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## **Andrei Vasilevskiy wins his season debut as Lightning rout Hurricanes**

### **Associated Press**

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Lightning had one of the most accomplished goalies in the NHL back in their net and lots of other achievements to go with it Friday night.

Andrei Vasilevskiy made 22 saves in his season debut, and Tampa Bay got a hat trick and two assists from Brayden Point in an 8-2 win over the Carolina Hurricanes.

“Guys played unbelievably in front of me,” Vasilevskiy said. “Lots of blocked shots, obviously the goal support is remarkable. It couldn’t be more perfect for a first game.”

Nikita Kucherov had two goals and four assists for just the second six-point game in Lightning history. The first was by defenseman Doug Crossman in a 6-5 overtime win against the Islanders on Nov. 7, 1992, the franchise’s first season. Crossman had three goals and three assists.

Steven Stamkos, Brandon Hagel and Luke Glendening also scored for the Lightning, which won for the fourth time in five games and hold a five-game points streak.

Vasilevskiy, a past winner of the Vezina (league’s top goalie) and Conn Smyth (playoff MVP) trophies, was playing his first NHL game since April 29 following offseason back surgery. The Lightning announced earlier in the day he would be in the net for the team’s opener of a three-game road stretch.

“He was good,” Kucherov said, “like he never missed a game.”

Vasilevskiy settled in by stopping seven shots in the first period, when the Lightning were outshot 8-1.

“We didn’t spend much time in our zone,” he said, pointing out the games are much more challenging than practices. “Just a great job by our team.”

It was just the second time in Tampa Bay’s last 13 games an opponent was held to fewer than three goals.

“He’s one of the best players on our team if not the best,” Lightning coach Jon Cooper said, calling the goalie’s return a momentum swing to the season. “When you have the guys you’re used to having, it definitely helps.”

Despite the Lightning’s huge goal total, defense had Cooper’s attention.

“I like the fact that we held them to 12 even-strength shots,” he said.

The Lightning scored three power-play goals in the first six minutes of the second period. Those were Tampa Bay’s first three shots of the period after putting the puck on goal only once in the first.

“We didn’t generate a ton of chances,” Point said. “When we did, we capitalized. ... We were making passes on the tape and using our speed.”

Stefan Noesen and Michael Bunting scored for the Hurricanes, who had a two-game winning streak snapped and lost for just the second time in eight home games this season. Hurricanes goalie Antti Raanta stopped six of 14 shots.

Penalties punished the Hurricanes, who were 1-for-6 on the penalty kill.

“We played how we were supposed to in the first period, but we beat ourselves,” coach Rod Brind’Amour said. “You can’t take those kind of penalties.”

Stamkos has scored in four straight games and has nine goals this season. Kucherov has 15 goals and an NHL-leading 35 points.

## **Here are 4 reasons to believe in the Lightning's penalty kill** **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — Assembling a successful penalty kill is a work in progress. There are ups and downs over the course of a season, and the Lightning's is no different.

Tampa Bay entered Friday's game at Carolina ranked 11th in the NHL with an 84.5% kill rate, including a pair of perfect games against two vaunted power-play units in recent wins over Boston and Edmonton.

A successful penalty kill can create momentum, while a power-play goal for the opposition can give it away. In Wednesday's overtime loss to the Jets, the Lightning allowed a goal on Winnipeg's first power play, putting them in a two-goal, first-period deficit.

There are several new faces on the Lightning penalty kill this season. Veteran forwards Luke Glendening and Tyler Motte were signed in the offseason in part to improve a penalty kill that already included Anthony Cirelli and Brandon Hagel. Having Glendening and Cirelli gives Tampa Bay strong faceoff men from both sides.

Defenseman Calvin de Haan stepped into the left-side role Ian Cole used to have, joining long-time penalty-kill defensemen Victor Hedman, Mikhail Sergachev and Erik Cernak. Rookie forward Walteri Merela earned some PK time before being sent to AHL Syracuse. Defenseman Darren Raddysh and forward Nick Paul also have contributed in shorthanded situations.

"They've all adapted," head coach Jon Cooper said before a 5-for-5 penalty-kill performance against Edmonton on Nov. 18. "It's been one of the bright sparks of this year. With the PK, you think about the points we have gotten to this point, the PK has been a big reason for that."

The return of goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy should further help. As we cross the quarter-mark of the regular season, here are four reasons to believe in the Lightning's penalty kill. Stats are before Friday's game at Carolina.

This seems obvious, but in the nine games this season in which the Lightning have allowed two or fewer power-play opportunities, they own an 85.7% success rate (10-for-12). The good thing is that after being one of the most penalized teams in the league over the past several years, Tampa Bay has cut back on the minor stick penalties that lead to 5-on-4 situations. Their 71 minor penalties rank in the middle of the league. Cooper likes to say the best way to kill penalties is to not get in the box in the first place, and it's true. When the Lightning have limited their penalties, they have been efficient.

The Lightning don't have a shorthanded goal this season, but expect that to change. Cirelli and Hagel are aggressive puckhounds during 5-on-5 play, and it's no different on the penalty kill. They fight for the puck and push it forward into the offensive zone, which keeps it away from the opponent and creates shorthanded scoring chances. The Lightning have nine shorthanded chances with Hagel and Cirelli on the ice together, combined with five PK scoring chances in all other situations. They also can draw penalties, something they did 11 times last season. "Tony and I kind of have that experience together," Hagel said. "We're really comfortable together. We read off each other. We have the same instincts at this point."

Glendening, Motte will become more familiar with one another

Glendening and Motte play a much different penalty-killing game than Hagel and Cirelli, one based on blocking shots, playing physical and interrupting passing and shooting lanes with their sticks. Glendening's ability to win faceoffs in the defensive zone can be a game-changer on the PK because

it results in less time chasing the puck, and he's won 55.2% of PK faceoffs (26 of 47). "We've got (strong faceoff guys) on both sides, and that was something we never had last year," Hagel said. "So it definitely helps winning the draw, getting it down and wasting, let's say, 20 seconds early." Because of Motte's hand injury in the season opener, he and Glendening have played only nine games together, so they will only continue to mesh.

Cernak has developed into an elite short-handed defenseman

Cernak's hard-nosed style largely goes unnoticed, and that's especially true on the penalty kill. But there's no player who has logged more shorthanded minutes than Cernak this season (55:46). The team's top right-shot defenseman's shorthanded play hasn't been perfect, but his gritty style shines on the PK. He plays physical down low, clearing the crease and using his body and stick to protect the front of the net while also battling for pucks in the dirty areas. He leads the team in hits (eight) and is second in blocked shots (six) in shorthanded situations. He's also drawn two penalties on the PK this season, as many as he did all last season. His biggest issue is staying on the ice, as he's a magnet for blocked shots, which can lead to missing games due to injury. But the Lightning penalty kill is significantly better when Cernak is on the ice.

## **Lightning's Andrei Vasilevskiy makes season debut vs. Hurricanes**

### **The Athletic Staff**

Tampa Bay Lightning goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy made his season debut Friday against the Carolina Hurricanes. Vasilevskiy made 22 saves en route to the Lightning's 8-2 win over the Hurricanes. Here's what you need to know.

Vasilevskiy underwent back surgery in September to address a lumbar disc herniation and was expected to miss the first two months of the 2023-24 season.

Vasilevskiy, 29, appeared in 60 games in 2022-23 and went 34-22-4 with a 2.65 goals against average and .915 save percentage.

Clearing the path for Vasilevskiy's return, Tampa Bay placed Matt Tomkins on waivers Thursday.

With the win, the Lightning improved to 10-6-5 in 2023-24.

### **Backstory**

Vasilevskiy entered the league in 2012 when the Lightning drafted him No. 19. He is a five-time All-Star, a two-time Stanley Cup champion and the 2019 Vezina Trophy winner.

Vasilevskiy is one of the best active goalies in the playoffs. Through 110 career playoff games, Vasilevskiy is 65-42 with a 2.37 goals against average and .921 save percentage and won the Conn Smythe Trophy in 2021. His 65 playoff wins are second among active goalies, behind Marc-Andre Fleury.

## **Lightning's Andrei Vasilevskiy makes season debut against Hurricanes** **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

Lightning goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy made his season debut Friday against the Carolina Hurricanes in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Vasilevskiy missed the first 20 games of the season while recovering from surgery to repair a herniated disc in his lower back. With Jonas Johansson carrying the bulk of the load in goal, Tampa Bay went 9-6-5 in Vasilevskiy's absence.

"He hasn't played an NHL game since April, so I know he is eager," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said following the morning skate. "There is a ton of work (that) has gone in to get him to this spot. He has worked his tail off, and this was the date circled on the calendar months ago and we hit the target date."

Cooper had been suggesting for the past several days that Vasilevskiy was close to a return.

Asked following Wednesday morning's skate if it was possible Vasilevskiy would return during the current three-game road trip, Cooper responded, "There's a very good chance." Thursday, the Lightning placed backup goaltender Matt Tomkins on waivers, the final procedural move needed to activate Vasilevskiy from long-term injured reserve to the active roster.

Following Friday's game, the Lightning play Monday in Denver against the Avalanche and Tuesday vs. the Coyotes in Tempe, Arizona.

Wednesday marked eight weeks since Vasilevskiy had microdiscectomy surgery on Sept. 28. He was placed on long-term disability injured reserve at the beginning of the regular season and already has met the 10-game, 24-day to be eligible to return. Because he was on the opening-night roster, the Lightning became salary-cap compliant once they sent Tomkins to AHL Syracuse.

Despite some pedestrian numbers, Johansson (8-4-4, 3.44 goals-against average, .894 save percentage) filled in well for Vasilevskiy. Johansson entered Wednesday's game against Winnipeg leading the league in games played (16), minutes (958) and goals allowed (55) while facing 69 more shots on goal (517) than any other goaltender in the league (San Jose's Mackenzie Blackwood was second at 448).

"Goaltending has not been an issue for us," Cooper said. "They give us a chance to win games. ... Our game has been inconsistent. Not inconsistent that it's 30 minutes on, 30 minutes off. It's been 53 minutes on, seven minutes off. ... We've got more wins than losses, and if we weren't getting great goaltending we probably wouldn't have done that."

## **Now that Vasilevskiy is back, the real work begins for the Lightning**

### **John Romano (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — For one night, they dazzled again. It was as if free agency and the salary cap were just minor details in a grander tale.

For one night in Raleigh, North Carolina, Nikita Kucherov was brilliant, Brayden Point was swift and Steven Stamkos was ageless. For one night in an 8-2 win at Carolina, Andrei Vasilevskiy was healthy and the rest of the hockey world was wondering how any of this was possible.

For one night.

There is still much for the Lightning to prove. We have seen too many lapses and too much on-ice messiness to automatically assume the Lightning are back to their old selves just because Vasilevskiy returned after a month's absence.

But we have seen the promise at times, and on Friday night we saw it in full orchestration, even it was greatly aided by Carolina penalties. The trick is whether Tampa Bay can play with this much juice and defensive discipline for more than a handful of games at a time.

For the Lightning have more foes than most. They are not just competing against the Maple Leafs, Panthers and Bruins, but also against the memories of themselves. They are taking on the expectations that naturally come when you've won 24 more postseason games than anyone else in your conference the past six years.

But there is a world of difference between this team and the Lightning of the recent past. The depth has been stripped away by the flat salary cap, and it's not easy to replicate the high-speed precision that comes from a group of skaters that grew up together.

That doesn't mean they are not capable of reaching the conference finals or beyond.

It just means they are no longer the obvious favorite.

Consider them a work in progress. The Lightning have played nearly 100 postseason games in the past six seasons, but just about half the players on the current roster have never won a playoff series in a Tampa Bay uniform. That's a lot of new blood to integrate into a specific style of play.

At times, you can see it coming together. The Lightning are averaging 3.71 goals per game, which leads the Eastern Conference and is the most they've scored since 2018-19. At other times, you wonder if the pieces will ever mesh. They are giving up 3.52 goals per game, which is second-worst in the conference and the most they've allowed during the Jon Cooper era.

And do not assume that Vasilevskiy, 29, is the lone answer to their defensive woes. He makes them better, no doubt about that. He is, after all, the only active goalie in the NHL with both a Conn Smythe and a Vezina in his duffel bag. The real difference between him and backup Jonas Johansson is that Vasilevskiy will occasionally steal a game the Lightning had no business winning.

But, for the most part, Vasilevskiy provides stability. Almost as if he were a safety net the team was missing. Since his first season as a full-time starter in 2015-16, the Lightning have earned an average of 1.39 points per game. When other goalies have been in the net, the Lightning have averaged 1.26 points per game. That's a significant difference, for sure, but it's not going to turn the season around.



The bigger issue for the Lightning is eliminating a lot of the high-end, quality scoring chances they have surrendered throughout the first month. The outrageously high goal total has been more of a skater problem than a goaltender issue, and Vasilevskiy cannot solve that on his own.

This is more about turnovers that lead to rushes. It's more about losing track of forwards in front of the net. It's more about forwards getting back on defense and defensemen getting out of position. It's about knowing when to take chances and understanding how to play with a lead.

If you go by points percentage, the Lightning are sitting in a playoff position this morning. Not a high seed, but not bad for a team missing its goaltender and integrating a lot of new faces in the lineup. To be honest, they're pretty close to where they should be.

But they're not good enough. Even while going 4-0-1 over the past 10 days, they are not playing the type of hockey that will win games in the postseason. And that's what the next 61 games will be about. They want to continue playing at a high speed but without those 10-15 minutes every night when they stop playing defense.

They did that Friday night in Raleigh.

Can they keep it up?

## **The Backcheck: Bolts win big in Vasilevskiy's return** **Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)**

Going into Friday night's game against the Carolina Hurricanes, all eyes were on Tampa Bay Lightning goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy, who was playing in his first game in over 200 days. But by the end of the night, it was one of Vasilevskiy's best friends that stole the show.

Nikita Kucherov had a historic game, scoring two goals and adding four assists for a six-point night, joining Doug Crossman as the only two players in Lightning franchise history to collect six points in a single contest.

The Lightning would skate to an 8-2 win over Carolina behind that six-point performance, along with a hat trick and five-point night from Brayden Point. Not many would have made that prediction after a first period that saw the Bolts go to the locker room in a 1-0 hole after recording just one shot on goal in the opening 20 minutes.

As a fairly uneventful first period was coming to a close, Carolina opened the scoring with Jack Drury sending a pass in front for Stefan Noesen, who went top shelf for his fifth goal of the season with 1:48 remaining in the opening frame.

For the next 40 minutes, it was like the Lightning couldn't miss. Tampa Bay tied the game 1-1 just 1:34 into the second period with a power-play goal from Steven Stamkos off assists from Point and Kucherov. After entering the offensive zone, Kucherov fed a pass to the top of the right circle for Point, who put the puck on a platter for Stamkos to hammer a one-timer past Antti Raanta for his ninth goal of the season.

Shortly after that, Jesperi Kotkaniemi took a tripping penalty, allowing the Bolts to capitalize on the power play once again. In the dying seconds of the man advantage, Mikey Eyssimont left the puck in the left corner for Brandon Hagel, who threaded a pass all the way across the Carolina zone, where Kucherov was waiting to blast a one-timer past Raanta with 10 seconds remaining on the power play. The go-ahead goal was Kucherov's 14<sup>th</sup> tally of the season.

On the ensuing faceoff at center ice, Michael Bunting was whistled for a double minor high-sticking penalty when he caught Cole Koepke up high. Just six seconds into the double minor, Tampa Bay made it a 3-1 game.

Following a clean faceoff win from Stamkos, the puck went right to the point for Victor Hedman. Walking the line, Hedman sent the puck to the right circle for Kucherov, who had everyone thinking he was going to shoot. Winding up for a one-timer, Kucherov put the puck right on the tape of Point, who was waiting on the doorstep to tap the puck into an open net for his ninth goal of the year.

Carolina got back within one and made it a 3-2 game after Austin Watson was sent to the box for slashing, enabling Bunting to score a power-play goal four seconds into the man advantage.

Entering the third period with a one-goal lead, the Lightning kept their foot on the gas, outscoring the Hurricanes 5-0 in the final 20 minutes to secure the 8-2 final.

Hagel put Tampa Bay back up by two 5:33 into the third after Kucherov sent a pass up to Point, who slammed on the brakes after entering the zone and sent a pass through a seam to Hagel. Collecting the puck on his forehand, Hagel wired a shot past Raanta for his 10<sup>th</sup> goal of the year to make it a 4-2 game.

Only 1:20 later, Erik Cernak's shot was denied by Raanta, but Luke Glendening was right at the netfront to jump on the rebound and jam the puck home with a wraparound for his third goal of the season, putting the Bolts up 5-2.

As the Lightning continued to capitalize on their offensive chances, Point got his second goal of the game with 9:19 remaining. Doing a nice job to fight off two Carolina defenders, Cole Koepke maintained possession of the puck in the offensive zone and found Nick Perbix in the slot, allowing the defenseman to send a quick pass to Point, who roofed a backhand shot and pushed the lead to 6-2.

With 3:15 remaining, Kucherov wasn't done putting on a show. Taking a pass from Hagel, Kucherov flew into the Hurricanes zone and put the puck into the skates of Jaccob Slavin before regaining possession and immediately ripping a shot into the top right corner for his second goal and fifth point of the game.

Only 1:23 later, Point completed his hat trick with Tampa Bay's fourth power-play goal of the evening. After Stamkos entered the zone and found Kucherov, the All-Star winger handed the puck off to Point, who took his time and picked his spot before firing home his third goal of the night with 1:52 remaining.

In total, the Lightning scored eight goals on just 14 shots. Kucherov led the way with six points, while Point had five, Hagel had three and Stamkos had two. Slightly overshadowed by the offensive performance, Vasilevskiy was sharp as ever in his return to game action, making 22 saves on 24 shots against for his first win in his first start this season.

### **Bolts by the Numbers**

- Nikita Kucherov is just the fourth player in the past 18 seasons with 35 or more points through his first 20 games played in a season. The only other players to do so are Connor McDavid (3x), Leon Draisaitl (2x) and Steven Stamkos (1x).
- The Lightning's win marked the first time in NHL history that a team has scored eight or more goals on 14 or fewer shots in a win.
- Nikita Kucherov (2-4—6) and Brayden Point (3-2—5) each recorded five points in the Lightning's 8-2 victory. The only other time Tampa Bay had multiple players record as many points in the same game was December 7, 2006, when Martin St. Louis (1-4—5) and Vincent Lecavalier (3-2—5) both did so against Atlanta.
- Nikita Kucherov matched Doug Crossman(3-3—6 on Nov. 7, 1992 at NYI) for the most points recorded in a single game in Lightning franchise history.
- Nikita Kucherov recorded the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> three-point periods of his career, surpassing Martin St. Louis (16x) for the most three-point periods in Lightning franchise history.
- Tampa Bay's shooting percentage of 57.1% is the highest recorded in NHL history since the league started tracking the stat in 1959-60.
- Steven Stamkos scored the 199<sup>th</sup> power-play goal of his career, passing Brian Bellows (198) for sole possession of 20<sup>th</sup> on the NHL's all-time list.

### **Bolts Quotes**

- Jon Cooper on Andrei Vasilevskiy: “He’s one of the best players on our team, if not the best. It’s a momentum swing when you get to have your full arsenal...When you have the guys you’re used to having, it definitely helps and I think the guys really dug in for him tonight.”
- Andrei Vasilevskiy on how he felt in his first game: “A little bit better than average, I guess. The guys played unbelievably in front of me, lots of blocked shots and, obviously, the goal support. It’s remarkable and it couldn’t be more perfect for your first game.”
- Jon Cooper: “I liked the fact that we held them to 12 even-strength shots. That’s what we did. We talked about it this morning and we didn’t really give them anything. When you’re going to do that, eventually we were going to get our looks. Holding them to 12 even-strength shots and our special teams were outstanding. That was the game.”

### **Krenner’s Three Stars**

1. Nikita Kucherov
2. Brayden Point
3. Andrei Vasilevskiy

### **Lightning Look Ahead**

Monday, November 27 at Colorado Avalanche, 9 p.m. ET, Ball Arena

Tuesday, November 28 at Arizona Coyotes, 9 p.m. ET, Mullett Arena

Thursday, November 30 vs. Pittsburgh Penguins, 7 p.m. ET, AMALIE Arena

## **Andrei Vasilevskiy's return to Tampa Bay Lightning overshadowed by the league record the team set**

**Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)**

RALEIGH, N.C. – Winter is not quite upon.

The day after Thanksgiving, though, does officially kick off the Christmas season and the Tampa Bay Lightning built the first snowman to kick things off.

But just like trying to build a snowman in Florida, how the Lightning got to the result on Friday just didn't make any sense. Because the storyline of the night was supposed the return of goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy. Instead, the Lightning made NHL history and Nikita Kucherov accomplished something no other forward has done in franchise history while tying a team record.

Yeah, it was that kind of a night. A night that Vasilevskiy, in his first game since April 29 while coming off back surgery, picked up his first victory of the season. A night that Kucherov registered six points to tie the franchise mark set by Doug Crossman on November 7, 1992, against the New York Islanders. A night Tampa Bay tied a franchise record for most goals in a road game. A night Brayden Point sent hats flying (metaphorically speaking).

A night logic was left out in the cold.

### **THE START**

By the end of the first period, the Lightning were conjuring up thoughts from one of Tampa Bay's lowest points of last season. Tampa Bay had almost zero puck possession to start the game.

In typical fashion when facing the Hurricanes, the Lightning were not able to handle the relentless pursuit of the puck. To beat what is essentially a full-court press at times, the puck has to move quickly because they are right on top of the puck.

Tampa Bay didn't move the puck quickly and it showed. Carolina had the puck for what felt like 19 of the 20 minutes. The Lightning registered only one shot on goal in the period – and that one was a 90-foot dump in by Tyler Motte that went on goal – and seven shot attempts.

Fortunately, Tampa Bay only trailed by a goal as they handled the lack of possession time by staying structured, blocking shots and limiting the damage as Carolina had a 28-7 advantage in shot attempts. The only goal came from Stefan Noesen with 1:48 left in the period.

"They didn't have any chances," Lightning head coach Jon Cooper said. "The one chance they had the entire period was the goal."

### **THE POWER PERIOD**

Despite the lack of puck possession time, the Lightning were just one shot – a real shot – from being back in the game. The Hurricanes, obliged.

Andrei Svechnikov tripped Luke Glendening on the opening shift of the second period to give Tampa Bay its first power play chance of the game. Steven Stamkos delivered, snapping off a quick one-timer to the top far post 1:34 into the period.

With another power play chance on a tripping call against Jesperi Kotkaniemi at 3:49, this power play chance summed up the game as a whole. Tampa Bay had difficulty gaining the zone and spent more time going back for the puck than pushing it up ice. Then, after finally gaining the zone, Mikey

Eyssimont banked a pass to Brandon Hagel who quickly sent a pass across the ice to Kucherov for a one-timer to give Tampa Bay the lead with nine seconds left on the power play.

Off the draw, Michael Bunting clipped Cole Koepke for a four-minute high sticking call. Six seconds into the power play, Brayden Point opened up a two-goal lead.

“We were just capitalizing on our looks,” Point said of the power play. “They made it extremely tough for us to get in and set up. But when we did, we just were capitalizing on our looks. We were able to create a decent chance and, again, just capitalizing on them.”

The three power play goals in a period matched the franchise record, done 14 other times, most recently March 7, 2021, against Chicago.

## **PULLING AWAY**

With a one-goal lead after two periods, the Lightning were going to be tested by the Hurricanes. They closed out the second period with a strong push reminiscent of how things were going in the first period.

Instead, the Lightning shoved back. Tampa Bay again used quality over quantity, scoring five goals on just seven shots. Brandon Hagel scored his 10th of the season at 5:33 while Luke Glendening scored 80 seconds later to make it 5-2. Point notched his second of the night followed by a highlight reel goal from Kucherov and suddenly it was 7-2. The period was finished off with Point's second hat trick of the season and third of his career. Kucherov notched his fourth assist of the night and sixth point.

## **LEAGUE RECORD FOR EFFICIENCY, FRANCHISE RECORD FOR KUCHEROV (AND POINT)**

It was a sort of inexplicable night when it came to trying to dissect what happened in the game.

If one were to take a look at the box score, it would suggest the Lightning were the dominant team. They won the game by six goals. Yet, watching the game suggests it might have been the other way around.

The Lightning were out-attempted 68-31 in all strengths. Tampa Bay had an expected goals of 1.46 and they had just 37-percent of the expected goals rate. The Lightning had just 14 shots on goal.

It just doesn't make sense. But it does add up to eight goals.

By scoring eight goals in 14 shots, Tampa Bay became the first team in NHL history to score at least eight goals on 15-or-fewer shots. They are the first team in league history, since shots on goal were first tracked in 1959-60, to shoot better than 50-percent in a game. Only two other teams have shot 50-percent: the Detroit Red Wings on Feb. 8, 1991, against the Islanders and Minnesota North Stars on Jan. 20, 1984, against Detroit.

Then there was the night for Kucherov. Earlier this month in Ottawa Kucherov had a five-point game and just missed an empty net goal for his sixth point. On Friday, he made good on becoming the second player in franchise history to score six points in a game, and the first forward. It's the second franchise record that was set in the inaugural season that was finally matched. Marty St. Louis scored four goals in a game against San Jose on January 18, 2014, to tie the record set by Chris Kontos in the first game in franchise history.

With Point tying his career-high with five points, it marked the second time in franchise history Tampa Bay had two players with at least five points in the same game. Vinny Lecavalier and St. Louis both had five points in a victory against Atlanta on Dec. 7, 2006,

## **OH, YEAH, VASILEVSKIY RETURNED**

Vasilevskiy was supposed to be the story of the night. His first game back was supposed to be a headliner. Instead, his performance was overshadowed by everything else that happened at the other end of the ice.

The last time Vasilevskiy faced shots in a live game was April 29 when Tampa Bay lost Game 6 to Toronto in overtime. All eyes were going to be on him in his return. The five-time Vezina Trophy finalist is the backbone of the Lightning's success since taking over as the starter in 2017-18.

While Vasilevskiy was never under duress, he was tested. Carolina had five high danger chances in the first period. Vasilevskiy passed the test.

"He's one of the best players on our team, if not the best," Cooper said. "So it's a momentum swing when you get to have your full arsenal. When you have your guys you're used to having, it definitely helps. I think the guys were able to dig in for him."

Vasilevskiy finished the night with 22 saves, while the Lightning blocked 18 shots.

Just like the offense, Vasilevskiy was effectively efficient.

"A little bit better than average, I guess," Vasilevskiy said. "The guys were unbelievably in front of me, just lots of blocked shots, obviously the goal support. It's just remarkable and couldn't be more perfect for the first game."

But Vasilevskiy knows there is still work to be done.

"Kind of still really hard on my body," he said. "Obviously the game it's much harder than practice but first one off and just moving on."

## **NOTES**

Tampa Bay scratched LW Alex Barre-Boulet and D Haydn Fleury. ... Steven Stamkos scored his 199th career power-play goal and surpassed Brian Bellows (198) for sole possession of 20th place in League history. Stamkos extended his goal scoring streak to four games. ... On Friday, 13 different NHL teams recorded a win on the road, the highest total on a single day in league history. This breaks the previous NHL record of 11 (done 3 times). This also ties the record among MLB/NBA/NFL as well, with MLB having this happen five different times

## **MY THREE STARS**

1. Lightning RW Nikita Kucherov – Two goals, six points to tie franchise record, nine shot attempts
2. Lightning C Brayden Point – Third career hat trick, five points
3. Lightning LW Brandon Hagel – Goal, two assists, plus-2

## **Crunch blank Comets, 3-0** **Syracuse Crunch**

**SYRACUSE, N.Y.** – Brandon Halverson and the Syracuse Crunch blanked the Utica Comets, 3-0, tonight at the Upstate Medical University Arena.

Halverson stopped all 26 shots he faced to help advance the Crunch to 9-5-0-2 on the season and 2-2-0-0 in the 14-game season series against the Comets.

Erik Källgren turned aside 22-of-25 shots in net for the Comets. The Syracuse power play went 1-for-5, while the penalty kill was a perfect 5-for-5.

The Crunch were first on the board with a power-play goal late in the first period. The puck bounced out into the high slot for Jack Thompson to fire through traffic and past Källgren.

Declan Carlile doubled the lead just 24 seconds into the middle stanza when he shoveled in a backhand.

Syracuse made it 3-0 halfway through the final frame off Walteri Merela's first North American pro goal. Tristan Allard centered the puck from beyond the goal line for Merela to chip in while all alone out front.

The Crunch host the Laval Rocket tomorrow night.

**Crunchables:** This is the third shutout by a Crunch goaltender this season...Gabriel Dumont played in his 700th career AHL game tonight...Brandon Halverson recorded his first AHL shutout tonight.



## **Game 17 Preview: Syracuse Crunch vs. Laval Rocket**

### **Syracuse Crunch**

#### **CRUNCH FINISH WEEKEND AGAINST ROCKET**

The Crunch play their second straight home game tonight as they host the Laval Rocket at Upstate Medical University Arena.

Syracuse picked up a 5-0 win over Laval last month in the opening game of this season's eight-game series.

#### **LAST TIME OUT**

Brandon Halverson made 26 saves to earn his first career AHL shutout in a 3-0 Crunch win over the Utica Comets last night.

Syracuse tallied once per period starting with Jack Thompson's power-play goal at 13:58 of the opening frame. Thompson fired home a shot off a feed from Gabriel Dumont for his second goal of the season.

Declan Carlile doubled the lead 24 seconds into the second period. He collected a pass from Max Groshev and flicked home a backhand shot for his second goal of the campaign.

The Crunch capped the scoring in the third when Waltteri Merelä banged home his first North American pro goal at 11:14 to make it 3-0.

#### **SCOUTING THE CRUNCH**

The Crunch enter tonight's contest at 9-5-0-2 with 20 points, good for third place in the North Division.

Forward Waltteri Merelä scored his first career AHL goal last night against Utica. Merelä skated in his third AHL game after signing with the Lightning organization during the summer. The Ylöjärvi, Finland native made Tampa Bay's NHL roster out of training camp and skated in 14 games prior to being assigned to the Crunch. The goal was also his first point recorded in North America.

The 25-year-old was an offensive weapon in Liiga – Finland's top professional league – helping Tappara to back-to-back postseason championships in 2022 and 2023. Merelä notched 14 points (8g, 6a) in 14 appearances during the 2023 Liiga playoffs, ranking second on his team and the entire league in production.

#### **HOME COOKING**

Tonight continues a three-game homestand for the Crunch, and also concludes the second of nine home back-to-backs this season. The Crunch split the first instance Oct. 27-28, which also featured home matches against Utica (loss) and Laval (win).

The Crunch are 4-2-0-1 at home this season and they've won consecutive home games for the first time this season.

#### **SCOUTING THE ROCKET**

The Rocket have lost four straight games, including two in a row in overtime against Rochester to

begin the week. Laval started the season 1-6-1-0, then picked up four wins in five games before this current losing streak. The Rocket have 13 points and are tied for sixth in the North Division.

Laval has scored 60 goals in 17 games this season. The team is potent in wins – scoring 30 goals in five games (6.00 goals per game) – but they have only tallied 30 in their 12 losses (2.50 goals per game). Despite being held scoreless in the last three games, rookie Joshua Roy tops Laval with 18 points (7g, 11a) in 17 games.

## **THE 700 CLUB**

Last night, Crunch captain Gabriel Dumont became the 86th player in AHL history to skate in 700 league games. He has appeared in 243 Crunch games, which ranks seventh in team history.

The 33-year-old is in his 14th pro season, which began full-time in 2010-11. He spent six campaigns in the Montreal organization with their AHL affiliate (Hamilton and St. John's). This is his sixth season - and fourth as captain - in Syracuse (2016-19 and 2021-24). He also spent two AHL seasons in Iowa (2019-21).

## **TOMKINS ARRIVES**

Goaltender Matt Tomkins has been loaned to the Crunch from Tampa Bay. The veteran appeared in his first three career NHL games for the Lightning, and earned his first NHL win Nov. 7 at Montreal. He went 1-2-0 in his three starts after making his NHL debut Oct. 15 at Ottawa.

Tomkins spent the previous two seasons in Sweden in the SHL, where he went 39-25-0 with a 2.50 goals-against average and a .910 save percentage.

He also represented Canada at the 2022 Olympics, the 2022 IIHF World Championships and the 2019 Spengler Cup.

Originally a seventh round draft pick by the Chicago Blackhawks in 2012, Tomkins spent time with Rockford and ECHL-Indy before heading to Sweden in 2021.

## **HEAD-TO-HEAD**

The Crunch took the opening game of this season's eight-game series against Laval with a 5-0 win Oct. 27. The first three matches are all slated in Syracuse before the Crunch make a two-game trip to Laval Dec. 29-30.

Thirteen different Crunch players logged a point in the win against the Rocket last month. Mitchell Chaffee and Felix Robert were the only two with multiple points.

Pyotr Kochetkov made 19 saves to earn the shutout win while Strauss Mann took the loss in net for the Rocket.

## **CLEAN SHEETS**

The Crunch picked up their third shutout of the season last night against the Comets. Syracuse has blanked Cleveland (Oct. 20), Laval (Oct. 28) and Utica (Nov. 24) so far in 2023-24.

The team has had three different goaltenders post shutouts. Hugo Alnefelt earned the first one against Cleveland. That was followed by Pyotr Kochetkov versus Laval and Brandon Halverson last

night.

The last time the Crunch had three different goalies record shutouts in the same season was 2018-19; the Crunch had 12 shutouts that season with contributions from Connor Ingram, Eddie Pasquale and Atte Tolvanen.

Halverson's was the first of his AHL career, and it came in his 58th AHL appearance.