



AMALIE Arena Media Clips
Thursday, December 21, 2023

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Lightning's Mikhail Sergachev absent from practice, status in question **Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev was absent from Wednesday's practice at Amalie Arena and continuing to undergo evaluation, according to the team. His status for Thursday's game against the Stanley Cup champion Golden Knights — and potentially beyond — is in question.

Sergachev exited Tuesday's 6-1 win over the Blues less than 13 minutes into the game after blocking a shot with his left foot. He fell to the ice and was slow to his feet before hobbling to the bench and eventually down the tunnel. He briefly returned to the bench later in the game before returning to the locker room.

After the game, Sergachev left the locker room wearing a boot on the foot and riding a scooter to keep weight off of it. While the team practiced Wednesday, he did some stick-handling drills on his own away from the ice, the scooter by his side.

The Lightning had no further update after practice other than to say he was still being evaluated.

Sergachev went into Tuesday's game second on the team in average ice time at 23:30 per game, trailing only Victor Hedman's 23:40.

In Sergachev's absence, the Lightning were down to five defensemen and just two left-shot defensemen. Haydn Fleury helped carry the load, logging a season-high 22:23 and scoring his first goal in more than two years.

Calvin de Haan skated as the third left-shot defenseman during Wednesday's practice, paired with Darren Raddysh. If Sergachev cannot go Thursday, Raddysh likely will continue to man the point on the second-team power-play unit, which he did Tuesday after Sergachev departed.

Any prolonged absence would impact the Lightning's blue-line depth. Hedman, Fleury and de Haan are the only left-shot defensemen on the roster. The next one on the depth chart likely would be Sean Day, who was called up from AHL Syracuse when Hedman recently missed two games with an upper-body injury. Day didn't play and returned to the Crunch.

Bottom-six center Luke Glendening also didn't skate Wednesday, receiving a body-maintenance day. He should play Thursday against Vegas.

What Lightning's Jon Cooper didn't like about five-goal win vs. Blues **Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — Whether Jon Cooper should be more concerned about where his middling team currently sits in the Eastern Conference standings can be debated, but there's nothing he can do about the past. Those opportunities for points are lost.

"The standings don't matter until the end," the Lightning coach said before Tuesday's 6-1 win over St. Louis. "So, to me, it's pointless. I looked at the schedule a lot, see what's going on."

That's why Cooper was ornery following the Lightning's five-goal victory over the Blues. He saw the flaws in a convincing win and knows similar mistakes will be more costly when Tampa Bay hosts defending Stanley Cup champion Vegas Thursday at Amalie Arena.

The Lightning played a superb first period against the Blues, using a simple brand of hockey: getting pucks deep, winning possession battles, driving to the net and creating traffic in front. After 20 minutes, they were rewarded with a three-goal lead.

But after going ahead by four early in the second period, the Lightning started to allow odd-man rushes and Grade-A chances that forced goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy to hold the lead.

"The problem was that we got that lead and then we just started doing things that we've done in 2-2 games and 3-2 games that have cost us, and then we're also doing them in a game we didn't need to do," Cooper said. "I thought we just gave far too many chances in this game, and Vasy fortunately kicked them out."

That won't fly against the Golden Knights, who led the league with 47 points entering Wednesday's games. In the midst of a stretch of five home games in six to close out December, the Lightning are in desperate need of points.

Tampa Bay has struggled in the second, a period Vegas has dominated. The Golden Knights have outscored opponents by 16 goals in the middle period, second-best in the league.

"The second's not been our favorite period, that's for sure," said forward Nick Paul. "But that's something we're trying to work on. We're having a good first (Tuesday), you've got to build on it. You know teams are going to have a push. ... Calm the nerves down a little bit, get the confidence going and start skating with the puck and building off that."

The formula Vegas followed last season en route to its first Stanley Cup — going up early and protecting the lead (the Golden Knights are 10-1-1 when ahead after one period this season) — is one other teams, including the Lightning, have tried to copy.

Tampa Bay this season began employing a zone defense much like the one Vegas perfected a year ago. It scraps the long-embraced man defensive structure and focuses on protecting the middle off the ice, particularly in front of the net: interrupting passing lanes that could lead to Grade-A looks, blocking shots and allowing teams all the movement and shots they want from the perimeter.

The system might allow more shot attempts and shots on goal, but Vegas showed it would generate more scoring chances in terms of volume and quality, and capitalize on them. Once they take a lead, the Golden Knights tighten down in their zone and protect the middle.

The Lightning's adjustment to the zone structure change — also known as the "box and one" — has been a work in progress. At times, they've gotten caught focusing too much on the puck and

overloading toward it, losing coverage and leaving space for opponents to get behind them into soft areas around the net. But over time, they seem to have grown more comfortable with it.

“Last year, we’re a little bit more man-on-man and just trying to grow out of that,” Lightning assistant coach Rob Zettler said. “You’re a little bit more zone, you’re more responsible for what we call our quadrants. So just understanding when to release a guy and when to pressure a guy, I think is the challenge.

“We talked to a ton of people over the summer time and we decided to do this, and it takes time. But our thought was that we wanted to give up less quality chances. We may end up spending a little bit more zone time, but actually it turns out when you compare the years we really haven’t spent a lot more zone time. So, it’s just understanding that when to flex, when to go and when to release.”

More than anything, it’s been turnovers leading to odd-man rushes the other way that have resulted in too many pucks in the Lightning net. Those are the kinds of things that had Cooper concerned after the win over St. Louis, especially heading into another crucial contest against the league’s top team.

“We can’t get too high on this one,” Paul said. “This is a big little push for us before Christmas. We want to stay strong and keep building. Not every game we’re going to be scoring that much, and we’ve got to learn to win by one, win by two, and not relying on getting six. This was good. We’ll take the good things out of this one and be ready for Vegas.”

Tampa Bay Lightning D Haydn Fleury makes the most of his opportunity – “It’s not easy sitting out”

Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)

TAMPA – Haydn Fleury carries the weight of draft pedigree.

The 27-year-old defenseman was the seventh overall pick in the 2014 NHL Entry Level Draft. Players drafted that high have expectations placed upon them, whether it’s fair or unfairly placed.

Since entering the league, however, Fleury has been burdened with those expectations. As a rookie with Carolina, he appeared in 67 games with the Hurricanes. In the six seasons since, Fleury has never appeared in more than 47 games in a single season. From Carolina to Anaheim to being an expansion pick by the Seattle Kraken – where he had the opportunity to play with his brother Cale – Fleury has not lived up to the expectations that come with being a top ten pick.

Even after signing with the Lightning last summer, finding a spot in the lineup has been more miss than hit. Last year, despite spending the entire season on the NHL roster, Fleury played in just 29 games. This year, it’s been more of the same with just six games played through the first 32 games of the season.

But no matter the situation, a player in Fleury’s situation needs to be ready when called upon. On Tuesday against St. Louis, an opportunity presented itself.

Fleury seized it.

When Mikhail Sergachev went down to injury in the first period, Fleury stepped up to the tune of 22 minutes, 32 seconds on a team-high 30 shifts. It’s been more than two years since Fleury played more than 20 minutes in a game. He also notched his first goal since October of 2021, recorded an assist and finished as a career-best, plus-4

“I’m sure he was thrilled with the minutes, he hasn’t played that much in a really long time,” assistant coach Rob Zettler said. “But he responded. Bottom line, I thought he played well. The best part about him was that he skated himself out of trouble a few times in our end, was able to break the puck out a few times just by using his legs. So he did a great job. Then the bonus goal, the assist, finished plus four. Anytime during the season where you can finish plus-four, you know it’s a good night.”

It hasn’t been easy for Fleury from a mental standpoint to deal with so much time out of game action. Practice is practice. Players can stay in shape and work hard during practices and morning skates. But it’s never the same.

Dealing with constantly being told he’s not in the lineup erodes confidence.

“It’s not easy sitting out,” Fleury said. “It’s tough to find your rhythm and feel good about yourself. Even when you do have good games, it’s tough to find that rhythm and keep your confidence and all that stuff. I think I have done a better job this year than in past years.”

Just through the process of maturing as a person and as a player has helped Fleury deal with his situation. Like Sam Obisanya, he’s learned to be a goldfish.

“As crazy as it sounds just like not care when mistakes are made,” Fleury said. “Just keep going out there. Mistakes made whatever, everybody makes mistakes. Sometimes when you don’t play and then you make a mistake, you can kind of be like “Oh, damn” and you know it’s not going to be a good night or anything like that. So I think that’s kind of in the biggest thing is, bury it, park it and just

not do it again the next time.

“I think I’ve matured a little bit with the way my game is, trying to take a little bit of the risk out in certain situations of the game but still being able to play my game and try and help the team.”

Fleury will no doubt get the chance to try and repeat his performance from Tuesday when the Lightning host Vegas. Sergachev’s status remains uncertain as the team said he was still undergoing further evaluation. But Sergachev did not practice, though he was in the building as Lightning Insider spotted Sergachev on the synthetic half sheet of ice working on stickhandling while his left ankle/foot was heavily wrapped while using a knee scooter.

While the Lightning will no doubt likely call Sean Day back up, there is a spot open on the left side for however long Sergachev will be out. Calvin de Haan will draw back in, but based on how Fleury played on Tuesday, he’ll likely see an elevated role.

While Fleury was paired with Nick Perbix, they only allowed one shot on goal and 0.17 expected goals against during 12:34 of ice time, according to MoneyPuck.com.

“As a staff we’re super happy for him because he works hard every day to try and get back in the lineup,” Zettler said. “He’s put his time in for sure.”

One thing that helped Fleury this season was a two-week conditioning assignment to the Syracuse Crunch in the American Hockey League from November 2-14. While with the Crunch, Fleury played in five games while logging top minutes.

“I think a big thing was that I had a good game against Seattle (on October 30) ... before I went down,” Fleury said. “So that’s a little bit of confidence, a little bit of rhythm going there. The coaches were great down there, the guys were great and I came back with a lot of confidence. I think I showed that in the Arizona game. And then Victor (Hedman) gets hurt on the road trip and kind of get a little bit of a chance to get into a rhythm. And I think you know, showed well in the Vancouver and Edmonton games, and then, you know, get a chance last night and something happened for me.”

It’s sort of the classic situation for when preparation meets opportunity. Fleury has now learned better how to prepare and he showed it when given the opportunity.

The coaches see the difference.

“I think when guys haven’t played they, go down to the American League and kind of finding your legs and having a feel for the game is really, really valuable,” Zettler said. “I think when you go down there you really have to think it because it can be a little bit more unpredictable than the NHL is. You find yourself in some hockey reads and hockey situations. So anytime anybody’s gone down, it’s not the first thing they want to do, but they always come back saying that really helped.”

Fleury has also included the help of a skills coach this year, Jonathan Sigalet who works with the Oates Sports Group, run by Hall of Famer Adam Oates. Fleury gets feedback on every game. It’s an extra set of eyes on his game, offering tips and advice. While the two had not spoken as of Wednesday afternoon, they did communicate.

“He sent me a meme, like a raise the roof meme,” Fleury said. “He’s been a good, kind of a fresh perspective. For me, I think having somebody watch my games for my best personal interest I think it’s been a huge thing for me. He’s a good guy to talk to, I talk to him almost every day. So I think he’s helped me a lot.”

But, like any goldfish, it's time to have short-term memory after Tuesday's performance.

"Just move on from it," Fleury said. "I think that's the biggest thing is don't get too high, don't get too low. After the good or the bad, just come from the rink, go through my routine and then get ready to go again."

Nuts & Bolts: Bolts host the defending Stanley Cup champs Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)

Everything you need to know ahead of Tampa Bay's matchup against the Vegas Golden Knights on Thursday.

When: Thursday, December 21 - 7 p.m. ET

Where: AMALIE Arena - Tampa, FL

TV coverage: Bally Sports (check local listings)

Radio coverage: 102.5 MHz-FM, Lightning Radio 24/7

Where to stream it: BallySports.com

Lines from Wednesday's practice (subject to change)*

Forwards

Nick Paul - Brayden Point - Nikita Kucherov

Brandon Hagel - Anthony Cirelli - Steven Stamkos

Conor Sheary - Tyler Motte - Mikey Eyssimont

Conor Sheary - Tyler Motte - Alex Barre-Boulet

Defensemen

Victor Hedman - Erik Cernak

Mikhail Sergachev - Nick Perbix

Haydn Fleury - Darren Raddysh

Goaltenders

Andrei Vasilevskiy

Jonas Johansson

Tuesday's Matchup

The Lightning and Golden Knights are playing the first of two matchups this season and the only meeting at AMALIE Arena...Tampa Bay posted a 0-1-1 record vs. VGK last season, losing 5-4 Feb. 18 at T-Mobile Arena before falling 4-3 in overtime March 9 at AMALIE Arena...Nikita Kucherov (1-3—4) and Mikhail Sergachev (0-4—4) were tied for the Bolts team lead in points vs. VGK last season with Sergachev pacing the team in assists and Brayden Point (2-1—3) leading the way in goals...Kucherov has found the scoresheet in each of his eight career games vs. VGK (1-11-12) and has five points over the last two meetings at AMALIE Arena (1-4—5)...Point has recorded seven points over his last six contests vs. VGK (5-2—7)...Steven Stamkos has picked up points in nine of his 10 career games vs. VGK (6-6—12)...Sergachev has recorded four assists over his last two contests vs. VGK (0-4—4)...Victor Hedman has five assists over his last four games vs. VGK (0-5—5)...The Lightning have scored a power-play goal in eight of their 10 contests all-time vs. VGK...The Bolts are 3-4-3 all-time vs. VGK, including a home record of 1-1-3... Kucherov (1-11—12) and Stamkos (6-6—12) are tied for the Tampa Bay franchise record for career points vs. VGK, with Stamkos leading the way in goals and Kucherov pacing the team in assists..

Injuries

The Road Ahead

Saturday, December 23 at Washington Capitals

Wednesday, December 27 vs. Florida Panthers

Saturday, December 30 vs. New York Rangers