



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips
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2. For veterans phased out by salary cap, Lightning camp offers opportunity – Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)

3 takeaways from Lightning's preseason home win over Nashville **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — For many players in the Lightning's training camp, Saturday's exhibition game against the Predators was their last chance to leave an impression on the NHL staff. With training camp at AHL Syracuse set to open Tuesday, many prospects would play their last preseason game before heading north.

The game at Amalie Arena also was the first preseason action for many of the Lightning's veterans. Steven Stamkos, Victor Hedman, Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point and Mikhail Sergachev played.

Tampa Bay entered the third period down a goal but scored three times — getting two goals from prospect Waltteri Merela — for a 5-4 comeback win.

After Merela's first goal tied the score at 3, Kucherov's one-timer from the right circle on a power play put Tampa Bay ahead 4-3. Merela's second goal with 6:07 remaining ended up being the winner.

After the game, the Lightning trimmed their roster from 56 to 26 ahead of Tuesday's exhibition against the Panthers in Orlando, the first of three meetings between the teams to round out the preseason schedule leading into the season opener Oct. 10 at home against the Predators.

"The first half of camp is more about the young guys, and the last half camp is about your team," Jon Cooper said. "So now, in this last week or so, we have to jell as a team.

"Half our team may have played (Saturday), and half our team played the night before (against the Hurricanes), and now it's putting those groups together and finding that chemistry."

Here are three takeaways from Saturday's win:

Merela made a strong impression

Merela, 25, knows the NHL is much different from the top league in his native Finland.

"I was like, yeah, this is crazy for the preseason games," the forward said. "We don't have that in Finland. People show up in the playoffs. It's an awesome hockey town, for sure, and I think it's going to get even better, so hopefully this isn't my last game here."

Merela, who survived the postgame camp cuts, stood out on the stat sheet with a three-point night. He is an aggressive two-way player who can make an impact in front of the net, where he scored his first goal, and he can skate. He collected a loose puck in the neutral zone and fought off a backcheck on a breakaway, beating goaltender Yaroslav Askarov to give the Lightning a two-goal lead.

"Whether you come from juniors or you come from Europe, you've got to get accustomed to the style of play and how things go down here," Cooper said. "I think he's improved every practice, every game, and I think he got rewarded tonight for some of his hard work."

All eyes are firmly focused on the Lightning's goaltending situation with Andrei Vasilevskiy out for the first two months of the season after back surgery. And though Matt Tomkins, one of two goalies the team is currently leaning on, didn't duplicate his 30 saves on 31 shots from his first preseason game Wednesday, in some ways his effort Saturday was more impressive.

Tomkins, who at 29 has yet to play in an NHL regular-season game, allowed four goals, but he aided the comeback effort in the third, stopping the first 13 shots of the period. Tomkins finished with 43 saves. He also stopped all eight shots he faced while Nashville was on the power play.

“He just has a really quiet game,” Cooper said. “He lets pucks hit him and puts them in the right places, and I thought he did another heck of a job. He let in four, but I can’t sit here and say, ‘Oh my God, I want that back.’ A lot of goalies in the league would have let those same four in.”

In two preseason starts, Tomkins has an impressive .935 save percentage. After Saturday’s postgame cuts, Vasilevskiy, Jonas Johansson and Tomkins are the three goalies remaining on the camp roster. Vasilevskiy will go on long-term injured reserve after opening night.

Hagel still plays like a guy fighting for his job

Fans will see a lot of Brandon Hagel, who got an eight-year, \$52 million contract extension in August, this season. He can play alongside Anthony Cirelli as part of a relentless two-way line or he can hold his own sharing the ice with Point and Kucherov, as he did Saturday. He’s in line to get time on the second power play, and he might be the team’s best penalty-killing forward.

And though he has long-term security now, Hagel continues to play like a guy who has nothing guaranteed.

With the Lightning down a goal and opening the second period on the penalty for the first 69 seconds, Hagel stole the puck on the kill, raced down the ice, parted two Nashville defenders as he reached the blue line and put a nifty forehand-backhand move on Predators goalie Kevin Lankinen that gave him an open net and a goal that tied the score at 1.

Then when Hagel saw Kiefer Sherwood make a run on Kucherov midway through the third period, he stood up for his teammate, dropping his gloves and launching some roundhouse punches toward the Nashville forward.

For veterans phased out by salary cap, Lightning camp offers opportunity **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

BRANDON — Tyler Motte is a player who can help a lot of NHL teams. As a bottom-six forward, he realizes that he's probably one of the final puzzle pieces a team considers when building its roster. But for the past two years, the 28-year-old wing has had to wait until the end of the offseason to find a job.

And had the Lightning not had an 11th-hour forward spot open up when free-agent acquisition Josh Archibald decided he wasn't going to play this season, Motte might have waited even longer for an opportunity to extend his career.

Motte signed a one-year, \$800,000 deal with the Lightning on Sept. 9, more than two months after free agency opened and 11 days before training camp report day. But being forced to wait out and hope for an opportunity has become a way of life for many players because of the slow increase of the salary cap, which has gone up just \$2 million over the past five seasons.

"It's really a grind, more mentally than physically," said Motte, who waited until Sept. 14 last year to sign a one-year deal with the Senators. "You attack the offseason the same way regardless of if you have a contract or not. But sometimes just waiting, the anxiety, it creeps up.

"Trying to get a move on for me and my wife and the dogs to get set up and just be comfortable when you go into the season ... obviously the longer you wait, sometimes the harder that is to do. ... It wasn't a fun offseason for a lot of (free agents)."

The cap remained flat at \$81.5 million through the pandemic, as part of a memorandum of understanding to the collective bargaining agreement between the league and the players; it allowed a return to play with the players placing a percentage of their salary in escrow to offset league revenue losses from the pandemic. The cap went up \$1 million last season and another \$1 million this season, to \$83.5 million.

And while the cap is projected to increase \$8.5 million over the next two seasons, that doesn't help players struggling to find jobs now.

The Lightning have had interest in Motte for a while. The past two seasons, they considered him at the trade deadline — he went to the Rangers both years — and they have had interest in free agency.

"Some teams are kind of handcuffed with what they can and can't do, whether they're interested or not," Motte said. "So fortunately for me, something happened along the way again. When I got the call (from the Lightning), it was a pretty easy decision for me."

It didn't make the offseason wait easier, especially after two seasons in which he continued to show value as a forechecker who is strong on the puck and can kill penalties. Over the past two years, he has averaged 7.5 goals and 17 points while being plus-5.

"It's unfortunate around the league just the way that the salary caps moved, I think you see some guys that have to take discounts or guys that are signing (professional tryout contracts) that maybe you could say shouldn't have to," he said. "Hopefully it's just the last summer of that."

“I think it’s important for organizations as well. They want to know who they have and what they’re dealing with capwise and personnelwise. It wasn’t an enjoyable process, but I like the way things were done, and I’m happy to be here.”

Another player affected is veteran forward Austin Watson, who had to settle for a personal tryout contract with the Lightning. A heavy-playing bottom-six forward who combined to score 19 goals and 27 points with the Senators the past two seasons, the 31-year-old knows he has an uphill climb to make the Lightning roster. He might have to settle for an AHL contract.

“Honestly, it’s been a struggle,” Watson said. “You see throughout the summer who gets deals and who doesn’t, and you can kind of call it both ways, and you can say, ‘Why not me?’ But as a bottom-six kind of role player, you’re fighting for your life. You’re fighting for your job every year.”

“Everybody’s ready to go, everyone’s in shape, but when you’re on a two-, three-year deal, you kind of can use the preseason to ramp up,” said Watson, who has played 482 NHL games, including 72 last season. “On a (professional tryout contract), you’ve got to be ready, raring to go every day. And we train for that. I’ve been doing it a long time.”

Lightning defenseman Calvin de Haan, 32, knows that experience. He went into the Hurricanes’ training camp last season on a professional tryout contract. He earned a spot, signing a one-year deal Oct. 1, just a few days before the season opened. Entering the offseason this year, de Haan didn’t want to wait through it to know where he’d play.

When the Lightning came calling, he quickly signed a \$775,000, one-year contract. He is slotted to fill the third left-shot defenseman spot and kill penalties, a hole left open by the departure of Ian Cole in free agency.

“When we went into it, I told my agent I didn’t really want to wait too long,” de Haan said. “We kind of jumped on the first opportunity that we had, and I’m thankful it was this organization. Love or hate the cap, it is what it is at this time. There’s not much you can do if you’re a player of my stature and where I stand on the totem pole in the league.

“It seems a lot of teams go with a younger player to a certain extent for the same amount of money, but I think I can still play, and that’s why I’m still here. These guys believed in me, and I think I have the opportunity to play some important minutes for this team.”