



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Carolina Hurricanes power-play surge keys seven-game winning streak

By Chip Alexander

In theory, the Carolina Hurricanes' power play shouldn't be this good.

Not with the Canes playing the same seven teams in the Central Division. Not with every shift, every pass and shot in every game situation evaluated on video in scouting.

Opposing teams probably know how many times Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour chews his gum on a power play.

On paper, the Canes' power play couldn't look any better.

Not 12 power-play goals in the past seven games, all victories. Not going 12-for-25, a 48% clip. How good is that?

The power surge has lifted Carolina to the top of the NHL in power-play percentage at 32.2% after Saturday's games, ahead of the Toronto Maple Leafs (30.2). It's a big reason the Canes are scoring 3.42 goals overall per game, second in the NHL, and why they're among the leaders in the Central Division with a 19-6-1 record.

The Canes were 3-for-3 on the power play Thursday in their 5-1 win over the Nashville Predators. They've scored a power-play goal in each of the past seven games, a first since the 2008-09 season, and had eight players scoring goals in that stretch. It's not a couple of guys carrying the load.

They've done it without forward Teuvo Teravainen, who has been sidelined by a concussion, and without defenseman Jake Gardiner, who has missed seven of the past eight games with back issues and on Saturday was placed on NHL waivers. Teravainen is one of the Canes' craftiest power-play passers, and Gardiner is a veteran power-play quarterback.

The Canes also were without center Vincent Trocheck on Thursday against the Predators. Trocheck, who leads the Canes with six power-play goals and 13 power-play points, has an upper-body injury. He will miss more games, Brind'Amour said Saturday, and will not be on the two-game road trip to Detroit.

But again, shouldn't the divisional teams know the Canes' power-play tendencies by now?

"You've got to adjust to what they're doing," Canes defenseman Dougie Hamilton said this week. "I think they're adjusting to us, so we have to adjust to them. They're watching video, we're watching video.

"We're trying to find openings every game. After every power play, we're trying to find different plays. So we're always talking to each other to see what's open and just trying to be ready right away and adjust as the game goes on."

Hamilton has quarterbacked the first power-play unit, sees the ice well and has a team-high 12 power-play assists. Trocheck has been in the middle of everything, patrolling the

slot, deflecting shots. Jordan Staal, given more power-play time this season, has scored five times.

Everyone has done their part. Andrei Svechnikov and Martin Necas are pretty slick passers whose heavy one-timers must be defended. Defenseman Jake Bean has stepped in for Gardiner on the second unit, handles the puck well and can find shooting lanes.

"I think our breakouts have been good," Staal said Saturday. "I think the more zone time you have the more opportunities you have to put the puck in the net and give yourself a chance to score. We have some great shooters from the outside, and the puck's been sneaking in for us and helping us win some games. It's been good."

On the flip side, the Canes in the past seven games have allowed just three power-play goals. They've adjusted on their penalty kill.

"It goes both ways," forward Brock McGinn, one of the Canes' best penalty killers, said this week. "I think they know our tendencies and we know theirs, so it's about going out and executing. You definitely learn a lot playing the same team a lot of times. You're adapting every time you play them."

The Canes had a new power-play wrinkle Thursday against the Preds: Morgan Geekie. With Trocheck out, Geekie went into the lineup as the fourth center, then scored twice playing on the Canes' second power-play unit.

On his first goal, the Canes had a 1-3-1 look with Bean at the point, forward Jesper Fast low, defenseman Brett Pesce and forward Nino Niederreiter on the wings and Geekie positioned between the circles.

Bean got off a shot, Geekie deflecting the puck to the ice. It took a wicked bounce and got past goalie Pekka Rinne for a 1-0 lead. It also started a scoring binge as McGinn and Hamilton soon followed with even-strength goals.

Geekie's second goal came as a Canes' power play was in its final seconds. Geekie simply put a shot on net, the puck hitting off Rinne, off defenseman Mattias Ekholm and back into the net.

In the third period, the Canes got a power-play score from its first unit, which had Necas filling Trocheck's spot. Svechnikov put a pass on Necas' stick in the low slot, the deflected puck trickling through Rinne's pads.

After sweeping a four-game homestand, the Canes have two games against the Red Wings, who are 8-16-4 but a more competitive 4-5-1 in their last 10 and held on to top the Tampa Bay Lightning 6-4 on Thursday.

The Red Wings' video coach is LJ Scarpace, who worked two years for the Canes and video coach Chris Huffine before joining the Detroit staff last season. Think he knows a



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

few things about the Canes' personnel and their power-play schemes?

"Every team has the things that they like to do, and you just need to keep getting sharper at what you do," Brind'Amour said.

Carolina Hurricanes vs Detroit Red Wings

When: Sunday, 5 p.m.

Where: Little Caesars Arena, Detroit.

TV: FSCR

THE ATHLETIC

Here's why the Hurricanes put Jake Gardiner on waivers

By Sara Civian

We in the hockey world have been so conditioned to freak out anytime we see a big name on waivers, and that's pretty much what happened Saturday on Twitter when the Hurricanes placed Jake Gardiner on waivers.

Intent won't really matter if he gets claimed (more on that later), but we have to remember there's more to waivers this season. They can be weaponized from a salary-cap standpoint with the taxi squad, and that's exactly what the Hurricanes are trying to do.

Gardiner has been in and out of the lineup with an upper-body injury for a few weeks now, missing a total of seven games. With the Hurricanes having more than enough talent on the blue line, and with Gardiner's \$4,050,000 cap hit, they decided to place him on waivers with the intent to get him on the taxi squad.

A front-office source says if he clears, Gardiner will be on the taxi squad on off days and on days when he would've been scratched, so the Canes can save a little cap space. "That's it. Nothing more," the source said.

One might wonder why they'd need the extra space, though. According to CapFriendly, they've already got a decent amount: \$5,052,292. And that's without the Gardiner situation finalized (and without putting any of their injured players on long-term injured reserve).

It could be nothing, but the trade deadline is approaching, so it also could be something. As Twitter user "bring E Staal back '21" asked me, are the Canes freeing up space in anticipation of another move?

Quite possibly.

Especially in light of Vincent Trocheck's upper-body injury (which I'm hearing is longer-term), it does look like the Canes might be primed for a move. And, according to Pierre LeBrun, it just might be one "bring E Staal back '21" would love.

Every day Gardiner is off the NHL roster will mean prorated cap savings for the Canes. And if a team actually picked him up off waivers, they'd be off the hook for his actual salary — and the two remaining years of his contract — as well.

What are the chances that of that happening?

Waiver rules for injury haven't changed this year, but a source indicates Gardiner isn't seriously injured and could probably play if needed. The thing is, the Canes don't need a banged-up player in their lineup when they already have six other NHL-caliber defensemen: Jacob Slavin, Dougie Hamilton, Brady Skjei, Brett Pesce, Haydn Fleury and emerging rookie Jake Bean.

Considering Gardiner's status as openly banged up and his cap hit, it doesn't seem likely. Barring LTIR, the only contenders that could realistically claim him with their current cap space are Florida and Boston, and neither seems like a likely destination for him. Columbus, Pittsburgh, Colorado and Dallas are other destinations that could use freed space from LTIR to pick him up, but there's always a risk that one of the players on LTIR comes back — it's just a risk.

So there's not a 100 percent chance Gardiner stays a Hurricane, but this move didn't have anything to do with his performance, and it's a calculated risk that makes sense given the unusual circumstances.



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021



Preview: Hurricanes at Red Wings

Canes take seven-game winning streak on the road

By Michael Smith

Riding a seven-game winning streak, the Carolina Hurricanes hit the road for a two-game set against the Detroit Red Wings.

The Match-Up

Carolina Hurricanes (19-6-1, 39 points) at Detroit Red Wings (8-16-4, 20 points)

Sunday, March 14, 5 p.m.

Watch: FOX Sports Carolinas, FOX Sports GO

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

Tracking the Storylines

Gardiner on Waivers: The Canes placed Jake Gardiner on waivers on Saturday with the intent of assigning him to the taxi squad. The move would provide salary cap flexibility for the team while Gardiner remains out of the lineup with an upper-body injury, which has caused him to miss nine of the last 11 games.

On the Mend: In addition to Gardiner, the Canes are without Teuvo Teravainen (concussion symptoms), Vincent Trocheck (upper body) and Petr Mrazek (right thumb) on this two-game road trip. Teravainen skated with the Canes on Saturday in a yellow, no-contact sweater. Mrazek has been off the ice in the last few days, but he figures to be the closest to returning to game action.

On a Roll: The Canes have won seven straight games for the sixth time in franchise history and the first time since 2010. The franchise record for longest win streak is nine games, accomplished in 2005, 2006 and 2009.

The Opposition

Last five games: 1-3-1, 3 points

At home: 5-6-3, 13 points

CAR vs. DET: 2-1-0

Leading scorer: Filip Hronek, 14 points (14a) in 28 games

The Wings have played just four games in the first 13 days of March, and after being on the road to begin the month, they returned home to claim three of a possible four points against the Tampa Bay Lightning in a 4-3 overtime loss and a 6-4 victory. Detroit has earned 13 of its 20 points this season at Little Caesars Arena.

The Last Meeting

The Canes scored four unanswered goals, including three in the third period, to fly past the Red Wings 5-2 in front of a 15%-of-capacity crowd at PNC Arena on March 4. Martin Necas tied the game late in the second period, and then the Canes broke the game open in the third. Jordan Staal scored 45 seconds into the final frame to give his team its first lead of the night, and that was that.

"We just decided we had to get to our game. We were just fighting it the whole night trying to find an easier way. We were fortunate to be tied going into the third. Then, the guys just started playing. You could see it," said head coach Rod Brind'Amour after his 100th win in the NHL. "Svech and Jordo, that line, they kind of took over early."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

AP ASSOCIATED PRESS

Carolina visits Detroit after Geekie's 2-goal game

Carolina Hurricanes (19-6-1, first in the Central Division) vs. Detroit Red Wings (8-16-4, eighth in the Central Division)

Detroit; Sunday, 5 p.m. EDT

BOTTOM LINE: Carolina visits the Detroit Red Wings after Morgan Geekie scored two goals in the Hurricanes' 5-1 victory against the Predators.

The Red Wings have gone 8-16-4 against division opponents. Detroit has given up 24 power-play goals, killing 70.7% of opponent opportunities.

The Hurricanes are 19-6-1 against the rest of their division. Carolina leads the NHL with 28 power-play goals, led by Vincent Trocheck with six.

Carolina knocked off Detroit 5-2 in the last meeting between these teams on March 4.

TOP PERFORMERS: Anthony Mantha leads the Red Wings with seven goals, adding six assists and totaling 13 points.

Sam Gagner has four goals and three assists over the last 10 games for Detroit.

Trocheck leads the Hurricanes with 24 points, scoring 13 goals and registering 11 assists. Sebastian Aho has four goals and four assists over the last 10 games for Carolina.

LAST 10 GAMES: Red Wings: 4-5-1, averaging 2.8 goals, 4.8 assists, 3.5 penalties and 7.6 penalty minutes while giving up 3.8 goals per game with an .894 save percentage.

Hurricanes: 7-3-0, averaging three goals, 5.6 assists, 3.9 penalties and 7.8 penalty minutes while allowing 2.1 goals per game with a .932 save percentage.

INJURIES: Red Wings: None listed.

Hurricanes: Teuvo Teravainen: out (concussion), Jake Gardiner: day to day (back), Petr Mrazek: out (thumb), Vincent Trocheck: day to day (undisclosed).



Hurricanes place defenceman Jake Gardiner on waivers

Defenceman Jake Gardiner has been placed on waivers by the Carolina Hurricanes, according to Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman.

The move is being made with the intent of assigning Gardiner to the taxi squad while he's sidelined with an injury.

Gardiner, 30, has registered seven assists with a plus-2 rating in 17 games with the Hurricanes this season.



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021



SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

They said it: Staal, Skjei, Brind'Amour post practice

Jordan Staal, Rod Brind'Amour and Brady Skjei spoke to the media via Zoom Saturday.

By Andrew Schnittker

The Hurricanes practiced Saturday at Wake Competition Center before the team heads to Detroit for a two-game set with the Red Wings. The news also came out Saturday that the Hurricanes have placed injured defenseman Jake Gardiner on waivers for the purpose of assigning him to the taxi squad, which would allow the Hurricanes to gain salary cap space while he's out.

Rod Brind'Amour, Brady Skjei and Jordan Staal spoke to the media after practice, here's a full breakdown of everything they had to say:

Rod Brind'Amour

On the power play: There's quite a bit of adjustments when it's a bunch of power plays. I think if it's just a couple in a game then it's probably less. Once you start really getting a bunch in a games, you definitely see teams making adjustments both ways. So you've got to be on top of it. But at the end of the day, really, every team has their things they like to do. You've just got to keep getting sharper at what you do.

On injured players Vincent Trocheck, Teuvo Teravainen, Petr Mrazek: [Trocheck] is definitely not going to be playing here, so that's a big loss for us. [Teravainen]'s practicing, but I don't expect him to come on the trip. Same with Petr, so there's no changes there.

On Trocheck's injury: He's got an upper-body injury. I think it might be a little longer than I had hoped, but it's just part of it.

On the timetable for Trocheck: I don't know yet. I just know he's not coming on this trip, so you can rule out a couple games there for sure.

On keeping momentum: If you're on a good momentum, you'd say yes, but really at the end of the day, what we always try to do is just focus on that one day. So we don't really have win streaks or losing streaks. It's always about this next day or next game, trying to do our best and win that one. I think that's really the best way to approach it.

Jordan Staal

On the power play: I think our breakouts have been good. I think the more zone time you have, the more opportunities you have to put the puck in the net and give yourself a chance to score. We've got some great shooters from the outside, and the puck's been sneaking in for us and really helping us win some games. So it's been good, and hopefully it can continue.

On keeping momentum: We've got a big game coming up. Having one extra day still feels like a lot from the amount of games we've been playing. So we've got to get right back into that game right off the bat and bring out best in the first period. So we've got a good challenge ahead of us to get back in the groove and continue this roll.

On a day off and nice weather: Being outside with the sun just for a day with the little ones and stuff like that, for me, mentally, it was really nice. It's obviously been a long year for everybody, a lot more indoor stuff than people would like. The weather's been kicking in here, it's been nice to see it out and enjoy the weather, enjoy some time with the family.

Brady Skjei

On playing with Brett Pesce: I've really enjoyed it. He's a defenseman that makes my job a lot easier. He's always in the right position. He's got a great stick. He wins a lot of 50-50 battles in the D-zone, which is what you need in a defenseman. So he's been playing great, and it's nice to see him contribute offensively and put up some good numbers.

On if there's another level for this team: I think we've been playing well. We know our system is built on speed and... There's a few times we've been saying we haven't had a full 60-minute effort for some games. If we do that throughout the whole entire game, I think that will get us to our next step and we're looking forward to that in Detroit tomorrow night.

On the pros and cons of playing the same teams: The pros is you see them back to back so you kind of have a good feeling of what their system is. You see similar players if you're doing matchups and stuff. I think that's definitely a pro. It's hard to pick out any cons, really. It's kind of nice going into Detroit and playing two games there, then they come here and play two games at home. I think there's definitely more pros than cons.



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NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021



Wolves too warm for Wild

Rookie goaltender Beck Warm rejected 31 shots to earn his first professional shutout as the Chicago Wolves rolled to a 4-0 victory over the Iowa Wild on Saturday night at Wells Fargo Arena.

Forwards Dominik Bokk, Tanner Jeannot, Tommy Novak and Sheldon Rempal scored for the Wolves (9-2-0-1), who registered their first shutout of the season and maintained their lead in the American Hockey League's Central Division.

The Wolves broke on top at 3:11 of the second when Bokk buried a wristed shot from the left circle. Chicago defenseman Cavan Fitzgerald and Max Lajoie inspired an extended stay in the offensive zone, then Lajoie spied Bokk unattended below the faceoff dot to step up the Germany native's second goal of the year.

Chicago extended the margin to 2-0 at 16:28 of the second with a perfectly conducted power play that needed just 10 seconds to click. Novak won the faceoff in the left circle, then the puck worked its way from Bokk to Phil Tomasino to David Warsofsky to Novak in the right circle. Novak fired a shot that

Jeannot, standing just outside the crease, redirected past Iowa's Hunter Jones for the goal.

The Wolves seized a 3-0 lead early in the third as the power-play unit needed just seven seconds to strike. Novak won another faceoff in the left circle, then the puck moved from Bokk to Warsofsky to Rempal — who found Novak via Bokk in the left circle for a blast past Jones.

Rempal delivered the biggest highlight of the night when he left the penalty box, accepted a pass from Jeannot, deked an Iowa defenseman out of his skates and flipped a backhand past Jones for a 4-0 lead at the 10:19 mark of the third.

Warm improved his record to 5-1-0 while Jones (0-4-1) posted 34 saves for the Wild (3-6-2-0).

The Wolves stay in Des Moines to face the Wild at 3 p.m. Sunday as their four-game road trip continues. Chicago's next home game is slated for Saturday, March 27, against the Rockford IceHogs.

TODAY'S LINKS

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

SportScan

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

1205811 Carolina Hurricanes

Carolina Hurricanes power-play surge keys seven-game winning streak

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

MARCH 13, 2021 02:36 PM

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The Canes were 3-for-3 on the power play Thursday in their 5-1 win over the Nashville Predators. They've scored a power-play goal in each of the past seven games, a first since the 2008-09 season, and had eight players scoring goals in that stretch. It's not a couple of guys carrying the load.

They've done it without forward Teuvo Teravainen, who has been sidelined by a concussion, and without defenseman Jake Gardiner, who has missed seven of the past eight games with back issues and on Saturday was placed on NHL waivers. Teravainen is one of the Canes' craftiest power-play passers, and Gardiner is a veteran power-play quarterback.

The Canes also were without center Vincent Trocheck on Thursday against the Predators. Trocheck, who leads the Canes with six power-play goals and 13 power-play points, has an upper-body injury. He will miss more games, Brind'Amour said Saturday, and will not be on the two-game road trip to Detroit.

But again, shouldn't the divisional teams know the Canes' power-play tendencies by now?

"You've got to adjust to what they're doing," Canes defenseman Dougie Hamilton said this week. "I think they're adjusting to us, so we have to adjust to them. They're watching video, we're watching video.

"We're trying to find openings every game. After every power play, we're trying to find different plays. So we're always talking to each other to see what's open and just trying to be ready right away and adjust as the game goes on."

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Considering Gardiner's status as openly banged up and his cap hit, it doesn't seem likely. Barring LTIR, the only contenders that could realistically claim him with their current cap space are Florida and Boston, and neither seems like a likely destination for him. Columbus, Pittsburgh, Colorado and Dallas are other destinations that could use freed space from LTIR to pick him up, but there's always a risk that one of the players on LTIR comes back — it's just a risk.

So there's not a 100 percent chance Gardiner stays a Hurricane, but this move didn't have anything to do with his performance, and it's a calculated risk that makes sense given the unusual circumstances.

The Athletic LOADED: 03.14.2021

1205824 Detroit Red Wings

Red Wings have decision to make on Jonathan Bernier at trade deadline

Updated Mar 12, 6:04 AM; Posted Mar 12, 6:04 AM

By Ansar Khan | akhan1@mlive.com

DETROIT – Jonathan Bernier could draw interest at the trade deadline from a playoff-contending team seeking goaltending depth or insurance, or one needing to replace an injured netminder.

The Detroit Red Wings might even get a second-round pick for the impending unrestricted free agent.

General manager Steve Yzerman, over the next month, must decide if the return would be worth weakening the club for the remainder of the season, because the Red Wings are much better with Bernier in net.

They showed it again Thursday in a 6-4 victory over the defending Stanley Cup champion Tampa Bay Lightning at Little Caesars Arena.

Bernier made 40 saves to improve to 7-5-0. That is a remarkable record for a team that is 8-16-3 at the midway mark of the season.

"He's our best player. He gives us a chance to win every single night," defenseman Troy Stecher said. "We wouldn't be in the position we're in without him. He's a heck of a goalie, he gives us a fighting chance every night. We have great appreciation for him as a group."

Said coach Jeff Blashill: "Certainly, goaltending is a huge part of this game and our goalie was the best player on the ice tonight."

Bernier stepped up his play in December of 2019 and has continued to thrive this season.

Given Thomas Greiss' struggles (1-11-4, 3.41 goals-against average, .883 save percentage), it is imperative for the Red Wings to re-sign Bernier, 32. None of their goaltending prospects will be NHL-ready next season, maybe not even the following season.

But trading Bernier by the April 12 deadline and then attempting to re-sign him in the summer could be an option.

Mantha rewarded for effort

Anthony Mantha produced only one point in his previous 11 games (a goal) but Blashill has been happy with his compete level. He was finally rewarded on Thursday, scoring a goal and assisting on two others.

Mantha gave the Red Wings the lead for good at 14:56 of the first period, scoring his team-leading seventh goal with hustle and determination. He raced down the ice and won a puck battle from Jan Rutta, powering his way to the net as the puck managed to cross the line. The Lightning's goalie interference challenge was unsuccessful.

"He's one of those guys that when he plays against big, strong, great defensemen, he can still create," Blashill said. "He's got the ability to play against those guys because he's got that kind of skill-set. Some guys try their hardest and don't really create much because of mismatch in skill-sets.

"He's actually played pretty good in the last little bit. He's done a really good job of moving his feet, bending his knees and skating."

Mantha had an easy chance for an empty-net goal but passed to Vladislav Namestnikov, who sealed the outcome with 20 seconds to play.

Stecher makes impact in return



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

Stecher returned after missing eight games with an injury and scored his first goal in 20 games as a Red Wing on a shot from the right face-off circle off the rush. It opened the scoring at 8:31 of the first period.

"It felt good," Stecher said. "I haven't contributed offensively the way I wanted to this year but to come back from an injury and get one right away felt good personally and for the team. Anytime you can play with the lead you play with a lot more confidence."

Stecher replaced left wing Mathias Brome in the lineup as Blashill opted to dress seven defensemen.

Michigan Live LOADED: 03.14.2021

1205825 Detroit Red Wings

Red Wings' offensive burst leads to rare victory over Lightning

Updated Mar 11, 2021; Posted Mar 11, 2021

By Ansar Khan | akhan1@mlive.com

DETROIT – It was a rare offensive outburst Thursday for a team that has struggled to put the puck in the net.

The Detroit Red Wings got goals from six different players and a 40-save performance from Jonathan Bernier Thursday in a 6-4 victory over the Tampa Bay Lightning at Little Caesars Arena.

Anthony Mantha led the way with a goal and two assists. It was the most goals Detroit has scored in game since a 6-3 victory over Boston on March 31, 2019.

The Red Wings (8-16-4) ended a four-game slide (0-3-1) as they reached the midway point of the season with 20 points.

It was Detroit's first regulation victory over the Lightning (18-5-2) in the regular season since Nov. 3, 2015. Tampa Bay was 19-0-1 in its past 20 games against the Red Wings.

The Red Wings appeared to be in control before Brayden Point scored a pair of goals 1:14 apart, the second one with 2:55 left in regulation, to cut the deficit to 5-4. Vladislav Namestnikov's empty-net goal with 19.6 seconds to play sealed the outcome.

Troy Stecher, Dylan Larkin, Luke Glendening and Robby Fabbri also scored for the Red Wings, who equaled their season-high in goals. Filip Zadina and Filip Hronek each provided a pair of assists. Bernier improved to 7-5-0, which is somewhat remarkable given the team's record.

Mantha, whose compete level has been lacking many nights this season, snapped a 2-2 tie at 14:56 of the first period with tremendous hustle and strength. He raced down the ice and won a puck battle from Jan Rutta, powering his way to the net as the puck managed to cross the line. The Lightning's goalie interference challenge was unsuccessful. It was Mantha's team-leading seventh goal.

The Red Wings scored a pair of goals in the second period to take a 5-2 lead. They scored five times on their first 14 shots against backup Curtis McElhinney, as Andrei Vasilevsky, who is 11-0-0 lifetime against Detroit, got the night off.

Glendening converted 37 seconds into the period. The Red Wings capitalized on a turnover and Glendening banked in his own rebound off McElhinney for his third of the season.

Fabbri's snipe at 4:40 made it 5-2. It was his fifth goal in 19 games this season.

Stecher returned after missing eight games with an injury and opened the scoring at 8:31 with a shot from the right face-off circle off the rush. It was his first goal in 20 games as a Red Wing.

After Mikhail Sergachev tied it at 10:55, Larkin answered at 12:12, redirecting a pass from the corner from Hronek. It was Larkin's second goal in as many games after sitting out four with an injury and his sixth of the season.

Steven Stamkos scored on the power play at 13:15 to tie it at 2-2.

Michigan Live LOADED: 03.14.2021

1205820 Columbus Blue Jackets

Fourth time the charm for Werenski, Blue Jackets in OT thriller against the Dallas Stars

Brian Hedger

The Columbus Dispatch

Zach Werenski (8) scores the game winning goal in overtime against Dallas Stars on Saturday night at Nationwide Arena, lifting the Blue Jackets to a 4-3 victory.

There were 22 seconds left in overtime when Jack Roslovic had the puck knocked off his stick.

Dallas Stars defenseman John Klingberg's poke check sent it back into the Blue Jackets' end and Roslovic, a swift skating center built for 3-on-3 OT play, scrambled back to win it back. That took five more seconds, leaving just 17 to go, and it felt like a game-deciding shootout was a sure thing.

Turns out, it wasn't thanks to a stretch pass from Roslovic to Oliver Bjorkstrand and Zach Werenski's winning goal four shots later – scored with 4.5 seconds left in a 4-3 OT victory that ended the Jackets' three-game winless slide and sent 4,160 fans home happy.

"Three-on-three, you just never know what's going to happen," Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella said, smirking. "As it's winding down, I'm getting in my mind what we're going to be doing for the shootout. But I'm glad. Hopefully it will relax some of the guys. It wasn't our prettiest game, but as we always talk about, it's finding a way to get two points and we got two tonight."

Indeed they did.

It was the Blue Jackets' first victory this season in a game that ended in 3-on-3, improving their record in that scenario to 1-4 and 2-6 when factoring in their 1-2 record in shootouts. There were a number of hair-raising moments that preceded that final sequence too, which could've easily resulted in another stinging loss.

It just didn't work out that way this time and that's something the frustrated, down-on-their luck Blue Jackets (11-12-6) desperately needed in the first of 28 games they had left on a 56-game schedule.

"It took us right to the 12th hour, Midnight almost, to get it ... but guys stuck with it," said Nick Foligno, who put his team up 3-2 with a goal late in the second period to end a 15-game drought for the captain. "It's the way 3-on-3 goes. You just kind of try to find your moment to break and to get an opportunity at odd-man, and it was kind of a split overtime. Both teams were trying not to give each other too much and we found a way to get a little break at the end."

It took some good old-fashioned hard work too.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

After turning Roslovic's pass into a 2-on-1 rush, Bjorkstrand got off two hard wrist shots that Stars goalie Jake Oettinger stopped. Werenski got to the rebound of his second one, fired off a third shot Oettinger stopped and then, finally, dug out the rebound of that one with an assist from Bjorkstrand, and fired it into the net on the far side.

It was Werenski's second goal of the season and first since Jan. 23, ending his own goal drought at 15 games – which includes seven games missed with a lower-body injury.

"It was one sloppy 3-on-3," Tortorella said. "But I had my six (forwards) ... I pick six (guys), pair 'em up and we've got our (defensemen), (Seth Jones), (Werenski), (Vladislav Gavrikov), and we swing away, see where we go."

Where they went, finally, was the right direction.

The Stars dominated the possession battle and outshot the Blue Jackets 21-12 through the first two periods, but Columbus scored the first goal for the 20th time in 29 games and then hung around long enough to eke out a win.

Max Domi had a goal and assist, Roslovic had three assists for the second three-point game of his career and Cam Atkinson scored his 11th goal of the season in his 600th NHL game – all for the Blue Jackets.

It was Domi who got things started, scoring his fifth goal of the season and second in as many games at 9:07 of the first for a 1-0 lead. After taking a pass from Roslovic off the rush, he scored with a second effort after defenseman Andrej Sekera blocked his first attempt in front of the net.

"Both of us are players that want to get involved in that first shift, get skating, have the puck on your stick and not spend the first few shifts defending in your zone," Domi said. "When you get a couple (scoring) chances like that, that's when you start to feel it and make some plays."

It didn't slow the Stars.

They tied it 1-1 on Andrew Cogliano's goal with 3:16 left in the period and began to swing momentum their way. The play started with a long pass from defenseman Jamie Oleksiak off the boards to Radek Faksa, who sent Cogliano a quick feed to the left face-off circle. Cogliano's wrist shot zipped just under the glove of Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins (27 saves) and the Stars were on the scoreboard.

It remained that way to start the second, which mostly belonged to Dallas.

The Stars took a 2-1 lead at 7:17 of the second on a goal by Sekera and also outshot Columbus 7-0 for more than half the period.

Bjorkstrand finally logged a shot against Oettinger (22 saves) with 8:27 left, ending a stretch of 12:48 without a shot, but it was a TV timeout that preceded it that sparked a late rally. Atkinson said Tortorella challenged the Jackets to "play with a little pride" in front of their own fans and the coach also switched up his forward lines – which both seemed to work as tactics.

After Bjorkstrand broke the ice, the Jackets worked themselves back into the game and then surged ahead, 3-2, on goals by Atkinson and Foligno a minute apart.

Atkinson celebrated his milestone game by tying it 2-2 with 3:15 left on a wrist shot to the far side. Foligno then followed with 2:15 left, using a sharp cut at the blue line to get into the Dallas zone for a wrist shot that sailed past Oettinger's blocker.

"The timeout, the TV timeout and us talking, it wasn't (coaches) leaning into them," Tortorella said. "It was nothing like that. It was just an honest conversation about where we are in the game right now and some of the things we may try to do to turn it around."

One of those things was putting Atkinson on a forward line with Domi and Roslovic, which paid off nicely.

It just didn't result produce a lead that lasted. The Stars tied it 3-3 at 5:08 of the third, when Denis Gurianov shoveled a puck through Merzlikins' pads, and that set up a frenzied finish.

The Stars continued to win the possession battle, but Columbus counterpunched sporadically – including Emil Bemstrom's breakaway at 9:02 that resulted in a penalty shot. Oettinger stonewalled his attempt to rip a low wrister through the five hole, keeping it 3-3, and then used his shoulder to deny another hard wrist shot from Bemstrom about five minutes later.

The Stars pinned the Blue Jackets into their own end for the final three minutes, a common sight this season, but three saves by Merzlikins, two blocked shots by David Savard and another block by Seth Jones helped get the game to overtime.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 03.14.2021

1205821 Columbus Blue Jackets

Blue Jackets getting what they need from versatile veteran Riley Nash, who's currently their top center

Brian Hedger

The Columbus Dispatch

10-year NHL veteran Riley Nash, here looking to pass against Carolina on Feb. 7, has given some of the Blue Jackets' top scoring options a spark with his steady play.

Riley Nash doesn't have elite speed, size or skill, but what he does offer the Blue Jackets as a center is something they sorely need.

Nash's two-way approach, as a 10-year NHL veteran, has given some of the Jackets' top scoring options a spark while not compromising on defense — a trait they've struggled to find while developing a trio of young pivots.

"He's been one of our better centers," said Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella, who moved Nash from a checking-first center role onto a forward line with some of the team's top scorers as wingers. "He's given us some good minutes. He's made plays. He's getting into a position with some offensive guys because he deserves to be there and other guys haven't done the job. A little bit of both."

It's not fair to Nash's unheralded offensive skill to say he's the Jackets' No. 1 center by default, but that's the main reason. After the Blue Jackets traded former No. 1 center Pierre-Luc Dubois to the Winnipeg Jets for Patrik Laine and Jack Roslovic on Jan. 23, there was a dearth of proven options to center their top two lines.

Max Domi's struggles led to his exit from the position, Mikko Koivu retired – and at age 37 wasn't really an option – and the Blue Jackets preferred to keep Boone Jenner and Nick Foligno at wing positions.

Jenner was eventually pressed back into the middle, but not before a competition for the top two center roles among young forwards Roslovic, Kevin Stenlund and Alexandre Texier. There were growing pains with all three, which led to Nash getting a shot to play as the top center recently in the final season of a three-year contract.

"It's another part of (developing) some of our centers, especially Tex and Jack," Tortorella said. "Are you able to handle situations in our end zone defensively, which is a very important part of that position. There's a lot of things that need to be learned from some of our (inexperienced guys). Nash's a very smart player below the hashes, and I think has provided us with some good offense. That's why he's getting the opportunity that he is."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

Nash is taking advantage of it, too, which he showed Thursday in the Blue Jackets' 5-4 overtime loss to the Florida Panthers. Not long after Oliver Bjorkstrand scored the game's first goal in the second period, Nash helped his linemate make it 2-0 with a feed from behind the net.

"He's one of those guys who hangs onto (the puck) that extra second, especially in the corners," Foligno said. "He's kind of slippery and then can find somebody or create space for somebody else. A big job of the centerman is just trying to create some time and space for the wingers and then go play in the offensive zone. He's a guy that can do that and you see it."

Nash also adds some levity with a dry sense of humor, which he showed this week while answering a question about Laine. The inquiry was whether Nash checked with the prolific goal-scorer about any preferences he might have from guys who center his line.

"Not really," Nash said. "I kind of know the way he plays and if he's expecting me to be Connor McDavid for him, that's probably not going to happen. At the same time, I know that I've got to make more plays for him and get him the puck."

Finnish'd trade

The Blue Jackets announced a trade Friday with the Toronto Maple Leafs, parting with goaltending prospect Veini Vehvilainen and acquiring 27-year old defenseman Mikko Lehtonen.

Vehvilainen, 24, made his NHL debut in relief of fellow Finnish goalie Joonas Korpisalo on Mar. 4 in Dallas, allowing one goal on four shots in the third period at American Airlines Center. He was selected by the Blue Jackets in the sixth round of the 2018 NHL draft in Dallas in his final year of draft eligibility.

Vehvilainen played one game in the American Hockey League this season with the Cleveland Monsters, taking a loss and posting a 3.05 goals-against average and .875 save percentage in the game. He has a 10-19-4 record, 2.77 GAA and .901 save percentage in 34 career AHL games, which includes 33 last season as a Monsters rookie.

Lehtonen is another intriguing international addition by Blue Jackets general manager Jarmo Kekalainen, who previously acquired 28-year old forward Gregory Hofmann from EV Zug in Switzerland on Feb. 13 for a 2022 seventh-round pick.

Lehtonen signed a one-year entry-level contract with the Maple Leafs on May 4, 2020 and made his NHL debut with Toronto this season with three assists in nine games. Lehtonen, a left-hand shot, will join the Blue Jackets' taxi squad once he gains a U.S. work visa and clears the NHL's COVID-19 protocols upon arrival in Columbus.

Prior to signing with the Maple Leafs, Lehtonen played in the Kontinental Hockey League with Jokerit, which Kekalainen used to run as GM when the franchise was part of the Finnish elite league (Liiga).

Lehtonen, who's 6-foot, 196 pounds, is an offensive-minded defenseman. He had eight goals, nine assists and 17 points in 17 games in the KHL while on loan with Jokerit prior to the current NHL season and led all KHL defensemen last season in goals (17), assists (32) and points (49) in 60 games. He also played in the 2020 KHL All-Star game.

Lehtonen joins a crowded group of NHL-caliber depth defensemen with Columbus who are split between the Blue Jackets, Monsters and the taxi squad. It's unclear what his acquisition might signal, in terms of future moves, but it says something that Kekalainen was willing to move a valued goaltending prospect to complete the deal.

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1205822 Columbus Blue Jackets

Under pressure after big trade, Max Domi finally taking flight with Blue Jackets

By Aaron Portzline

Mar 13, 2021

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Blue Jackets kept waiting for Max Domi to look and play like the Max Domi they thought they'd acquired in a big offseason trade with the Montreal Canadiens.

It's finally happening.

Domi had a goal and an assist for a second consecutive game Saturday, helping the Blue Jackets to a 4-3 overtime win over Dallas. The game ended on Zach Werenski's winner with 4.5 seconds left in OT, snapping a three-game losing streak.

"He's got that swagger," Blue Jackets forward Cam Atkinson said of Domi. "He's got so much skill. His passing ability is off the charts. Once he's feeling it, which he is now, it's fun to play with him."

"He could be a difference-maker and a game-changer for us."

If Domi had been simply average in the first two months of the season, the Blue Jackets might be in a different spot in the Central Division. But his struggles at center prompted coach John Tortorella to move him to wing, and his fight with the puck prompted him to be dropped in the lineup, playing most games in the bottom six.

Now, suddenly, he has as many points in the past two games (four) as he did in his previous 19.

"You have to stay with it and eventually the puck starts being your friend again, and it finds its home in the back of the net," Domi said. "That's what it's been doing the last couple of games. You have to ride that when you've got it."

Domi was asked whether the puck was ever his enemy the way it was in the first 25 or so games of the season.

"No," he said, before chuckling.

Domi's struggles were only exacerbated by the fact Josh Anderson — the player the Blue Jackets shipped to Montreal for Domi — was making quite a home for himself with the Canadiens. Scoring goals (10), throwing his broad shoulders into hits, standing up for teammates with fights ...

The Blue Jackets have been incredibly frustrated, from GM Jarmo Kekalainen and Tortorella all the way down.

"It's been very frustrating for him," Tortorella said of Domi. "There's been some pressure on him. We make the deal for him, hoping he can help us in the center ice position. That's didn't work out."

"He cares. He wants to try to help the team, and he knows he has the ability. I think he's handled himself really well through the first half of this year, trying to find his game. I hope it keeps on growing. He can be even better. We've seen him play better. But step by step, I hope he keeps growing."

Domi scored at 9:07 of the first period off a feed from Jack Roslovic, the first of three Roslovic assists. Domi's first shot was blocked by a Stars defenseman, but he skated into the loose puck and buried it past Dallas goaltender Jake Oettinger.

Then, near the end of a mostly awful second period by the Blue Jackets, Domi helped give them new life.

He, Roslovic and Atkinson did yeomen's work down low in the attack zone, with Domi, from below the goal line, setting up Atkinson in the lower left circle to make it 2-2 at 16:45 of the period.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

"You're seeing what Max can provide, what we've expected," Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno said. "He's looking more comfortable. He needed a few bounces, and he got those a couple games ago, and now he's run with it. Now he's making the plays we've seen him make. I'm really happy for him.

"You hate seeing one of your teammates struggle. You're trying to help him but also help the team. Sometimes it just has to come to him. When he's feeling it, he's dangerous every time he steps on the ice. It's really awesome to see that."

Domi's performance was crucial Saturday because the Blue Jackets weren't exactly sharp through most of the first two periods.

The first period was meh. The second period was downright snoozy. The Blue Jackets went 12:48 without a shot at one point and seemed to be headed in the wrong direction. Tortorella called an all-hands meeting on the bench during a TV timeout with 3:32 left in the period.

"I don't think it was a secret that we weren't playing with the energy we should have," Atkinson said. "(Tortorella) just wanted us to play with some pride. It's our home building, with our fans. Give them something to cheer for, cheer about.

"We all knew it, but it was good that (Tortorella) stepped up in that situation and said something. I think that really turned the corner for us, and we started playing the right way."

Truth be told, Tortorella has been under more scrutiny than Domi in the first half of the season. Kekalainen gave him a vote of confidence earlier this month, saying the veteran coach had led the Blue Jackets out of rough patches before and deserved a chance to do so again.

Tortorella didn't launch into a tirade during the TV timeout, but he got his point across.

"It wasn't leaning into 'em, it was nothing like that," Tortorella said. "Just an honest conversation about where we are in the game right now and some of the things we were going to try to do to turn it around."

Whatever he said, it worked.

Atkinson scored on the very next shift. One shift later, Foligno scored a dazzling goal to give the Blue Jackets a 3-2 lead.

Foligno made an abrupt cut in the neutral zone — can somebody check on Esa Lindell's ankles, please? — and found open ice in the Stars' zone. He scored off a wrister from the right circle.

An OT winner

The Blue Jackets had been 0-4 in overtime games this season, and they'd lost five in a row in the regular season dating to last season.

Since Artemi Panarin left to join the New York Rangers in free agency, the Blue Jackets are 9-15 in overtime, the most losses of any club at three-on-three.

But Saturday, the Blue Jackets won in dramatic fashion.

Bjorkstrand carried the puck into the zone, then pulled up and dropped a pass to Werenski above the left circle. Werenski quickly returned the puck to Bjorkstrand, who had not drifted into the slot.

Oettinger made the first stop on a Bjorkstrand wrister, but Bjorkstrand gathered the rebound and fired from the right circle just as Werenski circled the net.

Werenski initially whiffed on the rebound, then gathered back to his forehand and scored wide of Oettinger with only 4.5 seconds remaining.

"It's big for us, big for our club," Atkinson said. "Guys stepped up. Guys are starting to play the right way."

Snacks

• Cam Atkinson played in his 600th game Saturday, becoming only the second player to skate in that many games for the Blue Jackets. Rick Nash (674) holds the franchise mark. Atkinson had his wife, Natalie, two sons and parents in Nationwide Arena for the game.

• Emil Bemstrom was awarded the first penalty shot of his career at 9:02 of the third period after getting tripped by Stars defenseman Joel Hanley on a breakaway. With the score tied 3-3, Bemstrom tried to go five-hole, but the puck elevated and Oettinger made a stop with his glove and left pad. Bemstrom is the 24th player to attempt a penalty shot for the Blue Jackets.

• Werenski's OT winner is the fifth of his career, tying him with Panarin for fourth on the franchise list. Only Seth Jones (seven), Atkinson (six) and Nash (six) have more.

• This was the second three-assist game of Roslovic's career and his fourth career game with three or more points.

• Blue Jackets defenseman David Savard had six blocked shots.

• After missing one game following the birth of his family's first child, Vladislav Gavrikov was back in the lineup Saturday, replacing Gabriel Carlsson on a pair next to Savard.

The Athletic LOADED: 03.14.2021

1205899

Tampa Bay Lightning

Lightning withstand Predators' third-period rally

By Eduardo A. Encina

Published Yesterday

Updated 4 hours ago

TAMPA — With the general public returning to Amalie Arena to watch live hockey for the first time in a year, and the concurrent lifting of the 2019-20 Stanley Cup banner into the rafters, the Lightning surely wanted to send the home crowd home happy Saturday night.

Though the limited-capacity, socially distanced crowd of 3,800 provided energy early, they quickly became quiet as Nashville turned a seemingly comfortable three-goal Tampa Bay advantage into a one-score game in the first 5:03 of the third period.

And as well as the Lightning have played this season, they have still not put together a full 60 minutes of hockey. And their early third-period lapse Saturday left the game far from settled.

They needed a clutch score from the reassembled third line to seal the victory, as Blake Coleman's goal with 9:58 remaining provided the Lightning with the momentum swing needed for a 6-3 win. Anthony Cirelli's empty-netter with 1:34 left provided the final margin.

When Lightning coach Jon Cooper shuffled his lines earlier this week, putting Tyler Johnson at center along with Coleman and Barclay Goodrow, the two wings hadn't played much with Johnson. But the new unit has developed quick chemistry in their short time together.

After Nashville cut the lead to one on two quick goals in the third, including one coming on a hard carom off the end boards that gifted Erik Haula the puck in front of the net, the Lightning regained momentum.

The Johnson line made a game-sealing play, as Goodrow slowed the rush, curled back to the top of the right circle and found Coleman trailing through the slot. That's where Coleman unloaded a backhanded shot



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

past Nashville goaltender Pekka Rinne while Johnson opened the view in front of the net.

Fans cheer the victory of the Tampa Bay Lightning over the Nashville Predators at Amalie Arena in Tampa on Saturday, March 13, 2021.

Fans cheer the victory of the Tampa Bay Lightning over the Nashville Predators at Amalie Arena in Tampa on Saturday, March 13, 2021. [IVY CEBALLO]

"You can feel it," Coleman said of the momentum shift. "That's another part of it, right? You want to get your crowd back into it. You want to keep that edge and that advantage. It's the NHL, teams are going to make their pushes and crowds are going to get a little upset with you if you're not performing, and that's the fun of it."

"You want to always be bringing your best, obviously. It's just the whole emotion of the game changes when you got fans, and it makes the sport a lot more fun to play."

The Johnson line gave the crowd something to cheer about early. Coleman took a pass at the blue line and made a cross-crease pass to Johnson, who managed to flick the puck — after he slid onto the ice — into the net past Rinne 6:55 into the game.

"Johnny's always looking to make some plays, and he's strong on pucks," Coleman said. "Goody's a great forechecker, great defensively, so we don't spend much time in our own zone, so we get to spend a lot of time up-ice. ... That makes the game fun."

Erik Cernak assisted on each of the first two Lightning goals. He corralled the puck off a faceoff win and spun around to find Mathieu Joseph for a one-timer above the right circle for a 2-0 lead with 1:25 left in the first. Cernak's two-point night gave him five points in his past five games.

Alex Killorn made it 3-0 on the power play, redirecting a pass from Ondrej Palat to his stick blade just inside the crease and giving Killorn his fourth goal in his past six games, including two on the power play.

After Nashville cut the lead to 3-1 on Yakov Trenin's goal with 8:58 left in the second, Brayden Point scored his 10th goal of the season. He sped across the ice before unleashing a wrister at the top of the right circle with 1:12 left in the period.

With the win, the Lightning improved to 10-1-0 at home, and with a 18-6-2 record, they are tied for the league lead with 40 points.

Tampa Bay Times LOADED: 03.14.2021

1205900 Tampa Bay Lightning

Lightning welcome 3,800 fans back to Amalie Arena, raise banner

By Mari Faiello

Published Yesterday

Updated Yesterday

TAMPA — Debi Skinner had tears in her eyes earlier in the week thinking about returning to Amalie Arena for the first time since March 5, 2020 — the last home game the Lightning hosted fans before the season paused due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Skinner and longtime friend Angel Whitfield have been season ticket holders for the past 10 years. It just so happened they had tickets for Saturday's game against the Predators in the seven-game ticket plan they purchased back in January.

Skinner and Whitfield were two of 3,800 fans welcomed back at Amalie on Saturday, the first game open to the general public this season. The team also raised its 2020 Stanley Cup banner into the rafters, nearly two months after it was unveiled at the season opener against Chicago in a pregame ceremony.

When the two friends stepped out of the parking garage and into Thunder Alley, they knew they were back home.

"We're just so excited," said Skinner, 54 of Tampa. "We love the Bolts."

Whitfield said she has missed being at the games in-person because it's a different kind of feeling from watching the game at home on a screen.

"You can feel the energy of the players," said Whitfield, 46 of Clearwater. "You can feel the energy of the fans. It's just a much faster pace and everything feels so amplified when you're in the building."

Catherine Pedulla and her mother, Michele, agreed.

The season ticket holders also hadn't been back at Amalie since the last home game before the pandemic.

Michele knew her waterproof mascara would come in handy for the banner ceremony. She started crying just thinking about how much that moment would mean.

"We're here to represent all of those who can't be here," said Michele, 61 of Clearwater. "We'll scream loud, I promise."

Joshua Siegle and friend Mark Smith got decked out for the game in themed Lightning suit jackets.

"After a year of not being able to be at anything live, this is probably the best thing that can happen to us," said Smith, 45 of Valrico. "It's awesome to be able to get out of the house and actually see live hockey, watch the banner raising for the 2020 championship. Holy cow, I don't know how you could get any more excited for this."

Siegle and Smith already had the Nashville game on their ticket plan and also "got lucky" with it coinciding with the banner raising. .

"We don't have to watch (hockey) on a big TV in our living room," said Siegle, 42 of Riverview. "A big part of it is being able to see the entirety of the game. You get to see the parts that aren't necessarily caught on TV or on the cameras."

When it came time to raise the banner, fans started applauding long before players took the ice. Captain Steven Stamkos skated out to center ice and welcomed everyone back with a short speech.

"You guys don't know how much we missed you," Stamkos said. "We really hope that that 2020 Stanley Cup run gave you the joy it gave us. ... We heard you from afar. ... This banner is for you guys."

For the Lightning, it was important to wait until fans were back at Amalie before placing the banner in the rafters.

"The banners are for the fans," coach Jon Cooper said. " ... Albeit we're at 25 percent or whatever it is, but I think those 25 percent will sound like 100 percent."

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1205901 Tampa Bay Lightning

Nikita Kucherov back on the ice a welcome sight for Lightning

By Eduardo A. Encina

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

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TAMPA — When the Lightning hit the ice for the first time since returning from their season-long six-game road trip, they were greeted by a familiar face.

Star winger Nikita Kucherov was on the ice as part of the team's morning skate prior to tonight's home game against the Nashville Predators at Amalie Arena.

Kucherov, who is slated to miss the entire regular season recovering from hip surgery, started skating this week and is on track to return for a potential postseason run, Lightning general manager Julien BriseBois said Friday.

Kucherov skated on his own before the morning session and did some light work during the practice and even participated in a line rush, putting a one-timer from the right circle into the back of the net.

"It's great to see him back," Lightning forward Brayden Point said. "Obviously, it's great to see him progress. I know he probably misses being out there, we miss seeing him out there. So it was great to see. He's obviously one of the best players in the world, and with that much time off and he still looks like Kuch, so, it's pretty impressive."

Kucherov is still working to get his strength and range of motion back, BriseBois said, before he returns to full practice.

"I think it was good for him," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said of Kucherov. "We were gone for two weeks so he just gets to watch us on TV. So I think he was pretty excited to be around us. Kuch is a big part of our team, and so anytime we can be around him, it's great for us, especially coming off that road trip and being able to see progress is being made, he's starting to feel a little bit better."

"Is he far away from doing the things he usually does out there? Yes. Just to have him with the guys, it's why we have a close team, a good group. Everyone loves being around each other."

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1205902 Tampa Bay Lightning

Behind-the-scenes look at Nikita Kucherov's return and Lightning's banner night

By Joe Smith

"Kuuuuuch!"

You hadn't heard that nickname yelled at Amalie Arena for a while, not with Hart Trophy-winning wing Nikita Kucherov sidelined since late-December hip surgery. But it was a popular chant from teammates during Saturday's morning skate, which Kucherov joined after his solo rehab session.

There was Kucherov, sporting a beard and a white practice jersey, smiling and laughing, just happy to be back with teammates who had returned from a season-long 12-day road trip. He was stickhandling from his spot, the top of the right circle, maneuvering around imaginary defenders.

And, no surprise, Kucherov was filling the net.

There was one point during line rushes — which Kucherov didn't really participate in — when he jumped in at the end and lightly skated with

rookies Ross Colton and Alex Volkov. Kucherov glided into the zone, snapping a back-post one-timer for a score.

Teammates went "Ohhhhhh!" They slammed their sticks against the boards. A few screamed "Kuuuuuch!" Another teammate skated over to congratulate him with a hug and head pat, like they would in a game setting.

Yeah, Saturday wasn't a normal morning skate. Well, the entire day was unique, especially with the Lightning raising the Stanley Cup banner in front of their first ticketed crowd of the season (3,800). But Kucherov's morning appearance provided a notable buzz to the group.

"It's great to see him back," Lightning center Brayden Point said. "Obviously, it's great to see him progress. I know he probably misses being out there, we miss seeing him out there. So it was great to see."

While Point said Kucherov "looked like 'Kuch,'" let's make something very clear: The superstar winger is not anywhere close to returning. Kucherov just started skating on his own this past week, the next step in his rehab from late-December surgery to repair a torn labrum. GM Julien BriseBois said Kucherov is "exactly on track" to return for the start of the playoffs — the plan all along — and he's just trying to rebuild strength and range of motion.

Kucherov was on the ice for 45-plus minutes with his teammates, staying after to do some cone drills with other forwards. But he wasn't a full participant by any stretch. He was skating gingerly for the most part and doing a lot of stickhandling and setting up Steven Stamkos on one-timers. When the Lightning broke into drills on the power play — which usually run through him — Kucherov went to sit on the bench and watch.

But you could tell being back with the boys brought Kucherov to life. Teammates have described him as a quiet leader behind the scenes, elevating that element during the Stanley Cup playoffs, when they could hear him yell "Play the right way" from the bench. But Kucherov is also sneaky funny — anyone who watched his epic Cup celebration at Raymond James Stadium could see that. So it was fitting that one of the first things Kucherov did Saturday morning was chirp teammate Alex Killorn, who had gotten robbed on a point-blank power-play opportunity the other night in Detroit. It looked like Kucherov went up to him and then, in exaggeration fashion, took a similar shot, showing him what to do.

BriseBois said Kucherov has usually been in "good spirits" when they've interacted at the rink, and the team could tell he's "itching to get back." He'll have to be patient though, and so will the fans, with skates like Saturday with the team probably few and far between. The type of explosiveness you need in your skating takes time to get back, especially after not being able to use your hips for this long. But there were moments of watching Kucherov on Saturday when it would have seemed easy to forget that he had surgery a little less than three months ago.

Take the drill toward the end, when half the team had already exited for the dressing room. Several forwards were working with assistant coach Jeff Halpern in the corner of the zone. They had a couple of red cones set up and two gloves set on the ground, with the players darting around them before shooting from different angles.

Let's just say it's hard to keep Kucherov at half speed.

A banner night

Toward the end of the Lightning's banner ceremony Saturday night, captain Stamkos grabbed a mic from the bench and addressed the crowd.

"You guys don't know how much we've missed you," Stamkos said. "This year has been a tough year, but we hope the 2020 Stanley Cup run gave everyone the joy that it did for us. We wish everyone was there on the ride with us, but we heard you guys from afar. All the fans that are here tonight, to the Distant Thunder, everyone watching that are Lightning fans across the world — this banner is for you guys."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

The banner went up to a roar from the crowd, settling next to the other Cup banner from 2004.

It was emotional for the fans, as well as the players and staff.

"I remember thinking, 'Wow, it's going to be there forever,'" coach Jon Cooper said. "When my time's passed and all the players that played time's passed, that banner will still be there."

"It was awesome," Blake Coleman said. "Thirty-eight hundred (fans)? It felt like almost a sold-out building to me. You could feel the energy, the excitement of having people back. Watching that banner brought it all back, a wave of feelings. It reminds you of what we went through in the bubble as a team. No team in history has had that challenge."

The team had unveiled the banner on opening night, when the building was mostly empty, but wanted to wait until there were more fans for them to officially put it up in the rafters. Ideally, it would have been in front of a full house of 19,000-plus, but we don't know when the next time we'll see that, and Cooper pointed out it wouldn't make sense to wait until next season.

It certainly felt like the ceremony hit all the right notes, with retired play-by-play voice Rick Peckham serving as the MC. There was a five-minute video montage on the huge video screen, showing all the playoff's big moments and messages from players. Queen's "We Are the Champions" played on the organ before it started, and there were some pretty loud ovations afterward.

"Thirty-eight hundred sounded like 19,000 in there," Cooper said.

Game observations

- The Lightning took a 4-1 lead before this one got really interesting, as the Predators rallied to cut the deficit to one in the third period. But Tampa Bay closed it out for a 6-3 victory, moving back into a tie for first place in the Central Division at 19-5-2 (40 points). They're 8-1-1 in their past 10. Did the Lightning play perfectly? No. But they're a better — and deeper — team than the Predators, and that showed over the course of the 60 minutes. The two teams play again Monday in a 4 p.m. game.

- The best line for Tampa Bay again was Barclay Goodrow-Tyler Johnson-Coleman (75.0 Corsi-for percentage, 8-1 in shots). Coleman and Johnson each had a goal and an assist, with Goodrow adding an assist and winning 78 percent of his faceoffs. They could have easily had three or four more goals in how dangerous they were, relentlessly pursuing the puck and creating turnovers in the neutral zone. Johnson has looked great since getting moved back to the middle, his natural position, and it seems as though playing with Goodrow and Coleman has raised his compete level.

Coleman's much-needed insurance goal in the third was a perfect example of them working well together. Johnson grabbed the puck in the Lightning zone and used his burst of speed to carry it all the way across the Predators blueline. He passed to Goodrow on the right side before crashing the net and creating a screen. Coleman, trailing on the play, slashed to the slot and scored on a slick backhand.

- Erik Cernak is known for being part of the Lightning's shutdown pair with Ryan McDonagh. His biggest strength is his defending, how he uses his physicality and his skating. He's just a damn sound defenseman. But you've started to see him get more involved offensively, joining the rush and making plays. That was the case again Saturday when Cernak jumping into the play to carry the puck deep into Nashville's zone before finding Johnson with a cross-crease pass for the first goal of the game.

"When you're in the league longer, you feel much different on the ice, more confident," Cernak said. "And this year, after we won the Cup, I'm jumping more for offensive stuff. I'm trying to follow the play, jumping into the rushes. I just have to continue to do that."

- Birthday boy Point came through with a goal-of-the-year candidate. Point, who turned 25, carried the puck with speed into the left side of the Predators zone. He then crisscrossed, going east-west, to dart into the high slot area before flipping a surprise (no-look) shot across his body

and beating Pekka Rinne top shelf, blocker side. It reminded me of the kind of shot Kucherov would take going against the grain. It was the kind of creativity and execution that few players in the world can pull off.

I asked Coleman — who routinely matches up with the league's top offensive talent — "How do you defend a play like that?"

He laughed.

"You don't defend that," Coleman said. "He's another level of special when he's carrying the puck up the ice. When you've got 15 NHL players kicking each other on the bench like, 'Did you see that,' you know you've got a special talent."

It was barely a week ago when Cooper talked about how Point deserved more points than he was getting based on his play, his puck possession and chances. Now Point has three goals in his past two games, giving him 10 on the year.

- One area BriseBois said the Lightning have to improve on is how many scoring chances they allow off the rush. And that continued to hurt Tampa Bay in this game. Had it not been for Andrei Vasilevskiy — who entered the game leading the league with 14 goals saved above expectation (according to Natural Stat Trick) — the Predators could have pulled this one out. At five-on-five, Nashville had more shots on goal (27-23), scoring chances (24-17), dangerous scoring chances (9-7), per Natural Stat Trick. The expected goals were barely in favor of the Lightning (2.61-2.37).

- Cal Foote continues to show strong signs in his development. He's playing a more poised and physical game, including delivering a huge hit on Calle Jankrok in the first period. As one NHL scout told me, "Foote is coming. He's getting better and better every game."

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1205932 Websites

The Athletic / Breaking down the NHL's best and worst first lines this season

By Harman Dayal

Mar 13, 2021

An elite top-line is the bedrock for some of the NHL's powerhouse teams.

This has been especially true for the league's most recent Stanley Cup winners — Tampa Bay leaned heavily on the Brayden Point line, Ryan O'Reilly scored 77 points and won a Selke Trophy the year St. Louis won, Washington rode the wave of its juggernaut top line in 2018 and Sidney Crosby was a dominating force for the Penguins' back-to-back Stanley Cup wins.

Of course, there's a lot more to team-building than just having a strong first-line. The Islanders and Stars made it deep in the bubble playoffs without one, while the Rangers are an example of the opposite with a formidable top end but little overall success last year, but there's no denying that it's a good start.

With that in mind, it's worth analyzing which first lines are producing and which ones are underperforming so far this season. We're going to follow a similar methodology to the one that Jonathan Willis and Tyler Dellow have used in previous years: Identify the leading forward in average five-on-five ice-time as a proxy for the top line and then examine the results when that player is on the ice. If the average ice-time leader for the club has missed a few games or more with an injury we went with his linemate



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

instead (Mitch Marner instead of Auston Matthews in Toronto or Mikko Rantanen instead of Nathan MacKinnon for example).

The only exceptions to this proxy criteria will be situations where the ice-time is close and there's a more logical choice. This includes Vancouver (used Elias Pettersson rather than Bo Horvat), Carolina (used Sebastian Aho over Martin Necas) and St. Louis (O'Reilly instead of Brayden Schenn).

For transparency, we'll have a table at the end of the article with the forward that we used as a proxy for each team.

We'll begin by breaking down the on-ice goal metrics, comparing the goals for and against rate for each first line. I've highlighted teams that are currently top-10 in the NHL standings by points percentage on the chart so that we see where some of the top teams stack up.

Right off the bat, you'll notice that eight of the 12 best teams on this table are also top-10 in the NHL standings by points percentage. That's definitely nice to see as it tracks with the logic that a productive top line sets the foundation for a club.

Leading the pack are the Boston Bruins who are scoring goals at an elite rate while also allowing less than two goals against per hour. Boston's first line weathered the storm without David Pastrnak for the first seven games and since his return has mercilessly crushed opponents to the tune of a whopping 18-7 goal differential. One fascinating note about the first line is that while Pastrnak and Brad Marchand are usually at the top of the table in ice-time, Bruce Cassidy has conservatively budgeted Patrice Bergeron's minutes over the years. Since the 2018-19 season Bergeron's only eighth among Bruins' forwards in average five-on-five ice-time. The organization is doing its best to prolong the 35-year-old's peak form as a 1C and it's clearly paying dividends.

The biggest eye-opener is Arizona landing this high. If seeing that raised your eyebrows it's for a good reason because I think it reveals the imperfect nature of our methodology. This usually works as a team, rather than an individual player number, but I think Arizona is the exception where breakout star Conor Garland is skewing the numbers with results that are head and shoulders above his linemates. Arizona's outscored opponents by 10 with Garland on the ice at five-on-five and yet the center that he's spent almost all his time with, Nick Schmaltz, only possesses a middling 16-15 on-ice goal differential.

Garland is legit as an individual player but this feels like a distorted snapshot — the Coyotes' top-end hasn't been anywhere near as potent as their placement on this table might suggest when looking at any forward not named Garland or Clayton Keller. Don't expect them to last in this kind of position.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, it's downright shocking to see how badly Buffalo's top line has been beaten up. I would have expected the Sabres' top line to be an advantage considering they have weapons like Jack Eichel, Taylor Hall and Sam Reinhart at their disposal but they instead find themselves near the bottom with teams like Detroit and Ottawa that are bereft of high-end scoring talent. Eichel and Hall have combined for just four goals which is mind-blowing.

Another surprise near the bottom is the New York Rangers. The Rangers were first on this list when Willis compiled it last year thanks to an MVP-caliber season from Artemi Panarin but for various reasons they rank bottom-five this time around. Panarin's missed 11 games so that's been a significant blow but the bigger issue is that out of New York's six highest forwards by average ice-time, none are above break-even in terms of goal differential. Some step back from the top-six should have been anticipated — Mika Zibanejad who has just nine points in 23 games this season was my number one regression pick coming into this season — but the Rangers' top end should be performing a lot better considering the talent they boast.

Detroit, Ottawa, San Jose and New Jersey slot right about where we'd expect them to. The teams at the top of the table typically have the

game-breaking stars to drive first-line results that these clubs simply lack. Just look at who their five-on-five ice-time leaders are:

Detroit: Dylan Larkin

Ottawa: Connor Brown

San Jose: Evander Kane

New Jersey: Jack Hughes

You've got some good players on this list and I suspect Hughes will one day be a true talent first-line centre but for now, the gap in star power is evident for these teams. The Predators are in a similar boat. They didn't have elite offensive weapons up front during their best years, so it shouldn't be a surprise to see them slot in near the bottom now that they're at the end of their competitive cycle.

One of the strangest teams on this list is the Canucks. Their first-line is the only one in the league to be scoring four goals per hour offensively but they're also the second most permissive top line defensively. Pettersson's line is still driving a positive goal differential but the margin they're doing it at is a far cry from last year where they outscored opponents by a whopping 26 at five-on-five. The year-over-year decline at the apex of the lineup is definitely one of the reasons the club has taken a step back this year. Their bigger issue, however, is that the Canucks are essentially a one-line team. Just look at Vancouver's five-on-five results with and without Pettersson on the ice since 2019-20.

Vancouver leans on its first line to do all the heavy lifting. When it isn't elite like last year, the entire team capitulates because it has no other meaningful support.

With Columbus, it was really hard to find a decent proxy for its first line since there have been so many moving parts, including the Pierre-Luc Dubois trade. I ended up sticking with Patrik Laine since he leads forwards in average ice-time but just keep in mind this only reflects the 17 games he's spent with the club. During this time, you can see that the top of the Blue Jackets' lineup has been outscored by a pretty decent margin. Columbus' foundation is on the blue line so with its best defensive pair struggling, John Tortorella just doesn't have the dynamic forward pieces to compensate.

Shifting back to the successful first lines, it's clear how much of a driver star talent is. This is what fuels Boston (Marchand, Pastrnak) Colorado (MacKinnon, Rantanen), Vegas (Mark Stone) Toronto (Marner, Matthews), Florida (Aleksander Barkov) and Washington (Nicklas Backstrom). In particular, I'd like to point out Stone's ascent to mainstream superstardom. He's always been an elite two-way player but he's also now producing at what would be a 105-point pace over a normal 82 game schedule.

A couple of surprises in the top-half of the table are Los Angeles and Minnesota. With the Kings, Anze Kopitar (30 points in 24 games) and Dustin Brown (13 goals in 24 games) are turning back the clock as dominant first-line producers. In Minnesota's case, rookie sensation Kirill Kaprizov has become a must-watch player. Couple that with Joel Eriksson Ek putting together an elite two-way season and the Wild are getting excellent results from its best forwards at even-strength.

Tampa Bay's first line has held its own and continued finding success in the absence of Nikita Kucherov. Ondrej Palat has followed up on an excellent bubble playoff showing with 21 points in 24 games. And Jon Cooper has so much scoring depth that he's had the luxury of just being able to elevate Steven Stamkos up to play with Point without the rest of the lineup skipping a beat.

Calgary's really interesting because its core players have become such a lightning rod for criticism. Some of it is justified given what we've seen in prior years, but the Flames' entire top-six appears to be consistently outscoring the opposition's best players at five-on-five. Where the team's falling short is with its support cast — Calgary's been outscored by 12 at five-on-five when neither Matthew Tkachuk or Johnny Gaudreau is on the ice.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

In my opinion, the 20th ranking Ducks aren't being rated harshly enough for their top line. Just like the success of one individual player overrated Arizona's results, I think we're seeing a similar dynamic in Anaheim with Rickard Rakell. Rakell is having an admirable bounce-back year but he's averaging almost a minute and a half more at five-on-five than the second most deployed Ducks forward (Ryan Getzlaf). Rakell's on-ice results are decent but if you contrast them with Getzlaf (just 11 points and outscored by three goals) it's evident that Rakell isn't the best proxy for Anaheim's overall top line performance. One should expect the Ducks to continue falling on a list like this, at least until prospect Trevor Zegras takes the reins.

Goal differential is what ultimately drives wins and losses so it's the most important way of measuring a line's even-strength success. But in small sample sizes, luck and bounces can dramatically influence a team's final output. Therefore, as a sanity check to look at which lines are controlling possession and quality chances, we can use Evolving-Hockey's expected goal model. This examines the quality of chances generated for and against and determines how much on-ice production there should be under the assumption of league average finishing.

Expected goal models are a much better measure at an overall team level than first lines because elite players are so skilled that they can very easily outperform the expected numbers, so obviously take these results with a grain of salt. The point isn't to dissect this data with the same level of detail as the actual goal differentials but to see if there are any significant outliers that we need to pay attention to.

Most of the teams that did well in the actual goal differential department appear similarly strong in terms of their territorial and scoring chance control.

The Panthers and Islanders surprised me with how easily their first lines were crushing opponents on the scoresheet in the first table. That dominance seems completely earned based on how much possession they've had this season. In Florida, Barkov is over a point-per-game and making a ludicrous impact on both ends of the ice, controlling a 62 percent share of scoring chances at five-on-five. Flanking him is one of the best breakout performers of the year, Carter Verhaeghe, who's notched 17 points in 25 games.

The Islanders, meanwhile, have long defied analytics. This time around though even the numbers view New York as a strong contender and it's led by Mathew Barzal's line reaching a new level. Barzal hasn't seen an explosion in his point totals but his two-way impact and play-driving ability deserve a lot of recognition.

Another team I want to talk about is the Edmonton Oilers. It might have been puzzling to see them middle of the pack in the first table with Connor McDavid but there are a couple of reasons for that. For starters, this doesn't take into account special teams and that's where McDavid's really made his hay. He's always been a terrific power-play producer but he's in a new stratosphere even by his own standards this season.

McDavid was consistently in the 20-33 point range on the power-play for a while before jumping to 43 during a historic man advantage performance last season. He's somehow taken that a notch higher in 2021, where he'd be on pace for north of 60 points over an 82 game season on the power-play alone. It's just ludicrous.

Beyond the fact that this methodology doesn't account for special teams, the McDavid line's dominance by expected goals suggests he's probably been unfortunate not to have produced more at five-on-five. McDavid's line is owning the puck and creating chances like never before but this is the first time in his career that his on-ice and individual shooting percentage is under 10 percent at five-on-five. That should rebound — expect Edmonton's first line to score more at even-strength as the bounces start going their way again.

Another team that is due for better luck? The Rangers. They're doing the right things from a process standpoint, they just need to do a better job of converting their chances.

Philadelphia, Carolina and Montreal are also worth shouting out. These teams have underrated first line players who control play and fare pretty well in both the expected and actual goal differentials.

Lastly, I want to quickly point out three first lines that I think this model doesn't adequately account for: Washington, Chicago and Winnipeg. One of the shortcomings with expected goal models is that they don't have passing data so it doesn't accurately rate the elite playmaking ability of players like Patrick Kane, Nicklas Backstrom and Blake Wheeler.

Take Kane, for example. Kane has posted a five-on-five expected goal share below 50 percent in six consecutive seasons and yet, the Blackhawks have outscored opponents by 52 goals with their star winger on the ice during that span. That's a large enough sample size to prove Kane is an outlier — clearly, he's doing something that the models can't account for. Therefore, I wouldn't worry too much about the underlying numbers here.

Winnipeg is interesting because I do think there's a genuine concern to be had with the first line's defensive form. If you remember the first chart, the Jets are actually getting outscored at five-on-five with the Mark Scheifele line on the ice. How is that possible considering that line's eye-popping point totals?

The answer comes down to defence. Scheifele's line has been on the ice for more than three goals against per hour, not just this season but last year as well. They bleed shots and high danger chances against but because most people just glance at the mouthwatering point totals, Winnipeg's first line tends to get a little bit too much love. I'm inclined to believe the top line's results would improve with a more capable defence core, but for now, the first line's elite offensive impact is being marred by shoddy defensive play. Winnipeg's excellent depth, power-play and goaltending is where the team is really outshining opponents.

For a final check, let's dig into PDO. PDO is the sum of a team's shooting clip and save percentage. This number typically normalizes to the 100 range over large samples at a team level but since we're looking at first lines that can finish at an above-average clip, it's not unusual for some lines to sustain a PDO a notch or two above 100.

Dallas' .980 save percentage with the first line on the ice should come back down to Earth. Joe Pavelski's line is still playing very well so it shouldn't crater their results but they definitely still need more offence in other parts of the lineup. You can expect a similar correction for Arizona which doesn't really seem like the find of environment where an inflated PDO can last.

All the way at the bottom, it's appalling that Buffalo is rocking a 93.4 PDO. They're getting saves at an almost unfathomably low .862 rate. Really, Buffalo's top guns are due for some positive regression but with Eichel out and the season already over it doesn't really matter.

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1205933 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Andersen, Maple Leafs losing ground to Jets: 'Not good enough to win'

Luke Fox@lukefoxjukebox

March 14, 2021, 1:06 AM

TORONTO – So much has fallen so neatly into the Toronto Maple Leafs' 2021 plans that the results of the last 10 days stick out like a coffee ring on the blueprint.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

Turning in a spotty performance from crease to crease in Saturday's rubber match, the Maple Leafs didn't just lose 5-2 to the Winnipeg Jets. They lost their second consecutive miniseries and their fourth game in regulation of the past five. Moreover, they lost their buffer on first place and the ability to write their own ticket.

In swiping five of a possible six standing points on the road, Winnipeg has crept within four points of the Kings in North — with two games in hand and, perhaps, a psychological edge between the pipes.

Connor Hellebuyck stood on his head and stole the first three points. Jets backup Laurent Brossoit — coach Paul Maurice's surprise starter in primetime — wasn't taxed heavily but held the fort for the final two.

By the numbers, Toronto's Frederik Andersen was the third-best goaltender in this series, a potential playoff preview.

Coming off an undisclosed lower-body ailment, Andersen has posted a sub-.890 save percentage in four consecutive starts—his worst such stretch since early February 2020.

In 11 of 21 appearances in this contract year, Andersen's save percentage has been under .900.

Post-game, the Maple Leafs did a more admirable job of protecting their No. 1 than they did in-game.

John Tavares: "Freddie is playing great. We've got to limit the opportunities... They got some quality looks and got some quality players and shooters, so we've got to do a lot better job in front of him."

Morgan Rielly: "The way that we managed the puck has to be better. I think as a D corps, I don't think it was our best game in terms of breaking out and creating flow that way. I think as a group we have to take responsibility a little bit for that."

Coach Sheldon Keefe, asked directly about Andersen's play: "I didn't think anybody had a good game for us tonight."

To be fair, Andersen was outshot 32-22 in this one. Winnipeg clamped down defensively as well as they have all year, while the Leafs mustered all of three high-danger chances to their visitors' 14 at even strength and committed a series of disputed interference penalties.

The Jets soared with lethal power-play shooters (Nikolaj Ehlers, Mark Sheifele), determined odd-man rushes (Mason Appleton) and nifty double deflections (Paul Stastny).

Andersen singled out Adam Lowry's game-winner as the one of the five he wanted back. Travis Dermott was caught chasing passer Appleton behind the Leafs net on that one, and Lowry slipped a backhand five-hole on the big Dane.

"I thought he was going to go upstairs with it, and obviously he snuck it under me. That one hurt us. But besides that, I think there were some good things," Andersen said.

"Not good enough to win."

Right there.

That's the crux: Not good enough to win. It is what a significant portion of Leafs Nation frets about when it comes to Andersen and tough series.

Earlier in the day, defenceman Jake Muzzin had likened the feel of this three-game set against the No. 2 seed to a playoff series.

Much like Toronto's recent history of postseason defeats, the blame certainly does not fall to Andersen alone.

"I thought we had a real time stringing together two passes tonight," Keefe said post-game, curtly.

"We weren't sharp mentally, weren't sharp physically, couldn't get our game going. Credit to them and how they play. They forecheck hard, they had good sticks on puck and made it difficult on us, for sure. And,

again, they made good on their chances. We just weren't even close tonight with how we played."

But Andersen didn't outduel the guy standing 200 feet away either.

"He's dealt with a number of different things, even in the time that I've been here, injuries and such that he's had to deal with," Keefe had said of his starter pre-game. The coach praised Andersen's work ethic, noting how he showed up for Friday's optional practice. Andersen, too, brought up his extra work. "Just another sign that he's serious about being that guy that's reliable for us and doing what you need to get from your starting goaltender."

Andersen's work ethic has never been questioned. Performance under the highest pressure has.

So, about that grand plan.

The organization's intent was not to have Jack Campbell (3-0-0) stuck at just three starts by the season's midway point, to once again overload Andersen's plate.

Campbell has appeared just once — a Feb. 27 shutout of the Oilers — since defeating the Flames in pain on Jan. 24. Keefe describes his concern level for the No. 2 goalie's recovery as "low," yet No. 3 goalie Michael Hutchinson continues to back up Andersen.

Keefe was unsure if Campbell (day-to-day) would be available to start Sunday in Ottawa, which Rielly is now billing as "a huge game" for the Leafs.

With four days off after they face the Senators, and the footsteps now audible, Toronto must seize the opportunity to bank a couple of points and build their confidence from the net out.

"We're obviously very aware of the standings. Where we are, where [the Jets] are — we were aware of that going in," Rielly said. "It'll be interesting down the stretch."

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers not thinking of moral victories after narrow loss to Canucks

Mark Spector@sportsnetspec

March 14, 2021, 3:18 AM

It's been a long time since the Edmonton Oilers expected to win every night.

But that's the way Dave Tippett is coaching this team — whether they've won six road games in a row or not.

So after a well-played 2-1 loss in Vancouver that featured 70 shot attempts, Tippett didn't join the chorus of Canadian coaches who have spent the season talking about teaching moments, and moral victories, and how a 6-2 loss didn't really look like a 6-2 loss.

His team played well and lost. Tippett was inclined to focus on the latter part of that statement, rather than the former.

"We're coming here to win. Not to just get even," he said, in answer to a question about tying a game 1-1 that they would eventually lose by a 2-1 score. "We did some things right tonight, we had some chances, but we didn't win. We're coming here with a mindset that we'll do whatever it takes to win, and we didn't do it tonight."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

As the North Division tightens up, with Toronto, Edmonton and Montreal losing on Saturday while Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver won, it gets a little more interesting. Doesn't it?

Look, if you're an Oilers fan, you've got nothing to complain about. Your team has been dominant — six straight road wins prior to a 2-1 loss in Vancouver Saturday — one the back end of a back-to-back. They had won four straight and were unbeaten since their three-game debacle against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Frankly, the Oilers controlled much of the game. Vancouver simply got some excellent games out of goalie Thatcher Demko (34 saves), and a crew of shot blockers that managed to get a piece of just enough pucks to preserve a close victory.

"Their team defended us well," said defenceman Ethan Bear, who was on the ice for the game-winner. "We tried to play a good road game. I guess it just shows that every little play counts."

There is simply no way to criticize a team that has played this well over the past 20 games. Particularly on a night when they peppered the Canucks with shots and shot attempts, playing their second game in as many nights and third in four days.

There was a time when playing well was enough in Edmonton — whether you won or not. Now, that mantle has been passed to Ottawa and Vancouver, while the Oilers expect to win every night. It is a welcome change from, oh, the past 20 years or so.

"It's frustrating. We've been playing really well, playing as a team," Bear said. "At the same time, you've got to give credit to them. It just goes that way sometimes."

Sometimes you don't play that well and you squeak out a win. Other times you play pretty well, and you lose by a goal.

"I think we played pretty well for the most part," said Draisaitl, Edmonton's lone goal scorer. "We dipped a little bit in the third for a couple of minutes, but other than that I thought we were the better team. Sometimes that's just the way it goes. We had games this year where we probably weren't the better team and we won, so we just have to regroup, go to Calgary and try to win a couple of games."

Just bad luck, right Dave?

Yeah, he wasn't having any of that.

"I'd like to see us get more direct. Win a hard game on the road on a back-to-back. You've got to get the puck on the net," the coach said. "I'd like to see a few more results. A few more IN the net, instead of blocked or goalies making saves. It's about winning."

"You've got to score more to win. We didn't score enough to win."

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Sportsnet.ca / Danault's value to Canadiens clearer after short absence in loss to Flames

Eric Engels@EricEngels

March 14, 2021, 12:42 AM

They were the most revealing moments of this Canadiens season, with Phillip Danault receiving treatment in the locker room while the other Montreal centres were getting worked on by the Calgary Flames.

The 28-year-old pivot felt something go on his fifth shift of the first period, with 12:40 remaining, and he skated off the ice and headed straight for the locker room, leaving Nick Suzuki, Jesperi Kotkaniemi and winger-turned-centre Paul Byron to do all the work up the middle for the Canadiens while rookie centre Jake Evans looked on from the press box as the Flames built a snow bank in front of Carey Price and took a 2-0 lead to first intermission.

The takeaway was obvious — that Danault's importance to the team was largely undersold in the aftermath of his off-season comments about being unwilling to just lay down and accept a reduced role, and that his slow start and his failure to produce a goal until Game 25 only further masked just how valuable he truly was to Montreal's success.

Because Danault knew long ago what Canadiens fans are discovering right now: That even though Kotkaniemi and Suzuki have proven they can handle more responsibility, it would be too much to ask of players so young to carry the Canadiens on a nightly basis while playing the most challenging position. Especially in this all-Canadian North Division, which features some of the best centres and defencemen in the NHL.

And what happened to Kotkaniemi (20) and Suzuki (21) in Saturday's 3-1 loss to the Flames was just one of many lessons they'll be served up on their way to becoming the players they're expected to be.

These are lessons 26-year-old Sean Monahan learned well before he scored the first two goals of this one.

In Edmonton, two of the best players in the world — 24-year-old Connor McDavid and 25-year-old Leon Draisaitl — may have produced at exceptional levels, but they still went through the classic growing pains early on and have since emerged with a better understanding of what it takes to do the job at both ends of the ice night in, night out. And look at who 23-year-old Auston Matthews is now versus who he was a year ago, when he still had under 300 games of NHL experience under his belt.

"It's the NHL," said Canadiens coach Dominique Ducharme. "It's the best league in the world and there's nothing easy."

Not the matchups, not the travel, and certainly not the unrelenting schedule in this shortened season, which appears to have caught up to Kotkaniemi, Suzuki and the rest of the Canadiens at a time when they really need to win games to maintain their grip on a playoff spot.

It's why Ducharme kept them away from the rink on Saturday morning after they were off from practice Friday. They had no energy in Thursday's loss to Calgary, which came 22 hours after their dominant win over the Canucks in Vancouver, and he wanted to ensure they'd have what they needed for this all-important rubber match—with the Flames just four points behind in the standings.

"I liked our energy before the game," Ducharme said after the Flames cut their deficit to two points. "But the game started and we weren't moving our feet and we couldn't execute because of it."

The coach said there was no excuse for that.

But there was a reason. Because two of the players who can initiate that process for the Canadiens are Kotkaniemi and Suzuki, just by nature of where they line up and how much they must be depended on, and both of them were going through a growing-pains kind of night.

Even from the start, if you watched them closely away from the puck, they struggled to get to those key areas of the ice to provide a passing option for the defence or support the rush up the ice. And that issue was exacerbated when Danault left the game.

It persisted through his first shifts back in the second period, when he could barely move or dig in for faceoffs.

"He's been a big part of this team for a while, and he's good in the faceoff circle and he's responsible defensively," said Jeff Petry, whose 11th goal of the season stood as Montreal's only one in the game. "So when a guy like that leaves for a bit of time, it's definitely a hole that's tough to fill."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

It was nearly impossible with Evans not dressed. Byron played just over 10 minutes at the position, Jonathan Drouin played a few shifts there, and it was particularly challenging with Kotkaniemi and Suzuki not quite on point.

And don't get us wrong, Kotkaniemi and Suzuki both got better as the game wore on — they even both came out on the winning side of the ledger on faceoffs.

But if Kotkaniemi and Suzuki combined for just one shot attempt between them despite each of them playing roughly 19 minutes — Suzuki would've played more if he hadn't been forced away for 10 minutes of the third period to go through concussion protocol following a collision with teammate Corey Perry — it wasn't because this was one of their better nights in the NHL.

This was one of those nights both players knew they'd be facing prior to taking on elevated roles with the team this season. It was one of those nights they had to experience in order to continue progressing.

"That's what I want," said Suzuki. "I want to be a good player in this league that's going up against tough matchups—other teams' top lines, other teams' top D pairs. That's the player I want to be and I think it's been good for me."

But he also said he needs to rediscover the confidence with which he started the season, because he's been humbled a few times since—just as Kotkaniemi has—and he's now gone four straight games without a point.

Suzuki's got 17 in 27 games, which is still good production for his first full season as a top centre. And Kotkaniemi has fared reasonably well, too, putting up 14 points while playing mostly third-line minutes.

But the game is about more than just points, and both players need Danault to insulate them as they navigate the growth process in all other areas.

Ducharme said whatever was ailing Danault was nothing too serious, even if it prevented him from playing anywhere near his ability for most of Saturday's game. There were some camera shots at the beginning of the second period that showed the athletic therapist massaging his back on the bench, and the Canadiens will have to hope that, with some rest and more treatment, he'll be okay to play in Winnipeg on Monday.

Because the Canadiens are taking on a Jets team that pulled to within four points of the division lead with a win over the Toronto Maple Leafs Saturday — a Jets team with a centre line of Mark Scheifele, Paul Stastny, Adam Lowry and Nate Thompson — and it isn't going to get any easier for their young centre men against them.

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Sportsnet.ca / Monahan's milestone a reminder of how important he is to Flames' success

Eric Francis@EricFrancis

March 13, 2021, 11:53 PM

It's the type of trivia question a fella could certainly stump a room with.

Name the first player from the NHL's 2013 draft class to score 200 goals?

No, not any of the top five draft picks, including Nathan MacKinnon, Aleksander Barkov, Jonathan Drouin or Elias Lindholm.

It was the man picked sixth, Sean Monahan, who broke the barrier Saturday night with his first of two goals in a 3-1 win over Montreal.

At a time when speculation has been hot over how the 26-year-old centre will fare under Darryl Sutter, it's how he scored them that wasn't lost on the new coach.

Monahan initiated the game opener as the first forechecker behind the Canadiens' net, eventually retrieving the puck with the help of steamrolling linemate Brett Ritchie. A nifty net-front spin finished with him roofing it past Carey Price for his sixth of the year.

The second came on the power play after Matthew Tkachuk's tip and rebound attempt in tight sent the puck bouncing through the crease where Monahan batted it in from the paint.

He was in the guts of the game both times, where many frustrated fans feel they haven't seen enough of the three-time 30-goal scorer.

"They were goals from around the net and that's where he's got to score from," said Sutter, who also had Monahan out late in the game to preserve the win.

"He's a guy we have to rely on faceoff-wise and checking-wise -- the whole package. I think Sean has gotten stronger every game. I'm sure he wanted to play better than he did the other night."

Yet another subtle reminder there's room to grow.

That he got to 200 first is a testament to his consistency, world-class release and the sublime playmaking of his age-old winger, Johnny Gaudreau. In seven seasons the alternate captain has yet to finish with less than 22 goals. Just the ninth Flame to record 200 goals, it took him 567 games to hit Saturday's mark, which is only 41 more games than it took Jarome Iginla.

"Pretty cool -- it's special when you win and you have a milestone," said Monahan, who insists Sutter hasn't asked him to alter his game.

"I haven't been asked to do anything in particular. It's a team game. You want the centre to be good and that goes a long way. When they're strong it makes the game a lot easier for everyone else. Me and Backs (Backlund) are two centre men and we are trying to take charge and lead by example here."

Monahan's 201 goals are five more than MacKinnon, who went first overall in 2013 and is an undisputed superstar. In third place is Barkov, 36 goals behind. Bo Horvat is fourth, a whopping 70 goals back entering play Saturday.

Yet the focus on the former 34-goal scorer has long revolved around how he keeps people wanting more.

They feel there's more to give by way of a physical level he has yet to reach.

When Sutter was hired last week the two players people wondered about the most were Monahan and Gaudreau.

What might the Jolly Rancher be able to spur these two on to?

The Flames haven't had an elite centre since Joe Nieuwendyk left in 1995, but the coach avoided questions after the game about how he saw Monahan in the pecking order. He spoke only in generalities about how, in a system as heavily dependent on strength up the middle, it will be key for Monahan and the other three veterans to continue stepping up the way they did Saturday.

Monahan's productive start Saturday highlighted an impressive first period in which the rejuvenated Flames dominated battles and kept play in Montreal's zone, outshooting them 16-6 to go up 2-0.

The team may have been even better in the second, as part of six straight periods under Sutter in which the team has shown consistency and a work ethic befitting a Sutter-coached squad.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

The Flames' third goal was another tribute to the way Sutter wants his team forechecking, as diminutive Andrew Mangiapane out-duelled six-foot-three, 208-pound Jeff Petry for a puck in deep and fed Backlund out front for an easy finish.

"You've got to play with a little bit of swagger and confidence when you play," said Mangiapane, who pegged his team's increased work ethic as the biggest difference he's seen under Sutter.

"I think we're all working hard and playing the right way. We're strong defensively in our zone and we're playing quick. Quick on the puck, quick supporting, quick on the forecheck and quick everywhere. Obviously it's just two games but we have to keep building on the wins."

Petry closed the gap to 3-1 with five minutes left in the second, but the Flames responded with a push that prevented the Canadiens from registering a shot on goal the rest of the period.

Montreal's anticipated push in the third was dealt a crushing blow with 15 minutes left when Jacob Markstrom dove to make a stellar blocker save along the ice Tomas Tatar couldn't believe was stopped.

"We know how to play our system, we just have to execute it with some intensity and pace," said Backlund of his team's two-game turnaround under Sutter that has them just two points behind fourth-place Montreal.

"Playing with the pace we've been the last couple games and so much more in the offensive zone it makes it that much harder for Montreal to get into our zone."

The Flames host Edmonton Monday and Wednesday.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks rally around Demko with 'gutsy' effort vs. Oilers

Iain MacIntyre@imacSportsnet

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VANCOUVER -- Vancouver Canucks skaters blocked 25 shots on Saturday, and goalie Thatcher Demko saved nearly all of the rest as his team gutted out a 2-1 win against the Edmonton Oilers.

If it were January, you'd say this kind of grimy win -- heavy on effort, light on artfulness -- would be a team-builder for a Canucks team that got embarrassed 5-1 by the Montreal Canadiens on Wednesday. But this is mid-March, and Vancouver remains so far back in the standings that the only thing that matters now are points.

So, they got two to bounce back from an awful loss and end a five-game homestand with four wins. But they should feel good about holding Oilers monsters Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl to a single, power-play goal by the latter.

Six-foot-eight defenceman Tyler Myers, the one Canucks player who towers over them, literally, scored the winning goal with a top-corner rocket that beat Oilers goalie Mikko Koskinen from the top of the right-wing circle with 10:37 remaining in the third period.

The last and most important of the Canucks' season-high number of shot blocks came during a late Oilers power-play and the six-on-five that followed it until the game was almost over. Defenceman Alex Edler blocked two shots -- including a point-blank chance for Draisaitl when Demko was down -- and J.T. Miller got in front of another as Vancouver rallied around their goaltender after abandoning him three nights earlier.

"I liked everyone's game tonight," coach Travis Green said. "It was a gutsy effort. We harp a lot about the hard areas of the rink. We had a lot of guys step up and do some things that aren't comfortable."

Draisaitl's six shots on net were eclipsed by the seven of his attempts the Canucks blocked. McDavid had seven shots and missed the net six other times. Edler and defenceman Travis Hamonic each finished with six blocks for Vancouver.

"Those guys are going to create off the rush," Demko said of McDavid and Draisaitl, who are first and second in NHL scoring. "I thought our (forwards) did a great job of reloading in the offensive zone, allowing our D to have good gaps and making sure that we can shut down their chances coming into our zone. If we can make them chip pucks in and try and set up and defend from there, then I think we're going to be in a good spot. I thought we did a really good job of that tonight."

Except for a couple of early two-on-ones for the Oilers, which were broken up by defencemen Nate Schmidt and Quinn Hughes, the Canucks were light-years better with the puck and up-ice than they were against the Canadiens. For the most part, they forced Edmonton to earn its scoring chances.

And when the game was tied 1-1 heading into the final period, the Canucks produced their best spell of the night. Myers' game-winner was his 300th point in the NHL.

"I just tried to hit it as hard as I could," Myers said of his strategy. "It feels pretty good. It was great to put the team ahead, for one, and for the guys to battle to get the win is the cherry on top. So it was a good night."

A dull one, too, at the start.

An ugly first period was followed by an ugly goal when the Canucks took the lead. Held to just four shots on net during the type of first period that only coaches could like, Vancouver went ahead 1-0 at 12:59 of the second period when a rugby ruck broke out in front of the Oilers net, continued for several seconds under the gaze of referee Chris Schlenker and ended when the Canucks had pushed both rosters and the puck behind Koskinen at 12:59.

Schlenker had the best view as the All-Blacks and Springboks (these are rugby teams) went at it, ruling Koskinen never did have the puck covered. Canucks captain Bo Horvat, who is built for rugby, was credited with the goal and Oilers coach Dave Tippett was furious.

Horvat said the sequence was "pretty much a blur" and that the goal was easily one of the ugliest he has ever scored.

"It doesn't have to be pretty," Green noted. "You've just got to get the puck across the line. When you're not scoring, being hard at both nets is key. If you want to score, get to the paint. That goal really shows the type of game we wanted to play tonight."

This being the NHL and all, a borderline interference call against the Canucks' Miller soon after the contentious goal was followed by an iffy cross-checking penalty to Edler, as Schlenker and partner Brad Meier bestowed a 23-second five-on-three to Tippett's team, starting at 16:21.

Penalty-killers Myers, Hamonic and Brandon Sutter each failed on a chance to clear the zone before Edmonton, its advantage reduced to five against four, tied it at 16:59 when Ryan Nugent-Hopkins teed up a one-timer for Draisaitl from a sharpish angle to Demko's left.

It would be the only goal allowed by Demko, the Canucks' first-year starter who made 34 saves and played the entire homestand, allowing half of his 10 goals in the one loss against Montreal and stopping 94.5 per cent of the shots he faced over the five games.

Suddenly 5-2 in their last seven, the Canucks head to Ottawa for games Monday and Wednesday against the only team in the Canadian division that trails them.

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Sportsnet.ca / Quick Shifts: Why Zach Hyman's contract leverage keeps growing

Luke Fox@lukefoxjukebox

March 13, 2021, 10:29 AM

A quick mix of the things we gleaned from the week of hockey, serious and less so, and rolling four lines deep. I thought this week's column was good, but I guess I thought wrong.

1. Actions speak, and Sheldon Keefe tipped his hand.

When the Toronto Maple Leafs needed to score on their closest rival Thursday, when they were at risk of extending their losing streak to four games — the longest of their coach's tenure — Keefe formed the best top line he has. And stuck with it.

Zach Hyman is proving he can drive his own line this season. But come crunch time, the superstars want him on theirs.

Promoted to Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner's left wing mid-game, it was Hyman who hounded the puck in Winnipeg's end, stole it and extended the O-zone possession that eventually resulted in a Marner goal and revealed Connor Hellebuyck human.

Hyman didn't receive an official assist on the play, but the verbal credit flowed through the intermission and deep into the post-game Zooms.

"He's been lights out," Matthews beamed. "You know what you're gonna expect from him every night, and he's extremely easy to play with because you know he's just gonna get in there and battle and work. He's had a couple really, really nice goals lately. He's really been letting the hands come out to play, so it's been pretty fun to watch."

Flying in the face of your age-regression charts, Hyman is adding layers to skill-set at 28. Oh, and it just so happens to be a contract year.

Hyman was Kyle Dubas's first meaningful trade acquisition as a member of the Leafs front office, and he has long been highly regarded for his dogged forechecking and selfless penalty-killing.

But his ability to create scoring chances, knock 'em in, and establish himself as a net-front power-play guy have increased his value to the Leafs. Or any other club that tries to outbid them for his services.

Keefe's relationship with the coach's dream extends back to their Marlies days. And just as the coach has asked William Nylander to step in shot-blocking lanes, he's challenged Hyman to get creative. To attack the middle of the ice instead of straight-lining into the corners. The payoff is remarkable.

"He's got a lot of confidence," Keefe said. "We're encouraging him to hang on the puck a little more, encouraging him to look for linemates and make plays when they are there, encouraging him to challenge defencemen with his speed and the way he protects the puck."

"We know he's great at retrieving the puck and those types of things and we still obviously need that from him, but I love the way he challenges the defencemen. He doesn't let them off the hook. He doesn't make it so they can go back for a puck all the time. Sometimes he's just burying his head and challenging them to take it from him — and that mindset, I think defencemen don't like that."

This may be a longwinded way of saying the Maple Leafs need Hyman. Perhaps more than Hyman — who has always professed a desire to stay put and already took a hometown discount as an RFA — needs the Leafs.

Other teams will knock. Like Tom Wilson with the Capitals (but different), Hyman is that rare support player who can cash in.

Dubas must step up with a nice raise this summer (\$5 million AAV?), because the elements and consistency Hyman brings won't be easily replaced. And the window is now until Matthews' contract is up (2024).

All reports say negotiations have not begun, and it makes sense to shake hands and wait until after the expansion draft to minimize exposure risk.

Dubas has been reluctant to give his core term deep into their 30s. John Tavares will be 34 when his deal expires; Jake Muzzin will be 35.

Would Hyman — who plays a high wear-and-tear brand of hockey — accept extra years and salary bonuses in order to keep his cap hit workable and everybody happy?

Even with the winger's leverage at an all-time high, and the futures of Frederik Andersen and Morgan Rielly to consider, I think there's a path to make it fit.

2. Jordan Binnington's six-year, \$36-million extension matches the contract Jacob Markstrom signed in Calgary.

We don't foresee another UFA goalie this year eclipsing that bar, which appears to be the limit for No. 1 goalies under a pandemic-flattened cap.

Frederik Andersen, Tuukka Rask and Philipp Grubauer top the list, but they're all older than the 27-year-old Binnington — and none have backstopped their team to a championship (yet).

Incredible how the NHL's new math has tightened the purse-strings on netminders. The windfalls of Carey Price, Henrik Lundqvist and Sergei Bobrovsky now feel like outliers.

Two-time champ Matt Murray's \$25-million deal has Ottawa concerned it may have overpaid.

Binnington's deal is the same one then-recent Cup champ Corey Crawford inked way back in 2013: six times six.

"I'm not looking to kind of crush the bank," Binnington said on a video call with reporters. "It's not all about money to me. At the end of the day, I think what you look back on and you feel in your heart is the memories made and competing and being successful and going through tough times and getting out of them and being there for your teammates. We've got a good respected group here, and I'm excited."

Guys like Andersen and Grubauer, hoping for their big payday, may need to curb their expectations.

If Toronto can retain Andersen at his current \$5-million AAV, the Leafs may have to consider it. Although, his performance in the playoffs will sway things immensely.

3. Great year for goalie graduations from the American League to the National League.

With Vegas down Robin Lehner, the Golden Knights might give 24-year-old Logan Thompson a peek soon. He was set to be next man up when Marc-Andre Fleury had his false-positive COVID test. Thompson's numbers with the AHL Silver Knights — 6-1, 1.72 GAA, .946 — are shiny.

4. Extended tryouts in Leafland are over.

Much-discussed and heavily courted KHL imports Mikko Lehtonen and Alexander Barabanov are now elsewhere. Lehtonen was headed to the Marlies before being sent to Columbus Friday in exchange for goalie prospect Veini Vehviläinen. Barabanov will bide his time on the farm.

Both signed one-year deals to join Toronto and try to carve a niche in the world's best league.

Lehtonen registered three assists in nine games as a Leaf but hadn't appeared since Feb. 24. Barabanov was given an 11-game look with limited minutes and did not get on the scoresheet.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

"We've reached a different phase of the season here. I think we gave lots of opportunity to different people early in the season, Mikko being one, at times when maybe we really didn't have a reason to change the lineup other than to give more opportunity for Mikko and others," Keefe explained Thursday.

"You've got to give yourself the best opportunity to win each day. That's all part of it for us here now. Everybody really is just going to have to wait for their next opportunity and continue to put in the proper work to do so."

With integral winger Wayne Simmonds targeting a return to full team practices next week, Alex Galchenyuk eager for a peek, and the Leafs searching for a top-six forward on the trade market, Barabanov may have a harder time getting back to the NHL than Lehtonen.

Columbus is in need of an offensive jolt. The Jackets have the sixth-worst power-play in the league. Have to wonder if Lehtonen gets a better chance to prove himself there.

"In Mikko's case specifically, we have no doubts or questions about the work that he puts in. He's extremely committed, extremely focused, works very hard. We're happy with all of those kinds of things. For the last little while we just haven't seen a reason to make a change on defence," Keefe said.

5. Jimmy "Hollywood" Vesey estimates Joe Thornton has given him 15 to 20 nicknames since they became teammates.

"He's got seven California-themed nicknames for me," Vesey said Friday.

The friendly monikers — "Willy Styles" Nylander is a big hit — mostly stem from secret origin, and new ones pop up as quickly as the old ones vanish.

"He's a nickname machine," Frederik "Fredzilla" Andersen explained of Jumbo. "He has a lot. He even has nicknames you guys don't even hear before they come and go. He cycles through them pretty quick. He loves throwing out a good nickname."

"I didn't give 'Zilla his nickname, by the way," Thornton chuckles. "That was not me. I know who did, but it was not me. As a kid running around with my brothers and my cousins, we always had nicknames for each other, so it started at a young age."

A lover of life and keeping things light, Thornton believes balancing hard work with a double-scoop of humour relaxes the dressing room. And it makes sense with that performance on the ice.

"He's got more excitement every day than anyone else," Alexander ("Kerf"/"Footer") Kerfoot says. "We can all learn from that."

6. Very cool... and very overdue.

CCM's collaboration with Austin Matthews for a personalized skate feels like a long time coming when you consider basketball stars' longstanding relationship with sneaker giants. But the execution here is pretty sweet.

The Toronto skyline, tiny-type bio info and blue highlights are nice touches. Would love to see a royal-blue blade holder for the AM34 2s.

7. Ryan Johansen's two-question second-intermission interview with Nashville trailing Carolina 4-0 tells you all you need to know about the Predators' campaign:

Mindset heading into the third? "Go score five goals."

The Preds did not score five goals. They lost 5-1 and fell to 11-15-1 with an ugly negative-26 goal differential.

8. Quote of the Week.

Buffalo Sabres coach Ralph Krueger, speaking on Jeff Skinner finally finding the back of the net for the first and only time this season: "That's certainly something for Jeff Skinner, who's measured his whole career on goals."

Gulp.

9. Can't say I was this optimistic about live attendance at 2021 NHL games by the halfway mark. Canada's arenas are still exclusively reliant on pumped-in fake crowd noise — although the Edmonton Oilers are lobbying the Alberta government hard — but south of the border, more and more rinks are swinging open the doors.

With the state of Minnesota approving up to 3,000 fans indoors starting April 5, the Wild is poised to become the 18th NHL club to allow partial attendance at home games. That'll be 75 per cent of U.S. hockey cities with a green light.

Barns in Chicago, Washington, Colorado, San Jose, Los Angeles, and Anaheim remain empty.

On the one-year anniversary of the mandatory masks and six-foot buffers, Joe Thornton spoke eloquently on hockey night's missing ingredient.

"It just gives the atmosphere you need to really enjoy the experience. Just coming into games and seeing the fans with the jerseys on, giving the pucks to fans and things like that. As soon as you get in the buildings, you know where you're playing," Thornton said.

"If you're playing at home or on the road, it just gives that goosebump feeling of coming out and getting your name announced and the place goes crazy... it's little things like that you definitely miss."

10. Finding a way to award a Stanley Cup in the heart of a pandemic, inside a completely COVID-free bubble. And now bringing hockey back to ESPN.

Boo him if you choose, but some props are due. Gary Bettman has a had a better six months than most.

The \$2.8-billion, seven-year commitment is one thing, but the fact a second U.S. broadcast partner will hop in the mix is critical. The NHL can now following the NBA-NFL-MLB blueprint of spreading its reach — and income streams — across multiple channels.

ESPN should also assist in turning hockey's growing influx of American talent — Austin Matthews, Jack Eichel, Alex DeBrincat, the Tkachuk brothers, et al. — into superstars, which should in turn fuel sweater sales and all those other good things.

I'm not quite convinced I need Stephen A. Smith yelling some hockey randomness through my TV, but this deal is massive win.

11. Thirty-five NHLers have scored 11 or more goals. Sixteen of those players are American; 10 are Canadian.

Seven of the top 12 goal-getters are U.S.-born (compared to three Canadian) — and that group does not include stars like Jack Eichel, Jake Guentzel, Matthew Tkachuk, Brady Tkachuk, Dylan Larkin, Blake Wheeler, J.T. Miller and Phil Kessel.

Traditionally we think of Team Canada having a hard time picking and choosing its offensive weapons for the Olympics.

Team USA will face some headache decisions upfront for 2022, and goalies from the other nations will be under siege.

12. Mesmerizing...

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Sportsnet.ca / Why the Maple Leafs traded defenceman Mikko Lehtonen

Luke Fox@lukefoxjukebox

March 13, 2021, 12:22 PM



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

TORONTO – From the Toronto Maple Leafs' perspective, trading Mikko Lehtonen after a nine-game trial run is more about doing right by the player and their own homegrown defence prospects than it is about acquiring an asset in return.

General manager Kyle Dubas and chief European scout-slash-recruiter Jim Paliafito went to great lengths to lure the coveted 2020 KHL Defenceman of the Year to Toronto in the first place. So, Dubas wanted to give the 27-year-old Finn a shot to keep his NHL dreams alive once it became apparent that Lehtonen wasn't ready to wrestle away meaningful minutes and trust from Travis Dermott on Toronto's bottom pairing.

"He's an unrestricted free agent at the end of the season here, and it's a big year for him," Leafs coach Sheldon Keefe said Saturday. "So, I think there's something to be said for that as well. We wish him all the best."

Lehtonen heads to the Columbus Blue Jackets in exchange for 24-year-old goaltending prospect Veini Vehvilainen.

Columbus's Finnish GM, Jarmo Kekalainen, was among the executives in pursuit of Lehtonen as he was piling up points in the KHL for Jokerit Helsinki. Lehtonen will join the Jackets' taxi squad after obtaining a work visa and clearing quarantine.

The offensive-minded left shot and power-play specialist should have a greater opportunity to exercise his strengths in Columbus, where the power-play ranks just 25th overall (16.22 per cent).

To be fair to Lehtonen, who had spent his entire career on the large European ice, it was tough to leap over the likes of Dermott and prized prospects Rasmus Sandin and Timothy Liljegren on Toronto's defensive chart.

To ensure Lehtonen was given his nine-game tryout, Keefe experimented with dressing seven defencemen and scratched Dermott and Sandin in the early season more than he wished.

"Not having exhibition games really made it difficult for any incoming player to get the chance to sort of get the bugs out to adjust to the league, show what they could do, earn some additional trust, all those things," Keefe explained. "All things considered, he adjusted to the situation."

Lehtonen notched three assists, took two minor penalties, and registered a plus-1 rating in sheltered minutes. He showed creative flashes on breakouts and on the second power-play unit but was less assertive without the puck.

"We had Travis Dermott on the outside through training camp and just made a decision once the games were getting going that Lehtonen needed more time, and that's how it worked out. But he's definitely a talent, and he worked really hard here and waited for his chance," Keefe said.

The Lehtonen trade paves a clearer path for Liljegren and Sandin (still recovering from a foot fracture) to work their way back into the Leafs lineup this season, should injury strike.

"We've got a number of other people in the organization that didn't get the opportunity even that Mikko had here this season," Keefe said. "It'll open up a little more space and opportunity for them."

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With Hellebuyck sitting, Andersen can seize the spotlight

By Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs (optional) and Jets skated at Scotiabank Arena on Saturday.

After stopping 70 of 77 shots in two games against the Leafs this week, Vezina Trophy winner Connor Hellebuyck will get a rest tonight.

"Those are two heavy, heavy games that he played," Jets coach Paul Maurice explained. "You get close to 80 shots in back-to-back nights and you're that good, you can have a hot dog on the Saturday."

So, Laurent Brossoit, who has won three straight starts and owns a .923 save percentage on the season, will go for his first career win against the Leafs (0-2-0, .890 save percentage).

"I thought in the five road game trip that he was going to go in one and I actually had him scheduled for Game 2 of the Toronto series," Maurice said, "but based on the way the first one went ... Connor was so good in Game 1, I needed to go back with him."

The Jets, who played in Montreal last week, are in the middle of a road-heavy stretch of the season with trips to Edmonton, Vancouver and Calgary still to come in March.

"We have 17 games this month," Maurice added. "I've got to pick the games [Brossoit plays] and I don't want it to run too long between things right now."

The change between the pipes appears to give the Leafs an advantage in net although Frederik Andersen is just 2-2-0 with an .889 save percentage since returning from a lower-body injury.

"He's a very committed guy to being at his best and being reliable for his teammates," said coach Sheldon Keefe. "He's dealt with a number of different things, even just in the time I've been here, injuries and such. I know he works real hard with [goalie coach] Steve Briere on his game and even on a day like yesterday, it's an optional day, but he's out there and gets his work in. He wanted to have a better workout than he would get at a morning skate. It's just another sign that he's serious about being that guy who's reliable for us."

In a rare move, Keefe made both yesterday's practice and today's morning skate optional. Only three regulars took the ice this morning with Joe Thornton, Jason Spezza and Pierre Engvall taking part. Tonight marks Toronto's 19th game in the last 38 days.

Maurice reveals Brossoit gets the start tonight against the Leafs

Paul Maurice explains why Laurent Brossoit will start in goal tonight against the Maple Leafs after Connor Hellebuyck carried a huge workload over their last two contests.

Zach Hyman will remain on a line with Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner to start tonight's game.

"When you play with Auston and Mitch you try and get those guys the puck in space as much as you can," Hyman said.

Hyman, a righty, replaced Thornton, a lefty, midway through Thursday's game. Other than the handedness, Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey doesn't think the dynamic changes much.

"Both players are really good down low," Morrissey said. "Thornton has done that for a long time and produced a lot of assists from below the goal line and that area of the ice and I think Hyman does that pretty well also. They complement Matthews and Marner really well and either way it presents a big challenge."

The 28-year-old Hyman is faster and a bit grittier than the 41-year-old Thornton. And while Thornton is one of the greatest playmakers of all-time, Hyman has taken a big step on the offensive side this season.

"Holding onto the puck more, being more confident with the puck are things I've tried to implement into my game," Hyman said.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 14, 2021

"He's a force," observed defenceman Jake Muzzin. "Hymn has worked hard this summer and you can see it this year with his skill around the net, his shot and putting everything together."

'He's a force': Hyman remains on Leafs' top line with Matthews-Marner

Zach Hyman will stay on the Leafs' top line tonight when they finish off their three-game set against the Jets. Hyman says that he tries to bring the same game and same mindset no matter who he plays with. TSN's Mark Masters has more.

The Jets have been impressed with Toronto's determination to get to the net.

"There's a real willingness on that team now that maybe you didn't see in years past to have a net-front presence, a guy taking a beating at the net, which holds a D and that turns it into a four-on-four game, which they really excel at," said Maurice.

"They're really strong at getting pucks and making little plays around the net, little passes into the slot," noted Morrissey. "They're willing to go there even though you don't always see that with skill guys. They go to the net and they make those plays as well as any team we've played this year."

Establishing a net-front presence has been a point of emphasis for Keefe.

"Whether you're tipping a puck like Auston's been doing the last couple games or screening a goalie and getting in the way, it goes a long way to disrupting play and making things more confusing," said Hyman.

"Definitely, driving the net and staying at the net is something we've been stressing."

Jets discuss the difficulty of defending elite talent

Josh Morrissey tries to explain how difficult it is to defend elite talent in real time and how players are able to make plays at such high speeds now. He says on TV it often looks easy to spot the open man, but at ice level it's a whole different game.

Winnipeg can move within four points of Toronto with a regulation win tonight. The Jets have played two fewer games than the Leafs and the teams will face off six more times this season with five in Manitoba. So, the rubber match of the series this week has taken on even greater meaning.

"They have one, we have one and we want to come out on top," Muzzin said.

"Going to be a high-flying game," Hellebuyck predicted after Thursday's overtime loss. "These are two really good teams. You can feel it. You can feel the energy and you can see it in everyone's eyes. Everyone knows this isn't going to be an easy one. You have to fight for every inch of ice."

Thanks to the addition of veterans like Thornton, Zach Bogosian and T.J. Brodie, the Leafs feel like they're better positioned to handle these high-leverage, big-pressure moments. And Muzzin actually sees some similarities between this Leafs team and the Los Angeles Kings group he won the Stanley Cup with in 2014.

"It definitely helps when you have great personalities in the room," Muzzin said. "When it feels like a tight group and kind of like a family atmosphere in there, it's a lot more fun to be a part of. Everyone caring for each other, working for each other and it helps on the ice when you're trying to set up your teammates for success. So, similar feelings in both rooms: L.A. and then with this group here."

Muzzin: Personality of Leafs similar to Kings Cup-winning team

Jake Muzzin talks about the 'family atmosphere' in the Maple Leafs dressing room, and says it's a similar feeling he had in the room with the Kings team that won the Stanley Cup.

Muzzin, who sustained a facial fracture in Montreal on Feb. 20, is still adjusting to wearing a full shield.

"There's been a few [times] where if it's in tight in my feet it kind of gets lost," he admitted, "and when you're not feeling it that night it's sometimes a struggle to get it back."

How much longer will he have to wear it?

"Hopefully, not too much longer," he said with a smile. "Actually, I don't even know. They want to let it heal fully before the bubble comes off."

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