



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips
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1. 3 takeaways from Lightning's exhibition win over Panthers in Orlando – Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)
2. A closer look at Andrei Vasilevskiy's injury, recovery and prognosis – Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)
3. Bolts win in Orlando behind another Johansson shutout – Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)

3 takeaways from Lightning's exhibition win over Panthers in Orlando **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

ORLANDO — The stars weren't out for the Lightning's preseason game against the Florida Panthers Tuesday at Amway Center, but the night was important for players on the roster bubble.

Opportunities are drying up as the exhibition schedule winds down. The biggest competition is at forward, where four players — Alex Barre-Boulet, Gabriel Fortier, Austin Watson and Waltteri Merela — essentially are fighting for one or two spots.

Steven Stamkos, Victor Hedman, Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point and Mikhail Sergachev didn't dress Tuesday, but they'll get their work in over the final two games against Florida ahead of Tuesday's opener against Nashville.

The Lightning claimed a 2-0 win over the Panthers, getting power-play goals from Tanner Jeannot and Nick Paul. Goaltender Jonas Johansson recorded his second shutout in as many preseason starts, stopping 25 shots against a Florida team that played its share of stars.

The meeting between the cross-state rivals at a neutral site between the two cities drew a crowd of 16,806.

The game was extremely physical, as the teams combined for 159 penalty minutes, including seven roughing calls, four fighting majors and 10 misconduct penalties. The teams will meet again Thursday in Tampa and Saturday in Sunrise. The Lightning (4-1-0) have scored seven power-play goals in 21 opportunities and are 18-for-19 on the penalty kill over their five preseason games.

Here are three takeaways from Tuesday's game.

Defense has been a sum of its parts

In two preseason starts, Johansson has faced 67 shots and not allowed a goal. He had a 42-save shutout in his preseason debut, Friday's 4-0 win over Carolina. Tuesday, he held the Panthers scoreless despite five Florida power plays and a second period that saw Florida launch 16 shots on goal.

But all in all, Johansson didn't face many Grade-A chances — a handful at most — and his teammates played strong defense in front of him, blocking shots and letting him see the puck.

The Lightning have made some adjustments to their defensive system that they hope will lead to better protection in front of the net and decrease the number of high-grade chances they allow. It has certainly done that so far, and both Johansson and Matt Tomkins have been the beneficiaries.

"In the end, it starts with our team defense," coach Jon Cooper said. "And (Johansson's) made some big saves (Tuesday) on the penalty kill. So, it's just part of our process of getting better as a team, and the goalie is definitely doing his part."

Panthers bring out the intensity

The Lightning and Panthers always seem to bring out an edge in each other, even when the outcome doesn't count. Tuesday's game was by far the most physical of the preseason for Tampa Bay, with constant scraps and chirps between the teams.

“Guys are trying to make the team,” Cooper said. “Like, there’s guys on Florida trying to make the team. Both teams had some big names out of the lineup, but it’s when you get to these times and jobs are on the line, these guys are going to give it their all, and that’s what you’re seeing from both teams. And when that happens, usually the physicality starts going.”

The Lightning might have lost some toughness when they traded Pat Maroon, but with both Jeannot and Watson mixing it up, they showed they still don’t back down from a fight. Watson, who is trying to make the team on a personal tryout, logged 17 penalty minutes alone, drawing Matthew Tkachuk off the ice with matching slashing penalties and taking Sam Bennett off for 10 minutes with matching misconduct penalties.

“This is the first time I’ve played them with a Lightning jersey on, so I’m excited for these battles that we’re going to have with them this year,” said forward Mikey Eyssimont, who gave and took his share of hits.

Barre-Boulet needed a game like this

The Lightning are giving forward Alex Barre-Boulet, who is 26 and in his sixth camp with the team, every opportunity to make the opening-night roster, including minutes on the team’s third line and second power-play unit.

Barre-Boulet knows everything he does this preseason is under a microscope. He scored a power-play goal in his first exhibition game but was minus-3 in his second. And Tuesday didn’t start well when he missed a wide-open net.

But with the Lightning clinging to a one-goal lead in the third period, Barre-Boulet’s hard work on a 5-on-3 power play paid off. He launched a nasty one-timer from the right-circle, worked with Brandon Hagel to create another chance and then rocketed a shot from between the circles that Paul redirected past Panthers goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky, earning the primary assist.

A closer look at Andrei Vasilevskiy's injury, recovery and prognosis **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — The Lightning have long leaned on goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy. His teammates call him the best goalie on the planet, and NHL player polls agree.

But through at least the first two months of this season, Vasilevskiy will be sidelined as he recovers from surgery to repair a herniated disc in his lower back.

Early in the 2018-19 season, Vasilevskiy missed a little more than a month with a fractured foot, and backup Louis Domingue did a good job of carrying the load in his absence. The Lightning went 12-3-0 without Vasilevskiy. When he returned, they led the Atlantic Division with a 24-7-1 record on their way to the Presidents' Trophy before losing in the postseason's first round to Columbus. That was the last time Vasilevskiy missed a significant amount of game action.

"It seems like light years ago," Lightning captain Steven Stamkos said. "We're just going to have to play really well defensively and buckle things down a little bit, but it's going to be tough. Any time you're without a really important player, you just try to stay afloat until that guy gets back and try to push from there.

"We have a really good group, we know that. But it's going to be difficult. We're going to have to find a way"

Vasilevskiy's long-term health has long been a concern, especially as he draws closer to age 30, which he turns next July, and considering that no goaltender has played more hockey over the past four years than him. Medical experts, however, say he can return to his old form.

It is unclear how Vasilevskiy initially sustained a herniated disc in his lower back, but it happened in August well before training camp started. Initially, an injection alleviated the issue, but Vasilevskiy felt pain again during his first practice of camp; a second injection, treatment and rest didn't work.

"I always say the best analogy is like a car tire getting a tear and the air is leaking out," said Dr. Neel Anand, Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery and Director of Spine Trauma at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

"In this particular case, there is a jelly in the disc ... and that jelly comes out through a tear in the disc. But unfortunately when it comes out, the nerves are right behind, so it starts pinching up on the nerve and it can create pain going down the leg. ... Many times it gets better on its own at some point, but if not, you have to do surgery."

The microdiscectomy procedure Vasilevskiy had on Sept. 28 is a minimally invasive surgery that removes the portion of the disc that is putting pressure on the nerves and generally, the disc itself remains largely intact.

"We have a lot of athletes with microdiscectomies who are in major professional sports who have gone back doing what they do, but then unfortunately, it is genetics to a large extent that ultimately will determine, and his disc, just where that will go," Anand said. "Being a goalie, the load on the spine from squatting up and down is tremendous and actually even more than your regular hockey player.

“But he’s a professional athlete and extremely gifted and motivated and he can get back to normal. I feel confident that, as long as the surgery went well, he can get back to where he is and get back to the level he was at, as most professional athletes do.”

The injury Vasilevskiy had is more common in a football offensive lineman than a hockey goaltender, said Dr. Robert Volk, an orthopaedic surgeon specializing in sports injuries at The Centers for Advanced Orthopaedics in Washington, D.C.

“For a goalie, in particular, with just some of the way they make kick saves and some of the things that they have to do to contort their body in order to tend the goal, (they) have stresses that they can put on their back,” said Volk, who has served as a team physician for the Tampa Bay Bucs, Miami Dolphins and Florida Panthers. “It’s not a super common injury, but it does happen.”

Vasilevskiy likely would be able to keep working out with cardiovascular training like cycling or swimming shortly after the procedure, but wouldn’t be able to do much weight training until about four to five weeks after the surgery. Exercises like lifting weights overhead from a seated position or doing weighted squats would put pressure on the disc.

“He’ll be able to bounce back relatively quickly, which is why you’re hearing projections of eight weeks after surgery,” Volk said. “A lot of times after surgery, it’s a couple months.”

“It’s rare for someone in their 20s to have this type of injury,” he added. “It’s not super rare, but it does happen more commonly in the third or fourth decade of life. But it’s actually maybe a good thing for him that he’s a little bit younger, and, obviously genetically, very gifted. So he should bounce back much quicker than the average 40-year-old who has this type of injury.”

The Lightning said Vasilevskiy is expected to miss the first two months of the season. If that is in fact the case, he wouldn’t return until the 30th game of the season in mid-December. Anand said that two months is an average, but sometimes it can take up to three months to fully recover.

As far as a long-term prognosis, Volk said that studies predominantly focusing on NFL players who have had the same injury saw that they can return to form for several years after surgery.

“Those research studies suggest that on average, players are able to return to their same level of sport for an average of two and a half to three and a half — or an outlier of four — years after their surgery,” Volk said. “And one of the best prognostic indicators we found in the study is the number of games played at that level prior to injury. So the prognosis is good for (Vasilevskiy) to make a good recovery given the amount of time he’s already played at a high level. ...

“Obviously, as you get a bit older through professional sports, you’ve got to spend that much more time on things like conditioning and core stretching, things like that. And I’m sure he’ll take a professional work ethic towards this and get himself back to where it needs to be.”

Bolts win in Orlando behind another Johansson shutout Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)

In front of 16,802 fans at Amway Center in Orlando, the Tampa Bay Lightning skated to a 2-0 victory over the Florida Panthers Tuesday night for their fourth-straight win this preseason. Fans in attendance got plenty of entertainment in a contest that ended with 160 penalty minutes being handed out between both teams.

Jonas Johansson got his second start of the preseason for the Bolts and stopped all 25 shots he faced, moving him to 2-0 with two shutouts and 67 saves on as many shots.

The Lightning got on the board early when Tanner Jeannot scored a power-play goal just 5:24 into the opening period. After Zach Bogosian collected the puck at the point, he sent a pass to the right circle for Tyler Motte, who quickly one-touched a hard pass to the back door, where Jeannot was waiting to redirect the puck past Sergei Bobrovsky for his first goal of the preseason.

In typical Lightning vs. Panthers fashion, things got very chippy as the game rolled on with both teams racking up penalty minutes. Consequently, the first fight of the night came with 9:18 left in the second period with Austin Watson and Casey Fitzgerald dropping the gloves.

As the teams traded chances and tempers continued to flare, the second fight of the night occurred with 14:23 remaining in regulation when Jeannot squared off with Niko Mikkola and got some good shots in on the big Finnish defenseman.

Beginning to gain momentum, the Lightning earned a 5-on-3 power play with 10:14 remaining after Oliver Ekman-Larson and Kevin Stenlund were whistled for back-to-back penalties. With 9:14 remaining, Tampa Bay cashed in with Alex Barre-Boulet firing a hard shot pass towards Nick Paul, who redirected the puck past Bobrovsky to give the Bolts the 2-0 lead.

From there, the Lightning continued their strong defensive play and shut things down with Johansson earning his second shutout in as many games.

“He’s responded,” Mikey Eyssimont said when asked about Johansson. “He’s responded to this injury that we’re dealing with really well. We’re really excited playing in front of him.”

“We’re blocking a lot of shots and the shots that are going - I don’t know much about playing goalie, but he had a shutout tonight, so that’s pretty much as good as you can be.”

Following the news that Andrei Vasilevskiy will miss roughly the first two months of the season, the Lightning rotated between Johansson and Matt Tomkins between the pipes. Both goalies have posted a 2-0 record this preseason.

“Both of them have played really well,” Cooper said. “Even when we gave up four the other night, Tommer was great in that game and Jo was great again tonight.”

“In the end, it starts with our team defense and then he made some big saves tonight on the penalty kill. Just part of our process. We’re getting better as a team and the goalie’s definitely doing his part.”

With two games remaining this preseason, the Bolts still have a few cuts to make, but the decision won’t be an easy one for the coaching staff and front office.

“We’re going to probably have to send some guys down,” said Cooper. “Whatever the number’s going to be, it’s going to be extremely difficult, because everybody’s making a case for themselves to stay.

“In the end, it probably will come down to a little bit of chemistry on where guys fit in, but we’ve got a couple more games to kind of iron that out.

“But it’s a good problem to have when guys are pushing for spots and making it really difficult on the coaching staff.”

With four consecutive wins, the Lightning have played well throughout the preseason. Now, with two games to go, the group will look to get everything tightened up before Opening Night on October 10. The next preseason game is set for Thursday, October 5 at 7 p.m. ET in a rematch with the Panthers at AMALIE Arena.

“If I’m looking at the five games we’ve played so far, the guys have done a hell of a job and they’ve really played hard, so that’s a really good sign.”