



AMALIE Arena Media Clips
Thursday, December 28, 2023

1. Four observations from the Lightning's dud against the Panthers – Kristie Ackert (Tampa Bay Times)
2. Tampa Bay Lightning suffer a case of the egg nogs out of Christmas break – Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)

Four observations from the Lightning's dud against the Panthers **Kristie Ackert (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — This is one game the Lightning wish they could return.

After three days off for the Christmas break, Tampa Bay returned to the ice flat Wednesday night. The Lightning were held scoreless for the first two periods against the Panthers and then could not catch up, losing 3-2 at Amalie Arena.

The loss snapped the Lightning's season-high three-game winning streak. In the tight Eastern Conference standings, the Lightning (17-14-5) fell out of a playoff spot. Florida, the defending Eastern Conference champion, won its second straight game and moved into second in the Atlantic Division.

Panthers goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky was dominant, shutting down the Lightning for the first 40 minutes, 29 seconds, and finishing with 27 saves. The Lightning finally got going in the third period with Nikita Kucherov's rebound shot for their first goal and then a goal from Mikey Eyssimont, but a shorthanded goal between the Tampa Bay scores by Panthers forward Sam Reinhart proved to be the winner.

"How the game played out is frustrating," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said. "That's frustrating. Can't give up a shorthanded goal. ... That's unacceptable on our end.

"We just had a little bit of a meltdown there at the end, and it cost us."

As the Lightning approach back-to-back games this weekend, here are four takeaways from Wednesday night's loss.

Mr. 300

Twenty-nine seconds into the third period, Kucherov flipped a rebound back over the glove of Bobrovsky for his 300th career goal. The Lightning's leading scorer and league points leader is the 244th player in the NHL to reach 300.

He reached his 300th in his 679th game, becoming the ninth active player to hit the mark in fewer than 700 career games. Steven Stamkos also did that, needing 550 games. Kucherov, Stamkos, Vinny Lecavalier (in his 773rd game) and Marty St. Louis (in his 807th) are the only players to tally at least 300 goals in a Lightning uniform.

"A lot of things are impressive about him," Cooper said about Kucherov. "He's a student of the game. I don't think anybody studies it more than he does. He's got an impeccable work ethic to get better. We see that all the time. So it's on an everyday basis.

"He's clearly been our MVP, and in my book MVP of this season so far if you're going to go pre-Christmas, but he works at it."

Bring the emotion

The Lightning did not match the Panthers' intensity and desperation early. They brandished those traits more during their three-game winning streak.

"It's a Christmas crowd, and it's a rival, and I thought (the Panthers) got that early goal (4:16 into the game), and it just probably took a little air out of our tires. I don't know why," Cooper said.

“There was so much game left. But I am not so sure we were completely physically engaged in this one until we scored, and then we played (with) a little bit more spark that third period and until we made some errors at the end.

“It’s a little disappointing coming out of the break at home here and to let a cross-state rival to come in and beat us on our home ice. It’s disappointing.”

Power outage

The Lightning went 0-for-3 on the power play and gave up the shorthanded goal to Reinhart 3:11 into the third period. Tampa Bay was the top power-play team at home in the NHL going into the game and No. 2 overall.

The Lightning got four good shots on goal on their first power play, but Bobrovsky was outstanding in that stretch. He frustrated the Lightning all night.

“He was great. Made some nice saves not only on me, but on others’ chances, too,” Lightning center Brayden Point said. “Really good goaltender, playing well, played well (Wednesday), and yeah, he stopped some good ones there.”

Help is on the way

The Lightning’s offense starts when the defense is moving the puck out of the zone. They were without top defenseman Mikhail Sergachev for a third straight game with a lower-body injury.

Cooper said the Lightning hoped he would play Saturday against the Rangers or Sunday against the Canadiens.

Sergachev got hit with a puck in the back of his left foot in a game against the Blues on Dec. 19.

Tampa Bay Lightning suffer a case of the egg nogs out of Christmas break

Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)

TAMPA – Funny thing, momentum.

When you have it, you want to keep riding the wave. When you don't have it, stepping away briefly can be a welcome relief.

Heading into the league-mandated, three-day break for Christmas, the Tampa Bay Lightning were riding the wave of a three-game winning streak. During the time off, the momentum the Lightning gained crashed to the surface.

Tampa Bay tried to build their game up as Wednesday's game – the first coming out of the break – went along, but the wave just didn't materialize. And just when it felt like the Lightning were set to get things moving in the right direction again, the inexcusable happened.

Here's your talking points from a momentum halting setback to Florida.

STUCK IN THE EGG NOGS

Three days off is a long time for a hockey team. The break mandates no organized team activities. No skates. No practices. No team workouts.

There are no excuses being set up. Every team goes through the same situation. But some teams handle it better than others.

Tampa Bay didn't handle it very well.

Last season the Lightning had a full week between games during the break but handled it better against Montreal, though they did have a full practice the day before to shake off the egg nogs. This year, a morning skate and right back into a game against an in-state rival.

"Do I think we could have brought a little bit more emotion to the game," head coach Jon Cooper asked. "You know, it's a Christmas crowd and it's a rival. I thought they got that early goal and it just probably took a little air out of our tires. I don't know why, there was so much game left. But I'm not so sure we were completely, physically engaged in this one until we scored."

The Lightning fell behind 4:16 into the game on a long-range shot by Aaron Ekblad found its way through traffic from the right point.

Tampa Bay didn't really have much wind the rest of the first as the Lightning finished with just two shots on goal during 5-on-5 play and only 33-percent of the expected goals. One of those shots was a breakaway chance by Steven Stamkos early that could have lifted the team's sails. And if not for Sergei Bobrovsky in goal, Tampa Bay may have converted on one of their two power play opportunities in the first that produced seven shots on goal.

CAUGHT FLAT-FOOTED

The deficit hit two goals in the opening minutes of the second when some of the rust in the Lightning's game showed up. With the puck down low in the left corner, four Tampa Bay players were focused solely on the puck. That allowed Sam Reinhart to come in behind both Anthony Cirelli and Stamkos for a clean look on a pass from Evan Rodrigues 1:24 into the second to make it a 2-0 game.

"For whatever reason, we were flat early, got behind and then we had to chase it," Cooper said.

FINDING SOME WIND, HITTING A MILESTONE

Nikita Kucherov gave Tampa Bay life early in the third. Nick Perbix circled the back of the net, collected an errant puck, fed it back to Victor Hedman who quickly snapped a shot on goal. Kucherov was in the slot to knock in the rebound 29 seconds into the third.

The goal was Kucherov's 24th of the season, trailing only Auston Matthews for the league lead. It was also the 300th goal of Kucherov's career in his 679th career game. He is the ninth active player to hit the mark in fewer than 700 career games – a list that also includes teammate Stamkos (550 GP). Kucherov, Stamkos, Vinny Lecavalier (773 games played) and Marty St. Louis (807) are the only players to tally 300-plus goals in a Lightning uniform.

Kucherov increased his league-lead in points with 58, two more than Nathan MacKinnon.

"I don't think anybody studies (the game) more than he does," Cooper said of Kucherov. "He's got an impeccable work ethic to get better. And we see that all the time. It's on an everyday basis and he's clearly been our MVP, and in my book the MVP of the season so far if you're given one out pre-Christmas. But he works at it, that's what's impressive. He doesn't take anything for granted."

THE INEXCUSABLE PLAY

The building was alive. The Lightning had jump. They looked like the team that had won three consecutive games coming in.

Tampa Bay was within a goal and the No. 1 power play unit on home ice in the league was given a chance to pull the Lightning even when Nick Cousins took an extra roughing call during a skirmish between Oliver Ekman-Larsson and Cirelli at 1:27.

That's when the game changed, for the worse for Tampa Bay.

A lost faceoff in the Florida zone was rimmed around the boards up to the blue line where Nikita Kucherov was unable to keep it in as Sasha Barkov pushed it up ice. But that wasn't the inexcusable moment.

That happened a moment later as Hedman played too soft as Reinhart kicked the puck up off the wall and cut toward the net. Hedman failed to play the body in anyway and didn't do enough with his stick to disrupt the path to the net.

To make it worse, Andrei Vasilevskiy was too low in his crouch that opened up all kinds of space up high that Reinhart found to regain the two-goal lead for the Panthers.

"Can't give up shorthanded goal that ends up being a game winner," Cooper said. "That's unacceptable on our end."

HIGHWAY BOBBERY

Tampa Bay got right back in the game when Mikey Eyssimont scored 20 seconds after Reinhart to pull the Lightning to within a goal again.

But Bobrovsky was the difference for the final 18 minutes of the game. Just as he had done in the first period, the Florida netminder was sharp. He stopped Brayden Point on a breakaway with a spectacular stop that should have evened the score.

Point raced up ice and was able to cut around the defense and draw toward the crease. Point avoided the poke check attempt by Bobrovsky and then appeared to have an open net to tie the game. But Point was not able to get the puck elevated enough as Bobrovsky snared the puck with his glove, holding it out to make sure everyone in the building knew he had it secured.

“Thought I made a good play to dodge the poke check and then he’s still able to get across,” Point said. “A really, really great save at a big time of the game. ... He made some nice saves, not only on me, but on other chances we had. He’s a really good goaltender and played well tonight. He made some some good ones.”

Tampa Bay had an expected goals rate of 3.6 according to NaturalStatTrick and 3.82 according to MoneyPuck. They only scored twice, even while generating 14 high danger chances in the game.

The mistakes Tampa Bay made could have been erased if the Lightning finished their chances. But they didn’t and showed that for all the strides Tampa Bay has made in the past couple of weeks, there is still strides to be made.

“They’re skilled and you give them chances they’ll capitalize,” Point said. “They made some nice plays on their goals. The shorthand one hurts, those are always tough to give up especially at that time in the game. For the most part we did good things but still lots to clean up.”

NOTES

Mikhail Sergachev skated on Wednesday but missed his third consecutive game with a lower body injury. ... The Lightning recalled D Sean Day from Syracuse of the American Hockey League. ... Tampa Bay scratched RW Alex Barre-Boulet, Day and Sergachev. ... The shorthanded goal was the third allowed this season by the Lightning.

MY THREE STARS

1. Panthers G Sergei Bobrovsky – Stopped 27 shots, made 2.28 goals save above expectation
2. Panthers C Sam Reinhart – Two goals, SH winner, plus-3
3. Lightning RW Nikita Kucherov – 300th career goal, 11 shot attempts