it like reading Steve Dangle's book?

Uhhh... well you know what. I... hmmm.

There's that picture of you reading it on the dock and he sends it out all the time.

(laughing) Yeah I know.

Is that just a photoshoot! You didn't actually read the book?

(laughs) I have yet to read the book.

All right. The secret's out.

It's still on my list of books to read. (The photo) is to help the good fellow out. But I am actually a bookworm so it's not false in that way. I do intend to read it.

I'm sure in the summer you don't want to read about hockey and Toronto and stuff like that.

No, you know, I've got that book and [Cujo's book](#)...

Cujo's book is apparently amazing. His back story and everything.

Yeah that one's on my list. On my stack at home to read. And I've got another book, too, what's his face, the guy that got cut by a skate, how come I can't remember his name...

Malarchuk.

Malarchuk!

My guy Dan [wrote that](#). He did a great job.

Oh nice. That book was given to me, too. Those three books are on my list of must reads.

My guess is you don't know about starting Monday (in Toronto) yet, but are you hoping that you do? For old time's sake that you're in there.

Yeah. Yeah it'd be fun. I mean every game's an opportunity. Every game's fun so yeah, no, it'd be good to play. And both these next games, against Florida and Toronto, so both of them against old teams. (Petr Mrazek started in a loss to Florida on Saturday.)

Well, like you said, always something on the line.

Yeap. Every day. Every darn day.

Well, thanks for taking the time out to talk to me. Appreciate it. Maybe I'll see you at the rink on Monday.

For sure. That'd be great. And have fun at the Christmas concert tonight.



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Revisiting 10 bold Hurricanes preseason predictions before we ring in the New Year

By Sara Civian

TORONTO — Happy Hanukkah and an early Merry Christmas, y'all. Hope you're enjoying time with friends and family, and all the good hockey, of course.

In the spirit of reflecting on the year that was ahead of a brand new decade, let's check back in on our boldest predictions of the preseason and see how they're holding up.

1. The Hurricanes will make the playoffs again

Original boldness: 🔥🔥🔥

I gave the Hurricanes' playoff chances three out of five fire emojis in the original post because of how stacked the Metro division is. I was right about that, but wrong about who would be the toughest contenders.

Current rankings:

Capitals: 57 points
Islanders: 49 points
Hurricanes: 46 points
Penguins: 46 points
Flyers: 45 points
Rangers: 38 points
Blue Jackets: 38 points
Devils: 27 points

The Devils are far-and-away the biggest disappointment of the season, but the ... Islanders? Yep. The Islanders were there to pick up their spot in the rankings.

I mean, the Big, Bad Islanders? Who woulda thunk it?

Barry Trotz, man.

I figured the Flyers would be sleepers, and clearly they've got some of that magic teams get when they seem to enjoy each other (see also: The Hurricanes).

But the Canes are right where they need to be, and as stated in the original post — it starts with head coach Rod Brind'Amour.

In Denver, after the Hurricanes came from behind to beat the mighty Avalanche with three goals in three minutes, I asked Brind'Amour why they're able to do things like that so often.

"Well, first of all, that's their job ..."

Let's update this prediction by subtracting precisely one (1) fire emoji

Boldness on Dec. 22: 🔥🔥

2. Andrei Svechnikov will score 30 goals

Original boldness: 🔥🔥

Ha. How cute of us.

Surprise surprise, the magician already has 15, 36 games in. Two of them are a kind of goal literally no one else has pulled off in the NHL.

Maybe the question now is will Andrei Svechnikov score 30 lacrosse goals ... or should we say "Svechs".

Boldness on Dec. 22: 🔧

3. If there is a playoff run, Justin Williams will return

Original boldness: 🔥🔥🔥🔥

The Justin Williams situation was seriously uncertain upon his original announcement, and the Hurricanes were mostly happy to leave him alone.

Except for Tom Dundon, who I'm told keeps a (mutual, obviously) close relationship with Williams although the Hurricanes owner has stepped out of the limelight this season. Point of that is, of course Williams still cares about the Hurricanes and how they're trending even when he's not a part of it, and he wants to grow hockey interest in Raleigh. That's part of the reason he left to hang out with and coach his kids.

The Kings actually invited him to Los Angeles for Kings vs. Hurricanes and he turned it down because his son had a tournament.

Brind'Amour joked a few times since Williams took a leave of absence, if you will, that he'd get sick of them soon and he'd come back.

One former NHL coach who once coached Williams told me Williams is "way too good" not to keep playing.

Well, folks, he started skating on his own about a month and a half ago.

He wants to come back, and he wants to work it out with the Hurricanes.

The question becomes where he fits and if the Canes can make it work with the cap space. Stay tuned for more on all of that.

Boldness on Dec. 22: 🔥🔥

4. The Storm Surge hiatus will resume unless Williams comes back

Original boldness: 3.5 angry Don Cherrys

Well, that rating scale aged well.

As we all know now, the Storm Surge did, in fact, return. But I think we can all agree it's not as bold as it was in the Williams era.

Brian Pesce even tweeted that they need to step it up.

As always, I don't really have an opinion on the Surge. I think it's great the fans love it so much and the players enjoy doing it. I guess I actually prefer what they're doing most nights now — something a little different to show fan appreciation, but not over the top.

Boldness on Dec. 22: Pour one out for Don Cherry

5. There will be a goalie controversy between Petr Mrazek and Alex Nedeljkovic at some point this season

Original boldness: 🔥🔥🔥

Maybe for 1A ...



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Of all the things to be wrong about, I think many of us struck out on James Reimer.

It turns out Nedeljkovic struggled along with the rest of the Checkers to get going at the beginning of the season. He's picked it up as of late, but not convincingly enough to start any sort of controversy with Reimer or Petr Mrazek, who has been fine as well.

You know how it goes with goalies, though. As Reimer said in his one-on-one with The Athletic's James Mirtle, it's "What have you done for me lately?" It's "How were your last five starts."

Boldness on Dec. 22: 🔥🔥🔥

6. Warren Foegele is the real deal

Original boldness: 🔥🔥🔥🔥

As I wrote after he became the fifth Hurricane in franchise history to score two shorthanded goals in Calgary (and the first to get his first two shorthanded goals in the same game), I still have no idea what to make out of Warren Foegele.

And I think that's a good thing.

According to Natural Stat Trick, Foegele is 80th in the league in expected goals with 8.97 — that's more than folks like Nazem Kadri, Brayden Point, admittedly struggling Johnny Gaudreau, noted back-checker Patrik Laine and ... Evgeni Malkin (OK, he was hurt for a long time.)

Foegele is young, and I still believe he'll grow into an extremely valuable second-line winger. He can keep up with anyone's pace, sometimes he just doesn't know what to do with all that power.

He'll figure it out.

Boldness on Dec. 22: 🔥🔥🔥

7. A defenseman will get traded, but it won't be Justin Faulk

Original boldness: 🔥🔥🔥🔥

Hey idiot, you're an idiot!

Boldness on Dec. 22: 🔥🔥🔥🔥

8. The lines will look almost unrecognizable from opening night to the end of the season

Original boldness: 🔥

The Rod Brind'Amour blend-o-rama jury is still out.

Boldness on Dec. 22: 🔥🔥

9. Jordan Staal will be named captain

Original boldness: 🔥🔥🔥

At the time, I wrote this was pretty much a no-brainer with former co-captain Faulk gone and knowing Brind'Amour. Brind'Amour has a meticulous plan when it comes to the young stars, and the antithesis of it would be naming any of them captain.

Just play your game.

Staal can obviously handle the "heat" of the big, bad Hurricanes media AKA me asking him his favorite color. The guys look up to him. You could just tell when I asked Sebastian Aho how happy he was that Staal got two in the win at Winnipeg.

"He's the man, you know?"

Boldness on Dec. 22: 🔥

10. Celebrity shot

The full original prediction:

"Why not ask the Hurricanes themselves which teammate is going to have a big year?"

Sebastian Aho, without hesitation: 'Svech.'

Lucas Wallmark: *slowly raises finger and points at Aho*

Dougie Hamilton: 'You're really springing this on me. Svech.'

#SvechIsReady"

Since then, no one is springing Svech questions on Hamilton anymore — he joked on the road a few weeks ago after a scrum that all he ever talks about is Svechnikov. But if I'd asked more Hurricanes this one, I'm sure someone would've said Hamilton.

They'd be right.

Aho found his mojo, and you know what, with his well-documented early season struggles throughout his career, I've been thinking about The Offer Sheet (2019, Rated R for profanity).

Of course, he didn't want to risk missing camp.

He's harder on himself than any of us are during his October droughts. He knew he had to go through it to get to the November heater.



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Bag of Jerks: The latest on Justin Williams, trade deadline talk and your favorite player's favorite player

By Sara Civian

The Hurricanes just snagged nine of 10 possible points for the first time in franchise history on a road trip that lasted roughly 14 years and featured a detour in Banff National Park.

They played their most convincing hockey of the season. There was a James Reimer shutout. There was *another* Svechnikov lacrosse goal. There was a hilariously good penalty kill.

As always, y'all had a lot of questions.

Let's dive right in.

Is there any more information regarding Justin Williams's possible return?

Let's get the question of the hour out of the way. In last month's Bag of Jerks, I said it's more probable than not that he'd return, and that he'd started skating on his own.

Since then, I'm basically on the same page with colleague Pierre LeBrun. He confirmed last week Williams has been skating, and tweeted this: "Still no decision but possibility he comes back. Carolina obviously the front-runner but 'Canes cap situation also makes it a tight fit... other teams may poke around..."

My sources seem slightly more confident that he *will* come back, but as LeBrun mentioned there's much to work out.

Williams once said that Storm Surges work in mysterious ways, and so does he. My sense is that if he does return, the Hurricanes obviously want to work it out and are willing to move certain things around to some degree to do so.

Who sits when he returns? Right now I'd assume it's more about health. Erik Haula claimed Saturday that he's back for good, he's not looking back and there's no plan to play a few games then take a few off, but you never know with the nature of the injury he has. It seems it'd be a game-by-game call on the lineup.

Where he fits, how it works and the nitty-gritty warrant an article of their own. Look out for that in the coming weeks.

I'm sure there have been times when people/players have attempted to make you feel not as accepted in the sports reporting industry because you're female. Name a player who caused you to feel the exact opposite of that.

Actually, (disclaimer: I can only speak for my experience) I've never felt disrespected by a player — ever. And I love that when I ask a stupid question I get the same hard time as any of my counterparts would. That's real equality to me. Call me out on my bad moments so I can get better.

Trolls on Twitter and the occasional eye-rolling experience with male journalists are one thing, but it's always helpful to remind myself the people who actually matter show nothing but respect.

I loved the positive spin on this question. To reiterate, everyone just treats me normal. But I would say Williams, Dougie Hamilton and Calvin de Haan are three who really

stick out as players who have gone out of their way in completely different ways to make me feel like I belong.

Oh, and on the first day Nino Niederreiter arrived in Raleigh, I kept getting cut off in the scrum. It's no one's fault when this happens, I'm like four feet tall and we're all just trying to get our question in. But Nino remembered, and at the end of the scrum looked at me and said something like "Your turn."

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." — Maya Angelou

What, if anything, do you see the Canes doing prior to the deadline? (Besides adding one (1) Justin Williams)?

As you said, it depends on if they can add one (1) Williams, but my gut says there's one trade made for a little help up front.

Cats can have little a salami, as a treat.

Canes can have a little help up front, as a treat.

How many All-Stars do you think the Canes will have this year? How many SHOULD they have this year? (Feel like these are two different answers).

You're probably right. Have to remember the Metro is stacked and certain players with name recognition will always get the invite based on entertainment value alone — can't really hate on the NHL for that. They'll probably also want to invite more Blues players (when in Rome, play "Gloria" etc.).

I think Andrei Svechnikov and Hamilton will get in. Sebastian Aho is sure making a late push but three from the Canes could be a stretch in reality.

Honestly, I just hope Laila Anderson has fun.

Who is the Canes MVP so far this season?

(Insert Svechnikov screaming 'LET'S GO DOOOOOOOGIE' here)

Who is the most fun person in the Canes organization that no one knows about?

That would be Registered Massage Therapist Tristan Simmons. He's always up to something. He's the guy trusted with the post-game playlist — he's behind all those funny/timely songs and certified jams that come on after the player of the evening gets to pick his tune.

Trevor van Riemsdyk hand delivers him and the rest of the medical staff a crossword puzzle most mornings.

The most interesting man in the world.

One day I will thank him for all the viral tweets.

Ten Canes who aren't going anywhere, anytime soon? I need a jersey.

Ten?

Gestures toward GM Don Waddell's bold trade history



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Legally Aho can't go anywhere, and he's also decent at hockey so that's a safe bet. Svechnikov and Jaccob Slavin are two more you can be confident in.

If it were me, I'd probably just buy a Rod Brind'Amour jersey. I think it's cool he was a Hurricanes legend as a player and is already trending that way as a coach.

Best thing you ate and drank (that wasn't White Claw) during this most recent roadie?

First of all, no White Claw (#sponsored) in Canada. They have something called Nutrl, and since inquiring minds want to know, it isn't even in the same atmosphere as White Claw (#sponsored). But it'll get the job done, and frankly, you don't need much more than that out of a spiked seltzer.

Best thing I ate was elk in Banff, no question. If I'm being honest it was anywhere from 45-50 percent of the reason I made the trip. I literally ate it for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I was elk drunk. I was tweeting at PETA. I probably have rabies.

It was worth it.

Do you think the Hurricanes extend Erik Haula or let him walk?

It depends on several things and it's still too early to know for sure, I'd say, but he's going to rightfully ask for a lot after his start to the season. Is Williams coming back? How long? How much will Svechnikov get?

As great as Haula's been — Brind'Amour described his presence as allowing the rest of the puzzle to fit together — it might just not be possible with the cap situation.

Which player gives the best/most fun interviews on a regular basis?

Anytime Brett Pesce is available he's a must-interview for me. I wouldn't say "most fun," but he's really informative. He's willing to talk to me about systems and all that, and I usually walk away learning something.

Most fun these days is Reimer. Honest, funny, puts some thought into his answers, self-aware and easy to talk to. The rumors are true!

How freaking good is Jaccob Slavin? Am I biased as a Canes fan or is he just a flat-out star?

Three of Slavin's four goals this season are game-winners. He's No. 3 among NHL defensemen in plus/minus at plus-19 (Hamilton leads the league at plus-23) — all while averaging more than 22 minutes TOI and taking few penalties (only two of the Hurricanes' million so far this season).

He proved he could step up in the big moments for the Hurricanes in his playoff debut with 11 points in 15 games last season.

He's your favorite player's favorite player.

He's the type of defenseman you don't always think about during a game because you're pretty sure he won't mess up, but at the same time he turns any run-of-the-mill two-on-one pass breakup into a highlight reel event, and he doesn't cost the team a penalty in his process.

He sees the ice like a quarterback and he knows how to slow things down when his teammates clearly need it.

One panelist told *The Athletic* "Slavin is fucking unbelievable."

Slavin has never uttered a swear in his life, so I'm not sure he appreciates that, but to answer your question he's a flat-out star.

Could Reimer win the Masterton?

For sure.

What's the one thing you miss from Hockey Valley?

Funny you should say that, because the Hurricanes are probably the only NHL franchise that boasts everything I love about Hockey Valley, right down to the tailgating. There are college hockey-esque chants at games, there's a real community feel — especially tight bonds with the so-called early adapters, there are other sports in the area that take some of the spotlight so it still feels like your own thing and most importantly there are downright good guys on the team.

Penn State ruined college hockey. The Hurricanes are a Bunch of Jerks.

I clearly have a thing for an underdog story ... and fast teams that take 1,000 shots a night.

There's even a Gardiner brother here! (Jake's brother, Max, played at Penn State when I was there).

I was chasing the feeling I found covering Penn State when I came to Raleigh.

I found it.

If the Canes could improve one single aspect of their team game, what would it be?

I get that the penalty kill is on fire, but cool it with the stick infractions. Currently second in the league in penalty minutes behind the Sharks, who have Evander Kane.

Is there a legitimate rivalry between Carolina and Washington?

You can always tell there's a legitimate rivalry brewing between two teams when fans furiously deny it.

Like, why so mad if you don't care?

The emergence of the bad blood between these two has been fascinating because it's equal parts digital-age Twitter chirping (stay classy, carolina), vintage on-ice beef and timeless damn good hockey.

Is it a full-fledged rivalry yet? No.

Did I have to ask Warren Foegele about a former adult film star wishing him erectile dysfunction? Yes.

Favorite NHL players outside of Carolina?

Is this allowed? No one got mad at me when I tweeted about loving Elias Pettersson so here we go.

Elias Pettersson and Jake DeBrusk.

I played defense but I always secretly wished I had, like, literally any skill or I was at least fun to watch. I would just get a penalty anytime I tried to do anything fancy.



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Petterson has the rare combination of elite skill and hilarious, GIFable facial expressions. DeBrusk is an electric factory.

What's your favorite NHL city to be in if you have a few days to spare?

Vegas is a boring answer but I love it because I'm not the kind of person that would ever go there if it wasn't part of the NHL circuit, so I just walk around laughing the entire time like 'Wow, I'm seriously in Las Vegas right now in my finest grandma sweater.'

Real answer: Vancouver and Detroit are two places I'd live.

Sara, did you and/or the Canes visit The Roxy when in Vancouver?

Mentally I'm always at The Roxy.

If you were in charge of the sound system what would you play as a song to announce the start of a Canes power play?

"At Last" by Etta James.



Preview: Hurricanes at Maple Leafs

Monday matinee precedes three-day holiday break

by Michael Smith

TORONTO - Prior to the three-day holiday break, the Carolina Hurricanes and Toronto Maple Leafs square off in a Monday matinee.

After taking nine of a possible 10 points (4-0-1) on a five-game road trip, the Hurricanes briefly returned home and were topped, 4-2, by the Florida Panthers on Saturday night. Still, the team boasts a 7-2-1 record in their last 10 games.

"The tough part was we didn't get the result that I think we deserved in that one," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "The guys played hard. I wasn't sure what we were going to get based on the mental fatigue. Not the physical fatigue, but the mental grind they've been on. But, as a group, I thought we played well."

Rest Stop

Monday's matinee marks the Hurricanes' 37th game of the regular season, after which the team and NHL will pause for a three-day holiday break.

"We've got to grind one more game," Teuvo Teravainen said on Saturday. "Then, we get a little bit of rest."

Bolstered by their 4-0-1 road trip, the Canes are 12-6-2 on the road this season. But, Monday's game has some caution flags for the head coach.

"It will be interesting, to me," he said. "We'll get right back on the plane and go back out. That's the game that worries me."

Reim & Reason

James Reimer is set to make his return to Toronto, where he made 207 appearances for the Maple Leafs from 2010-16. Reimer, who was drafted by Toronto in the fourth round of the 2006 NHL Entry Draft, is expected to get the start in net for the Hurricanes.

In Reimer's last seven starts, all of which have come on the road, he's posted a 6-1-0 record with a 1.57 goals-against average, a .950 save percentage and two shutouts.

The Opposition

The Maple Leafs are riding a four-game winning streak and have been victorious in six of their last seven games dating back to Dec. 7. With a 7-3-0 record in their last 10 games, Toronto has surged into second place in the Atlantic Division. Austen Matthews ranks third in the NHL in goals (23) and leads his team with 41 points through 37 games.

"One of the best offensive machines out there," Brind'Amour said. "You've got some high-end talent, maybe some of the highest in the league, up front, for sure. I think they've kind of turned them loose a little bit, but there's a definite commitment to defense, too."



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Hurricanes at Maple Leafs preview

Gardiner faces Toronto for first time since joining Carolina as free agent

by Dave McCarthy

HURRICANES (22-12-2) at MAPLE LEAFS (19-14-4)

2 p.m. ET; ESPN+, SNO, FS-CR, NHL.TV

The Game

Jake Gardiner will play against the Toronto Maple Leafs for the first time with the Carolina Hurricanes at Scotiabank Arena on Monday.

Gardiner, who signed a four-year contract with the Hurricanes as an unrestricted free agent on Sept. 6, played his first 551 NHL games with the Maple Leafs from 2011-19. He had 245 points (45 goals, 200 assists) with Toronto.

Carolina's seven-game point streak (6-0-1) ended with a 4-2 loss to the Florida Panthers at PNC Arena on Saturday.

The Maple Leafs have won four in a row and six of their past seven games. They have outscored opponents 19-8 during the winning streak.

Players to watch

Hurricanes forward Teuvo Teravainen has five assists during a four-game point streak.

Maple Leafs forward Mitchell Marner has a seven-game point streak (four goals, eight assists).

They said it

"We've got to grind one more game, and then we get a little bit of rest. We have to put [the loss Saturday] behind [us], put everything for the next game, and that's it." -- Hurricanes forward Teuvo Teravainen

"It's not an ideal circumstance, but the fact we are coming off a day off and then we go right into the game, that's something. We'll come in, get right to it, and that's the beauty of these afternoon games -- you wake up, get a meal, get to the rink and play the game and when it's over, you still have time to do your thing." -- Maple Leafs coach Sheldon Keefe

Hurricanes projected lineup

Andrei Svechnikov -- Jordan Staal -- Warren Foegele

Nino Niederreiter -- Sebastian Aho -- Teuvo Teravainen

Ryan Dzingel -- Erik Haula -- Martin Necas

Brock McGinn -- Jordan Martinook -- Jordan Martinook

Jacob Slavin -- Dougie Hamilton

Joel Edmundson -- Brett Pesce

Jake Gardiner -- Trevor van Riemsdyk

James Reimer

Petr Mrazek

Scratched: Haydn Fleury

Injured: None

Maple Leafs projected lineup

Kasperii Kapanen -- Auston Matthews -- William Nylander

Zach Hyman -- John Tavares -- Mitchell Marner

Pierre Engvall -- Alexander Kerfoot -- Ilya Mikheyev

Trevor Moore -- Frederik Gauthier -- Jason Spezza

Morgan Rielly -- Tyson Barrie

Jake Muzzin -- Justin Holl

Travis Dermott -- Cody Ceci

Frederik Andersen

Michael Hutchinson

Scratched: Dmytro Timashov

Injured: Andreas Johnsson (leg)

Status report

Andersen, who started nine in a row before backing up Michael Hutchinson in a 4-1 victory against the Detroit Red Wings on Saturday, will start for Toronto. ... Haula returned Saturday after missing 15 straight games and 19 of 21 because of a knee injury.

Stat pack

Reimer has won six of his past seven starts. ... Hamilton has five points (one goal, four assists) in his past four-games. ... Aho, who has 99 NHL goals, has five points (three goals, two assists) in his past four games. ... Matthews has seven points (four goals, three assists) during a three-game multipoint streak.



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About Last Night: All Good Things Must End

The hot run was never going to last forever, but the Hurricanes have some things to fix to ensure that Saturday was a one-game blip.

By Brian LeBlanc

When he was coaching the Carolina Hurricanes - in either of his two stints behind the bench - Paul Maurice often referred to the first game after a long road trip as one of the most difficult games that a team can win. Often, it's the result of heavy legs combined with the requisite distractions that returning home entails, things that you don't have to worry about when you're city-hopping and living out of a suitcase.

The Hurricanes mostly did everything right to prove Maurice's maxim incorrect on Saturday, save for the small matter of actually winning the game. The Florida Panthers stole the game thanks to rookie goaltender Chris Driedger and a few ill-timed Carolina penalties, ending the Canes' point streak at seven straight games with a 4-2 win.

Even Superheroes Have Bad Days

Petr Mrazek has been as automatic as a goalie can be at home this season, but he was due for an inevitable clunker, and that bill came due on Saturday.

The Hurricanes allowed just two scoring chances in the third period, yet both of them ended up in their net. The first of those two was a comedy of errors. From three penalty killers dropping below the goal line to Mrazek getting way too aggressive on Jonathan Huberdeau in front of the net, gifting Huberdeau a wide open net, it was a textbook example of how not to kill a penalty.

The second, a partial breakaway by the suddenly-scorching Noel Acciari, left Mrazek in the Statue of Liberty pose, a look you never want to see from your goaltender. It was the second goal that Mrazek surrendered from a breakaway, joining Evgenii Dadonov's first-period tally, but it was the Acciari goal that really broke the back of the Hurricanes, who had pulled back to within 3-1 and were pressing hard for the next goal.

They eventually got that second goal, but by then they were trying to climb a mountain, one that was ultimately too high to summit.

What Time Is It?

When Bill Peters was coaching the Hurricanes, after a bad game he'd inevitably make a comment about how the Hurricanes failed to start on time. After the trip they'd been on, you could forgive the Hurricanes for not knowing what time the game actually started.

Tripp Tracy made the point during the first period that the Hurricanes were playing their seventh straight game in a different time zone. Even by the standards of the NHL

schedule monkey, who assigns games seemingly at random, that seems to be a bit ridiculous. The Canes' journey took them from Eastern time (Minnesota at home) to Mountain (Edmonton), Pacific (Vancouver), back to Mountain again (Calgary), Central (Winnipeg), Mountain for a third time (Colorado), and finally back to Eastern when they returned to Raleigh.

Let that sink in: there are four NHL teams located in the Mountain time zone, and the Hurricanes visited three of them on their road trip, none of them consecutive. And, for that matter, Saturday's game was functionally like another road game, since the Hurricanes go right back out on the road to visit Toronto on Monday, return home for Christmas, then head to Madison Square Garden on Friday. (December's jet fuel bill is going to be bonkers.)

While their play was seemingly unaffected at a macro level, what with their team Corsi and scoring chances sitting at 70% at 5-on-5 and an expected goals percentage of 65% in all situations, it was the little plays that cost the Hurricanes, ones that could easily be explained by mental fatigue. Jordan Staal was standing by looking at the play on Huberdeau's goal, which you can see above. Jake Gardiner tried to feather a pass that was intercepted by Brian Boyle, who found a streaking Dadonov for the opening goal.

Now, obviously we're nitpicking a bit here. No team is going to play a perfect game, and the Hurricanes have built enough more than a little goodwill with how they've played in the past two weeks to tolerate a dud game. Still, you can bet that when the Hurricanes gather for practice today, there will be more than a little video review to remind the team that there are things they can control, and mental sharpness is one of them.

[Requisite Gwen Stefani pun]

Erik Haula looked like he didn't miss a beat after being sidelined for more than a month. While he didn't score, he made his presence known on his very first shift, when he went straight to the front of the net and nearly scored. He went 10-for-15 in the faceoff circle, and his combination with Ryan Dzingel and Martin Necas looked every bit as dangerous as it had earlier in the season, when it was the line that carried the Hurricanes offensively.

(The comment, incidentally, is correct: Necas has to score there. It's right in his wheelhouse, and if he does, the Canes never go down by three and chances are we're not breaking down a loss today.)

It's so nice to see the Hurricanes give players a chance to rest and heal properly, after years of seeing players return at 70% and inevitably go back out injured again. Haula got a few days of practice, was matched with linemates he knows intuitively, and stepped right in like he had never left the lineup. Proper management of injuries has been a welcome development across the NHL in recent years, and when you saw how well



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Haula was playing against Florida you can see why it's so important.

We'll get a good sense of whether Saturday was a hiccup or the start of a trend on Monday in Toronto, when the Hurricanes face a Leafs team whose new-coach bounce has

mostly tapered off but remains quite dangerous. The last time the Canes and Leafs met at Scotiabank Arena for an afternoon game just before Christmas, Scott Darling surrendered a snowman. Here's hoping this one goes a little more according to plan.



Checkers head into holiday break on high note

by Nicholas Niedzielski

The Checkers are heading into the holidays on a high note after pulling off a 4-2 victory over Lehigh Valley.

The visiting Phantoms got on the board first, but a second-period surge pulled things back in Charlotte's favor. Gustav Forsling clapped a point shot home to tie the game, then Roland McKeown joined the rush and sniped a shorthanded goal to give the Checkers a lead heading into the final frame.

That third period wouldn't be without drama, as Greg Carey pushed his way through traffic and knotted the score before the midway point. But the Charlotte blue line continued to pitch in offensively, as Chase Priskie launched a shot that found the back of the net and regained the lead for the home side.

The Checkers would weather one final push from the Phantoms as Anton Forsberg stood tall in his 26-save performance, and a strong individual effort from Steven Lorentz into the empty-net sealed the deal for Charlotte.

QUOTES

Coach Ryan Warfosky on the win

We gutted one out there. Our backs were against the wall there early in the first period and we found a way to play the right way into the second and the third and got rewarded with some goals. It was just a gutty effort late in the third period.

Warfosky on defensemen stepping up offensively with six forwards out of the lineup

It's important. I thought Forsling was really, really good tonight and last night too. He's probably playing his best hockey right now, and Freddie Claussen same thing. He really stepped up. Fitzgerald and Sheppard playing fourth-line forward isn't easy at this level and they've done a good job of helping us out there.

Warfosky on heading into the holiday break with a win

It's something that we talked about a lot this morning. We can end this home stand on a really good high note going 4-2 and above .500 now and go into the break with a reset to get our heads away from the game a little bit and spend some time with family. It's super important when you don't

see them very often to see your family and enjoy life away from the game. It is a grind, and we've been grinding here for a hard three months.

Roland McKeown on the win

It was awesome. The last 10-12 games we were trending all upward and then I thought we came off the gas yesterday. To get back on it today before the Christmas break and establish the identity we're always seeking for I thought was really good. There's a lot of accountability and a lot of guys, including myself, weren't happy with the game yesterday, so you've got to put it on yourself to perform and I thought we did a better job of that today.

McKeown on players playing out of position

I thought Fitzy and Shep and Lacroix were all over the puck tonight and playing heavy in the offensive zone, and that's great. Guys know their roles and that's the key to winning. Everyone has a role on the team, and I give those guys huge props because it's not easy to switch positions at this high of a level.

McKeown on the break

It's nice. Obviously it's good to get time away because you only get one off day a week or so with the schedule. It's going to be really nice just to chat with family and relax and have that time away.

NOTES

The Checkers enter the holiday break with five wins in their last seven games ... This was the fifth time in the last six seasons that the Checkers played their last game before the holiday break at home. They won all five ... Starting with the Checkers' last goal vs. Hartford on Dec. 18 and going through tonight's first goal (three games), Forsling recorded a point on four consecutive Checkers goals (2g, 2a) ... Spencer Smallman extended his career-long point streak to four games (1g, 3a) ... In addition to having the AHL's No. 1 penalty killing unit at 89.8 percent, the Checkers are tied for sixth in the league with six shorthanded goals ... Of McKeown's three goals on the season, two have come in his last three games. This was his second career shorthanded goal ... Priskie has seven points (2g, 5a) in his last seven games ... The Checkers improved to 2-3-1 in their season



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series against Lehigh Valley. They are now two points ahead of the Phantoms in the standings ... Forwards Terry Broadhurst, Morgan Geekie, Colin Markison, Stelio Mattheos

and Kerby Rychel missed the game due to injury ... Forward Julien Gauthier missed out due to injury.

TODAY'S LINKS

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SportScan

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

1167477 Carolina Hurricanes

Canes' Sebastian Aho becomes Raleigh's most talked-about elf

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

DECEMBER 22, 2019 04:27 PM

Sebastian Aho wasn't the game's first star Saturday as the Carolina Hurricanes faced the Florida Panthers at PNC Arena.

But Aho had a starring role.

The Canes center didn't have a point or assist as the Canes lost 4-2. But he seemingly had everyone's attention when the massive scoreboard showed "The Elf on the Shelf" Christmas production with, yes, Aho as the elf.

"You think the fans liked it?" Aho asked Sunday.

Told it might have been the highlight of the game for many in the near-sellout crowd, young and old, Aho beamed.

"If the fans liked it that's the whole point of the video," he said. "I'm happy it went over well."

Talk about perfect casting. Aho looked the part and while he did not have a word of dialogue, his facial expressions were perfectly posed as he jotted down the names of those who were being naughty to report back to the North Pole — general manager Don Waddell, for example, for opening a Christmas gift too early.

Aho said the filming by a Hurricanes crew took him about a half-hour or so Friday and it was strictly one and done, with no second-takes. The rub: it came on the day after the Canes returned from their long, five-game road trip.

"They asked me about a month ahead of time to do it," Aho said. "Then we get back and it was on an off-day for us. But it was fine. They had it all set up for me and it was a quick in and out."

Aho said he did not remember being in any big plays or have any acting parts as a kid in Finland. This might have been his acting debut. If so, he nailed it.

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said he did not get a glimpse of the Aho video during the game.

"Was it good?" Brind'Amour said. "I'm oblivious to that. Maybe I need to get more dialed in."

Told he looked like an elf, Aho said, "Is that a good thing or bad?"

At Christmas, always a good thing.

"Then it was a good thing to do," he said, smiling.

News Observer LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167478 Carolina Hurricanes

Forever the Optimus: Catching up with James Reimer about life in the NHL crease, as a Leaf and a Hurricane



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By James Mirtle Dec 22, 2019

It was New Year's Day, nine years ago, that James Reimer made his first NHL start for the Maple Leafs, a win in Ottawa.

The Leafs were then a team in turmoil, with their goaltending a mess, and he was a long shot to be the solution. Yet somehow the 22-year-old kid from tiny Morweena, Manitoba, who was fourth or fifth on the organizational depth chart, proved a lot of people wrong.

He somehow took that team on a run that fell just shy of the postseason.

And his own personal run is still going, this time with the Carolina Hurricanes, who he has a sparkling .927 save percentage with through 14 appearances.

My guess is he'll be in the crease come Monday afternoon in Toronto, too, making a very rare start back where he got his start.

James and I had a strong relationship when he played here, for whatever reason. We had a lot of good conversations, and even when the team (and he) struggled, there was an understanding that we were both there to do our jobs. Honestly, some of my favourite stories I wrote on the beat in the early years were about his improbable rise, from his origin story to how his faith helped him play in the NHL.

So when I knew Reimer was calling this week, I didn't prepare a whole bunch of canned questions like you might for some interviews. I knew we'd land on an interesting topic. What I didn't realize was we would talk about getting old... but I guess that's a good landing point for anyone over 30 in the NHL these days.

Our conversation has been lightly edited.

So what's new with James Reimer?

Not much. Not much. Just hanging out. Got a bunch of kids now. Just trying to stay sane.

How many's a bunch?

We've got two girls.

Hey, I've got two kids. I know what that's about.

You know the circus. How old are they?

My son is almost 5 and he's in kindergarten. Actually he's singing in the Christmas play here in about a half hour. That's what we're getting ready for. As soon as we get off the phone, I'm running over to the school. And my daughter's a year and a half. We're still in the thick of the craziness. What about you? I remember Nevaeh was born a few years ago.

Yeah she's almost 3. And the youngest is eight months old. Hope.

That's nice.

Oh we're elbows deep. Yeah, no, but it's good. They play together.

Two's enough for us. I'm getting old man. At least you had your kids pretty young. That's good.

I don't know. Yeah it's good. It's funny – I don't know about you, but you always wonder how many kids you want to have and all of a sudden you have a couple and it's like 'Well, you know what... two might be good enough!'

I tell you, the people that have four, you wonder, what's happening? What is your life? I don't understand. I don't understand how you're doing this?

Do you hate yourself? You're signing up for this. This is your fault. Are you crazy? But no. It's good.

How's Carolina?

Good. Yeah. Honestly Carolina's been awesome. City's great. It's kind of our pace. Slower paced. And you know full of southern hospitality, so it's been a really good place to live.

What about in terms of on the ice? Your numbers are excellent so far this year. Is there an explanation for the start you're having so far?

Uh yeah. I don't know. I mean like every summer you work hard and you tweak a few things and whatnot but I think it's honestly just we have a pretty solid team here and I don't hate to use this word but I need to come up with a different word because I'm overusing it but you know I think we have an honest team. So you play the game the right way every night or if you take a period off – you know because you're human – you get back on it for the rest of the game. Guys' work ethic is there every night. So, you know, when you're playing the game the right way, usually everybody looks good.

So you went to Florida. You signed the five-year deal, with a different management group in place. It didn't really go down the path that you wanted it to. Was there some uncertainty for you last year about what was going to happen?

Yeah definitely. I mean towards the end of last year you didn't know what was... I mean obviously I knew I wasn't coming back but, I mean, you didn't know what was going to happen. If there was going to be a buyout or if you're going to get traded or you know what was going to happen. It was a weird summer of not knowing what was going to happen. It feels like the goalie market is always super weird or volatile or whatever you want to call it. Especially this summer with the cap not going up as much. It made for a really interesting summer for a lot of guys. Yeah I mean we just kind of sat around and just kept preparing like you're going to do something in the fall. And then obviously when Carolina traded for me (in late June), had some conversations with them and whatnot and it seemed like it would be a good fit. And so far things have gone well.

So you're 31 now, you're going to be 32 in March. Does it feel a lot different than earlier in your career?

Yes and no. I think so. I think you just have a better understanding about how things play out. I get jealous of all the young guys on the team, how fresh they feel all the time. (Laughs). No, but I always joke (about it). People sometimes ask 'How does it feel?' because I think I'm actually the oldest guy on the team by a few months. And so...

Wow.

Yeah who would have thought!? But I feel just as good as I did when I was 23 or 24 years old. But you've just got to work a little harder before you get on the ice to get that feeling. Yeah no I feel in comparison pretty much the same.

So I'm looking it up (on HockeyDB). It says Brian Gibbons is older than you by about two weeks.

Oh yeah that's right Gibby's on the squad now! That's right. (laughs)

There you go!

When he's not around, I'm a couple months older than Jordo (Staal).



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You're six months older than Jordan. Well, it shows how young the NHL is now. It's amazing. I remember going into the dressing room when I started, 12 years ago or whatever, and it was way different. I felt young in there and I was, whatever, 26. And now, everybody's so young. Now I'm closer in age to guys' parents it feels like.

I know. It's crazy. It's crazy you know? But yeah I mean the skill level is crazy. I mean you see Svech the other night again (with the lacrosse goal). It's just not even fair. So, you know. Good for them.

Did you learn something about watching Luongo play into his late 30s that maybe you can take with you in your career?

Uhhh you know honestly just the preparation I think. Honestly I learned a lot of things (from him). I could talk a long time about the way he played and prepared and whatnot, but just everyday was Groundhog Day, in a really good way. You know what I mean? He just brought a high level of preparation and play/compete every day. In a way, it's kind of funny, only in the last year or two would, as a young guy you think you're invincible and you don't really have to warm up or whatever before you get on the ice. If you're on the road or something and guys want to get out early it's like okay I'll just jump out early, you don't have to worry about pulling a groin or getting warmed up or whatever. And as you get older, you've just got to take care of your body better and better to keep playing at a high level. What I learned from him is what I said earlier. You're more cognizant and aware of what you need to do to be at your best and so that was something that he did really well. He had his routines that he did on the ice and whatnot and obviously when you're a goalie late in the years like he was it's even more important. He stuck with it and was the ultimate pro. That's one thing I took for myself.

I'm just looking here... have you played a game at the Air Canada Centre recently? You haven't had a start there in quite a while now.

Not for a while. I think it was my second year in Florida...

Looks like '16-17.

Really? I thought was one... I got schmucked in my head my last start there. I came out halfway through the second. I don't know what year that was.

Anyway, it's been a long time. When you come to Toronto, is there still... how does that feel for you? Is there a lot of nostalgia?

Yeah. I mean it's funny you know, as the years go on, it's time passes and things get less and less (that way). But still you land and you're driving and you see where I lived – I lived right off the Gardiner (Expressway) for most of my time there – and then you walk into the rink, there's a lot of memories. There's still some of the same support staff there and you definitely get that nostalgia. But I think also what lessens it a lot, too, is there's been so much turnover of guys. I think Rielly might be the only guy left there? You know. And so I think also changes a lot of things, too. You see the Toronto Maple Leafs and it's a totally different team than the one you suited up for. There's nostalgia when you play against guys that are now on different teams that you played with during that era, too. Whether it's JVR or Bozak or Gards – now he's on our team. A lot of those feelings are connected to the players you played with. But the other half is obviously the city and the fans and the rink itself.

Do you still run into Leafs fans around the league? Do you still get them coming up and talking to you about those years?

Yeah. I would say so. Even in the summer. Honestly Leafs fans are everywhere. They've got a massive following, right? You still run into the odd fan here and there.

Do they still call you Optimus Reim?

Yeah some of them do! Thanks to them. That's a nickname that's stuck with me. It's given me a theme for my masks for my career.

You still have that on your mask?

Yeah. Still every mask has some form of Optimus Reim on there.

So that's like the beginning of your career sticking with you. I mean it's been almost 10 years since you broke into the league. Hard to believe.

Yeah I know time flies. It's crazy.

What are some of your goals for this season and for your career going forward? How are you looking at things?

Obviously the ultimate goal is to win a Cup right? That's pretty standard. You know, I think just win. Honestly, you look at my career, and when you're just starting off, the world's your oyster. All things are possible. And as you play longer and longer, the window to win, it shortens. So to have a team like the 'Canes, I think we have a great chance to do some damage. In the playoffs, every team is dangerous. So it's by no means a given or nothing like that, but I think we have the group to be able to come together and do something special. That doesn't come around very often. For me, it's do my part and try to win games when I get the nod and give these guys the best chance.

Do you still feel like you have something to prove? You have a tough year in Florida and... it must be as a goalie that you've got to prove yourself every year unless you're Carey Price or something? It's all based on your last start and your last month and all of that. It feels like it's never-ending pressure being a goalie.

Yeah. I mean there is no taking your foot off the gas. It's what have you done for me lately? How are your last five starts? The league's too good. Goalies are too good. Players are too good to sit back and pat yourself on the back. When the season's over, then you can take a couple months to congratulate yourself – or the opposite – but yeah no. It's every year. You're pushing yourself and trying to make yourself the best you can be. Because even if you play for 15 years, it's a short career, so you've got to try to make the most of it.

Do you know how many career NHL games you've played now?

I want to say like 340-ish. That's my guess.

Yeah so your last game was 350. That was kind of like a milestone game. 400's coming for you. I remember when you started, the year you made the Leafs, you were like fourth or fifth in their system, no one in the organization was talking about you, and you were a fourth-round pick. And then you get called up and you play as well as you do and, well, you've had a really unique, remarkable journey in hockey since then. Does it feel that way to you?

Yeah. I mean it feels like, yeah, maybe unique is the best way to put it. Obviously, I feel like every year, it's another experience. Whether it's a high or a low or whatnot. It's just another treat, another gift. Another gift from the Good Lord, right? It's been a very interesting career and some really cool experiences. It's funny. When you're coming up through junior or even playing in the Coast and the AHL, it's, you always have this, for myself, this deep-down belief, that you can do it. I don't know where that comes from. But it's deep down. Yet superficially you're always like I don't know. It just seems so far away. The NHL seems so far away. It seemed like it was impossible. But you just stuck with it and believed like I said deep down and lucky for me things worked out. It's been a fun career so far.



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I've got a few Carolina questions. What's it been like playing for Rod Brind'Amour?

Great. Really good. I talk about the identity of our team and we've got a bunch of great guys who work hard and have a lot of integrity and honesty and approach the game the right way and that stems down from his leadership. The way he approaches the game. The way he carries himself. You can tell the way he coaches and the way he treats us is just the way he lives his life so there's nothing fake. There's nothing dressed up. It's just straight from the heart. For that reason, makes it pretty easy to get behind him.

What's it been like playing on a team with Jake Gardiner again? Do you guys ever talk about your days with the Leafs together?

The good ol' days?

In some ways.

No, we reminisce for sure. We talk about back in the day, guys we played with, coaches, scenarios, situations, whatnot. It's fun. Often it's funny too because the young guys will ask us because they hear the stories or they play against Toronto and they ask what was it like? This and that. It's been fun playing with him.

Jake says it's night and day, Toronto and Carolina, just like a lot of it. It's completely different.

It's funny seeing him in that scenario. I mean I was him three years ago when I went to Florida. Obviously I had a short stopover in San Jose, which was a lot of fun and learnt a lot. That kind of was maybe a nice in-between. But definitely night and day. It's interesting when you play for a non-hockey market team. It's good. You're just playing hockey. You're going out with the guys, having fun playing hockey. Even still the fans in Carolina are awesome. It's loud in our rink. It's been a really fun place to play.

Does Svechnikov do that move in practice? Do you ever have to try and stop that?

Yeah. The funny thing is that it doesn't work in practice. But it works in games.

It doesn't work?

I don't know why. Maybe there's too much snow on the ice or whatnot. But usually it doesn't work in practice. But it works in games, so that's all that matters.

Would you have a plan for that move if it came to it and you had to stop that? What are you supposed to do – like stand up if you see that happening?

Yeah I don't know. I don't know if I want to say. Maybe people will know then! Honestly I think you do what Helly did (earlier in the week against the Jets) – you try and meet it with your hand. And it just found a way in. But I think the main thing is you have to see it coming and if you see it coming then you maybe kind of prepare for it. But yeah I mean it's one of those things where it's obviously just a high talent, high skill move. And hopefully you have what it takes to stop it.

The kids in the league are just incredible now aren't they? We see it with Marner and Matthews – the puck skills that guys have is just unreal.

Yeah. And you know what it is, too, that I find? These kids – I don't know, whatever – they just love playing the game. Svech is always the last guy off the ice with our team. He's always just playing with the puck and playing little games after practice and always just working on different things. Same with Turbo (Teravainen). He's

always just playing around. Just having fun after practice and it maybe doesn't look like much when you're just watching then all of a sudden you see him doing some of that stuff in games and it just translates. When you're having fun then the game's maybe a little easier.

What was it like reading Steve Dangle's book?

Uhhh... well you know what. I... hmmm.

There's that picture of you reading it on the dock and he sends it out all the time.

(laughing) Yeah I know.

OPTIMUS REIM SUPPORTS BUMBLE-STEVE 📖🐝
@STEVE_DANGLE PIC.TWITTER.COM/WNIHEVGJEQ

— APRIL REIMER (@APRIL_REIMER) JULY 26, 2019

Is that just a photoshoot! You didn't actually read the book?

(laughs) I have yet to read the book.

All right. The secret's out.

It's still on my list of books to read. (The photo) is to help the good fellow out. But I am actually a bookworm so it's not false in that way. I do intend to read it.

I'm sure in the summer you don't want to read about hockey and Toronto and stuff like that.

No, you know, I've got that book and Cujo's book...

Cujo's book is apparently amazing. His back story and everything.

Yeah that one's on my list. On my stack at home to read. And I've got another book, too, what's his face, the guy that got cut by a skate, how come I can't remember his name...

Malarchuk.

Malarchuk!

My guy Dan wrote that. He did a great job.

Oh nice. That book was given to me, too. Those three books are on my list of must reads.

My guess is you don't know about starting Monday (in Toronto) yet, but are you hoping that you do? For old time's sake that you're in there.

Yeah. Yeah it'd be fun. I mean every game's an opportunity. Every game's fun so yeah, no, it'd be good to play. And both these next games, against Florida and Toronto, so both of them against old teams. (Petr Mrazek started in a loss to Florida on Saturday.)

Well, like you said, always something on the line.

Yeap. Every day. Every darn day.

Well, thanks for taking the time out to talk to me. Appreciate it. Maybe I'll see you at the rink on Monday.

For sure. That'd be great. And have fun at the Christmas concert tonight.

The Athletic LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167479 Carolina Hurricanes



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Bag of Jerks: The latest on Justin Williams, trade deadline talk and your favorite player's favorite player

By Sara Civian Dec 22, 2019

The Hurricanes just snagged nine of 10 possible points for the first time in franchise history on a road trip that lasted roughly 14 years and featured a detour in Banff National Park.

They played their most convincing hockey of the season. There was a James Reimer shutout. There was another Svechnikov lacrosse goal. There was a hilariously good penalty kill.

As always, y'all had a lot of questions.

Let's dive right in.

Is there any more information regarding Justin Williams's possible return?

Let's get the question of the hour out of the way. In last month's Bag of Jerks, I said it's more probable than not that he'd return, and that he'd started skating on his own.

Since then, I'm basically on the same page with colleague Pierre LeBrun. He confirmed last week Williams has been skating, and tweeted this: "Still no decision but possibility he comes back. Carolina obviously the front-runner but 'Canes cap situation also makes it a tight fit... other teams may poke around..."

My sources seem slightly more confident that he will come back, but as LeBrun mentioned there's much to work out.

MUCH TO THINK ABOUT. PIC.TWITTER.COM/8ER6A0QANY

— BILLY RAY CYRUS (@BILLYRAYCYRUS) JUNE 9, 2015

Williams once said that Storm Surges work in mysterious ways, and so does he. My sense is that if he does return, the Hurricanes obviously want to work it out and are willing to move certain things around to some degree to do so.

Who sits when he returns? Right now I'd assume it's more about health. Erik Haula claimed Saturday that he's back for good, he's not looking back and there's no plan to play a few games then take a few off, but you never know with the nature of the injury he has. It seems it'd be a game-by-game call on the lineup.

Where he fits, how it works and the nitty-gritty warrant an article of their own. Look out for that in the coming weeks.

I'm sure there have been times when people/players have attempted to make you feel not as accepted in the sports reporting industry because you're female. Name a player who caused you to feel the exact opposite of that.

Actually, (disclaimer: I can only speak for my experience) I've never felt disrespected by a player — ever. And I love that when I ask a stupid question I get the same hard time as any of my counterparts would. That's real equality to me. Call me out on my bad moments so I can get better.

Trolls on Twitter and the occasional eye-rolling experience with male journalists are one thing, but it's always helpful to remind myself the people who actually matter show nothing but respect.

I loved the positive spin on this question. To reiterate, everyone just treats me normal. But I would say Williams, Dougie Hamilton and Calvin de Haan are three who really stick out as players who have

gone out of their way in completely different ways to make me feel like I belong.

Oh, and on the first day Nino Niederreiter arrived in Raleigh, I kept getting cut off in the scrum. It's no one's fault when this happens, I'm like four feet tall and we're all just trying to get our question in. But Nino remembered, and at the end of the scrum looked at me and said something like "Your turn."

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."
— Maya Angelou

What, if anything, do you see the Canes doing prior to the deadline? (Besides adding one (1) Justin Williams)?

As you said, it depends on if they can add one (1) Williams, but my gut says there's one trade made for a little help up front.

Cats can have little a salami, as a treat.

Canes can have a little help up front, as a treat.

How many All-Stars do you think the Canes will have this year? How many SHOULD they have this year? (Feel like these are two different answers).

You're probably right. Have to remember the Metro is stacked and certain players with name recognition will always get the invite based on entertainment value alone — can't really hate on the NHL for that. They'll probably also want to invite more Blues players (when in Rome, play "Gloria" etc.).

I think Andrei Svechnikov and Hamilton will get in. Sebastian Aho is sure making a late push but three from the Canes could be a stretch in reality.

Honestly, I just hope Laila Anderson has fun.

Who is the Canes MVP so far this season?

(Insert Svechnikov screaming 'LET'S GO DOOOOOOOGIE' here)

Who is the most fun person in the Canes organization that no one knows about?

That would be Registered Massage Therapist Tristan Simmons. He's always up to something. He's the guy trusted with the post-game playlist — he's behind all those funny/timely songs and certified jams that come on after the player of the evening gets to pick his tune.

Trevor van Riemsdyk hand delivers him and the rest of the medical staff a crossword puzzle most mornings.

The most interesting man in the world.

One day I will thank him for all the viral tweets.

Ten Canes who aren't going anywhere, anytime soon? I need a jersey.

Ten?

Gestures toward GM Don Waddell's bold trade history

Legally Aho can't go anywhere, and he's also decent at hockey so that's a safe bet. Svechnikov and Jaccob Slavin are two more you can be confident in.

If it were me, I'd probably just buy a Rod Brind'Amour jersey. I think it's cool he was a Hurricanes legend as a player and is already trending that way as a coach.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Best thing you ate and drank (that wasn't White Claw) during this most recent roadie?

First of all, no White Claw (#sponsored) in Canada. They have something called Nutrl, and since inquiring minds want to know, it isn't even in the same atmosphere as White Claw (#sponsored). But it'll get the job done, and frankly, you don't need much more than that out of a spiked seltzer.

Best thing I ate was elk in Banff, no question. If I'm being honest it was anywhere from 45-50 percent of the reason I made the trip. I literally ate it for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I was elk drunk. I was tweeting at PETA. I probably have rabies.

It was worth it.

Do you think the Hurricanes extend Erik Haula or let him walk?

It depends on several things and it's still too early to know for sure, I'd say, but he's going to rightfully ask for a lot after his start to the season. Is Williams coming back? How long? How much will Svechnikov get?

As great as Haula's been — Brind'Amour described his presence as allowing the rest of the puzzle to fit together — it might just not be possible with the cap situation.

Which player gives the best/most fun interviews on a regular basis?

Anytime Brett Pesce is available he's a must-interview for me. I wouldn't say "most fun," but he's really informative. He's willing to talk to me about systems and all that, and I usually walk away learning something.

Most fun these days is Reimer. Honest, funny, puts some thought into his answers, self-aware and easy to talk to. The rumors are true!

How freaking good is Jaccob Slavin? Am I biased as a Canes fan or is he just a flat-out star?

Three of Slavin's four goals this season are game-winners. He's No. 3 among NHL defensemen in plus/minus at plus-19 (Hamilton leads the league at plus-23) — all while averaging more than 22 minutes TOI and taking few penalties (only two of the Hurricanes' million so far this season).

He proved he could step up in the big moments for the Hurricanes in his playoff debut with 11 points in 15 games last season.

He's your favorite player's favorite player.

He's the type of defenseman you don't always think about during a game because you're pretty sure he won't mess up, but at the same time he turns any run-of-the-mill two-on-one pass breakup into a highlight reel event, and he doesn't cost the team a penalty in his process.

He sees the ice like a quarterback and he knows how to slow things down when his teammates clearly need it.

One panelist told The Athletic "Slavin is fucking unbelievable."

Slavin has never uttered a swear in his life, so I'm not sure he appreciates that, but to answer your question he's a flat-out star.

Could Reimer win the Masterton?

For sure.

What's the one thing you miss from Hockey Valley?

Funny you should say that, because the Hurricanes are probably the only NHL franchise that boasts everything I love about Hockey Valley, right down to the tailgating. There are college hockey-esque

chants at games, there's a real community feel — especially tight bonds with the so-called early adapters, there are other sports in the area that take some of the spotlight so it still feels like your own thing and most importantly there are downright good guys on the team.

Penn State ruined college hockey. The Hurricanes are a Bunch of Jerks.

I clearly have a thing for an underdog story ... and fast teams that take 1,000 shots a night.

There's even a Gardiner brother here! (Jake's brother, Max, played at Penn State when I was there).

I was chasing the feeling I found covering Penn State when I came to Raleigh.

I found it.

If the Canes could improve one single aspect of their team game, what would it be?

I get that the penalty kill is on fire, but cool it with the stick infractions. Currently second in the league in penalty minutes behind the Sharks, who have Evander Kane.

Is there a legitimate rivalry between Carolina and Washington?

You can always tell there's a legitimate rivalry brewing between two teams when fans furiously deny it.

Like, why so mad if you don't care?

The emergence of the bad blood between these two has been fascinating because it's equal parts digital-age Twitter chirping (stay classy, carolina), vintage on-ice beef and timeless damn good hockey.

Is it a full-fledged rivalry yet? No.

Did I have to ask Warren Foegele about a former adult film star wishing him erectile dysfunction? Yes.

Favorite NHL players outside of Carolina?

Is this allowed? No one got mad at me when I tweeted about loving Elias Pettersson so here we go.

Elias Pettersson and Jake DeBrusk.

I played defense but I always secretly wished I had, like, literally any skill or I was at least fun to watch. I would just get a penalty anytime I tried to do anything fancy.

Pettersson has the rare combination of elite skill and hilarious, GIFable facial expressions. DeBrusk is an electric factory.

What's your favorite NHL city to be in if you have a few days to spare?

Vegas is a boring answer but I love it because I'm not the kind of person that would ever go there if it wasn't part of the NHL circuit, so I just walk around laughing the entire time like 'Wow, I'm seriously in Las Vegas right now in my finest grandma sweater.'

Real answer: Vancouver and Detroit are two places I'd live.

Sara, did you and/or the Canes visit The Roxy when in Vancouver?

Mentally I'm always at The Roxy.

If you were in charge of the sound system what would you play as a song to announce the start of a Canes power play?

"At Last" by Etta James.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 23, 2019

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1167555 Toronto Maple Leafs

Hockey's moment of reckoning is personal for Sheldon Keefe. A survivor of abuse, he opts to lead with positivity, empathy

By Rosie DiManno

Star Columnist

Sun., Dec. 22, 2019

There was a coach, once upon a Mike Babcock time, who spoke often of moulding hockey players into better men.

That's not the job, of course. The job is to win.

When Babcock couldn't do it with these Maple Leafs, he was fired in what felt like the blink of an eye. And that job passed to Sheldon Keefe.

What kind of man is he? Should we even ask? Does it matter?

Young, articulate, a breath of fresh air that immediately dispelled the heaviness which had enveloped the team, as if the players had been caught in a trough of low barometric pressure, the kind that makes the head throb and the nerve endings zap. Infused with a passion for hockey, for coaching, for positivity over haranguing negativity. The psychic uplift was instant.

And Keefe is much more one of them, in age proximity and character.

In a post-Babcock era, the Leafs — for all their chronic defects — have responded with enthusiasm, rebooted conviction and reignited moxie. It is not trite to say, with fun. There'd been precious little of that through the struggles of October and most of November as players and coach wore on each other. Babcock begged his players to grind, but instead he ground on them.

Keefe has possibly never used that word — grind — since assuming the reins. Rather, he's encouraged them to fly. To become more the slick creative team envisioned by his boss, general manager Kyle Dubas, who constructed a team which embodied that doctrine.

The transformation has been manifest and manifold. But the man now behind the bench is himself an avatar of transformative reinvention.

As not much more than a boy, Keefe fell in thrall to a terrible human being: David Frost. It's a subject scarcely mentioned these days and Keefe is long removed from the manipulated, compliant — also cocky and stroppy — adolescent he was, caught up in the bizarre cult of Frost that included, most notoriously, Mike Danton. Mesmerized by and in mental bondage to a toxic Svengali-agent who gnawed at the bones of his impressionable acolytes.

The question is asked: Has Frost contacted Keefe since he was named the 40th head coach of the Toronto Maple Leafs?

"No. Never."

We'll set that aside for now and return to it later. Because, to be fair, the measure of Keefe will be drawn from how he acquits himself in his current position, what defines The Sheldon Way of doing hockey.

A syllabus refined through 13 seasons in junior A, major junior and with the Marlies — seven of them as coach on Dubas-managed teams.

"There's the on-ice side and the off-ice side," Keefe explained in a sit-down interview this past week. "Off the ice, first of all, we're trying to put together a program that celebrates the positives in people. Also, pinpointing and working on the areas where we need to grow. While staying positive and showing us at our best, still being realistic about where we need to go and what we're capable of."

"Then, on the ice, reflecting that in a style of play that fits the group and the talent level that we have, and a structure that will help us put players in positions to succeed. Then also trying to plug the holes, if you will, defensively that have held the team back, in my opinion."

In the opinion of many, frankly, alarmed by the shortcomings of a defensively sketchy D-crew and the frequent disinterest by forwards in playing without the puck. Shortcomings baked into Dubas' unconventional blueprint. Keefe counters that his incarnation of structure cleaves to the Leafs' strengths, with a marquee netminder in Freddie Andersen as the final bulwark.

"One of the primary things that I've known with the team for some time, having worked with the team through training camp, through summers and in my role with the Marlies, is just the way the team defends and what it gives up in the middle of the ice. The high-end scoring chances that Freddie has to face. My priority coming in was to fix that, try to change the way in which chances and shots come at the goaltender."

The premise, Keefe expounds, is curtailing opposition shots from high-danger areas, trusting that Andersen will handle most of the toughies. "I believe there's a level of confidence that comes with that, so that when the breakdowns do happen (Andersen) is going to be sharp. It hasn't been perfect, but we've seen some progress in that area. We've had to give up different things in terms of the pressure that we have on the puck, or the time we may spend in our zone, but trying to limit what we're giving up in the middle of the ice and getting our players to value that space."

It has been, philosophically and tactically, a meeting of the minds between Dubas and Keefe — Boy Genius and The Professor, as the latter was known even in his junior playing days. Because he's always thought the game.

"The vision that we've had on the teams where we've been together, starting in the Soo and then coming here, has always been a work in progress, adapting and changing," says Dubas. "But I thought from the very first time when I met with Sheldon that the general foundations of our philosophy were close enough that it would be a good relationship where we had alignment."

"I was very young in my career and inexperienced. I knew 100 per cent how we wanted to play and the type of players that we needed. I wouldn't say that I had 100 per cent conviction in that quite yet. It began to really solidify — my philosophy about the game."

Keefe had previously worn all hats with the Pembroke Lumber Kings: owner, GM, coach. It didn't take long to go all in with his rather revolutionary manager.

"I don't necessarily think, when I joined him in Sault St. Marie, that I had that philosophy. But what I had was an open mind and a willingness to learn. I've really only ever worked with Kyle, whether the Soo or the Marlies and now here."

It was, he acknowledges, a dramatic shift from the traditional approach to hockey, though Keefe had also expanded his perspective under the aegis of Hockey Canada, attending coaching



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seminars and immersing himself in psychology — particularly examining the nature of interpersonal relationships.

Unlike Babcock, he isn't detail-obsessed. "Details are important, that's how you win. But I'm not one to get hung up on detail so much, because I recognize there's a high level of randomness that happens in this sport. The game is very unpredictable and very dynamic. You need to have dynamic thinkers. So there has to be a certain level of freedom and trust that the players are going to be able to adjust on the fly."

Overstructure, he suggests, can be stultifying.

"Take away some of those freedoms and you take away the skills that got these players here. That's an important piece of what we're trying to do: allow the players to make decisions on the ice and give them guidance to create frameworks in the decision-making process on the ice. But recognizing that things happen really fast. We have to trust that they're going to do the right things."

Unlike, say, Babcock, Keefe has known failure. While a points production league leader in the OHL, his NHL resumé is patchy and mediocre from six seasons with Tampa Bay, bouncing back and forth from the minors, and finally out for good with a shredded knee. But because he's always been a keen observer, Keefe watched and learned from the early travails of teammate Martin St. Louis in Tampa and the gaining of wisdom by Vincent Lecavalier, made Lightning captain at just 20 years old. And, of course, enduring a sometimes turbulent relationship with John Tortorella.

"Those are things that stayed with me forever. Despite my pro career being short, I went through a lot of things that really gave me a foundation when I started coaching."

More recently, he's observed the purported moment of reckoning in hockey as former players have come forward with disturbing stories about mistreatment, mental and physical abuse by coaches, and the destructive mind games some have utilized.

"It's a moment in time that brings attention to the way things were," he says. "But it's also a moment to reflect and see where the game has grown. I really believe there are substantial changes that have been made in terms of how coaches deal with players. I know it's a priority for me. I've gone outside of hockey to develop these skills, to learn how to deal with people, manage people. Since I started to coach professionally, I've put a priority on positivity, a priority on empathy, a priority on the well-being of players and staff."

For Keefe, it's been a deeply personal awakening. He was abused, mentally and emotionally, by Frost, who was very effective at ostracizing teenage players from their families. Keefe spent years as an eager pupil of Frost's harmful dictates. That was the Keefe who was loathed by teammates outside the clique of Frost disciples on the Quinte Hawks, the St. Michael's Majors and the Barrie Colts, among others. The Keefe who basically disregarded his coaches while being signalled from the stands by Frost. The Keefe who memorably refused to shake the hand of OHL commissioner David Branch at the 2000 Memorial Cup opening ceremony. The Keefe who was a witness at Frost's 2008 trial on four counts of sexually exploiting young hockey players. (Frost was acquitted. Keefe's testimony remains under a publication ban.)

Frost had also punched a player on the bench during a phase when he coached the Hawks, for which he was arrested, pleading guilty and receiving a conditional discharge. Perhaps most revolting was a photo that surfaced in 2001 of Danton's then-13-year-old brother wearing only underwear and taped to a chair. Frost and Keefe were present.

None of it turned Keefe off Frost back then. Now he has a different perspective.

"I recognize that I was put in a tough spot, in that I was a developing hockey player being coached by someone who was making me a better player, and had the trust of my family in order to do so. You're feeling like this is just how it is.

"I was a young person being influenced by a situation that, if I were to look back on it and had more control over things, I wouldn't put myself in that situation. I wouldn't want to put my kids in that situation. That was not a good situation and certainly not one that I would ever want to recreate as a coach and as a leader now. As an adult, I'm smart enough to know what's right and what's wrong, and would help guide anyone that's having those negative influences in their life.

"The changes that society has made and the sport has made to weed out people like that, in terms of what's acceptable, benefits everybody. I'm very grateful to have the opportunity to be a part of that change."

His well-documented background, though, required Keefe to beg for redemption and sell himself as a fundamentally altered man to the citizens of Pembroke when he bought the Lumber Kings.

"I had to spend time with very influential people, to reassure them, get to know my character. Ask them for a chance to earn their trust, their respect." He vowed that no Frost-like individual would ever be allowed near the team.

There was no definitive snapping of his ties with Frost, more a gradual distancing by Keefe.

"It was very clear that I had reached a point in my life where there had to be a clear separation if I was going to have any success (coaching). Creating that situation was step one."

Again, when Dubas fired Mike Stapleton and replaced him on the Greyhounds with Keefe, who was by then married and starting a family, Dubas dug deep for character appraisals. "I knew when we made the hire that it was going to be met with ... some blowback," says Dubas. "We did an exhaustive job in learning about who he was and who he had become." Extraordinarily positive feedback. And later, a much less controversial segue to the Marlies. Hardly a peep about darker days either when elevated to the Leafs.

"He's been a part of the Leafs organization for five years," continues Dubas. "In regards of who he is and the quality of character, what he's become as an adult and a professional, a husband and a father, I have no apprehensions about him being anything but the most solid character and person."

In speaking about Frost now, in late December of 2019, Keefe's comments become terser, more guarded. How often must he finger the entrails of a sordid past? He's obviously not that person anymore.

And yet, Keefe adopts an almost passive tone about Frost, a whispering echo of ties that once bound, as if the creepy puppet master could still yank at strings if he chose.

"The one piece that I'm grateful for is that he has allowed me, really since I started coaching, to just live my life, unaware of what's happening with him. He's allowed me to just coach."

Allowed.



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Defenceman Jake Gardiner returns to Toronto with eight points in 36 games as a Hurricane.

By Mark Zwolinski

Sports Reporter

Sun., Dec. 22, 2019

It will be interesting to see how Maple Leafs fans react on Monday afternoon when defenceman Jake Gardiner steps onto the ice at Scotiabank Arena as a Carolina Hurricane for the first time.

The 29-year-old Gardiner had plenty of success over eight seasons as a regular on the Toronto blue line, but two ugly playoff moments often overshadowed it.

"He was a great teammate," Leafs centre Auston Matthews said of Gardiner after Saturday's win over the Red Wings. "Great guy, super popular, loved to be with his teammates and we loved to be around him ... It will be awesome to see him."

Gardiner — who tested free agency and signed a four-year deal with the Hurricanes, worth \$16.2 million (U.S.) — has made a career as a puck-moving defenceman with elite passing skills. He was blessed with skating edges that even the Leafs' instructors felt they couldn't improve.

He appeared in 551 games as a Leaf — 10th most in franchise history among defencemen — while his 45 goals and 245 points rank 28th.

Beyond the numbers, he was as well liked in the dressing room as any Leaf in recent memory. Gardiner roomed with Morgan Rielly during his early years and played a significant role in Rielly's development into an all-star calibre defenceman.

Despite his contributions to the Leafs' progression toward the puck possession style that today's NHL demands, many fans only remember two Game 7 failures against the Boston Bruins: in 2013, when a Gardiner giveaway led to Patrice Bergeron's series winner in overtime; and 2018, when Gardiner went minus-5 in the deciding game.

Those moments have been hard to live down. Gardiner said as much before joining the Hurricanes.

"That's just the way it is: If you're winning, you're the best player on earth. If you're losing, you suck," Gardiner said. "Toronto will always hold a special place in my heart."

His play was under a microscope every game last season. The Leafs scored 60.5 per cent of their five-on-five goals with Gardiner on the ice in 2018-19, a remarkable stat, but his accomplishments were often mentioned alongside references to those playoff nightmares.

In his first season as a Hurricane, he has found the fan base in Carolina to be a bit different. At a charity golf event during training camp, for example, a fan came up and asked for a picture. Gardiner prepared to pose for one with the fan, as he had done many times as a Leaf, but was asked instead to take the picture while the fan posed with the team mascot.

In his second game with Carolina, Gardiner scored the game-winning goal in overtime to beat the Washington Capitals. It's been a struggle since then, however. He went 26 games without a goal, ending the drought Dec. 5 against the Sharks, and has just eight points while his plus-minus has plummeted to minus-19.

Whatever the numbers suggest, Gardiner's former teammates know what he'll bring to the table on Monday — when another ex-Leaf, James Reimer, might get the start in goal for the Hurricanes.

"He was a big part of the team through my time here, and I'm still a close friend with him," Leaf Mitch Marner said of Gardiner. "Their team is hot right now (7-2-1 in their last 10 games), so we've got to make sure we come ready to play."

"He loves it down there in Carolina. He's out of the condo and into a house now, so he's loving that ... They have a lot of offensive defencemen, guys who can make a lot of plays in the offensive zone — like our team — so we've got to make sure we make the right plays, take care of that puck."

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1167557 Toronto Maple Leafs

The knives were out for Mike Babcock long before the Leafs cut ties

By Kevin McGran

Sports Reporter

Sun., Dec. 22, 2019

The words hung there as if few believed what they'd actually heard.

It was April 25, just a few days after the Maple Leafs were eliminated by the Boston Bruins in the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs, and a softball question to general manager Kyle Dubas about Mike Babcock's job security received a hardball answer.

"With how fluid the situation is," Dubas said that day, "I wouldn't give any guarantee to anybody in our whole organization, starting with me. We'll do what we think is best, and we'll let you know when we know. That's my expectation."

It was probably more of a shock than it should have been: Babcock's job was on the line. That he'd guided the Leafs to the playoffs three times in a row — after they had missed the post-season in 12 of the previous 13 years — was not enough.

It stands as the bellwether moment of 2019 for the Maple Leafs, the point at which the tables began to turn on hockey's most celebrated coach.

When Babcock was hired, it was groundbreaking. He was the highest-paid coach in the NHL: eight years, \$50 million (U.S.). Other coaches have him to thank for raising the bar on salaries. And under his guidance, the Leafs went from laughingstock to contender.

But when he was fired, the ground shook even more. Hockey's culture came under attack with the power structure of teams, mental health of players and abusive conduct under the microscope.



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It would take a while to get to the firing, but it was perhaps inevitable. There were already questions about line deployment, ice time for top players, using grinders instead of skilled players, and goaltending: from playing Frederik Andersen too much, to using him too little.

So on May 6, when Dubas said he was “all in” on Babcock keeping his job, few believed him. The knives were out. It was more or less a waiting game. And the game may have been rigged, with a slow start to the season the excuse Dubas needed to make the change.

The Star has subsequently learned that Dubas had wanted Sheldon Keefe to coach the Leafs for some time, and even suggested Keefe to club president Brendan Shanahan before Babcock was hired in 2015.

Dubas had hired Keefe in 2012 to coach the OHL's Soo Greyhounds, and in 2015 to handle the AHL's Marlies.

Dubas and Keefe clearly see the game the same way: Let highly skilled players be creative. Mix and match lines. Play Morgan Rielly and Tyson Barrie together? Oh my.

Babcock was stubborn and had his own ideas: He loved to grind out wins. He needed stay-at-home types, guys who'd be tough along the wall and in front of the net.

Despite a very public disparity between how Dubas wants a team built and how Babcock likes a team to play, Babcock kept his job to start the season. But suddenly the world the Leafs inhabited was no longer calm and predictable, as it had been under Lou Lamoriello.

In Dubas's time as GM — he's now into his second full season — there has been massive change.

There's a new salary structure with four players earning half the salary cap.

Nazem Kadri, Jake Gardiner and Ron Hainsey were let go or traded to make room for the fourth of those players, Mitch Marner, to hit the jackpot.

There has been a lot of change throughout the roster with the additions of Barrie, Cody Ceci, Ilya Mikheyev, Alex Kerfoot, Jason Spezza, Dmytro Timashov, Pierre Engvall, Nic Petan, Michael Hutchinson, Pontus Aberg and others. So, chemistry has been an issue.

To be sure, injuries took a toll at the start of this season, starting with Zach Hyman and Travis Dermott. John Tavares, Marner, Kerfoot, Trevor Moore and Andreas Johnsson also missed considerable time.

The Leafs went 29-27-10 in 66 games from Jan. 1 to Nov. 20, when Babcock was fired. That was the 22nd-best record in the NHL over that time. Not good enough.

Backup goaltending became their Achilles heel. One point from a possible 12 with the backup in net is all Babcock's Leafs got to start the season. If that had been even four or five points, perhaps it would have been harder to justify firing Babcock. The Leafs would have been in a playoff position and perhaps played with more confidence as a result.

But there was something deeper at play: There was no jump in their game, no joy on their faces. They appeared to be tuning out the coach.

Why? The tipping point might have been the very first game of this season when Spezza, the hometown veteran who took a pay cut to sign with the Leafs, was a healthy scratch with friends and family on hand — a game against the Ottawa Senators, no less, the team he started out with and played for in his prime.

Babcock said Spezza needed more time to work on the penalty kill. Spezza played the second game without even practising the penalty kill in between. Babcock was laying down the law: He was in charge.

Even Babcock's hardcore defenders had trouble with that one. When he was fired, that story resonated with former NHL defenceman Mike Commodore piling on — reminding the world that Babcock, then coaching the Red Wings, once scratched him and Mike Modano, denying Modano a chance to reach 1,500 games. Modano retired stuck at 1,499.

Soon after, the story broke about a mind game Babcock had played on Marner in his rookie season — urging the young winger to rate his teammates based on work ethic, then reading the list to the players. That resonated even louder, especially at a time of increased awareness about mental health.

On and on they came, stories about Babcock abusing Johan Franzen in Detroit, and about other coaches mistreating players under their charge.

Babcock's hiring changed the Leafs; Babcock's firing changed hockey.

Without him, the Leafs and the league are very different indeed.

Toronto Star LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167558 Toronto Maple Leafs

Game Day - Maple Leafs vs. Hurricanes

Lance Hornby

December 22, 2019 10:35 PM EST

THE BIG MATCH-UP

D Jake Gardiner vs. D Tyson Barrie

The most offensive blueliner the Leafs have had in the past decade makes his return, going head-to-head against his replacement. Both men have had adjustment issues with their new teams, but Barrie has found his game under new Leaf coach Sheldon Keefe and been given the quarterback duties on the first power play unit, which is hot of late. Both teams also have other defencemen who like to step in the rush.

KEYS TO THE GAME

1. RAISING CANE ON THE ROAD

Carolina just had a successful five-game trip, nine of a 10 possible points, before a stinker at home against Florida and are the only team not to have lost in regulation when leading, either after the first period (11-0-1) or second (15-0-0).

Put that record up against the Leafs scoring first in their past seven games, with six of those victories, though it took Toronto awhile to get rolling on Saturday against last place Detroit.

2. THE FRED FACTOR

Frederik Andersen, about the NHL's busiest goalie, needed a day off with this weekend's compressed schedule and Michael Hutchinson



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took the heat off with a win on Saturday. Now it's back to Andersen with a record of 6-3-0 against Carolina. That's the team that originally drafted Andersen, a seventh rounder in 2010, but he didn't sign.

3. ATTACK MODE

The Leafs will be peppering either Petr Mrazek or James Reimer (Reimer is usually the Canes' go-to road goaltender), but coach Rod Brind'Amour has a bend-but-don't-break team. The Canes have a record of 12-2-1 when outshot and are good in transition. Early Sunday, Carolina was the only NHL team this season with four skaters who have each have at least 34 points.

4. THAT'S A SVECH

Andrei Svechnikov's inventive lacrosse style back door goals this year inspired Auston Matthews to try one Saturday, but too much snow was on his blade for the puck to stick. Svechnikov might try one for the young audience of this game, but expect some stick work on him by Toronto defencemen who don't intend to get embarrassed.

5. CROWDED ROSTER

It's just not enough for the Leafs bottom six forwards to have a great game here and there. It has to be consistent now that Trevor Moore is back and Andreas Johnsson is expected to return in a couple of weeks. Salary issues are going to mean few if any spares will be kept on the roster.

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1167559 Toronto Maple Leafs

'BLAST FROM THE PAST': Ex-Leaf Jake Gardiner returns to Toronto with Canes

Lance Hornby

December 22, 2019 8:13 PM EST

Good Jake, bad Jake, cheer Jake, boo Jake.

The Maple Leafs, their coaches, managers and fans wrestled with all of that through Jake Gardiner's eight seasons in Toronto, which put the defenceman on a stage many NHLers would crave. Yet a few times Gardiner must have felt like jumping in the orchestra pit.

"That's just the way it is," the sanguine Gardiner said of exiting Toronto. "If you're winning, you're the best player on earth, if you're losing, you suck. You just have to deal with it, whether it's fans ripping you or media, it's part of pro sports. You've got to get through it."

Gardiner is enjoying the lower profile hockey life, though it will be quite emotional to return Monday afternoon to Scotiabank for the first time with the Carolina Hurricanes. Gardiner, who is turning 30 next year, will likely get a timeout video tribute, when even those districts of Leafs Nation who for a time took to mocking him every time he touched the puck will recognize the 11th longest serving blueliner in franchise history.

"I've been here a long time, through the ups and downs," Gardiner said in what was his last locker clean-out day in April. "When I first came, the team was not great. I'll be pretty proud of what we've done here and the way we brought this organization to a team that we can be proud of."

"The playoffs didn't go the way we wanted to (Gardiner's minus-5 in a Game 7 loss in Boston in 2017 is seared in the memory of many fans among him being in three such defeats to the B's), but this team has a real bright future ahead of them."

A powerful skater, who usually made up for any turnovers or blown coverage with a few quick strides to get back in play, had a career-best 52 points in '17-18. When he missed a chunk of the second half last year with a worrisome back problem and Toronto struggled to get the puck out, suddenly people started to miss him. Then-coach Mike Babcock warned the boo-birds that simply dumping Gardiner on another team ran the risk of Toronto repeating its error with Larry Murphy, a fan whipping boy who ended up winning two Cups in Detroit.

Despite some of the harsher treatment, Gardiner hung in through almost 600 games and would not sign elsewhere last summer until he knew the Leafs had exhausted all financial resources, the last of their cap allocation finally going to holdout Mitch Marner after training camp opened.

Even Gardiner's worst critics in Toronto might note he turned down rival Montreal's higher bid than Carolina, three years at \$15.75 million US in early July, in part because joining the Leafs oldest rival just didn't seem right to him. Gardiner, wife Lucy and young son Henry went to Raleigh, for four years and \$16.2 million.

He has eight points in 36 games this far and a minus-2 against Florida on Saturday leaves him a team-worst negative 19. Yet he's valued by coach Rod Brind'Amour, who has chalked up Gardiner's poor numbers to date to unfamiliarity with the Canes' system that encourages more touches than he's used to.

Carolina remains four points ahead of Toronto, which has had its own issues on defence. One Leaf who benefitted from Gardiner's roster spot opening up, along with that of Nikita Zaitsev and Ron Hainsey, is fellow Minnesotan Justin Holl.

"It will be a blast from the past," Holl said of Monday's game. "I'll be on the same flight home with him (for the Christmas holidays) afterwards and it will be great catching up."

Marner and Auston Matthews were close to Gardiner, too, as they got comfortable in the league.

"He was a great teammate for three years and an awesome guy," Matthews said. "We're extremely happy for him that he's in the position he is in Carolina and enjoying it."

"I've talked to him a couple of times," Marner added. "He's loving it down there, he's out of the condo and into a house."

He's still wearing No. 51 and it will be awhile before anyone in Toronto identifies that with any other Leaf.

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1167560 Toronto Maple Leafs

LEAFS SNAPSHOTS: Coach Keefe drawing a line with forwards



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Lance Hornby

December 22, 2019 6:48 PM EST

Sheldon Keefe didn't mean it to sound like a threat to his players.

But when you have the offensive weaponry of the Maple Leafs, and the shock and awe isn't there on a given night, some bombers and fighter jets can expect to be grounded for other war birds.

"I've got a number of things in the back of my mind all the time," said Keefe, who held back William Nylander and Kasper Kapanen at times late in Saturday's win over Detroit, in favour of using their centre, Auston Matthews, between Zach Hyman and Mitch Marner. "I just felt I needed to mix it up a little bit, try to spark something. That line didn't get much going offensively and I liked how other lines were moving. I wanted to give Matthews a chance to get going."

What could have been an upset loss to the last-place Red Wings turned into a 4-1 rout by the end, eight points from that re-configured line when power play produce was included.

Keefe could just as easily come back with Saturday's original flight plan on Monday afternoon when the Carolina Hurricanes visit. While Kapanen would like to get off his 10-game goal schneid, Nylander had played well Friday in New York before looking sluggish defensively versus Detroit.

"It's the way it goes, part of an 82-game season," Keefe said of any hurt feelings among forwards. "We'll mix up back and forth."

Keefe has done some other shuffling the course of winning 10 of his first 14 games as Mike Babcock's replacement.

AFTERNOON DELIGHT

When there are so many former Marlies on the Leafs, including Keefe, a 2 p.m. start is not such a big change in routine.

Defenceman Justin Holl, forwards Hyman, Nylander, Frederik Gauthier, Dmytro Timashov, Pierre Engvall, Trevor Moore and others all had a few 11 a.m. 'school day' matches at Coca-Cola Coliseum through the years, start times designed to bring in younger AHL fans. Monday is Toronto's third annual 'Next Generation' game, where ticket-holders are encouraged to bring kids.

"I love the afternoon games," Holl said. "You don't have to wait around all day to play. You wake up and go."

With Sunday a day off, Keefe also reckoned it was ideal for Toronto to step into action before any rust set in.

"That is the beauty of the afternoon game: Wake up, get a meal, get to the rink and when the game's over, you still have time to do your thing. It's a good time for guys to scatter, too (for Christmas holidays)."

It will be the Leafs' last game before a three-day break, resuming the schedule Friday in New Jersey.

CALL OF THE WILD

The Leafs are eighth in the league in fewest penalties taken, but seven minors, majors and misconducts were assessed in the third period on Saturday between themselves and the Wings. Jake Muzzin received roughing and unsportsmanlike calls, Travis Dermott 10 minutes for lipping off to the referees and later Holl took exception to an Andreas Athanasiou knee on Leaf Alex Kerfoot and wrestled the former to the ice.

Until recently, the Leafs had been the only NHL team without a fighting major this season.

"Some things happened out there that we don't entirely agree with," said Holl. "You always just have to be ready to step up for your teammates. It got a little chippy at the end, but I thought we did a good job of sticking together."

MIKE LIKED HIS NIGHT

Now that he has his first win of the season to his credit, Michael Hutchinson can look at a likely start in New Jersey on Friday with a chance to breathe. Rather than the Leafs simply out-scoring Detroit out of the gate to end his streak at six defeats, Hutchinson had to be sharp from puck drop, stopping a Dylan Larkin breakaway and keeping the Leafs in until they found some holes for goals on Calvin Pickard.

"There's a lot of people you can talk to in the Leafs and the Marlies to get back in that good head space," Hutchinson said of not getting down on himself the past three months. "With the team we have, once we get a bit of momentum going, we're tough to stop."

LOOSE LEAFS

Keefe liked Trevor Moore's return on Saturday, playing right wing with Gauthier at centre and Timashov on the left. "We showed a couple of clips to the team between the second and third period and one was that line doing a good job of getting through the neutral zone and playing in the offensive zone. I thought it cued us up well to play in the third" ... Centre/winger Jason Spezza sat the end of the back-to-back, but is due to return ... Greg Moore was a winner in his first game coaching the Marlies as Keefe's replacement. During the farm team's 6-3 victory in Belleville on Saturday, Pontus Aberg scored 26 seconds in as part of his two-point night. Nic Petan had the game winner on the power play to cap a three-point evening and centre Kalle Kossila, in his first game since an early season injury, had an assist.

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1167561 Toronto Maple Leafs

Forever the Optimus: Catching up with James Reimer about life in the NHL crease, as a Leaf and a Hurricane

By James Mirtle

Dec 22, 2019

It was New Year's Day, nine years ago, that James Reimer made his first NHL start for the Maple Leafs, a win in Ottawa.

The Leafs were then a team in turmoil, with their goaltending a mess, and he was a long shot to be the solution. Yet somehow the 22-year-old kid from tiny Morweena, Manitoba, who was fourth or fifth on the organizational depth chart, proved a lot of people wrong.

He somehow took that team on a run that fell just shy of the postseason.



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And his own personal run is still going, this time with the Carolina Hurricanes, who he has a sparkling .927 save percentage with through 14 appearances.

My guess is he'll be in the crease come Monday afternoon in Toronto, too, making a very rare start back where he got his start.

James and I had a strong relationship when he played here, for whatever reason. We had a lot of good conversations, and even when the team (and he) struggled, there was an understanding that we were both there to do our jobs. Honestly, some of my favourite stories I wrote on the beat in the early years were about his improbable rise, from his origin story to how his faith helped him play in the NHL.

So when I knew Reimer was calling this week, I didn't prepare a whole bunch of canned questions like you might for some interviews. I knew we'd land on an interesting topic. What I didn't realize was we would talk about getting old... but I guess that's a good landing point for anyone over 30 in the NHL these days.

Our conversation has been lightly edited.

So what's new with James Reimer?

Not much. Not much. Just hanging out. Got a bunch of kids now. Just trying to stay sane.

How many's a bunch?

We've got two girls.

Hey, I've got two kids. I know what that's about.

You know the circus. How old are they?

My son is almost 5 and he's in kindergarten. Actually he's singing in the Christmas play here in about a half hour. That's what we're getting ready for. As soon as we get off the phone, I'm running over to the school. And my daughter's a year and a half. We're still in the thick of the craziness. What about you? I remember Nevaeh was born a few years ago.

Yeah she's almost 3. And the youngest is eight months old. Hope.

That's nice.

Oh we're elbows deep. Yeah, no, but it's good. They play together.

Two's enough for us. I'm getting old man. At least you had your kids pretty young. That's good.

I don't know. Yeah it's good. It's funny – I don't know about you, but you always wonder how many kids you want to have and all of a sudden you have a couple and it's like 'Well, you know what... two might be good enough!'

I tell you, the people that have four, you wonder, what's happening? What is your life? I don't understand. I don't understand how you're doing this?

Do you hate yourself? You're signing up for this. This is your fault. Are you crazy? But no. It's good.

How's Carolina?

Good. Yeah. Honestly Carolina's been awesome. City's great. It's kind of our pace. Slower paced. And you know full of southern hospitality, so it's been a really good place to live.

What about in terms of on the ice? Your numbers are excellent so far this year. Is there an explanation for the start you're having so far?

Uh yeah. I don't know. I mean like every summer you work hard and you tweak a few things and whatnot but I think it's honestly just we have a pretty solid team here and I don't hate to use this word but I need to come up with a different word because I'm overusing it but you know I think we have an honest team. So you play the game the right way every night or if you take a period off – you know because you're human – you get back on it for the rest of the game. Guys' work ethic is there every night. So, you know, when you're playing the game the right way, usually everybody looks good.

So you went to Florida. You signed the five-year deal, with a different management group in place. It didn't really go down the path that you wanted it to. Was there some uncertainty for you last year about what was going to happen?

Yeah definitely. I mean towards the end of last year you didn't know what was... I'm mean obviously I knew I wasn't coming back but, I mean, you didn't know what was going to happen. If there was going to be a buyout or if you're going to get traded or you know what was going to happen. It was a weird summer of not knowing what was going to happen. It feels like the goalie market is always super weird or volatile or whatever you want to call it. Especially this summer with the cap not going up as much. It made for a really interesting summer for a lot of guys. Yeah I mean we just kind of sat around and just kept preparing like you're going to do something in the fall. And then obviously when Carolina traded for me (in late June), had some conversations with them and whatnot and it seemed like it would be a good fit. And so far things have gone well.

So you're 31 now, you're going to be 32 in March. Does it feel a lot different than earlier in your career?

Yes and no. I think so. I think you just have a better understanding about how things play out. I get jealous of all the young guys on the team, how fresh they feel all the time. (Laughs). No, but I always joke (about it). People sometimes ask 'How does it feel?' because I think I'm actually the oldest guy on the team by a few months. And so...

Wow.

Yeah who would have thought!? But I feel just as good as I did when I was 23 or 24 years old. But you've just got to work a little harder before you get on the ice to get that feeling. Yeah no I feel in comparison pretty much the same.

So I'm looking it up (on HockeyDB). It says Brian Gibbons is older than you by about two weeks.

Oh yeah that's right Gibby's on the squad now! That's right. (laughs)

There you go!

When he's not around, I'm a couple months older than Jordo (Staal).

You're six months older than Jordan. Well, it shows how young the NHL is now. It's amazing. I remember going into the dressing room when I started, 12 years ago or whatever, and it was way different. I felt young in there and I was, whatever, 26. And now, everybody's so young. Now I'm closer in age to guys' parents it feels like.

I know. It's crazy. It's crazy you know? But yeah I mean the skill level is crazy. I mean you see Svech the other night again (with the lacrosse goal). It's just not even fair. So, you know. Good for them.

Did you learn something about watching Luongo play into his late 30s that maybe you can take with you in your career?

Uhhh you know honestly just the preparation I think. Honestly I learned a lot of things (from him). I could talk a long time about the way he played and prepared and whatnot, but just everyday was



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Groundhog Day, in a really good way. You know what I mean? He just brought a high level of preparation and play/compete every day. In a way, it's kind of funny, only in the last year or two would, as a young guy you think you're invincible and you don't really have to warm up or whatever before you get on the ice. If you're on the road or something and guys want to get out early it's like okay I'll just jump out early, you don't have to worry about pulling a groin or getting warmed up or whatever. And as you get older, you've just got to take care of your body better and better to keep playing at a high level. What I learned from him is what I said earlier. You're more cognizant and aware of what you need to do to be at your best and so that was something that he did really well. He had his routines that he did on the ice and whatnot and obviously when you're a goalie late in the years like he was it's even more important. He stuck with it and was the ultimate pro. That's one thing I took for myself.

I'm just looking here... have you played a game at the Air Canada Centre recently? You haven't had a start there in quite a while now.

Not for a while. I think it was my second year in Florida...

Looks like '16-17.

Really? I thought was one... I got schmucked in my head my last start there. I came out halfway through the second. I don't know what year that was.

Anyway, it's been a long time. When you come to Toronto, is there still... how does that feel for you? Is there a lot of nostalgia?

Yeah. I mean it's funny you know, as the years go on, it's time passes and things get less and less (that way). But still you land and you're driving and you see where I lived – I lived right off the Gardiner (Expressway) for most of my time there – and then you walk into the rink, there's a lot of memories. There's still some of the same support staff there and you definitely get that nostalgia. But I think also what lessens it a lot, too, is there's been so much turnover of guys. I think Rielly might be the only guy left there? You know. And so I think also changes a lot of things, too. You see the Toronto Maple Leafs and it's a totally different team than the one you suited up for. There's nostalgia when you play against guys that are now on different teams that you played with during that era, too. Whether it's JVR or Bozak or Gards – now he's on our team. A lot of those feelings are connected to the players you played with. But the other half is obviously the city and the fans and the rink itself.

Do you still run into Leafs fans around the league? Do you still get them coming up and talking to you about those years?

Yeah. I would say so. Even in the summer. Honestly Leafs fans are everywhere. They've got a massive following, right? You still run into the odd fan here and there.

Do they still call you Optimus Reim?

Yeah some of them do! Thanks to them. That's a nickname that's stuck with me. It's given me a theme for my masks for my career.

You still have that on your mask?

Yeah. Still every mask has some form of Optimus Reim on there.

So that's like the beginning of your career sticking with you. I mean it's been almost 10 years since you broke into the league. Hard to believe.

Yeah I know time flies. It's crazy.

What are some of your goals for this season and for your career going forward? How are you looking at things?

Obviously the ultimate goal is to win a Cup right? That's pretty standard. You know, I think just win. Honestly, you look at my career, and when you're just starting off, the world's your oyster. All things are possible. And as you play longer and longer, the window to win, it shortens. So to have a team like the 'Canes, I think we have a great chance to do some damage. In the playoffs, every team is dangerous. So it's by no means a given or nothing like that, but I think we have the group to be able to come together and do something special. That doesn't come around very often. For me, it's do my part and try to win games when I get the nod and give these guys the best chance.

Do you still feel like you have something to prove? You have a tough year in Florida and... it must be as a goalie that you've got to prove yourself every year unless you're Carey Price or something? It's all based on your last start and your last month and all of that. It feels like it's never-ending pressure being a goalie.

Yeah. I mean there is no taking your foot off the gas. It's what have you done for me lately? How are your last five starts? The league's too good. Goalies are too good. Players are too good to sit back and pat yourself on the back. When the season's over, then you can take a couple months to congratulate yourself – or the opposite – but yeah no. It's every year. You're pushing yourself and trying to make yourself the best you can be. Because even if you play for 15 years, it's a short career, so you've got to try to make the most of it.

Do you know how many career NHL games you've played now?

I want to say like 340-ish. That's my guess.

Yeah so your last game was 350. That was kind of like a milestone game. 400's coming for you. I remember when you started, the year you made the Leafs, you were like fourth or fifth in their system, no one in the organization was talking about you, and you were a fourth-round pick. And then you get called up and you play as well as you do and, well, you've had a really unique, remarkable journey in hockey since then. Does it feel that way to you?

Yeah. I mean it feels like, yeah, maybe unique is the best way to put it. Obviously, I feel like every year, it's another experience. Whether it's a high or a low or whatnot. It's just another treat, another gift. Another gift from the Good Lord, right? It's been a very interesting career and some really cool experiences. It's funny. When you're coming up through junior or even playing in the Coast and the AHL, it's, you always have this, for myself, this deep-down belief, that you can do it. I don't know where that comes from. But it's deep down. Yet superficially you're always like I don't know. It just seems so far away. The NHL seems so far away. It seemed like it was impossible. But you just stuck with it and believed like I said deep down and lucky for me things worked out. It's been a fun career so far.

I've got a few Carolina questions. What's it been like playing for Rod Brind'Amour?

Great. Really good. I talk about the identity of our team and we've got a bunch of great guys who work hard and have a lot of integrity and honesty and approach the game the right way and that stems down from his leadership. The way he approaches the game. The way he carries himself. You can tell the way he coaches and the way he treats us is just the way he lives his life so there's nothing fake. There's nothing dressed up. It's just straight from the heart. For that reason, makes it pretty easy to get behind him.

What's it been like playing on a team with Jake Gardiner again? Do you guys ever talk about your days with the Leafs together?

The good ol' days?

In some ways.



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No, we reminisce for sure. We talk about back in the day, guys we played with, coaches, scenarios, situations, whatnot. It's fun. Often it's funny too because the young guys will ask us because they hear the stories or they play against Toronto and they ask what was it like? This and that. It's been fun playing with him.

Jake says it's night and day, Toronto and Carolina, just like a lot of it. It's completely different.

It's funny seeing him in that scenario. I mean I was him three years ago when I went to Florida. Obviously I had a short stopover in San Jose, which was a lot of fun and learnt a lot. That kind of was maybe a nice in-between. But definitely night and day. It's interesting when you play for a non-hockey market team. It's good. You're just playing hockey. You're going out with the guys, having fun playing hockey. Even still the fans in Carolina are awesome. It's loud in our rink. It's been a really fun place to play.

Does Svechnikov do that move in practice? Do you ever have to try and stop that?

Yeah. The funny thing is that it doesn't work in practice. But it works in games.

It doesn't work?

I don't know why. Maybe there's too much snow on the ice or whatnot. But usually it doesn't work in practice. But it works in games, so that's all that matters.

Would you have a plan for that move if it came to it and you had to stop that? What are you supposed to do – like stand up if you see that happening?

Yeah I don't know. I don't know if I want to say. Maybe people will know then! Honestly I think you do what Helly did (earlier in the week against the Jets) – you try and meet it with your hand. And it just found a way in. But I think the main thing is you have to see it coming and if you see it coming then you maybe kind of prepare for it. But yeah I mean it's one of those things where it's obviously just a high talent, high skill move. And hopefully you have what it takes to stop it.

The kids in the league are just incredible now aren't they? We see it with Marner and Matthews – the puck skills that guys have is just unreal.

Yeah. And you know what it is, too, that I find? These kids – I don't know, whatever – they just love playing the game. Svech is always the last guy off the ice with our team. He's always just playing with the puck and playing little games after practice and always just working on different things. Same with Turbo (Teravainen). He's always just playing around. Just having fun after practice and it maybe doesn't look like much when you're just watching then all of a sudden you see him doing some of that stuff in games and it just translates. When you're having fun then the game's maybe a little easier.

What was it like reading Steve Dangle's book?

Uhhh... well you know what. I... hmmm.

There's that picture of you reading it on the dock and he sends it out all the time.

(laughing) Yeah I know.

Is that just a photoshoot! You didn't actually read the book?

(laughs) I have yet to read the book.

All right. The secret's out.

I'm sure in the summer you don't want to read about hockey and Toronto and stuff like that.

No, you know, I've got that book and Cujo's book...

Cujo's book is apparently amazing. His back story and everything.

Yeah that one's on my list. On my stack at home to read. And I've got another book, too, what's his face, the guy that got cut by a skate, how come I can't remember his name...

Malarchuk.

Malarchuk!

My guy Dan wrote that. He did a great job.

Oh nice. That book was given to me, too. Those three books are on my list of must reads.

My guess is you don't know about starting Monday (in Toronto) yet, but are you hoping that you do? For old time's sake that you're in there.

Yeah. Yeah it'd be fun. I mean every game's an opportunity. Every game's fun so yeah, no, it'd be good to play. And both these next games, against Florida and Toronto, so both of them against old teams. (Petr Mrazek started in a loss to Florida on Saturday.)

Well, like you said, always something on the line.

Yeap. Every day. Every darn day.

Well, thanks for taking the time out to talk to me. Appreciate it. Maybe I'll see you at the rink on Monday.

For sure. That'd be great. And have fun at the Christmas concert tonight.

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1167555 Toronto Maple Leafs

Hockey's moment of reckoning is personal for Sheldon Keefe. A survivor of abuse, he opts to lead with positivity, empathy

By Rosie DiManno

Star Columnist

Sun., Dec. 22, 2019

There was a coach, once upon a Mike Babcock time, who spoke often of moulding hockey players into better men.

That's not the job, of course. The job is to win.

When Babcock couldn't do it with these Maple Leafs, he was fired in what felt like the blink of an eye. And that job passed to Sheldon Keefe.

What kind of man is he? Should we even ask? Does it matter?

Young, articulate, a breath of fresh air that immediately dispelled the heaviness which had enveloped the team, as if the players had been caught in a trough of low barometric pressure, the kind that makes the head throb and the nerve endings zap. Infused with a passion for



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hockey, for coaching, for positivity over haranguing negativity. The psychic uplift was instant.

And Keefe is much more one of them, in age proximity and character.

In a post-Babcock era, the Leafs — for all their chronic defects — have responded with enthusiasm, rebooted conviction and reignited moxie. It is not trite to say, with fun. There'd been precious little of that through the struggles of October and most of November as players and coach wore on each other. Babcock begged his players to grind, but instead he ground on them.

Keefe has possibly never used that word — grind — since assuming the reins. Rather, he's encouraged them to fly. To become more the slick creative team envisioned by his boss, general manager Kyle Dubas, who constructed a team which embodied that doctrine.

The transformation has been manifest and manifold. But the man now behind the bench is himself an avatar of transformative reinvention.

As not much more than a boy, Keefe fell in thrall to a terrible human being: David Frost. It's a subject scarcely mentioned these days and Keefe is long removed from the manipulated, compliant — also cocky and stropy — adolescent he was, caught up in the bizarre cult of Frost that included, most notoriously, Mike Danton. Mesmerized by and in mental bondage to a toxic Svengali-agent who gnawed at the bones of his impressionable acolytes.

The question is asked: Has Frost contacted Keefe since he was named the 40th head coach of the Toronto Maple Leafs?

"No. Never."

We'll set that aside for now and return to it later. Because, to be fair, the measure of Keefe will be drawn from how he acquits himself in his current position, what defines The Sheldon Way of doing hockey. A syllabus refined through 13 seasons in junior A, major junior and with the Marlies — seven of them as coach on Dubas-managed teams.

"There's the on-ice side and the off-ice side," Keefe explained in a sit-down interview this past week. "Off the ice, first of all, we're trying to put together a program that celebrates the positives in people. Also, pinpointing and working on the areas where we need to grow. While staying positive and showing us at our best, still being realistic about where we need to go and what we're capable of."

"Then, on the ice, reflecting that in a style of play that fits the group and the talent level that we have, and a structure that will help us put players in positions to succeed. Then also trying to plug the holes, if you will, defensively that have held the team back, in my opinion."

In the opinion of many, frankly, alarmed by the shortcomings of a defensively sketchy D-crew and the frequent disinterest by forwards in playing without the puck. Shortcomings baked into Dubas' unconventional blueprint. Keefe counters that his incarnation of structure cleaves to the Leafs' strengths, with a marquee netminder in Freddie Andersen as the final bulwark.

"One of the primary things that I've known with the team for some time, having worked with the team through training camp, through summers and in my role with the Marlies, is just the way the team defends and what it gives up in the middle of the ice. The high-end scoring chances that Freddie has to face. My priority coming in was to fix that, try to change the way in which chances and shots come at the goaltender."

The premise, Keefe expounds, is curtailing opposition shots from high-danger areas, trusting that Andersen will handle most of the

toughies. "I believe there's a level of confidence that comes with that, so that when the breakdowns do happen (Andersen) is going to be sharp. It hasn't been perfect, but we've seen some progress in that area. We've had to give up different things in terms of the pressure that we have on the puck, or the time we may spend in our zone, but trying to limit what we're giving up in the middle of the ice and getting our players to value that space."

It has been, philosophically and tactically, a meeting of the minds between Dubas and Keefe — Boy Genius and The Professor, as the latter was known even in his junior playing days. Because he's always thought the game.

"The vision that we've had on the teams where we've been together, starting in the Soo and then coming here, has always been a work in progress, adapting and changing," says Dubas. "But I thought from the very first time when I met with Sheldon that the general foundations of our philosophy were close enough that it would be a good relationship where we had alignment."

"I was very young in my career and inexperienced. I knew 100 per cent how we wanted to play and the type of players that we needed. I wouldn't say that I had 100 per cent conviction in that quite yet. It began to really solidify — my philosophy about the game."

Keefe had previously worn all hats with the Pembroke Lumber Kings: owner, GM, coach. It didn't take long to go all in with his rather revolutionary manager.

"I don't necessarily think, when I joined him in Sault St. Marie, that I had that philosophy. But what I had was an open mind and a willingness to learn. I've really only ever worked with Kyle, whether the Soo or the Marlies and now here."

It was, he acknowledges, a dramatic shift from the traditional approach to hockey, though Keefe had also expanded his perspective under the aegis of Hockey Canada, attending coaching seminars and immersing himself in psychology — particularly examining the nature of interpersonal relationships.

Unlike Babcock, he isn't detail-obsessed. "Details are important, that's how you win. But I'm not one to get hung up on detail so much, because I recognize there's a high level of randomness that happens in this sport. The game is very unpredictable and very dynamic. You need to have dynamic thinkers. So there has to be a certain level of freedom and trust that the players are going to be able to adjust on the fly."

Overstructure, he suggests, can be stultifying.

"Take away some of those freedoms and you take away the skills that got these players here. That's an important piece of what we're trying to do: allow the players to make decisions on the ice and give them guidance to create frameworks in the decision-making process on the ice. But recognizing that things happen really fast. We have to trust that they're going to do the right things."

Unlike, say, Babcock, Keefe has known failure. While a points production league leader in the OHL, his NHL resumé is patchy and mediocre from six seasons with Tampa Bay, bouncing back and forth from the minors, and finally out for good with a shredded knee. But because he's always been a keen observer, Keefe watched and learned from the early travails of teammate Martin St. Louis in Tampa and the gaining of wisdom by Vincent Lecavalier, made Lightning captain at just 20 years old. And, of course, enduring a sometimes turbulent relationship with John Tortorella.

"Those are things that stayed with me forever. Despite my pro career being short, I went through a lot of things that really gave me a foundation when I started coaching."



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More recently, he's observed the purported moment of reckoning in hockey as former players have come forward with disturbing stories about mistreatment, mental and physical abuse by coaches, and the destructive mind games some have utilized.

"It's a moment in time that brings attention to the way things were," he says. "But it's also a moment to reflect and see where the game has grown. I really believe there are substantial changes that have been made in terms of how coaches deal with players. I know it's a priority for me. I've gone outside of hockey to develop these skills, to learn how to deal with people, manage people. Since I started to coach professionally, I've put a priority on positivity, a priority on empathy, a priority on the well-being of players and staff."

For Keefe, it's been a deeply personal awakening. He was abused, mentally and emotionally, by Frost, who was very effective at ostracizing teenage players from their families. Keefe spent years as an eager pupil of Frost's harmful dictates. That was the Keefe who was loathed by teammates outside the clique of Frost disciples on the Quinte Hawks, the St. Michael's Majors and the Barrie Colts, among others. The Keefe who basically disregarded his coaches while being signalled from the stands by Frost. The Keefe who memorably refused to shake the hand of OHL commissioner David Branch at the 2000 Memorial Cup opening ceremony. The Keefe who was a witness at Frost's 2008 trial on four counts of sexually exploiting young hockey players. (Frost was acquitted. Keefe's testimony remains under a publication ban.)

Frost had also punched a player on the bench during a phase when he coached the Hawks, for which he was arrested, pleading guilty and receiving a conditional discharge. Perhaps most revolting was a photo that surfaced in 2001 of Danton's then-13-year-old brother wearing only underwear and taped to a chair. Frost and Keefe were present.

None of it turned Keefe off Frost back then. Now he has a different perspective.

"I recognize that I was put in a tough spot, in that I was a developing hockey player being coached by someone who was making me a better player, and had the trust of my family in order to do so. You're feeling like this is just how it is.

"I was a young person being influenced by a situation that, if I were to look back on it and had more control over things, I wouldn't put myself in that situation. I wouldn't want to put my kids in that situation. That was not a good situation and certainly not one that I would ever want to recreate as a coach and as a leader now. As an adult, I'm smart enough to know what's right and what's wrong, and would help guide anyone that's having those negative influences in their life.

"The changes that society has made and the sport has made to weed out people like that, in terms of what's acceptable, benefits everybody. I'm very grateful to have the opportunity to be a part of that change."

His well-documented background, though, required Keefe to beg for redemption and sell himself as a fundamentally altered man to the citizens of Pembroke when he bought the Lumber Kings.

"I had to spend time with very influential people, to reassure them, get to know my character. Ask them for a chance to earn their trust, their respect." He vowed that no Frost-like individual would ever be allowed near the team.

There was no definitive snapping of his ties with Frost, more a gradual distancing by Keefe.

"It was very clear that I had reached a point in my life where there had to be a clear separation if I was going to have any success (coaching). Creating that situation was step one."

Again, when Dubas fired Mike Stapleton and replaced him on the Greyhounds with Keefe, who was by then married and starting a family, Dubas dug deep for character appraisals. "I knew when we made the hire that it was going to be met with ... some blowback," says Dubas. "We did an exhaustive job in learning about who he was and who he had become." Extraordinarily positive feedback. And later, a much less controversial segue to the Marlies. Hardly a peep about darker days either when elevated to the Leafs.

"He's been a part of the Leafs organization for five years," continues Dubas. "In regards of who he is and the quality of character, what he's become as an adult and a professional, a husband and a father, I have no apprehensions about him being anything but the most solid character and person."

In speaking about Frost now, in late December of 2019, Keefe's comments become terser, more guarded. How often must he finger the entrails of a sordid past? He's obviously not that person anymore.

And yet, Keefe adopts an almost passive tone about Frost, a whispering echo of ties that once bound, as if the creepy puppet master could still yank at strings if he chose.

"The one piece that I'm grateful for is that he has allowed me, really since I started coaching, to just live my life, unaware of what's happening with him. He's allowed me to just coach."

Allowed.

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1167556 Toronto Maple Leafs

Defenceman Jake Gardiner returns to Toronto with eight points in 36 games as a Hurricane.

By Mark Zwolinski

Sports Reporter

Sun., Dec. 22, 2019

It will be interesting to see how Maple Leafs fans react on Monday afternoon when defenceman Jake Gardiner steps onto the ice at Scotiabank Arena as a Carolina Hurricane for the first time.

The 29-year-old Gardiner had plenty of success over eight seasons as a regular on the Toronto blue line, but two ugly playoff moments often overshadowed it.

"He was a great teammate," Leafs centre Auston Matthews said of Gardiner after Saturday's win over the Red Wings. "Great guy, super popular, loved to be with his teammates and we loved to be around him ... It will be awesome to see him."

Gardiner — who tested free agency and signed a four-year deal with the Hurricanes, worth \$16.2 million (U.S.) — has made a career as a puck-moving defenceman with elite passing skills. He was blessed



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with skating edges that even the Leafs' instructors felt they couldn't improve.

He appeared in 551 games as a Leaf — 10th most in franchise history among defencemen — while his 45 goals and 245 points rank 28th.

Beyond the numbers, he was as well liked in the dressing room as any Leaf in recent memory. Gardiner roomed with Morgan Rielly during his early years and played a significant role in Rielly's development into an all-star calibre defenceman.

Despite his contributions to the Leafs' progression toward the puck possession style that today's NHL demands, many fans only remember two Game 7 failures against the Boston Bruins: in 2013, when a Gardiner giveaway led to Patrice Bergeron's series winner in overtime; and 2018, when Gardiner went minus-5 in the deciding game.

Those moments have been hard to live down. Gardiner said as much before joining the Hurricanes.

"That's just the way it is: If you're winning, you're the best player on earth. If you're losing, you suck," Gardiner said. "Toronto will always hold a special place in my heart."

His play was under a microscope every game last season. The Leafs scored 60.5 per cent of their five-on-five goals with Gardiner on the ice in 2018-19, a remarkable stat, but his accomplishments were often mentioned alongside references to those playoff nightmares.

In his first season as a Hurricane, he has found the fan base in Carolina to be a bit different. At a charity golf event during training camp, for example, a fan came up and asked for a picture. Gardiner prepared to pose for one with the fan, as he had done many times as a Leaf, but was asked instead to take the picture while the fan posed with the team mascot.

In his second game with Carolina, Gardiner scored the game-winning goal in overtime to beat the Washington Capitals. It's been a struggle since then, however. He went 26 games without a goal, ending the drought Dec. 5 against the Sharks, and has just eight points while his plus-minus has plummeted to minus-19.

Whatever the numbers suggest, Gardiner's former teammates know what he'll bring to the table on Monday — when another ex-Leaf, James Reimer, might get the start in goal for the Hurricanes.

"He was a big part of the team through my time here, and I'm still a close friend with him," Leaf Mitch Marner said of Gardiner. "Their team is hot right now (7-2-1 in their last 10 games), so we've got to make sure we come ready to play."

"He loves it down there in Carolina. He's out of the condo and into a house now, so he's loving that ... They have a lot of offensive defencemen, guys who can make a lot of plays in the offensive zone — like our team — so we've got to make sure we make the right plays, take care of that puck."

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1167557 Toronto Maple Leafs

The knives were out for Mike Babcock long before the Leafs cut ties

By Kevin McGran

Sports Reporter

Sun., Dec. 22, 2019

The words hung there as if few believed what they'd actually heard.

It was April 25, just a few days after the Maple Leafs were eliminated by the Boston Bruins in the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs, and a softball question to general manager Kyle Dubas about Mike Babcock's job security received a hardball answer.

"With how fluid the situation is," Dubas said that day, "I wouldn't give any guarantee to anybody in our whole organization, starting with me. We'll do what we think is best, and we'll let you know when we know. That's my expectation."

It was probably more of a shock than it should have been: Babcock's job was on the line. That he'd guided the Leafs to the playoffs three times in a row — after they had missed the post-season in 12 of the previous 13 years — was not enough.

It stands as the bellwether moment of 2019 for the Maple Leafs, the point at which the tables began to turn on hockey's most celebrated coach.

When Babcock was hired, it was groundbreaking. He was the highest-paid coach in the NHL: eight years, \$50 million (U.S.). Other coaches have him to thank for raising the bar on salaries. And under his guidance, the Leafs went from laughingstock to contender.

But when he was fired, the ground shook even more. Hockey's culture came under attack with the power structure of teams, mental health of players and abusive conduct under the microscope.

It would take a while to get to the firing, but it was perhaps inevitable. There were already questions about line deployment, ice time for top players, using grinders instead of skilled players, and goaltending: from playing Frederik Andersen too much, to using him too little.

So on May 6, when Dubas said he was "all in" on Babcock keeping his job, few believed him. The knives were out. It was more or less a waiting game. And the game may have been rigged, with a slow start to the season the excuse Dubas needed to make the change.

The Star has subsequently learned that Dubas had wanted Sheldon Keefe to coach the Leafs for some time, and even suggested Keefe to club president Brendan Shanahan before Babcock was hired in 2015.

Dubas had hired Keefe in 2012 to coach the OHL's Soo Greyhounds, and in 2015 to handle the AHL's Marlies.

Dubas and Keefe clearly see the game the same way: Let highly skilled players be creative. Mix and match lines. Play Morgan Rielly and Tyson Barrie together? Oh my.

Babcock was stubborn and had his own ideas: He loved to grind out wins. He needed stay-at-home types, guys who'd be tough along the wall and in front of the net.

Despite a very public disparity between how Dubas wants a team built and how Babcock likes a team to play, Babcock kept his job to start the season. But suddenly the world the Leafs inhabited was no longer calm and predictable, as it had been under Lou Lamoriello.

In Dubas's time as GM — he's now into his second full season — there has been massive change.



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There's a new salary structure with four players earning half the salary cap.

Nazem Kadri, Jake Gardiner and Ron Hainsey were let go or traded to make room for the fourth of those players, Mitch Marner, to hit the jackpot.

There has been a lot of change throughout the roster with the additions of Barrie, Cody Ceci, Ilya Mikheyev, Alex Kerfoot, Jason Spezza, Dmytro Timashov, Pierre Engvall, Nic Petan, Michael Hutchinson, Pontus Aberg and others. So, chemistry has been an issue.

To be sure, injuries took a toll at the start of this season, starting with Zach Hyman and Travis Dermott. John Tavares, Marner, Kerfoot, Trevor Moore and Andreas Johnsson also missed considerable time.

The Leafs went 29-27-10 in 66 games from Jan. 1 to Nov. 20, when Babcock was fired. That was the 22nd-best record in the NHL over that time. Not good enough.

Backup goaltending became their Achilles heel. One point from a possible 12 with the backup in net is all Babcock's Leafs got to start the season. If that had been even four or five points, perhaps it would have been harder to justify firing Babcock. The Leafs would have been in a playoff position and perhaps played with more confidence as a result.

But there was something deeper at play: There was no jump in their game, no joy on their faces. They appeared to be tuning out the coach.

Why? The tipping point might have been the very first game of this season when Spezza, the hometown veteran who took a pay cut to sign with the Leafs, was a healthy scratch with friends and family on hand — a game against the Ottawa Senators, no less, the team he started out with and played for in his prime.

Babcock said Spezza needed more time to work on the penalty kill. Spezza played the second game without even practising the penalty kill in between. Babcock was laying down the law: He was in charge.

Even Babcock's hardcore defenders had trouble with that one. When he was fired, that story resonated with former NHL defenceman Mike Commodore piling on — reminding the world that Babcock, then coaching the Red Wings, once scratched him and Mike Modano, denying Modano a chance to reach 1,500 games. Modano retired stuck at 1,499.

Soon after, the story broke about a mind game Babcock had played on Marner in his rookie season — urging the young winger to rate his teammates based on work ethic, then reading the list to the players. That resonated even louder, especially at a time of increased awareness about mental health.

On and on they came, stories about Babcock abusing Johan Franzen in Detroit, and about other coaches mistreating players under their charge.

Babcock's hiring changed the Leafs; Babcock's firing changed hockey.

Without him, the Leafs and the league are very different indeed.

Toronto Star LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167558 Toronto Maple Leafs

Game Day - Maple Leafs vs. Hurricanes

Lance Hornby

December 22, 2019 10:35 PM EST

THE BIG MATCH-UP

D Jake Gardiner vs. D Tyson Barrie

The most offensive blueliner the Leafs have had in the past decade makes his return, going head-to-head against his replacement. Both men have had adjustment issues with their new teams, but Barrie has found his game under new Leaf coach Sheldon Keefe and been given the quarterback duties on the first power play unit, which is hot of late. Both teams also have other defencemen who like to step in the rush.

KEYS TO THE GAME

1. RAISING CANE ON THE ROAD

Carolina just had a successful five-game trip, nine of a 10 possible points, before a stinker at home against Florida and are the only team not to have lost in regulation when leading, either after the first period (11-0-1) or second (15-0-0).

Put that record up against the Leafs scoring first in their past seven games, with six of those victories, though it took Toronto awhile to get rolling on Saturday against last place Detroit.

2. THE FRED FACTOR

Frederik Andersen, about the NHL's busiest goalie, needed a day off with this weekend's compressed schedule and Michael Hutchinson took the heat off with a win on Saturday. Now it's back to Andersen with a record of 6-3-0 against Carolina. That's the team that originally drafted Andersen, a seventh rounder in 2010, but he didn't sign.

3. ATTACK MODE

The Leafs will be peppering either Petr Mrazek or James Reimer (Reimer is usually the Canes' go-to road goaltender), but coach Rod Brind'Amour has a bend-but-don't-break team. The Canes have a record of 12-2-1 when outshot and are good in transition. Early Sunday, Carolina was the only NHL team this season with four skaters who have each have at least 34 points.

4. THAT'S A SVECH

Andrei Svechnikov's inventive lacrosse style back door goals this year inspired Auston Matthews to try one Saturday, but too much snow was on his blade for the puck to stick. Svechnikov might try one for the young audience of this game, but expect some stick work on him by Toronto defencemen who don't intend to get embarrassed.

5. CROWDED ROSTER

It's just not enough for the Leafs bottom six forwards to have a great game here and there. It has to be consistent now that Trevor Moore is back and Andreas Johnsson is expected to return in a couple of weeks. Salary issues are going to mean few if any spares will be kept on the roster.

Toronto Sun LOADED: 12.23.2019



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1167559 Toronto Maple Leafs

'BLAST FROM THE PAST': Ex-Leaf Jake Gardiner returns to Toronto with Canes

Lance Hornby

December 22, 2019 8:13 PM EST

Good Jake, bad Jake, cheer Jake, boo Jake.

The Maple Leafs, their coaches, managers and fans wrestled with all of that through Jake Gardiner's eight seasons in Toronto, which put the defenceman on a stage many NHLers would crave. Yet a few times Gardiner must have felt like jumping in the orchestra pit.

"That's just the way it is," the sanguine Gardiner said of exiting Toronto. "If you're winning, you're the best player on earth, if you're losing, you suck. You just have to deal with it, whether it's fans ripping you or media, it's part of pro sports. You've got to get through it."

Gardiner is enjoying the lower profile hockey life, though it will be quite emotional to return Monday afternoon to Scotiabank for the first time with the Carolina Hurricanes. Gardiner, who is turning 30 next year, will likely get a timeout video tribute, when even those districts of Leafs Nation who for a time took to mocking him every time he touched the puck will recognize the 11th longest serving blueliner in franchise history.

"I've been here a long time, through the ups and downs," Gardiner said in what was his last locker clean-out day in April. "When I first came, the team was not great. I'll be pretty proud of what we've done here and the way we brought this organization to a team that we can be proud of.

"The playoffs didn't go the way we wanted to (Gardiner's minus-5 in a Game 7 loss in Boston in 2017 is seared in the memory of many fans among him being in three such defeats to the B's), but this team has a real bright future ahead of them."

A powerful skater, who usually made up for any turnovers or blown coverage with a few quick strides to get back in play, had a career-best 52 points in '17-18. When he missed a chunk of the second half last year with a worrisome back problem and Toronto struggled to get the puck out, suddenly people started to miss him. Then-coach Mike Babcock warned the boo-birds that simply dumping Gardiner on another team ran the risk of Toronto repeating its error with Larry Murphy, a fan whipping boy who ended up winning two Cups in Detroit.

Despite some of the harsher treatment, Gardiner hung in through almost 600 games and would not sign elsewhere last summer until he knew the Leafs had exhausted all financial resources, the last of their cap allocation finally going to holdout Mitch Marner after training camp opened.

Even Gardiner's worst critics in Toronto might note he turned down rival Montreal's higher bid than Carolina, three years at \$15.75 million US in early July, in part because joining the Leafs oldest rival just didn't seem right to him. Gardiner, wife Lucy and young son Henry went to Raleigh, for four years and \$16.2 million.

He has eight points in 36 games this far and a minus-2 against Florida on Saturday leaves him a team-worst negative 19. Yet he's valued by coach Rod Brind'Amour, who has chalked up Gardiner's poor numbers to date to unfamiliarity with the Canes' system that encourages more touches than he's used to.

Carolina remains four points ahead of Toronto, which has had its own issues on defence. One Leaf who benefitted from Gardiner's roster spot opening up, along with that of Nikita Zaitsev and Ron Hainsey, is fellow Minnesotan Justin Holl.

"It will be a blast from the past," Holl said of Monday's game. "I'll be on the same flight home with him (for the Christmas holidays) afterwards and it will be great catching up."

Marner and Auston Matthews were close to Gardiner, too, as they got comfortable in the league.

"He was a great teammate for three years and an awesome guy," Matthews said. "We're extremely happy for him that he's in the position he is in Carolina and enjoying it."

"I've talked to him a couple of times," Marner added. "He's loving it down there, he's out of the condo and into a house."

He's still wearing No. 51 and it will be awhile before anyone in Toronto identifies that with any other Leaf.

Toronto Sun LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167560 Toronto Maple Leafs

LEAFS SNAPSHOTS: Coach Keefe drawing a line with forwards

Lance Hornby

December 22, 2019 6:48 PM EST

Sheldon Keefe didn't mean it to sound like a threat to his players.

But when you have the offensive weaponry of the Maple Leafs, and the shock and awe isn't there on a given night, some bombers and fighter jets can expect to be grounded for other war birds.

"I've got a number of things in the back of my mind all the time," said Keefe, who held back William Nylander and Kasper Kapanen at times late in Saturday's win over Detroit, in favour of using their centre, Auston Matthews, between Zach Hyman and Mitch Marner. "I just felt I needed to mix it up a little bit, try to spark something. That line didn't get much going offensively and I liked how other lines were moving. I wanted to give Matthews a chance to get going."

What could have been an upset loss to the last-place Red Wings turned into a 4-1 rout by the end, eight points from that re-configured line when power play produce was included.

Keefe could just as easily come back with Saturday's original flight plan on Monday afternoon when the Carolina Hurricanes visit. While Kapanen would like to get off his 10-game goal schneid, Nylander had played well Friday in New York before looking sluggish defensively versus Detroit.

"It's the way it goes, part of an 82-game season," Keefe said of any hurt feelings among forwards. "We'll mix up back and forth."



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Keefe has done some other shuffling the course of winning 10 of his first 14 games as Mike Babcock's replacement.

AFTERNOON DELIGHT

When there are so many former Marlies on the Leafs, including Keefe, a 2 p.m. start is not such a big change in routine.

Defenceman Justin Holl, forwards Hyman, Nylander, Frederik Gauthier, Dmytro Timashov, Pierre Engvall, Trevor Moore and others all had a few 11 a.m. 'school day' matches at Coca-Cola Coliseum through the years, start times designed to bring in younger AHL fans. Monday is Toronto's third annual 'Next Generation' game, where ticket-holders are encouraged to bring kids.

"I love the afternoon games," Holl said. "You don't have to wait around all day to play. You wake up and go."

With Sunday a day off, Keefe also reckoned it was ideal for Toronto to step into action before any rust set in.

"That is the beauty of the afternoon game: Wake up, get a meal, get to the rink and when the game's over, you still have time to do your thing. It's a good time for guys to scatter, too (for Christmas holidays)."

It will be the Leafs' last game before a three-day break, resuming the schedule Friday in New Jersey.

CALL OF THE WILD

The Leafs are eighth in the league in fewest penalties taken, but seven minors, majors and misconducts were assessed in the third period on Saturday between themselves and the Wings. Jake Muzzin received roughing and unsportsmanlike calls, Travis Dermott 10 minutes for lipping off to the referees and later Holl took exception to an Andreas Athanasiou knee on Leaf Alex Kerfoot and wrestled the former to the ice.

Until recently, the Leafs had been the only NHL team without a fighting major this season.

"Some things happened out there that we don't entirely agree with," said Holl. "You always just have to be ready to step up for your teammates. It got a little chippy at the end, but I thought we did a good job of sticking together."

MIKE LIKED HIS NIGHT

Now that he has his first win of the season to his credit, Michael Hutchinson can look at a likely start in New Jersey on Friday with a chance to breathe. Rather than the Leafs simply out-scoring Detroit out of the gate to end his streak at six defeats, Hutchinson had to be sharp from puck drop, stopping a Dylan Larkin breakaway and keeping the Leafs in until they found some holes for goals on Calvin Pickard.

"There's a lot of people you can talk to in the Leafs and the Marlies to get back in that good head space," Hutchinson said of not getting down on himself the past three months. "With the team we have, once we get a bit of momentum going, we're tough to stop."

LOOSE LEAFS

Keefe liked Trevor Moore's return on Saturday, playing right wing with Gauthier at centre and Timashov on the left. "We showed a couple of clips to the team between the second and third period and one was that line doing a good job of getting through the neutral zone and playing in the offensive zone. I thought it cued us up well to play in the third" ... Centre/winger Jason Spezza sat the end of the back-to-back, but is due to return ... Greg Moore was a winner in his first game coaching the Marlies as Keefe's replacement. During

the farm team's 6-3 victory in Belleville on Saturday, Pontus Aberg scored 26 seconds in as part of his two-point night. Nic Petan had the game winner on the power play to cap a three-point evening and centre Kalle Kossila, in his first game since an early season injury, had an assist.

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1167561 Toronto Maple Leafs

Forever the Optimus: Catching up with James Reimer about life in the NHL crease, as a Leaf and a Hurricane

By James Mirtle

Dec 22, 2019

It was New Year's Day, nine years ago, that James Reimer made his first NHL start for the Maple Leafs, a win in Ottawa.

The Leafs were then a team in turmoil, with their goaltending a mess, and he was a long shot to be the solution. Yet somehow the 22-year-old kid from tiny Morweena, Manitoba, who was fourth or fifth on the organizational depth chart, proved a lot of people wrong.

He somehow took that team on a run that fell just shy of the postseason.

And his own personal run is still going, this time with the Carolina Hurricanes, who he has a sparkling .927 save percentage with through 14 appearances.

My guess is he'll be in the crease come Monday afternoon in Toronto, too, making a very rare start back where he got his start.

James and I had a strong relationship when he played here, for whatever reason. We had a lot of good conversations, and even when the team (and he) struggled, there was an understanding that we were both there to do our jobs. Honestly, some of my favourite stories I wrote on the beat in the early years were about his improbable rise, from his origin story to how his faith helped him play in the NHL.

So when I knew Reimer was calling this week, I didn't prepare a whole bunch of canned questions like you might for some interviews. I knew we'd land on an interesting topic. What I didn't realize was we would talk about getting old... but I guess that's a good landing point for anyone over 30 in the NHL these days.

Our conversation has been lightly edited.

So what's new with James Reimer?

Not much. Not much. Just hanging out. Got a bunch of kids now. Just trying to stay sane.

How many's a bunch?

We've got two girls.

Hey, I've got two kids. I know what that's about.

You know the circus. How old are they?



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My son is almost 5 and he's in kindergarten. Actually he's singing in the Christmas play here in about a half hour. That's what we're getting ready for. As soon as we get off the phone, I'm running over to the school. And my daughter's a year and a half. We're still in the thick of the craziness. What about you? I remember Nevaeh was born a few years ago.

Yeah she's almost 3. And the youngest is eight months old. Hope.

That's nice.

Oh we're elbows deep. Yeah, no, but it's good. They play together.

Two's enough for us. I'm getting old man. At least you had your kids pretty young. That's good.

I don't know. Yeah it's good. It's funny – I don't know about you, but you always wonder how many kids you want to have and all of a sudden you have a couple and it's like 'Well, you know what... two might be good enough!'

I tell you, the people that have four, you wonder, what's happening? What is your life? I don't understand. I don't understand how you're doing this?

Do you hate yourself? You're signing up for this. This is your fault. Are you crazy? But no. It's good.

How's Carolina?

Good. Yeah. Honestly Carolina's been awesome. City's great. It's kind of our pace. Slower paced. And you know full of southern hospitality, so it's been a really good place to live.

What about in terms of on the ice? Your numbers are excellent so far this year. Is there an explanation for the start you're having so far?

Uh yeah. I don't know. I mean like every summer you work hard and you tweak a few things and whatnot but I think it's honestly just we have a pretty solid team here and I don't hate to use this word but I need to come up with a different word because I'm overusing it but you know I think we have an honest team. So you play the game the right way every night or if you take a period off – you know because you're human – you get back on it for the rest of the game. Guys' work ethic is there every night. So, you know, when you're playing the game the right way, usually everybody looks good.

So you went to Florida. You signed the five-year deal, with a different management group in place. It didn't really go down the path that you wanted it to. Was there some uncertainty for you last year about what was going to happen?

Yeah definitely. I mean towards the end of last year you didn't know what was... I'm mean obviously I knew I wasn't coming back but, I mean, you didn't know what was going to happen. If there was going to be a buyout or if you're going to get traded or you know what was going to happen. It was a weird summer of not knowing what was going to happen. It feels like the goalie market is always super weird or volatile or whatever you want to call it. Especially this summer with the cap not going up as much. It made for a really interesting summer for a lot of guys. Yeah I mean we just kind of sat around and just kept preparing like you're going to do something in the fall. And then obviously when Carolina traded for me (in late June), had some conversations with them and whatnot and it seemed like it would be a good fit. And so far things have gone well.

So you're 31 now, you're going to be 32 in March. Does it feel a lot different than earlier in your career?

Yes and no. I think so. I think you just have a better understanding about how things play out. I get jealous of all the young guys on the team, how fresh they feel all the time. (Laughs). No, but I always joke (about it). People sometimes ask 'How does it feel?' because I think I'm actually the oldest guy on the team by a few months. And so...

Wow.

Yeah who would have thought!?! But I feel just as good as I did when I was 23 or 24 years old. But you've just got to work a little harder before you get on the ice to get that feeling. Yeah no I feel in comparison pretty much the same.

So I'm looking it up (on HockeyDB). It says Brian Gibbons is older than you by about two weeks.

Oh yeah that's right Gibby's on the squad now! That's right. (laughs)

There you go!

When he's not around, I'm a couple months older than Jordo (Staal).

You're six months older than Jordan. Well, it shows how young the NHL is now. It's amazing. I remember going into the dressing room when I started, 12 years ago or whatever, and it was way different. I felt young in there and I was, whatever, 26. And now, everybody's so young. Now I'm closer in age to guys' parents it feels like.

I know. It's crazy. It's crazy you know? But yeah I mean the skill level is crazy. I mean you see Svech the other night again (with the lacrosse goal). It's just not even fair. So, you know. Good for them.

Did you learn something about watching Luongo play into his late 30s that maybe you can take with you in your career?

Uhhh you know honestly just the preparation I think. Honestly I learned a lot of things (from him). I could talk a long time about the way he played and prepared and whatnot, but just everyday was Groundhog Day, in a really good way. You know what I mean? He just brought a high level of preparation and play/compete every day. In a way, it's kind of funny, only in the last year or two would, as a young guy you think you're invincible and you don't really have to warm up or whatever before you get on the ice. If you're on the road or something and guys want to get out early it's like okay I'll just jump out early, you don't have to worry about pulling a groin or getting warmed up or whatever. And as you get older, you've just got to take care of your body better and better to keep playing at a high level. What I learned from him is what I said earlier. You're more cognizant and aware of what you need to do to be at your best and so that was something that he did really well. He had his routines that he did on the ice and whatnot and obviously when you're a goalie late in the years like he was it's even more important. He stuck with it and was the ultimate pro. That's one thing I took for myself.

I'm just looking here... have you played a game at the Air Canada Centre recently? You haven't had a start there in quite a while now.

Not for a while. I think it was my second year in Florida...

Looks like '16-17.

Really? I thought was one... I got schmucked in my head my last start there. I came out halfway through the second. I don't know what year that was.

Anyway, it's been a long time. When you come to Toronto, is there still... how does that feel for you? Is there a lot of nostalgia?

Yeah. I mean it's funny you know, as the years go on, it's time passes and things get less and less (that way). But still you land and



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you're driving and you see where I lived – I lived right off the Gardiner (Expressway) for most of my time there – and then you walk into the rink, there's a lot of memories. There's still some of the same support staff there and you definitely get that nostalgia. But I think also what lessens it a lot, too, is there's been so much turnover of guys. I think Rielly might be the only guy left there? You know. And so I think also changes a lot of things, too. You see the Toronto Maple Leafs and it's a totally different team than the one you suited up for. There's nostalgia when you play against guys that are now on different teams that you played with during that era, too. Whether it's JVR or Bozak or Gards – now he's on our team. A lot of those feelings are connected to the players you played with. But the other half is obviously the city and the fans and the rink itself.

Do you still run into Leafs fans around the league? Do you still get them coming up and talking to you about those years?

Yeah. I would say so. Even in the summer. Honestly Leafs fans are everywhere. They've got a massive following, right? You still run into the odd fan here and there.

Do they still call you Optimus Reim?

Yeah some of them do! Thanks to them. That's a nickname that's stuck with me. It's given me a theme for my masks for my career.

You still have that on your mask?

Yeah. Still every mask has some form of Optimus Reim on there.

So that's like the beginning of your career sticking with you. I mean it's been almost 10 years since you broke into the league. Hard to believe.

Yeah I know time flies. It's crazy.

What are some of your goals for this season and for your career going forward? How are you looking at things?

Obviously the ultimate goal is to win a Cup right? That's pretty standard. You know, I think just win. Honestly, you look at my career, and when you're just starting off, the world's your oyster. All things are possible. And as you play longer and longer, the window to win, it shortens. So to have a team like the 'Canes, I think we have a great chance to do some damage. In the playoffs, every team is dangerous. So it's by no means a given or nothing like that, but I think we have the group to be able to come together and do something special. That doesn't come around very often. For me, it's do my part and try to win games when I get the nod and give these guys the best chance.

Do you still feel like you have something to prove? You have a tough year in Florida and... it must be as a goalie that you've got to prove yourself every year unless you're Carey Price or something? It's all based on your last start and your last month and all of that. It feels like it's never-ending pressure being a goalie.

Yeah. I mean there is no taking your foot off the gas. It's what have you done for me lately? How are your last five starts? The league's too good. Goalies are too good. Players are too good to sit back and pat yourself on the back. When the season's over, then you can take a couple months to congratulate yourself – or the opposite – but yeah no. It's every year. You're pushing yourself and trying to make yourself the best you can be. Because even if you play for 15 years, it's a short career, so you've got to try to make the most of it.

Do you know how many career NHL games you've played now?

I want to say like 340-ish. That's my guess.

Yeah so your last game was 350. That was kind of like a milestone game. 400's coming for you. I remember when you started, the year you made the Leafs, you were like fourth or fifth in their system, no one in the organization was talking about you, and you were a fourth-round pick. And then you get called up and you play as well as you do and, well, you've had a really unique, remarkable journey in hockey since then. Does it feel that way to you?

Yeah. I mean it feels like, yeah, maybe unique is the best way to put it. Obviously, I feel like every year, it's another experience. Whether it's a high or a low or whatnot. It's just another treat, another gift. Another gift from the Good Lord, right? It's been a very interesting career and some really cool experiences. It's funny. When you're coming up through junior or even playing in the Coast and the AHL, it's, you always have this, for myself, this deep-down belief, that you can do it. I don't know where that comes from. But it's deep down. Yet superficially you're always like I don't know. It just seems so far away. The NHL seems so far away. It seemed like it was impossible. But you just stuck with it and believed like I said deep down and lucky for me things worked out. It's been a fun career so far.

I've got a few Carolina questions. What's it been like playing for Rod Brind'Amour?

Great. Really good. I talk about the identity of our team and we've got a bunch of great guys who work hard and have a lot of integrity and honesty and approach the game the right way and that stems down from his leadership. The way he approaches the game. The way he carries himself. You can tell the way he coaches and the way he treats us is just the way he lives his life so there's nothing fake. There's nothing dressed up. It's just straight from the heart. For that reason, makes it pretty easy to get behind him.

What's it been like playing on a team with Jake Gardiner again? Do you guys ever talk about your days with the Leafs together?

The good ol' days?

In some ways.

No, we reminisce for sure. We talk about back in the day, guys we played with, coaches, scenarios, situations, whatnot. It's fun. Often it's funny too because the young guys will ask us because they hear the stories or they play against Toronto and they ask what was it like? This and that. It's been fun playing with him.

Jake says it's night and day, Toronto and Carolina, just like a lot of it. It's completely different.

It's funny seeing him in that scenario. I mean I was him three years ago when I went to Florida. Obviously I had a short stopover in San Jose, which was a lot of fun and learnt a lot. That kind of was maybe a nice in-between. But definitely night and day. It's interesting when you play for a non-hockey market team. It's good. You're just playing hockey. You're going out with the guys, having fun playing hockey. Even still the fans in Carolina are awesome. It's loud in our rink. It's been a really fun place to play.

Does Svechnikov do that move in practice? Do you ever have to try and stop that?

Yeah. The funny thing is that it doesn't work in practice. But it works in games.

It doesn't work?

I don't know why. Maybe there's too much snow on the ice or whatnot. But usually it doesn't work in practice. But it works in games, so that's all that matters.



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Would you have a plan for that move if it came to it and you had to stop that? What are you supposed to do – like stand up if you see that happening?

Yeah I don't know. I don't know if I want to say. Maybe people will know then! Honestly I think you do what Helly did (earlier in the week against the Jets) – you try and meet it with your hand. And it just found a way in. But I think the main thing is you have to see it coming and if you see it coming then you maybe kind of prepare for it. But yeah I mean it's one of those things where it's obviously just a high talent, high skill move. And hopefully you have what it takes to stop it.

The kids in the league are just incredible now aren't they? We see it with Marner and Matthews – the puck skills that guys have is just unreal.

Yeah. And you know what it is, too, that I find? These kids – I don't know, whatever – they just love playing the game. Svech is always the last guy off the ice with our team. He's always just playing with the puck and playing little games after practice and always just working on different things. Same with Turbo (Teravainen). He's always just playing around. Just having fun after practice and it maybe doesn't look like much when you're just watching then all of a sudden you see him doing some of that stuff in games and it just translates. When you're having fun then the game's maybe a little easier.

What was it like reading Steve Dangle's book?

Uhhh... well you know what. I... hmmm.

There's that picture of you reading it on the dock and he sends it out all the time.

(laughing) Yeah I know.

Is that just a photoshoot! You didn't actually read the book?

(laughs) I have yet to read the book.

All right. The secret's out.

I'm sure in the summer you don't want to read about hockey and Toronto and stuff like that.

No, you know, I've got that book and Cujo's book...

Cujo's book is apparently amazing. His back story and everything.

Yeah that one's on my list. On my stack at home to read. And I've got another book, too, what's his face, the guy that got cut by a skate, how come I can't remember his name...

Malarchuk.

Malarchuk!

My guy Dan wrote that. He did a great job.

Oh nice. That book was given to me, too. Those three books are on my list of must reads.

My guess is you don't know about starting Monday (in Toronto) yet, but are you hoping that you do? For old time's sake that you're in there.

Yeah. Yeah it'd be fun. I mean every game's an opportunity. Every game's fun so yeah, no, it'd be good to play. And both these next games, against Florida and Toronto, so both of them against old teams. (Petr Mrazek started in a loss to Florida on Saturday.)

Well, like you said, always something on the line.

Yeap. Every day. Every darn day.

Well, thanks for taking the time out to talk to me. Appreciate it. Maybe I'll see you at the rink on Monday.

For sure. That'd be great. And have fun at the Christmas concert tonight.

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1167566 Washington Capitals

Nicklas Backstrom's security with Caps makes negotiating his own contract 'pretty cool'

Samantha Pell

December 22, 2019 at 8:00 AM EST

Washington Capitals center Nicklas Backstrom is inherently curious and thoughtful. He is quick-witted and highly knowledgeable after soaking in every facet of the game over the course of his 13-year NHL career. These traits influenced the 32-year-old Swede to negotiate his next contract on his own.

"It is not just about saving money," said Backstrom, who is playing in the final year of a 10-year, \$67 million deal. "I want to do it. I'm interested in it. I want to know what is going on, like, behind the scenes. When you have an agent, you only hear what the numbers are. I just wanted to see how people react and stuff. That is what I think is pretty cool."

Backstrom decided he wanted to negotiate his own contract during the summer and shortly thereafter let go his longtime agent, Mark Levine. Backstrom's father, Anders, knows his son is capable of getting a deal on his own. Nicklas was always asking questions when he was younger, Anders said, and he has become "a little bit wiser."

"He knows what he is doing," Anders said. "He is confident with the organization, owners, the GM and stuff like that, and, yeah, I think he's a stable, calm guy, so I know it is what he wants. So we are satisfied with that."

When asked whether he had looked at contract terms for comparable players around the league, Nicklas Backstrom said he hadn't done a lot of market research.

"I feel like I don't need to go in there and be specific," Backstrom said. "We can just have a normal conversation, and that is what we are having. So that's it."

The sticking point in negotiations is contract length, not money, according to a person with knowledge of the situation. Backstrom is meeting directly with General Manager Brian MacLellan to negotiate, and both parties have made it clear they want Backstrom to stay in Washington.

From the Capitals' perspective, a three-year deal makes sense because it would extend through the season when Backstrom turns 35, the age at which data shows players' production begins to fall.

Backstrom wants to avoid another negotiation in the near future so would prefer a five-year deal. His résumé is stellar, including 900



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points in 924 games, a key role in the run to the Stanley Cup in 2018 and a secure reputation as one of the best players in franchise history. Backstrom would prefer it if the next time he talked about his contract situation was to announce a new agreement.

"Either it is going to be done or they will be going the other direction, I don't know," said Backstrom, who has 27 points (eight goals, 19 assists) in 29 games this season.

Contracts for NHL players over 35 could offer clues to how Backstrom's deal could be constructed. Joe Thornton signed a three-year extension with the San Jose Sharks in 2014, when he was 34. Since that deal expired, he has returned each season on a one-year deal.

Backstrom's reasoning for wanting to negotiate his own contract was similar to that of countryman Nicklas Lidstrom, who starred for the Detroit Red Wings.

Widely considered to be one of the best defensemen to play in the NHL, Lidstrom was the first Swedish player to negotiate his own NHL contract and ended up signing a one-year, \$6.2 million deal in 2010. During the 2010-11 season, he became the first NHL defenseman to record 60 points at the age of 40.

"I wanted to gain the experience of negotiating my own deal late in my career," Lidstrom said in a text message. "It was a good experience, and having had Ken Holland as my GM for a lot of years helped. ... We've had a good working relationship."

Los Angeles Kings defenseman Drew Doughty also negotiated his own contract in 2018, an eight-year, \$88 million extension. This month, Doughty applauded Backstrom's decision and encouraged more players to follow suit. The 2016 Norris Trophy winner recognized that not all players are as fortunate as him and Backstrom, whom Doughty described as "a veteran player in this league who year after year shows how good he is and how key he is to the Washington Capitals."

When a player is in such a position, Doughty stressed, he believes self-representation is helpful. Players still need lawyers to look over the contract and can seek outside advice. "I wasn't just doing it on my own," Doughty said, "but I didn't have to pay anyone."

Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin is the other widely known Capital to have negotiated his own deal; he signed his 13-year, \$124 million contract extension in 2008.

"Good on him," Doughty said of Backstrom. "Those guys, the agents, they obviously do a good job for you. But once you get to a certain age and you are old enough to negotiate your own contract, it is pretty easy and you save a lot of money. I know we make a lot of money, so saving money kind of sounds good, I don't know, it doesn't sound great. But at the end of the day, you are saving millions of dollars not using an agent."

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1167567 Washington Capitals

Alex Ovechkin named an All-Star Game captain but remains noncommittal about playing

Samantha Pell

December 22, 2019 at 7:00 AM EST

Alex Ovechkin was named a captain for the 2020 NHL All-Star Game in St. Louis on Jan. 25 after receiving the most fan votes of any player in the Metropolitan Division. However, the Washington Capitals' 34-year-old captain remains noncommittal on whether he will play in the league's annual contest.

Last year, Ovechkin opted to not play, deciding he was better off using that January break to recharge for the season's second half. Addressing his 2020 all-star selection Saturday night after the Capitals' 3-1 win over the Tampa Bay Lightning, Ovechkin said his health will take top priority in his decision.

"We'll see," said Ovechkin, who has 35 points (22 goals, 13 assists) this season. "It's lots of games to play. I'm going to do the best for my health and for the playoffs, and I have to be healthy for the most important games moving forward."

Ovechkin was selected to the All-Star Game for the 11th time in his 15-year NHL career. He has played in seven All-Star Games (2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2015, 2017 and 2018) and was voted captain of the Metropolitan Division for the third consecutive year and fourth time overall.

"It's always nice to be a captain on the all-star team," he said. "Thanks to the fans for voting me. It's a huge honor for me, for this organization and this team."

The all-star format will be a four-team, three-on-three competition. Each team will be made up of 11 players (six forwards, three defensemen and two goaltenders) from their respective division. The other captains are Boston Bruins right wing David Pastrnak (Atlantic), Colorado Avalanche center Nathan MacKinnon (Central) and Edmonton Oilers center Connor McDavid (Pacific).

Ovechkin isn't likely to be Washington's only all-star. Norris Trophy candidate John Carlson is sure to be in consideration, and Coach Todd Reirden is the head of the league's best team after 37 games. Carlson and Reirden were selected to their first All-Star Game last season.

Carlson has 47 points (13 goals, 34 assists) and leads all defensemen in points and assists. He is tied for first in goals with Nashville's Roman Josi. Capitals goaltender Braden Holtby also has been selected to four-straight All-Star Games.

The head coach of the team with the highest points percentage (points earned divided by total possible points) in each of the four divisions at the halfway point of the regular season will guide the respective all-star squads.

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1167568 Washington Capitals

Ovechkin voted NHL All-Star captain for third straight year

By Adam Zielonka - The Washington Times

Sunday, December 22, 2019



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Washington Capitals star Alex Ovechkin was voted one of four captains for the 2020 NHL All-Star Weekend, taking place Jan. 24-25.

Ovechkin led all Metropolitan Division players in fan voting, giving him the captaincy. It's the third year in a row and fourth time overall that Ovechkin was named captain of the Metropolitan team.

The other captains will be David Pastrnak of the Boston Bruins for the Atlantic Division; Connor McDavid of the Edmonton Oilers for the Pacific Division; and Nathan MacKinnon of the Colorado Avalanche for the Central Division.

This year marks the ninth time Ovechkin, 34, has been named an All-Star, but last year he turned some heads by opting not to participate. In accordance with league rules, Ovechkin served a one-game suspension from the NHL for skipping All-Star festivities.

It's unclear whether he'll choose the same route this season. Last year, Ovechkin cited needing a true break from hockey to allow his body some recovery time. At the time the Capitals were just seven months removed from their Stanley Cup championship, and the shorter (and more celebratory) offseason that followed it.

Ovechkin leads Washington and is tied for fourth in the NHL in goals with 22.

Washington Times LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167569 Washington Capitals

Third-period penalty kills help Capitals beat Lightning

By Stephen Whyno - Associated Press

Sunday, December 22, 2019

It looked like curtains for the Washington Capitals when Lars Eller went to the penalty box with the score tied and the Tampa Bay Lightning's NHL-best power play given more than a minute of 5-on-3 time.

Instead, goaltender Braden Holtby and Washington's penalty killers were at their best. The Capitals killed off that Lightning power play and several others to come away with a 3-1 victory Saturday night.

"We stuck with our game plan," Holtby said. "They're going to get looks. They're too skilled not to. It's just a matter of when they get them, don't get running around after, and we did a great job of that."

Holtby turned aside two quality shots by Tyler Johnson and another by Victor Hedman, the three biggest saves of 26 during the game. Tom Wilson also blocked a shot during the 1:26 of 5-on-3 penalty killing time in a crucial part of the game, and Dmitry Orlov scored the go-ahead goal soon after.

"It was a big moment there," penalty-killer Nic Dowd said. "We had a chance from going down a goal to potentially being on the kill again to getting out of it, and we gave ourselves the opportunity to score and win the game."

The Lightning's power play went 0 for 7 as they lost for the second game in a row and third time in their last four.

"We're a proud group and we're not happy about our performance on the power play tonight," Hedman said. "We take it upon us to go out there and get us goals and get us momentum, and we didn't do that today and that's on us."

Led by their penalty kill, the NHL-leading Capitals improved to 5-0-1 in the second half of back-to-backs this season. They were the better team for a large portion of the game against a rested opponent even after playing at New Jersey on Friday.

"The maturity of the team speaks for itself," said defenseman Radko Gudas, who scored his first goal of the season. "We're playing smart hockey in these back-to-backs. We're playing simple and we don't make it overly hard on ourselves with unnecessary turnovers."

Curtis McEllhenney got a surprise nod over regular Lightning starter Andrei Vasilevskiy, who was not on the bench for the entire game. He made 32 saves, but the Lightning lost their second in a row.

"I can't sit here and say we played very well," Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper said.

The NHL-leading Capitals swept the three-game season series against the Lightning, who are outside a playoff position after being a popular preseason pick as Stanley Cup champions.

"Obviously we don't view them as what their record is," Holtby said. "They're a good hockey team. I think our group really gets excited to play good hockey teams. All the games were good. We just did that little extra to come out on top."

The Capitals got a scare in the second when winger T.J. Oshie crashed head-first into Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev and looked to be in distress lying on the ice. Oshie, who has had five documented concussions in 12 NHL seasons, skated off and went straight down the tunnel but returned later in the period.

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1167570 Washington Capitals

Capitals superfan Alex Luey passes away

By Mike DePrisco

December 22, 2019 1:32 PM

Capitals superfan and inspiration to Alex Ovechkin, Alex Luey, passed away Sunday after a three-year battle with cancer.

Luey developed a special bond with Ovechkin over the last two years. In 2017, Luey got to read the Caps' starting lineup. Ovechkin promised him he'd score for him and proceeded to go off for a hat trick.

Ovechkin shared a tweet about Luey on Sunday afternoon.

Our Caps family heartbroken...so sad to hear Alex Luey pass away today. Such a great kid. He inspired me and our team with his strength. My family will pray for him and his mom and dad. Love you bro. I will miss seeing you in Toronto. Rest in Peace. ❤️
#LueyStrong pic.twitter.com/PIb7CXUsEs

— Alex Ovechkin (@ovi8) December 22, 2019



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Tom Wilson also shared his condolences.

One of the kindest and bravest kids I've had the pleasure of meeting over the years. We will miss you. #LueyStrong
pic.twitter.com/MCy7aqB7A7

— Tom Wilson (@tom_wilso) December 22, 2019

Luey was the team's good luck charm when he returned to see his favorite team play in October.

In that game, Ovechkin scored two goals, one of them a game-winner, so the Caps gave Luey the player of the game helmet after a win in Toronto.

Player of the Game Helmet for Alex Luey!

Keep up the fight, Alex!!#ALLCAPS | #LEUYSTRONG
pic.twitter.com/6q04MzyRw

— Washington Capitals (@Capitals) October 30, 2019

Luey was 13 years old.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167571 Washington Capitals

Alex Ovechkin is honored by All-Star vote, but noncommittal on his participation

By J.J. Regan

December 22, 2019 9:20 AM

WASHINGTON -- The NHL announced on Saturday that Alex Ovechkin had been voted captain of the Metropolitan Division for the NHL All-Star Game, but that is certainly no guarantee that the Capitals captain will participate.

This is the fourth time Ovechkin has been voted a captain and the third straight year. If he participates, it will be his eighth appearance in the All-Star Game.

The keyword there is "if."

Ovechkin chose to sit out of last year's All-Star Game, and received a league-mandated one-game suspension. On Saturday after Washington's 3-1 win over the Tampa Bay Lightning he was noncommittal on whether he would participate in this year's festivities and at the very least left open the possibility that he may not be going.

"We'll see," he said when asked if he would go. "It's lots of games to play. I'm going to do the best for my health and for the playoffs and I have to be healthy for the most important games moving forward."

All-Star weekend is set for Jan. 24-25. Should Ovechkin choose not to attend, he will receive a one-game suspension. Last season, he and the team had the choice of whether he would miss the game before or after the break. That would mean Ovechkin would miss either the Jan. 18 game against the New York Islanders or the Jan. 27 game against the Montreal Canadiens, both on the road. Again, Ovechkin would miss one of those games only if he does not participate in All-Star weekend.

While he made it clear his health for the playoffs was his main concern, Ovechkin did stress that it was an honor to be voted captain by the fans.

"It's always nice to be a captain on the All-Star team," Ovechkin said. "Thanks fans for voting me. It's a huge honor for me, for this organization and this team."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167572 Washington Capitals

'Three Canadians?' — Talk of Capitals' dressing room is the shrinking number of Canadians

By Tarik El-Bashir

Dec 22, 2019

WASHINGTON – When Chandler Stephenson was traded away on Dec. 2, it signaled more than just the departure of a teammate and close friend for a handful of Capitals.

It also marked the departure of another Canadian.

As the NHL-leading Caps near the midpoint of the 2019-20 campaign, the team's roster features only three players born in the Great White North: Braden Holtby, Tom Wilson and Brendan Leipsic. Canada, of course, is the birthplace of hockey, home to seven of the NHL's 31 franchises and it still sends more players to the league than any other country, though its share has been declining for decades.

Soon after Stephenson said his goodbyes, the dwindling number of Canucks on the Caps' roster became a topic of conversation in the room following the morning skate in Anaheim.

"We were talking about it, obviously," Holtby told The Athletic. "We assume it's the lowest in the league and it could be the lowest ever."

"It's strange," the goalie added. "Really strange."

Holtby's suspicions were correct, according to the NHL.

Although Washington has boasted an increasingly international lineup during the Alex Ovechkin era, the Caps currently feature the fewest Canadians among the NHL's clubs. Boston is next with five, then Arizona and the New York Rangers each have six.

Furthermore, the Caps have never had three or fewer Canadians on their roster at any time prior to this season, according to league records. (Three other Canadians – Michael Sgarbossa, Beck Malenstyn and Tyler Lewington – have suited up for the Caps this season but are currently playing for Washington's minor league affiliate in Hershey, Pa.)

The fewest Canadians the Caps have ever had on their roster before now was four, which occurred for 20 games last season.

"As it started getting thinner and thinner, we were aware of it," Wilson said. "Then it was, 'Oh, another one's gone.'"

"And now," he continued, "you're left with three."



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Leipsic, who's in his first season with the Caps but has suited up for four other organizations over the past five seasons, said it's "weird" and "odd" and unlike anything he's experienced at any level.

"You look at Vegas," said the Winnipeg native, who spent the 2017-18 season with the Golden Knights, "there's four Winnipeggers on one team alone (Cody Eakin, Ryan Reaves, Cody Glass and Mark Stone). And here there's just three Canadians.

"It's totally different."

In Washington, the transformation has unfolded over time but it has accelerated over the past couple of years. Consider:

In Ovechkin's rookie season of 2005-06, 13 of the top 20 Capitals players in games played were products of Canada.

Fast forward to Wilson's rookie year of 2013-14, 12 of the top 20 in games played hailed from Canada.

By 2017-18, the Caps' championship season, only eight of the top 20 in games played came from Canada.

Jay Beagle left via free agency soon after winning it all. Eventually, Alex Chiasson, Madison Bowey, Devante Smith-Pelly and Brett Connolly followed Beagle out of the door. And then Stephenson was dealt.

"I mean, I can't think of a time or a team that I've been on," Holtby said. "Three Canadians? It's just ... it's hard to think of. Even just less than half North Americans is, you don't see that very often."

After a pause to collect his thoughts, Holtby steered the conversation in another direction. As weird as it is to see fewer Canadians in the room, he said, he considers the Caps' diversity of nationalities to be a strength.

"It's different but we make it work," Holtby said. "It's forced us to get rid of cliques a little bit more. A group of us from North America hang out with the Czech guys all the time. It's pretty unique that way."

On the current roster, there are players from eight different countries: United States (6), Russia (4), Canada (3), Czech Republic (3), Sweden (2), Denmark, Slovakia and Switzerland.

Coach Todd Reirden called the makeup of this year's roster "a little bit random."

"It's not by design, by any means," said Reirden, who is from Illinois. "It just seems that's where we're at right now. That could change next year. It could be seven or eight (Canadians) or whatever. It's not something we spend a lot of time thinking about. We think we have a good enough culture established where it doesn't matter what nationality a player is. We just want guys that want to play and want to be Capitals."

Wilson agreed with Reirden and Holtby.

"We talk about it but it's not a thing you really look at," Wilson said. "With our team, it's never really feels like that because everyone is so close. It doesn't really matter where you come from. It's actually cool when you stop and look it. Some of your best buddies on the team are Swedes or Czechs or whatever."

Wilson noted how he and his father, Keven, went to lunch last week with Michal Kempny, Jakub Vrana, Radko Gudas and Richard Panik.

"They didn't speak one word of Czech the entire time," Wilson said. "It was cool."

Wilson said he's had the same experience on the ice.

"I've played on a line with Ovi and Kuzy," Wilson said, referring to Ovechkin and Evgeny Kuznetsov. "Sometimes, they'd come off speaking Russian for a little bit. Then they'd tell me what they were saying in English. It's just a cool dynamic we have around here."

Leipsic said he also has taken note of how the European players often go out of the way to speak English in the presence of the North Americans.

"It's good they are making the effort to keep us included now," he said with a chuckle.

Asked for his thoughts on Canada's shrinking footprint in the Caps' room, Ovechkin shrugged.

"The guys who came to the league are good players, so it doesn't matter where you are from – Russia, Czech, Sweden, Canada, America," he said. "If you made the team, you made the team. I don't think anyone is looking at passports. It's not how it used to be. The world has changed. The league has changed. The hockey game has changed. It doesn't matter who you are, you play your game and that's it."

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1167566 Washington Capitals

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From the Capitals' perspective, a three-year deal makes sense because it would extend through the season when Backstrom turns 35, the age at which data shows players' production begins to fall.

Backstrom wants to avoid another negotiation in the near future so would prefer a five-year deal. His résumé is stellar, including 900 points in 924 games, a key role in the run to the Stanley Cup in 2018 and a secure reputation as one of the best players in franchise history. Backstrom would prefer it if the next time he talked about his contract situation was to announce a new agreement.

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The all-star format will be a four-team, three-on-three competition. Each team will be made up of 11 players (six forwards, three defensemen and two goaltenders) from their respective division. The other captains are Boston Bruins right wing David Pastrnak (Atlantic), Colorado Avalanche center Nathan MacKinnon (Central) and Edmonton Oilers center Connor McDavid (Pacific).

Ovechkin isn't likely to be Washington's only all-star. Norris Trophy candidate John Carlson is sure to be in consideration, and Coach Todd Reirden is the head of the league's best team after 37 games. Carlson and Reirden were selected to their first All-Star Game last season.

Carlson has 47 points (13 goals, 34 assists) and leads all defensemen in points and assists. He is tied for first in goals with Nashville's Roman Josi. Capitals goaltender Braden Holtby also has been selected to four-straight All-Star Games.

The head coach of the team with the highest points percentage (points earned divided by total possible points) in each of the four divisions at the halfway point of the regular season will guide the respective all-star squads.



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Washington Post LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167568 Washington Capitals

Ovechkin voted NHL All-Star captain for third straight year

By Adam Zielonka - The Washington Times

Sunday, December 22, 2019

Washington Capitals star Alex Ovechkin was voted one of four captains for the 2020 NHL All-Star Weekend, taking place Jan. 24-25.

Ovechkin led all Metropolitan Division players in fan voting, giving him the captaincy. It's the third year in a row and fourth time overall that Ovechkin was named captain of the Metropolitan team.

The other captains will be David Pastrnak of the Boston Bruins for the Atlantic Division; Connor McDavid of the Edmonton Oilers for the Pacific Division; and Nathan MacKinnon of the Colorado Avalanche for the Central Division.

This year marks the ninth time Ovechkin, 34, has been named an All-Star, but last year he turned some heads by opting not to participate. In accordance with league rules, Ovechkin served a one-game suspension from the NHL for skipping All-Star festivities.

It's unclear whether he'll choose the same route this season. Last year, Ovechkin cited needing a true break from hockey to allow his body some recovery time. At the time the Capitals were just seven months removed from their Stanley Cup championship, and the shorter (and more celebratory) offseason that followed it.

Ovechkin leads Washington and is tied for fourth in the NHL in goals with 22.

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1167569 Washington Capitals

Third-period penalty kills help Capitals beat Lightning

By Stephen Whyno - Associated Press

Sunday, December 22, 2019

It looked like curtains for the Washington Capitals when Lars Eller went to the penalty box with the score tied and the Tampa Bay Lightning's NHL-best power play given more than a minute of 5-on-3 time.

Instead, goaltender Braden Holtby and Washington's penalty killers were at their best. The Capitals killed off that Lightning power play and several others to come away with a 3-1 victory Saturday night.

"We stuck with our game plan," Holtby said. "They're going to get looks. They're too skilled not to. It's just a matter of when they get them, don't get running around after, and we did a great job of that."

Holtby turned aside two quality shots by Tyler Johnson and another by Victor Hedman, the three biggest saves of 26 during the game. Tom Wilson also blocked a shot during the 1:26 of 5-on-3 penalty killing time in a crucial part of the game, and Dmitry Orlov scored the go-ahead goal soon after.

"It was a big moment there," penalty-killer Nic Dowd said. "We had a chance from going down a goal to potentially being on the kill again to getting out of it, and we gave ourselves the opportunity to score and win the game."

The Lightning's power play went 0 for 7 as they lost for the second game in a row and third time in their last four.

"We're a proud group and we're not happy about our performance on the power play tonight," Hedman said. "We take it upon us to go out there and get us goals and get us momentum, and we didn't do that today and that's on us."

Led by their penalty kill, the NHL-leading Capitals improved to 5-0-1 in the second half of back-to-backs this season. They were the better team for a large portion of the game against a rested opponent even after playing at New Jersey on Friday.

"The maturity of the team speaks for itself," said defenseman Radko Gudas, who scored his first goal of the season. "We're playing smart hockey in these back-to-backs. We're playing simple and we don't make it overly hard on ourselves with unnecessary turnovers."

Curtis McIlhenney got a surprise nod over regular Lightning starter Andrei Vasilevskiy, who was not on the bench for the entire game. He made 32 saves, but the Lightning lost their second in a row.

"I can't sit here and say we played very well," Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper said.

The NHL-leading Capitals swept the three-game season series against the Lightning, who are outside a playoff position after being a popular preseason pick as Stanley Cup champions.

"Obviously we don't view them as what their record is," Holtby said. "They're a good hockey team. I think our group really gets excited to play good hockey teams. All the games were good. We just did that little extra to come out on top."

The Capitals got a scare in the second when winger T.J. Oshie crashed head-first into Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev and looked to be in distress lying on the ice. Oshie, who has had five documented concussions in 12 NHL seasons, skated off and went straight down the tunnel but returned later in the period.

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1167570 Washington Capitals

Capitals superfan Alex Luey passes away

By Mike DePrisco

December 22, 2019 1:32 PM



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Capitals superfan and inspiration to Alex Ovechkin, Alex Luey, passed away Sunday after a three-year battle with cancer.

Luey developed a special bond with Ovechkin over the last two years. In 2017, Luey got to read the Caps' starting lineup. Ovechkin promised him he'd score for him and proceeded to go off for a hat trick.

Ovechkin shared a tweet about Luey on Sunday afternoon.

Our Caps family heartbroken...so sad to hear Alex Luey pass away today. Such a great kid. He inspire me and our team with his strength. My family will pray for him and his mom and dad. Love you bro. I will miss seeing you in Toronto. Rest In Peace. ❤️
#LueyStrong pic.twitter.com/Plb7CXUsEs

— Alex Ovechkin (@ovi8) December 22, 2019

Tom Wilson also shared his condolences.

One of the kindest and bravest kids I've had the pleasure of meeting over the years. We will miss you. #LueyStrong
pic.twitter.com/MCy7aqB7A7

— Tom Wilson (@tom_wilso) December 22, 2019

Luey was the team's good luck charm when he returned to see his favorite team play in October.

In that game, Ovechkin scored two goals, one of them a game-winner, so the Caps gave Luey the player of the game helmet after a win in Toronto.

Player of the Game Helmet for Alex Luey!

Keep up the fight, Alex!!#ALLCAPS | #LEUYSTRONG
pic.twitter.com/6q04MzyRew

— Washington Capitals (@Capitals) October 30, 2019

Luey was 13 years old.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167571 Washington Capitals

Alex Ovechkin is honored by All-Star vote, but noncommittal on his participation

By J.J. Regan

December 22, 2019 9:20 AM

WASHINGTON -- The NHL announced on Saturday that Alex Ovechkin had been voted captain of the Metropolitan Division for the NHL All-Star Game, but that is certainly no guarantee that the Capitals captain will participate.

This is the fourth time Ovechkin has been voted a captain and the third straight year. If he participates, it will be his eighth appearance in the All-Star Game.

The keyword there is "if."

Ovechkin chose to sit out of last year's All-Star Game, and received a league-mandated one-game suspension. On Saturday after

Washington's 3-1 win over the Tampa Bay Lightning he was noncommittal on whether he would participate in this year's festivities and at the very least left open the possibility that he may not be going.

"We'll see," he said when asked if he would go. "It's lots of games to play. I'm going to do the best for my health and for the playoffs and I have to be healthy for the most important games moving forward."

All-Star weekend is set for Jan. 24-25. Should Ovechkin choose not to attend, he will receive a one-game suspension. Last season, he and the team had the choice of whether he would miss the game before or after the break. That would mean Ovechkin would miss either the Jan. 18 game against the New York Islanders or the Jan. 27 game against the Montreal Canadiens, both on the road. Again, Ovechkin would miss one of those games only if he does not participate in All-Star weekend.

While he made it clear his health for the playoffs was his main concern, Ovechkin did stress that it was an honor to be voted captain by the fans.

"It's always nice to be a captain on the All-Star team," Ovechkin said. "Thanks fans for voting me. It's a huge honor for me, for this organization and this team."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.23.2019

1167572 Washington Capitals

'Three Canadians?' — Talk of Capitals' dressing room is the shrinking number of Canadians

By Tarik El-Bashir

Dec 22, 2019

WASHINGTON – When Chandler Stephenson was traded away on Dec. 2, it signaled more than just the departure of a teammate and close friend for a handful of Capitals.

It also marked the departure of another Canadian.

As the NHL-leading Caps near the midpoint of the 2019-20 campaign, the team's roster features only three players born in the Great White North: Braden Holtby, Tom Wilson and Brendan Leipsic. Canada, of course, is the birthplace of hockey, home to seven of the NHL's 31 franchises and it still sends more players to the league than any other country, though its share has been declining for decades.

Soon after Stephenson said his goodbyes, the dwindling number of Canucks on the Caps' roster became a topic of conversation in the room following the morning skate in Anaheim.

"We were talking about it, obviously," Holtby told The Athletic. "We assume it's the lowest in the league and it could be the lowest ever."

"It's strange," the goalie added. "Really strange."

Holtby's suspicions were correct, according to the NHL.

Although Washington has boasted an increasingly international lineup during the Alex Ovechkin era, the Caps currently feature the



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fewest Canadians among the NHL's clubs. Boston is next with five, then Arizona and the New York Rangers each have six.

Furthermore, the Caps have never had three or fewer Canadians on their roster at any time prior to this season, according to league records. (Three other Canadians – Michael Sgarbossa, Beck Malenstyn and Tyler Lewington – have suited up for the Caps this season but are currently playing for Washington's minor league affiliate in Hershey, Pa.)

The fewest Canadians the Caps have ever had on their roster before now was four, which occurred for 20 games last season.

"As it started getting thinner and thinner, we were aware of it," Wilson said. "Then it was, 'Oh, another one's gone.'"

"And now," he continued, "you're left with three."

Leipsic, who's in his first season with the Caps but has suited up for four other organizations over the past five seasons, said it's "weird" and "odd" and unlike anything he's experienced at any level.

"You look at Vegas," said the Winnipeg native, who spent the 2017-18 season with the Golden Knights, "there's four Winnipeggers on one team alone (Cody Eakin, Ryan Reaves, Cody Glass and Mark Stone). And here there's just three Canadians.

"It's totally different."

In Washington, the transformation has unfolded over time but it has accelerated over the past couple of years. Consider:

In Ovechkin's rookie season of 2005-06, 13 of the top 20 Capitals players in games played were products of Canada.

Fast forward to Wilson's rookie year of 2013-14, 12 of the top 20 in games played hailed from Canada.

By 2017-18, the Caps' championship season, only eight of the top 20 in games played came from Canada.

Jay Beagle left via free agency soon after winning it all. Eventually, Alex Chiasson, Madison Bowey, Devante Smith-Pelly and Brett Connolly followed Beagle out of the door. And then Stephenson was dealt.

"I mean, I can't think of a time or a team that I've been on," Holtby said. "Three Canadians? It's just ... it's hard to think of. Even just less than half North Americans is, you don't see that very often."

After a pause to collect his thoughts, Holtby steered the conversation in another direction. As weird as it is to see fewer Canadians in the room, he said, he considers the Caps' diversity of nationalities to be a strength.

"It's different but we make it work," Holtby said. "It's forced us to get rid of cliques a little bit more. A group of us from North America hang out with the Czech guys all the time. It's pretty unique that way."

On the current roster, there are players from eight different countries: United States (6), Russia (4), Canada (3), Czech Republic (3), Sweden (2), Denmark, Slovakia and Switzerland.

Coach Todd Reirden called the makeup of this year's roster "a little bit random."

"It's not by design, by any means," said Reirden, who is from Illinois. "It just seems that's where we're at right now. That could change next year. It could be seven or eight (Canadians) or whatever. It's not something we spend a lot of time thinking about. We think we have a good enough culture established where it doesn't matter what nationality a player is. We just want guys that want to play and want to be Capitals."

Wilson agreed with Reirden and Holtby.

"We talk about it but it's not a thing you really look at," Wilson said. "With our team, it's never really feels like that because everyone is so close. It doesn't really matter where you come from. It's actually cool when you stop and look at it. Some of your best buddies on the team are Swedes or Czechs or whatever."

Wilson noted how he and his father, Keven, went to lunch last week with Michal Kempny, Jakub Vrana, Radko Gudas and Richard Panik.

"They didn't speak one word of Czech the entire time," Wilson said. "It was cool."

Wilson said he's had the same experience on the ice.

"I've played on a line with Ovi and Kuzy," Wilson said, referring to Ovechkin and Evgeny Kuznetsov. "Sometimes, they'd come off speaking Russian for a little bit. Then they'd tell me what they were saying in English. It's just a cool dynamic we have around here."

Leipsic said he also has taken note of how the European players often go out of the way to speak English in the presence of the North Americans.

"It's good they are making the effort to keep us included now," he said with a chuckle.

Asked for his thoughts on Canada's shrinking footprint in the Caps' room, Ovechkin shrugged.

"The guys who came to the league are good players, so it doesn't matter where you are from – Russia, Czech, Sweden, Canada, America," he said. "If you made the team, you made the team. I don't think anyone is looking at passports. It's not how it used to be. The world has changed. The league has changed. The hockey game has changed. It doesn't matter who you are, you play your game and that's it."

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