



AMALIE Arena Media Clips
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1. Tough roster decisions ahead for Lightning as preseason winds down – Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)

Tough roster decisions ahead for Lightning as preseason winds down **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — With the regular-season opener Tuesday, the Lightning have tough roster decisions to make, possibly more difficult than the team brass might have anticipated before training camp began.

After the Lightning's 2-0 preseason win over the Panthers in Orlando on Tuesday, they have two preseason games remaining, both against Florida, at home tonight, then Saturday in Sunrise. Many of the Lightning's regulars likely will take up minutes in those contests as they prepare for the regular season, but the team still has an opportunity to get final looks at players on the bubble.

"I want to see which guys are going to be a fit for us, both playing style, personality, all those things that we look for," coach Jon Cooper said Monday after a practice in Orlando. "And then on their side of things, I want to see a guy who wants to make the team."

Goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy's back surgery last week added an unanticipated wrinkle. He is expected to miss the first two months of the season recovering. And in order to reap the benefits of long-term injured reserve, the Lightning must carry Vasilevskiy as a third goaltender on opening night, which leaves just 20 spots on the roster for skaters. A spot will open the next day once Vasilevskiy is moved to injured reserve.

Here are the key factors the Lightning must consider in assembling their 23-man roster:

Can they carry eight defensemen?

The Lightning would like to be able to carry eight defenseman, four left-shot and four right-shot. But if they do, that would leave them with just 12 forwards, so they would be compromising depth at one position for depth at another.

Defense depth is invaluable, and beyond the Lightning's top eight, there's a significant drop-off. Philippe Myers is really the only player with significant NHL experience, and that he was bypassed by Nick Perbix and Darren Raddysh on the right-shot depth chart suggests he might be a step behind in the organization's eyes.

The fourth pairing is Haydn Fleury and Zach Bogosian, veterans signed to club-friendly deals who would have to pass through waivers if they didn't make the team. Losing either could put a dent in the defensive depth, so the Lightning would be hesitant to do so.

Of the four players competing for one or the two open forward positions — Alex Barre-Boulet, Gabriel Fortier, Austin Watson and Waltteri Merela — Barre-Boulet and Fortier are the only ones who would have to clear waivers to be sent to the AHL.

One factor is the Lightning don't want to risk losing Barre-Boulet on waivers. They've already lost him once, to the Kraken, before getting him back via waivers. Given what they've invested in Barre-Boulet, 26 — five AHL seasons that include a career-high 84 points last season — they don't want to see him get an opportunity elsewhere and become an NHL regular. That's why they've given him the chance to shine on the third line and power play, but he has been up and down.

Fortier, in his fourth full pro season, is 23 and has played just 11 NHL games, but he was a 2018 second-round draft pick and has done enough to potentially intrigue other teams.

How will intangible factors play a role?

Finding the players who best fit on the opening roster isn't always about on-ice performance. Entering his first season in North America after winning consecutive championships in Finland's top-tier league, Merela has played well and would seem to fit in a variety of positions. But he's also still getting adjusted to the NHL's smaller rink and quicker pace, so he might be better served starting the season in the AHL.

Then there's Austin Watson, a 31-year-old with nearly 500 games of NHL experience. He came in on a professional tryout offer, so the Lightning owe him little more than the opportunity they've given him. But he has been a seamless fit in a locker room that could use an added dose of veteran leadership given the players lost in the offseason.

Watson also adds an enforcer equivalent that the Lightning lack with Pat Maroon's departure in a July trade with the Wild. While the focus entering this season has been on getting quicker, the Lightning always could use more sandpaper in their bottom six. And Watson would be a perfect complement to Tanner Jeannot as the team's top tough guys. The Lightning don't sign many guys on professional tryout offers, but in this case it could help them sign Watson, especially with the Day 1 roster crunch they have with Vasilevskiy.