



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips  
Monday, December 18, 2023**

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## **The Backcheck: Bolts can't overcome rough second period, fall to Flames**

### **Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)**

The Tampa Bay Lightning concluded their five-game road trip with a 4-2 loss to the Calgary Flames Saturday night at Scotiabank Saddledome.

As has been the case for the duration of the road trip, the Bolts struggled in the second period and were outscored 3-0 in the middle frame. Over the course of the five-game trip, the Lightning were outscored 12-0 in the second period.

And despite scoring twice in the final 20 minutes, the three-goal deficit was too much to overcome with the Flames adding one additional goal in the third to secure the 4-2 win.

After 20 minutes of scoreless hockey to start the game, Calgary got three consecutive goals from A.J. Greer (2:30), MacKenzie Weegar (6:17) and Yegor Sharangovich (7:00), while outshooting Tampa Bay 12-10 in the second period.

The Bolts got on the board 4:10 into the third period when Nikita Kucherov did a nice job to force a turnover on the forecheck and sent the puck to the slot, where Brayden Point was waiting to quickly fire home his 14th goal of the season.

Not shortly after, the Lightning found themselves right back in the game when Steven Stamkos netted his 15th goal of the year just 1:30 after Point made it a 3-1 game.

With Tampa Bay on the power play, Kucherov sent a pass to the slot for Point that was redirected and shot up into the air. Tracking the puck the whole way, Stamkos quickly leapt into the air, caught the puck, laid it down and hammered a slap shot past Dan Vladar for his 400th career power-play point.

Suddenly, the Lightning were back within one goal and still had 14:20 remaining in regulation to work with.

Tampa Bay continued to push for the tying goal, but fell back into a two-goal hole with 8:18 remaining when Connor Zary snuck a shot short side past Andrei Vasilevskiy to give Calgary a 4-2 lead.

That would be the final goal of the contest, sending the Bolts back to Tampa with four points earned on the five-game trip. The Lightning dropped to 14-13-5 on the season with a road record of 6-10-2.

Victor Hedman returned to the lineup after missing the past two games with an upper-body injury and logged a team-high 24:41 time on ice with three shots, one hit and two blocked shots.

### **Bolts by the Numbers**

- Nikita Kucherov picked up two assists for his 15th multi-point game of the season.
- Kucherov has eight points over his last four games with three goals and five assists.
- Kucherov's 52 points (20G, 32A) are the most among all NHL skaters.
- Steven Stamkos scored a power-play goal and became the 64th player in NHL history to record 400 career power-play points.
- Stamkos has scored five goals over his last two games and is up to 31 points (15G, 16A) on the season.

- Brayden Point scored one goal and extended his point streak to four games.
- Point now has 34 points (14G, 20A) in 32 games this season.
- Calvin de Haan recorded a season-high four blocked shots.

### **Bolts Quotes**

- Jon Cooper on the five-game road trip: "I'm disappointed in the road trip. You come out here. It's a long way to go and a lot of days to come away with four points. We left points on the table, but in the end, it comes down to puck management. We'll go through video with them, and they'll watch their shifts and stuff like that, but some of the decision making we've made on this trip has been tough and it's cost us. Giving up three goals in a game is too much, let alone three goals in four and a half minutes. It's tough to get points when you're doing that."

- Victor Hedman on the five-game road trip: "You're going to go through tough times in this league. We've just got to get back to playing the right way. We're not doing that. Even the game we won against Edmonton; we don't win that game if Vasy doesn't stand on his head. It's just a matter of us getting back to what works and we know we have it in us. We've just got to make the right plays at the right time."

- Brayden Point on the loss: "We're not a bad team when we're executing, but when we get sloppy in our own end, it's tough. Teams take over. There are skilled guys on the other team. You give them time and space and you give them turnovers; they make you pay. Again, tonight, that's what happened."

### **Krenner's Three Stars**

1. MacKenzie Weegar
2. Nikita Kucherov
3. Blake Coleman

### **Lightning Look Ahead**

- Tuesday, December 19 vs. St. Louis Blues, 7 p.m. ET, AMALIE Arena
- Thursday, December 21 vs. Vegas Golden Knights, 7 p.m. ET, AMALIE Arena
- Saturday, December 23 at Washington Capitals, 7 p.m. ET, Capital One Arena

## Second period woes once again prevent Tampa Bay Lightning victory

Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)

CALGARY – Tampa Bay headed into Saturday hoping to ride the Lightning of momentum to close out the longest road trip of the season. Instead, they fizzled out and the road trip went down in Flames.

After [rallying to victory in Edmonton](#) on Thursday, the Tampa Bay Lightning had the chance to turn their five-game road trip into a success with one more victory, or even one more point.

Instead, the Lightning suffered a familiar looking setback. And by the time the team found their game, it offered nothing by false hope.

“It’s probably easier to play the third when you know the other team has a big lead,” Lightning head coach Jon Cooper said. “It’s tough to try and win a hockey game when you only play 20 of the 60 minutes.”

And when things start to go bad for Tampa Bay at first, it’s generally in the second.

Once again, it was the middle period that gave the Lightning the biggest problem.

After a relatively even first period – Calgary did have a 7-2 advantage in scoring chances – the game went downhill quickly in the second period.

The Flames opened the scoring after the Lightning were hemmed in their zone for an extended period of time. Luke Glendening lost a faceoff – one of only two he lost all game – to Mikael Backlund to start the shift. Tampa Bay was unable to clear the puck out of the zone, a familiar issue that has plagued this team too often this season.

Nick Paul, Mikael Sergachev, Erik Cernak and Glendening were caught out for 70 seconds, all while trying to defend. Steven Stamkos, who started the shift in the zone, was the only Lightning player who managed to get off the ice when the puck did finally exit the zone.

But the puck barely reached the red red line as the Flames transitioned back up the ice. It wasn’t even close to enough time for Brandon Hagel, who jumped on the ice for Stamkos, to get into the Tampa Bay zone before A.J. Greer fired a near perfect shot to the top corner on the short side at 2:40 of the second period.

All four Lightning players who were caught on the ice were noticeably gasping for air, particularly in the high Alberta altitude.

The second Calgary goal came off an offensive zone faceoff, which Tampa Bay lost, and Calgary quickly transitioned up ice as Blake Coleman burst up ice. Then with all five Lightning players below the hashmarks, Coleman won the puck downlow to Andrew Mangiapane at the near boards. Mangiapane sent it to McKenzie Weegar on the right point for a well-timed shot to the far corner as Coleman ran a moving screen across the bottom of the slot at 6:17.

It took all of 43 seconds later for the Tampa Bay deficit to increase to three, again with the play starting off an offensive zone faceoff. Calgary won the draw rushed up ice and had Tampa Bay chasing the play below the goal line. It didn’t take long for assignments to be missed that left Yegor Sharangovic wide open for a one-timer from the top of the right circle.

With the 3-0 deficit after two periods, with all three Calgary goals coming in the second, Tampa Bay ended the five game road trip being outscored 12-0 in the second period. In the first four of those

games, Tampa Bay scored the opening goal and had the lead after the first period three times. In all five games, they were either in the lead or tied after the opening period.

They earned four out of a possible 10 points in the five games.

“We just can’t have those second periods anymore,” said Victor Hedman, who returned after missing two games. “Feels like that’s been kind of our Achilles heel as of late. So we’ll address that and be better.”

Second periods have been an issue for the Lightning for a good portion of the season. While their second-period, goal-differential is now a minus-8, it is also Tampa Bay’s lowest scoring period by eight goals. They’ve been outshot in the second period this season 353-303.

“It’s definitely pretty evident that we’re losing those (second periods),” center Brayden Point said. “But it’s definitely something that we have to figure out if we want a chance to win games.”

If Tampa Bay could play more consistently like they did in the third on Saturday, they would win more games.

After registering just 16 shots on goal in the first two periods, Tampa Bay had 17 in the third period. After generating nine scoring chances in the first two periods, they created 12 in the third.

With goals 90 seconds apart from Brayden Point and Steven Stamkos, the Lightning pulled to within a goal just 5:40 into the third period. They were doing everything right in the third that they failed to execute in the first 40 minutes.

“The third period, I thought we did a better job of executing our breakouts,” Point said. “That’s why we didn’t spend as much time in the D zone. But I think our push was better, too, and our effort was better in the third.”

Tampa Bay had plenty more good looks to get the game even on the scoreboard. Darren Raddysh hit the post with a clean look from the right faceoff dot. Erik Cernak had a clean chance off a rebound from the slot. Point had clean look from in close, as well.

But then the unthinkable happened – Andrei Vasilevskiy allowed a bad goal.

From near the goal line at the left circle, rookie Connor Zary put a low shot that found the small hole down low before Vasilevskiy could seal the post. The goal came with 8:18 left in the third.

It’s a deflating moment and any push the Lightning showed evaporated.

It prevented a successful road trip.

“To come out here, it’s a long way to go and a lot of days to come up with four points,” Cooper said. “I think we left points on the table. But in the end, it comes down to puck management. I know guys are going to go through video with them and watch their shifts and stuff like that. But some of the decision making we’ve made on this trip, it’s been tough and it’s cost us. Giving up three goals in a game is too much, let alone three goals in 40 minutes. And it’s tough to get points when when you’re doing that.”

Now the Lightning return home from the extended road trip to face St. Louis on Tuesday.

“We had a chance to get more points than games and I think that’s the goal on every road trip,” Point said. “To come out and kind of have the performance we did, especially the second period, is tough to take. But you have to move forward until you can try to get better for the next one.”

## **NOTES**

Tampa Bay scratched LW Alex Barre-Boulet, D Sean Day and D Haydn Fleury. ... C Steven Stamkos recorded his 400th career power play point. ... RW Nikita Kucherov notched his 15th multi-point game of the season. ... C Brayden Point scored his first ever goal in his hometown of Calgary.

## **MY THREE STARS**

1. Flames D McKenzie Weegar – Goal, plus-3, five shot attempts, three hits, two blocked shots
2. Flames LW Blake Coleman – Assist, plus-2, six shot attempts, 68-percent expected goals when on the ice
3. Lightning RW Nikita Kucherov – Two assists, nine shot attempts

## Is Nikita Kucherov having an MVP season right under our noses?

Julian McKenzie (The Athletic)

CALGARY — The Tampa Bay Lightning locker room is star-studded with champions, playoff warriors and franchise players. There is Steven Stamkos, a former No. 1 overall pick and future Hall of Famer, in his corner of the room. Across the way, cornerstone defenceman Victor Hedman who just played his 1,000th NHL game. You don't have to crick your neck too far to see another future Hall of Famer Andrei Vasilevskiy, talking with a trainer a couple of stalls to Hedman's left—greatness following at every turn.

But as more players filled up the Lightning's visiting room, another Hall of Famer eventually filed in among them. But it's almost as if he magically appeared at his stall and snuck into the room. There was Nikita Kucherov, sitting all by himself and not in the mood to talk. One TV reporter tried to get his attention, but he was brushed aside. A TV analyst wanted some one-on-one time with him, just as a swarm of reporters formed around Stamkos. The conversation couldn't have lasted longer than a minute.

Once the analyst left his stall, Kucherov vanished — almost into thin air. If you blinked, you missed him.

If you didn't have statistics in front of you, you may not have realized that Kucherov is leading the NHL in scoring. While it is common for NHLers to be allergic to the spotlight, the silence around Kucherov's stellar start has been quite strange. Kucherov is not a new name who is just getting by on a hot shooting percentage. He is a 10-year veteran with two Stanley Cups, a Hart Trophy and several other accolades to his name.

Sure, Stamkos was coming off his first-ever four-goal game in Edmonton. But Kucherov should have just as many reporters flocking to speak to him — he even got assists on two of Stamkos' goals and added a goal of his own that night.

Entering Saturday night's games, Kucherov had already reached the 20-goal and 50-point mark — the first player to reach that points threshold this season. On Saturday night, Kucherov extended his scoring lead with two assists in a 4-2 loss against the Calgary Flames.

Kucherov is now on pace to establish career highs in goals, possibly reaching the 50-goal plateau for the first time in his career, and in points. Fifteen of Kucherov's 31 games played this season have been multi-point games. The Russian just had an 11-game, 21-point streak expire, featuring a six-point effort against the Carolina Hurricanes in late November. His recent streak was one game off a 12-game, 27-point streak he had during his 2018-19 MVP campaign. Earlier this month, colleague Dom Luszczyszyn's model ranked Kucherov third in the Hart Trophy race.

But it still feels as if he's been under the radar all season long.

"I've had a front-row seat for a long time," Stamkos said. So, it's not a surprise for me to see the success. I see the work that he puts in every day in the summertime. Every day during the season to get better. The expectation he has on himself, but also his teammates to want to improve and get better. For a guy that's leading the league in points, it just still seems like he's underappreciated in terms of our game and what he brings to that.

"I think he just slides under. Maybe he doesn't have the McDavid blazing speed or the MacKinnon power. But he's got a combination of everything. His vision and his hockey IQ are off the charts."

His teammates know him best as a quiet superstar. The lack of attention around him is just par for the course.

It wasn't always this way. Kucherov's play on the ice was always effective, but his stardom reached new heights while celebrating a 2021 Stanley Cup Final win with a shirtless, WWE-style press conference. It drew the ire of Canadiens fans whose team had fallen victim to the Lightning while drawing celebrations from fans across the league starved for personality.

But in the present day, Kucherov's season has played second fiddle to other tantalizing storylines around the league. There is Connor McDavid single-handedly carrying the Edmonton Oilers back to relevance after a horrid start and trying to close the gap on Kucherov's scoring lead. Another Connor, the young Bedard, is dazzling the hockey world with his shot in his rookie campaign. The first quarter of the season saw many in hockey media debate over Quinn Hughes' placement among the NHL elite and his chances at a Norris Trophy and debate how much money William Nylander would get on his next contract during his 18-game points streak.

But we can't take Kucherov's performances for granted. Kucherov's offensive metrics at five-on-five are stronger than any other year in his career. His 1.67 points per game leads the league and is higher than the rate from 2018-19 (1.56). His overall defensive impact could be better, but it has still shown some improvement at five-on-five compared to recent seasons.

"I think, and I'm biased, I think right now he's at a level above everyone else," Lightning head coach Jon Cooper said. "I think he's playing better now than he did in his MVP year."

Kucherov's performances have come on a Lightning team that began the year without Vasilevskiy. His fellow countryman has since returned to goal, but his team continues to fight off teams like Detroit and Carolina for a wild-card playoff spot while nine points off of Atlantic Division-leading Boston. The feel around the Lightning is that they've already inserted themselves into a playoff race, which means every point is necessary from here on out.

It also means leaning on their superstar players, including the quiet one.

"He's a huge part of why we're even in the mix this season, because of the season that he's had," Stamkos said.

"He's more experienced," Cooper added on Kucherov. "He's taken on more of a leadership role. I think his all-around game is better. I think, maybe four years ago, five years ago, people looked at him as an offensive player. And now, I think people should look at him as a 200-foot player. He always could think the game. But the way he's thinking it now, elite is the only way I can describe it."

There is more than half a season to go for the Lightning to make the playoffs and for Kucherov to make his case for MVP. If the Lightning succeeds in their goal, there is a great chance for Kucherov to be a massive reason why. And he'll be considered as a worthy candidate to add a second Hart Trophy to his trophy case.



## **Why defenseman Victor Hedman is so crucial to the Lightning's success** **Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — Victor Hedman looms large, both in his physical presence on the ice and his impact in the Lightning dressing room.

Earlier this month, he became the first defenseman to play 1,000 games in a Tampa Bay sweater. He's the highest-scoring defenseman in team history, and his franchise-best plus-152 plus/minus rating shows his strong two-way game.

Over the past three decades, Hedman is one of only four defensemen to win multiple Stanley Cups, a Norris Trophy and the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP. He is a future Hockey Hall of Famer. He possesses one of the hardest shots in the game, his size and smooth skating ability make him one of the best back-checkers, and he remains the quarterback of one of the league's most deadly power plays.

Now, as he approaches his 33rd birthday on Monday — and until an upper-body injury recently sidelined him — Hedman has recaptured his top form.

In his 15th NHL season, he might be the most important player in the Lightning room. As the team tries to right itself from a slow start to make the playoffs, he arguably is the player it can't afford to be without.

"He looks great out there," said Predators defenseman and former teammate Ryan McDonagh. "He looks like he's back to his old self out there, just making things look easy, always in the right spots, finishing plays off, creating stuff, so it's great to see him feeling good about his game again."

### **Back to his old self**

The Lightning are a competitive bunch, but Hedman might be the most so. Whether it's a Game 7 with the season on the line or a small-ice drill in practice, he wants to win.

"I know in practice, when he's running up it's kind of like the Red Sea parting," defenseman Darren Raddysh said. "You've got to get out of the way, because you don't want to be hit by it. So, I can't imagine playing on the other side against him when he's shooting the puck and skating."

Last season's first-round playoff exit wasn't ideal for Hedman, but the longer offseason allowed him to train in a way he wasn't able to during the previous three. He had time not only to rehab from injuries — he played through a hip impingement during the six-game loss to Toronto — but also to work on facets of his game. He went back to basics, concentrating on skating, shooting and stickwork.

Last season was a down year by Hedman's standards. Two seasons ago, he set career highs with 20 goals and 85 points while playing in all 82 games. A slow start in 2022-23 drew whispers of regression in his game. But he undoubtedly has rebounded this season. His 27 points (5 goals, 22 assists) lead Lightning defensemen and are tied for fifth-most among NHL blueliners. His 23:39 average ice time leads Tampa Bay, and his 9.1 shooting percentage is identical to two seasons ago.

"It's just his confidence in not caring much about what people say," defenseman Mikhail Sergachev said. "And he's just going out there and showing us vintage Heddy, which I guess was just two years ago. Some might say he's getting older, but he's still got young legs, shoots the puck well. He's still, in my opinion, the best defenseman in the league."

### **The anchor the Lightning need**

Not only has Hedman carried the offensive load for the Lightning blue line — defensemen have scored just seven goals so far this season, and Hedman has five — he's been the team's top defenseman in the defensive zone.

"He's 6-6, so he takes three strides and he's on the other side, and that's what makes him the best defenseman," Sergachev said. "Sometimes he can get poke-checked through and he's behind, and it takes them three strides to catch up to a guy. So he can do everything. He can cheat the game, too, sometimes, because he can always get back."

The biggest problem with the Lightning's season so far has been coverage lapses and bad gapping in the defensive zone. Hedman has had his share of problems defensively, but he's been by far the most reliable defensemen in his own end. In fact, he's the only one with a positive plus-minus in 5-on-5 play.

"I think it just creates some stability when he's out there," Raddysh said. "You know he's going to make the right play, he's going to make the right read. If you're playing with him or you're out on the ice with him, you know you have a solid person over there to lean on. If you turn the puck over or you make a bad play, it's going to happen, but you know he's going to be there to help you out and to make sure it will be alright."

### **Big presence in the room**

One facet of Hedman's value that often goes unnoticed is the way he's embraced his role of leader and teammate. As he's gotten older, he knows the influence he can have on younger players, whether it's by the way he takes care of his body or how he treats those around him.

"It's a game that's super fast and physical, and it takes a toll on your body and especially in the schedule we are on right now with a lot of travel and a lot of games," Hedman said. "To stay healthy, you've got to make sure that you take care of your body. Everything, with sleep to nutrition, it's super important.

"So as you've gotten older, it's gotten even more important. Maybe in the beginning, you can get away kind of slacking on what you're eating and stuff like that. But as you get older, your body gets older, you've really got to learn what works for you, and I feel like I've found a recipe of what works and I'm going to keep at it for as long as I can."

Former teammate Luke Schenn, now with the Predators, said that when you combine Hedman's resume and his humility, you get a teammate who is one of a kind.

"I feel like I had a better sense of it when I met his dad (Olle) on the dad's trip a few years back," Schenn said. "We had a couple of dinners. You just kind of see his roots and his upbringing and how he comes from northern Sweden and he's just simple. His family's simple and just easy-going people, and I don't think he's really changed since he's played in the NHL.

"Obviously, he's got a Hall of Fame career. But he doesn't really talk about himself like that."

Raddysh said Hedman has been instrumental in making younger defensemen like him and Nick Perbix comfortable, seeing that they're included in dinners on the road and golf outings.

"He's, in my opinion, the best defenseman in the league and you would never know," Raddysh said. "There's no ego to him. He takes care of guys all around the room. He's good to the trainers, the coaches, everyone. He'll speak up and say the right things at the right time, but he's just a friend to everyone. He's consistent. You'd never have to guess what you're getting out of him."

## **How Lightning's Steven Stamkos broke out with four goals vs. Oilers** **Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

Elite goal-scorers like Steven Stamkos realize that during times when it's difficult to find the back of the net, goals can suddenly start coming in a flurry.

You just have to keep shooting.

But even Stamkos admits that scoring droughts can get to him. The more pucks you ping off a post or that go wild off your stick blade, the more you try to find the perfect shot to break out of your slump.

And then you just have to get back to basics and be more determined than ever to continue to shoot. Stamkos' persistence paid off with a four-goal night in the Lightning's 7-4 comeback win Thursday night over an Oilers team that was the hottest in the league, riding an eight-game winning streak.

Despite scoring 529 goals in his career — 36th on the NHL's all-time list — Stamkos had never scored four in a game until Thursday night. He does have 12 career hat tricks.

"He's going to go to the Hall of Fame because he shot the puck," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said. "For some guys the puck has eyes, and the more you do it, the more they go in."

Stamkos entered Thursday goalless in his previous five games — he also missed a game in Seattle due to illness — and his struggles weren't from not shooting the puck. He had 18 shots on goal, 30 attempts and 15 scoring chances over that stretch.

Chasing his 200th career power-play goal, Stamkos hadn't scored with the man advantage in his previous eight games. As a group, the Lightning were 0-for-9 in their previous three games and 4-for-28 (14.3%) over their last nine.

"The last, probably, week or two, I've had some really quality chances that haven't gone in the net, and it's probably been bunching up for a moment like this and that's what happens," Stamkos said. "They come in spurts usually, so you just try not to get too down and continue to shoot the puck, and obviously they went in (Thursday), which was really nice to see."

Stamkos got going early, scoring on his first shift of the game on the power play as the Lightning forced havoc in front of the Edmonton net. Nick Paul poked the puck out to Stamkos at the left circle for a one-timer, making Stamkos the 20th player to reach 200 power-play goals.

"You get one first shift of the game, everything feels better for the rest of the night," Stamkos said. "You talk about having goal legs, the puck feels a little better on your blade. Your legs all of a sudden feel a little better, so that was nice."

Stamkos' most important goal of the night tied the game 6:48 into the third when he batted a puck out of the air from a tight angle — both of his feet were over the end line — past Oilers goaltender Stuart Skinner shortside.

He then surprised Skinner again when he pulled up on the rush just inside the blue line and wristed a shot from long distance, using defenseman Evan Bouchard to screen the goaltender and put the Lightning up 5-3. Stamkos added an empty netter in the game's final seconds.

He had just seven shot attempts, but all were on goal.

"I always think he needs to shoot more and more and more," Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev said. "If he's going to shoot 10 times in a game, he's going to score two, because he's just got a really accurate shot and he's been in the league for 15 years being a leader on this team.

"He's just a threat out there. He shot from the blue line (Thursday), and he scored because their goalie got screened a little bit. So anywhere he shoots it from, it's got a chance."

After Thursday's performance, Stamkos' 90 shots on goal rank in the 95th percentile of NHL skaters, according to NHL Edge. His 15.6% shooting percentage is in the 85th percentile.

"I've hit a lot of posts lately, and chances that I normally see go in the net haven't. So, listen, you're human," Stamkos said. "You're going to get a little in your own head sometimes. But when you get those chances, you just try to keep shooting them. Eventually, the odds say they're going to go into the net. There's a couple ones that maybe weren't traditional goals (Thursday), but when you throw pucks at the net, you never know."

## **Returning the favor: Watson's Dads Trip guest made his hockey journey possible** **Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)**

The holiday season is here. Trees planted along Channelside Drive are wrapped from top to bottom with glowing lights. Giant gift decorations are scattered along Water Street. Songs like “All I Want for Christmas Is You” and “Jingle Bell Rock” echo throughout shopping malls across the country.

And along with the holiday season comes everyone’s favorite activity – gift shopping. Those same shopping malls have parking lots jammed just as much as the stores inside with everyone searching for the perfect presents to gift to some of the most important people in their lives.

Some will shop for their significant other, while others will browse for their siblings or co-workers. And a large group will be looking to purchase gifts for their children.

Whether it’s a family of three, four or five, the cost seems to go up with each passing year for parents hoping to fill the empty spaces underneath the tree.

Now, imagine what that process is like as a parent of 10 children.

That was life for the Watson family with nine boys and one girl. The oldest of them all was Austin, a quick-witted boy with an inexhaustible love for the game of ice hockey.

Growing up in the Ann Arbor area, Watson was right in the middle of one of the biggest hockey hubs in the United States, with standout AAA organizations like Compuware, Honeybaked, Belle Tire and Little Caesars all within driving distance.

So, when Watson’s father, Mike, received a job offer all the way down in Florida in 2003, a difficult decision had to be made.

One year before the Lightning won the Stanley Cup for the very first time, the ice hockey landscape in the Sunshine State was vastly different from how it looks today. The competition Watson was facing in Michigan was far superior to anything in Florida at the time. So, now what?

Meet Richard Wrubel, the father of Austin’s mother, Mary. Along with his wife Margaret, Richard also lived in the Ann Arbor area and was part of Austin’s hockey journey from the very first time he put on skates at three years old.

“We were like second parents to him,” Wrubel said. “He was around us since he was a little guy. We moved out onto a lake and, when the ice would freeze, he’d come out to the house and we’d put him out there.

“I had a little white chair, so he could go out and hold onto it and skate around. The ice was always available. He was just a good kid. He was a really good kid.”

Fast forward nearly 10 years later, Richard and Margaret were more than happy to take Austin in and support his desire to continue playing hockey in Michigan.

“It was great,” said Watson. “I was heavily involved in hockey at the time and it was something that I wanted to do. My grandparents were able to do it for me. My parents were willing to let it happen.

“There was a lot going on from all sides, but it’s been a blessing in my life. I wouldn’t have been able to play hockey and chase this dream without him and without them.”

Playing AAA hockey with Compuware, Watson was able to compete against some of the best talent in his age group around the world, traveling as far as Quebec City, Alaska, and even Sweden for tournaments throughout the year.

“We traveled all over,” Watson shared. “When I was 12, we went to Quebec City and then went to Alaska for Nationals. I’m sure it was an expensive year. Now, being an adult, I don’t even want to know what that tab looked like.

“I just have a ton of appreciation for them doing that for me. We got a chance to go to Sweden and I played in a hockey tournament over there. We spent 10 days over there traveling around and doing that kind of stuff.

“Hockey’s given us a lot. It’s given us a lot of time to spend together and things to do together. It’s no different now.”

Hockey has certainly given Austin and his grandfather plenty of unforgettable memories. When the Lightning let the players know that the team’s Dads Trip was set to take place during the road trip to Colorado and Arizona, Watson knew exactly who would be joining him.

Between his time with the Nashville Predators and Ottawa Senators, Watson was part of four or five Dads Trips. Wrubel was there every single time. Serving as a father figure for a large portion of Watson’s life, bringing Wrubel on Tampa Bay’s Dads Trip was an easy decision.

“He’s just a kind man,” Watson said. “When you grow up with that as an example of how to be as an adult and as a man, I think that kind of wears off on you.

“I just try to be a good person like him. I try to be kind and loving and selfless. He’s all of those things and more, and he continues to be like that to this day.

“I wouldn’t be here doing what I am today if it wasn’t for my grandparents. I have a ton of gratitude and appreciation for them. They really stepped up and they made it possible for me to do what I do and to have the life that I have with my family. It’s all possible because of them.”

When Watson was drafted by the Windsor Spitfires in the second round of the 2008 OHL Draft, his entire family was elated. Not only was he moving forward on his journey to the NHL, but the big forward was set to play in a city that was no more than an hour drive from Ann Arbor.

“We’d drive into Detroit, cross the border, maybe check out a couple casinos,” Wrubel said with a laugh. “Then, we’d drive another 10 minutes and we’d be at the arena to watch him play. It was great.”

Whether it’s been Compuware, Windsor, Peterborough, London, Milwaukee, Nashville, Ottawa or Tampa, Wrubel has been all in on Watson’s hockey journey from the very beginning.

Without his grandparents, there’s a chance Watson may have never played a single game in the National Hockey League. Now, he’s just three games away from playing his 500<sup>th</sup> career game in the NHL.

You can bet Richard Wrubel will be tuning in for that game, just as he has for every single contest that got his grandson to this point. And as proud as Watson’s accomplishments as a hockey player have made Wrubel feel, there’s still something that means even more.

“I’m still watching every game,” Wrubel said. “Of course, I’m so proud of what he’s been able to do with his career, but I think I’m just most proud of what a good guy he is.

“He’s just a really good guy. He’s very sincere. He takes things the way they come. He’s happy.

“You know how you can tell when things are good with a family? Look at the kids. I look at his two little girls and they’re just really peaceful. They’re really happy. That’s a family that’s really in a great place. That just makes me feel really proud.”

That just makes me feel really proud.”