



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips
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Why isn't Lightning's Nikita Kucherov receiving more Hart Trophy love? Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)

TAMPA — As the Lightning enter the All-Star break, Nikita Kucherov is playing the best hockey of his already illustrious career. The right wing leads the NHL in scoring with 85 points, one more than Colorado's Nathan MacKinnon.

The two players have exchanged the lead for most of the past month. Barring injury, they likely will continue to do so through the end of the regular season. They've both been that consistent.

This is the time of the season talk about the top contenders for the Hart Trophy, given annually to the NHL's most valuable player, becomes prevalent. But from a national perspective, MacKinnon is widely considered the frontrunner, followed by everybody else.

Kucherov, 30, is on pace for 142 points, which would better his 2018-19 Hart Trophy season, when he scored a career-best and league-leading 128. With 32 goals in 49 games, he also is on pace to shatter another career high (41 in 2018-19).

The Lightning have lost significant firepower in recent offseasons, so Kucherov — already one of the league's top playmakers — has taken it upon himself to assume more of the goal-scoring load.

"This stretch has been pretty amazing," captain Steven Stamkos said Thursday. "And you look at what MacKinnon is doing and everyone's talking about how he's playing, and I think Kuch took the point lead back (Thursday)? I don't want to use the word 'surprising,' because, like I always say, I see the work that he puts in. So, there's a correlation."

So, why hasn't Kucherov received more Hart Trophy love?

A poll of NHL.com writers last week tabbed MacKinnon as the midseason favorite, as he received eight of 14 first-place votes. Kucherov got just one vote for first and finished second, 12 points behind MacKinnon. NHL on TNT analyst Paul Bissonnette last week posted on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, that MacKinnon was the "top guy," followed by the Maple Leafs' Auston Matthews, with "a few guys tied at third."

The case for Kucherov

Statistically, the comparison between Kucherov and MacKinnon is close. Kucherov has more goals, points, power-play goals and owns a better shooting percentage.

But two numbers best illustrate Kucherov's value. He has played a role in more of his team's goals, earning a point in nearly half of the Lightning's this season (48.6%, compared to MacKinnon's 44.2). And Kucherov's point total is 31 points higher than his team's next-highest scorer (Brayden Point, with 54) despite playing with some of the NHL's best in Point, Stamkos and Victor Hedman. MacKinnon's point total is just 18 ahead of Colorado's next-highest scorer (Mikko Rantanen, with 66).

Kucherov also is on pace for a career high in ice time. He rarely comes off the ice on power plays and has played a consistent two-way game in recent weeks.

"You look at the teams we've had in the past, and we've talked about this year's team, maybe a little transition year, ... (so) for him to be doing what he's doing is even more impressive," Stamkos said. "I know every team has some really good players that each guy plays with, but the discrepancy in points versus MacKinnon for our team with what Kuch has done is pretty amazing."

Ultimately, a team's success matters. When Kucherov won the Hart in 2019, the Lightning had a record-setting Presidents' Trophy-winning regular season. Currently, they're fighting for a playoff spot. The last player to win the trophy for a middling team was the Taylor Hall for the Devils in 2018.

Lightning coach Jon Cooper identified two reasons Kucherov doesn't receive more national attention.

"One, we play most of our games 1,200 miles or whatever it is away from Toronto," Cooper said. "And two, we're not high enough up in the standings. (The Oilers' Connor) McDavid wasn't even being mentioned, but now he's going to be mentioned now that he's climbing the standards. The more we win, the more (Kucherov) he will get."

More efficiency than flash

Kucherov is a dynamic player worthy of highlight shows and social media views, but at his best he makes difficult plays look easy. Plus, playing in a market that doesn't garner significant national attention (despite numerous deep postseason runs) might limit the number of people who see how well he's playing.

"With Kuch, his goal is to be as smooth as possible," Lightning forward Nick Paul said. "He doesn't want to make it look like he's trying, so when he goes through three guys, if he doesn't need to make an extra stick handle, he won't. He'll kind of hold it there, not look at the guy once and then backhand it right on his tape.

"With Kuch, it's all about being smooth and efficient. He's not doing a toe drag, go through another guy's legs and then do a spin-a-rama. He's still going through two guys but it makes it look like it's easy."

The Lightning don't have the scoring punch they possessed in previous seasons, and there's no question that's why Kucherov is shooting and scoring more. He knows the more he scores, the more opponents have to account for his shot, which opens up space for his teammates. Cooper has raved about Kucherov's play away from the puck this season and how every step he takes has a purpose.

"I'd tell people just to watch him play," Paul said. "And really watch him play, not just kind of be on your phone and just look at numbers. Actually watch what he does out there, and it's crazy."

Will his performance speak for him?

The Hart Trophy is voted on by members of the Professional Hockey Writers Association. To say a player's popularity with the media doesn't play a role in voting — whether right or wrong — would be misleading.

Kucherov prefers to let his play do his talking. He dislikes interviews and doesn't do many, especially for a player consistently viewed among the league's best. This season, despite wearing an "A" on his jersey as an alternate captain, he's avoided postgame interview requests even after milestone games. He doesn't like to talk about himself, and when he does his answers are often short.

Friday, Kucherov said he hasn't paid attention to the Hart Trophy discussion this season. Asked this week why the Lightning don't receive more recognition nationally, he was typically brief: "Probably should ask you guys. You guys are talking about it. It's you guys. ... What else can we do? We can't go out there and talk for ourselves."

His teammates are more than willing to do the talking for him. They know it's not his thing.

But are enough people listening?

“We’re not the biggest market in the NHL,” Stamkos said. “And although we’ve had a ton of success, that’s still just the way it is. ... The fact that we’re right in the mix, too, in the playoffs, so he should be getting more credit.”

Is this hot streak just a tease or a sign that the Lightning are back?

John Romano (Tampa Bay Times)

TAMPA — This is what an epic comeback looks like. Wins, milestones and celebrations all around.

For three weeks, the Lightning have been playing with confidence and commitment. The 6-3 victory against New Jersey on Saturday night gave them eight wins in their past nine games and put them right back in the picture for a postseason spot.

All that's left is 32 regular-season games.

And some nagging doubt.

That's what nearly three months of uneven play does to a hockey team. It makes you realize everything that can possibly go wrong. Age and injuries. Depth and disarray. Or maybe just the inevitability of misfortune catching up with a franchise that nearly cornered the market on glory for a spell.

Are we seeing a very good team coming together, or a middling team on a roll?

Honestly, it's hard to tell. There's no doubt the Lightning have been playing better hockey the past few weeks, but most of those games have been at home where they have excelled. And a lot of those games have been against teams that are not currently in the playoff picture.

So how close are the Lightning to being a team that can excel in April?

"It's hard to answer that question," coach Jon Cooper said before Saturday's game. "Are we fully healthy (in April), are we not? Is our mentality in the right spot? Right now, it is. Are our elite players playing elite? They are. So if you have that going for you, that's always a good start."

The good news is the Lightning seem to have rectified a season-long problem with defense. After giving up 3.48 goals per game through the first half of the season, they have held opponents to 2.33 goals in the past nine games. The difference between two and three goals is basically the dividing line between success and mediocrity for the Lightning.

Hold a team to two goals or less, and the Lightning are 12-1. Give up three goals or more, and they are 14-22.

"Our commitment to play D has really escalated here in this last month," Cooper said, "and we're seeing results because of it."

It also brings up an interesting point. The defense has gotten tighter since Mikhail Sergachev went down with an injury in December. Rookies Emil Lilleberg and Max Crozier have only 17 games of NHL experience between them but have had eye-opening results with Sergachev and Erik Cernak out of the lineup.

"Crozier and Lilleberg have been fantastic on the back end for us," Cooper said.

Confidence has also grown as the Lightning have climbed the standings. Two weeks ago, they blew a two-goal lead against the Devils before winning in overtime. On Saturday, they were up 2-0, 3-1 and 4-2 and allowed New Jersey to get within one goal of tying the game three different times in the third period.

Brandon Hagel, who scored a pair of goals on Saturday, said there's a different mindset from earlier in the season, when the Lightning would allow misfortune to snowball.

"We would sit back and kind of get a little nervous," Hagel said of previous months. "But when we get scored on (now), it just seems that the next line that goes out there kind of lifts the team up."

On Saturday, it was Steven Stamkos who answered with a critical third-period goal after former Lightning star Ondrej Palat got New Jersey back in the game at 2-1. Later, Brayden Point answered a Devils score with an unassisted goal.

"We've got to do a better job of eliminating those Grade A chances that we gave away, but at the same time I like how we responded after they scored," said defenseman Victor Hedman, who had three assists and reached 700 points for his career. "We came back and scored almost right away twice, so that's good. That's good."

So is there any chance the NHL can reconsider this whole All-Star break business?

Because, just when the Lightning have found their groove and worked themselves back into playoff contention, they begin an ill-timed 10-day break.

"Jersey is kind of in the same spot we're at. We're all battling to get ourselves in (the postseason)," Cooper said before the game. "You look at games like New Jersey, Philly, Detroit, all games that we've played here in the last few weeks. What's the cliché, those are four-point games? That's what they are, and so these are big ones for us."

No doubt about it, that was a big win on Saturday night. Just like the half-dozen others in the past two weeks.

They look much better. More disciplined. Certainly, more consistent.

But does that mean the Lightning are back?

We've got 32 games to find out.

A quick trip inside the Bolts On Board inaugural cruise

Jodi Kaufman (Lightning Insider)

TAMPA – What Happens on a Bolts on Board Cruise . . . probably gets recorded or photographed!

If you take a bug on a boat, you get fun!

You get mayhem when you invite Andre Roy.

The inaugural Bolts on Board Cruise (put together by the Lightning with the Sixthman group) set sail on Friday, January 12, 2024. Nearly 400 avid Lightning fans took the plunge, or rather, the boat, sailing on the Norwegian Jade for four nights.

Wonder what the Bolts On Board cruise was like?

Launch day kicked off at Sparkman Wharf in the morning where Greg Wolf and Gabby Shirley hosted the pre-cruise party. Cruisers were entertained by Calvin de Haan, Haydn Fleury, Austin Watson, and Jonas Johannsen, as the players answered questions from Shirley. Being the generous guys that Lightning players are, they hung around for photo opportunities before boarding the ship.

Once on board, an afternoon tiki party was the first event of the cruise, complete with mai tais, swag, and music. The next event featured the Lightning Legends – Phil Esposito, Bobby “The Chief” Taylor, Brian Bradley, Dave Andreychuk, Freddy Modin, Brad Lukowich, and Andre Roy. It was a story-telling session moderated by Wolf. Roy channeled Robin Williams with his singing and no-filter antics. His energy has not dropped off since 2004. Funny stories, trash talking, and interesting hockey history was shared by the legends and appreciated by participants.

Throughout the trip there were trivia sessions, Family Feud, and a session called Are You Smarter Than A Legend? Trivia contests pitted cruisers against each other and were hosted by a legend or two. The other contests pitted the Legends against fans who were randomly chosen for these games. Cool first prizes included signed mini sticks and pucks.

There was also an autograph session, casino games, and a hockey ball clinic. A special happy hour with Andreychuk and Esposito was available for a donation to the Lightning Foundation.

And Thunderbug seemed to be everywhere and the Legends were often found on board for selfies!

The oldest legend was the Stanley Cup, which was in need of a Florida tan. The Cup made its way, alongside Cup keeper Phil Pritchard (who was probably happy to be there in January), to Key West where the boat was docked for an excursion day. The highlight of this visit, of course, was getting a photo with the Cup!

Also on Saturday, a loud fanatic group of Bolts fans took over most of the sports bar on one of the decks for a private watch party to cheer on the Lightning to a huge win over the Anaheim Ducks.

On Sunday, the next stop was scheduled to be Great Stirrup Cay in the Bahamas, but due to high waves, the boats used to transport cruisers to shore were not able to run for safety reasons. No problem, outdoor sports games were added and the fun continued.

As usual, the Lightning organization shows they know how to throw a party, complete with the Cup and a Bolts win as the frosting on the cake. Not a shabby way to spend four nights at sea!