



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 29, 2021

## THE NEWS & OBSERVER

### 'He's never lacked confidence.' How Martin Necas became the Hurricanes' go-to player

By Chip Alexander

Martin Necas may be the fastest skater in the National Hockey League.

Talk about wheels: When the Carolina Hurricanes winger starts moving those feet and gets in motion, he's hard to catch. Add in his deceptive one-timers, quick wristers and darting wraparounds, in addition to his ability to make tape-to-tape passes, and he's a pretty complete offensive player.

Canes teammate Cedric Paquette skated against Necas a year ago as a member of the Stanley Cup Champion Tampa Bay Lightning. Saturday, Paquette had a front-row seat to watch Necas record four points against those same Lightning players.

"He's been unreal," Canes teammate Cedric Paquette said. "He's got some skills, a crazy shot and he's got the confidence right now."

Necas had two power-play goals and two assists in the Canes' 4-3 Central Division victory over the Lightning at PNC Arena. He was the game's first star as the Canes (23-7-3) pulled within one point of the division-leading Lightning.

When center Vincent Trocheck went out of the lineup in early March with an upper-body injury that remains undisclosed, Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour had to be fretting, even if he didn't talk about it publicly. The Canes already had lost forward Teuvo Teravainen, first to COVID-19 and then a concussion. Then the veteran Trocheck, who had 13 goals, went down.

Trocheck might have been the Canes' MVP to the point in the season when he went out, after the March 9 game against Nashville.

Necas might be the Canes' MVP since then, good enough to warrant consideration when the NHL picks its three stars for the month of March.

Necas has seven goals and 10 assists in 13 games in March, and five of the goals and five assists have been in the eight games since Trocheck was injured. That's called filling a void, and the former first-round draft pick has done it well, and with flair.

On the power play, Necas is like a quick-draw artist, getting off shots rapidly, with velocity. His winning goal Saturday with 3:53 left in the third period came on a whistling wrist from the top of the right circle that Tampa Bay goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy, the best in the business, had no chance of stopping.

"He's never lacked confidence," Brind'Amour said after Saturday's game. "From day one, he's been trying to make plays. We encourage it but now I think he has a better understanding of when and where to make plays.

"You can see it. He's matured. Physically he's a little stronger, which goes a long way to having your own confidence. I think it's his maturity, physically. He's always had the confidence."

Necas grows up, adds strength

While Necas grows in many ways, two things he always had growing up in his native Czech Republic are speed and quickness.

But not strength.

He began regimented conditioning and weight-training when he was 17, when he was about 5-8 and 137 pounds.

Now 22, he's listed at 6-2 and 189 pounds. Still slender, but stronger, sturdier. No. 88 has grown up.

Necas was the 12th pick of the 2017 NHL Draft, playing in the Czech Extraliga for another season after making his NHL debut with Carolina in a cameo appearance. He chafed a bit when his first professional season in North America was spent mostly with the Charlotte Checkers in the American Hockey League, not the Canes.

But Necas, drafted as a center, was used on the wing with the Checkers in 2018-19 and was a big part of their Calder Cup championship run. In his first season with the Canes, in 2019-20, he had 16 goals and 20 assists in 64 games before the league's coronavirus pause, then had a goal and three assists in eight postseason games.

Playing more alert hockey, playing harder in the defensive end, back-checking, and blocking shots, Necas earned Brind'Amour's trust. And more minutes.

And here he is.

Asked Saturday about stepping in for Trocheck, Necas matter-of-factly explained that there was a need for a right-shot forward on the top power-play unit to replace Trocheck. He moved up from the second unit. That had him playing with Sebastian Aho. Soon he was on Aho's line. That simple, to him.

With his speed and puck-handling, Necas is adept in zone entries. If a game goes to overtime, the three-on-three format and open ice give him more room to roam. He has nine goals and 19 assists in 30 games, and a plus-16 rating.

"I got on the first 'PP' which gives you a little more confidence and time on the ice," Necas said. "I felt good. My teammates played great and I've been trying to keep up with them."

Keep up with them? How about keeping up with Necas?

"He's got all the skill in the world," Aho said Saturday. "The way he skates is pretty impressive. Fun player to play with."



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## The Athletic

### DGB weekend rankings: How many playoff teams are locked in? Are Blues in danger?

By Sean McIndoe

We're going to flip the calendar over to April later this week, which in a typical year means the regular season is almost done. This isn't a typical year, so we've still got about six weeks to go, and maybe more if rescheduled games keep pushing the finish line out. But with the trade deadline in two weeks and some teams having only 20 games left to play, we're certainly headed down the homestretch. It's time to get ready for a thrilling playoff race.

Only... what if there isn't one?

It's too early to write off any of the division races, but we're getting close on a few of them. It's not hard to imagine some scenarios where we could soon wind up with only one or two decent races to watch down the stretch. And when you take a look at Dom's projections, you wonder if we'll even get that much.

Let's start in the North. The Leafs, Jets and Oilers are jockeying for top spot, with all three looking like reasonably safe playoff bets. A quick glance at the standings shows a tight race for the last spot between Montreal, Vancouver and Calgary, but that glance has to be quick enough that you don't notice how many games in hand the Habs have – five on the Flames and six on the Canucks. As of yesterday, Dom's model had the Canadiens with a 92 percent chance of getting that last spot, meaning the North has four teams with playoff odds over 90 percent. That's not over, but it's definitely in the ballpark.

The East was supposed to be the toughest race, with five or six playoff-worthy teams fighting for four spots. But one of those teams was the Flyers, who are currently spiraling out of contention; Dom had their odds down to 7 percent yesterday. The Rangers have clawed back into the race, but are still underdogs, with just a 13 percent chance before their loss to the Caps. That leaves us, once again, with four teams all sitting over 90 percent. Not done, but getting there.

The Central does have a real race for the last spot, but only that last spot, because the Lightning, Hurricanes and Panthers are all basically locks. That leaves us with the Stars, Blackhawks, Blue Jackets and Predators in the mix for that last berth, which makes for a decent race. We'll see if any of those teams throw in their cards by selling at the deadline. But for now, we've got one race to watch.

Then there's the West, which looked like the easiest race to figure on opening night. You had three elite teams in the Golden Knights, Avalanche and Blues, and one spot that would probably come down to the Wild and Coyotes. But the Wild ran away with that race quickly, and Dom already has them as basically a lock, meaning the West is all over unless one of the three good teams collapses. That might actually be happening in St. Louis, and we'll get to that in a bit, so let's call this one an open race for one spot.

That's it. That's the whole league, in terms of playoff spots – remember, there's no wild card or crossover spots this year, so if you're not in a division's top four, you're nowhere. And right now, the races for those four spots aren't much to look at. Dom has 14 different teams already sitting with playoff odds better than 90 percent, meaning only two spots up for grabs over the next six weeks unless somebody falls apart.

For what it's worth, Dom's model is a little more pessimistic about an exciting stretch run than others out there. If you check out Money Puck, you'll find they agree that the North is close to over, but aren't quite as confident in the East, and their model thinks that the last spots in the West and Central are wide open. Dom's not wrong often, but for the sake of entertainment value we'll have to hope he is here.

Of course, there's 20+ games to go, and lots of time for things to shift. Of those 14 teams that seemed locked in, at least one or two might completely collapse – 90 percent is a lot, but it's not 100 percent. Some bad team that we're close to writing off will probably go on a heater and at least make it interesting. And it's worth noting that the races for seeding in all four divisions could be fantastic, with top spot up for grabs in all four. We don't know how much that really matters, since home ice in a half-empty building might not be much of a factor, but it will give us some races to track.

But for those last playoff spots? Let's cross our fingers that things tighten up, because we may be headed towards an anti-climactic finish in at least a few divisions. And maybe even in all four of them.

Road to the Cup

The five teams with the best chances of becoming the first team in history to win a Stanley Cup in July.

We don't get a lot of Devils talk in the Top Five section, but we need to recognize Mackenzie Blackwood with what might be the save of the year in the dying seconds of a 1-0 win over the Bruins:

5. Washington Capitals (23-7-4, +20 true goals differential\*) – They've lost one of their last 11 and opened up a bit of daylight on top of the East, and it still feels like the four teams ahead of them in the rankings are pulling away. Tough year to be a top team.

4. Carolina Hurricanes (23-7-3, +25) – They rebounded from a tough week with three straight wins, including a statement game against the Lightning on Saturday. Carolina outshot Tampa 40 to 22 in that one, so while it's just one game, if you wanted to nudge them ahead in your rankings, I don't think it would be crazy. I'm going to wait a bit; this week the Hurricanes get two each against the Hawks and Stars, so they can help us figure out that race for that last Central spot.

3. Vegas Golden Knights (23-8-1, +31) – They needed a better showing against the Avalanche on Saturday after



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getting thumped on Thursday, and they got it with a bit of a break leading to an overtime win.

That puts them back in first in the West. And while Colorado has been so hot that it feels temporary, you never know which game could end up being the one that decides the race. The Knights get two against the Kings now, which could either be easier wins or a trap.

2. Tampa Bay Lightning (24-8-2, +41) – A pair of 4-3 losses to the Stars and Hurricanes gives Tampa its first two-game losing streak in over a month, and just the third of the season. They responded to each of the first two streaks by rolling off six wins in a row, so nobody's panicking here. But it's worth mentioning that Carolina's win actually moved the Hurricanes ahead of the Lightning in terms of points percentage.

1. Colorado Avalanche (21-8-4, +39) – The top spot is a logjam this week, with solid cases for any of the top four teams claiming it. I'm going with the Avalanche, partly because it's always nice to work a new team into the mix but mostly because they took three of four points against Vegas in a mini-series that included one dominating performance and one that was merely pretty good. They've got points in 10 straight, and as Dom points out, they've spent a good chunk of that streak absolutely rolling teams. They've got singles against the Ducks and Coyotes and then two against the team we have to talk about next...

\*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Not ranked: St. Louis Blues – Last week I did a version of that "the playoff race might be a bust" section on Puck Soup, and I mentioned the West being mostly wrapped up, including a spot for St. Louis. That was before the Blues lost four straight, so it's already drifting into the "this take hasn't aged well" territory. But right after the episode dropped, somebody hit me with this:

Yeah, the schedule hasn't been completely balanced, but I doubt the Blues are only playing those three teams.

(Checks the Blues' remaining schedule.)

Oh no.

I mean, they don't play only those three teams. They also have one game left against the Coyotes in April, two against the Ducks in May, plus that Kings game that just got rescheduled to the end of the season. And... that's it. No, really, go check it yourself. The Blues have 21 games left on the schedule, and 17 of them are against the Knights, Avs or Wild. Including the next eight in a row.

That's not great! Especially for a team that's lost nine of its last 11 and is now just one point up on the Coyotes for that final spot in the West. The Ducks were supposed to offer a chance to get right before the tough part of the schedule kicked in, but instead the Blues picked up one point in two games. That's not going to cut it.

So is it time to panic? Not yet, they told us over the weekend, even after becoming the first team in six weeks to lose to the Ducks in regulation. That's kind of what they have to say, so the rest of us can just say it for them: Yeah, it's time to panic,

or at least to have some significant worries that this whole season is falling apart. They can't score, and at this point we should probably be at least a little concerned that the return of Vladimir Tarasenko hasn't done much to help there (he picked up his second goal in 11 games yesterday). The goaltending hasn't been great either, and when you can't get a stop and can't get a goal [checks analytics] that's bad. Would Taylor Hall help? We might find out.

The Blues are still holding down a playoff spot, if only barely, and I'd still have them as the favorite to keep it. But it's going to be a tougher race than most of us thought, and the schedule is brutal. There's no quit here, according to Craig Berube. But unless they smarten up soon, there may be no playoffs either.

The bottom five

The five teams that are headed towards the best lottery odds and trying to figure out if we should call this an Owen Power Ranking.

Worst moment of the weekend: Florida's Aaron Ekblad being stretched off after an ugly looking leg injury:

That's awful, and could be a major turning point in what had so far been close to a dream season for the Panthers. At this point we don't know how long he'll be out.

5. San Jose Sharks (13-16-4, -26) – With losses in five of seven and a debate over whether they need to start all over again, some good news: Patrick Marleau has tied Mark Messier for second spot on the all-time games played list. Marleau remains on track to pass Gordie Howe over the coming weeks for top spot. The question might be whether he does it as a Shark.

4. Anaheim Ducks (11-19-6, -36) – Two straight wins against the Blues included yesterday's overtime decision. A bigger story could be the injury to Rickard Rakell, which might derail some trade deadline plans if he'll be out for a while.

3. Detroit Red Wings (12-20-4, -36) – Leading scorer Filip Hronek goes end-to-end again! In related news, what a disaster for the Blue Jackets, who go 0-for a two-game weekend series with the Wings and miss out on banking some desperately needed points in the Central race.

2. Ottawa Senators (12-20-4, -42) – They've won three of six and have points in each of the losses, which passes for a hot streak when in you're in mid-rebuild. Anton Forsberg looked sharp in his first game as a Senator, making 38 saves against the Leafs in Saturday's OT loss that cost one brave cup its life.

1. Buffalo Sabres (6-23-4, -50) – Make it 17 in a row, one shy of catching the 2003-04 Penguins for the NHL's all-time record for consecutive losses. They came close to snapping the streak on Saturday, leading the Bruins heading into the third period, before losing in regulation. (And yes, it is a losing streak, even if the NHL's band of participation-trophy GMs doesn't want us to call it that.)

One positive about the Sabres: They're giving us no shortage of candidates for our weekly Depressing Stat About a Bad Team. John Vogl has a few here, and this was a



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doozy, and then there was also this one. But I'm going to stick with the losing streak theme and go with this one:

It was actually a decent week for the Sabres in the big picture, as they made the first of what should be several deadline trades and finally started to rebuild a decimated front office. With the season already a lost cause, looking towards the future is all the team has left.

As for that losing streak record, they can tie the record tonight and break it on Wednesday. In a nearly perfect bit of scheduling, both games are against another team that's been struggling lately...

Not ranked: Philadelphia Flyers – There are no must-win games when a season is 32 games old. That would be silly. There are still six weeks left for teams to sort stuff out, so let's not get ridiculous.

That said, if the Flyers had lost on Saturday the season would have been over and everyone would have been fired.

Over-dramatic? Probably, yeah. It's late in a long column and we're not doing subtlety. But it's hard to overstate how close the Flyers' season was getting to writeoff territory. It had been one month since the Flyers shut out the Sabres in back-to-back games, back when that still felt impressive and not just mean. Since then, they'd won just four of 14, including two embarrassing blowouts at the hands of Mika Zibanejad and the Rangers.

So heading into Saturday, the Flyers didn't necessarily need a win, but they needed to at least look like they belonged on the same rink as a Ranger team that hasn't looked all that scary to anyone else. They managed both, delivering a solid 2-1 win that was basically exactly what coach Alain Vigneault wanted to see. It wasn't a thriller, but boring is fine when the alternative is looking like the 1976 Scouts.

So what now? They're still three points back of the Bruins for the final playoff spot, and Boston has two games in hand, so their playoff odds are grim. Carter Hart is broken, and the question now is how quickly he can be fixed. Vigneault isn't doing much to dispel that reputation for being a guy who can turn things around in year one and then immediately start losing the room. And while Chuck Fletcher says he'll be buying at the deadline, it's worth asking whether his team has earned that.

Here's the good news, which might also be awful news: The Flyers get the Sabres Monday and Wednesday. There are no guarantees in the modern NHL, but two points against Buffalo is as close as we come. Win both of those games, and the Flyers will have a three-game streak for the first time in a month. Then comes one against the Islanders, and then two against that Bruins team they're chasing for a playoff spot. Two weeks from now, we could be talking about a hot Flyers team being right back in it.

Or, you know, they could lose to the Sabres and become the laughingstock of the league. No pressure.



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## Hurricanes' Martin Necas cannot be ignored any longer and he's here to stay

By Sara Civian

You could consider the Hurricanes' 4-3 win over the Lightning on Saturday their best of the season for a few reasons: Their perseverance to come back after falling into an early 2-0 hole. The league's best power play staying consistent. The fact that they beat the best team in the league and by far the best goaltender.

But when I look back on that game, I'll remember something that has been quietly building all season and hit critical mass that day: the unignorable emergence of Martin Necas.

Necas' career-best four-point evening left no crumbs. He factored in on every Carolina goal, assisting on Cedric Paquette and Sebastian Aho's goals while giving the Canes the lead twice with his own snipes.

And he did that against Tampa Bay. Against Andrei Vasilevskiy.

If you watched, you'll also recall the crossbar he hit and Vasilevskiy's robbery of another chance.

"I know how good he is," Aho said when I asked him if Necas is underrated around the league. "In my mind, he's not. Our team knows how good he is. But maybe for the media and other teams, maybe underrated. I don't know. But our team for sure knows how good he is."

It all brought me back to the first game of the month against the Panthers, when head coach Rod Brind'Amour benched Necas for almost nine minutes after some lazy defense. Y'all remember the rest of March 11, 2021, though? Necas came back for an assist and the game-winning goal in overtime.

"He's never lacked for confidence," Brind'Amour said. "From Day 1, he's been trying to make plays. We encourage it, but I think now he has a better understanding of when and where to make plays. You can see it. He's matured. Physically, he's a little stronger, which goes a long way to having your own confidence. I think it's his maturity, physically. He's always had the confidence."

I picked the brain of Hurricanes color commentator Tripp Tracy while writing this article, and he nailed the dynamic between Brind'Amour and players like Necas that has made this team work so well: "It's a two-way road, and two-way players get two-way coaching."

Necas has been one of the best players in the league in March with seven goals and 17 points in 10 games, but his impact — and Brind'Amour's decision to put him on a line with Aho and Nino Niederreiter — has been deeper than that.

Overall, Necas ranks No. 3 among the Canes in Goals Above Replacement, according to Evolving-Hockey. His power-play production (four goals and 10 points) has contributed greatly to his point totals, but then you consider his plus-16 rating, and it's his even-strength offense and reliability that is driving that.

And according to The Athletic contributor Shayna Goldman, Necas' progress is likely here to stay.

"His offense looks pretty sustainable — no red flags standing out, no inflated shooting percentage (13 percent), goal scoring is close to expectations (8.02 expected versus actual 9), and the team is driving play at five-on-five with him on the ice," she said. "When we weigh his ice time to compare how he stacks up to the team, he's scoring at a rate of 3.18 points per 60 minutes in all situations, which is second to Vincent Trocheck (and rates 29th in the league)."

In eight games with Aho and Niederreiter, Necas has posted five goals and five assists. And when the line is on the ice at five-on-five, the Canes control 53.3 percent of the shots and 56.7 percent of the expected goal share. The team has scored at a rate of 2.22 goals per 60 minutes with them on the ice, which is just below expected (2.42 goals per 60).

Hockey-Viz shows us something Brind'Amour would love: The Hurricanes are 14 percent stronger defensively when the NAN line (we're making this a thing unless you have any better suggestions) is out on the ice.

You'll notice how much they have protected right in front of the net.

That doesn't come without buy-in from Necas, and many wondered if he'd be given that after finding himself on the short end of an expansion-draft loophole that allows the Canes to keep him — unprotected — because they left him in AHL Charlotte in 2018-19.

"It was hard, that one year when I was in the AHL," Necas said. "I was not upset, but maybe it pissed me off that I was in the AHL. But it happens. You've just got to keep getting better every day. That's what I was doing in the AHL. Last year was my first year in the NHL, and this year it's better."

Can confirm.

He ended up getting Calder Cup-champion experience despite probably being ready to play in the NHL, and while anyone would have been frustrated, he also got to work on the defensive side of the game, which is part of what has made him ready for the first line now.

Patience pays off, but this is one of these situations where it truly seems the perfect coach met the perfect player.



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## Hurricanes do Storm Surge celebration for local frontline worker

Carolina honored Wake County EMS compliance officer after win against Lightning

By Pat Pickens

The Storm Surge is back and perhaps better than ever.

The Carolina Hurricanes celebrated with their fans and honored another local frontline worker after their 4-3 win against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

After more than a year without Storm Surges, the Hurricanes reintroduced the postgame celebrations that would honor

essential workers after their 5-2 win against the Detroit Red Wings on March 4.

On Saturday, the Hurricanes did the traditional Skol clap along with the roughly 3,000 fans in attendance at PNC Arena.

But instead of an elaborate celebration like the ones of the past, Carolina simply saluted Wake County EMS compliance officer Larry McMillan for his service fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fans cheered as McMillan's picture was shared on the scoreboard with a special "Canes Salute" banner.



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## About Last Night: Carolina Hurricanes top Lightning to pull within a point

The Canes won by a score of 4-3 in their final home bout against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

By Zeke Lukow

On Pride Night, the Carolina Hurricanes also gave us a lot to be proud of. First, they made a great strong statement supporting the LGBTQ community. Second, the team on the ice gave every fan something to be proud of.

The Canes beat the division leaders to pull within a point of the Lightning for the lead of the Central Division and for the President's Trophy Race.

Early Woes for the Hurricanes

The Canes came into the game against the league's best team hoping for a quick start but it was quite the opposite. The Canes started the game by taking a penalty in the first 17 seconds of the game. While the Hurricanes were able to kill the penalty, the momentum was too much to overcome.

The Lightning were able to score two goals in the first 5:41 of the game. The first goal was a great play by Blake Coleman to hit the empty space in front of the net and tip in a shot in front of the net with no traffic. The second goal was the only goal that really goes against James Reimer.

With the puck around the crease, Reimer failed to cover the puck. While most on the ice expected a whistle, Pat Maroon was able to gather the puck and score. It didn't help that the Canes thought the puck was covered and Haydn Fleury had a broken stick behind the net as well. Despite going down two goals early, the Canes never gave up the fight.

Strangely enough, the player that stood up to the Lightning was Nino Niederreiter. He ended up taking a double minor, two of which were offset. Nino was not happy with any of the liberties that Tampa was taking and was quick to stand up for his teammates.

Martin Necas does Martin Necas things

Necas continued to be the best player on the ice last night, as he earned a point in every goal that the Canes scored. His two-goal, two-assist night was his highest point total night in his career. This continues his streak of being the best player on the ice. Two nights ago, Necas willed the Canes to a win against the Blue Jackets. Last night he would not be denied.

The Canes started the scoring when Necas was able to find Cedric Paquette alone in the slot. Paquette buried the goal glove side to make the game 2-1 on a delayed penalty. Necas then set up a three-on-one that ended with a



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Sebastian Aho goal. He then got back-to-back goals on the power play to give the Canes the eventual game-winner.

Necas's skill and speed will not be denied. He has always been the fastest player on the team with the best vision, but Rod Brind'Amour has been reluctant to use him in the top six because of his defensive issues. Necas has shut the haters up with his play on the top line. Necas leads the team with a 73.08% Goals for.

He has proven that he belongs on the top line, he can fill in when Aho gets thrown out of the circle and the two have proven to be a true Batman and Robin. They have combined for multiple OT goals this season, and they have proven lately that they can produce this magic during regulation.

Douglas Hamilton keeps it rolling

Dougie Hamilton now has the longest point streak this year with a 14-point streak. Many will point to the fact that he has not scored a ton of goals this year, but his play continues to

set up his teammates for success. It was also reported that his contract talks have been pushed to end of the season.

He has been a great player, and has continued to improve the longer he has been able to play since coming back from a broken leg. His 54.55% Corsi leads all defensemen on the team for possession. He has proven that he has picked up where he left off last year.

Looking Ahead

The Canes now have two games against the Chicago Blackhawks coming up in Chicago. The Blackhawks have been struggling to score as of late, and with a confident Canes team, it should be expected that they can keep pace with a Tampa Bay team that is playing its next games against the desperate Columbus Blue Jackets.



## Rees, Wolves rally for win

Jamieson Rees' second goal of the game snaps the fourth and final tie

Rookie forward Jamieson Rees' third-period goal erased the game's fourth and final tie as the Chicago Wolves claimed a 5-4 victory over the host Rockford IceHogs Sunday afternoon.

Rees produced the Wolves' final two goals while forwards Tanner Jeannot, Sean Malone and Ryan Suzuki also scored during a wild affair that featured three lead changes during an eight-minute span of the second period.

Rookie goaltender Devin Cooley, loaned to the Wolves Saturday afternoon, posted 20 saves in his AHL debut to earn the win as Chicago (12-2-0-1) extended its winning streak to four games and increased its Central Division lead to 5 points over the Texas Stars.

Rockford's Dylan McLaughlin gave the hosts the initial lead when he knocked home a rebound for a power-play goal at 16:34 of the first period.

The Wolves pulled even with just 23 seconds left in the first when Jeannot zoomed up the right wing to lead a 3-on-1 rush. Instead of dishing the puck, Jeannot fired from the faceoff dot and placed his wrist in the top left corner to make it 1-1.

During an eight-minute stretch of the second period, the Wolves and IceHogs combined for five goals as the lead changed hands three times.

Malone started the roller-coaster ride at 4:38 by raising his stick and redirecting defenseman Matt Murphy's blast from the left point. Rockford's Evan Barratt and Wyatt Kalynuk responded to give the IceHogs a 3-2 lead at 8:03, but Suzuki and Rees answered to restore a 4-3 Wolves edge at 12:12.

Suzuki and Phil Tomasino teamed up for a 2-on-1 rush that ended with Rockford's Lucas Carlsson tipping Suzuki's cross-crease pass into the net. Rees bucked an IceHogs defender who was riding his back, then skated to the right faceoff dot and roofed a blast past goaltender Matt Tomkins.

Rockford (6-11-1-0) forged the game's fourth tie at 1:15 of the third as Josiah Slavin, making his pro debut, scored a power-play goal to lock it at 4-4.

The Wolves didn't wait long to regain the lead. Sheldon Rempal (2 assists) ringed a pass along the right boards and behind the net. Tomkins skated into the trapezoid to try to corral it, but Rees swooped in to gain possession, emerged on the other side and rammed home the wraparound for the 5-4 edge at 4:41.



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The Wolves defense clamped down and allowed just one shot over the final 15 minutes to improve the team's record to 5-0 against Rockford this year. Tomkins (2-7-1) finished with 28 saves in the loss.

Chicago hosts the Grand Rapids Griffins at 2 p.m. Thursday at the Wolves Training Facility in Hoffman Estates before resuming its four-games-in-12-days stretch with Rockford.

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# SportScan

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

1207133 Chicago Blackhawks

Chicago Blackhawks fall to 5th in the Central Division with a 3-2 loss to the Nashville Predators

By PHIL THOMPSON

MAR 28, 2021 AT 9:54 PM

Alex DeBrincat brought the Chicago Blackhawks from a two-goal deficit with third-period tallies two minutes apart, but Roman Josi quelled the rally with his third goal of the season during Nashville's 3-2 win Sunday night.

The Predators' second straight win against the Hawks propelled them to fourth in the Central Division while dropping the Hawks to fifth. Although the teams are tied with points each, the Hawks are 0-2-2 against the Predators, giving Nashville the tiebreaking edge.

"It's frustrating," DeBrincat said. "Obviously we lost too many games in this stretch to be OK with. We've got to find our way back to what we're successful with. We have that in us."

Early on, the Hawks had trouble shaking the same malaise from Saturday night, a 3-1 loss to the Predators.

"Not the start we wanted," coach Jeremy Colliton said. "Disappointed in the response, beginning in the first period, just understanding how big the game was.

"They were getting inside us and thought they created chances. It was too easy for them to create chances, and on the flip side of it they did a good job of keeping us to the outside and getting in between us and the net. Hard pressure all over the ice."

Blackhawks goalie Malcolm Subban gave up two goals in the first period.

He was a victim of bad judgment and bad luck on Viktor Arvidsson's goal 4:43 into the game. Subban went behind net to try to rim a pass to Patrick Kane, but Arvidsson blocked it and as Subban scrambled back in goal, Arvidsson's shot from below the goal kicked off Hawks defenseman Calvin de Haan's skate and banked off Subban's side and into the net.

"They got two bounces," Subban said. "Obviously the first one I probably could've made a better play behind the net, maybe prevent that. It's tough, but at the end of the day we battled back, tied the game and had chance to win the game."

On Calle Jarnkrok's goal, Mattias Ekholm took a blast from the left circle and as de Haan defended Jarnkrok in front of the net, de Haan's leg pushed Jarnkrok's leg forward and the puck deflected in off Jarnkrok's skate.

DeBrincat had his fourth two-goal game of the season and first since March 5 against Tampa Bay.

On his first goal Sunday, he took a deflected pass from Patrick Kane and fired through a tight window to goaltender Pekka Rinne's stick side. On



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DeBrincat's second goal, he raced off the left wall, then went forehand-backhand as he crossed in front of Rinne.

DeBrincat has a team-leading 18 goals on the season.

"Those are games that we're going to have to win down the stretch to make it to the playoffs," he said.

The Hawks managed just one shot on goal through three power plays and allowed a shorthanded shot attempt.

Rinne had 27 saves while Subban had 28.

Chicago Tribune LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207134 Chicago Blackhawks

Blackhawks' ineptitude against Predators continues in loss Sunday

By Ben Pope Mar 28, 2021, 9:40pm CDT

Forward Dylan Strome missed the Blackhawks' game Sunday against the Predators because of the birth of his first child, daughter Weslie.

Outside of a two-minute takeover by best friend Alex DeBrincat, he didn't miss much.

In a near-replay of the game Saturday, the Hawks were flummoxed by the Predators' active forecheck and unable to find openings in the offensive zone for most of the night. DeBrincat's two goals in the third period briefly gave them life, but the result was a 3-2 loss.

The Hawks are winless in four games against the Predators this season, scoring only six goals in those games, and now trail them in the race for the last playoff spot in the Central Division on the basis of regulation victories.

"I'm disappointed in the response, beginning in the first period, [of] just understanding how big the game was," coach Jeremy Colliton said. "It was too easy for [the Predators] to create chances. On the flip side, they did a good job of keeping us to the outside."

The Predators produced 26 scoring chances and held the Hawks to 12 — tied for their fewest in a game since March 2017. The Hawks also had only one shot on goal on three power plays.

With the Hawks trailing 2-0, DeBrincat beat goalie Pekka Rinne with a one-timer with 12:25 left, then blew past defenseman Dante Fabbro and around Rinne to tie the score with 10:35 to play.

But a sequence of blown coverages in the defensive zone gave Roman Josi an easy look on the tiebreaking goal with 6:33 left.

"Those are games that we're going to have to win down the stretch to make it the playoffs," DeBrincat said. "We did a good job coming back, but we've got to stick with it and be able to hold that tie to the end."

Beaudin back with Hawks

Rookie defenseman Nicolas Beaudin drew back into the Hawks' lineup for consecutive games Saturday and Sunday for the first time since Feb. 17 and 19.

Beaudin, who was a regular earlier this season, said he was able to continue his development seamlessly with Rockford of the American Hockey League, where he had nine points in six games while handling a massive 25-minute-per-game role.

"It was good for me to go there and play some games just to keep my momentum going," Beaudin said. "For me, [the priority is to] play as many games as I can. If it's in Chicago, it's in Chicago. If it's in Rockford, it's in Rockford."

Beaudin's analytical mind helps him to identify where he needs to improve and focus on those areas.

"I'm working on my gap, trying to angle guys, not going backward," he said. "[And] I'm trying to work on retrieving pucks, escaping left-right, making some plays down low for breakouts."

Chicago Sun Times LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207135 Chicago Blackhawks

Despite COVID restrictions, Blackhawks still enjoy food selection at this season's team meals

By Ben Pope Mar 28, 2021, 7:30am CDT

Aside from arenas packed with fans, what NHL players might miss most during this COVID-19 season are team dinners on the road.

The 29-city NHL circuit across the U.S. and Canada takes the Blackhawks — and all their opponents — within close range of many of the continent's most delicious restaurants every year. Those off- and practice-day dinners out with teammates provide rare, much-appreciated breaks from the physical, mental and even social grinds of weeklong trips.

This year, because of league policy changes designed to limit the virus' spread, those restaurant visits haven't been possible.

"On an off-day, usually you have a lot more freedom — lunch is provided, but maybe [for] dinner you go to a restaurant with a group of guys," forward Ryan Carpenter said. "Now all the meals are provided for us, all the time."

Those restaurant dinners have been replaced with an endless schedule of buffets, and not the typical kind of buffets, either. Players aren't allowed to serve themselves, and sometimes each available item comes pre-packaged.

"We're not allowed to dole it out ourselves; we have to get someone to do it for us," defenseman Ian Mitchell said. "It's a little bit different than in most years, of course."

But while the NHL's COVID-19 policy changes have affected where and how the Hawks get their food, the amount they eat — and the high quality of that food — remains unchanged.

Hockey players are notoriously ravenous. Simply to replenish their caloric output, Hawks players regularly consume food quantities that would add many pounds to the average person.

There is no McDonald's on the menu, but there is some of everything else.

"We have meals pretty much all day, pretty much everything you can think of," defenseman Connor Murphy said recently. "They coordinate with our trainers and nutritionists to make sure we've got the right stuff cooked a certain way."

The Hawks have a reputation as one of the best teams, food-wise, in the league, Murphy said. That's not only because of Chicago's world-class array of restaurants, but because the food the organization cooks in-house or caters is especially tasty and abundant.

"That's a perk that guys have here more so than other teams: the amount of food and everything being available to us all day long and on the road, [allowing us] to keep eating and getting recovered," Murphy said.

"We have a full salad bar and pretty much any kind of food you can think of. A lot of guys go with the chicken and pastas and other cooked vegetables, so nothing too crazy there. But the food has been unreal."



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He's not kidding about the fact most players, in spite of the unlimited options, seek the same regular order every time — at least for their pregame meals.

Consider how frequently chicken appears among these Hawks' go-to choices:

- Carpenter: Salad, chicken with rice.
- Mitchell: Salad, sweet potatoes, chicken with rice.
- Mattias Janmark: Salad, breaded chicken with pasta.
- Alex DeBrincat: Salad, chicken with pasta.
- Brandon Hagel: Chicken Parmesan.

DeBrincat admitted — regarding his chicken and pasta — that “when you're on the road for so long, you get sick of it a little bit.” But that doesn't stop him from going back to it every game day.

Hagel has no remorse about his obsession.

“I'm a 'chicken parm' kind of guy,” he said. “That's where I need to get my strength from for games. That's my favorite every day of the week.”

So while COVID-19 might have made acquiring food slightly less exciting and more routine for the Hawks, they're still clearly eating well.

After all, if Hagel still can charge into a four-man battle and come out with the puck during a pandemic, there's no way it can stop him from getting his beloved chicken parm, either.

Chicago Sun Times LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207136 Chicago Blackhawks

Predators remain pests for Blackhawks in 3-2 loss

John Dietz

Updated 3/28/2021 10:54 PM

Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, the sky is not falling for the Blackhawks.

Not yet, anyway.

While it's true that coach Jeremy Colliton's team has lost eight of 11 -- including a 3-2 setback to Nashville at the United Center on Sunday that dropped them into fifth place in the Central Division -- it doesn't mean the season is suddenly over and their playoff dreams have been dashed.

After all, just four days ago everyone was giddy over the fact that the Hawks swept Joel Quenneville's Florida Panthers to theoretically get their train back on the track.

Well, another derailment occurred over the weekend, thanks in large part to a pesky bunch of Predators (18-17-1) who have won five straight and jumped over the Hawks (16-15-5) into the final playoff spot in the division.

“All teams go through ebbs and flows through the year,” Colliton said. “This is ours, and we got to nip it in the bud. The positive is (because of) how we played earlier we're still in a good position in the standings.”

Despite being thoroughly outplayed much of the night, the Hawks were still in a good position Sunday after Alex DeBrincat scored a pair of third-period goals just 110 seconds apart to make it 2-2.

Unfortunately for the Hawks, a Kirby Dach turnover in the defensive zone led to the game-winning goal by Roman Josi with 6:33 remaining. Viktor Arvidsson and Eeli Tolvanen assisted with some sweet passing that led

to Josi walking down the middle and snapping a shot off that beat Malcolm Subban.

“Those are games that we're gonna have to win down the stretch to make it to the playoffs,” said DeBrincat, who has 18 goals to equal his total from all of last season. “Obviously we did a good job coming back, but we've got to stick with it and hold that tie to the end or battle and get another one.”

The Predators were a pain all night, getting in passing lanes, nipping at the Hawks' heels and yielding few scoring opportunities. They also took a 2-0 lead thanks to some crazy caroms -- the first of which was a double deflection of an Arvidsson pass that hit Calvin de Haan's skate and ricocheted off Subban's right leg. The puck trickled into the net at 4:43 of the first period.

Calle Jankrok scored 14 minutes later when Mattias Ekholm's turnaround shot bounced off him and past Subban.

DeBrincat and Colliton both agreed the Hawks have gotten away from what made them so successful during the first half of the season.

The fire, the hustle, the decisiveness, the compete level, the physicality -- it's gone MIA for large portions of recent games.

“(Be) willing to play a zero-zero shift and just leave the next line in a better spot,” Colliton said.

So stop guessing on no-look passes, assuming a teammate is there. Take an extra second or a different angle on a clearing attempt. Don't hand the puck to the opposition -- as Subban did to Arvidsson on that first goal.

“Do little things that will help your teammates have a chance at success,” Colliton said. “It may not be you who makes the play to win the game, but you can set the table for them. And then hopefully they do it for you.”

“I just feel like we were missing that edge to our game and just the commitment to do the little things that help you win.”

Strome out:

Dylan Strome became a father Sunday and did not play against Nashville. Matthew Highmore drew back into the lineup for just the second time in 13 days.

Slap shot:

Ian Mitchell had an assist for Rockford in a 5-4 loss to the Chicago Wolves on Sunday. Mitchell was assigned to the IceHogs on Saturday. Defenseman Wyatt Kalynuk had a goal and an assist as Rockford fell to 6-10-1.

Daily Herald Times LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207137 Chicago Blackhawks

Dach returns to Hawks just in time for stretch run

BY CHARLIE ROUMELIOTIS

After missing the first 34 games because of a right wrist injury, Kirby Dach made his much-anticipated season debut on Saturday at the United Center. But the party was spoiled by a 3-1 loss to the Nashville Predators, who have pulled within two points of the No. 4 spot in the Central Division.

“It felt good,” Dach said. “Obviously, there's still some things that I'd like to get better at, but that doesn't include what's going on with my wrist and injury-wise. I felt good out there. It's good to get back in the swing of



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things. I think there's still another level that I can take my game to to help the team win here."

Dach started the game as the third-line center alongside Mattias Janmark and Dylan Strome but played with Patrick Kane in the third period when the Blackhawks were trailing by two. And he didn't look limited in any way.

The 20-year-old center recorded four shot attempts (one on goal), won four of 10 faceoffs and logged 20:08 of ice time, which ranked third among team forwards; only Alex DeBrincat (23:03) and Kane (23:07) had more.

"I thought he did well," head coach Jeremy Colliton said. "Skated well, was aggressive and won some races and made some plays. Obviously you can see he's going to help us. And he'll keep getting better the more he plays. So happy for him. He's worked extremely hard to get back in. It's big for our team he's with us now."

Dach, who suffered the wrist injury in Team Canada's lone exhibition game at the 2021 IIHF World Junior Championship and underwent surgery on Dec. 28, was originally put on a four-to-five-month timetable. His season appeared to be in jeopardy at the time, but he never lost confidence that he'd be able to return at some point.

"I never had any doubts in my mind that I was going to play," Dach said. "I knew what was going to happen and the work I had to put in to get back here. I just put my head down and went to work that way. Feels good to be back but at the same time, feeling's a little bit moot right now because we lost the game."

With Saturday's loss, the Blackhawks have dropped seven of their last 10 games in regulation and are trying to stave off three teams for the final playoff spot. The NHL trade deadline is April 12, but the Blackhawks essentially got a free acquisition in Dach, who returned way ahead of schedule and is back just in time to help his team for the stretch run.

"We're right in the mix of things and we want to be in that playoff spot," Dach said. "It's going to be a fight till the end. We've got to find a way to bring it each and every night and that's that."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207138

Chicago Blackhawks

Make or break time for Blackhawks as Predators jump them for playoff spot

By Scott Powers Mar 28, 2021

This feels like a crossroads moment for the Blackhawks.

With 20 games to go, the Blackhawks can go one of two ways. Either they fade away from here on out or they battle for the final Central playoff spot.

The Blackhawks lost slight control of their fate by losing to the Nashville Predators 3-2 Sunday at the United Center. With the Predators sweeping the two-game series, they overtook the Blackhawks for fourth place in the Central. They both have the same number of points and winning percentage, but the Predators own the regulation-wins tiebreaker.

The Blackhawks made Sunday's game competitive behind the individual brilliance of Alex DeBrincat, who erased a 2-0 deficit with consecutive goals in the third period, but the Blackhawks didn't win much of the 60 minutes otherwise. The Predators had a 22-10 edge in scoring chances and a 59.2 expected goals percentage, according to Natural Stat Trick. The Predators led 10-4 in slot shots on net, according to Sportlogiq. The Predators had a better scoring opportunity on the Blackhawks' power

plays than the Blackhawks. The analytics, the eye test, it all came up in the Predators' favor Sunday.

Considering that, it wasn't surprising Blackhawks coach Jeremy Colliton had a long list of areas he'd like to see his team improve in to get back to where they once were.

"Skating, work ethic, competitiveness, relentlessness, defending hard," Colliton said. "Being willing to play a zero-zero shift and just leave the next line in a better spot. Being harder to play against physically. Being willing to grind. The best thing you do may be just finishing in the offensive zone, or maybe you start in D-zone and just don't get scored on. That can be a positive for the team. Draw a penalty. Do little things that will help your teammates have a chance at success. It may not be you who makes the play to win the game, but you can set the table for them. And then hopefully they do it for you. I just feel like we were missing that edge to our game and just the commitment to do the little things that help you win."

What was most disappointing for Colliton was he didn't see that edge when the puck dropped Sunday. Coming off Saturday's loss and the positive play he got from the third period in that game, he was hoping for more come Sunday, and the Blackhawks didn't give it to him. The Predators were flying around making plays and the Blackhawks weren't.

There are people, especially those in analytics, who expect the Blackhawks to fall out of the playoff race during the final stretch. The Blackhawks have defied the analytics much of the season thanks to their goaltending and power play. They're last in the NHL with a 45.34 expected goals percentage in five-on-five play. Will they prove those people right or wrong? Time will tell.

What is known is the Blackhawks' schedule isn't getting any easier. They now host the Carolina Hurricanes for two games. The Hurricanes are 7-1-2 in their last 10 games. That's followed by another game with the Predators, then two games with the Dallas Stars, then two games with the Columbus Blue Jackets. Aside from two more games with the Detroit Red Wings, the Blackhawks' other 18 games will all be against teams ahead of them in the standings or fighting with them for that fourth spot.

"They're really important for us to learn and learn quick," DeBrincat said. "We've got another game Tuesday, so we need points in that. Every game from now on is pretty much do or die. We've got to figure out what our identity is. We've got to go back to what we were doing earlier in the season: battling hard, getting cheap goals, going to the net, getting pucks on net and doing all that. We've gotten away from that a little bit, and that's why we're struggling right now. We'll be fine. We have a good team. We've just got to figure it out real quick and we'll be back and ready to play."

1. The Predators' game-winning goal by Roman Josi accentuated one of the Blackhawks' biggest issues in the game — getting the puck out of the defensive zone cleanly.

The Predators can pounce on the puck quickly. Instead of clearing the puck and surviving for another shift, the Blackhawks twice tried to too passively pass the puck out of the zone, and the Predators made them pay for it.

On the following play, Kirby Dach gives the Predators the puck back with his turnover. The video is stopped for a moment, so you can see his exit options. After that, Brandon Hagel uncharacteristically gets caught flat-footed and watching the puck at the blue line and Josi past him into the slot. That moment is also stopped.

"We turned the puck over, and then the D jumped by our forward," Colliton said.

2. The Blackhawks had a similar issue on the Predators' second goal. On that one, Nicolas Beaudin allowed the Predators to remain in the offensive zone with a turnover.



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The Beaudin turnover was followed by a number of quality looks, including the final one, when Calvin de Haan wasn't able to get position at the net.

"Probably gotta go through it clip by clip," Colliton said of the exit issues. "Overall we can execute better. We can be cleaner with the puck. We can do a better job being an option. If there is pressure, maybe you've just got to hold the guy off, protect the puck, buy yourself a little more time to make a play. Winning confrontations at the blue line against their pinch. There's a lot of little things we could do to get out cleaner."

3. DeBrincat scored 18 goals in 70 games last season. He matched that total this season in his 32nd game.

Here was his first goal Sunday:

Later in the period, he scored another one:

DeBrincat, of course, downplayed the achievement.

"They're just kinda going in this year," DeBrincat said. "A lot of times those shots don't go in, and you lose the puck. Been getting a lot of chances this year. I'm playing with really good players. It's been good. They're giving me a chance to put the puck in the net."

4. Malcolm Subban got the nod in net with it being the second game of a back-to-back. This felt like a vital game for him to remain the No. 2 goalie. Since his shutout Feb. 27, he had allowed 18 goals on 140 shots for an .871 save percentage in his last four games. If that trend continued, it would make sense to give Collin Delia a look again.

Subban stepped up to the challenge. Aside from misplaying the puck on the Predators' first goal, he didn't do much wrong in the game. He finished with 28 saves on 31 shots.

This was probably his best save:

5. Dylan Strome became the newest father on the Blackhawks. He missed Sunday's game because of the birth of his first child, Weslie Margaret Strome, who came in at 7 pounds, 7 ounces, the Blackhawks announced.

The Blackhawks don't hit the road until Friday, so Strome should have some time to bond with his child.

6. David Kampf has to feel cursed not to have a goal on the season yet. He was denied by Pekka Rinne's helmet Sunday.

7. Blackhawks prospect Lukas Reichel picked up another point for Eisbaren Berlin on Sunday in Germany. He has eight goals and 15 assists in 28 games. His 0.82 points per game is the fourth-highest average among under-20 players in Germany's top division ever.

Blackhawks general manager Stan Bowman recently said he'd like to get Eichel over next season. It wouldn't be surprising if he pushed for an NHL spot right out of the gate. I wrote about him at length recently if you missed it.

8. Blackhawks defenseman prospect Slava Demin has not had any discussions about signing an entry-level contract, according to a source. Demin is a junior at the University of Denver. His rights were acquired as part of the Robin Lehner trade with the Vegas Golden Knights last season.

9. I need to go back and watch the Rockford IceHogs' last two games, but I wonder if Evan Barratt might be the next prospect to get an NHL look? He's had a goal and an assist in each of his last two games. He also has four goals and three assists over his last eight games.

When I watched the IceHogs early in the season, Barratt and Wyatt Kalynuk were the two players I thought would likely make their NHL debuts this season.

We're recording a new podcast Monday. Email us at [email protected] or call us at 714-759-4529 to be included.

The Athletic LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207146

Dallas Stars

While Stars remain confident after loss to Panthers, they're running out of time to turn the season around

By Matthew DeFranks 10:13 PM on Mar 28, 2021 CDT

This Stars season — a tapestry slowly being picked apart stitch by stitch, most recently in Sunday's 4-1 loss to the Florida Panthers — has been woven by the threads of hope.

There's the hope that the injuries stop or that finishers finish. There's the hope that scoring chances evolve into goals or that the schedule doesn't bludgeon the Stars. The hope that Tyler Seguin or Ben Bishop can be saviors. The hope that Roope Hintz or Alexander Radulov even suit up.

With each passing game treading water in the Central Division standings, the hope becomes more desperate — a call to somebody, anybody, something, anything to repair the Stars. Instead, the oncoming reality is closing in to crush the ray of optimism.

Florida scored the final four goals Sunday to erase an early and brief 1-0 lead. Jonathan Huberdeau scored twice, Anthony Duclair scored on a penalty shot and Owen Tippett added an empty-netter. Chris Driedger made 33 saves.

Jason Robertson scored the lone goal for the Stars, who finished a five-game homestand with one win. Dallas finishes the season with 16 of its remaining 24 games on the road.

"None of us in that room think we're down and out," alternate captain Blake Comeau said. "I still feel like we're a very confident group. We've just got to go out and play with that confidence. We've got a lot of games against teams that we're chasing. There's going to be big swings, and we still feel like we're right there."

Even with the glut of one-goal losses and pile of overtime and shootout losses, the truth is that the Stars remain in the playoff hunt. But being in the hunt does not guarantee a team anything. Only wins do, and those have been tough to come by.

The Stars are stuck in a cycle that gobbles consolation points and spits on optimism.

Since March 4, the Stars have played 15 games. Split into three-game segments, those five sections of the schedule read identically: one win, one regulation loss and one overtime or shootout loss. Dallas is collecting points by losing and riding those points into a playoff crawl in a soft Central.

If the Stars want to be in the playoffs, the chance is still there for them. They play Nashville four more times. They play Chicago four more times. They play Columbus twice more. Want to prove you belong? Transform from a hopeful team into a winning one.

Coach Rick Bowness said he talked with the team weeks ago about their standing: "Do we believe we can do it, and do we want to do it?"

"You've got to look inside yourself, get the desperation level a little higher," forward Jason Dickinson said. "The coaches can't go out and win games. They put out the game plan for us, but we've got to go out there and do it, ultimately. If we're not willing to do that, then it's on us. I think we are."

"We've got a group in here that wants it. Nobody is sitting back and saying 'Oh, next season. Oh, we've got all these injuries.' Nobody's saying that. We want to go for it. We're trying, but that first period is not good enough."



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The first period Sunday was the Stars' downfall. They were dominated in many aspects, and trailed 3-1 at intermission. Florida had 14 shots to Dallas' seven. The Panthers cashed in on a penalty shot, a power play and a bad Jamie Benn turnover in his own zone.

"To come out flat like that was really disappointing," Comeau said. "It's just going to take everyone to take a look in the mirror individually, and correct it themselves. I don't think there's anything the coaches can do or say. It's got to come within the locker room."

Bowness, alerted of Comeau's comments, shouldered blame.

"Listen, I am the head coach," he said. "It's my responsibility to get the team ready. We weren't ready to the level we need to be."

If there's proof a team can turn around, Nashville is the showcase. The Predators were left for dead after they were ravaged by injuries and buried in the standings. But a scorching stretch has vaulted them past the Stars and on the periphery of the playoff picture.

If there's proof the Stars can do it, it hasn't arrived. Maybe it does for a two-game set in Nashville this week, but that's just hopeful right now.

"The road trip is there for us if we want it," Bowness said. "If we go on the road and win some games, we're alive. We're not that far out. Even as bad as we are tonight, we're not that far out. But it has to come now."

"We're going to have to have a lot more fight in us than we showed tonight."

Briefly: Radulov remained out of the lineup with a lower-body injury. It was his sixth straight missed game. Hintz returned to the lineup after a one-game absence, and centered the top line between Jason Robertson and Joe Pavelski... Duclair's penalty shot was the second against the Stars this season (Columbus' Emil Bemstrom was denied by Jake Oettinger on March 13). Duclair's came after he was slashed by Andrew Coglian on a breakaway. The last two successful penalty shots against the Stars have both been scored by Florida. Last season, Noel Acciari beat Anton Khudobin on Dec. 20.

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207158 Florida Panthers

Panthers beat Stars, but expect Aaron Ekblad to miss 'extensive time' with leg injury

BY DAVID WILSON

MARCH 28, 2021 07:47 PM,

Jonathan Huberdeau knew from the screams how bad Aaron Ekblad's leg injury must have been.

The defenseman stayed down on the ice for more than five minutes after he planted his right leg awkwardly after taking a hit midway through the second period. The Florida Panthers' training staff came on to the ice, wrapped his left knee in a cast, then wheeled him out on a stretcher and back into the Panthers' dressing room at the American Airlines Center.

Florida was on its way to a 4-1 win against the Dallas Stars, but it was impossible for the Panthers to shake away the emotion and long-term worry about its top defenseman. When the second period ended, a procession of teammates headed into the training room to check in with Ekblad.

"It got pretty emotional," Huberdeau said.

Ekblad knew something was wrong as soon as he landed. Star defenseman Esa Lindell checked Ekblad up against the boards and he grabbed at his left knee as he crumpled to the ice. He pounded on the ice

and summoned for help. At least half a dozen of his teammates surrounded him when he finally left the ice on a stretcher. After more than five minutes of silence, the crowd of 4,026 in Dallas rose for a standing ovation.

Ekblad will undergo an MRI on his left leg Monday, but Florida (22-9-4) expects it will only confirm its fears.

The Panthers' injury list continues to grow and the latest addition seems to be the most serious.

"We think he's going to be out for an extensive time," coach Joel Quenneville said.

Ekblad left with 11:02 left in the second period and Florida struggled to regroup without the 25-year-old. The Panthers jumped out to a 3-1 lead in the first period by piling up 14 shots, then managed just four in the second, although three came after Ekblad's injury. The Stars (11-12-9) ultimately outshot Florida, 34-23, and the Panthers had just seven shots after the injury.

The Panthers, who were already playing without star forwards Aleksander Barkov and Patric Hornqvist, were left without three of their top five scorers and now might be missing their best defenseman for an extended period of time.

"It's tough to see that," defenseman Keith Yandle said. "He's been a huge part of the success that we've had."

Ekblad's injury came just a day after he played the hero in Florida's overtime win against the Stars on Saturday. Ekblad scored an apparent game-winning goal in the final minute of overtime, only to have it wiped out because he was offside. Less than a minute later, he actually scored with 9.3 seconds left to snap the Panthers' season-long three-game losing streak.

On Sunday, Ekblad assisted Huberdeau on a goal in the first period for his 22nd point of the season — fifth most on the team. With 11 goals and 11 assists, Ekblad thrust himself into contention for the Norris Trophy, awarded to the NHL's top defenseman.

Now Florida will have to get by without him.

"We know it's going to be bad, probably," Huberdeau said.

The All-Star left wing's best performance in weeks, however, helped the Panthers survive.

Huberdeau scored twice in the first period to bust out of a weeks-long slump and push the Panthers out to a 3-1 lead, then he assisted on right wing Owen Tippett's empty-net goal with 1:05 left to clinch the win.

Huberdeau, who hadn't posted a multi-point game since March 15 and hadn't scored a goal since March 18, scored once at even strength to tie the game at 1-1, then on a power play with 6:23 left in the period to put Florida ahead 3-1.

The forward had just one goal in the Panthers' previous 11 games before he scored twice in the first 14 minutes.

It was enough for Chris Driedger. The goaltender made 33 saves on 34 shots to seal a second straight win and move Florida back within one point of the second-place Carolina Hurricanes in the Central Division.

"In the third period, we had to come out and play well," Huberdeau said, "and we got the win for him tonight."

Miami Herald LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207159 Florida Panthers

Florida Panthers standout Aaron Ekblad taken off on stretcher with serious leg injury



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • March 29, 2021

By STEVE SVEKIS

MAR 28, 2021 AT 10:12 PM

Florida Panthers standout defenseman Aaron Ekblad was taken off the ice on a stretcher after sustaining a serious injury during the Panthers' game Sunday in Dallas against the Stars.

With the Panthers ahead 3-1 and on a power play with 11:02 left in the second period, Ekblad was taken into the corner boards in his offensive zone by Dallas' Esa Lindell.

Lindell appeared to catch Ekblad's right skate with his stick, resulting in Florida's alternate captain hopping airborne and then landing with his full weight on his left leg. It appeared Ekblad's leg gave way, sending the former All-Star to the ice, writhing in pain. He immediately removed his helmet and grabbed below his knee as medical personnel arrived.

The arena fell silent for a handful of minutes until Ekblad, 25, was rolled off the surface, an air cast placed around his left lower leg.

There was no penalty called on what looked like a fairly routine play until the injury.

Panthers coach Joel Quenneville, who has seen standouts Aleksander Barkov and Patric Hornqvist also injured on the road trip, did not go into specifics pertaining to Ekblad's injury, but said: "It's not an easy game to go through... you have a defenseman controlling, playing big minutes and in all situations and you lose him. You lose his leadership. It's tough. It will be a big test for us for sure."

Ekblad is in his sixth season with Florida after he was picked first in the 2014 NHL draft.

The Ekblad injury came less than 24 hours after he had scored with 9.3 seconds left in overtime — after his apparent winner moments earlier was wiped out by a replay review — as the Panthers beat the Stars 4-3.

"I don't think I've ever seen someone score two overtime goals in the same game," Florida coach Joel Quenneville said late Saturday.

Carter Verhaeghe got the Panthers to overtime with a hat trick and they snapped a three-game losing streak that marked their longest of the season. Sergei Bobrovsky made 31 saves in the first of back-to-back games between the teams in Dallas.

Ekblad scored on a backhand on a 2-on-1 after being denied a goal with 47.8 seconds remaining in the extra period when a video review determined he was offside.

On Sunday evening, the Panthers got three points from Jonathan Huberdeau and a goal each from Owen Tippett and Anthony Duclair as they rallied to a 4-1 win in Dallas.

The 22-9-4 Panthers have 48 points — in third place in the Central Division, two points back of the Tampa Bay Lightning and one behind the Carolina Hurricanes — and begin a weeklong four-game homestand on Tuesday against the Detroit Red Wings.

Sun Sentinel LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207160 Florida Panthers

Serious injury to Ekblad casts shadow on Panthers win at Dallas

Published 7 hours ago on March 28, 2021 By George Richards

Jonathan Huberdeau scored twice in the first period but it was a serious-looking injury to star defenseman Aaron Ekblad which cast a pall on the Panthers 4-1 win in Dallas Sunday night.

Ekblad, the top pick of the 2014 draft, was having his best NHL season before he had to be carted off the ice by Dallas EMTs after an awkward collision in the second period as his left skate appeared to be wedged between the ice and the boards.

On Saturday, Ekblad scored twice in OT — only one counted, obviously — to end Florida's three-game losing streak.

Sunday, it is possible his season may be over. Coach Joel Quenneville said he expects Ekblad to be out an "extensive" amount of time.

"Tough blow for us," Anthony Duclair said.

Before the injury, Huberdeau ended his five-game scoring slump in a big way, scoring twice in the first period to give the Panthers a 3-1 lead they would not give up.

Florida's two-game sweep of the host Stars was most welcomed after the team opened this five-game road trip with its first three-game losing streak of the season.

But again, there were few smiles around the Panthers on Sunday.

The Panthers are back in Sunrise on Tuesday to face a Detroit team coming off a sweep of its own as the Wings took out Columbus in consecutive days.

Florida remains shorthanded, playing without Sasha Barkov for the fourth consecutive game and Patric Hornqvist for a second.

Those two are expected back in the coming days. Ekblad could be out for some time. The fear is a broken leg as well as damage to the knee.

Quenneville said Ekblad would be evaluated by doctors in South Florida on Monday and they hoped to have a clearer indication of the severity of the injury.

Florida was coming off the emotional high of a 4-3 win the night before one in which Carter Verhaeghe got a hat trick and Ekblad got the OT winner with 10 seconds left.

"Momentum is obviously important," Ekblad said before the game.

The Panthers did not have it in the opening moments Sunday night as they trailed 1-0 on a power play goal at 4:32 (with Ekblad in the penalty box) but they got it right back.

Huberdeau gave the Panthers much life as he picked off the puck on the side wall in the offensive zone, drove in and sniped one bar-down to tie it 32 seconds later.

Florida kept its legs moving and creating chances and less than 90 seconds after Huberdeau scored, Duclair was slashed on his way to the net.

Duclair was awarded a penalty shot and he buried the chance, giving the Panthers a 2-1 lead at 6:29 of the opening period.

At 13:37 of the period, Florida led 3-1 as Huberdeau sent one through Jake Oettinger's skates on the second power play chance of the night.

Florida's final tally came on Owen Tippett's empty net goal off a feed from Huberdeau with 1:05 remaining.

Chris Driedger made 33 saves for his ninth win this season.

"That was a very important win for us," Quenneville said. "You lose a guy like Ek, and you know the severity of it, it is not an easy game to go through. We stayed with it and battled. Lose a guy who is having that kind of season ... you lose his leadership. It is tough, will be a good test for us."

For Huberdeau, who has been a close friend of Ekblad since he joined the team in 2014, Sunday was a tough blow.

"We have been together a long time," Huberdeau said. "It is obviously tough to see a teammate, a good friend go down like that."



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### SCHEDULE UPDATE

The NHL finally got around to extending its regular season by a few days and, as expected, bumped back the Panthers and Lightning final series by a couple of days.

Florida was supposed to play host to the Lightning on May 6-8, but the first game was postponed. It will now be on Monday, May 10.

So, the season-ending series between the Panthers and Lightning will now be May 8-11 in Sunrise.

### HEPO RETURNS

The Panthers made one roster move on Sunday, calling forward Aleks Heponiemi back and placing him on the taxi squad.

Heponiemi has only played in three games for the Panthers this season but his debut was memorable as he got the game-winner in Detroit on Jan. 30.

In three games at AHL Syracuse, Heponiemi had four assists.

Florida may have to bring up another player for the taxi squad with the likelihood Anton Stralman goes back into the lineup. Grigori Denisenko, Brady Keeper or Chase Priskie would make sense.

Defenseman Noah Juulsen is on a conditioning assignment and should be back as well.

### GAME HIGHLIGHTS

Dallas defenseman John Klingberg flipped the puck into the stands 55 seconds in and gave Florida a power play chance early.

The Panthers got three shots off but could not beat Oettinger — at least right here.

The Stars took the early lead as Roope Hintz's shot from the right side deflected off Radko Gudas and Jason Robertson as Ekblad seethed in the penalty box following a roughing call.

But then Huberdeau broke loose, grabbing the puck off the side wall and went straight to the net without passing it up to tie it at 1.

After Duclair scored to make it 2-1 on the penalty shot, Huberdeau got back on the scorecard but threading a shot from Keith Yandle (playing in consecutive game No. 901) to give Florida a two-goal lead at 13:37.

Florida outshot Dallas 14-7 in the opening period and had a 23-13 shot attempt advantage as well.

The Panthers looked like the much better team in the first despite the 1-0 Dallas lead early on.

### GEORGE'S THREE STARS OF THE GAME

F Jonathan Huberdeau, Florida

F Anthony Duclair, Florida

G Chris Driedger, Florida

### ON DECK: RED WINGS AT PANTHERS

When: Tuesday, 7

Where: BB&T Center, Sunrise

Tickets: [AVAILABLE HERE](#)

Season series: Florida leads 4-2.

TV/Radio: FSF/560-AM

Florida Hockey Now LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207161 Florida Panthers

Aaron Ekblad injured, carted off in Florida Panthers game in Dallas

Published 8 hours ago on March 28, 2021 By George Richards

Less than 24 hours after he was the hero of the Florida Panthers overtime win in Dallas, star defenseman Aaron Ekblad appeared to be seriously injured and had to be carted off the ice Sunday night.

With 11:02 left in the second period, Ekblad chased down a puck toward the half wall, turned and was hit.

It looked like his left skate was caught in the small gap between the ice and the half boards, the impact of the hit apparently taken by his left leg.

Ekblad immediately hit the ice clutching his left knee and looked to be in considerable pain.

The game was stopped as soon as officials saw him writhing on the ice and, not long after Florida's medical staff got to him, local EMTs came onto the ice with a wheeled stretcher.

Ekblad was stabilized on the ice and gave a wave as he was carted off.

Obviously, the severity of the injury is not known but it certainly does not look good.

Coach Joel Quenneville said after the game that Ekblad would fly back to Fort Lauderdale with the team and would be checked out by specialists Monday.

He said the team expects Ekblad to miss considerable time.

Ekblad, 25, is having perhaps his best season in the NHL since the Panthers selected him first overall in 2014 and losing him for an extended period of time — or the rest of this season — will hurt the Panthers.

Florida was already playing without two of their top players as Sasha Barkov missed the past four games and Patric Hornqvist two.

General manager Bill Zito was already thought to be in the market for an additional defenseman before the April 12 trade deadline and now he most certainly is.

Florida Hockey Now LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207223 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Corey Perry's passion, desire to win fuelling season with Canadiens

Eric Engels

MONTREAL—Why would a Stanley Cup winner, two-time Olympic gold medalist, World Cup champion, member of the exclusive Triple Gold Club, former Hart Trophy winner, former Maurice Richard Trophy winner and four-time NHL all-star who has earned over \$85 million through the first 15 years of his career decide to sign for the league minimum in his 16th season with a team that can't even guarantee him a spot on the roster?

Why would someone so accomplished make the heartbreaking choice of leaving his wife and three-year-old son for an extended period—and for the second time in just months—to join a deep team that has warned him it's likely he'll have to start on the taxi squad?

"Because I love playing hockey," Corey Perry said in an interview with Sportsnet earlier this week. "I love going to the rink, I love being around



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the guys, I love the camaraderie, I love the competitiveness and I know there's still lots of good hockey left in me.

"But the main thing is I want to win. I've had that feeling before—I was young, and I don't know if I appreciated it as much as I should've. It was only my second year in the league and I thought maybe every year you could do this, but I've only been back to the Stanley Cup Final once and that was last year and we lost in six. You get that feeling and you're so close that you want to continue that journey and you want to get to that final and win."

When Canadiens general manager Marc Bergevin made a contract offer on Dec. 28, Perry, with the blessing and support of wife Blakeny, immediately signed, packed up his gear and a few belongings, said a tearful goodbye to his son Griffin and then drove straight from the family's London, Ont., home to his new place in Montreal.

"I got the call, it was like 9:30, 10 in the morning, and I was on the road by 1 p.m. driving to Quebec," the 35-year-old said. "It was about a seven-hour drive by myself and I had some time to think, get excited and reflect on what's at stake and where we can go."

There had been conversations with other teams, but no official offers outside of Montreal's. Perry had a sense something would come soon enough from someone else, but there was no guarantee another opportunity would come with a team that would give him a chance to resolve the unfinished business of last fall.

The Canadiens, who had an unexpectedly good run in the Toronto bubble before adding Jake Allen, Joel Edmundson, Tyler Toffoli and Josh Anderson to their team, presented exactly that.

"I jumped at it," said Perry. "I knew a little bit about their team, and watching them in the bubble and seeing where they were going and the additions that Marc Bergevin made, I thought this team had a really good chance and I jumped at it right away."

Since landing in Montreal, Perry's gone from taxi squad to utility vehicle squad, from bottom six to top six within games—producing six goals and six assists in 24 games.

It's not just Perry's production that's stood out, as he's averaged only 12:24 per game, it's the influence he's had on a power play that's scored 10 goals in its last 29 attempts and soared to the top of the NHL since Dominique Ducharme took over from Claude Julien and Alex Burrows took over from Kirk Muller as Canadiens coaches. The 6-foot-3 right-hander put one in himself, set up two more and stood in front of the net on another four.

The Canadiens have also scored three goals late in games with their net empty and Perry's accounted for one, assisted on one and screened the goalie on the other.

Tyler Seguin, Perry's old Stars teammate who's been sidelined from all games this season post-hip surgery, said no one should be surprised.

"When I see the highlights, I see Corey Perry scoring Corey Perry goals," Seguin said when we caught up with him last week. "He's so good on the power play in front of the net, we didn't talk enough about it in Dallas through the media. I don't care if you're 20, 30 or 40, it's a special gift he has and he's a special player."

Perry started as one in Anaheim. The New Liskeard, Ont., native was drafted 28th overall by the Mighty Ducks in 2003, halfway through a prolific junior career with the Ontario Hockey League's London Knights, and he made his NHL debut with them in 2005-06—their last season before changing their name to the Ducks.

Perry jumped from 13 goals and 25 points in 56 games his rookie season to 17 goals and 44 points in his sophomore year, which culminated with six goals and 15 points in 21 playoff games and a Stanley Cup celebration. He then cemented himself as one of the best players in the NHL, with five consecutive seasons of at least 70 games played, 27 goals scored, 60 points notched and 104 penalty minutes served.

In 2010-11 he scored 50 goals and 98 points and won the Hart and Rocket Richard Trophies. And Perry continued to score a minimum of 33 goals in four of five seasons that followed (he had 15 in 44 games in the lockout-abridged 2013 season).

It wasn't until 2016-17 that the goals started to dry up—19 in 82 games that year, 17 in 71 the following one—and his decline became undeniable.

"It was tough," said Perry.

But he seemed to be able to put it in perspective immediately, adopting the attitude that he could contribute in other ways and still prove himself valuable every time he stepped on the ice.

Perry's role was reduced, but those close to him say he never let on that he was bothered by it.

"I think the most impressive thing I've seen from Perris, and I think it speaks to him as a person and teammate and it's probably what I'll remember most about him after we're done playing hockey, is that he was a Hart Trophy winner and near the end in Anaheim it just wasn't the same—everyone reaches a point where those goals don't go in and the production goes down—but his attitude, how he was around the rink and who he was towards us never changed," said former Ducks and Stars teammate Andrew Cogliano in a telephone interview last Tuesday. "I wasn't a player like him, and there's not many who are, but I envision that when you are of his calibre and things aren't the same, I'm sure there's players whose moods change and perspectives change at the rink and on an everyday basis. Perris' never did.

"I'm pretty confident anyone that ever played with Perris would say the same thing. That's why I think he's always on winning teams is because he has that attitude and that mindset, and he's a guy that you just want around."

A guy willing to battle through mental adversity, and one willing to fight through the physical grind, too.

It was torturous for Perry on that front over the two seasons prior to this one. In his last year in Anaheim, he tore the meniscus in his right knee in warmup of a pre-season game and then had surgery to repair that and a long-damaged MCL. It led to a four-month rehabilitation before returning to play (nowhere near 100 per cent) for the final 31 games of the season.

"It felt normal," Perry said. "But being comfortable on the ice? I'm probably looking back and saying, 'Yeah, I was comfortable,' but I wasn't comfortable in doing the things that I do."

\*I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

The Ducks could tell. They bought out the final two years of Perry's contract in the spring of 2019, after he produced just six goals and 10 points and finished as a minus-16.

Then he signed a one-year, \$1.5-million pact with the Stars. It was an immediate shot at redemption, nearly spoiled by some more terrible luck.

"It got off, no pun intended, on the wrong foot," said Perry. "Walking down your stairs to let your dog out and you trip on the last step and break your foot the day before training camp starts—that doesn't help. And you're going to a new team.

"Not having a training camp, you miss four weeks and the first seven games of the season and you're coming in—you're around the team but you're not skating—pretty much a fresh face and trying to learn everything on the fly. I think I had two practices and I played. It's not easy. As much as people think you just go out and play, you're playing with brand new people, you have no idea, no chemistry and all those things come into play."

With only five goals and 21 points in 57 games, the idea that Perry was done being an effective player was gaining traction outside of the Stars' room.

Inside it, the opposite was happening.



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"I wish I could've been his teammate for a longer time," said Seguin. "It's kind of the clichés of the ultimate guy, the ultimate winner and the ultimate competitor, but that's who he is. It was great to have another voice like that in the dressing room, and his insight and his passion for the game was contagious. Loved being around him. He was a pretty fun guy, but his resume speaks for how he is as a person and a player. He just knows how to win, knows what it takes, and when he spoke up he had everyone's attention. It was great."

Particularly in the playoffs, where Perry had five goals and nine points in 27 games and helped propel the Stars to within two wins of the Cup. It was a confidence-inspiring process.

Perry said it left him "wanting more, wanting to continue to play and wanting to have that chance to win."

He feels the Canadiens have given him that chance. They signed him and have used him the same way the Stars did—mostly in a fourth-line role, but also on their top power play unit and as a rover who fills in on whichever line needs a boost or is most likely to come up with a rally goal late in games.

Perry has loved every second of it.

"Everything about being in Montreal has been great," he said. "The organization has been phenomenal, and we're trying everything we can to put a good product on the ice and go out there and try to win every single night. What I see of this team is that it's a special group and we're looking forward to continuing this season and making that push in those playoffs."

Perry's hopeful that will be with at least some fans back at the Bell Centre. And he's expecting that, as COVID restrictions loosen in Quebec, once the majority of the at-risk population gets vaccinated, he can finally have his family join him.

"It's been tough," he said of being away from Blakeny and Griffin. "Obviously with a three-year-old at home, he's got his pre-school and she has a little bit of help there... I talk to him every morning before he goes to school, and every day it's a little bit more talking. He wants to tell me about his cars and his transformers and things like that. It's been good that way in that FaceTime is live, but it's been hard not being there and seeing him grow up, having a chance to skate on the outdoor rink that my buddy built in our backyard for the winter."

But Perry's chasing the dream while he still can, as his family and friends want him to.

"He's a guy that really loves the game, and I think he loves being part of something special like that with a special organization, and he loves being in the heat of things in such a special hockey atmosphere and there's no better place than Montreal and places like that," said Cogliano. "I think you're going to see big moments from him, I really do. I'll be watching, and when it happens I won't be surprised."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207224 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' Nate Schmidt still learning new city amid unusual season

Iain MacIntyre

March 28, 2021, 12:15 PM

VANCOUVER — Like anyone new to Vancouver who loves adventure outside, Nate Schmidt sees the mountains and the ocean and endless possibilities.

"Guys talk about salmon fishing, and that would be so cool," the Vancouver Canucks defenceman said. "I'd love to go whale watching, snowmobiling in the mountains. We're not allowed to go skiing, but maybe tubing. Could I go sledding? I think that's OK. A lot of outdoor stuff, which is what I love."

Traded to the Canucks last fall by the Vegas Golden Knights, Schmidt, a Minnesotan, always wondered what it would be like to live in Vancouver. Now he knows — except he doesn't.

NHL protocols in the season of COVID prevent players from doing most things the rest of us are able to do even with provincial health restrictions. Players can't even go out for dinner.

The Canucks, who played more than anyone at the start of the season — 16 games in 27 nights — are suddenly on a six-day break that makes about as much sense as the rest of their 2021 schedule.

It probably comes too late in the shortened hockey season to do much good for the team, which stumbled its way into a deep hole with a 6-11-0 start and has been trying frantically, many would say hopelessly, to catch up in the Canadian division standings since then.

But players, as tired mentally as physically, finally get a chance to rest even if there are practices before they play the Calgary Flames on Wednesday.

"Take a breath," Schmidt said this week in a Zoom call.

In an interview with Sportsnet before the Canucks' break began, Schmidt said it has been difficult to get to know his new home city, which was always his favourite place to visit when he played for Vegas and the Washington Capitals.

Getting to know his new teammates, and especially their spouses and kids, has also been a problem.

"Eddie and I were talking the other night," Schmidt said, referring to defence partner Alex Edler. "He said: 'You know how wild it is that I haven't met Allie yet?' I said: 'Yeah, I haven't met your wife, your kids, nobody.' It's been tough on that end. The beauty of sports is that you automatically get a family with your team."

Usually, you do.

Allie Reinke, Schmidt's partner, moved to Vancouver with him after the trade. They met at the University of Minnesota, although they didn't go to school together. Schmidt was using his alma mater's training facilities when he spotted Reinke, who was on the Gophers' women's soccer team.

"We obviously didn't hit it off at that moment because she blew me off," Schmidt laughed. "Then she blew me off again. Maybe once more after that."

Reinke is a graphic designer, Schmidt said. She has been working out of their Yaletown condo.

"I'm not usually a huge walker but we've been doing a lot of seawall walks," he said. "I like being by the water. I've been rocking the water taxis because it's outside and I'm still allowed to do that, which is fun, buzzing around."

In the first month of the season, Schmidt seemed mostly to be buzzing around his own zone as the Canucks struggled to build structure and cohesiveness. Schmidt played both sides of the ice and there was a turnstyle of defence pairings as Vancouver bled scoring chances and goals, and coach Travis Green tried to find combinations that worked.

It wasn't the start to the rest of his career that the 29-year-old Schmidt envisioned.



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"I wanted to come in and showcase everything in my game in the first shift," he said. "I can do this, I can do that, let me show you all at once. But that's not hockey. It's letting the game come to you."

31 Thoughts: The Podcast

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

"With Braden here (former Washington Capitals teammate Braden Holtby), at least I had somebody to bounce things off of. You can talk to him, like: 'I'm friggin bumming right now. I'm trying too hard. It's like quicksand; the harder I work, the worse it gets.' You don't want to let your new teammates know that you're upset by how things have gone, maybe feeling a little bit vulnerable. I felt like there were a lot of games I was trying to do so much."

"That's why the game has gotten so much better for Alex and I over the last couple of weeks. We've both gotten to the point where we know what we expect out of each other. Those things mean so much to a pair, mean so much to your group. I feel so much more comfortable with him and how much we talk on the ice. Jordie Benn one game said: 'You guys are like a bickering old couple.'"

Schmidt said he took it as a compliment.

He and Edler have been paired since the Feb. 8 game in Toronto that started the uptick in Vancouver's season. The Canucks dominated the Maple Leafs for two periods and still lost 3-1. But they started managing the puck better, played with more intensity and defensive structure.

The Canucks ended a six-game losing streak two games later, then went 10-5-3 before damaging their playoff chances by getting swept over a two-game span by Winnipeg.

Schmidt's average ice time of 20:16 is down slightly from the 21:59 he logged in Vegas. With two goals and eight points in the past 18 games -- after three points in his first 19 as a Canuck -- Schmidt is starting to contribute to the attack like he did with the Golden Knights while filling a matchup role on defence that he became accustomed to in Vegas.

He loves playing with Edler, 34, but said he has had to tone down his on-ice chatter.

"It's kind of a bummer not having fans, for obvious reasons," Schmidt said. "But it's also a bummer that you can hear everything. So if I call for a puck from Eddie, the other guy (from the opposing team) is coming over. If I yell 'wall,' all of sudden their guy peels off and he's like: 'Sorry, man, I literally heard the call so I went there.'"

"I'm not talking like a standard D-to-D (pass). Most of the time it's on the breakout when you use your terminology for however you want to play it. If there's time when I call it, their other guy is coming over. So sometimes, we've had to kind of adapt to it so I can't call it right away. I have to be late so that they're not sitting there picking apart what you're saying."

During the interview, Schmidt asked the reporter questions about his family. He said he likes to know about people he deals with. Even 37 games into the season, Schmidt said he still doesn't know his teammates as well as he'd like.

"I'm a people person," he said. "Social stuff is usually my forte. At this point of the year ... all the things that you would have gotten already (in a normal season) hasn't happened. Halloween party, Christmas get-togethers -- the stuff where you really kind of get to know everybody. I'm still getting to know guys at the rink but we're not really allowed to be together. It's just hard to get to the grassroots of somebody and really get to know who they are."

\*I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

"I don't like to play video games as much as I have been, but it's almost like you don't have a choice if you want to interact. I'm that guy who will

literally play anything you're playing just to be in a group again. It could be Call of Duty, could be Fortnite, could be Madden, NBA, whatever. I'm mediocre at all of them."

Schmidt said what the team needed, but couldn't get, more than anything during its difficult start was just a night out together on the road.

"Like, 'OK, guys, local pub, 20 minutes, let's go,'" he said. "Just sit there and talk through things. But the protocols kind of forced you into isolation from the guys. It really kind of forced you just to stew on your own thoughts."

As Schmidt said, those aren't always positive.

He has probably been the Canucks' best defenceman after Quinn Hughes. He's finding his game, still getting to know teammates and a new city. But after the past five seasons in Las Vegas and Washington, Schmidt is also looking at missing the Stanley Cup playoffs for the first time.

"I'm a competitive S.O.B.," he said. "You always want to push yourself to be trusted in situations. As a new guy, though, that trust and those relationships are still building."

"This is the first time I've gone through this. This is the first time I've really been in a position where you're fighting and clawing like we are now. That's been something that's been, you know, different. It gives you a new perspective on how important each game is."

And how much it takes to win.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207225 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Jack Campbell must stay 'even keel' amid heavy workload

Chris Johnston

March 28, 2021, 4:25 PM

TORONTO -- Now that Jack Campbell has control of the Toronto Maple Leafs' crease, his coach wouldn't mind seeing him go a little easier on himself.

Campbell was critical of his own performance in two recent victories, including saying, "I just didn't have it tonight" after his teammates rallied for a 4-3 overtime win against the Edmonton Oilers on Saturday.

There can be limitations to that kind of internal standard, especially with goaltending partner Frederik Andersen sidelined by a lower-body injury and a busy stretch of games on deck. Campbell has made three straight starts for the Leafs -- all victories -- and will likely shoulder the heaviest workload of his NHL career in the coming weeks.

"I think you've got to be even keel, especially the more you play," Leafs coach Sheldon Keefe said following a rare Sunday practice. "You've got to recognize there's going to be ups and downs."

Campbell allowed three goals on 20 shots to the Oilers, but Keefe pointed out that he still played a huge role in Toronto's comeback -- stopping Connor McDavid on a Grade A chance late in the third period before staring down Darnell Nurse on a 2-on-1.

"One of those goes in, we're leaving the game without any points and we're disappointed here today. You make those saves, all of a sudden you get to overtime and get a bounce and win a game in overtime, and the team is feeling really good about itself today," Keefe said. "So there's



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something to be said about that: When it's time to make the save, you make it, no matter how you're playing, and he did that for us last night so he's got no reason to be hard on himself today."

The Leafs were in need of some stabilizing performances when Campbell returned to the lineup last weekend and have maintained their place atop the North Division after getting them.

The 29-year-old is playing some of the best hockey of his pro career, going 6-0-0 this season with a .945 save percentage. But he's not one to rest on his laurels, nor blame his defencemen, say, after letting Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl connect on a gorgeous goal.

"I mean, he's such a great guy," William Nylander said of Campbell. "He's won a couple games for us by himself, so all we can do is get behind him and help him win yesterday's game.

"But for the most part he's been great and he doesn't need to get down on himself. We're here for him."

Campbell is a former 11th overall draft pick who took eight years to carve out a regular NHL job. He's acknowledged having to learn when to let himself off the hook in the process.

The Leafs had him sit out of Sunday's practice for maintenance and were urging him to clear his mind as well.

"He's a tough critic on himself," said defenceman Jake Muzzin, a former teammate in Los Angeles. "But if you guys know Soup that's just kind of the way he is. He put it on himself, but it's definitely a team thing, not just Soupy obviously."

With the regular season series against Edmonton due to wrap up on Monday night, the Leafs are focused on doing a better job against McDavid and Draisaitl. They did a pretty good job of taking the middle of the ice away from the Oilers during Saturday's game and still saw those two combine for five points.

"We've got to be better. We've got to do a better job," Keefe said. "When you make a mistake when they're out there, they're that much more dangerous -- it's not just one guy that you've got to contend with. You saw the way that they paired up on the Draisaitl goal.

"I mean I don't know (if) there's many players in the league that can make that pass and I don't know that there's many players in the league that can make that shot."

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1207226 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Stanley gets well-earned milestone moment as Jets stumble vs. Flames

Ken Wiebe

March 28, 2021, 9:10 AM

WINNIPEG — The evidence was mounting and it was starting to get to the point where it was looking to be a matter of when, and not if, Logan Stanley was going to find the back of the net.

Given the high volume of shot attempts the Winnipeg Jets' towering defenceman had been able to generate during his first NHL season, it's not a stretch to suggest Stanley was operating in the realm of being due.

But that's part of the beauty of hockey: whether you're a raw rookie or seasoned veteran, goals can often be tough to come by.

Some nights, a glorious chance rings off the iron or is quickly erased by an acrobatic save by the opposing goalie.

But sometimes, the stars align and magical milestones end up on national television.

After showcasing an uncanny ability to get his shot through from the point during the first 22 games of his career, Stanley found himself in the slot with the puck on his stick during the second period on Saturday night against the Calgary Flames.

When he ripped his shot bar-down on David Rittich, Stanley let out a guttural roar that told you all you needed to know about what it meant for the Kitchener/Waterloo product to deliver his first NHL goal.

"It's a pretty good feeling to get that one. Something you dream of as a kid, playing your first NHL game and scoring a goal in the NHL," said Stanley. "I've had some chances to score that haven't went in. I try not to think about it that much. My primary job is to keep the puck out of the net. Just nice to get one past the goalie.

"My parents would say it's because all the pucks I would shoot at the wall in the basement, maybe, working on that stuff. It's just something I like to work on after practice and I like shooting the puck. When I get a chance, I like to shoot it. Sometimes, there's other plays to be made."

Stanley's marker made the score 2-2, but the story took a twist and ended with the Jets suffering a 4-2 loss to a Flames team that played with the desperation required for a group trying to keep its fading playoff hopes alive.

Despite the defeat, the praise for Stanley was pouring in from his teammates.

Given the appreciation for the journey Stanley has been on to reach this point, the reaction was expected.

"It was just a matter of time. He gets so many pucks through, he's got such a heavy shot," said Jets captain Blake Wheeler. "(Stanley's) probably been our biggest pleasant surprise this year. We couldn't be happier with him, so it was great to see him get rewarded."

There's nothing quite like the look on the face of a player after they score for the first time.

"Yeah, it's awesome. That's one of those things you can carry with you for life," said Jets centre Adam Lowry. "It's one of those great memories he'll have. To see him come so close last game, ring one off the post. For him to get a nice one (Saturday), we're all really happy for him. Hopefully it's the first of many."

Stanley was viewed as a long-term project when the Jets made a trade with the Philadelphia Flyers to move up to the 18th spot in the 2016 NHL Draft and selected him.

At a time when Jets first-rounders were routinely jumping into the lineup within a couple of seasons, let's just say a portion of the fan base was beginning to grow impatient with the progress of the defence prospect.

Stanley went back for two more seasons in the Ontario Hockey League and spent the first two seasons of his pro career with the Manitoba Moose in the American Hockey League.

There were signs of growth during that rookie campaign and a couple of injuries to overcome last season, but Stanley was the first to admit he wanted more from himself.

He was determined to take a step forward and wasn't afraid to share that opinion publicly during training camp.

Well, after Luca Sbisa was claimed off waivers by the Nashville Predators and Tucker Poolman tested positive for COVID-19 following the season opener, Stanley was thrust into the Jets lineup.



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Stanley made his NHL debut against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Jan. 18 and suited up in 13 consecutive contests before he was replaced by Poolman.

Then, after sitting out for nearly a month, Stanley got another opportunity when Nathan Beaulieu suffered a hand injury.

Since returning to the lineup, Stanley is building confidence and showing signs of growing into a steady NHL regular.

Sure, Stanley is being sheltered to a degree on the third pairing, but that's not uncommon for a player of his age and experience.

"Early on, you kind of, you have the tendency your first few games in the NHL, you don't want the puck on your stick a whole lot," said Lowry. "I think now he's gotten used to the pace, he's gotten used to the speed, he's kind of gotten used to the positioning. He's starting to use his body. You saw him in Vancouver, he steps up and kind of sets the tone for us with a good fight. He's been real good at stopping the cycle in our zone and getting shots through from the point.

"So he's continuing to get better every day. As the games progress, he's looked more and more comfortable out there."

Some of the subtle things Stanley does with the puck in tight areas have caught the attention of the Jets' coaching staff and his teammates.

It's tough not to stand out when you stand six-foot-seven, but Stanley is gaining trust and showing he'd love to secure his spot in the lineup even when the Jets are back to full health.

"You know what, he's been so close. He's had a couple of bars and he's had a bunch of great shots," said Jets head coach Paul Maurice. "But I've really enjoyed watching his confidence grow and the quality of his game. There's not a lot of big men that can go bar down like that, so we think we've got a good find here. Really happy with where he's at."

Stanley has taken some time to appreciate what he's been able to accomplish so far, even though the compressed nature of the schedule doesn't always allow a lot of time for reflection.

"It's going by fast this year, lots of stuff going on," said Stanley. "It is kind of hard to take a breath and kind of look at what's going on. I'm just enjoying myself and trying to get better every day here and try and help this hockey club win hockey games."

The loss snapped a three-game winning streak for the Jets, who slipped to 21-11-2 and are now two points behind the Toronto Maple Leafs in the battle for top spot in the North Division.

Will the Jets view this as a missed opportunity, a chance to perhaps leave the reeling Flames in the rearview mirror, since the cushion would have expanded to 13 points (instead of nine) with another regulation victory?

Maybe, but for a team that responded to consecutive regulation losses to the Edmonton Oilers with three wins in a row, this looks more like a minor bump in the road going into the finale of this three-game series on Monday.

Goaltending has been at the foundation of the Jets' success this season, but this was a rare off-night for Jets backup Laurent Brossoit.

Although two of the four goals changed direction off the sticks of teammates, including one in the opening minute of the third period, Brossoit directed the final goal into his own net when he misplayed a shoot-in from Sam Bennett that appeared to be going wide.

The Jets certainly weren't pointing the finger in the direction of the crease, since Brossoit is still sporting a .914 save percentage in his nine appearances so far this season and has done his part to instill belief with his body of work.

"You learn over time that these guys are really proud professional athletes, so you wouldn't say anything to anybody after a game like that,"

said Maurice. "You'd wait, slap him on the pads the next time you're on the ice and have a chuckle about it and move on."

Part of the Jets moving on is staring at another opportunity to regroup.

As the Jets get set to close out a season-high seven-game road trip against the Flames, it's sure to be another test.

The Jets are 8-1-1 in games following a regulation loss and that bounce-back ability has become their calling card, a critical part of their identity.

Leaning on that foundation piece is something the Jets plan to do with regularity during the stretch run, since it's the only way they'll be able to remain in the race for first place.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 03.29.2021

1207227 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Galchenyuk shining in audition on Tavares-Nylander line

Luke Fox

March 28, 2021, 2:19 AM

TORONTO – Immediately after he was traded to Toronto Maple Leafs, Alex Galchenyuk's phone illuminated with a welcoming text message from Auston Matthews.

The two top-three NHL draft picks with very divergent career trajectories had developed a relationship over the pandemic off-season, engaging in some exclusive, private skills and skating sessions in Phoenix with Galchenyuk's father, Alexander Sr., and Matthews' boyhood trainer Boris Dorozhenko.

On Saturday night, Galchenyuk (now with his seventh franchise) and Matthews (destined to become the face of his first) were integral to the construction of a come-from-behind, 4-3 overtime victory over the dynamic Edmonton Oilers.

Matthews snuffed out his five-game goal drought by scoring his league-best eighth game-winner in the extra frame.

But that opportunity would not have presented itself had Galchenyuk — bumped up to Line 2 mid-game by coach Sheldon Keefe — not played a helping hand in the set up of third-period strikes by linemates John Tavares and William Nylander.

"It's funny how things work out," said Galchenyuk, following his first multi-point effort since three teams ago. "Definitely happy to be on the same team."

If you've played any left wing for the Maple Leafs this season, chances are you've had a tryout alongside Tavares-Nylander as Keefe searches for a third tenor to make his second line sing.

Remaining Time -1:57

Matthews talks what drove Maple Leafs in gritty comeback win against Oilers

Jimmy Vesey, Wayne Simmonds, Zach Hyman, Joe Thornton, Alexander Kerfoot, Ilya Mikheyev....

At the risk of drawing conclusions from a four-game, three-point sample size, maybe Galchenyuk is not only the one that sticks, but the one who makes general manager Kyle Dubas wonder if he already traded for his top-nine winger.



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That low-risk, high-reward flyer the Leafs GM plucked off the Carolina Hurricanes, in part, because, hey, Galchenyuk was already in Ontario, had already cleared waivers and wouldn't require an extensive quarantine.

Saturday's showdown between two-thirds of the North Division's best was loaded with blinding assist highlights: Connor McDavid's top-speed, no-look rush pass to Leon Draisaitl. Draisaitl's no-look, behind-the-back, behind-the-net, give-and-go with Tyson Barrie. And Galchenyuk's no-look, between-the-legs, backhanded drop pass to Tavares in the slot — on a rush that began off a D-zone draw and which triggered the Leafs' rally and further endeared castaway Galchenyuk to a Toronto team growing tighter by the win.

"He plays with a lot of energy," Matthews beams. "He's really passionate about hockey. He works extremely hard. He cares a lot. He's been playing great over the games he's been with us. He works hard every shift, he competes, and you can't really ask for more. He's got plenty of skill to go along with that. He made a couple of really nice plays tonight, and a couple of huge goals from that line."

Remaining Time -1:03

McDavid makes unbelievable no-look pass to the trailing Draisaitl one-timer goal

That line — Galchenyuk-Tavares-Nylander — has now generated 82 per cent of expected goals and 90 per cent of high-danger chances in the 30 minutes it's been on the ice together.

Keefe had started Simmonds in that spot early, but once the Maple Leafs started getting caved in and lost their legs — and the lead — in the second period, the coach peeked at Galchenyuk's minimal ice time and gave him a promotion.

"I thought Galchenyuk had played well to that point. I hadn't used him very much, yet the shifts that he had I thought were good," Keefe explained post-game.

"Galchenyuk hadn't done anything to come off of that line. He had played quite well. It was more just about giving Simmonds that opportunity there. Just the way that it works out with how the game was going, needed to make some changes. And it was nice to see that line continue the way that it had been playing."

Remaining Time -3:44

Matthews never let up in game, enabled him to snag OT winner

Especially nice for Tavares, whose strong work in the D-zone and the face-off circle hasn't kept critics from noticing his lack of even-strength production.

On a night where the Oilers rolled McDavid and Draisaitl on the same line, conjured up wow moments and still lost, it's worth remembering that the success of the Maple Leafs rests on the Matthews and Tavares units smacking defenders with a one-two punch at even strength.

Particularly when Toronto's vaunted power play, now 0 for its past 18, gets stuck in the mud.

"Nice to get one," said Tavares, up to 10 goals in 34 games. "(Scoring) is a big part of my game, and this year it hasn't seemed to be as consistent as I'd like.

"I'm still trying to figure some things out. Not a perfect science. Just got to bear down on some opportunities. I'm good around the net at finding rebounds and plays in tight, and I haven't seemed to get as many of those."

Tavares credits Galchenyuk's blend of talent, work ethic and playmaking sense as a complement to him and Nylander.

"He was drafted really high for a reason," Tavares said.

"He's had really good success in this league. He makes plays quickly, and great two plays on the two goals that help tie it up. Just the energy that he brings. He won a lot of loose pucks, getting first to pucks and just keeping possession and doing a lot of things like that that just help you just make positive plays and over time wear the opponent down and create the openings that you're looking for."

Hockey, as always, is a game of breaks. Of opportunity seized.

Galchenyuk, it seems, needed a club willing to be patient, to pump up his confidence and comfort in the minors, then give him shifts alongside high-end talent to jolt a revival.

And Matthews, after drilling posts and pounding Mike Smith's pads all night, needed an OT puck to clink off Draisaitl's stick and Darnell Nurse's foot before finally finding twine and quenching his drought.

Next one's going in, next one's going in, the Rocket leader kept thinking to himself as his attempts got denied.

"Sometimes those ugly ones help you get out of a big slump," Matthews smiled.

"Not really how I drew it up, but I'll definitely take it."

We could say the exact same for the Maple Leafs' incorporation of Galchenyuk into their top six.

Funny how things work out.

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1207228 Websites

Leafs plan to tighten up on McDavid, Draisaitl

By Mark Masters

The Maple Leafs practised at Ford Performance Centre on Sunday.

The Leafs held the Oilers to just 20 shots on Saturday night, but a couple moments of brilliance from Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl forced them to chase the game.

"Two really good players and then put them together and," defenceman Jake Muzzin said before pausing and starting to laugh, "it's a lot. They look for each other. They find each other. You can't make a mistake. You can't let up. You just got to be on every second they're on the ice, because they can make you pay. So, it is what it is, man."

On Edmonton's second goal, McDavid jumped on a loose puck after Justin Holl failed to knock down a clearance at the offensive blue line. The Toronto defenceman did a good job of skating back hard and keeping McDavid to the outside, but the National Hockey League's scoring leader still managed to find the reigning Hart Trophy winner for a one-timer goal. Muzzin was back in time, but couldn't get his stick on the pass. McDavid took a peek back during the rush up ice, but didn't look at Draisaitl when he fired the pass.

"I don't know if there's many players in the league that can make that pass and I don't know if there's many players in the league that can make that shot," said Leafs coach Sheldon Keefe. "I'm not sure if people appreciate just how difficult that shot is. There's maybe less than five players in the world that will make that shot. So, you got the combination of the pass and the shot together and it just goes to show you how dangerous it is and how good you got to be."

Saturday was the first time this season that Edmonton deployed their two top weapons consistently together on the same line against the Leafs.



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"We got to be better," said Keefe. "When you make a mistake when they're out there, they're that much more dangerous. It's not just one guy that you got to contend with."

On the third Edmonton goal, Draisaitl knocked down a Muzzin pass behind the Leafs' net and fed Tyson Barrie at the opposite point. The Oilers defenceman sent the puck back to Draisaitl, who made a no-look, backhand pass from behind the net back to the ex-Leaf, who had moved into the slot. Holl was at the side of the net looking to deny a pass to McDavid.

The Leafs eventually pulled off a comeback win to improve to 6-1-1 this season against the high-octane Oilers, including four straight wins. Toronto's only regulation loss to Edmonton this season was the first game between the two teams way back on Jan. 20. Three of the victories by the Leafs came without the league's leading goal scorer, Auston Matthews, in the lineup.

"We know we're going against another highly skilled, top end skill-set over there so maybe we're a little more dialled in defensively," Muzzin mused. "We're a little tighter. Our back-checks are a little harder. We're not giving free ice out there so maybe it's something to do with that."

The Oilers are averaging two goals per game against the Leafs this season and 4.4 goals per game against the rest of the North Division.

"How dangerous their best people are, it really challenges us to be really focused and very committed defensively and taking care of the puck," Keefe noted, "and just having so much respect for the opponent."

NHL: Oilers 3, Maple Leafs 4 (OT)

Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid combined for five points in the second period to give the Oilers a 3-1 lead but the Maple Leafs battled back to tie it in the third before Auston Matthews sealed the comeback victory for Toronto in overtime with his 22nd goal of the season.

On Saturday night, Jack Campbell allowed more than two goals in a game for the first time this season.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat it, I just didn't have it," he admitted afterwards. "Didn't like my game one bit. We won the hockey game so it makes it a little bit easier. I'll have a good practice and we'll go from there."

But Campbell didn't get a chance to take the ice at practice. He was held out for a maintenance day. The team is being cautious with Campbell's workload since he returned from injury on March 20. He twice hurt his leg this season and now, with Frederik Andersen sidelined, is playing a string of games in a row.

"He's a tough critic on himself but, if you guys know Soup, that's just kind of the way he is," said Muzzin, who also played with Campbell in Los Angeles. "He put it on himself, but it's definitely a team thing and not just Soupy, obviously."

Saturday was Campbell's third straight start and the schedule is starting to get really busy. How big is the adjustment?

"Honestly, it's normally pretty easy, because you get in a nice rhythm and you're not thinking so much and you just go out and play," Campbell said. "That's typically when everybody's at their best is when you're just having fun and playing and, for whatever reason, I was thinking a little bit [on Saturday night] but I'm not too worried about it. I didn't like my game, but I know what to do to fix it."

Keefe suggested the goalie, who is a perfect 6-0-0 this season, was being a bit too hard on himself.

"You got to be even keel, especially the more you play," the coach said. "You got to recognize there's going to be ups and downs. Jack definitely feels like he wasn't at his best last night."

Keefe pointed out that Campbell made key stops late in the third period to keep the Leafs in the game.

"It was 3-2 and McDavid is basically in all alone on Campbell and he makes a huge save for us," the coach noted. "At 3-3, two and a half minutes left, [Darnell] Nurse is in basically alone on a two-on-one, we get a huge save. Those are game-saving saves and he stood tall on those and gave us a chance. If one of those goes in, we're leaving the game without any points and we're disappointed here today ... There's something to be said about that, when it's time to make a save, you make it no matter how you're playing and he did that for us last night. He's got no reason to be hard on himself today."

Andersen, again, was not on the ice and hasn't skated since March 19 as he deals with a nagging lower-body injury. There was no further update on his status.

Veini Vehviläinen skated with the team for the first time since being acquired in a trade from Columbus.

"We've been through a lot with our goaltenders this season and the more guys we have available to us the better," Keefe said. "We'll just take it a day at a time and let the organization get more familiar with him and allow him to get more familiar with his surroundings."

Leafs Ice Chips: Maintenance day for 'tough critic' Campbell

Jack Campbell was not impressed with his own play in the win over the Oilers on Saturday and was eager to get back on the ice at practice to work on his game. Instead, Sheldon Keefe opted to give Campbell a maintenance day as the team tries to manage his workload with Frederik Andersen still out with a nagging injury.

While Campbell kept the Leafs in the game down the stretch, the second line stepped up in a big way at the other end.

Alex Galchenyuk, who started the game on the fourth line, was promoted to the left wing spot with John Tavares and William Nylander and picked up a pair of assists.

"They just looked really committed to making a difference," Keefe said. "Galchenyuk, in a lot of ways, really drove the line with the speed and work ethic he had off the puck and [gave] those other guys a little more space with it."

"He's been flying around out there," said Nylander. "I mean, heavy forecheck, getting pucks back and obviously making some great plays on the goals last night."

Galchenyuk owns a deadly shot of his own, but has impressed his new teammates the most with a positive attitude and determined approach. The 27-year-old is eager to make things work in Toronto after bouncing around between teams the last few years.

"He's the hardest-working guy on the team right now," said Muzzin. "It's contagious. When you see a guy working like that you want to continue working. He's done a great job for us and we're going to need him to continue."

Galchenyuk played three straight games with Tavares and Nylander before Wayne Simmonds took that spot to start Saturday's game.

Tavares, Nylander growing in confidence as Galchenyuk provides a spark

It hasn't been the smoothest season for John Tavares and William Nylander, but on Saturday night, Toronto's second line came to life, sparking a third period comeback against the Oilers. Tavares scored his fourth goal in five-on-five play this season, while Nylander snapped a four-game drought and newcomer Alex Galchenyuk deserves a lot of the credit. Mark Masters has more.

Tavares, Nylander and Galchenyuk stayed out late after Sunday's practice to fine tune their skills and have some fun. Tavares won a shootout game and the normally reserved captain raised his arm in celebration as he skated off the ice.

The line was all smiles throughout Sunday's workout.



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"I think the confidence for us scoring those goals is going to help our line a lot," said Nylander.

Saturday's goal was just the fourth in five-on-five play for Tavares this season.

"Nice to get one, obviously," Tavares said. "It's a big part of my game and this year it hasn't seemed to be as consistent as I'd like. I'm doing some good things and just trying to stay with it."

What's been missing?

"I'm still trying to figure some things out," Tavares said. "It's not a perfect science. Some of them I just have to bear down on my opportunities. I'm good around the net, finding rebounds and plays in-tight, and I haven't seemed to get as many of those as I'd like so I think that's one area."

Keefe has repeatedly pointed out that Tavares has made strides defensively. He finished last season at minus-seven and has improved to plus-12 so far this year.

"I know I can't sacrifice that part of the game and only worry about producing," the 30-year-old said. "I want to be, in all facets, relied upon so just continue to work at it and find my balance and hopefully you're able to really connect those two parts of your game. That's always the goal."

**'It's not a perfect science': Tavares seeks to be a more consistent goal scorer**

John Tavares scored just his fourth five-on-five goal of the season on Saturday night. "It's a big part of my game and this year it hasn't seemed to be as consistent as I'd like," the Leafs captain admitted. "It's not a perfect science ... I'm good around the net, finding rebounds and plays in-tight and I haven't seemed to get as many of those as I'd like." Tavares, however, is playing better defensively this season.

Tavares has scored five of his 10 goals this season on the power play despite spending a lot of time on the second unit. But, at practice on Sunday, Tavares was promoted to the bumper spot on the top unit, which features Matthews and Mitch Marner on the flanks, Simmonds in front of the net and Morgan Rielly up top.

"A way to get John a little more involved and have that option available to us," Keefe explained. "There's a lot of positive signs there with our power play and I think we're on the verge of getting it back into the net."

The Leafs are 1/22 on the power play over the last 10 games.

"We need to get some more action around the net," said Simmonds. "Teams have tried to take away Mitchy and Auston a little bit more. Not a little bit more, a lot more, and we need to find ways to counteract that and that's what we've been working on. That's why you see Johnny go in the slot there so we have another great shooting option in the middle."

Joe Thornton moved to the second unit at practice.

**'It's not a perfect science': Tavares seeks to be a more consistent goal scorer**

John Tavares scored just his fourth five-on-five goal of the season on Saturday night. "It's a big part of my game and this year it hasn't seemed to be as consistent as I'd like," the Leafs captain admitted. "It's not a perfect science ... I'm good around the net, finding rebounds and plays in-tight and I haven't seemed to get as many of those as I'd like." Tavares, however, is playing better defensively this season.

Simmonds has one assist and five shots on net in four games since returning to the lineup. He missed six weeks with a broken wrist and hasn't shaken off all the rust yet.

"It's coming along," he said. "Obviously, I don't think I've been playing the greatest at the moment, but every day my wrist is getting better and I'm able to do different things. I need to be a lot better. I'm going to be a lot better. I need to start contributing now that I'm back in the lineup."

Simmonds had been heating up before the injury with five goals in six games.

"It's not about points to me," he stressed. "It's being able to shoot as hard as I can, go into the boards and be able to dig and have one hand on my stick and just be strong and confident with the wrist. Every day that is going to another level [as] it's healing more. My first two games I probably wasn't able to shoot the puck, but I was able to do other things to contribute to the team and the last couple games were a lot better. But I got to find my timing here and be better."

As wrist gets stronger, Leafs' Simmonds vows to be better

Wayne Simmonds admitted to the media on Sunday that his wrist still doesn't feel 100%, but he continues to make progress with each passing day. Simmonds recognized that his game isn't where he wants it to be and vowed that he will be a lot better as he inches closer to full strength.

Lines at Sunday's practice:

Hyman - Matthews - Marner

Galchenyuk - Tavares - Nylander

Thornton - Kerfoot - Spezza

Mikheyev - Engvall - Simmonds

Barabanov, Robertson, Sabourin

Rielly - Brodie

Muzzin - Holl

Dermott - Bogosian

Hollowell, Liljegren

Hutchinson

Vehvilainen

Power play units at Sunday's practice:

Rielly

Matthews - Tavares - Marner

Simmonds

Brodie

Nylander - Thornton - Spezza

Hyman

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Simmonds slowly working way back to full form

By Kristen Shilton

TORONTO — It's one thing to recover from an injury. It's another to play like you did before it happened.

Wayne Simmonds is at that space in between. The Maple Leafs winger is four games back from a wrist injury suffered on Feb. 6, right when he was finding a rhythm offensively. Since returning, Simmonds has registered one assist and bounced from Toronto's top line all the way to its fourth.



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"I don't think I've been playing the greatest at the moment," Simmonds said after Sunday's practice. "I think every day my wrist is getting better. I'm able to do different things. I need to be a lot better. I'm going to be a lot better. I need to start contributing now that I'm back in the lineup."

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What that looks like for Simmonds goes beyond the scoresheet. He didn't score his first points from Toronto until seven games into the season, and then collected five goals in the six games prior to being sidelined (including two against Vancouver the night he was hurt).

Simmonds has one assist since coming back - oddly, his first helper of the season - but low output isn't what's troubling Simmonds most about his performances.

"It's not even about points to me," Simmonds said. "It's being able to shoot as hard as I can, go into the boards and be able to dig and have one hand on my stick and be strong and confident within the wrist. Every day that is going to another level simply for the fact that it's healing more."

Simmonds has found his progress to be pretty steady since stepping back in on March 19, although his assignment in the lineup has been anything but predictable. Coach Sheldon Keefe has shuffled Simmonds from Toronto's top unit with Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner, to the second line with John Tavares and William Nylander, and now to the projected fourth line, beside Pierre Engvall and Ilya Mikheyev.

Through these last four games Simmonds has averaged 12:54 per game, including 2:32 on the power play, and he's registered five shots on net. That's a lot, considering how Simmonds felt initially upon his return.

"I think my first two games [back], I probably couldn't even shoot puck," he said. "But I was able to do other things to contribute to the team. My last couple games were a lot better but I've got to find my timing here and be better."

Keefe agreed Simmonds isn't all the way back just yet, not entirely unexpected given the six-week layoff he went through.

"We've seen some really good things, where he's calm with the puck and makes a good play, gets to the net," Keefe said. "We've also seen times where you can tell he's a little bit off, his timing is off, he's still getting used to playing under pressure [again] and [dealing with] all those things that come with game action. [In a good game], he's obviously physical and he's involved and engaged, he's around the net and helping us at 5-on-5 and on the power play."

Toronto needs all the help it can get right now on the man advantage and Simmonds is jonesing to be the one who can make an impact.

The Leafs are riding a woeful 1-for-22 stretch with the extra man over their last 10 games, a 4.6 per cent rating that puts them just ahead of Buffalo for the NHL's worst power play since March 4.

Despite what time he's missed, Simmonds' three power play goals on the season is tied for third-most on the team. Keefe has placed him right back on Toronto's first unit as the net-front man, but so far Simmonds hasn't been able to break the Leafs out of their special teams funk.

"Sometimes you get hot, sometimes you're cold, that's just the nature of the beast," Simmonds said of the Leafs' struggles. "We need to get some more action around the net. Teams have tried to take away Mitch and Auston a lot more, you know, and I think we need to find ways to counteract that, and that's what we've been working on and that's why you see [John Tavares] go on the slot there so we have another great shooting option in the middle."

It's a work in progress, just like Simmonds post-injury. With any luck though, Simmonds thinks a return to form isn't too far off.

"I'm pretty close now," he said. "We're at seven weeks [since the injury], so I'm pretty happy with the progression of my wrist and it's only going to get better from here."