



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • December 29, 2018

## THE NEWS & OBSERVER

### Canes relying even more on 'Wally' with Staal out

By Chip Alexander

The Washington Capitals sent out a starting lineup Thursday that had Nicklas Backstrom at center with Alex Ovechkin and T.J. Oshie on the wings.

The Carolina Hurricanes had Lucas Wallmark stepping in to the center-ice faceoff circle against Backstrom for the opening draw, with Jordan Martinook and Warren Foegele on the wings.

Normally, that would have been Jordan Staal taking the faceoff. It would have been Staal centering the Canes' top checking line and matched up as much as possible on the road against one of the most dangerous lines in the league.

But Staal is out, again. Concussion symptoms continue to linger and his return, to practice or games, is unknown.

"That's a huge piece missing, for sure," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Thursday before the game.

Asked who his best checking center was with Staal out, Brind'Amour quickly mentioned "Wally" -- that is, Wallmark.

"It's a lot to ask," Brind'Amour said.

Well, yes. Staal, 30, is a 6-foot-4, 220-pound forward with a Stanley Cup ring and more than 900 games of regular-season and playoff experience. Wallmark, 23, is listed at 6-0 and 178 pounds, having now played 55 NHL games.

"Everyone knows how good Jordan is and how important he is to our team," Wallmark said Thursday. "Hopefully he'll be back soon. Everyone has to pick it up a little bit more and show they want to play."

The Canes' centers Thursday in the 3-1 loss to the Caps were Sebastian Aho, Wallmark, Clark Bishop and Victor Rask. By the third period, Brind'Amour had Rask and winger Janne Kuokkanen on the bench, relying even more on his top three centermen.

It was another full night for Wallmark. The Swede had more than three minutes of penalty-kill time, almost two minutes of power-play time and was used on a team-high 21 faceoffs, winning 11.

Special teams play was decisive in the game. The Caps picked up a power-play goal from T.J. Oshie while the Canes were 0-for-4 on the power play. Chandler Stephenson had an even-strength goal for the Caps and defenseman John Carlson an empty-net score late as Canes goalie Petr Mrazek and the Caps' Braden Holtby matched saves most of the night.

Aho had the goal for the Canes (15-16-5), eight points out of playoff position in the Eastern Conference after Thursday's games.

With Staal sidelined, Wallmark has averaged about 18 minutes of ice time per game. That's more than he could have imagined at the start of training camp, when he was just trying to lock down a roster spot.

But Rask, one of Wallmark's best friends on the team and a fellow Swede, cut two fingers in a kitchen accident before camp began. Come opening night, Wallmark was on the team.

"It's my first (full) year in the league and I felt at the beginning it was a process and I was just trying to learn," Wallmark said. "After that, I felt I was getting better and better and getting more confidence. Just trying to do all the small things right and get better each game."

Martinook said Wallmark might be the most underrated player on the team, saying, "He's so responsible-minded defensively." Wallmark, who has quick hands and good instincts, has won more than 53 percent of his faceoffs. Despite a lack of size, he's wiry tough along the walls. He's usually in the right spots in the defensive zone, earning Brind'Amour's trust.

"Wally's doing the job and has been doing a great job all year," Brind'Amour said.

What's missing? Goals, mainly. Puck luck.

Despite doing so many things well, Wallmark has scored two goals in 36 games -- one on the power play. He has 78 shots on net, so he's getting looks. Like many of his teammates, he's not finishing.

"Hit the posts, unbelievable saves, something," he said, shaking his head. "But I'm still creating the chances. Sooner or later, hopefully it's going to come for me."

Wallmark, a former fourth-round draft pick by Carolina, had 24 goals in 67 games for the Charlotte Checkers in the AHL during the 2016-17 season, when he made his NHL debut and was in eight games for the Canes. He had 17 goals and 38 assists in 45 games last season with the Checkers in being named the team's MVP.

But his NHL totals remain: three goals, 12 assists in 55 games.

"Right now I'm trying to stay positive and stay with it and do what I've been doing to create the chances," Wallmark said. "Sooner or later ..."



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## Triangle Ten: The 10 most influential people in Triangle sports in 2018

By Luke DeCock

When Debbie Yow was hired in the summer of 2010 to turn around the N.C. State athletic department, she promised a top-25 athletic program on all fronts, especially in football and men's basketball, both of which were mired in prolonged droughts

As she prepares to exit the scene this summer – when Yow signed a contract extension four years ago taking her through July 2019, she said it would be her last – she has delivered on that promise, and not just in football and basketball, both of which have been in the Associated Press top 25 this season for the first time since 2003. The Wolfpack is strong across the board – a remarkable 15th in the overall Directors Cup standings last academic year and ninth this fall semester, ranked alongside Duke and North Carolina having narrowed the non-revenue gap for those local rivals, and programs like wrestling and swimming have become national powerhouses.

Football has a new indoor practice facility and Reynolds Coliseum has gone through a top-to-bottom renovation. Revenue has grown to feed the increasing success. Yow hasn't been perfect – and the indiscretions of the Mark Gottfried regime continue to hang over the school – but she hasn't hesitated to make changes when needed, even of her own hires. Her direct style occasionally ruffles feathers, but there's no question she gets results – and no doubting her passion for the job or N.C. State.

For all of that, and her continuing influence on sports in the Triangle, Yow tops the 2018 Triangle Ten, an unscientific assessment of the 10 most influential people in Triangle sports over the past year.

Even after her expected retirement in July, don't expect her influence to diminish. She'll likely be even more vocal on social media, where she already spars with opposing fans – her Twitter address is @gopacknow, identified as “#1 State Fan” – and it wouldn't be surprising to see her take an active role with Lead1, the athletic-director association-slash-lobbying group run by Tom McMillen, the former Congressman and Maryland basketball star.

Yow is joined by an agent, an entrepreneur, athletes and administrators, among others, in this list compiled by News & Observer sports columnist Luke DeCock with input from other staff members, focusing on impact in 2018 specifically.

### 2. Jordan Bazant, agent

A year after he leveraged Tennessee's interest in Dave Doeren into a five-year extension for the N.C. State football coach, Bazant maneuvered another one of his clients into a big move. Bazant's legwork was apparent when Mack Brown's hiring at North Carolina was announced less than 24 hours after Larry Fedora was fired. In addition to Doeren and Brown, Bazant at one point had the N.C. State trifecta with Gottfried and baseball coach Elliott Avent.

### 3. Zach Maurides, Teamworks founder

What started as a class project during Maurides' sophomore year at Duke 14 years ago has morphed into an industry

essential. The former football player's team management software and app is now used by more than 2,400 athletic clients, including universities, professional teams, national teams, conferences and events. In 2018, Teamworks added more than 700 teams, grew to more than 100 employees and opened a massive, high-tech new office in downtown Durham. Maurides and Teamworks have quietly become part of the hidden foundation of sport, domestically and abroad.

### 4. Zion Williamson, Duke basketball player

Already a YouTube phenomenon for his dunking ability before he even arrived on Duke's campus, Williamson has lived up to the hype in his first and only season with the Blue Devils. His unique blend of size, strength, quickness and personality has him poised to become the most marketable prospect of his generation no matter where he's actually drafted next spring. Williamson has certainly gotten some help from ESPN's promotional machine, but he has more than paid the network back in high-flying highlights. The world is at Williamson's feet, unusual power for an 18-year-old.

### 5. Tom Dundon, Carolina Hurricanes owner

The Texas billionaire closed on the purchase of the Carolina Hurricanes from Peter Karmanos in January and has been personally involved with every aspect of the organization, from the roster shake-up to the coaching changes to the decision to wear Hartford Whalers jerseys earlier this month for the first time since the team moved here from there two decades ago. The results? Less certain so far, with attendance stagnant and the on-ice performance all too similar. But the future of the Triangle's only major-league team remains very much in Dundon's hands.

### 6. Ezra Baeli-Wang and 292 (and counting) other UNC athletes

Baeli-Wang, a North Carolina fencer who graduated in 2017, started an open letter to the North Carolina administration opposing the plan to build a \$5.3 million pavilion for Silent Sam, the toppled confederate statue now widely seen as a symbol of white supremacy on campus. Hundreds of current and former athletes from across all sports – including active football and basketball players – have signed. A group of former basketball players signed a separate statement, applauding the “courage and conviction” of the current athletes who spoke up against the plan, which has since been tabled as the university looks for another solution.

### 7. Nina King, Duke deputy athletic director

King already had a full plate at Duke as Kevin White's day-to-day operations manager and in-house counsel; when Gerald Harrison left to become athletic director at Austin Peay last summer, King was handed oversight of football as well. Named to Sports Business Daily's “40 under 40” in college athletics earlier this year, she also serves on the NCAA women's basketball committee. Insiders view her as White's most likely successor at some point down the road

### 8. McCall Zerboni, NC Courage midfielder



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There's no question that coach Paul Riley's vision for the team was the backbone of the Courage's unprecedented success in 2018 but there was plenty of credit to go around. As much as Zerboni's steady play, the 32-year-old's driving leadership behind the scenes both before and after suffering a season-ending elbow injury in September was a critical element in the best season in the history of American women's soccer. The Courage took on and beat two of the best teams in the world – Paris St. Germain and Olympique Lyonnais – in August before cruising through the NWSL season, being sent on the road by Hurricane Florence during the playoffs and beating the Portland Thorns for the title on the Thorns' own home field.

## 9. Mack Brown, North Carolina football coach

Brown's return after 21 years away – and five years out of coaching – created a lot of warm feelings for alumni nostalgic for the days when Brown had the Tar Heels as a consistent top-25 program. There's plenty of talent coming back from a team that lost five of nine games by a touchdown or less, so a quick turnaround on the field would not be surprising, but Brown faces a bigger challenge rebuilding interest in a program that always seems to be overshadowed by the basketball team. (A factor in his departure for Texas in 1997.) As evidenced by the television commercial he filmed immediately after his introductory press conference, selling tickets will be as big a part of his job as winning games – starting with North Carolina's opener in Charlotte next year against South Carolina.

## 10. Que Tucker, NCHSAA commissioner

In almost 28 years at the NCHSAA, Tucker has become one of the most influential high-school administrators in the country. A Rockingham County native and former Kay Yow assistant coach at N.C. State, Tucker was promoted from within in 2015. Wrangling the competing needs and desires of 400 schools of varying sizes across the state, from Mattamuskeet (119 students) to Myers Park (3,248) is no easy task but Tucker has made it look easy.

## FIVE TO WATCH IN 2019

### 1. Kevin Keatts, N.C. State basketball coach

Keatts has N.C. State back in the top 25 for the first time since 2013 and continues to rack up victories against top-10 opponents. Can he break a longer drought and deliver the ACC title the Wolfpack has sought since 1987?

### 2. Thomas McCormick, Centennial Authority chairman

The Centennial Authority oversees PNC Arena and that body has some big decisions approaching quickly. The building is starting to show its age and is in need of a massive, multimillion dollar renovation, first discussed in 2015 but put on hold while the Hurricanes were on sale. The Hurricanes' lease expires in 2024 and the PNC naming-rights deal expires in 2022. McCormick and executive director Jeff Merritt have work ahead.

### 3. Randy Woodson, N.C. State chancellor

Assuming Yow retires as planned, her successor will be a pivotal choice for the future of N.C. State athletics. Woodson overruled his hiring committee and search firm to hire Yow, so it will be curious to see who he settles upon as her replacement – and difficult to predict.

### 4. Trei Oliver, N.C. Central football coach

A former defensive back and punter for Central, Oliver gets his first shot at a head-coaching job at his alma mater. Things slipped a little last season after Jerry Mack left, but the program remains on solid footing and Oliver has a chance to do great things in Durham.

### 5. John Swofford, ACC commissioner

The ACC commissioner, whoever that may be, wields disproportionate power in the Triangle. With the ACC Network scheduled to launch in August and the conference membership stable, how much longer will Swofford, 70, want to remain in charge? His current contract runs through 2020 and he says he has no plans to go anywhere.

## THE 2017 TRIANGLE 10

1. Scott Dupree, Greater Raleigh Sports Alliance executive director

2. Rick Evrard, Bond, Schoeneck & King lawyer

3. Kevin White, Duke athletic director

4. George Williams, St. Augustine's athletic director and track coach

5. Stephen Malik, North Carolina FC/NC Courage owner

6. Mike Krzyzewski, Duke men's basketball coach

7. Ingrid Wicker McCree, N.C. Central athletic director

8. Dundon

9. Yow

10. Dwayne West, Garner Road AAU executive director



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## THE ATHLETIC

### Dellow: No, Dougie Hamilton's on-ice shot numbers aren't being cheaply inflated

By Tyler Dellow

Writing about Dougie Hamilton last week, I pointed out that his new team, the Carolina Hurricanes, is generating a ton of shots when he's on the ice. Meanwhile, the rate at which Calgary generates shots with Mark Giordano on the ice has fallen off dramatically from last year, when he was partnered with Dougie Hamilton. Many, many commenters smelled a rat. Their theory was simple: Hamilton inflates the shot totals when he's on the ice with cheap shots from the point, which is why his shot volume's so good but the Hurricanes can't score.

So, I looked. Hamilton's not driving his on-ice shot numbers with piles of attempts. If you think he is, you're wrong. Lets start with last year, in recognition of the fact that a lot of people who closely follow the Flames aren't as plugged into the 2018-19 Carolina Hurricanes. Hamilton was second in individual 5-on-5 shots and attempts among NHL defencemen who played at least 500 minutes. The top eleven in attempts (weird number chosen for reason that will become obvious) were Brent Burns, Hamilton, Johnny Boychuk, Ryan Pulock, Seth Jones, Roman Josi, Victor Hedman, Oscar Klefbom, Mikhail Sergachev, Jacob Trouba and...wait for it...Mark Giordano.

So, on a basic level, yes Hamilton shot the puck a lot. That's not really what we're interested in though. What we're really interested in is whether his prolific shooting was somehow distorting his possession numbers with tons of shots that register on the shot counts but don't really trouble the goalie. Among the leaders, the answer seems to be "not really" — Hamilton's numbers aren't really out of line with that group. Burns is a gunner and took 33 percent of his team's 5-on-5 attempts when he's on the ice in 2017-18. After that comes Boychuk (28 percent), Pulock (26 percent), Hamilton (24 percent), Hedman (24 percent), Jones (23 percent), Trouba (23 percent), Klefbom (23 percent), Sergachev (22 percent), Josi (22 percent) and Giordano (20 percent). He's basically in a clump in the middle of all of the other guys who shoot the puck a lot.

Hamilton did use a lot of his team's shot attempts — he was fifth in the NHL among defencemen last year — but his team also attempted a lot of shots when he was on the ice. The easiest way to show this is to probably just look at the list of defencemen whose forwards attempted the most shots per 60 when they were on the ice in 2017-18. Hamilton slots in at 34th with defencemen who played at least 500 minutes on a single team, with Flames' forwards attempting 39.9 shots per 60 minutes when he's on the ice. He was right below Giordano, which makes sense given that they played together all year.

Now, there's an interesting little wrinkle here. Giordano and Hamilton are both shooters. Unsurprisingly, they were first (Hamilton) and second (Giordano) in terms of attempts by the defence per 60 minutes when they were on the ice. (Amusingly, Burns, whose defence partners were 190th out of 208 qualifying defencemen is third on this list. That man is a shooter.) This does bring a question to mind about efficiently assembling defensive pairs. Does it make sense to pair two

shooters together? I don't profess to know the answer to that question but it'd be interesting to look into.

Moving forward to this year, Hamilton is again shooting the puck a lot. He's third in the NHL in 5-on-5 attempts per 60 minutes among defencemen, with only Burns and Erik Karlsson in front of him among defencemen who've played a minimum of 250 minutes. He still eats up a big percentage of his team's shot attempts — he's sixth there. Giordano is still a shooter as well — he's 18th. Hamilton is taking 24 percent of Carolina's shot attempts when he's on the ice; Giordano is attempting 23 percent of Calgary's.

As was the case last year, no defenceman is on the ice for more attempts per 60 by his team than Hamilton. His number has actually spiked — he's on the ice for 79.2 CF/60. Giordano has fallen off this year sitting at just 60.5 shot attempts per 60 minutes. Most devastatingly for the argument that Hamilton inflates his on-ice numbers with muffins is that no defenceman has seen the forwards take more shots per 60 minutes when he's on the ice than Hamilton — Carolina's forwards attempt 49.2 shots per 60 with him. For Giordano, that number is at 38.5. Of course, Carolina's forwards have struggled to score, Calgary's haven't and here we are.

So what we're seeing this year isn't really all that different than what we saw last year from Hamilton. In fact, you might have had a better argument about Calgary's defence shooting too much last year, when both he and Giordano were on the ice together, consuming 44 percent of Calgary's shot attempts. Separated, they're at 38 percent (Hamilton) and 36 percent (Giordano). The league norm is a little bit under 36 percent, so they're both well in the normal range. The league average team gets 36.6 shot attempts per 60 minutes from their forwards though, which is a little below where Giordano (38.5) is at and miles below where Hamilton (49.2) is at. Even allowing for Carolina's tendency to generate a lot of shot attempts, that's a wild number — Carolina's forwards generate just 40.6 shot attempts per 60 minutes when he's not on the ice.

There's probably an argument to be made that all high shot volume defencemen shoot too much but that argument is hardly unique to Hamilton. Moreover, unlike a lot of other high shot volume ("volume" in the sense of being responsible for a high percentage of their team's attempts) defencemen, Hamilton is somewhat unusual in that the forwards with whom he shares the ice see an appreciable bump in their shot volume.

There are undoubtedly criticisms that you can make of Hamilton's game. That sort of thing gets turned way up when you leave a high profile media market where you were playing with an excellent partner and move to a smaller one and your old team excels while your new team struggles. That said, if the data doesn't fit the theory, it's probably not what's happening. Beyond the simple fact that Hamilton shoots a lot, which can be explained by the fact that his teams seem to shoot a ton when he's on the ice — suggesting he's in the offensive zone a lot — there's simply not a lot to suggest that



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he's goosing his on-ice numbers with his own shot volume. If anything, the evidence this year seems to suggest the

opposite: compared to other defencemen who take a lot of shots, Hamilton's forwards seem to get a lot of opportunities.



## Gold's Hurricanes GameDay Notebook: We need more power

By Adam Gold

The Carolina Hurricanes skate a little Saturday afternoon matinee (1:00 pm face off/12:30 Storm Watch on 99.9 the Fan) at the Prudential Center against the New Jersey Devils today. And hopefully, the Canes will remember what time the match starts. Thursday night in Washington, the first day back after the holiday break, the Hurricanes were missing in action over the first 20 minutes, which was unfortunate seeing as they had three first period power plays which could have proven useful.

I'm not going to get caught up in the literal words used by head coach Rod Brind'Amour after the 3-1 loss to the Capitals. Rod said the team "wasn't ready" to resume the schedule after the holiday. You're not always going to play well. You're not always going to have it all going for the entire game. And, it really didn't look all that different from some other nights when the opposition was simply better than the Hurricanes.

This shouldn't come as a shock to anyone, but the Caps are better than the Canes.

More alarming, though, is that it also shouldn't surprise us that the Carolina power play was a disaster (24th in the league at 15.2%). Even on nights when the Hurricanes are good it's not unusual for the Canes to be suboptimal with a manpower advantage. And, while there are many areas where the Hurricanes need improvement the element that would probably have the greatest impact would be the power play.

Here's the truth, though. It's not ONLY about scoring power play goals, though that is — of course — the end game. You have to use those two minutes -- or more, in some cases -- to at least build momentum, because even the best power plays fail to score 70% of the time.

What happened in DC was the opposite.

The Hurricanes three, first period power plays were impotent. They struggled just to gain entry into the offensive zone. When Carolina did manage to set up, they'd mishandle a pass or try to make the perfect play. So, rather than glean some energy and create quality scoring chances, the end result was a feeling of deflation.

The third period power play at least created a few scoring opportunities. Though, to be honest, the first half of it seemed as anemic as all of the others.

Is that about talent? To a point, yes. But, a top unit of Sebastian Aho, Teuvo Teravainen, Andrei Svechnikov, Justin Williams and Justin Faulk isn't lacking for goal-scoring ability. The second unit, on the other hand, leaves a bit to be desired. Brind'Amour said he would look at the personnel and consider

some changes, though I'm not sure an attitude adjustment isn't more necessary.

There's just no substitute for hard work and physical play at 5-on-4. Be active, be decisive with the puck and be strong in front of the net. The Hurricanes don't possess an Alexander Ovechkin who can just camp out in the face off circle and blast one-timers through goaltenders. And, while the top unit has plenty of speed and skill, that second group is kind of slow and lacks quickness and physicality other than Michael Ferland.

I wouldn't be all that shocked to see Jordan Martinook or Warren Foegele show up on the power play. While they're not gifted goal-scorers, they're tenacious, high energy players who have a knack for getting the puck and creating chaos around the net.

Something has to change, though, because since the Canes pumped in three power play goals in a shootout loss to the Capitals a few days before Christmas, they're 0 for 18 in their last five games. Carolina can't get NOTHING 5v4. Right now, they are.

\* The Hurricanes are tied for 6th with Philadelphia in the Metropolitan Division, nine points behind the Penguins for the third playoff spot. They're also nine points behind Boston for the final Wild Card spot in the East.

\* The Devils are 6th in the NHL on the penalty kill and 19th on the power play.

\* Carolina has scored a power play goal in 14 of 36 games. They're 7-5-2 in those games, 8-11-3 when they fail to ring the bell with the man advantage.

\* Dougie Hamilton scored six power play goals for Calgary a year ago. He has one for the Hurricanes. Aho scored eight on the PP a year ago, he has two almost halfway through this season. And, all of Svechnikov's 10 goals have come at even strength.

\* At 13-16-7, the Devils have the worst record in the Eastern Conference. But, New Jersey is a stout 9-4-4 on home ice and they're coming off of a 5-2 win in Boston on Thursday.

\* No matter who starts in goal for the Devils, the Canes have their work cut out for them. Keith Kinkaid is 7-2-0 in nine starts against Carolina with a 1.87 GAA/.942 SV%. Rookie Mackenzie Blackwood is 1-1-0 in four appearances with a 2.15 GAA and .939 SV% and just stopped 40 of 42 shots in the win over the Bruins.

\* Taylor Hall, the Devils points leader (11 goals, 26 assists) is not expected to play due to a lower body injury.



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\* Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney have each enjoyed success against the Devils. McElhinney stopped 33 of 34 shots in a 2-1 win over New Jersey in November. Carolina scored twice in an 8-second span in the first 30 seconds of the game. For his career, McElhinney is 5-1-0 with a 1.58 GAA/.942 SV% in seven appearances. Mrazek is 4-1-0 with a pair of shutouts, a 2.02 GAA and a .918 SV%.

\* Aho has 11 points (7 goals, 4 assists) in his last 7 games. Against the Devils, Aho has three goals and zero assists in nine games.

\* Justin Williams has 31 points (7 goals, 24 assists) in 45 career games against New Jersey.

\* After today's game Carolina returns home to host the Philadelphia Flyers on New Year's Eve at 6:00 pm. Then, the Hurricanes will play four of their next five games on the road.

Thursday, January 3 at Philadelphia

Friday, January 4 vs Columbus

Sunday, January 6 at Ottawa

Tuesday, January 8 at NY Islanders

Thursday, January 10 at Tampa Bay



## Preview: Hurricanes at Devils

Last road game of 2018 brings Canes to New Jersey

by Michael Smith

SHORT HILLS, N.J. - The Carolina Hurricanes' final road game of the 2018 calendar year brings them to New Jersey for a matinee faceoff against the Devils.

Saturday's stop in Newark is the final destination on a two-game road trip coming off the three-day holiday break. The Canes returned to action on Thursday in a 3-1 loss to the Washington Capitals.

### Bouncing Back

The Hurricanes find themselves in the midst of a stretch of five consecutive games against divisional opponents, and they'll be looking for a bounce-back effort in New Jersey after dropping a 3-1 decision in Washington after returning from the holiday break.

The power play was the difference maker on Thursday, as the Capitals converted one of their four opportunities, while the Canes whiffed on their four cracks at the man advantage. Sebastian Aho scored the lone goal of the game for his team, cutting the deficit to just one in the third period, but that's as close as the Canes would come.

"Our game is close. We're not out of games. We're right there, and the turning point seems to go the other way right now. We've got to find ways to turn it our way," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said after practice on Friday. "We are close, but we need everybody to contribute. We're not getting contributions from everyone right now."

If the Canes convert any one of their four power-play opportunities in Washington, perhaps the result is different. Alas, the man advantage was one of the chief focuses of Friday's practice in Newark.

"We've moved the units around, put in new people. We've tried quite a few different things. But at the end of the day, you've got to execute. You've got to bring the work ethic," Brind'Amour said. "If you're a painter, paint, and if you're a plumber, plumb. We've got to do what we do. We've got some high-end players who need to make plays. That's what it comes down to."

### The Last Meeting

The Hurricanes scored two goals in an eight-second span in the first 30 seconds of the game, all the offense they would need to defeat the Devils, 2-1, in Raleigh on Nov. 18. After dropping a disappointing 4-1 result to the Columbus Blue Jackets the night prior, scoring on the first two shifts of the game was an emphatic response for the Canes, who finished a season-long, six-game homestand with a 4-1-1 record.

### The Opposition

The Devils returned from the holiday break with a 5-2 victory over the Boston Bruins but have won just four of 12 games in the month of December and find themselves at the bottom of the Eastern Conference with a 13-16-7 record (33 points). New Jersey will be without leading scorer Taylor Hall and forward Marcus Johansson.



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## Notebook: Reassessing the Canes' Power Play

Canes tinker with man advantage, plus notes on waiver moves

by Michael Smith

SHORT HILLS, N.J. - Justin Faulk and Dougie Hamilton huddled up in their stalls after practice in New Jersey on Friday.

In lieu of a whiteboard and marker, Faulk diagrammed a play on his pants with his right index finger, strategizing the power play that's going to need to be more powerful against the Devils on Saturday than it was in Washington on Thursday.

What needs to be better?

"Everything, obviously," Faulk said. "I don't think there was one particular part that was any good. I think our breakouts were pretty brutal. We didn't generate much and turned it over a couple of times. When we dumped it in, we weren't able to get it back and made it pretty easy on them. They were able to win the battles and clear pucks out pretty efficiently."

He's not wrong.

Of their three straight first-period power plays, the Canes recorded one shot on goal on each. None was too threatening, save for Micheal Ferland's net drive on the first man advantage. The rest of those six minutes were mired in shots being blocked, failed attempts to gain the zone, sloppy passing and dump-ins retrieved by the opposition.

"Work. Work was missing," Sebastian Aho said after the game. "We didn't work hard enough."

After Aho scored to bring the Canes within a goal in the third period, they had a fourth power play and a chance to even in the game with less than four minutes to play.

The Canes won the faceoff - something they've struggled with in the absence of Jordan Staal - but a pass from Faulk to Justin Williams hopped over his stick and out of the zone. Then, Teuvo Teravainen lost control of the puck before gaining the zone. The best scoring chance came on the next possession, as Aho fed Andrei Svechnikov in the slot. The Russian rookie didn't get all of either of his whacks at the puck before it died on the post and was cleared by the scrambling Caps' defense. The Canes then pulled Petr Mrazek for a 6-on-4 advantage and had a couple of looks - Ferland tried a wrap-around and Hamilton's point shot was tipped on goal - before a low-to-high pass again escaped the zone. Power play over.

"We were just all over the place," Faulk said. "You need to have natural instincts or feel to adapt when things are happening out there on the power play, and we seem to be kind of stuck there."

"Execution. Just execution," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said after practice on Friday. "We're not following through with the plan, and then when we do, we're not executing the little plays that elite power plays make when there's pressure - putting it over a stick, on the tape, just the little things. Last

night, for me, we got outworked, and that should never happen."

The Canes finished the night 0-for-4 on the power play, and though they were equally as stingy on their kill, the Caps floated a redirected wrist shot in for the game-winning tally on the man advantage in the second period.

"At the end of the day, you can look at the box score sometimes and tell the story of the game. Not always, but a lot of times you can," Williams said after the game. "They scored a power-play goal, and we didn't."

"That's the difference in the game," Brind'Amour said. "We've got to find a way to get better."

So, that's what the Canes did on Friday in New Jersey. They held an extended power-play meeting prior to practice, a rarity for the team, according to the head coach, and then put what had been talked about into action on the ice.

"We've moved the units around, put in new people. We've tried quite a few different things. But at the end of the day, you've got to execute. You've got to bring the work ethic," Brind'Amour said. "If you're a painter, paint, and if you're a plumber, plumb. We've got to do what we do. We've got some high-end players who need to make plays. That's what it comes down to."

### Fleury Practices Again

Defenseman Haydn Fleury has been sidelined for the last six games with a concussion, but he returned to practice on Thursday in Raleigh. He skated with the team again on Friday but doesn't figure to be in the lineup on Saturday. He remains day-to-day.

### Cajkovsky on Unconditional Waivers

The Hurricanes placed defenseman Michal Cajkovsky on unconditional waivers Friday for the purpose of terminating his contract.

Cajkovsky, 26, signed a one-year, two-way contract after attending training camp on a PTO. He skated in 23 games with the Checkers this season and recorded four points (1g, 3a). Cajkovsky is likely to head to the KHL, where he reportedly will sign with Dynamo Moscow.

### Zykov Back on Waivers

Former Canes forward Valentin Zykov is back on waivers after a brief stint with the Edmonton Oilers. There, he played five games and recorded two penalty minutes and no shots on goal. The 23-year-old Russian forward has totaled three assists, a minus-2 rating and 13 shots on goal in 18 games this season.

The Hurricanes could opt to reclaim Zykov and assign him to Charlotte, but that seems somewhat unlikely given the fact that he's in the first year of a two-year, one-way contract.



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## Gritty, Ovechkin's summer and an EBUG: The Top 10 viral stories of 2018

We have your funniest, favorite and most heartwarming moments of this year right here

by Daniel O'Leary

It was another year of big goals, jaw-dropping saves, spectacular assists and epic games around the NHL.

Along with all the incredible on-ice action in 2018, there were just as many amazing, funny and heartwarming moments off the ice.

Our Short Shifts team took the liberty of narrowing down the Top 10 viral stories of 2018, (including a few honorable mentions):

### 1. The World Meets Gritty

It's hard to imagine a National Hockey League - or a world - without Gritty now, but the Philadelphia Flyers mascot has only been with us a few months.

On Sept. 24, the Flyers introduced their new mascot and everything changed.

Since hitting the scene, the lovable orange furball has appeared on "The Tonight Show," became a tattoo trend, had a feud with the San Jose Sharks mascot, made a grand entrance into Wells Fargo Center at the home opener, became a Halloween costume, nearly got elected to public office, drew praise from Flyers great Bernie Parent, battled some youth hockey players, became a Time Magazine "Person of the Year" candidate, attended a wedding, nailed a halfcourt shot at college basketball game, played Santa Claus and even took down some Santa impostors.

That's a big year for most. Gritty did it all in less than four months.

### 2. Caps Win, Party with Cup

The Washington Capitals won the first Stanley Cup title in their history and did not get cheated on the celebration.

Starting from the moment 2018 Conn Smythe winner Alex Ovechkin led the team in a stirring rendition of Queen's "We Are the Champions," the Capitals and the Cup were inseparable.

They took it to a Washington Nationals game, to Las Vegas for the NHL Awards, to "The Tonight Show" and plenty of other places.

Ovechkin even took it to bed.

### 3. The Accountant Turned Goalie

On March 29th, a 36-year-old accountant from Oak Park, Illinois had nothing else to do, so he pulled on a Chicago Blackhawks jersey and shut out an NHL team for 14 minutes.

Scott Foster became the first emergency backup goalie (or EBUG) to make a save in an NHL game.

After injuries struck Blackhawks goalie Anton Forsberg in warmups and backup Collin Delia in the third period, Foster was pressed into service. And he did not disappoint.

Foster stopped seven shots, including one terrifying one from Winnipeg Jets defenseman Dustin Byfuglien, and was named the game's First Star.

### 4. Vegas Does Things Differently

During their inaugural season, the Vegas Golden Knights proved to do things a little differently. While some teams may have proposals during games, in Vegas they had the actual wedding.

Steven Poscente had the whole thing planned out for his girlfriend Cari, who became his fiancée in the first period, his wife during the second intermission and an old married couple by the time the game ended.

The ceremony was officiated by none other than Elvis, of course.

It was a wild year for the Golden Knights, who also saw a puppy named after their goalie Marc-Andre Fleury skyrocket to fame, Jeremy Roenick participate in all of their fun, and a number of showstopping pregame ceremonies.

Also Chance the mascot drove the Knight Rider car to one of the games.

### 5. Hockey Is For Everyone

The nation of Kenya has one ice hockey team, but got some added depth thanks to a pair of NHL All-Stars.

Without another team to play in their home country, the Kenya Ice Lions met up with Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby and Colorado Avalanche forward Nathan MacKinnon in Toronto for a game.

The result was the feel-good game of the year.

### 6. "We're The Devils!"

Hey, you gotta support your team.

Actor Patrick Warburton, who famously played rowdy New Jersey Devils fan David Puddy on "Seinfeld" actually showed up to Game 4 of the team's Eastern Conference First Round series against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Warburton went all in, complete with face paint, the letter D painted on his chest and even let out his "We're the Devils!" line from the iconic sitcom.

### 7. Persistence Pays Off for Connolly



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During the Washington Capitals Eastern Conference First Round back in April, forward Brett Connolly wanted to give a puck to a young girl named Keelan Moxley.

Things didn't go smoothly.

But after more than a few tries, the puck got to the 6-year-old Moxley and she and her family were guests of his at Game 4 of the Stanley Cup Final, as well.

Of course, Connolly scored much to the delight of his new pal.

Connolly, however, still needs to work on his fist bumps.

## 8. Hurricanes Score With Celly

The Carolina Hurricanes are switching things up.

The team went with a new goal song and some new postgame celebrations and are having a great time doing it.

What have we learned from this? Hockey is fun. And, also, defenseman Dougie Hamilton does a mean floss.

But as the Hurricanes move forward and build new traditions, they are still taking time to honor the past.

## 9. A Burning Talent

Norman Shewchuk is a 52-year-old resident of Mundare, Alberta. He is also a quadriplegic with limited use of his hands.

But that doesn't stop him from making some amazing works of art using a magnifying glass and the Sun. His favorite subject? The Edmonton Oilers and captain Connor McDavid.

## 10. Coming Through in the Clutch

Ask and you shall receive.

Penguins fan Kelly Sowatsky went viral looking for a kidney donor. And it's a good thing she did.

Sowatsky got her message out to enough people that someone came through for her, a fellow Penguins fan named Jeffrey Lynd.

And while we are on the subject, another Penguins fan, Ashley Pritchard is currently looking for a kidney for her father, so if you know someone give her a call.

## HONORABLE MENTIONS

- Phil Kessel in the Penguins cold tube is the greatest thing ever and Evgeni Malkin knows it.

- Say it ain't so Joe. Brent Burns sat Joe Thornton down and took a razor to his teammate's epic beard.

- He may be a rookie, but Brady Tkachuk's reaction face has already become a thing.

- The Nashville Predators decided to steer into some criticism of a trio of banners they raised and it was quite funny.

- Auston Matthews and Mitchell Marner were in "The Nutcracker." No joke. This happened recently.



## By the Numbers: The Defensive Shooting Quandary

The Hurricanes blue line logs shots on net at one of the highest rates in the NHL, yet defensive scoring production is very low. What needs to change?

By Andrew Ahr

With three shots in Sunday night's Whalers Night win over the Boston Bruins, Dougie Hamilton hit 200 consecutive games with a shot on goal, the longest active streak in the NHL. Three more in the Carolina Hurricanes' loss to the Capitals last night extended that streak to 201 games. He's logged 119 shots in total this season for an average of 3.31 shots per game, yet he's only scored three times.

The problem isn't unique to Hamilton. Justin Faulk has tallied 105 shots on goal and has found the net only twice this year. Hamilton has eclipsed 10 goals in a season four times, while Faulk has done it three times. Both carry strong reputations as offensive defensemen in the NHL, yet this season they're both shooting under 3%. Jacob Slavin has tallied 74 shots and scored three times. That's better, but he's still posting a shooting percentage of just 4%.

In watching the Hurricanes this season the eye test tends to suggest that defensemen are shooting from the points too frequently, often with minimal traffic in front. That trend is

backed up by the fact that two defensemen — Hamilton and Faulk — are in the top three in shots recorded this season for the Hurricanes (the other shot leader is Sebastian Aho). The only other team in the NHL in which two defensemen are in the top three in shooting is in San Jose, where Erik Karlsson and Brent Burns are facing similar scoring woes despite peppering opposing nets at a rate of nearly 3.5 shots per night.

The only defensive corps that is outshooting the Canes as a whole this season is Burns' and Karlsson's Sharks, who have tallied 437 shots from the blue line. That barely eclipses the Canes' 426, while most backends around the league have logged shots in the high 200's to mid 300's. The Predators defensemen have recorded 396 shots on net, but it helps when your top pairing offensive defensemen in Roman Josi has tallied a league leading 139 of them.

It's interesting that two of the most highly-regarded offensive blue liners in Burns and Karlsson are both posting a shooting percentage lower than 4%. They've combined for just seven goals this season despite 258 shots on target. I think the difference in this case is that they're getting pucks to the net, but their primary goal isn't to score on every shot. Rather, they try to generate a rebound or redirection that in turn makes



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things difficult for the opposing goaltender. This is reflected in their assist tallies, where they've combined for 62 assists before the halfway point this season. Faulk and Hamilton, by contrast, have combined for just 17 helpers.

Despite being the only other NHL defensive corps getting pucks on net at the same rate as the Sharks, the Canes' scoring production is significantly lower. I wouldn't expect for the Canes' premier offensive defensemen in Hamilton and Faulk to keep up with Burns and Karlsson in offensive numbers, but a combined five goals and 17 assists thus far isn't enough given that they're shooting at such a high rate.

## About Last Night: Another Powerless Outing

In which we analyze yet another game in which the Hurricanes' powerless power play cost them two points.

By Cody Hagan

Another game, another wasted opportunity for the Carolina Hurricanes. While Petr Mrazek held the Canes in the game, the Washington Capitals got just enough offense to get the job done by a score of 3-1. The power play and overall offensive woes continue to plague the Hurricanes who are creeping closer and closer to the bottom of the league standings instead of the top.

### The Good

While last night was another game where it was hard to find many good things to take away, Petr Mrazek was the one shining star. He continues to be solid game in and game out and without him the Capitals would have racked up numerous goals. Along with Curtis McElhinney, Mrazek has helped lead the Hurricanes to above league average goaltending for the first time in a very long time. Last night was no exception as he held one of the most potent offenses to just two goals by standing on his head.

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For so long the issue for the Canes was goaltending and now that they have quality guys in net the team in front can't do anything with it. Is Petr Mrazek the long term solution for the Hurricanes? Most likely not. But at the rate he is playing it's hard to see a situation where the Canes do not offer him an opportunity to return next season as the main guy. His numbers do not reflect just how good he is playing but you can see him giving it his all every night. With a little more goal support Mrazek would be looking like an All-Star.

### The Bad

This seems pretty obvious but the Hurricanes can't score with any consistency. When they turn on the jets they can be deadly just as we saw against Boston, but when they are off, the Canes offense looks realllllyyyy bad. It has become a complete feast or famine situation and they are not feasting nearly enough.

It took until the 12:25 mark of the third period for the Hurricanes to break Braden Holtby's shutout on a Sebastian Aho goal.

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Maybe they need to exercise better shot selection. But I get the impression that they're being coached to get shots to the net at a high volume from the point. And I really don't think that they should stop doing that — most offensive D-men around the league are shooting at similar, if slightly lower, rates.

It seems apparent that Hamilton and Faulk would enjoy much better results if they were able to force goalies into a save with more red jerseys in front of the net. This would generate those second and third chance opportunities that could move the needle forward for a Hurricanes team scoring at the fourth lowest rate in the NHL.

It's not a work ethic issue or a strategy issue, it's a talent issue. It's becoming painfully obvious by the day that guys like Victor Rask and Brock McGinn do not belong on a NHL roster. This is a results league and they aren't getting results. Plain and simple.

After so many games like last night you would think the Canes would be able to get it figured out but Rod Brind'Amour seems more lost than anyone.

When he was first introduced as head coach Brind'Amour was good for calling it like it was but now he seems stuck on repeat just like his predecessor was. It's not a work ethic problem, Rod; it's a lot more complex than that.

But what is the answer to the offensive woes? The Canes called up Janne Kuokkanen saying they wouldn't drag him down playing on the fourth line, yet he was benched for almost the entire third period. Will Martin Necas get a shot after he returns for the World Juniors? Will the Canes trade for some true top six talent? Maybe we start the lose for Hughes campaign? The answer isn't simple but whatever the Canes have now just is not working.

Just as equally bad for the Hurricanes last night was their ability to turn the puck over at bad times. Washington's first goal was directly caused by a turnover. Kuokkanen decided to pass the puck instead of holding on to it and then Calvin de Haan couldn't clear, handing Chandler Stephenson a golden opportunity.

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For a team that struggles to score you can't give the opposition such easy chances. That is simply not a recipe for success.

### The Ugly

You know where this is going.

Tripp Tracy said on the television broadcast they he believes the Hurricanes' power play, or lack thereof, has directly cost the team between five and ten points this season. One can easily argue the high side of that as the powerless power play has been beyond horrendous almost every game this season. Last night was just another example of it.

The Hurricanes can't gain entry on the power play so they can never get anything set up. When they do gain entry their setup is very slow and unproductive which leads to either a turnover



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or a easy shot on goal which has minuscule chances of going in.

Justin Faulk continues to lead the way on the power play as he got more ice time (4:33) on the 0-4 power play last night than anyone else. Faulk has twelve points on the entire season yet he continues to quarterback the power play.

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Oddly enough Jaccob Slavin is hardly getting any consistent power play time even though most would consider him the best offensive defenseman on the Hurricanes. Slavin got just 1:46 on the man advantage last night.

On the forward side, can anyone explain why Rask is getting so much power play time? He got 2:50 last night with his whopping two points on the year. That's more than Micheal Ferland, Warren Foegele, Kuokkanen or Slavin got.

After Aho pulled the Canes to within one in the third period the Hurricanes had a fairly strong push which saw Andrei Svechnikov nearly score. Then they got a power play with under four minutes remaining in the game with a chance to tie. Instead of this continuing the momentum it completely killed

it. At the biggest moment of a game your power play needs to step up. Instead, the Hurricanes' man advantage is deflating them.

The power play is horrendous and it has been for years. Brind'Amour cannot fix it and without some more elite talent it will continue to fail which will continue to hold the Hurricanes back. It's the ugliest part of this team and has certainly cost them at least ten points on the season.

Moral of the Story

It's another tough pill to swallow as the Canes had numerous opportunities to win the game last night. Watching the power play continue to squander games is beyond frustrating but there is no simple way to fix it. The head coach has led a failing power play for multiple years, the roster lacks offensive talent, and guys with two points on the year are getting lots of man advantage ice time. As 2018 come to an end it's hard to see this team, as currently constructed, doing anything this season. That great start to the season is a faded memory and the darkest days may still be ahead with a ton of games within the Metro remaining.



## Hurricanes' Old Habits Die Hard

By Mark Shiver

The Carolina Hurricanes returned from the NHL's league-wide holiday break Thursday night to face the Washington Capitals in D.C. It was not pretty as the Capitals beat the Hurricanes 3-1. What is compelling about the Hurricanes is not that they lost or that they lost on the road, but that they looked so lethargic...again.

A Peters' Problem?

One of the most reiterated and frustrating points when former head coach Bill Peters was at the helm was the constant "we did not start on time" mantra. It was a constant throughout his tenure with the Hurricanes and never made any sense. It was an inexcusable characteristic of the team in 2014-15, and in Jan. 2018 it was still the albatross around the team's neck.

"You got to give yourself a mental break, and then you're going to have to wrap your head around the identity of our team and how we have to play to be successful," Peters said. "The nights that we're not the hardest-working team, and I don't know our record, but it wouldn't be flattering. So, if we're not going to wrap our head around the fact that we have to start on time, each and every night, and outwork our opponent, then it's going to be a frustrating second half." (From "After Dismal Loss and Aho Injury, Canes Deed to Do Some Soul-Searching During the Break," – News & Observer – 1/4/18).

Can anyone explain how highly paid athletes, most of whom by nature are highly competitive or they would not be playing at the professional level, can "not start on time?" It's a ridiculous thing to admit by a coach or players that slow starts

are a characteristic of their team. Yet time and again during Peters' tenure, the Hurricanes went out and started a game flat and lethargic with no sense of urgency.

A Brind'Amour Problem, Too

At first, it seemed that Peters' replacement Rod Brind'Amour would be able to make not starting on time a part of the team's past. On Oct. 11 of this year, I wrote "The Carolina Hurricanes have eradicated at least one phrase from their vocabulary. 'We did not start on time' has yet to be heard...What had been a staple statement during the four years that former head coach Bill Peters was at the helm has suddenly disappeared."

Those early-season words of enthusiasm for the team's high-energy play may have been prematurely penned. As recently as Thursday night, the Hurricanes once again looked like the embodiment of "old habits die hard," with their lackluster outing against the Capitals. Even Brind'Amour admitted that there was a serious lack of energy when interviewed after the game. He said,

They had the same break. I think we just weren't ready to go like we needed to be. That's on me. I saw it and talked about it, but I should have done something different. I don't know what, but we were not ready to go like we needed to be against that team at this time of the year.

Unfortunately, that statement is glaring in its implications. The team was not ready and the coach did not know what to do about them not being ready to go. Perhaps "I don't know what" is not something a head coach should be saying, especially one in his first gig. Brind'Amour is learning the nuances of being a head coach in the NHL as he goes. But there is no



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sense in giving critics fodder by admitting when he is in a situation that for which he has no answer.

The Washington Post had this opening paragraph to describe Thursday night's contest: "After four days off — three without practice — the Washington Capitals shook off some expected rust Thursday night in one of their most balanced performances of the season." (From "Carlson, Oshie Lead Caps to 3-1 Win Over Canes," — Washington Post — 12/27/18).

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Rust from the break was to be expected for the Capitals as well as for the Hurricanes. That is normal. But winners shake it off. The Capitals did just that while the Hurricanes did not get going until late in the game and lost as a result.

The bottom line is that there is a systemic problem in the culture of the Hurricanes. It reared its ugly head under Peters and is still embedded under Brind'Amour. Many thought that naming Justin Williams captain would eradicate the lethargy. So far that has not been the case.

Where's the Hurricanes' Chaos?

When the season started it was easy to write that Brind'Amour had the team starting on time. They were like the cartoon character the Tasmanian Devil, whirling and buzzing all over the ice. They were shooting and forechecking like it was playoff time. That chaotic brand of hockey has not been seen in some time. What happened?

The criticism was that the Hurricanes were just blasting away and not scoring. But, at least they played with more energy and brought it to the opponent every night. Perhaps Brind'Amour needs to bring back the chaos and go from there.

Or, perhaps he needs to bring a little Peters to the practice ice, as The Hockey Writers' Ian Pham wrote recently: "Wake-up calls have been consistent with Peters throughout the season when the Flames are caught napping. Last Friday during practice, 'Peters blew his whistle, spit out a few words unsuitable for young children,' and made the players do some punitive 'extra skating,' according to The Calgary Sun's Kristen Anderson (from 'Flames Notes: Backlund Looks Ready for Action,' — The Calgary Sun — 12/14/18). What ensued was a weekend of winning, as the Flames topped the Minnesota Wild 2-1 on Saturday before smashing the St. Louis Blues 7-2 on Sunday."

Peters is old-school, and extra laps around the rink are right up his coaching-style alley. And, this season he's not talking about his team not starting on time. His Calgary Flames are winning.

The difference is that the Hurricanes, to a man, need to decide that they want to win. It's gut-check time. It's "lace 'em up and go like your hair is on fire for 60 minutes" time. If the players cannot summon the energy or the will to win, then nothing Brind'Amour does will matter. The puck is in the Hurricanes' players' court so to speak. Will they respond?



## Checkers stumble in return from holidays

By Nicholas Niedzielski

The Checkers stumbled early on in their return from the holiday break, ultimately falling to the Laval Rocket 4-2. The home side came out firing in Charlotte's first visit to Quebec this season, launching 10 shots on goal and building a substantial 3-0 advantage through one period of play. The Checkers looked to replicate the come-from-behind magic they've pulled off at times this season, with glove-side snipes from Greg McKeeg and Dennis Robertson in the middle frame narrowing the lead to just one heading into the third.

But despite a strong push down the stretch the Checkers couldn't solve rookie netminder Connor LaCouvee, and a well-timed stretch pass by the Rocket led to a breakaway tally for Hunter Shinkaruk to put the final nail in the coffin. The physical contest saw three fights in the first 23 minutes of play, with Zack Stortini, Patrick Brown and Steven Lorentz all

dropping the gloves — the latter of whom was also assessed a 10-minute misconduct for instigating.

### NOTES

The Checkers defeated Bridgeport for the first time in three tries this season, extending their Atlantic Division lead to seven points in the process ... The Checkers avoided going winless in three straight for the first time this season ... Geekie's goal was his third in four games ... Aleksii Saarela picked up two assists, extending his career-long point streak to eight games (2g, 7a). It is the longest streak by a Checker since Greg McKeeg scored in 12 straight in March-April of last season ... Andrew Poturalski extended his point streak to three games (2g, 2a) ... Nedeljkovic maintained his AHL wins lead with his 15th of the campaign ... Defenseman Josiah Didier missed the game due to injury ... Forwards Steven Lorentz and Cliff Pu and defenseman Josh Wesley were healthy extras.



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## Cajkovsky placed on unconditional waivers

By Nicholas Niedzielski

Michal Cajkovsky's time with the Checkers has come to an end, as Carolina has placed the blue liner on unconditional waivers for the purpose of terminating his contract.

The 26-year-old defenseman logged four points (1g, 3a) and 18 penalty minutes in 23 games with Charlotte this season, his first in the AHL since 2014-15. Cajkovsky spent the two

seasons prior to this one in the KHL with Yekaterinburg. According to Michael Smith, Cajkovsky is now likely returning to the KHL.

With Cajkovsky's departure the Checkers now have seven healthy options at defense, having recalled the recently signed Derek Sheppard from Florida this morning.

### TODAY'S LINKS

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## SportScan

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

1123145 Carolina Hurricanes

Canes relying even more on 'Wally' with Staal out

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

DECEMBER 28, 2018 01:16 PM

The Washington Capitals sent out a starting lineup Thursday that had Nicklas Backstrom at center with Alex Ovechkin and T.J. Oshie on the wings.

The Carolina Hurricanes had Lucas Wallmark stepping in to the center-ice faceoff circle against Backstrom for the opening draw, with Jordan Martinook and Warren Foegele on the wings.

Normally, that would have been Jordan Staal taking the faceoff. It would have been Staal centering the Canes' top checking line and matched up as much as possible on the road against one of the most dangerous lines in the league.

But Staal is out, again. Concussion symptoms continue to linger and his return, to practice or games, is unknown.

"That's a huge piece missing, for sure," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Thursday before the game.

Asked who his best checking center was with Staal out, Brind'Amour quickly mentioned "Wally" -- that is, Wallmark.

"It's a lot to ask," Brind'Amour said.

Well, yes. Staal, 30, is a 6-foot-4, 220-pound forward with a Stanley Cup ring and more than 900 games of regular-season and playoff experience. Wallmark, 23, is listed at 6-0 and 178 pounds, having now played 55 NHL games.

"Everyone knows how good Jordan is and how important he is to our team," Wallmark said Thursday. "Hopefully he'll be back soon. Everyone has to pick it up a little bit more and show they want to play."

The Canes' centers Thursday in the 3-1 loss to the Caps were Sebastian Aho, Wallmark, Clark Bishop and Victor Rask. By the third period, Brind'Amour had Rask and winger Janne Kuokkanen on the bench, relying even more on his top three centermen.

It was another full night for Wallmark. The Swede had more than three minutes of penalty-kill time, almost two minutes of power-play time and was used on a team-high 21 faceoffs, winning 11.

Special teams play was decisive in the game. The Caps picked up a power-play goal from T.J. Oshie while the Canes were 0-for-4 on the power play. Chandler Stephenson had an even-strength goal for the Caps and defenseman John Carlson an empty-net score late as Canes goalie Petr Mrazek and the Caps' Braden Holtby matched saves most of the night.

Aho had the goal for the Canes (15-16-5), eight points out of playoff position in the Eastern Conference after Thursday's games.



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With Staal sidelined, Wallmark has averaged about 18 minutes of ice time per game. That's more than he could have imagined at the start of training camp, when he was just trying to lock down a roster spot.

But Rask, one of Wallmark's best friends on the team and a fellow Swede, cut two fingers in a kitchen accident before camp began. Come opening night, Wallmark was on the team.

Jim Mone AP

"It's my first (full) year in the league and I felt at the beginning it was a process and I was just trying to learn," Wallmark said. "After that, I felt I was getting better and better and getting more confidence. Just trying to do all the small things right and get better each game."

Martinook said Wallmark might be the most underrated player on the team, saying, "He's so responsible-minded defensively." Wallmark, who has quick hands and good instincts, has won more than 53 percent of his faceoffs. Despite a lack of size, he's wiry tough along the walls. He's usually in the right spots in the defensive zone, earning Brind'Amour's trust.

"Wally's doing the job and has been doing a great job all year," Brind'Amour said.

What's missing? Goals, mainly. Puck luck.

Despite doing so many things well, Wallmark has scored two goals in 36 games -- one on the power play. He has 78 shots on net, so he's getting looks. Like many of his teammates, he's not finishing.

"Hit the posts, unbelievable saves, something," he said, shaking his head. "But I'm still creating the chances. Sooner or later, hopefully it's going to come for me."

Wallmark, a former fourth-round draft pick by Carolina, had 24 goals in 67 games for the Charlotte Checkers in the AHL during the 2016-17 season, when he made his NHL debut and was in eight games for the Canes. He had 17 goals and 38 assists in 45 games last season with the Checkers in being named the team's MVP.

But his NHL totals remain: three goals, 12 assists in 55 games.

"Right now I'm trying to stay positive and stay with it and do what I've been doing to create the chances," Wallmark said. "Sooner or later ..."

Carolina Hurricanes at New Jersey Devils

Saturday, 1 p.m., Prudential Center, Newark, NJ

TV: Fox Sports Carolinas

News Observer LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123146 Carolina Hurricanes

No, Dougie Hamilton's on-ice shot numbers aren't being cheaply inflated

By Tyler Dellow Dec 28, 2018

Writing about Dougie Hamilton last week, I pointed out that his new team, the Carolina Hurricanes, is generating a ton of shots when he's on the ice. Meanwhile, the rate at which Calgary generates shots with Mark Giordano on the ice has fallen off dramatically from last year, when he was partnered with Dougie Hamilton. Many, many commenters smelled a rat. Their theory was simple: Hamilton inflates the shot totals when he's on the ice with cheap shots from the point, which is why his shot volume's so good but the Hurricanes can't score.

So, I looked. Hamilton's not driving his on-ice shot numbers with piles of attempts. If you think he is, you're wrong. Lets start with last year, in recognition of the fact that a lot of people who closely follow the Flames aren't as plugged into the 2018-19 Carolina Hurricanes. Hamilton was second in individual 5-on-5 shots and attempts among NHL defencemen who played at least 500 minutes. The top eleven in attempts (weird number chosen for reason that will become obvious) were Brent Burns, Hamilton, Johnny Boychuk, Ryan Pullock, Seth Jones, Roman Josi, Victor Hedman, Oscar Klefbom, Mikhail Sergachev, Jacob Trouba and...wait for it...Mark Giordano.

So, on a basic level, yes Hamilton shot the puck a lot. That's not really what we're interested in though. What we're really interested in is whether his prolific shooting was somehow distorting his possession numbers with tons of shots that register on the shot counts but don't really trouble the goalie. Among the leaders, the answer seems to be "not really" — Hamilton's numbers aren't really out of line with that group. Burns is a gunner and took 33 percent of his team's 5-on-5 attempts when he's on the ice in 2017-18. After that comes Boychuk (28 percent), Pullock (26 percent), Hamilton (24 percent), Hedman (24 percent), Jones (23 percent), Trouba (23 percent), Klefbom (23 percent), Sergachev (22 percent), Josi (22 percent) and Giordano (20 percent). He's basically in a clump in the middle of all of the other guys who shoot the puck a lot.

Hamilton did use a lot of his team's shot attempts — he was fifth in the NHL among defencemen last year — but his team also attempted a lot of shots when he was on the ice. The easiest way to show this is to probably just look at the list of defencemen whose forwards attempted the most shots per 60 when they were on the ice in 2017-18. Hamilton slots in at 34th with defencemen who played at least 500 minutes on a single team, with Flames' forwards attempting 39.9 shots per 60 minutes when he's on the ice. He was right below Giordano, which makes sense given that they played together all year.

Now, there's an interesting little wrinkle here. Giordano and Hamilton are both shooters. Unsurprisingly, they were first (Hamilton) and second (Giordano) in terms of attempts by the defence per 60 minutes when they were on the ice. (Amusingly, Burns, whose defence partners were 190th out of 208 qualifying defencemen is third on this list. That man is a shooter.) This does bring a question to mind about efficiently assembling defensive pairs. Does it make sense to pair two shooters together? I don't profess to know the answer to that question but it'd be interesting to look into.

Moving forward to this year, Hamilton is again shooting the puck a lot. He's third in the NHL in 5-on-5 attempts per 60 minutes among defencemen, with only Burns and Erik Karlsson in front of him among defencemen who've played a minimum of 250 minutes. He still eats up a big percentage of his team's shot attempts — he's sixth there. Giordano is still a shooter as well — he's 18th. Hamilton is taking 24 percent of Carolina's shot attempts when he's on the ice; Giordano is attempting 23 percent of Calgary's.

As was the case last year, no defenceman is on the ice for more attempts per 60 by his team than Hamilton. His number has actually spiked — he's on the ice for 79.2 CF/60. Giordano has fallen off this year sitting at just 60.5 shot attempts per 60 minutes. Most devastatingly for the argument that Hamilton inflates his on-ice numbers with muffins is that no defenceman has seen the forwards take more shots per 60 minutes when he's on the ice than Hamilton — Carolina's forwards attempt 49.2 shots per 60 with him. For Giordano, that number is at 38.5. Of course, Carolina's forwards have struggled to score, Calgary's haven't and here we are.

So what we're seeing this year isn't really all that different than what we saw last year from Hamilton. In fact, you might have had a better argument about Calgary's defence shooting too much last year, when both he and Giordano were on the ice together, consuming 44 percent of Calgary's shot attempts. Separated, they're at 38 percent (Hamilton) and 36 percent (Giordano). The league norm is a little bit under 36 percent, so they're both well in the normal range. The league average team gets 36.6 shot attempts per 60 minutes from their forwards though, which is a



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little below where Giordano (38.5) is at and miles below where Hamilton (49.2) is at. Even allowing for Carolina's tendency to generate a lot of shot attempts, that's a wild number — Carolina's forwards generate just 40.6 shot attempts per 60 minutes when he's not on the ice.

There's probably an argument to be made that all high shot volume defencemen shoot too much but that argument is hardly unique to Hamilton. Moreover, unlike a lot of other high shot volume ("volume" in the sense of being responsible for a high percentage of their team's attempts) defencemen, Hamilton is somewhat unusual in that the forwards with whom he shares the ice see an appreciable bump in their shot volume.

There are undoubtedly criticisms that you can make of Hamilton's game. That sort of thing gets turned way up when you leave a high profile media market where you were playing with an excellent partner and move to a smaller one and your old team excels while your new team struggles. That said, if the data doesn't fit the theory, it's probably not what's happening. Beyond the simple fact that Hamilton shoots a lot, which can be explained by the fact that his teams seem to shoot a ton when he's on the ice — suggesting he's in the offensive zone a lot — there's simply not a lot to suggest that he's goosing his on-ice numbers with his own shot volume. If anything, the evidence this year seems to suggest the opposite: compared to other defencemen who take a lot of shots, Hamilton's forwards seem to get a lot of opportunities.

The Athletic LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123209 New Jersey Devils

David Backes suspended three games for hit on Blake Coleman in Devils vs. Bruins

NorthJersey.com Digital Desk Published 6:37 p.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018 | Updated 6:39 p.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018

A 5-2 loss is no longer the only blow the Bruins received in their game Thursday against the Devils.

The NHL's Department of Player Safety announced Friday that David Backes will be suspended for three games. The decision comes after the Bruins center hit Blake Coleman in the head near the end of the loss.

Coleman potted two goals in the win.

Per the press release for the department, Backes is considered a repeat offender under the terms of the Collective Bargaining Agreement and will be hit with a fine just over \$219,000 based on his \$6 million AAV on his contract.

Backes will be eligible to return for Boston's Jan. 5 matchup against the Sabres.

Bergen Record LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123210 New Jersey Devils

A closer look at NJ Devils' goalie Mackenzie Blackwood

Abbey Mastracco, North Jersey Record Published 3:36 p.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018 | Updated 4:47 p.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018

BOSTON -- It's hard to imagine the same goaltender who coolly beat the Boston Bruins with a 40-save performance on Thursday night is the same one who was playing in the ECHL earlier this year.

Mackenzie Blackwood, a second-round draft pick of the Devils in 2015, was struggling through his second season in the American Hockey League when the club loaned him to Adirondack. He played well in five regular season games and even better in the Kelly Cup Playoffs but still... It was Adirondack. It wasn't the level of competition needed to take the next step in his career.

Blackwood, then 21, didn't exactly appear to be on his way to the NHL.

But that's exactly where he's been for the past few weeks, up with the big club in New Jersey trying to prove he belongs. And so far, he has shown that he belongs. Blackwood boasts a 2.15 GAA and a .939 save percentage through four games (two starts).

The sample size is small but beyond the numbers, Blackwood has shown that he has learned from those past experiences and his development is back on track.

"The thing we've really liked about his game, and not just tonight, but in every game that he's played for us, is his composure," coach John Hynes said, following the game in Boston. "So now you have, you know, a big mountain of a man who's in the net who's got great athleticism but also plays with poise and is in good position. That's tough to beat."

At 6-foot-4, 225 pounds, the Thunder Bay, Ontario native takes up a lot of cage. But he moves well for a big player and is deceptively athletic.

He's shown quite a bit of deception in the way he plays in practice vs. the way he plays in games. Blackwood gets deep in his net when on the friendly ice of RWJBarnabas Health Hockey House but come game time he's moving fluidly from post-to-post cut off angles and read plays.

"It's actually interesting," forward Kyle Palmieri said. "He's a big guy, one of the most athletically-gifted guys I've seen. At the goalie position, you see a lot of gifted athletes. He finds a way to make saves, he doesn't do anything he's not."

The Devils entered the season thinking they would have an option A and 1-A in Keith Kinkaid and Cory Schneider. Instead, they have the third-worst team save percentage in the league (it was second entering Thursday's game but Blackwood bumped it up one spot). Kinkaid has been overplayed and Schneider has been injured and ineffective.

Blackwood isn't a finished product just yet and there are growing pains to be had. But if Blackwood can keep up this type of play it will make things a lot easier on the Devils moving forward.

"We haven't had much of that where we've had tandem goaltending," Hynes said. "So that fact that Mackenzie came in and played well is a good sign and hopefully he can continue to be that type of guy for us."

Back it up

Boston's David Backes had a hearing with the NHL's Department of Player Safety on Friday for an illegal check to Blake Coleman's head. The penalty was incurred with two minutes left to play in the Devils' 5-2 win at TD Garden on Thursday. Coleman was blindsided by Backes while trying to shoot the puck out of the zone from the slot. Backes came flying in and threw his shoulder into Coleman's head. Coleman was on a knee for a minute but was uninjured and practiced with the team on Friday.

Trainer's room

New Jersey used the same lineups from Thursday's game in practice with Taylor Hall and Marcus Johansson still out of commission. While Johansson remains on injured reserve with an upper-body injury, Hall is still considered day-to-day. Hynes gave no firm timeline on the status of the Hart Trophy winner following practice.



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Johansson and Schneider (strained abdominal) skated on their own after the team cleared the ice, showing preliminary improvement in their respective rehabs.

Bergen Record LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123211 New Jersey Devils

3 Takeaways from NJ Devils' win over Bruins: Miles Wood shines in hometown

Abbey Mastracco, North Jersey Record Published 6:01 a.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018 | Updated 9:17 a.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018

BOSTON – The Devils may as well be the Southern Bruins with all of the Boston connections on the team.

Between head coach John Hynes (Rhode Island native, Boston University alum), forwards Brian Boyle (Hingham, Massachusetts, Boston College), Miles Wood (Noble and Greenough School, Boston College) and Brett Seney (Merrimack College) New Jersey had a large contingent present at TD Garden on Thursday night.

The Devils didn't let them down, defeating the Bruins 5-2 in the first game after the Christmas break.

Here are three takeaways from the win:

Home for the holidays

Dec 27, 2018; Boston, MA, USA; New Jersey Devils left wing Miles Wood (44) gets by Boston Bruins defenseman John Moore (27) during the first period at TD Garden.

It's no secret Wood isn't exactly scoring at the same rate he did last season. He has just three goals and five assists through 35 games and has gone through some lackluster stretches. But he's picked up his play as of late and was rewarded for it Thursday.

Wood didn't score, though he came close in the third period, but he did set up Nico Hischier for a goal by power skating past Torey Krug to create a 2-on-1 rush and get the puck to the open center. In what may have been his best game of the season, he won puck battles, he came hard on the forecheck, threw pucks on net and drove a second line that created chances.

Wood was taken off the power play early in the season but he's earned back his spot on the second unit.

"We talked with him about it, there's an opening on the power play," coach John Hynes said. "When he plays an abrasive game and he uses his speed and uses his intensity level to his advantage to disrupt the other team, he's a real effective player."

Executed within the system

Dec 27, 2018; Boston, MA, USA; Boston Bruins left wing Brad Marchand (63) and New Jersey Devils defenseman Ben Lovejoy (12) battle for the puck at center ice during the second period at TD Garden.

The Devils were forced to make up for the losses of Taylor Hall and Marcus Johansson and they did that by playing a simple game and playing to their strengths. They used their speed to get out on the forecheck, killed penalties and got in the face of Bruins goalie Jaroslav Halak.

The Bruins found the Devils difficult to play against when the visitors were protecting a lead.

"New Jersey is really stingy in that aspect," Boston forward Jake DeBrusk said. "They play a fast chip-and-chase kind of game and once they get two goals, it's kind of hard to generate offense."

Mackenzie Blackwood earning it all

Blackwood's 40-save performance earned him his first NHL win and more playing time. In a league where nothing is given and everything is earned, he's certainly earned the strong look the Devils are giving him right now.

"I wouldn't say it's owed to me or it's coming for me because this league is unforgiving," he said.

"You can play your best 10 games in a row and not get a win, so it was definitely nice to be able to come out on the winning side of that one and have the team play as great as they did for me."

Bergen Record LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123212 New Jersey Devils

Goaltending, Taylor Hall and John Hynes: 5 NJ Devils' storylines to watch in 2019

Abbey Mastracco, NHL writer Published 8:21 a.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018 | Updated 8:56 a.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018

It seemed as though there was a light at the end of the Devils' rebuild tunnel last spring when the team snapped a five-year playoff drought.

Taylor Hall was named the club's first-ever Hart Trophy winner and Brian Boyle won the Masterton for his remarkable and inspiring 2017-18 campaign.

But it's become glaringly apparent that the Devils are still deep into that rebuild. Maybe further behind than many thought. Goaltending, defensive structure and player development are only a few of the issues currently plaguing New Jersey right now.

The Devils enter the New Year as one of the worst teams in the Eastern Conference but they have some things working in their favor, such as cap room space and an improving player development system.

Here are five storylines to watch in 2019:

The goaltending situation

New Jersey Devils goaltender Cory Schneider (35) reacts after giving up a goal during the second period of the team's NHL hockey game against the Tampa Bay Lightning, Sunday, Nov. 25, 2018, in Tampa, Fla.

New Jersey Devils goaltender Cory Schneider (35) reacts after giving up a goal during the second period of the team's NHL hockey game against the Tampa Bay Lightning, Sunday, Nov. 25, 2018, in Tampa, Fla. (Photo: Willie J. Allen Jr., AP)

Goaltending was supposed to be an area of strength this season. Instead, the Devils' save percentage has been among the worst the league this season, Keith Kinkaid is being overplayed, Cory Schneider is injured and will end the year without a regular season win (his last came December 27, 2017). This doesn't excuse the defensive deficiencies in front of the net but there is no immediate answer to this problem unless Mackenzie Blackwood somehow turns into the next Martin Brodeur.

Some of that cap space could be used over the summer to buy out Schneider, who is still owed \$6 million in each of the next three seasons. Keith Kinkaid looked like a No. 1 goalie in the second half of last season but hasn't yet proved he's capable of handling the workload of a No. 1



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netminder. The Devils need to see if he can do that and fast since he's set to become an unrestricted free agent on July 1.

### Player development

New Jersey Devils left wing John Quenneville (47) celebrates his goal during the first period of their game against the New York Rangers at Prudential Center.

This year, the Devils needed some of their prospects to contribute. The problem is that only few are panning out. Part of the problem is that the Devils are still saddled with players from the old regime.

Former GM Lou Lamoriello and former scouting director David Conte handled the drafting up through 2015 and left the system nearly devoid of high-end talent. Some in the organization have mused that Conte lost his fastball but the Devils new regime has been determined to salvage the system with an overhauled player development program. It may be time to cut ties with a handful of players in the system.

### Talent acquisition

It's unclear whether the Devils will be buyers or sellers on the Feb. 25 trade deadline. They don't have much to sell, though back-end veterans like Ben Lovejoy could net late-round draft picks.

They're not moving Taylor Hall and the goalies aren't worth much right now. They could be buyers even in a down year with the cap space needed to acquire players on long-term contracts. This isn't exactly uncommon, but any roster overhaul is still more likely to come over the summer.

If the Devils have the same luck they did two years ago, they may be able to acquire a big talent in Jack Hughes, the projected first-overall pick in the 2019 Draft. However, New Jersey has no plans to tank anytime soon.

### Extensions for Taylor Hall and Nico Hischier

The fanbase has been wondering (angrily so, as of late) why the Devils are banking so much cap space. The answer is, it's for Taylor Hall and Nico Hischier. The reigning league MVP and the Devils' leader in points and leader in the locker room has one more year remaining and can begin negotiating for a new deal in the offseason. Hischier is also up after next season and he'll be due for a significant raise.

### John Hynes' status

This isn't really a storyline but it's a hot-button issue with the New Jersey faithful these days, especially since his contract is also up after this season. General manager Ray Shero has said he's pleased with the job Hynes has done and sees him as an effective leader and motivator. Not to mention, Hall has publicly said he feels Hynes is one of the best coaches he's played for and it's important to keep the MVP happy.

If a team is on the verge of winning it all but it's clear the coach can't get them over the edge, then maybe a change becomes necessary. The Anaheim Ducks were in that position in 2016 when they fired Bruce Boudreau and re-hired Randy Carlyle. But Anaheim was one season removed from Game 7 of a Conference Final with a wide-open championship window, not in the midst of a rebuild. The Devils, on the other hand, are still in the midst of a rebuild.

The foundation has been laid but this team is still on the ground floor.

Bergen Record LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123227 Philadelphia Flyers

With Nolan Patrick injured, Jordan Weal gets another opportunity

Wayne Fish

Dec 28, 2018 at 4:47 PM

SUNRISE, Fla. — In the start-and-stop world of Jordan Weal, another start doesn't require him to stop and think about what this opportunity means.

With third-line center Nolan Patrick expected to miss four or five days due to an upper-body injury he received in Thursday night's 6-5 overtime loss at Tampa, Weal gets another chance to get back in the lineup.

Working in Weal's favor is the fact he has played for new coach Scott Gordon when the two were together on the Lehigh Valley Phantoms two seasons ago.

Weal is scheduled to play with Michael Raffl and Oskar Lindblom when the Flyers meet the Florida Panthers at BB&T Center on Saturday night.

Since he has played in only two of the Flyers' last 12 games and none since Dec. 15 at Vancouver, he probably has to shake off some rust.

"It's been awhile. In December, I haven't been in a lot of games," the 26-year-old Weal said. "It (coming back from a layoff) is probably one of the toughest things in hockey.

"You know you just have to take it one shift at a time. Simplify things, get pucks in, go to work from there and the rest will take care of itself."

Weal is on the second year of a two-year contract which pays him \$1.75 million annually. He's never really made an impact on the Flyers since joining them three years ago but there are occasional flashes of brilliance which helps keep him around the NHL.

He says he's familiar with Gordon's style and perhaps that can work in his favor. Weal hasn't played since Dave Hakstol was relieved of his coaching duties a couple weeks ago.

"Gordo was really good for us down in Allentown," Weal said. "We had a really good team when I was there. He keeps everyone accountable, keeps everyone in line. That's all you can ask from a coach and I think that's why we had so much success.

"I know what he's like behind the bench and stuff like that, the kind of vibe he gives off. Other than that, you just have to go out and play."

Gordon wouldn't confirm that Weal will play with Lindblom and Raffl.

Raffl hopes that is the case, though.

"He should be fired up," Raffl said. "I'm sure he's going to be excited to be out there."

### Hart gets start vs. Panthers

Carter Hart will get back into action against the Panthers. He recorded wins vs. Detroit and Nashville, lost to Columbus, then sat out games vs. the Rangers and Tampa.

Gordon acknowledges Hart is getting valuable experience in what amounts to an emergency recall with both Brian Elliott and Anthony Stolarz out long-term.

"There's no downside to it," Gordon said. "It's an opportunity for him to build on what he's done so far in the three games he's played.

"His confidence ... he should feel pretty good about going into tomorrow's game. Whatever happens, happens. It's not something that right now we have to worry about."

Hart spent much of the Christmas break with captain Claude Giroux.

He hopes he can stick around a while longer.



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"Just come to work and take things one day at a time," he said. "I think we have a good group of guys here. It's a lot of fun playing with these guys. We've been playing really hard the last four or five games.

"I don't want to go anywhere — I want to stay here. That's my goal. I'm going to do everything I can to stay here."

Burlington County Times LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123228 Philadelphia Flyers

Flyers needed a new voice, and they're getting an earful from Scott Gordon

John Boruk

December 28, 2018 9:42 PM

Scott Gordon usually has a little something for his players after a shift that Dave Hakstol didn't.

A few choice words.

Sometimes positive, sometimes critical, but make no mistake, the most observable difference between the two Flyers head coaches are the verbal cues Gordon provides throughout the course of a game.

"That seems definitely noticeable," James van Riemsdyk said. "He likes to give you some feedback, good or bad sometimes. Certainly, that's a little bit of a difference."

Defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere said last week that Gordon's input on the bench at times is "a little too much," but regardless, it's a clear deviation from what they had grown accustomed to under Hakstol, who had more of a deadpan stare when caught on camera, especially during a stoppage in play.

Unlike Gordon, who's in constant communication with his players during the course of a game, Hakstol was more selective.

For those who played with Gordon with the Phantoms, his ongoing feedback is nothing out of the ordinary. But for those who haven't, it comes as part of the adjustment to a new coach.

"There's a balance there," Andrew MacDonald said. "You can do it in a way where you tell guys and get the message across, but at the same time, kinda beat them down so to speak, which I think he's done a real good job of. I think as a player, as long as (the coach) is being fair with it — both ways — I think it's really healthy."

Gordon's former player while with the Phantoms, Danick Martel, has mixed reviews regarding Gordon's techniques. Perhaps some of that is derived from now playing for a Tampa Bay Lightning team that may not need much constructive criticism at all times.

"Maybe sometimes he panics," Martel said. "That's why he talks a lot. You're trying to figure out everything in one second, instead of calming your team down and now all the players know how to play," Martel said. "He brings a lot of energy, a lot of character. He's trying to bring everyone's best every night. I think he's good at it."

But Gordon's message doesn't just start and stop with the drop of the puck. He firmly believes the postgame analysis is critical in cleaning up problem areas and ensuring they don't linger, which is why the 12-18 hour period after a game is when mistakes can be corrected.

"It's a lot of video," Jake Voracek said. "We watch a lot of video, which is good, and with that a lot of learning points. It's been really good for us. I think we've been playing better because we've been on the same page."

"I always try to have some postgame review to touch on something," Gordon said, "especially here where you don't have the practice time, which forces you to work on the little things, the things you talk about. It's one thing to put it on the board (during intermission), it's another thing to show video of it."

Friday afternoon was just Gordon's second full practice with his new team. He spent half of the workout reinforcing neutral zone and defensive zone coverages, including zone breakouts — an area where the Flyers had performed slow and sloppy under Hakstol.

"I feel like every drill we're doing is pretty much the routes he wants us to take," Radko Gudas said. "He wants us in certain spots. It's a different look from what we had before and everybody's trying to get into it as fast as we can. The sooner we get it, the better for the whole group."

The fact that the Flyers are embracing change seems to be a convincing sign that change was long overdue.

The team needed a new voice, and now they're getting an earful for sure.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123229 Philadelphia Flyers

Nolan Patrick could miss time with injury; Carter Hart back in net vs. Panthers

John Boruk

December 28, 2018 3:40 PM

Nolan Patrick's upper-body injury that forced him out of Thursday's game in Tampa could likely keep the Flyers' second-year center off the ice for the remainder of the road trip.

Patrick's day-to-day injury has a timetable of at least four or five days, according to head coach Scott Gordon.

The more pressing concern regarding Patrick has been a complete lack of production. From Oct. 20 to Nov. 10, Patrick played his best hockey of the season, scoring nine points (five goals, four assists) in a 10-game span.

Since then, Patrick has produced just two assists in his last 18 games, a dramatic drop-off that Gordon doesn't seem too concerned about.

"I think you got to realize that points for guys that are first- or second-round picks usually go to teams that don't have the offensive players we have here," Gordon said. "To me, what I like is the defensive play, which will eventually lead to more offensive opportunities. For me, I like that piece. That piece is going to stay with him."

Now 106 games into his NHL career, Patrick seems to be perfectly suited to a third-line center role, which means ice time in the 13-15 minute range with very little power play time.

For Saturday's game against the Panthers, Jordan Weal will step in to fill Patrick's role, centering a line with Oskar Lindblom and Michael Raffl.

Weal has been idle for the longest stretch of hockey in his Flyers career. He has been a healthy scratch in 10 of the Flyers' previous 12 games. In his last game on Dec. 15, he saw a season-low 7:58 TOI.

"It's probably one of the tougher things in hockey — to take a month there and only play two games and come back in the lineup," Weal said.

Hart to start against Panthers



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As part of Gordon's plan to work in both goaltenders, Carter Hart will earn his first start of the Flyers' five-game road trip Saturday in Florida.

It will be Hart's first game action in a week coming off the Christmas break. Gordon considered playing the 20-year-old rookie Sunday at Madison Square Garden, but thought the workload could have been too much with six games (including two in Lehigh Valley) over a ten-day period.

Saturday's game at the BB&T Center will also mark Hart's first NHL game on the road. Hart said the Christmas break came at the right time with a much needed break. He stayed in Philadelphia, going to Claude Giroux's house for Christmas Eve and then to Dale Weise's home on Christmas.

"Right now, the group that we have is fun to be a part of," Hart said. "I don't want to go anywhere. I want to stay here. Obviously, that's my goal and I'm going to do everything I can to stay here."

Gordon seems to be comfortable with the tandem of Hart and Michal Neuvirth as he had no definitive timetable regarding the injury to Brian Elliott.

"I said to Neuvy after the game, it doesn't show up on the stat sheet, but that was a pretty good six-goal performance. For me, he gave us a chance to get the two points," Gordon said.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123230 Philadelphia Flyers

Flyers playing with never say die attitude under Scott Gordon

John Boruk

December 28, 2018 12:25 AM

TAMPA, Fla. — Flyers assistant Kris Knoblauch thought he could contribute to Scott Gordon's second-intermission pep talk. Knoblauch reminded the interim head coach of the craziness that ensued Nov. 17 at the Wells Fargo Center.

That was the game against this same Lightning squad that saw the Flyers erase a four-goal deficit over the final 10 minutes of regulation, just the ninth time such a feat has occurred in NHL history.

Gordon, who has penchant for being overly communicative, conveniently worked it into his speech. Gordon preached about the seam passes the Flyers were allowing the Lightning to convert easily on and then, he brought up the comeback.

"This was an easy challenge for us," Gordon said with a grin, referring to the 5-1 deficit the Flyers faced in Philadelphia.

All it took was Dale Weise banking a shot inadvertently off his skate and the comeback was indeed on .

"As soon as we got the first one, it was like, we can actually do this one more time," Robert Hagg said. "We knew we could come back because they're going to be sloppy with a big lead. Somehow, we found a lot of energy."

Hagg snapped off a shot that beat goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy less than three minutes later and then, Ivan Provorov tied the game before the third period was even at the midway point.

Three goals in just seven minutes.

"This game proves that this team doesn't quit," Provorov said, "plays to the end and that's what happened in the third."

The Flyers are now proving that under Gordon, whereas under Dave Hakstol, that mindset was being highly questioned and scrutinized.

"It's obviously a huge thing when your players believe that they're never out of a game," Gordon said. "This is the best team in the league. They lead the league in scoring goals. To be able to score five goals against a team that only has four losses at home and 11-0-1 in their last 12 games."

In five games since the Flyers made the necessary change behind the bench, they've played five one-goal games, taking seven out of a possible 10 points. They're playing competitive hockey, inspired hockey, and for the most part, winning hockey.

However, some bad habits still linger.

The Flyers have now dropped their last four overtime decisions with three of them coming on the opening shift. As much as Claude Giroux electrified the Flyers with his world-class toe drag through three Lightning defenders, which led to a dazzling goal, the Flyers' captain also took the loss personally. It was Anthony Cirelli who stripped Giroux in OT that led to the game winner.

"I make a careless play, a soft play. That can't happen," Giroux said. "When you're put in a situation like that after a game you got to be sharp and you've got to make better plays. We should have had two points and I'm responsible for losing one point."

Still, the game played out not much differently than their mid-November matchup, and these two teams still have one more game to go, Feb. 19th at the Wells Fargo Center.

I'm just wondering if the Flyers should just spot the Lightning another 5-2 lead and then, we'll see if the third time might be the comeback charm.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123231 Philadelphia Flyers

Flyers audition continues for Carter Hart, facing first road game

Dave Isaac

4:34 p.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018

SUNRISE, Fla. — Life on the road as a professional first hit Carter Hart when he boarded a plane for Boston in preseason. He didn't expect to be served dinner on-board the return flight postgame.

That kind of thing doesn't happen in junior hockey or in the American Hockey League, where travel is mostly by bus. Charter service is a perk that the 20-year-old goalie could definitely get used to. The only question is whether he'll have enough time to become accustomed or not.

Both general manager Chuck Fletcher and interim coach Scott Gordon seemed unsure when the Flyers called Hart up from the Lehigh Valley Phantoms just how long this will last. Hart knows it will be at least one more game as he gets his first road start in the NHL Saturday against the Florida Panthers.

"I don't want to go anywhere," Hart said. "I want to stay here. Obviously that's my goal and I'm gonna do everything I can to make sure that I stay here."

The Flyers seem to want him to, also. Players say that Hart's addition to the team has given them a boost and newlywed Claude Giroux took the rookie goalie in on Christmas Eve while Dale Weise hosted Hart on Christmas day, both offering a home-cooked meal for the first-year pro who is still living out of a hotel room.



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"It was really nice for them to have me around Christmas," Hart said.

The reason that Fletcher and Gordon were hesitant at the time was they were unsure how Hart would handle his first NHL call-up, whether it would be too much too quick after only 17 AHL games under his belt and a .901 save percentage.

So far he's been good at the next level, winning two of his first three NHL games with a .904 save percentage. Will it be enough to keep Fletcher from making a move, though? National pundits have said that acquiring a steady goalie was high on Fletcher's priority list. He couldn't do that for the last week and a half as the NHL had a roster freeze from Dec. 19 to 12:01 a.m. Friday morning.

Brian Elliott is nowhere close to returning to the Flyers' lineup and Anthony Stolarz is also on the shelf with a "lower-body injury." Michal Neuvirth has played well in his last two games but has a shaky injury history himself. If the Flyers do end up making a move, the trickle-down effect might be Hart returning to the minors.

He's trying not to think about that and take the games he's gotten so far as a positive to start what figures to be a long NHL career.

"There's no downside to it," Gordon said. "It's an opportunity for him to build on what he's done so far in the three games that he's played. I think that his confidence, he should feel pretty good going into (Saturday's) game. Whatever happens, happens. It's not something that right now we have to worry about. You just worry about tomorrow and after that you worry about the next day."

That's the approach Hart has tried to take whether he's starting in a game or not.

When he was with Phantoms, he didn't watch any Flyers games on TV except for Phil Varone's debut in orange and black so he doesn't have much of a book on other NHL teams he'd face. The only Florida Panther he's familiar with is defenseman Mark Pysyk, who works out at the same gym as Hart during summers in Alberta.

"There's teams you play against and you realize their tendencies, but I think when you prepare for the game you prepare the same," Hart said. "There's obviously gonna be different situations where they have different kinds of players on the ice and it's more so on special teams when you're facing their power play, looking at their tendencies. For myself, I just focus on my game and worry about what I can control."

Weal in for Patrick

Jordan Weal will return to the lineup Saturday after sitting out 10 of the last 12 games because Nolan Patrick got hurt in Thursday night's 6-5 overtime loss in Tampa. Patrick collided with Ondrej Palat at the side of the Flyers' net right before Steven Stamkos' first goal and he left the game with what the team called an "upper-body injury."

Gordon said Patrick will likely miss the next four or five days, which is basically the rest of the road trip. Patrick has not produced offensively, but Gordon said that he likes the 2017 second-overall pick's commitment to defense and that as long as that's a staple of his game, the offensive opportunities will present themselves.

Weal figures to have some rust when he takes the ice Saturday, but that's a situation he's dealt with before.

"It's probably one of the tougher things in hockey to take a month there and only play two games and come back in the lineup but just gotta take it one shift at a time, simplify things, kind of get pucks low and go to work from there and the rest will start coming," said Weal, who centered Oskar Lindblom and Michael Raffl in Friday's practice. "A lot of things during the season are so reactionary because you've been playing so many games and you know where everyone is. It's a matter of getting back into that vibe and getting to play with some good players. Just have to use them and get pucks in and play to our strengths."

Courier-Post LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123232 Philadelphia Flyers

Lightning 6, Flyers 5: 10 things we learned from a point stolen, a point lost

Charlie O'Connor

Dec 28, 2018

When the Philadelphia Flyers hit the locker room for the second intermission trailing the powerhouse Tampa Bay Lightning by a score of 5-2, it sure seemed like their chances of pulling out a victory were essentially nonexistent. One spark of hope remained — the Flyers had erased a four-goal deficit in the final stanza against this same club just last month. It could, at least in theory, happen again.

As it turns out, the Flyers apparently were dead set on replicating that November game, but doing so with 100 percent accuracy also required a heartbreaking overtime loss after racing all the way back to tie the contest. Philadelphia evened the score at 5-5 before permitting the game-winner in the extra session after just 18 seconds of play for a 6-5 loss. Alex Killorn was the hero, taking advantage of a screen and a Claude Giroux turnover to rip a shot past Michal Neuvirth and send the home fans out the doors happy.

Giroux, Michael Raffl, Dale Weise, Robert Hagg and Ivan Provorov all lit the lamp for the Flyers, who were able to steal a standings point due to their furious third-period comeback. But Tampa Bay's firepower ultimately proved too much to overcome, with Steven Stamkos, Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point, Tyler Johnson and the aforementioned Killorn all putting goals on the board for the Lightning. Neuvirth took the loss in net, stopping 31 of 37 shots, while Andrei Vasilevskiy earned the win in a 28-save performance.

Note: This article will reference advanced hockey stats. If you're looking to better understand any of the referenced metrics, please read this primer, which explains the concepts behind them.

1: Successful game, even if ending didn't feel like it

Tampa Bay holds the best record in hockey for a simple reason: they're the best team in hockey, period. This isn't a case of a club riding a goalie playing way over his true-talent level or a forward corps scoring on 18 percent of their shots. The Lightning have the league's third-best 5v5 score-adjusted Corsi For Percentage, the best 5v5 high-danger scoring chance percentage, the 11th-best save percentage and the best goal differential — it's a team with no real statistical holes, and that's before you get to the fact that they possess four bona fide superstars (Stamkos, Kucherov, Victor Hedman, Point) and two guys who fit comfortably in the next tier down (Vasilevskiy, Ryan McDonagh). They're stacked.

So when the Flyers fell behind 5-2 despite not playing all that poorly, it made sense. The Lightning can overwhelm pretty much any club not named the Maple Leafs or Penguins with sheer displays of high-end talent, and with players like Shayne Gostisbehere, Provorov and Jakub Voracek not playing their best all-around hockey right now, it made the top-end disparity between the two teams even greater. Going into Tampa and nabbing two points was always going to be a very tough task.

Yet Philadelphia persevered. Perhaps emboldened by the knowledge that they had basically played Tampa Bay to a draw over the first 40 minutes as far as even-strength shot/chance creation, the Flyers came out in the third and ran all over the imposing Lightning, scoring three times in a 7:05 span to tie things up. And it was a team effort — sure, Provorov potted one of the tallies, but Dale Weise and Robert Hagg? Those are the types of players who need to step up in this kind of environment in order to overcome the inherent talent disparity.



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Did the game end poorly? Of course. Giroux can't turn that puck over in overtime, and considering the fact that Voracek was basically even with Killorn in the neutral zone as the turnover occurs, ideally Killorn doesn't enter the offensive zone two strides ahead of him so Voracek can put sufficient back-pressure on the Tampa Bay trailer. But that doesn't blot out the fact that the Flyers largely got the better of a great Lightning team over 60 minutes of regulation play (54.65% score-adjusted Corsi, 13-7 high-danger chance advantage at 5v5), didn't pack it in when the results weren't going their way, and snatched a key standings point in the process.

2: Your semi-regular reminder that Giroux is great at hockey

For the Flyers to hang with the Lightning, Giroux — the only elite offensive talent on the club actually playing like it on a nightly basis this year — was going to have to deliver a vintage performance. And after something of a quiet first 20 minutes, he found a way to do this.

Ignore for a second that the Flyers captain basically goes 1-on-5 (including Vasilevskiy) and still puts the puck in the net; instead, pay attention to what he does to McDonagh, who has been talked up as a sleeper Norris Trophy contender. In full control of the puck and realizing that he needs to clear out the Lightning defenseman to open up a path to the crease area, Giroux quickly lifts up McDonagh's stick — a play generally reserved for those trying to get the puck back, not someone in possession of it. When a term like "hockey genius" is thrown around, these are the kind of plays that are being referenced.

He wasn't too shabby the rest of the way, either, breaking even by 5-on-5 Corsi but winning the scoring-chance battles handily, and also adding a primary assist on Hagg's third-period goal to lock down his 14th multi-point game of the 2018-19 season. Of course, he had the overtime turnover, which can't be ignored when evaluating his night as Giroux himself would surely acknowledge. But the Flyers never even get to OT without his typical stellar work in regulation.

3: Provorov with one of his strongest efforts of the season

His third-period goal may have been the moment when some became fully convinced that Provorov was looking more like his 2017-18 self rather than the diminished version that has appeared all too often in games this season. For me, however, it was two first-period plays without the puck that told me the Flyers would be receiving the best their No. 1 defenseman had to offer on this night.

It hasn't just been play with the puck that's been lacking from Provorov this year, though ugly turnovers have been the most obvious issue with his game. He's also been inconsistent in his defensive zone positioning and puck recoveries, ending up burned for chances or stuck on the ice for extended cycles due to an inability to get to loose pucks and get them out of his own end. With these two plays, Provorov sure looked like a player who wasn't going to have that issue on Thursday.

And eventually, the offense came around to match the defense. Provorov's third-period snipe of a wrister was straight out of 2017-18, when the Flyers' blueliner tied for the league lead at his position with 17 goals. He didn't stop after the goal, either — from that moment on, Provorov seemed to be showcasing an increased willingness to dive deep into the offensive zone to try and create chances, a hallmark of his game last year. By the end of regulation, Provorov looked like he was firing on all cylinders.

The numbers backed up the eyes. In over 27 minutes of total ice time (27:10 was his fourth-highest single-game total this year), Provorov posted a strong 57.50% Corsi For at 5-on-5, and saw the Flyers generate a 9-4 high-danger chance advantage while he skated. Setting aside all the theories about injuries, stick length and whether we've all misjudged his true talent, Provorov more than anything else has looked to me like a player trying too hard to be perfect at times this season, rather than just letting the game come to him. Hopefully, this is the kind of performance that can spark an extended run of undeniably strong work, simply by functioning as cold hard proof of that fact to the most important person — the player himself.

4: Slot passes the key to Tampa Bay's offense

The key flaw of public Expected Goal formulas is that — due to the limitations of current data — they remain largely location-based in nature. A shot from the point is less likely to become a goal than a shot from the slot, and xG recognizes that in a way that the all-shot-attempts-are-created-equal Corsi does not. But what xG can't measure (yet) is the sequence that leads up to a shot. For example, a shot from the right faceoff dot let loose from a stationary target who carried the puck there himself isn't as dangerous as a shot from that same spot that came about on a 2-on-1 transition rush. Location can only tell so much by itself about shot quality.

Tampa Bay does well enough solely by location-based metrics; only four teams average more high-danger chances per 60 in all-situations than the Lightning. But my guess is that those metrics still underrate the quality of Tampa Bay's chances. By my eye, no team in the NHL generates more dangerous passing sequences than the Lightning, particularly in how their passes directly preceding shots tend to cross through the middle of the slot area. A league-wide study completed back in 2016 found that 5-on-5 shots preceded by passes that cross the "Royal Road" (a name given to the slot area through the middle of the offensive zone) result in goals a whopping 15.50 percent of the time — which is more than twice as efficient as any other shot. The Lightning generate these shots seemingly at will when they're clicking offensively.

All five of the Lightning's regulation goals on Thursday were either preceded by a pass that crossed through the slot (Goals 1, 4 and 5) or ended up on the tape of a player actually sitting in the slot itself. These aren't fluky plays — they're ones that can only be consistently created by lines and teams with ample high-end skill. Tampa Bay certainly possesses that.

5: Where does Couturier fit in when it comes to high-end offensive skill?

When I noted on Twitter during the game that due to the relative struggles of dynamic offensive players like Gostisbehere, Provorov and Voracek (the latter is scoring but his play-driving game has been lacking in 2018-19), it forced Giroux to essentially match on his own the offensive work of Messrs. Kucherov, Stamkos, Point and Hedman, a follower understandably pointed out that I left Sean Couturier off that mental list. After all, Couturier did score 31 goals and play at nearly a point-per-game pace last year — surely he deserved a mention as well.

Anyone who regularly reads my work knows my respect for the value that Couturier brings to the table; that said, his omission wasn't an oversight. Couturier is a fantastic all-around hockey player, a true No. 1 center in my estimation due to his two-way prowess. But in terms of creating offense out of thin air, the way truly dynamic players can? That's really not his game. In the offensive zone, he's more of a support player, complementing the work of linemates. He's not going to be beating anyone 1-on-1 with sheer speed or slick puck handling, or freezing defenders with a highlight-reel pass — at least not often. Asking him to be dynamic like Kucherov, Stamkos and Point simply isn't a fair request.

What Couturier does do against a team like the Lightning — and it's an invaluable service — is provide a stabilizing force for his line while taking on heavy minutes against those superstars. And that's exactly what he pulled off on Thursday. With Couturier on the ice, the Flyers won the shot-attempt battle at 5-on-5 by a whopping 20-9 margin, and led in scoring chances 11-3. They did so despite Couturier receiving a not-insignificant amount of minutes matched up with Stamkos (5:22) and Kucherov (4:31). Philadelphia might not want to rely on Couturier to help them match Tampa Bay goal-for-goal (though he did nab a secondary assist on Provorov's tally). But they're right to trust Couturier to help the team win the goal-differential battle with him on the ice, which in the end is more important anyway.

6: Power play finishing issues continue

It was understandably forgotten in the wake of the Flyers' three-goal, third-period comeback, but it's worth noting that after Giroux's all-world goal, they actually found themselves on the power play due to Tampa



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Bay head coach Jon Cooper's decision to challenge Giroux's tally on the grounds that the play was offside. He lost the challenge, and per the rules governing offside oppositions, handed the Flyers a 5-on-4 opportunity, with the score suddenly tied 2-2. It was the perfect time to break the game open.

Predictably, however, Philadelphia floundered on the ensuing two-minute PP, an outcome that very likely influenced Cooper's decision to take the risk. Right now, this Flyers' power play can't buy a goal with the man advantage, unless it's a flat-out slam dunk play.

The second unit is irrelevant to this conversation; it's bad, it's been bad for years, there's no reason to believe it won't stay bad for the remainder of the season. But PP1 is a different story. They're creating chances — Wayne Simmonds had two golden opportunities on the first of the two penalties that the Lightning took — and putting together sequences that really should end up in the back of the net. The players on the unit have long track records of being able to finish on the power play. They're just not doing so this year.

Head coach Scott Gordon has rightfully expressed amazement at the lack of tangible power play production from his top unit when asked about their struggles over the last week and change. It make sense — PP1 looks like it's doing everything right from a process standpoint, and the Flyers aren't a team like the Carolina Hurricanes where their top talent up front historically lacks above-average finishing ability. Sometimes, teams just have bad-luck goal-differential years at 5-on-5, expressed by artificially low PDO ratings. Maybe Philadelphia is just having the power play equivalent of that in 2018-19. I'm certainly open to competing theories.

7: JvR starting to get going?

James van Riemsdyk has had himself a strange first season back in the Orange & Black. He lasted just four periods before getting knocked out of the lineup for the better part of six weeks with a lower-body injury, and with just two more games until the turn of the calendar year, he sits with a mere five goals — a far cry from the 36 he scored for Toronto in 2017-18, and certainly nowhere close to what fans expected from him at this stage of the season.

Yet peer a little closer, and you might see that JvR seems to be finding his offensive game. Since breaking out for a goal and an assist against Buffalo back on Dec. 8, van Riemsdyk has nine points (four goals, five assists) in his last 10 games, and more recently, seven points in his last six games — aided by a two-helper showing last night. Suddenly, JvR is sitting with a solid 2.17 Points/60 rate at 5-on-5, which is right in the range of a first-line-caliber scorer. In fact, it would be the third-highest rate of his NHL career, and even better than his performance last season.

So why are the raw full-season numbers still down? The injury obviously plays a big role — missing six of about 12 weeks of 2018-19 will do that — and the fact that JvR hasn't been an every-night staple on the top power play unit hasn't helped him, either. But in terms of even-strength scoring, van Riemsdyk has ridden this recent surge right back to where he should be, at least by points. A few more goals would certainly be appreciated by his teammates and the fanbase at large.

8: A game where numbers lie for MacDonald?

With Dave Hakstol no longer around to be the target of fury from Flyers fans on social media, it was fair to wonder where all of that unused frustration might land. In reality, it was close to a foregone conclusion who would take the brunt of it — former target Andrew MacDonald, who had received something of a reprieve over the last two seasons as most fans seemed to focus their anger on either Brandon Manning (due to the perception that he had taken a lineup spot from the more exciting Travis Sanheim) and then Hakstol after Manning was not re-signed. Well, Hakstol is now gone as well, so it's MacDonald — with his oversized contract and perceived propensity for glaring mistakes — who has become Public Enemy No. 1 again.

After the first period on Thursday night, Twitter was abuzz again with criticism of the 32-year-old, particularly due to his work on Point's power play tally, when MacDonald ended up stuck in the crease along with Neuvirth as the latter tried to recover in time to stop Point's final shot. For some, the narrative was set in stone after that play — another awful Andrew MacDonald game.

The numbers, however, tell a different tale. No defenseman on the Flyers posted a higher Corsi For Percentage (65.63%) than MacDonald, and his 10-5 on-ice scoring-chance differential wasn't bad, either. Nor was MacDonald getting particularly easy minutes; he and Radko Gudas were largely used as Philadelphia's second pair by Gordon and assistant coach Rick Wilson, and MacDonald's most frequent opponent was none other than Kucherov. By the stats, No. 47 held his own in the matchup. And MacDonald even had a few solid straight eye-test plays as the game progressed, disrupting a potential Hedman scoring chance late in the third period after Couturier turned the puck over, protecting the tie score.

Interestingly enough, the 47-3 duo actually has performed quite well by advanced stats so far. In a little over 91 minutes together, they hold a 58.25% Corsi, giving an early answer to the question of what happens when a notorious shot-differential inflater (Gudas) skates next to a deflator (MacDonald). Mistakes are going to happen with MacDonald, and my view is that the 5-on-5 numbers from last night did miss a few less-than-stellar moments on his part. But most likely, his overall performance on Thursday was nowhere near as underwhelming as it may have seemed on first watch. Maybe this pairing could legitimately work.

9: Patrick leaves with injury

In a piece of legitimately concerning news, Nolan Patrick left last night's game in discomfort near the midpoint of the second period, and did not return for another shift the rest of the way. He did remain on the bench through the conclusion of the period, but never again hit the ice for a live-action turn, staying in the locker room for the final stanza and overtime. Let's take a look at the sequence where the injury most likely occurred.

It appears to have stemmed from a netfront collision between Patrick and Ondrej Palat. Patrick crushes Palat with his left shoulder, sending the Tampa Bay forward to the ice, but it's the 20-year-old who appears to get the worst of it. He seems clearly hampered as the sequence progresses, and shows obvious signs of pain after play concludes.

My guess? It looks like either a left shoulder or arm issue. That was the main point of contact, and at the conclusion of the above clip, Patrick does appear to be clutching his left arm. A bit of good news did come in the way that the Flyers announced the injury in the third period, stating that Patrick was "unlikely" to return rather than simply ruling him out entirely — their usual protocol. It left the door open for a return, even if there was a much better chance he would stay in the locker room. That crack of sunlight in the doorway could be a tell that the injury isn't especially serious, and it was merely a matter of pain tolerance for the young center. Hopefully it does prove to be relatively minor — we'll find out in the coming days.

10: Neuvirth over Hart made sense

If you've made it this far and realized that there was no note of rookie goalie Carter Hart in the above nine points, know that it wasn't an oversight. Neuvirth received the start in goal and stayed in net for the entire game, making Hart the backup for a second straight contest.

Obviously, fans want to see Hart play, and he's shown himself quite well thus far in a Flyers uniform. Nevertheless, I have little problem with the move to turn to Neuvirth on Thursday. The veteran delivered a stellar showing in New York before the break, and had certainly earned another look, per classic hockey lingo. But going with Neuvirth over Hart also felt like the result of the night's quality of competition. Tampa is arguably the most fearsome offensive club in the league, capable of making any netminder look foolish with their barrage of dangerous passing and shot sequences. Neuvirth, to my eyes, didn't have an especially poor



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performance, yet still ended up with an 0.838 save percentage on the evening. That speaks to the difficulty of the matchup.

Yes, Hart put in a great showing against the Nashville Predators last week — another elite team. But they were missing some key pieces (Filip Forsberg, Victor Arvidsson, P.K. Subban) and even when fully healthy simply aren't as electric up front as the Lightning (Nashville's strength is on the back end). I have no issue with deeming that Hart's fourth NHL start shouldn't come in a situation where he's almost certain to fail. I'd be disappointed if he isn't given the nod on Saturday against the Florida Panthers, though.

The Athletic LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123162 Columbus Blue Jackets

Scott Harrington sets milestone

Adam Jardy

Dec 28, 2018 at 10:03 PM Dec 28, 2018 at 10:03 PM

The passing of a career milestone for Scott Harrington came and went with little fanfare Thursday against the New York Rangers. When the 25-year-old defenseman hit the ice for the Blue Jackets that night, it marked his 33rd game of the season — a career high.

Now in his fifth NHL season and third with the Jackets, Harrington has cemented himself as a member of coach John Tortorella's third defensive pairing. He celebrated the milestone by recording an assist, adding to his career-high mark of 10 so far this season.

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"I think I've just tried to play my game," he said Friday night before a game against Toronto at Nationwide Arena. "I haven't tried to change too much. I've just tried to play with confidence and show the coaches the player that I am."

Although Tortorella has changed pairings more this season than he did last year, Harrington has primarily remained in the lineup while seeing time occasionally paired with Zach Werenski, David Savard and Markus Nutivaara.

He's stayed there for a key reason.

"He's a competitor," Tortorella said. "That's what we love about him. (He) continues to work on his positioning, continues to work on his puck skills. That's what's going to keep him in the lineup. ... Just how hard he competes. He's outstanding there."

Harrington also has a career-best plus-8 rating this season while averaging 11:12 of ice time per game.

"The last couple years whenever I wasn't playing I just tried to keep a positive mindset," he said. "I've just had confidence in myself that I knew if I did put work in the right way and kept putting in work in all aspects of my game that it would hopefully pay off. That's all you can do."

Bjorkstrand streaking

Barely a month ago, forward Oliver Bjorkstrand was a healthy scratch as Tortorella tried to get more overall game from the goal-scorer.

Now in his last 11 games entering Friday, Bjorkstrand had three goals and four assists and had scored in consecutive games.

"I'm getting a few bounces here and there, getting a few points and a few goals," he said. "It all adds together. I battle harder. I'm winning battles,

and that helps the overall game. I'd still like to score more. I need to keep finding a way to put pucks on net and putting them in the net."

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123163 Columbus Blue Jackets

Maple Leafs 4, Blue Jackets 2 | Toronto, vocal fans enjoy visit with victory

Adam Jardy

Posted Dec 28, 2018 at 10:01 PM Updated Dec 28, 2018 at 10:01 PM

John Tortorella tried to downplay it before the game began.

A sold-out crowd awaited Friday night's showdown between two of the league's hottest teams, and Toronto's visiting fans descended en masse on Nationwide Arena in full voice. They clearly felt differently than the Blue Jackets coach, who said that he "doesn't get involved in what the crowd is going to be" and was focused only on keeping his team's season-best five-game winning streak rolling.

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The Maple Leafs instead played Grinch to the Blue Jackets, scoring first and never trailing in a 4-2 win Friday night in a showdown of two of the top four teams in the Eastern Conference. John Tavares provided Toronto's first two goals, Mitchell Marner pushed it out of reach midway through the second and Frederik Gauthier finished a centering pass from Par Lindholm to give the Maple Leafs their own five-game winning streak.

As bagpipes provided by the Columbus Police and Fire Pipes and Drums group added to the pregame festivities, more than a dozen Toronto signs dotted the glass during warmups. Many advertised the distance traveled to get to the game, and they didn't have to wait long for a payoff. Barely two minutes in, and only 32 seconds into an early power play, the Maple Leafs took the lead at 2:22 when Tavares deflected a shot by Nazem Kadri past Blue Jackets goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky.

It marked a rare recent blemish for the Jackets, who had killed off 20 of 22 power-play chances (90.9 percent) during their last 10 games entering the night. It also marked the first time they hadn't scored first in seven games, but Nick Foligno answered at 4:47 when he beat Toronto backup goaltender Garret Sparks from the right face-off dot to tie the game at 1.

Tavares then scored his second goal of the night when he beat Bobrovsky from the left face-off circle on a shot that looked to catch the goalie in between as it flew over his left shoulder at 18:04.

With both teams playing 4-on-4 after a scrum broke out in the corner and sent Scott Harrington and Kasper Kapanen to the penalty boxes, Toronto's Auston Matthews led a 2-on-1 charge into the zone and fed Marner to Bobrovsky's left. His goal at 9:46 made it a 3-1 Maple Leafs lead, and although the Jackets would have their chances, it proved to be insurmountable. Artemi Panarin's 100th career goal came at 18:32 of the third to set the final score.

Toronto had been off since last Sunday and had actually been in Columbus longer than the Blue Jackets, who played Thursday night at the New York Rangers. Aside from Bobrovsky replacing Joonas Korpisalo in net, the Jackets made no lineup changes from the Rangers game.

Even the Maple Leafs fans got the last word. Every time a "Let's Go Jackets!" chant started up, a "Go Leafs Go!" one punctuated the off beats and eventually drowned out the cheers of the home crowd.



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Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123164 Columbus Blue Jackets

Blue Jackets 4, Rangers 3, OT | Five takeaways

Brian Hedger

NEW YORK – They've dominated and won by slim margins, they've won when they were "just OK," by coach John Tortorella's assessment and the Blue Jackets have also won games they were outplayed.

The common thread, of course - following a 4-3 comeback win in overtime Thursday at the New York Rangers - is the Jackets keep winning. They have now won five straight games and six of the past seven since dropping the first two of a season-long, six-game homestand earlier this month.

Columbus (47 points) has also earned 13 out of a possible 14 points in that stretch to remain just ahead of the surging Pittsburgh Penguins (44 points) and just behind the first-place Washington Capitals (49 points) in the Metropolitan Division.

Would Tortorella like them to be better than they were the past three games? No question, but all three games were victories and they'll take them all.

"Everybody else is winning too in our division," Tortorella said Thursday night, after watching his team get a boost from a video review to overturn a late goal by the Rangers. "We found a way to win."

The path to victory this time included successfully challenging Ryan Strome's goal with 4:36 left in the third – which prevented New York from extending its 3-2 lead. It also included Zach Werenski's game-tying goal about two minutes later and the winning goal scored 31 seconds into overtime by Pierre-Luc Dubois.

Just that quickly, the Blue Jackets (22-12-3) were off to Columbus for the conclusion of a tough back-to-back Friday against the Toronto Maple Leafs (25-10-2) - happily taking two more points back with them.

"I'm not trying to criticize the team," Tortorella said. "I don't want to be too hard on it, because this is a big part of the National Hockey League. It happens every night that teams don't play their best but they find ways to win."

The Blue Jackets are making a habit out of it, though, along with cleaning up against Metro opponents. They're now 7-2-1 in their past 10 games against division foes and 8-4-1 this season.

Here are five takeaways from the Blue Jackets and Rangers:

### 1) Another Singleton Special

It didn't take long for video coach Dan Singleton to contact the Blue Jackets' bench and recommend challenging Strome's goal for a missed offside.

"It's a big call by Danny, finding it right away, but he radioed it to us right away – and once we looked at it, we knew we were going to get that back," Tortorella said.

That's because it was an obvious call on replay. Strome's right skate entered the offensive zone before the puck was carried across the blue line by Vladislav Namestnikov across the ice.

Instead of the Rangers taking a commanding 4-2 lead with 4:36 left, the goal was overturned and the Jackets drew some hope from it.

"It keeps us in the game," Tortorella said. "I'm not sure how much momentum (we get). It gives us a life ... to just keep banging away and try to tie the game up."

Singleton has an eagle eye for offside violations, which can be costly to challenge. The challenging team gets a two-minute minor for delay of game if it's determined the play isn't offside, which is why video and head coaches must be absolutely sure of what they see.

Singleton and Tortorella had no doubts and it paid off big.

### 2) Dominating the dots

The Blue Jackets have struggled on face-offs in a number of games, but this time they got the better of it at the dots. Columbus finished with a decisive edge, winning 58 percent of the game's 55 draws and scored goals off two of them.

Werenski's game-tying goal with 2:20 left in regulation was scored directly off a face-off won straight back to him by Boone Jenner and Dubois' winner happened 31 seconds after Brandon Dubinsky won the only overtime face-off.

All four players who took more than one face-off for Columbus finished with win percentages of at least 50 percent. Dubinsky was 6 for 9 (67 percent), Alexander Wennberg was 9 for 14 (64 percent), Pierre-Luc Dubois was 7 for 12 (58 percent) and Jenner was 9 for 18 (50 percent).

### 3) Tough turnaround

The NHL schedulers didn't do Columbus any holiday favors, handing the Blue Jackets a tough back-to-back coming out of the Christmas break that includes a taller order in the finale Friday against the rested Toronto Maple Leafs.

The Blue Jackets flew home Thursday night to conclude their long one-day excursion to New York/New Jersey, which began with a morning flight to Newark, N.J. for a morning skate at Prudential Center.

"It's going to be a challenge, but I think we're up for it," Werenski said. "It's part of our jobs to deal with stuff like this. These are huge points, and if we can come away with four points this week that would be huge coming back from break."

### 4) Top line redemption

The Jackets' first line of Artemi Panarin, Dubois and Cam Atkinson struggled by turning pucks over and letting puck-carriers Waltz largely uncontested up and down the ice.

They had good moments, though, including Atkinson's assist on a goal by Oliver Bjorkstrand and then Dubois' goal in overtime. After Dubinsky won the face-off to start OT, he went off for Panarin – who got the primary assist with a setup feed to spring Dubois to the net.

"Their third goal, I thought it was my fault, that goal," Dubois said, referring to Chris Kreider's second goal of the game to put the Rangers up 3-2 midway through the third. "I did a lot of bad things tonight. It felt good to get that one."

Tortorella concurred.

"I thought (Dubois') line was god-awful all night long, but then they end up scoring a goal to win it," Tortorella said. "That's the way it works."

### 5) Defense to offense

Werenski's goal wasn't the only big offensive contribution by a Blue Jackets defenseman. David Savard also scored to make it 2-1 with 3:52 left in the first period and two defensemen – Seth Jones and Scott Harrington – assisted on goals.

Jones gave the puck to Panarin for the feed to Dubois in overtime and Harrington got the second assist on Savard's goal – scored with a wrist shot to the far side of the net against star goalie Henrik Lundqvist.



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Werenski has points in three straight games, including goals in two games, while Harrington's assist was his 10th of the season. It was also his 11th point in 33 games. Last season, Harrington had two goals, three assists and five points in 32 games.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED:

1123165 Columbus Blue Jackets

G38: Blue Jackets don't have an answer for high-flying Maple Leafs

By Aaron Portzline Dec 28, 2018

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The 2018-19 season is nearly half in the books, but the Blue Jackets still seem to be fighting their identity.

It's not like the old days, when the Blue Jackets were a collection of misfit toys, when they lacked the high-end talent or a building approach that could define their path to victory.

These Blue Jackets know who they are, or at least how they need to play. These Jackets have more skill than previous teams, certainly, but not enough skill to play without an attention to detail defensively or a driven, purposeful style offensively.

In a 4-2 loss to the Maple Leafs on Friday, the Blue Jackets made clutch mistakes defensively, played without a meaningful contribution from their No. 1 line, and seemed to never establish themselves against one of the Eastern Conference's most dynamic teams.

"That was kind of the game plan, to not allow them to get into that transition game," Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno said. "It cost us a couple of goals tonight.

"It's hard when you allow that team to get going. We started chasing them a little bit, but once we got underneath the hashmarks against that team, we gave them fits. They didn't have much. They do not like defending down there at all. We have to find a way against a team like that to play down there more. Keep it as simple as possible through the neutral zone, get down there and make it as hard as we can on those guys. When we did, we had glorious chances."

In just the last three weeks of play, the Blue Jackets have swung wildly from a club that was bleeding scoring chances to a team that was playing much better defensively but couldn't score. Then, over the previous four games (all wins) the Jackets didn't like their play on either end of the ice.

They know how Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella wants them to play consistently, and they've tasted success playing that way. But, just as they did last season, Columbus has struggled to stick to it.

On Friday, the Blue Jackets were lamenting the 19 shots they took that missed the goal entirely, either by misfire or deflection. They also mourned the 17 shots that Toronto blocked. That's more shot attempts that didn't go on net (36) than did (29), and some of the chances they failed to convert were glorious.

Artemi Panarin was the poster child. He had one shot on goal, five shots blocked and one shot that sailed off the mark.

Foligno scored the 1-1 goal only 2:25 after Toronto took the lead, but the Jackets could not keep pace.

"We missed the net a lot, especially early on," Tortorella said. Then he repeated his line for effect: "Missed the net a lot."

The Leafs went up 1-0 on a deflected goal by John Tavares. They pushed the lead to 2-1 late in the first when Tavares came through the left circle with Mitch Marner.

Marner touched the puck over to Tavares off the rush, and Tavares didn't break stride or slow the play. When the puck reached his wheelhouse, he one-timed it to the far corner as Bobrovsky flailed awkwardly to deny it.

The Blue Jackets could only dream of scoring goals like that regularly.

If the Blue Jackets are to fight fire with fire in any way against the Leafs, their No. 1 line has to be a force. Asked what he thought of their performance after Friday's game, Tortorella said: "Not much."

The only time Panarin hit the net was with 1:28 to play when he scored his 12th goal of the season on a one-timer from the left circle.

But he was noticeable earlier in the game, and not for a good reason. Panarin blew a four-on-four assignment that allowed the Leafs to get a two-on-one rush midway through the second. Mitch Marner finished to give Toronto a 3-1 lead.

"No backcheck," Tortorella said. "It's man-to-man. (Pierre-Luc) gets beat up the wall ... I think it's Matthews that beats him, so it's a two-on-one.

"Bread is standing in the middle of the ice and doesn't backcheck."

Tortorella was convinced the Blue Jackets played better Friday than they had their previous four games, even though they won all four of those games.

Notebook

- The loss snapped the Blue Jackets' season-long five-game winning streak. It also snapped their seven-game point streak (6-0-1), which matched their longest of the season.
- Right winger Anthony Duclair lost his feet and slammed hard into the end boards in the early moments of the third period. He was slow to get up, and skated directly to the room, holding his left arm. It did not look good initially, but Duclair returned to the game several minutes later.
- Boone Jenner went 11 of 15 in the faceoff circle for the Blue Jackets, but he's the only guy who was getting it done. The rest of the club went a combined 15 of 47 (31.9 percent).
- The regular-season series is over with the Blue Jackets and Leafs. Toronto takes two of the three, and all three had the same score: 4-2.
- Panarin's goal was the 100th of his career.
- The Blue Jackets are off Saturday, then return to practice Sunday in advance of the New Year's Eve game versus Ottawa.

Analytically speaking

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

- Did the Jackets deserve a better fate? Probably not. Although they owned the five-on-five high-danger shot share (55.81 percent) they were below the bar in shot attempts (48.71 percent) and scoring chances (48.58 percent). And while we always talk about all shot attempts, there was a large portion of those tonight (16 of 60) that were blocked and another 18 that were missed altogether. That's a lot of pucks that don't see the net, don't challenge the goaltender, and rarely create a follow-up opportunity of the rebound or follow-up play. As a result, the expected goal total wasn't as stark as the actual final, but it still favored the Leafs: 2.33 to 2.22.
- Leafs goaltender Garret Sparks played well. But, for many of the reasons above, he wasn't a huge difference-maker. His save percentage was exactly as expected based on the shots he faced. According to Corsica.hockey, he saved only .01 goals above average.
- Acknowledging some late line jumbling by John Tortorella, there was only one Jackets line that earned the advantage over Toronto in their primary matchup tonight and that was the line of Alexander Wennberg, Nick Foligno and Anthony Duclair. These three had the best shot differentials of all Jackets, and what's even more interesting is that they played primarily against the talented combination of Patrick Marleau,



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Auston Matthews and Kasperii Kapanen. In the approximately eight minutes these two trios faced off, the group of Jackets held a plus-10 shot attempt advantage and a plus-6 scoring chance advantage. And that's even with Wennberg taking not one shot attempt tonight.

- That Jackets line also dominated their primarily defensive opponents of Morgan Rielly and Ron Hainsey.
- On the power play, the Jackets generated four attempts, two shots and no scoring chances in four minutes of time. For comparison, the Leafs had just more than half as much time at five-on-four (2:32) and generated just as many shots and two scoring chances. Each team allowed one shorthanded scoring chance against.

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G37: Pierre-Luc Dubois' overtime winner caps wild win by Blue Jackets over Rangers in Garden

By Aaron Portzline Dec 28, 2018

NEW YORK — With 4:36 remaining, New York Rangers forward Ryan Strome slipped behind Blue Jackets forward Artemi Panarin at the blue line and was set free for a breakaway goal thanks to a timely pass from Vladislav Namestnikov.

The goal would have made it 4-2, and it would have been "kind of a dagger," said Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski.

But Blue Jackets video coach Dan Singleton immediately signaled to the bench that he believed the Rangers — Strome specifically — were offside on the play. The Blue Jackets, watching replays via tablets on the bench, said it was a clear call.

"From what it sounded like, everybody was certain that it was offside," Werenski said. "We kind of knew right away."

Score (another) one for Singleton, who helped pave the way for a huge comeback by the Blue Jackets in Madison Square Garden. This is four or five times now in the past several years he's had an impact on an outcome.

Werenski's goal with 2:20 to play — a one-time whipper off a Boone Jenner faceoff win — allowed the Blue Jackets to force overtime in a game that seemed a lost cause.

Pierre-Luc Dubois' OT winner, only 31 seconds into the three-on-three play, gave the Jackets a 4-3 win over a Metro rival.

"It keeps us in the game," Tortorella said of the overturned goal by Strome. "I'm not sure how much momentum, but it gives us life with like ... I think we had four-plus minutes left in the game to just keep banging away and try to tie the game up.

"It's a big call by Danny, finding it right away. But he radioed it to us right away, and once we looked at it, we knew we were going to get that back. We were OK. We found a way to win."

The Blue Jackets have won five in a row and have earned points in seven consecutive games (6-0-1). The last game they lost in regulation was Joonas Korpisalo's last start, a 3-2 decision to Vancouver.

On this night Korpisalo needed to make only 19 saves — 11 of them in the second period — for his first win since Nov. 15.

Not bad for having gone three full days without a practice because of the NHL's holiday break, then flying to Newark, New Jersey, on Thursday

morning, busing over to Manhattan for the day and playing the Rangers in the Garden at night.

"I was really pissed (after the Vancouver game)," Korpisalo said. "It's pretty hard when you don't play too much. (A game like that) kind of stays in you.

"This was huge for the team. Huge. And I'm happy I could contribute to it."

Werenski's goal, his seventh of the season, could not have been timed better. It involved a little bit of luck, too.

No matter how Jenner won the faceoff, Werenski said, the plan was for Werenski to put a shot on net immediately. He was settled back beyond the faceoff dot alongside playing partner Seth Jones.

"Me and Jonesy were lined up for the one-timer," Werenski said. "So if (Jenner) won it that way, Jones was going to bump it to me. (But) he won it straight back and I just walked into one and got a lucky bounce."

Werenski said Rangers forward Mats Zuccarello skated into his shot lane, so he altered slightly and ended up shooting the puck wide of the net.

Until it glanced off the left shin pad of Rangers defenseman Marc Staal, that is.

"That's why you put pucks on net," Werenski said with a smile.

The Blue Jackets are not entirely thrilled with the way they've played of late — more on that below — but they have enough individual talent now to patch some of the mistakes.

Tortorella wasn't pleased with the play of Dubois' line — Panarin to his left and Cam Atkinson to his right — but he still turned to those players in OT.

Dubois was out with Brandon Dubinsky and Jones to start the three-on-three, but as soon as Dubinsky won the faceoff back to Jones he skated off in favor of Panarin.

It was wise of Dubois to play the puck back to Jones to settle it down after Panarin sailed a shot wide of the net just 10 seconds into the OT. As the Blue Jackets started back up the ice, Panarin passed to Dubois along the left wall where he was picking up speed.

Dubois simply skated around Rangers forward Kevin Hayes for a clean look at Lundqvist, scoring his 14th goal of the season.

"Well, I think he sees that it's Hayes that he's attacking and he licked his chops, as far as trying to take it to a forward like," Tortorella said. "When you get a forward trying to play defense and trying to skate backward ... you've got an advantage."

Notebook

- Tortorella hasn't liked the way the Blue Jackets have played since a 1-0 win over Vegas. They went 4-0 versus Metro opponents, grabbing all eight points to put some separation between the clubs. But all is not well.

- Here's Tortorella: "The biggest key is, the second half of the second period I thought we played our best hockey (of the night) when we made simple plays and played straight ahead and made the (Rangers) go 200 feet. A lot of the game, though ... Bread turns it over ... I thought Luc's line was god-awful all night long, but then they end up scoring a goal to win it. That's the way it works. We have some work to do."

- Dubois' OT game-winner was the second of his career. He ended a game last April 3 versus Detroit, the 80th game of the season.

- As he closed in on Lundqvist, Dubois went backhand to forehand and tried to beat the veteran goaltender to the near post. Lundqvist got his stick on the shot initially. But ... well, we'll let Dubois take the play-by-play from there: "It was kind of like in slow motion. I saw him stop it and I was like, 'great.' But then it kept moving. I was like, 'Come on, come on!' And it went in. My heart kind of dropped there (at first)."



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• Ultimately, though, Dubois agreed with Tortorella's assessment. "Their third goal, I thought was my fault on that goal. To get a goal back in overtime and help the team win ... I did a lot of bad things tonight. It felt good to get that one."

• Scary moment for the Blue Jackets early in the third, when Cam Atkinson lost an edge just as he started to cut and skate behind the Rangers' net. Atkinson went down and slammed hard, knees-first, into the near post to Lundqvist's right. He was down for a second, but quickly rose and gathered himself. When he reached the bench, assistant equipment guru Tim Leroy could be seen checking Atkinson's skates.

• Werenski on the Rangers' apparent goal being disallowed: "When they scored that fourth goal, it's kind of deflated on the bench a little bit. It's kind of a dagger. Once it's overturned we have new life. We're right back in the game. One shot can tie it up, and, fortunately for us, it was a lucky bounce, and we end up winning in overtime, so it's a good night."

• Sight of the night: Blue Jackets defenseman David Savard, very much the stay-at-home type, wandering way off the front porch to score the 2-1 goal at 16:08 of the first. Savard kept skating and kept finding more room before he let loose a wrist from the top of the right circle and beat Lundqvist to the far post. Yowza.

• RW Oliver Bjorkstrand had 1-1-2 and a plus-3 rating, and Boone Jenner had two assists and a plus-3. Jenner had the pass of the game, throwing the puck off his backhand and against his momentum as he skated from the left circle to the right across the high slot. The pass was right on Bjorkstrand's stick for the 1-0 goal at 9:17 of the first.

• The Blue Jackets had just one power play Thursday, but it was enough to show a new look. Apparently, they unfurled this new look in New Jersey just before the break. An old-school 2-3 format on the power play, with Werenski and Jones playing the points (two points!!!) and the top line configured across the circle. The second unit was still a 1-3-1 format, with Ryan Murray the single point.

• Tortorella went back to pairing Jones with Werenski on the top defensive pair. Murray and Markus Nutivaara were the second pair, followed by Scott Harrington and David Savard.

• Savard's goal snapped a 27-game drought. He took matters into his own hands, too, leading a rush up ice and firing a wrist at the top of the right circle. Lundqvist appeared surprised, the puck rattling home off the far post.

Analytically speaking

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

• It took more time than probably anyone in a Blue Jackets sweater wanted, but the team earned a win over the Rangers at the Garden. The Jackets held the advantage in five-on-five shot share (55.17 percent), scoring chances (60.87 percent) and high-danger chances (61.54 percent). They also won in expected goal totals by a score of 1.91 to 1.54. The only weakness Columbus showed was in the third period when they gave the lion's share of scoring chances to New York. The Rangers held a 7-5 advantage in that period.

• Goaltending was a struggle in both nets tonight. Two of Korpisalo's goals against came at a disadvantage — first, off a three-on-one rush against, and then with the Rangers on the power play — but Korpisalo ended the night with 1.46 goals saved below expectations based on the shots he faced, according to evolving-hockey.com. Lundqvist gave up 2.09 goals more than expected.

• Wennberg drew attention tonight with four shot attempts, including two on target. That's the fifth time this season he's had that many looks on his own. Wennberg also performed well against a jumbled Rangers lineup. In terms of whom the center saw the most time against, Wennberg held an advantage in shots (plus-7) and scoring chances (plus-4) over Pavel Buchnevich and bested the Brady Skjei-Adam McQuaid pairing as well as forwards Filip Chytil and Mika Zibanejad.

• Defensively, a reunited Ryan Murray and Markus Nutivaara stole the show. Playing a little more than 20 minutes, the pairing led the Blue Jackets in five-on-five shot share, (67.86 percent and 62.96 percent respectively). Murray was plus-8 in scoring chances while Nutivaara was close behind at plus-5.

• Also, on the defensive side of the ice, a credit to Savard and Werenski for scoring. According to moneypuck.com, Savard's shot had a 1.4 percent chance of getting in the net, and Werenski's late game-tying goal was scored at just 1.8 percent in terms of becoming a goal.

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1123286 Websites

The Athletic / DGB Grab Bag: Seattle GM power rankings and the 2018 Three Stars of Comedy Hall of Fame class

By Sean McIndoe Dec 28, 2018

The NHL is on the way to Seattle, but we still don't know what the team will be called, or what the uniforms will look like. And more importantly, we don't know who'll be building the roster, as the team hasn't hired a GM yet.

They still have plenty of time, but it's a big decision. The Golden Knights got it right, hiring George McPhee and then watching him assemble a team that nearly won the Stanley Cup in year one. It's fair to say that the bar has been set pretty high.

There's no shortage of candidates, including several up-and-coming first-timers like Mike Futa, Kelly McCrimmon and Mark Hunter. But while those guys could all do a good job, I'm hoping Seattle goes for a more dramatic choice. We're all about entertainment value around here, after all.

Let's help the new guys out with a power ranking of the ten most entertaining GMs that Seattle could pick. We're looking for at least marginally realistic candidates here, so we'll limit the pool to guys who have actual NHL front-office experience and who'll be available to take the job. That still gives us plenty of fun options, so let's run down the list. And again, this is for potential entertainment value, not necessarily the smartest hire.

10. Ken Holland — He's not available right now, but everyone assumes he will be once Steve Yzerman takes over in Detroit.

9. Dean Lombardi — Like Holland, he'd follow the McPhee model of bringing in a guy who's been around forever. As an added bonus, Lombardi has two Cup rings. Either Holland or Lombardi would make sense ... almost too much sense. We need a little more chaos, so let's reach deeper.

8. Mike Milbury — Maybe a little too deep.

7. Ron Hextall — Much better. Hextall was kind of a letdown as a GM because unlike his playing days he was super even-keeled. But after getting publicly called out by Paul Holmgren for being too cautious, what if Hextall over-corrected and came back as a raging maniac? It would be like when Eddie Guerrero kept berating Chavo for refusing to cheat until he snapped and went insane, except probably not like that at all. I just enjoyed that storyline.

6. John Ferguson Jr. — Would he be any better than he was in Toronto? Maybe not, but seeing him succeed in Seattle would drive every Maple Leaf fan crazy, which would be fun in its own right.



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5. Tim Murray – I miss having an NHL GM who made frequent reference to pee-pees getting slapped. Plus it would be fun to hear him angry-shout all 30 picks for the expansion draft in less than a minute.

4. Mike Gillis – Having an ex-Canucks GM would help jumpstart the rivalry; Dave Nonis could work here too. As an added bonus, Gillis actually seems to be a realistic option, which is good because the rest of the guys on our list are not.

3. Pierre McGuire – He already knows where all the eligible players were born, played their junior hockey and ate breakfast this morning. Plus he manages to get his name mentioned for every opening, meaning at some point he has to get hired. Besides, what's the worst that could happen? (Remembers Hartford.) Yeah, this would be awesome.

2. Phil Esposito – OK, we're admittedly stretching credibility here; Esposito hasn't been a GM in 20 years. But he does have experience with an expansion team, having helmed the Lightning for their first six seasons. And more importantly, in his first GM stint with the Rangers, he was the most aggressive trader the NHL has ever seen. Seriously, check out this insanity. He once traded for a coach. Today's GMs think averaging one trade a month is impressive? Peak Esposito averaged that every few hours.

Plus he's one of the game's all-time great characters. What more could you want than a guy with the guts to make big trades and who loves the camera? If only there was a slightly more recent candidate who met both criteria. And luckily, there is ...

1. Brian Burke – Yes, I know he says he's done with the front office life and wants to settle down as a media pundit. But you know there has to be a part of him that wants to get back in there. Would he be willing to move across the continent to do it? Well ... no. This has no chance of happening.

But this is about entertainment value, not realism. And Burke would be the single best option for a Seattle team that wanted to generate a few headlines. He's one of the best traders in recent history. He's quite possibly the best talker the league has ever seen. And he has zero patience for rebuilds, so he'd be trying to bring the Cup to Seattle right out of the gate. Mix in his history with division rivals Vancouver, Anaheim and Calgary, and he's the perfect fit.

Please make it happen, Seattle. An entertainment-starved league turns its eyes to you.

### Welcoming the Three Stars of Comedy Hall of Fame class of 2018

The regular three stars will return next week. In their place, it's time for a year-end tradition we started last year: Welcoming the latest class of the Three Stars of Comedy Hall of Fame.

The three stars of comedy is, if you can believe it, over seven years old. It actually predates the Grab Bag itself, having been a monthly standalone feature on Grantland that debuted back in 2011, and has been celebrating hockey players who make us laugh (intentionally or otherwise) ever since. Last year, the inaugural class was headlined by Ilya Bryzgalov, the first person to be disqualified from future three stars consideration way back in 2014 because he was showing up too often. He was joined by another slam dunk in Phil Kessel, along with P.K. Subban and Roberto Luongo.

That left a few near-misses who had to wait a year for another shot. We'll start the Class of 2018 with one of those guys.

Jaromir Jagr – He very nearly made it in last year, but fell victim to the four-player limit. One of the few hockey superstars to eventually start displaying a full-fledged personality, Jagr has made frequent appearances in the three stars section. He live-tweeted his reactions to Connor McDavid, declared himself to be his own favorite player growing up and met his weird travelling group of superfans. He even inspires other players to be funny about him. And who could forget the whole thing with his groin and the peanut butter? Jagr's a unanimous pick.

Alexander Ovechkin – Honestly, I think he'd make it in just based on his Stanley Cup summer, which allowed him to pull off the rare feat of sweeping all three stars in a single week. But there was also the shirtless wedding reception, the time he swore at Pierre McGuire and his shaving cream assault on Tom Wilson. Even his defensive shortcomings managed to be funny. And we won't even mention those weird engagement videos that will make their way to the YouTube section someday ...

Gritty – Obviously.

(Courtesy of the Philadelphia Flyers)

That leaves one spot for this year's class and I'm going to turn this one over to you. I've narrowed it down to three nominees; cast your vote in the comment section and I'll tally them up and name a winner. Or I'll forget to do that and this won't go anywhere. But that would be kind of funny too, when you think about it.

The nominees are:

Ryan Reaves: He's not so good at giving handshakes or giving himself pep talks. But he's very good at imitating the NHL 94 goal siren and terrifying Phil Kessel and I think we can agree those are more important.

Patrik Laine: From his disturbingly laid-back draft lottery interview to his ability to score at both ends to his Fortnite ethering of the Canucks, Laine has been an entertaining character since entering the league last year.

Joe Thornton: We has a pretty solid case just based on what he wanted to do to his rooster. But he's also danced with fans, had funny commercials (with even funnier outtakes) and a memorable shirtless stroll.

Who will be the fourth member of the class of 2018? Cast your vote in the comments.

### Be It Resolved

This is the time of the year when we all enjoy our own annual traditions. Maybe you celebrate the holidays in the same way, or go the same friend's place for New Years. For me, it's the time of year when I remind you that the NHL's insistence on choosing one all-star from every team is hopelessly lame.

We've been over this before, but since the NHL isn't taking the hint, we have to keep beating on the drum. The all-star game is generally awful hockey, but that's at least a little bit OK because it's meant to be harmless fun. But then the league goes and steps on some of that fun by refusing to let the best players show up at the game that's supposed to be for, you know, the best players.

FOR EXAMPLE, WHO DO YOU ADD IN THE ATLANTIC DIVISION? THERE ARE ONLY FIVE OPEN FORWARD SPOTS BEHIND MATTHEWS FROM A GROUP THAT INCLUDES KUCHEROV, MARNER, EICHEL, PASTRNAK, POINT, TAVARES, MARCHAND, STONE, STAMKOS, SKINNER, BARKOV, DUCHENE AND DOMI.

— CHRIS JOHNSTON (@REPORTERCHRIS) DECEMBER 27, 2018

It's dumb that the 2018-19 Maple Leafs, a team stacked with entertaining players, might only send two of them to the all-star game, leaving some of Mitch Marner, Morgan Rielly and John Tavares at home. And it was even dumber when the 2015-16 Maple Leafs, a garbage fire of a team with no redeeming qualities other than their ability to tank for lottery odds, sent Leo Komarov to the all-star game.

I promise you, not one Leaf fan tuned into that year's game to see Uncle Leo stumble his way up and down the ice. Stacking the host team with players is also annoying, but at least it helps sell tickets. Leaving fun, exciting players at home so somebody worse can take their spot accomplishes nothing. Be it resolved: Stop doing this, NHL.

One player from every team made sense when there were 21 teams and 42 roster spots. In the days of 31 teams, please just give us the best players. If it's close and you want to use one-player-per-team as a tie-



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breaker, go ahead. But some teams just don't have any all-stars on their roster and that's OK.

Obscure former player of the week

Now that the holidays are over, you're probably left wondering if you spent too much on all those gifts. So today, let's look at some Christmas costs. Or, to put it slightly differently, at some Noel Price.

Noel Price was a defensive defenseman who made his NHL debut with the Maple Leafs by playing a single game in the 1957-58 season. He played 28 more the next year before playing in eight games over two years with the Rangers and 20 more with the Red Wings. After a couple of years in the AHL, he resurfaced with the Canadiens in 1965, playing 39 games over two seasons and winning a Stanley Cup.

With his tour of the Original Six two-thirds complete, Price moved on to the expansion newcomers. He was claimed by the Penguins in 1967, where he finally got to see full-time NHL action for two seasons. After another year in the minors (during which he was named AHL defenseman of the year), he played one more NHL season with the Kings before making his way to the Atlanta Flames. He'd finish his career in Atlanta at the age of 40, having played parts of 14 NHL seasons spread over 19 years. He ended up playing exactly 500 NHL games, scoring 14 goals and 128 points.

My favorite part of Price's resume is the transactions section. He was traded six times in deals involving 10 other players, including Rogie Vachon. He was also traded straight up for fellow defenseman Pete Goegan twice in the same year.

Let that be a lesson to you: If you don't like something you got this week, you can always just exchange it.

Classic YouTube clip breakdown

The Winter Classic is on Tuesday, featuring a battle between ... uh ... honestly, I'm not even sure. The Blackhawks, it goes without saying, and I guess somebody else. The Penguins? What the hell, let's just say the Penguins.

This year's game doesn't have quite the same buzz as we've had in the past. That's only natural – the NHL has been regularly featuring outdoor games for 11 years now, and a lot of the novelty has worn off. But there was a time when the whole concept felt fresh and exciting. Let's head back to the very first outdoor game of the NHL's modern era.

No, not Edmonton and Montreal in the 2003 Heritage Classic. Let's head back another dozen years before that and a game played in a market that had never seen NHL hockey before.

It's September 27, 1991, and we're coming to you from the parking lot of Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. That's right – 17 years before the NHL figured out how to safely host a game outdoors in the cold, the league figured "what the hell" and scheduled one for Las Vegas in September. What could go wrong?

Regular YouTube section readers will remember this game from a breakdown we did five years ago. But back then, the only clip we could find was Kris King fighting Rod Buskas. Years later, thanks to a certain expansion team, there's way more footage of the NHL's first foray into Las Vegas. That includes virtually the entire broadcast of the game and various slickly produced packages from the league. It goes without saying that we've chosen some raw footage shot from the stands.

We get a quick shot of the arena set up, which looks odd because the seats are actually up against the ice, not way back like we're used to seeing when the game is played in a football stadium or baseball park. The Rangers and Kings take the ice and it's clear that the Kings are the hometown favorites. Man, I haven't seen Vegas sports fans this happy to see the Kings since the 2018 playoff bracket came out.

Man, I miss the days when the pregame warmup had everyone skating laps instead of just the starters. I know it messed up the ice, but there was just something cool about both rosters circling each other. It was

dramatic and almost menacing. Also, I liked watching backup goaltenders try to handle the puck. OK, it was mainly that last thing.

Our camera zooms in on Wayne Gretzky, who's skating around without a helmet on terrible ice that had carpet sticking out of it. That seems unsafe. We'd better keep an eye on him. I hope that if the camera pulls back somebody is kind enough to point him out ... OK cool, thanks man.

Weirdly, at this point, the game just starts. There's no laser drummer show or a choreographed fight where a king in a purple robe beheads a park ranger. They just get right to playing hockey. Strange.

Our first highlight is the Kings almost icing the puck, which the crowd goes crazy for. Or maybe they don't and the camera just happens to be right next to a bunch of especially loud drunks. Either way, it makes for a fun atmosphere. This may have been our first sign that hockey could work out here.

The Rangers open the scoring, but we quickly cut to the aftermath of a Kings goal. That's followed by a shot going into the stands, where it's caught by a fan who is immediately congratulated by a dude wearing a pink shirt, suspenders and sunglasses even though it's night time. He's like the love child of Larry King and Corey Hart and I want to be his friend.

We see a nice Kings' save, at which point the crowd sounds like they're booing but are actually chanting for Kelly Hrudey. Who is, it must be noted, on duty.

There's a bit of a jarring moment three minutes in as we see a shot taken by a Ranger forward wearing No. 11 who is not Mark Messier. The blockbuster trade with Edmonton wouldn't happen until a week after this game, so I'm not sure who that is; Kelly Kisio wore No. 11 for the Rangers the year before, but he's in San Jose by now, so it's probably some guy trying to crack the roster. Little does he know that Messier's on the way and he's about to get his number Wayne Maki'd.

We get a Kings goal on a play that starts with a Rangers defenseman losing the puck and then falling down, either because the ice has grasshoppers in it or because he's an NHL defenseman and this is the early 1990s.

Next comes a montage of things that don't happen in NHL games anymore: The playing of "Rock and Roll Part 2," faceoffs outside the faceoff circles, an open-ice body check that isn't immediately followed by a half-hearted fight and a forward scoring off the rush on a slapshot. A mixed bag, all in all.

We get another Kings goal, and then that King/Buskas fight that's eventually broken up by the two giant linesmen. That's followed by a Gretzky goal and our clip ends. The Kings ended up winning by a 5-2 final, meaning they scored more goals in this parking lot than they did in the entire 2018 playoff series against the Golden Knights. But it's cool, I'm sure they've rebounded nicely.

You can learn more about this game, including what the deal was with the carpet and the grasshoppers, from this article. A few years ago, I ranked this as the 13th best outdoor game ever, ahead of a few Winter Classics. Will it be better than this year's game between the Blackhawks and, uh, Red Wings? Time will tell. Either way, here's hoping the Golden Knights get to try their hand at the real thing soon. We know it can be done.

The Athletic LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123287 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Sparks' strong outing helping Leafs push ahead with goaltending plans



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Chris Johnston December 28, 2018, 9:55 PM

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Toronto Maple Leafs are in the middle of their 38th set of back-to-back games since Frederik Andersen arrived in the organization and until Friday there had been an unbroken pattern as to how those situations played out in net.

Andersen always got the first start on the schedule — each and every one of them — as head coach Mike Babcock tried to take advantage of the moments when his teammate's legs would be freshest and the Maple Leafs had the best chance to claim two points.

That the streak ended here at Nationwide Arena with Garret Sparks starting Toronto's first game out of the Christmas break appears to be a harbinger of things to come. The Leafs intend to find Andersen more rest before the playoffs and it will require them to alter their deployment strategy from years gone by.

"We just felt that after a break it's important for Freddie to get some practice in," Babcock said in explaining his goaltending decision following Friday's 4-2 win over the Columbus Blue Jackets. "Freddie is our guy and we've got to make sure he's healthy. So we'll probably do it after the next break as well. That's the way we have it."

Andersen has appeared in 66 regular-season games each of the last two seasons and is currently on pace for roughly the same number of starts again. That's no longer the kind of workload you typically see from the No. 1 goaltender who lifts the Stanley Cup each June, with no one having played more than 60 games before a successful four-round playoff run since Jonathan Quick in 2012.

What's really changed in Toronto is how much more comfortably the Leafs should be able to get by on nights when Andersen watches from the end of the bench.

They have already banked a boatload of points with a 25-10-2 start that is among the best in franchise history, and are scoring at a ridiculous pace of 3.79 goals per game — better than everyone but the Tampa Bay Lightning. It's allowed them to win 7-6 and 5-4 on nights when Sparks didn't have his best.

And on Friday night, with Sparks starting for the second time in five days, they saw the backup deliver a strong 27-save performance against a red-hot Blue Jackets team. He's had some trouble handling long gaps of inactivity after playing big minutes in the American Hockey League last season and believes he'll be sharper if given a better chance to get in a rhythm.

"It definitely felt like there was less rust than there had been in the past," Sparks said of Friday's start. "Every opportunity that I get to be in there it's another opportunity to play in the NHL. You've got to do the most you can with it."

They key, in the big picture, is what the extra rest might do for Andersen.

He last played in a 5-3 victory over the New York Rangers on Saturday night and managed to get in an extra workout with goalie coach Steve Briere here before Friday's game. That should have him feeling fresh when he faces the New York Islanders to finish this back-to-back set at Scotiabank Arena.

After that, Toronto doesn't play again until Thursday afternoon against Minnesota — giving Andersen added time to both work on his game and rest.

All told, he'll make just three appearances in 13 days.

The Dane is off to the best start of his NHL career — among the league leaders in wins (20) and save percentage (.923) — but the goal is to keep him performing at a high level right into the playoff grind. He struggled in March last season and didn't have a great series against the Boston Bruins afterwards.

Plus, there is a growing case that suggests Sparks can handle more work. The AHL's reigning goalie of the year was particularly sharp during a 10-save second period against the Blue Jackets and now sports a .910 save percentage — a tick above league average in a season where scoring is up considerably.

He also has a 6-1-1 record.

"I'm just at a point now where I'm trying to make the next save and trying to focus on shot-by-shot, and not get too ahead of myself," said Sparks. "When you get too wrapped up in that stuff — stats, numbers and stuff like that — [it's not good]. All I care about is winning."

Ultimately, that's what the organization prioritizes above all else, too.

They are at the progressive end of the curve with a growing sports science department and nutrition specialists available to players both at home and on the road. They've obviously studied what the ideal workload is for their No. 1 goaltender.

And here, kicking off the unofficial second half of their season, they veered from a well-established pattern in the crease.

It probably won't be the last time, either.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 12.29.2018

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens skate Panthers into ground in first game without Price

Eric Engels December 28, 2018, 10:45 PM

It was a day that didn't start particularly well for the Montreal Canadiens, but one that ended for them on a high note.

On Friday morning, Canadiens coach Claude Julien gave an update on starting goaltender Carey Price's lower-body injury, telling reporters at the team's morning skate in Florida that Price had been dealing with an "irritation" for several weeks.

"It was examined thoroughly and it seemed as though he could get through it," Julien said. "We thought four days off would've done him some good, but yesterday (practice) was very difficult for him. So, at the moment, all we can say is that he continues to be examined. He's still day-to-day, but we don't know (how long he could be out or how serious it is) until we get the information from the doctors."

It was an update that left many possibilities on the table. Not one Canadiens fans were hoping for ahead of a game against a divisional rival that sat seven points back with two games in hand.

This was going to be a tall task for backup Antti Niemi, regardless. Possibly the first of many as the Canadiens await news on Price and charge forth into the second half of their season.

Here are some takeaways on how he—and his teammates—handled it, in what turned out to be a 5-3 win over the Florida Panthers.

Niemi finds his game just in the nick of time

The Finnish netminder came into Friday's game with a 4-3-1 record on the season, which was somewhat remarkable given his 4.14 goals-against average and his .876 save percentage.

He didn't exactly inspire much confidence after the Canadiens built a 2-0 lead in the first 2:51 of the first period.



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It was Henrik Borgstrom who beat Niemi with Florida's third shot of the game, and then Denis Malgin tied things up on Florida's fifth shot.

Granted, the goals came off terrible bounces for Montreal's Jesperi Kotkaniemi and Paul Byron, but the shots provided opportunities for Niemi to show his team he was there to stand in for the injured Price. He whiffed on them.

But much like he has throughout his career, Niemi rebounded exceptionally well.

Saves on Aaron Ekblad and Jared McCann, while the Panthers enjoyed an early power-play opportunity in the second period, kept the game tied at 2-2. Another on Mike Hoffman, who leads Florida with eight power-play goals this season, was huge for Niemi.

With just over 13 minutes to play, the 35-year-old came up with his best save of the night on Borgstrom.

The play then turned down to the other end of the ice, forcing Florida's Frank Vatrano to haul down Montreal's Michael Chaput.

Panthers defenceman MacKenzie Weegar shot the puck over the glass a minute and 19 seconds later, and Montreal's Tomas Tatar scored right as Vatrano was stepping out of the box to make it 3-2 Canadiens.

Niemi allowed a goal to Keith Yandle with 1:16 remaining. One he had no chance on.

But he held the fort as the Panthers pushed for more seconds later, and he walked away with a well-earned win.

Tatar keeps on rolling

Tatar's power-play goal, at 8:54 of the third period, was his second tally of the night.

His first came 35 seconds into the game, when he crossed over from the left wing to the slot and roofed a backhand over goaltender Roberto Luongo's arm to open the scoring.

That's now 14 goals and 14 assists in 38 games for the man who was the throw-in to the deal that sent Max Pacioretty away from the Canadiens and to the Vegas Golden Knights on Sept. 10.

Tatar had gone six games without a point before Montreal's last game ahead of the Christmas break. But he came to Vegas with the Canadiens on Dec. 22 and appeared to be on a mission from the second the puck dropped to the second the game ended 4-3 in favour of his team, registering two assists in that one.

He was probably Montreal's best player in that game, and he was definitely their best player in Florida—adding four shots on net to his two goals, dominating possession (60 per cent Corsi For, according to naturalstattrick.com), and forcing turnovers all over the ice.

The Canadiens played a stifling game in all three zones, skating the Panthers into the ground from start to finish.

It's a recipe that's given Montreal 20 wins in 38 games. One that vaulted them past the Boston Bruins and into the first wild-card position in the Eastern Conference on Friday.

As Brendan Gallagher put it following the team's 46-shot output in Vegas:

"When we skate, we give every team in the league trouble, and that's got to be our strength. When we get away from that, we're a bad team, and I think we're starting to understand that."

"For the most part this year, we've been skating, we've been moving our feet," added Gallagher. "It puts teams on their heels, and when we can come at teams like that line after line with the speed we have I think it's got to be the identity of our group. I think it's why we've been getting the results we have so far."

There's no question about it.

If you want a sense for how well the Canadiens executed that style of game against Florida—not that the Panthers played their best—leading scorers Aleksander Barkov and Jonathan Huberdeau were held to zero shots on net through the first 58 minutes.

Huberdeau, who came into Friday's game with 25 points in his last 15 outings, got one scoring chance with Luongo pulled and an extra man on the ice for his side. He pinged it off the post.

Barkov got one harmless shot off in those dying minutes. It came right before Jonathan Drouin made a good hustle play and iced the game for Montreal with an empty-net goal at 19:37 of the third period.

If Drouin and the Canadiens bring that speed into Tampa Bay Saturday, they'll give themselves their best chance at a win over the rested Lightning, who have rattled off 15 wins in their last 17 games.

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1123289 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / From MacKinnon to Scheifele: Seven of the NHL's best value contracts

Sportsnet Staff | December 28, 2018, 11:00 AM

Every time the NHL salary cap rises, older contracts hold a little more value for the team that signed them. A rising cap brings contract inflation, so players with comparable point productions who signed their deals four years apart could have vastly different average annual values (AAV).

Because of this there are plenty of value contracts around the NHL. In coming up with this list below we stayed in the present, and took into account the AAV relative to today's market. Some of these deals may not have been such steals when they were signed, but they sure are now.

We also considered term left on the deal — the best ones don't just come with low cap hits for this season or next, but well into the future, too.

Ryan Dixon and Rory Boylen go deep on pucks with a mix of facts and fun, leaning on a varied group of hockey voices to give their take on the country's most beloved game.

Brad Marchand: \$6.125 million through 2024-25

Signed just before the start of the 2016-17 NHL season, the Bruins locked in Marchand for the long-term just before he had a career-year. The agitator saw a 24-point year over year improvement that season, finishing with 39 goals and 85 points and has been a top five points-per-game player in the NHL ever since.

Nathan MacKinnon: \$6.3 million through 2022-23

Though MacKinnon won the Calder Trophy after a 63-point rookie season, he followed it up with seasons of 38 and 52 points — closing out his entry-level contract nowhere near the player he has become since. He signed his seven-year deal in July of 2016 and was the 51st highest-paid NHLer at the time, but scored just 53 points in the first year of the contract and went through the first four seasons of his career with one 20-goal season. But the first overall pick in the 2013 draft arrived as one of the league's best last season, scoring 39 goals and 97 points. Showing that wasn't a fluke, he continues to centre the NHL's highest scoring line and already has 56 points through 37 games.

John Klingberg: \$4.25 million through 2021-22

A fifth-round pick in 2010, Klingberg had only played 65 NHL games when his entry-level contract ran its course, but posted 40 points and averaged 21:50 of ice time per game. He locked in to a seven-year



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extension that counted for 6.16 per cent of Dallas' cap, which is a little less than Noah Hanifin got on his six year deal with the Flames this year. But since signing his deal, Klingberg is the fifth-highest scoring defenceman in the NHL and has evolved into Dallas' No. 1, being entrusted with one of the heaviest workloads in the league.

Viktor Arvidsson: \$4.25 million through 2023-24

There are a few notably great value contracts on the Predators roster — including Mattias Ekholm (\$3.75 million) and Roman Josi (\$4 million) — but considering Arvidsson just signed his deal in 2017 to lock in through the 2023-24 season, a contract providing incredible value already will just get better and better over the next five years. Arvidsson has averaged 30 goals and 61 points in each of the past two seasons and was on a point a game pace in 2018-19 before an injury forced him to the sidelines. Arvidsson won't put up superstar numbers, but he brings a high level of consistency and productivity and his low AAV will help open up the Predators to more expensive options through the life of the contract.

Mark Scheifele: \$6.125 million through 2023-24

It didn't always look like Scheifele would be the dominant centre he is today. It's easy to forget he was returned to junior two years in a row after being drafted seventh overall in 2011, and his point totals in his first three NHL seasons rose from 34 to 49 to 61. But it wasn't until after he signed an eight-year deal in July of 2016 that he really exploded. Scheifele scored 82 points in 2016-17 and has been better than a point per game player since. He's a top 20 player in both goals and assists since signing the deal.

Jonathan Marchessault: \$5 million through 2023-24

Since coming out of nowhere with a 51-point season in 2016-17, Marchessault is the 38th-highest scoring forward in the NHL. But after being sent to Vegas in the expansion process and having a career-year, Marchessault signed a long-term extension months before becoming UFA eligible for a \$5 million AAV that makes him tied for the 169th-highest paid player in the league.

Aleksander Barkov: \$5.9 million through 2021-22

Although he hadn't yet scored 40 points in a season when he signed in January of 2016, Barkov was in the midst of a career-high 28-goal campaign that started to etch his place in yearly Selke Trophy talk. He came the closest to claiming it just last season when he recorded a career-high 78 points and over the past two seasons no forward averages more than his 22:21 per game.

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Sportsnet.ca / 9 bold NHL predictions for 2019

Luke Fox | December 28, 2018, 9:38 AM

You won't find any safe bets here.

Yes, Peter Chiarelli will be dismissed if the Oilers fail to make the playoffs, Brayden Point will get paid, and Joel Quenneville will stuff the shotski back in the closet and get back to work. Those are givens.

For our nine NHL predictions of 2019, we get more specific. We're not guaranteeing all of these events will come to pass in the next 365 days, but if you want to become a very rich fan, you might want to place a prop bet or six based on my supreme clairvoyance.

1. Auston Matthews will make more money than Connor McDavid (and oh so much of it will be in upfront signing bonuses).

The Toronto Maple Leafs haven't owned the rights to a young franchise centre since Mats Sundin and aren't about to let this one get away. Matthews is business savvy and uber confident. While contemporaries McDavid and Jack Eichel never played a shift of their platform year without taking care of their max-term financial stability first, Matthews decided to wait and let the money pile up — a decision all the more gutsy considering he was coming off a season in which he suffered three separate injuries.

By the time Matthews does sign, he'll know the cap has been bumped twice since McDavid inked. The projected ceiling for the summer of 2019 (\$83 million) is up \$8 million from when McDavid signed in 2017.

It's worth remembering a couple other things, too: first, McDavid essentially gave some of his dough to Leon Draisaitl. And second, there was no threat of an offer sheet when Chiarelli locked up his generational talent. There will be one if Kyle Dubas doesn't crunch the math and make Matty a \$100-million-plus man come June.

2. Erik Karlsson leaves San Jose... for New York... and signs for less than Drew Doughty.

The assumption that deploying the twin right-shot, minute-munching threats of Brent Burns and Karlsson would forever keep the puck in the opponents' zone and elevate a perennial playoff team to the most frightening team in the Pacific has fallen flat. Despite Doug Wilson's all-in mentality over the summer, the Sharks are still a work-in-progress. There's not enough puck to go around; the sum feels slightly less than the parts.

While we'd be floored to see Wilson give up on Karlsson before the 2019 trade deadline, we'd be even more shocked if he offered the impending UFA a contract rich enough to prevent EK65 from testing the open market.

Kevin Shattenkirk never did amount to the bona fide blue-line stud New York banked on in 2017. Here's betting Karlsson becomes the cap-clearing Rangers' No. 1 defenceman of the future, but after a just-OK-by-his-standards platform campaign, Karl will have to settle for a lighter deal than the one agency pal Doughty (\$88 million) took to remain in L.A.

As Karlsson joins forces with Henrik Lundqvist and reunites with Mika Zibanejad, the Blueshirts become the de facto home team of Swedes everywhere.

3. Sergei Bobrovsky and Artemi Panarin stick around for the playoffs — and then bounce.

Columbus Blue Jackets GM Jarmo Kekalainen is in a pickle. Neither of the two most gifted players on his roster are eager to sign a contract extension, and both appear headed for intriguing bidding wars come July 1. (New York, Chicago, Carolina, Florida and New Jersey would all be interested in Panarin; Philadelphia, Calgary, St. Louis and the Islanders should consider Goalie Bob.)

As painful as it'll be to watch superstars walk for nothing, here's betting Kekalainen sees the value in rolling the dice and making a legitimate last-gasp run with his group. The Jackets need to win to be buzzy in a college-sports town, and with the Metropolitan softer than usual, it would be a shame to pass up the franchise's best shot at a playoff-series victory. Renting these guys out would gut the dressing room and tarnish fan loyalty. (The John Tortorella comments would make for must-see TV, however.)

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4. A familiar name will storm out of semi-retirement and into the playoffs.

Call it the Mike Fisher Special.

There are a few recent NHL veterans who have been staying in shape and have held off on filing their retirement press releases. These guys



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understand the toils of the 82-game marathon and may be perfectly satisfied with a 35-game sprint.

With GMs more reluctant to part with early-round draft picks for rental players, we wonder if a playoff-tested, well-rested player like Kevin Bieksa (Spengler Cup!), Rick Nash, Antoine Vermette or Dominic Moore might be pried off the couch to add affordable depth and leadership to a contender by the deadline.

5. P.K. Subban will get traded (again).

At a highly unsanctioned gathering of hockey writers this July, everyone at the dinner table was pressed to announce their very early prediction for the 2019 Stanley Cup Final. Mine was Tampa over Calgary, and I'm sticking with it. The Calgary half of my guess yielded some snickers because Nashville and Winnipeg were wiser (safer?) bets. But when the Preds and Jets wear each other down to pulp in a Central final rematch, the Flames will be the beneficiary.

Another stumble to represent the West in mid-June will propel a gunslinger like David Poile to shake things up before he starts paying Roman Josi (skating with a near-criminal \$4-million cap hit 'til 2020) the salary he deserves.

Tell me I'm not the only one who finds it difficult to envision Subban, with his AAV of \$9 million and recent injury woes, retiring in Nashville.

6. Florida will be awarded an outdoor game.

The NHL has already hinted at plans to increase the number of its outdoor events — a fun, reliable gimmick that took a step back in 2018–19 after a hectic centennial season — and colleague Elliotte Friedman has been all over the designs for a show in Saskatchewan.

Because Lightning owner Jeff Vinik is one of the most respected in the biz, because the Panthers' sagging attendance will only embolden commissioner Gary Bettman's resolve to sell hockey in Sunrise, and because Florida is one of the few markets still waiting for an outdoor game, I predict we'll learn of plans for a Lightning-Panthers stadium showdown in '19. Who knows? Maybe Roberto Luongo even gets to start in this one.

7. Gritty will get arrested. His googly mug shots will go viral.

You can't convince me he's not up to something shady, and Tommy Hawk has already broken down barriers in terms of public behaviour for mascots.

8. First-timers will dominate NHL Awards night.

Mikko Rantanen will hang on to raise the Art Ross Trophy, John Gibson will capture his first Vezina, and David Pastrnak — buoyed by the healthy return of Patrice Bergeron — will come from behind to steal Alex Ovechkin's Rocket Richard Trophy.

Washington's John Carlson will edge out Mark Giordano and Morgan Rielly for the Norris Trophy, making Don Cherry and a lot of Canadians furious. Aleksander Barkov will win the first of several Selke trophies. Jared Bednar will put his name on the Jack Adams he almost deserved in 2018. And Jason Botterill will rake GM of the Year.

Oh, and give Jack Eichel the Hart — unless the Oilers make the playoffs, in which case it goes to the only guy drafted ahead of him.

9. Patrick Marleau will be traded back to San Jose.

The respected veteran's work in Toronto will be done after a thrilling 2019 playoff run. Yes, Marleau's contract is virtually buyout-proof and those 39-year-old legs are made of iron, but \$6.25 million is simply too steep of a cap hit for a club that will be paying forwards Matthews, William Nylander and Mitch Marner real money in 2019-20. (Kasperii Kapanen, Andreas Johnsson, Par Lindholm and Jake Gardiner would like raises too, please.)

It goes like this: The Leafs pay Marleau his \$3-million signing bonus on July 1, then move Marleau to San Jose, which only has to pay the living legend \$1.25 million in base salary.

So, at little real-money cost to the Sharks, they welcome back Marleau and eat the bulk of his cap. Marleau can retire in teal, Hall of Famer Joe Thornton can finally rest what's left of his knees, and Wilson can obtain a useful bottom-six forward for the price of a late-round pick or long-shot prospect.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 12.29.2018

1123291 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Leafs' Matthews: 'Very deserving' players won't make NHL All-Star Game

Luke Fox | December 27, 2018, 2:54 PM

TORONTO — Immediately after saying how honoured he was to be voted captain of the Atlantic Division for the 2019 NHL All-Star Game, Auston Matthews hit the nail on the head with his next comment.

"With the way it's set up, obviously a lot of very deserving guys won't be able to go," Matthews said Thursday, following his first practice since Christmas with the Marleaus.

"We've had four or five guys who've made huge impacts night in and night out on this team: Mitch [Marner], John [Tavares], Morgan [Rielly], Freddy [Andersen] are all really deserving to go and compete in this game."

As dominant as their individual campaigns have been, barring a series of unforeseen injuries or dropouts, we won't see the Maple Leafs roll five-deep through San Jose on Jan. 25-26.

The NHL wishes that all 31 clubs send at least one representative, and the Leafs are far from the only team that should expect a high-profile snub as a result.

Joining Matthews are Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Alex Ovechkin as the divisional superstars nominated by fans via online ballots (the voting tallies were not revealed by the league). With the exception of Ovechkin, who referred to himself as the group's "old horse," the other captains all dressed as Team North America mates at the 2016 World Cup.

"It's just the way the game's trending — young guys coming up being able to make an impact early in their careers and continue to get better," Matthews reasoned.

"It's fun to watch. It's fun to be a part of and play in this type of game now, where it's just fast and skilled. It's still physical — guys are still competing out there — but it's definitely not how it used to be. It's evolving.

"I'm really grateful to be able to play in a market like Toronto and have such passionate fans that go out of their way to vote for you and do that kinda stuff. It means a lot to me as a player and as a person and being part of Toronto."

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

Matthews gets to wear a letter on his sweater (hey!) despite missing 38 per cent of Toronto's games due to a shoulder injury.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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"Well deserved," Rielly said. "One of the best players in the world, so... shocker."

The 21-year-old Matthews' 19 goals and 34 points over 23 games speak for themselves. Though Matthews ranks fourth on his own team in scoring, his 1.48 points per game place him fifth overall in that category.

"He's at that point in his career — a lot of notoriety right now. He's exciting. It's exciting for our franchise," coach Mike Babcock said. "It's a real compliment to him from the fans. You always want to be good to the fans, and they'll be good to you. With the skill set he has and the demeanour he has, there's a lot to like."

And there's a lot to question regarding the NHL's selection process, which favours equality over merit. Satisfying player quotas for every team, every division and every position could leave some marquee, deserving names enjoying career years in Colorado, Calgary, Winnipeg, Tampa and Toronto on the outs.

Frederik Andersen's 20 wins tie him with Vegas's Marc-Andre Fleury for the most in the league and are five more than any other goaltender in the division (Montreal's Carey Price and Tampa backup Louis Domingue have 15 apiece). Because Montreal (Price) and Detroit's (Jimmy Howard) best blends of star power and All-Star Game worthiness rest in net, there's a chance Andersen misses out. (Although I'd give up press-box ice cream sandwiches for a month to see Connor McDavid and Dylan Larkin head-to-head in a Fastest Skater heat.)

Frederik Andersen has 20 wins through 30 games this season. Only George Hainsworth reached 20 wins in fewer games in a season in #LeafsForever history (28 GP in 1934-35).

— Sportsnet Stats (@SNstats) December 27, 2018

Rielly is arguably the Norris Trophy frontrunner. He leads the NHL in plus/minus (+26) and tops all defencemen in goals (13) and points (44). Not naming Rielly to the Atlantic's blue line would be a crime, although the defenceman says he "doesn't really think about it." He simply wants to help the Leafs win games.

If Rielly had one vote? "Our goalie. Freddy, for sure. No question."

Ottawa's Thomas Chabot and Florida's Keith Yandle would be our hunch for the other two D spots, although that could come at the expense of teammates Mark Stone and Aleksander Barkov, respectively.

It's an ugly, complicated puzzle for the league's head office and its hockey operations department to sort out, and some colourful pieces will be left in the box.

The Lightning's Victor Hedman and Ryan McDonagh each have a case, for example, but how could the NHL possibly overlook Nikita Kucherov (No. 2 overall in scoring with 57 points) and Brayden Point (47 points, 11th overall)? Steven Stamkos, with a cool 20 goals before Christmas Eve, may lose out because he's a great player on a loaded team.

Buffalo's Jeff Skinner, Colorado's Gabriel Landeskog, Winnipeg's Patrik Laine, and Calgary's Elias Lindholm are all on the bubble.

Here in Toronto, Tavares (third overall in goals with 24) and/or the electric Marner (fifth overall in scoring with 50 points) are in serious danger of their invites getting lost in the mail despite their career years. Crazy to think that Tavares's streak of four straight all-star game appearances is in doubt the first year he's tracking 50 goals.

Matthews has four deserving teammates, so, we ask, who would he bring if he could vote just one of them in?

"It's tough," Matthews smiled. "I think if I could take one guy, it'd probably be Patty Marleau. Take him back to San Jose. Probably stay at his house there, the whole nine yards."

One-Timers

The Maple Leafs (again) recalled Trevor Moore Thursday, and it appears he'll get a look on the second power-play unit. The injury fill-in had been

formally returned to the Marlies over the Christmas break only as a cap-saving measure.... Babcock is still keeping Matthews and William Nylander apart. Despite starting Sunday's game together, the duo was split after one period versus Detroit Sunday and remained that way at practice Thursday. Patrick Marleau skated on Matthews' left side, with Kasperii Kapanen to their right, and Nylander — mired in a career-worst six-game point drought — rejoined Nazem Kadri and Connor Brown on the third line.... Toronto gets back in action Friday in Columbus for a showdown between the NHL's two hottest clubs at the break. Both the Maple Leafs and Blue Jackets toasted four-game win streaks Christmas Eve, and the Leafs have the advantage of watching Columbus play the Rangers Thursday in New York and will catch them on a back-to-back. "It works to our advantage to have our practice today and game tomorrow," Rielly says.

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Sportsnet.ca / Stars CEO rips Seguin, Benn: 'These guys are not good enough'

Mike Johnston | December 28, 2018, 7:07 PM

The Dallas Stars are displeased with where they currently sit in the standings and frustrations within the organization are beginning to boil over publicly.

In particular, CEO Jim Lites and team owner Tom Gaglardi are unhappy with the performances of captain Jamie Benn and star centre Tyler Seguin.

"They are [expletive] [expletive], I don't know how else to put it," Lites said via Sean Shapiro of The Athletic (subscription required).

Lites explained that he frequently receives texts during Stars games from a vexed Gaglardi who's irked by the recent play of his team's top stars.

"We are a stars-driven league, and our stars aren't getting it done," Lites said. "It's embarrassing, and no one writes it."

Benn has a respectable 15 goals and 15 assists through 38 games but by his standards he's having a down year. Same goes for Seguin who has only 11 goals and is on pace to record his lowest goal total since the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season.

"He used to be a pest to play against," Lites said of Seguin. "People hated playing against Tyler Seguin. They don't anymore. These guys have been great players, but we are 40 games into this season and they aren't getting it done. We are going to sleepwalk to another 14th place from the bottom and miss the playoffs."

The Stars have been at or above .500 since Oct. 23 but the team has been steadily sliding down the standings over the past six weeks or so. They are currently fourth in the stacked Central Division and occupy the final Western Conference wild-card spot, but that won't suffice for the Stars executives.

"These guys are not good enough," Lites said. "They're not good enough for me, they're not good enough for the owner, and they're certainly not good enough for the general manager [Jim Nill], who I can't speak for, but it's not good enough for the job he's done. But we've had meeting after meeting after meeting. The accountability on the ice is not there."

"These guys were signed to big contracts because they were the third- and sixth-leading scorers in the National Hockey League over the past five years. They get their money, we expect them to not be outplayed



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every game we play in. And if they were as good as they've been in the past we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Benn and his \$9.5-million annual salary cap hit are locked up through the 2024-25 campaign. Meanwhile, the eight-year, \$78.8-million contract extension (\$9.85-million cap hit) Seguin inked in September doesn't kick in until the beginning of next season.

Lites echoed his frustrations to Matthew DeFranks of the Dallas News.

"If 14 and 91 don't lead, we will not be successful," Lites told DeFranks. "I think this is the most talented and deep team we've had in years here. Certainly, this is the best team that we've put together from a talent perspective since Tom Gaglardi's owned the franchise. Tom has allowed us to do everything we needed to do to be successful. Whatever it's taken, he's done. And I am tired of getting emails from him saying 'What the hell is going on with our best players?'"

The next chance Benn and Seguin will have to redeem themselves is on Saturday when they host the Detroit Red Wings.

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Sportsnet.ca / Why Jason Arnott chose hockey over every other sport he was great at

David Singh | December 28, 2018, 11:43 AM

There were only so many times per day Jason Arnott could rifle a tennis ball into the goalie net on the driveway. Whenever his mind yearned for a release from hockey, a young Arnott would venture to the backyard of his parents' Wasaga Beach, Ont., home to shoot hoops.

He had to be careful, though. The makeshift basketball court was the domain of his older sister and she defended it fiercely. Kari is five years older than Arnott and towered over him when the two were growing up. While the difference in stature didn't factor into games of 21, it certainly mattered during one-on-one matchups.

"She wasn't letting up on me, especially because I was her little brother. She wanted to show me she was the boss," Arnott recalls. "If I took the ball to the net, she would throw a high elbow at me and take the ball."

That competitive foundation served the siblings well — Kari went on to play basketball at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ont., while Arnott grew to become a feisty, dependable centre over 18 NHL seasons. Hockey was obviously Arnott's first passion, but he excelled in every sport he touched. By the time he attended high school in Collingwood, the site of this week's Rogers Hometown Hockey stop, Arnott was dabbling in football, wrestling, soccer, volleyball and golf, in addition to basketball and hockey.

"Hockey wasn't [the] seven-days-a-week thing that it is now," Arnott says. "You practised a couple times during the week and you maybe had one game here or there.... You had to fill your days up and be busy."

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Bert Crago, a longtime basketball coach at Collingwood Collegiate Institute (CCI), suggests that Arnott wasn't simply biding his time on the hardwood. He was actually a dominant forward who could score in bunches, hovering around six-feet tall by the age of 15 and oozing with athletic ability.

Crago knew Arnott played hockey, but wasn't quite aware of his skill level on the ice. So, when the time came for Arnott to leave CCI after Grade

10 and head to Lindsay, Ont., in pursuit of a pro career, Crago stepped in.

"I was trying to convince him to stay at Collingwood Collegiate and play senior basketball and he was telling me, 'Coach, you know what, I'm gonna go on and pursue my No. 1 love,'" says Crago, who's now retired. "So I'm giving him a hard time. I'm saying, 'Ah, don't do that. You'd be a really good senior boys' basketball player.'"

"The joke ended up being on me."

The same episode unfolded on the high school football team. Arnott joined the squad as a linebacker in Grade 9 and, of course, stood out.

Head coach Dick Edwards and his staff noticed during first-year practices that whenever Arnott casually tossed the ball, it would sail with mechanic perfection. His footwork was impeccable, too, so the coaches moved him to quarterback. It paid off as he led the team to the regional finals at the end of his second year.

However, just as he was peaking in football, hockey hauled him away.

"One of my coaches — and he chuckles about it — bumped into Arnott in the hall and I think he was saying half facetiously, after we knew he wasn't coming back: 'Oh, you know, Jason, you could probably do well as a quarterback in a Canadian college,'" remembers Edwards, who's also retired. "But you don't have to be a Rhodes scholar to know that for a Canadian kid, a hockey road can lead to a lot more opportunity than a Canadian college quarterback."

Says Arnott: "I loved both [basketball and football] and I played every sport to the best of my abilities. But obviously, hockey was my No. 1 love.... It was always hockey, 100 per cent."

Ultimately, that avenue took Arnott to Lindsay, then Oshawa, Ont., where he spent two seasons with the Generals before being drafted by the Edmonton Oilers. The forward was traded to New Jersey in 1998 and enjoyed his best years with the Devils, helping the club to a Stanley Cup in 2000 by scoring the championship-clinching goal in double overtime of Game 6 against the Dallas Stars.

The ensuing moment is immortalized on a banner in the gymnasium at Arnott's high school. It pictures a drained Arnott — sporting two black eyes and a red Devils sweater — jubilantly hoisting the Stanley Cup.

The over-sized banner was raised during a recent ceremony that inducted Arnott and others into the school's athletics hall of fame. He wasn't able to make it to CCI for the event, so Kari attended in his place. She's no longer playing competitive sports and currently works in parks and recreation, but the fire still smoulders when it comes to besting her brother.

When Kari texted Arnott photos of the banner, she made sure to include a few words that reminded him who was boss, in case he had forgotten after all these years.

"Any time something comes up where [it looks like] I am tougher than her," says Arnott with a laugh, "she always brings up, 'Remember that time I elbowed you and your nose was bleeding and you ran to Mom? I used to dominate you on the basketball court.'"

"She gives it back to me."

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TSN.CA / Lafrenière lands in Hunter's doghouse

Mark Masters



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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TSN reporter Mark Masters checks in daily with news and notes on Team Canada, which held a media availability on Friday in Vancouver.

Why did Tim Hunter bench Rimouski Oceanic left winger Alexis Lafrenière during Thursday's World Juniors game?

"We showed him some video from the Denmark game and he was out there skating around like it was a free skate, lots of circles in his game and we weren't happy with that," Team Canada's head coach revealed. "And we talked to him about it and we showed him the video and explained it to him. I told him, 'At the start of the game, you're going to show me whether you understood this or not and if you don't we're going to limit your ice time.'"

Drummondville Voltigeurs forward Joe Veleno also had his playing time scaled back as Hunter shortened his bench to preserve a third-period lead against Switzerland.

"Those guys didn't have a great game," Hunter said. "We have to win games so it's not about evening the ice time out. We're going to be a lot better against the Czechs than we were last night (Thursday). We have lots of things to clean up, but I'm confident in our group that we'll get better as we move along here."

Hunter promoted Boston University's Shane Bowers to the left side of Spokane's Jaret Anderson-Dolan and Owen Sound's Nick Suzuki using that trio in a matchup role against the Swiss. Hamilton's Mackenzie Entwistle was elevated from the 13th-forward spot and is likely to remain the centre on the fourth line with Lafrenière and Veleno platooning on his left side.

"We'll meet with all the groups and talk to them about the way we want each line to find their way through a game and get a little more clarity for them," Hunter said. "We haven't done that yet. We've just been waiting for things to find their way, but I think things are getting clearer now."

The other two lines – Portland's Cody Glass between Drummondville's Maxime Comtois and Mississauga's Owen Tippett and Sault Ste. Marie's Barrett Hayton between fellow Greyhound Morgan Frost and Prince Albert's Brett Leason – will remain unchanged.

"They've had lots of scoring chances," Hunter said. "They need to clean up being a little bit East-West in the offensive zone and being closer together, but the chemistry on those lines is important. You leave those guys together. They are the top-six guys in my mind."

Seravalli: Lafreniere is at the WJC for a reason

Tim Hunter didn't mince his words when discussing Alexis Lafreniere's play against Denmark. TSN Senior Hockey Reporter Frank Seravalli joins Mark Masters to discuss Hunter's handling of the 17-year-old and to talk about how big of an opportunity the World Juniors is for Hunter's career.

Hunter isn't planning to overhaul his power play units after Team Canada failed to convert on five chances against the Swiss on Thursday night. Four of those opportunities came in the third period with the game hanging in the balance.

"We would've liked to close the game out with a power-play goal," the coach admitted, "but these guys are still finding their way of playing together and building that chemistry that a power play needs to click and our power play will get better when it's needed."

Is he looking for a more shoot-first mentality?

"There's five guys on the power play so we don't need guys being selfish," Hunter said. "We'll give them some new wrinkles. They're not moving the puck fast enough. They're looking at seams and when you're looking at a seam it's too late. You got to make the pass as soon as it's on your tape, know the seam is there and make the pass and we're just waiting a little too long."

With so much skill on the groups, the frustration level is creeping up a bit.

"A little bit, yeah," admitted London Knights defenceman Evan Bouchard, who quarterbacks the top unit. "It's a little frustrating not seeing the puck go in. But it would be even more frustrating if we weren't getting our chances ... We just got to keep shooting."

Hunter sticking with his power play units ahead of test against Czechs

Despite being outscored 2-0 on special teams by Switzerland, Tim Hunter says he is sticking with Canada's two power play units. James Duthie and Bob McKenzie discuss his calculated approach and whether or not there will be any line changes ahead of Canada's third game against the Czech Republic.

The penalty kill, which gave up two goals on similar behind-the-net plays against the Swiss, seems to be more of a concern.

"That play, we watched it and we knew about it and our guys were half asleep on it and that's why they scored," Hunter said. "It needs work as well. It's a tournament so we don't need our penalty kill to be great right now."

But Hunter's patience seems to be wearing thin. Even before the game it was on his mind as he invited all the players to the penalty-kill meeting – not just those who work on it in practice – so that everyone knew the game plan. That gave the coach more personnel options and he took advantage by using Tippett and Comtois in a shorthanded situation in the late stages.

"Our two best players so put them out in that situation," Hunter explained. "They were urgent, they were desperate and they got the job done."

Leason, who kills penalties in Prince Albert, also got some time shorthanded.

"It's all about being aggressive," said University of Denver defenceman Ian Mitchell. "It's tough for any power play to play against pressure and move pucks quickly so I think that the more that we work together we'll start to work as a tandem and work as one. That's something the coaching staff has been harping on us about."

Kurashev scores on the power play to even the game

Early in the second period, the Swiss take advantage of the Canadians inability to clear the zone, and Philipp Kurashev makes no mistake from the slot to even the game at 1-1.

Team Canada's defensive alignment will stay together after a strong effort against the Swiss. Ty Smith, who logs big minutes in Spokane of the WHL, had been on the hot seat after averaging one minute per shift in the opening game against Denmark.

"We weren't happy with that and he was the best last night at 37 seconds (per) shift," Hunter said. "He played hard and hustled on, hustled off so he got that message and that's all you expect."

Smith, a New Jersey Devils prospect, and others who extended shifts during the blowout win against the Danes were put on notice before stepping on the ice against the Swiss.

"We posted the shift lengths before the game and in the morning we talked to them about that and all the guys who were over 45 got to see it," Hunter noted.

The result?

"Our shift lengths were excellent last night," Hunter said. "The analytics show that you're at your best up to 37 seconds and then after that, if you're going hard and maximizing your effort, you start to drop off in intensity."

Ferraro: 'Not an easy game for Canada's unheralded defence'

Gord Miller and Ray Ferraro break down the play of Canada's defence in front of goalie Ian Scott and how it propelled them to a record of 23-0 over the Swiss at the World Juniors.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Bouchard revealed that a phone call from Connor McDavid, who won a World Junior gold medal in 2015, boosted the team ahead of the tournament.

"It's pretty cool to hear his side of things, how it was and what they did to come together as a team," Bouchard said.

What stood out the most from McDavid's message?

"Don't pay attention to all the media stuff going on around you," Bouchard said, "especially with this being in Canada there will be a lot of hype around all the stuff."

Bouchard said McDavid's advice is one of the reasons why the players decided, as a group, to stay off social media during the tournament. And the Oilers captain hasn't been the only high profile guest speaker so far.

"We had Sidney Crosby send the players a message," said Hunter. "We also had Manny Malhotra talk to the team. Hockey Canada uses alumni to their advantage, they've got some great alumni, a local guy like Manny and then some phone interviews and phone conversations with Sidney and Connor McDavid. It's a powerful weapon, a powerful tool for us and these guys are excited when they hear from those guys."

Bouchard: Team Canada inspired by call from McDavid

Evan Bouchard revealed that Team Canada received a call from Connor McDavid ahead of the tournament and the Oilers captain shed some light on what to expect when playing on home soil and how to handle the extra media attention.

Projected lineup for Saturday's game:

Forwards

Comtois-Glass-Tippett

Frost-Hayton-Leason

Bowers-AndersonDolan-Suzuki

Veleno/Lafrenière-Entwistle-Studnicka

Defencemen

Phillips-Bouchard

Brook-Mitchell

Smith-Dobson

McLissac

Goaltenders

DiPietro

Scott

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TSN.CA / Hunter auditioning for NHL job as Team Canada coach

Frank Seravalli

VANCOUVER — Tim Hunter hoisted the Stanley Cup and led the NHL in penalty minutes twice before he got bit by the coaching bug late in his career.

He said he realized he wanted to be a coach while playing under Pat Quinn with the Vancouver Canucks from 1992 through 1996.

It's only fitting that it's here, in the shadow of the Big Irishman's statue inside the building on Pat Quinn Way, that Hunter has earned his moment to shine as Team Canada's head coach at the World Junior Championship.

Hunter certainly has applied a few lessons learned from the Hall of Fame coach. He recalled his favourite story on Friday when Quinn went on a tirade during an intermission one night in Winnipeg.

He said Quinn came in the locker room and swatted a five-gallon Gatorade bucket "like it was a cup across the table.

"We're like 'Ooooooh!,' " Hunter said.

Quinn then took aim at his next target.

"They had these big 50-gallon drums, steel drums as garbage cans, and I'm looking at him and he boots this can and it didn't move," Hunter said. "Then he left the room and I'm like 'Wow!' I go over and moved the can and it's half full of cement."

The lesson?

"You have to rattle their chains every now and again," Hunter said. "But yeah, I'm going to make sure I don't kick any cans of cement."

Hunter, now 58, has played second fiddle for most of the last two decades. After an 815-game NHL career, he followed Ron Wilson around as an assistant coach in the league for more than 1,100 games with stops in Washington, San Jose and Toronto, before re-joining the Capitals for an abbreviated season under Adam Oates.

Even at the World Juniors, Hunter was an assistant under Dominique Ducharme for the last two tournaments, before Ducharme was hired as an assistant this year by the Montreal Canadiens.

It wasn't until 2014, at the age of 54, that Hunter finally became a head coach with the WHL's Moose Jaw Warriors. That has caused him some regret.

"I look back on my coaching career and I probably should have went out and become a head coach a lot earlier and I stuck to working with Ron," Hunter said. "I liked working for Ron and 14 years being an assistant coach, [but] I should've been a head coach a lot earlier."

This is Hunter's moment on the big stage, his chance to impress as a potential NHL head coaching candidate.

Mike Babcock, Claude Julien, Mike Keenan, Dave King, Brent Sutter and Craig Hartsburg all coached Canada at the World Junior Championship before moving up to the NHL.

Coaching in the NHL is increasingly a young man's game, but Hunter has shown that he has evolved. With the Maple Leafs, Wilson and Hunter developed a reputation that they were at times dismissive with players.

The current generation of NHL players, and even more so the millennials that Hunter is now guiding, takes more listening. They want to be engaged and involved in the process, not told what to do.

Hunter appears to have learned that.

"Last night after the game, I had my points to say, then I went around the room and I had every player talk about his feelings of how we played so far and how they played in the game," Hunter said on Friday. "It was great because a lot of guys said the same thing, they had real good comments. They all know where we're heading, they all know where we need to improve. It was great conversation. When you have a family, guys can hold themselves accountable and check their egos at the door. They were honest and upfront about things and upfront about things that we need to work on."

Make no mistake, Hunter still carries a stick – and he isn't afraid to use it. He torched 17-year-old Alexis Lafreniere, the expected No. 1 pick in the 2020 NHL Draft, for his play against Switzerland on Thursday night.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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"He was out there skating around like it was free skate, lots of circles in his game," Hunter said of Lafreniere. "We talked to him about it and showed him the video and explained to him. I told him 'At the start of the game, you're going to show me whether you've understood this or not. If you don't, we're going to limit your ice time."

It will now be up to Hunter to re-engage younger, high-end players like Lafreniere and Joey Veleno to see if he can squeeze the most out of them for the benefit of Canada. They were picked for a reason. They can make plays others cannot.

Really, the rest of the tournament will be about the buttons Hunter chooses to push, and how his team responds. He pumped them up before the tournament, pumped the brakes after the 14-0 win over Denmark, and now will need to pump the tires on special teams.

For just the third time in the last nine tournaments – a span of 47 games – Team Canada was outscored by their opponent on special teams.

Not only is an entire nation watching Hunter's every move, but so is the NHL. He may never get a better shot.

But for now, Hunter said gold is his only focus.

"It means a lot. I'm honoured and proud to coach this team," Hunter said. "Look at what's happening, all you people here interviewing Tim Hunter so that's a pretty cool thing. I believe in myself and it's an honour to be a part of Hockey Canada."

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TSN.CA / Lafreniere lands in Hunter's doghouse

Mark Masters

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Drummondville Voltigeurs forward Joe Veleno also had his playing time scaled back as Hunter shortened his bench to preserve a third-period lead against Switzerland.

"Those guys didn't have a great game," Hunter said. "We have to win games so it's not about evening the ice time out. We're going to be a lot better against the Czechs than we were last night (Thursday). We have lots of things to clean up, but I'm confident in our group that we'll get better as we move along here."

Hunter promoted Boston University's Shane Bowers to the left side of Spokane's Jaret Anderson-Dolan and Owen Sound's Nick Suzuki using that trio in a matchup role against the Swiss. Hamilton's Mackenzie Entwistle was elevated from the 13th-forward spot and is likely to remain the centre on the fourth line with Lafreniere and Veleno platooning on his left side.

"We'll meet with all the groups and talk to them about the way we want each line to find their way through a game and get a little more clarity for them," Hunter said. "We haven't done that yet. We've just been waiting for things to find their way, but I think things are getting clearer now."

The other two lines – Portland's Cody Glass between Drummondville's Maxime Comtois and Mississauga's Owen Tippett and Sault Ste. Marie's Barrett Hayton between fellow Greyhound Morgan Frost and Prince Albert's Brett Leason – will remain unchanged.

"They've had lots of scoring chances," Hunter said. "They need to clean up being a little bit East-West in the offensive zone and being closer together, but the chemistry on those lines is important. You leave those guys together. They are the top-six guys in my mind."

Seravalli: Lafreniere is at the WJC for a reason

Tim Hunter didn't mince his words when discussing Alexis Lafreniere's play against Denmark. TSN Senior Hockey Reporter Frank Seravalli joins Mark Masters to discuss Hunter's handling of the 17-year-old and to talk about how big of an opportunity the World Juniors is for Hunter's career.

Hunter isn't planning to overhaul his power play units after Team Canada failed to convert on five chances against the Swiss on Thursday night. Four of those opportunities came in the third period with the game hanging in the balance.

"We would've liked to close the game out with a power-play goal," the coach admitted, "but these guys are still finding their way of playing together and building that chemistry that a power play needs to click and our power play will get better when it's needed."

Is he looking for a more shoot-first mentality?

"There's five guys on the power play so we don't need guys being selfish," Hunter said. "We'll give them some new wrinkles. They're not moving the puck fast enough. They're looking at seams and when you're looking at a seam it's too late. You got to make the pass as soon as it's on your tape, know the seam is there and make the pass and we're just waiting a little too long."

With so much skill on the groups, the frustration level is creeping up a bit.

"A little bit, yeah," admitted London Knights defenceman Evan Bouchard, who quarterbackes the top unit. "It's a little frustrating not seeing the puck go in. But it would be even more frustrating if we weren't getting our chances ... We just got to keep shooting."

Hunter sticking with his power play units ahead of test against Czechs

Despite being outscored 2-0 on special teams by Switzerland, Tim Hunter says he is sticking with Canada's two power play units. James Duthie and Bob McKenzie discuss his calculated approach and whether or not there will be any line changes ahead of Canada's third game against the Czech Republic.

The penalty kill, which gave up two goals on similar behind-the-net plays against the Swiss, seems to be more of a concern.

"That play, we watched it and we knew about it and our guys were half asleep on it and that's why they scored," Hunter said. "It needs work as well. It's a tournament so we don't need our penalty kill to be great right now."

But Hunter's patience seems to be wearing thin. Even before the game it was on his mind as he invited all the players to the penalty-kill meeting – not just those who work on it in practice – so that everyone knew the game plan. That gave the coach more personnel options and he took advantage by using Tippett and Comtois in a shorthanded situation in the late stages.

"Our two best players so put them out in that situation," Hunter explained. "They were urgent, they were desperate and they got the job done."

Leason, who kills penalties in Prince Albert, also got some time shorthanded.



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"It's all about being aggressive," said University of Denver defenceman Ian Mitchell. "It's tough for any power play to play against pressure and move pucks quickly so I think that the more that we work together we'll start to work as a tandem and work as one. That's something the coaching staff has been harping on us about."

Kurashev scores on the power play to even the game

Early in the second period, the Swiss take advantage of the Canadians inability to clear the zone, and Philipp Kurashev makes no mistake from the slot to even the game at 1-1.

Team Canada's defensive alignment will stay together after a strong effort against the Swiss. Ty Smith, who logs big minutes in Spokane of the WHL, had been on the hot seat after averaging one minute per shift in the opening game against Denmark.

"We weren't happy with that and he was the best last night at 37 seconds (per) shift," Hunter said. "He played hard and hustled on, hustled off so he got that message and that's all you expect."

Smith, a New Jersey Devils prospect, and others who extended shifts during the blowout win against the Danes were put on notice before stepping on the ice against the Swiss.

"We posted the shift lengths before the game and in the morning we talked to them about that and all the guys who were over 45 got to see it," Hunter noted.

The result?

"Our shift lengths were excellent last night," Hunter said. "The analytics show that you're at your best up to 37 seconds and then after that, if you're going hard and maximizing your effort, you start to drop off in intensity."

Ferraro: 'Not an easy game for Canada's unheralded defence'

Gord Miller and Ray Ferraro break down the play of Canada's defence in front of goalie Ian Scott and how it propelled them to a record of 23-0 over the Swiss at the World Juniors.

Bouchard revealed that a phone call from Connor McDavid, who won a World Junior gold medal in 2015, boosted the team ahead of the tournament.

"It's pretty cool to hear his side of things, how it was and what they did to come together as a team," Bouchard said.

What stood out the most from McDavid's message?

"Don't pay attention to all the media stuff going on around you," Bouchard said, "especially with this being in Canada there will be a lot of hype around all the stuff."

Bouchard said McDavid's advice is one of the reasons why the players decided, as a group, to stay off social media during the tournament. And the Oilers captain hasn't been the only high profile guest speaker so far.

"We had Sidney Crosby send the players a message," said Hunter. "We also had Manny Malhotra talk to the team. Hockey Canada uses alumni to their advantage, they've got some great alumni, a local guy like Manny and then some phone interviews and phone conversations with Sidney and Connor McDavid. It's a powerful weapon, a powerful tool for us and these guys are excited when they hear from those guys."

Bouchard: Team Canada inspired by call from McDavid

Evan Bouchard revealed that Team Canada received a call from Connor McDavid ahead of the tournament and the Oilers captain shed some light on what to expect when playing on home soil and how to handle the extra media attention.

Projected lineup for Saturday's game:

Forwards

Comtois-Glass-Tippett

Frost-Hayton-Leason

Bowers-AndersonDolan-Suzuki

Veleno/Lafrenière-Entwistle-Studnicka

Defencemen

Phillips-Bouchard

Brook-Mitchell

Smith-Dobson

McIssac

Goaltenders

DiPietro

Scott

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TSN.CA / High-risk Gardiner quietly excelling for Leafs

Kristen Shilton

TSN Toronto reporter Kristen Shilton checks in daily with news and notes on the Maple Leafs. The team held a meeting and optional morning skate at Nationwide Arena on Friday.

Jake Gardiner is used to taking heat for his style of play, as comparably high-risk as it can be to the other Leafs' defencemen. But like the rest of Toronto's blueline, under fire since before the season even started, Gardiner has worked his way into fine position through 37 games.

"I just looked today, happened to be scanning through it, and noticed [Gardiner's] like 19th in defensive scoring and he's plus-17," said coach Mike Babcock after the Leafs' optional morning skate on Friday. "And he's been on a power play that's been kind of non-existent with the second group. So, Jake is a good player, he's one of those guys who to me is an elite brain, makes tons of good plays all the time, is real smart, is way better than people think defensively and he's an important player for us."

Gardiner is one of three skaters the Leafs have among the NHL's top-10 defencemen in plus-minus, along with Morgan Rielly (pacing all defenders at plus-26) and Ron Hainsey (plus-22). While that individual statistic is debated as a true measure of how good a player is, on the whole, Toronto has also given up the sixth-fewest goals in the NHL this season (at 2.78 per game).

That's not to say general manager Kyle Dubas won't upgrade the Leafs defence before the league's Feb. 28 trade deadline, but for now, the blue line will stay the course with one another.

"I feel pretty good," Gardiner said. "It's pretty easy playing with Nikita [Zaitsev]. He's so solid defensively and just takes time and space away from the other team. [It] makes it easy for me to get the puck and break it out."

Breakouts have been an issue for Toronto all season to the point that Dubas mentioned earlier this month a lack of improvement there would expedite the process of a potential trade. Better communication will help the breakouts, though, and Gardiner has made strides in that category alongside Zaitsev.



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"We're very comfortable with each other," Gardiner insisted. "That Russian barrier is tough sometimes, but he's really opened up. You can see his personality more and more every day. He's very sarcastic and he's just fun to be around."

Travis Dermott could use some tips from Gardiner as he tries to build a similar bond with the Leafs' other Russian blueliner, Igor Ozhiganov. The two have been partners for most of the season, and even though Ozhiganov spoke less English than Zaitsev did when he arrived in Toronto, Dermott has made slow progress in growing their relationship.

"I think that we have a good level of comfortability with each other now; we've been working on that for this whole season so far," Dermott said. "I think we're at a good spot in the process of becoming fully comfortable, I think it is right there. I'm sure we're just going to keep getting better game by game."

Ozhiganov will slot back in with Dermott on Friday against Columbus after missing the Leafs last three games with an illness and, ideally, the partners will be able to establish a good rhythm at both ends of the ice.

"Even though we're a third D-pair where we're not supposed to be the ones making the offensive plays or really making a big impact in the offensive zone, I think we both like doing that," Dermott said. "I think we're just coming in trying to do the best with what we're given - try to earn our ice time every night and try to limit our mistakes and make some good plays."

It's only been four days since the last time Toronto suited up for a game, capping off a back-to-back against the Detroit Red Wings on Dec. 23.

But enjoying the three-day Christmas break did come at a small price, with players showing more rust during Thursday's practice than Babcock would have liked.

Meanwhile, the Blue Jackets got right to work, defeating the New York Rangers, 4-3, in overtime on Thursday. Whether that gives Columbus the edge against Toronto will be determined in short order.

"I guess we'll see," Dermott said. "Hockey is a weird game where you can think that and then it turns the other way. So whether it's them having the comfortable feet from playing last night or maybe they're tired or maybe we're fresh, maybe we're cold. You never know. You just try to prepare as best we can and have a good game."

Friday will be the third and final meeting between the Blue Jackets and Leafs this season, with the sides splitting the season-series to date with 4-2 victories for the home team in each outing. All things considered, Gardiner was happy to have the team session on Thursday rather than just jumping right into game action.

"It's not that long, but it feels like it kind of is sometimes," he said of the layoff. "[We got to] handle the puck a little bit, had a pretty hard practice [yesterday] just trying to get back to it. Obviously [Columbus] having played last night, I wouldn't say it's an advantage because they're going to be tired from the back-to-back, but they have their legs under them, so they're back to game speed and we'll have to warm-up extra hard and be ready to go."

The last time the Leafs visited the Blue Jackets on Nov. 23, Josh Anderson scored twice in the first 10 minutes to put Toronto in a deficit they couldn't quite overcome. Knowing how valuable the first half of the opening frame will be on Friday, Babcock hopes his squad is as mentally ready as they are physically to battle back.

"[Columbus] will have had their hands and their brain back," Babcock explained. "That first 10 minutes when you're back and you're not used to executing at a high pace...we practiced yesterday and it was very evident we had a few days off from practice. You have to survive that first 10 and take care of the puck and get on them instead of them on you."

Following the Blue Jackets' win on Thursday, head coach John Tortorella was critical of his group, saying they had "work to do" despite coming away with a victory in six of their last seven games and five wins in a row.

Babcock can appreciate that drive to improve on a coaching level, but sees more than enough to like about this Columbus team.

"Any way you look at it, good teams find ways to win on a regular basis," Babcock said. "They have a real good hockey club, real good depth, good goaltending. They're going to be hard to play against. In saying all that, we have a good team too."

"They have a really good goaltender [in Sergei Bobrovsky], mobile defencemen and obviously some firepower up front," added Gardiner. "They're just trailing us in the standings [by five points]. I'm sure this is going to be a meaningful game for both teams and just have to be ready to go."

The question mark for Babcock is how much of the good Toronto will be able to bring right away. It's a night where the Leafs' own depth, already impacted by the loss of Zach Hyman and Tyler Ennis to ankle injuries, could be in the spotlight and how efficient their secondary scorers and bottom defencemen are could ultimately tell the tale.

"You'd like to have your best stuff every day," Babcock said. "But the more depth you have, the more people who can pick each other up and I think that's what happens with good teams."

Maple Leafs projected lines vs. Columbus

Johnsson-Tavares-Marner

Marleau-Matthews-Kapanen

Brown-Kadri-Nylander

Lindholm-Gauthier-Moore

Rielly-Hainsey

Gardiner-Zaitsev

Dermott-Ozhiganov

Andersen starts Sparks

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USA TODAY / Dallas Stars management blasts Jamie Benn and Tyler Seguin in expletive-filled tirade

Kevin Allen, USA TODAY Published 6:45 p.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018 | Updated 6:54 p.m. ET Dec. 28, 2018

Dallas Stars President Jim Lites told The Athletic Friday that he and owner Tom Gaglardi are angry about the lack of production from captain Jamie Benn and star Tyler Seguin.

"We are a stars-driven league, and our stars aren't getting it done," Lites said. "It's embarrassing, and no one writes it. Write it," Lites said.

In a profanity-laced tirade in which he called the pair "(expletive) horse (expletive)," Lites said he hears from Gaglardi five times per game about how poorly Benn and Seguin are playing. The Stars beat the Nashville Predators 2-0 Thursday night, but Lites still offered his premeditated tongue lashing.

"The team was OK, but Seguin and Benn were terrible," Lites said.

About Benn, Lites said, "(Benn's) the leader of the team, he stirs the drink, but he's not doing it. He's got to get it done."

Lites also doesn't accept the excuse that Seguin has had poor puck luck this season.



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"He's hitting posts, 'Wah-wah,' That's what I say about hitting posts," Lites said. "Get a little bit closer to the action, actually go to the spot where you score goals. He doesn't do that, he never does that anymore. He used to be a pest to play against, people hated playing against Tyler Seguin, they don't anymore."

Lites said he has never before commented on player performance, but said he could no longer stand idly by and watch Seguin and Benn play poorly. He asked for a meeting with hand-picked reporters. According to The Athletic, Lites insisted that every word he said was on the record.

This tongue-lashing from Lites came after a Thursday morning skate in which coach Jim Montgomery told his players he was "embarrassed" by how they practiced, considering that they are barely holding onto a wild-card spot in the Western Conference.

However, Lites' criticism was directly pointed at Benn and Seguin.

"We've had meeting after meeting after meeting," Lites said. "The accountability on the ice is not there."

"These guys were signed to big contracts because they were the third- and sixth-leading scorers in the National Hockey League over the past five years. They get their money, we expect them to not be outplayed every game we play in. And if they were as good as they've been in the past, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Benn has a salary of \$13 million and a cap hit of \$9.5 million and has 30 points in 38 games. Seguin, who signed an eight-year \$78.8 million contract extension, has 32 points.

Because it is unusual in the NHL for team officials to criticize players, it's fair to conclude that Lites' tirade was designed to fire up his stars.

"It's not about how much money. I don't resent the money," Lites said. "It's about what we expect the money to be. You just can't win if your best players aren't your best players. And they aren't our best players."

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