



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips  
Tuesday, October 10, 2023**

1. Nuts & Bolts: The season begins in Tampa Bay – Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)
2. Lightning confident Jonas Johansson can give them ‘a chance to win’ – Kristie Ackert (Tampa Bay Times)
3. Lightning finalize opening-night roster, which has several new faces – Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)
4. 3 predictions that will shape the Lightning’s season – Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)

## **Nuts & Bolts: The season begins in Tampa Bay** **Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)**

Everything you need to know ahead of Tampa Bay's matchup against the Predators on Tuesday.

**When:** Thursday, March 30 - 7 p.m. ET

**Where:** AMALIE Arena - Tampa, FL

**TV coverage:** ESPN (check local listings)

**Radio coverage:** [102.5 MHz-FM](#), [Lightning Radio 24/7](#)

**Where to stream it:** [ESPN+](#)

### **Projected Lineup (subject to change)**

#### *Forwards*

Steven Stamkos - Brayden Point - Nikita Kucherov

Brandon Hagel - Anthony Cirelli - Tyler Motte

Mikey Eyssimont - Nick Paul - Conor Sheary

Tanner Jeannot - Luke Glendening - Waltteri Merela

#### *Defensemen*

Victor Hedman - Nick Perbix

Mikhail Sergachev - Darren Raddysh

Calvin de Haan - Erik Cernak

#### *Goaltenders*

Jonas Johansson

Matt Tomkins

### **Tuesday's Matchup**

The Lightning and the Predators are playing the first of two matchups this season and the only meeting at AMALIE Arena... The Bolts are opening the season against NSH for the first time in franchise history...Tampa Bay posted a 2-0-0 record vs. NSH last season with a 3-2 overtime win Nov. 19 at Bridgestone Arena and a 5-2 victory Dec. 8 at AMALIE Arena...Brayden Point (2-2—4) led the Lightning in goals vs. NSH last season and was tied with Nikita Kucherov (1-3—4) for the team lead in points...Steven Stamkos is riding a 12-game point streak vs. NSH (10- 11—21) with goals in nine of those 12 contests... Stamkos has pointed in seven consecutive home games vs. NSH (5-6—11)...Kucherov has recorded points in seven consecutive contests vs. NSH (5-8—13) with assists in each of the last six meetings...Kucherov has pointed in three straight home games vs. NSH (1-4—5)...Point is riding a six- game point streak vs. NSH (4-4—8) and has found the scoresheet in 13 of the last 15 meetings (6-13—19)...Point has picked up points in six of his last seven home games vs. NSH (4-4—8)...Conor Sheary is riding a three-game point streak vs. NSH (0-2—2)...Victor Hedman has points in four of his last five contests vs. NSH (1-4—5)...Hedman has found the scoresheet in 10 of his 13 career home games vs. NSH (2-11—13)...Mikhail Sergachev has pointed in three straight contests vs. NSH (0-3—3) and 11 of the last 13 meetings (0-14—14)...Sergachev has picked up points in five of his last six home games vs. NSH (0-6—6)...Tampa Bay is 22-15-3 with two ties all-time vs. NSH, including a home record of 10-7-1 with two ties...Stamkos (16-16—32) holds the Lightning franchise records for career goals and points vs. NSH.

### **Game ONE**

Join us to begin the 2023-24 season on Water Street. The fun starts at 1 p.m. with an entire day of festivities, including food and drink specials, a Lightning Player Blue Carpet Walk through Ford Thunder Alley and a special musical performance by Grammy Award-winning artist Big Boi!

## **Tampa Bay Sports Item of the Game**

### *Limited Edition 2023-24 Home Opener Puck*

Commemorate the Lightning's 2023-24 Home Opener with this Limited Edition Puck. Available today in store and online at [TampaBaySports.com](https://TampaBaySports.com), while supplies last.

## **The Road Ahead**

Saturday, October 14 at Detroit Red Wings

Sunday, October 15 at Ottawa Senators

Tuesday, October 17 at Buffalo Sabres

## **Lightning confident Jonas Johansson can give them ‘a chance to win’ Kristie Ackert (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — The Lightning rolled the dice this offseason. With Andrei Vasilevskiy more established and no longer in need of a mentor nine seasons into his NHL career, Tampa Bay freed up some cap space by not signing a veteran goaltender back him up.

Now, with Vasilevskiy out for the first two months of the season, the Lightning will quickly see if their gamble on unproven Jonas Johansson will pay off.

Johansson, 28, will start the opener against the Nashville Predators Tuesday at Amalie Arena as Vasilevskiy recovers from back surgery.

“It’s really exciting, and I feel good and I think I’m ready to go,” Johansson said after the final practice of training camp on Monday. “I think the whole team is ready to go, and we’ve had a good preseason. I’m going to build off of that now and start strong.”

Johansson allowed only two goals in three preseason games, stopping 94 of the 96 shots he faced. He impressed his head coach enough to name him the Lightning’s opening-night starter.

“Surprised he hasn’t played more in the NHL to this date,” Jon Cooper said. “Now, in saying that, I do believe goalies develop later, there’s a later development in them, and so maybe this is his time. And everything he’s done before this is to get to this point. So, again, it’s just preseason, so you can’t read too much into it. But he has definitely deserved to be in the net (Tuesday) night.”

It’s been a long road for Johansson, signed to a two-year \$1.5 million contract in July, to get to this point.

A third-round pick (61st overall) of Buffalo in the 2014 draft, he had his best season last year with Colorado, going 2-0-0 in three games, including two starts, stopping 68 of 73 shots. His .932 save percentage and 2.1 GAA were the best of his four seasons in the NHL. In 26 games in the AHL in 2022-23, he had a 2.33 GAA and 9.20 save percentage.

Still, he has just 35 NHL games on his resume, going 11-13-4 with a 3.35 goals against average and .886 save percentage while playing for the Avalanche, Sabres and Panthers.

Johansson and Matt Tomkins, who has never played in an NHL regular-season game, are being asked to fill the vacancy in the Lightning net for the next two months while Vasilevskiy, 29, recovers from surgery to repair a herniated disk.

It’s no small task.

Vasilevskiy, the 2019 Vezina and 2021 Conn Smythe trophy winner, anchored the Lightning to back-to-back Stanley Cup titles in 2020 and ‘21. He is coming off his sixth straight season with at least 30 wins, going 34-22-4 last season.

“Not much really changed for me personally,” Johansson said. “I try to do the same thing as I would whatever would have happened. I just try to practice hard, to play as good as I can when I get the chance.

“You always feel bad for the guy that is injured. It’s never easy, but it’s, I guess, it’s a part of the game, too. So, I’m just being myself and working hard and kind of try to play as best as I can for the team.”

While it’s unfair to ask Johansson or Tomkins to be Vasilevskiy, Cooper is confident the tandem can give the Lightning what they need to win.

“Are they going to stop every puck all year? Clearly no,” Cooper said. “But are they stopping all the ones they need to give our team a chance to win? They most definitely are. And they are a couple of great guys, so that’s been a win for us so far, too.”

## **Lightning finalize opening-night roster, which has several new faces** **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — As a 10-year-old growing up in Finland, Waltteri Merela hung a poster of Steven Stamkos on his bedroom wall. Monday morning, Merela — a dark-horse candidate to make the Lightning's opening-night roster — learned he'll be able to call Stamkos a teammate to start the season.

"We had this Finnish hockey magazine coming (to our house), like, once a month," Merela said Monday, describing the feeling of making his first NHL roster. "In, like, 2008, there was a Stammer poster in between there. ... And now I'm playing with the guy in the NHL. You can imagine how that must feel. It's pretty amazing."

The Lightning officially will open the 2023-24 season Tuesday against the Predators at Amalie Arena as the first game of a nationally televised tripleheader.

Forget the turnover from the 2020 Stanley Cup championship team. Of the 23 players who will start the season with the Lightning, 11 weren't on the roster at this time a year ago. That includes both healthy goaltenders, as Jonas Johansson and Matt Tomkins will fill in for the injured Andrei Vasilevskiy.

"The groups we've had here, I wouldn't trade anything in the world to have them around again, that's how close everybody was," head coach Jon Cooper said. "We've had such a great core here that's kind of set the standard for all these guys to come in, but that's OK. It's OK to have a little bit of change.

"There is a rejuvenating piece to this of new teammates, new friendships and a new common goal of let's do this together, especially for the guys who haven't had that opportunity to raise the Stanley Cup. There's a lot of fun in that."

Among the newcomers are two surprises: Merela, an international free agent playing his first season in North America, and veteran forward Austin Watson, who arrived at training camp on a personal tryout.

Defenseman Zach Bogosian and center Gabriel Fortier cleared waivers and can be assigned to AHL Syracuse. Forward Alex Barre-Boulet was absent from practice, but was still on the Lightning's first roster released Monday evening.

"For some guys it works out on opening night, for some guys it does not," Cooper said. "I think the big message is, who's here right now are not going to be the only people playing for us, and you never go through the season without injuries. Something's going to happen. ...

"For the guys who are here, they're happy, but my thing with them is do not get content, because the second that happens your spot might not be there any more."

Merela and Watson didn't receive any guarantees entering camp.

The Lightning thought highly of Merela, 25, who was coming off back-to-back championships in Finland's top pro league, and signed him to a two-way deal. He had been slated for AHL Syracuse, where he could adjust to the smaller rink and quicker pace of the NHL game. But he got better every day during camp, and his tenacity with and without the puck showed the Lightning he is ready for the NHL.

“Every day it’s kind of tough mentally, a lot of new stuff all the time, a different language and stuff like that,” Merela said. “When you come here, you need to be ready to learn and just be yourself ... and just figure out the little stuff that’s different here. ...

“At the start of those first practices, I really didn’t understand what we were doing. At least now, I know a little bit. I started off at the back of the line sometimes, because I didn’t know what we were doing. But I understand now how the game should work.”

Watson, a 10th-year veteran with 482 games of NHL experience, was a quick fit on and off the ice. He adds a physical presence and can fill an enforcer role the Lightning has been missing since trading Pat Maroon in July. In three preseason games, Watson showed he will stand up for teammates, getting into two fights with Florida’s Casey Fitzgerald and logging 22 penalty minutes.

The Lightning on Monday signed Watson to a one-year, \$776,665 contract.

“I’m definitely proud of the way I came in here,” he said. “It was new. I’ve probably been a regular for seven, eight years now on three-year contracts, so a PTO (professional tryout offer) was definitely a new experience for me.

“They’re nervy days. ... I’m definitely thrilled to put pen to paper and have it be official.”

Even though Vasilevskiy will miss the first two months recovering from back surgery, the Lightning have to carry him on their opening-night roster to gain salary-cap relief in his absence through the long-term injured reserve exemption.

There was plenty of behind-the-scenes paperwork to arrive at the opening roster. The one submitted to the league at 5 p.m. Monday actually did not include Merela — who at that point sat on AHL Syracuse’s roster — but after 5 p.m., he was added to the NHL roster. In order to clear space for Merela to play Tuesday, Barre-Boulet will be placed on waivers; if he clears, he will be assigned to Syracuse.

Then, on Wednesday, Vasilevskiy can be placed on long-term injured reserve, which will open a spot for Bogosian to return, giving the Lightning 13 forwards, eight defensemen and two goaltenders moving forward.

According to PuckPedia, the Lightning came in just \$2 under the cap after getting cap-hit relief for placing the contracts of defenseman Brent Seabrook (\$6.875 million) and forward Logan Brown (\$775,000) on long-term injured reserve.

### **3 predictions that will shape the Lightning's season** **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — The Lightning might have us right where they want us, with pundits predicting their downfall, setting Tampa Bay up to prove everyone wrong again on the way to another deep playoff chase of the Stanley Cup.

Yes, last season's first-round playoff exit was disappointing, especially the three home overtime losses that led to the Maple Leafs taking the series. But it was a valuable reminder that it's not that easy to get to the Cup final in today's NHL, and if offered the Lightning time to recover mentally and physically after some short offseasons.

Still, national experts are predicting doom in Tampa Bay, some saying this is the year the team actually misses the playoffs. And that was before learning that the Lightning would be without goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy to open the season.

Slow down. The Lightning aren't done yet.

The success that the team had over the past decade was largely done in the shadows. The Lightning aren't a Canadian team. They don't play in a huge hockey market. They go largely ignored nationally — their greatness often questioned — until the eve of the postseason when those who speak loudest suddenly notice Tampa Bay exists on a map.

Here, where we watch the Lightning every game, we know better.

Which leads us to three predictions about the 2023-24 Lightning, who are probably better than even local diehards think.

Make no mistake, going into the season without the league's top goaltender could be devastating. But the Lightning have overcome the loss of a top player before. They played a whole regular season without Nikita Kucherov, were without Anthony Cirelli for the first eight weeks last season, and have been through stretches missing Steven Stamkos and Brayden Point. They were fine every time.

Let's say Vasilevskiy doesn't return until two months into the season as expected. He will rejoin the team 30 games in, which is more than one-third into the regular-season slate. That's more than enough time for the Lightning to either put themselves in a favorable playoff position or even fall out of the race. And the past several seasons, the Lightning have done the former, essentially locking up a playoff position by the end of the calendar year.

The Atlantic Division should be a lot more competitive from top to bottom, so there won't be as many easy points on the schedule. But outside of the first two weeks, the Lightning really don't have many division games through the first two months. Three of their first four games — all making up the first road trip of the season — and seven of their first 13 games come against division foes. After that the Lightning have just one game (a Nov. 20 home game against Boston) against an Atlantic Division opponent over their next 16 matchups.

Also, just 13 of the Lightning's first 30 games are against teams that made the playoffs last season. That suggests an easier path to munching points early, but one thing's for sure: They will have to play better on the road than last season; from the beginning of November into mid-December, 15 of 23 games are away from Amalie Arena.



Whether Jonas Johansson or Matt Tomkins carries the load or the Lightning end up seeking an external option, the team's early-season success is less about who is in net and more about how the Lightning play in front of the goalie. They leaned on Vasilevskiy to bail them out many times and that ends now. They made some defensive system changes they believe will help, and history says they can thrive.

Cirelli has been one of the league's top two-way forwards for a while now, but outside of Tampa Bay, he never quite gets the credit he deserves. The Lightning will need more from him — and he already does a lot, playing second-line center and on both power-play units.

He could see additional time on the top power-play unit, filling Alex Killorn's spot down low at the net. Cirelli is an easy fit because it involves a lot of important roles: screening the net, digging the puck out from behind the goal while being a facilitator down low, and of course, pouncing on rebounds around the net.

Cirelli has finished in the top five in voting for the Selke Trophy — given to the league's top defensive forward — twice in the past four seasons. But his lack of big offensive numbers has kept him from winning. Being on the power play will help that because he'll certainly get more scoring chances. Remember that Killorn's goal-scoring numbers got a boost when he became a major part of the Lightning's power play.

Also, Cirelli is healthy. Last season, offseason shoulder surgery shelved him for the first eight weeks of the season, and he struggled to find his footing early on. We see Cirelli's career-low shooting percentage of 9.9% last season as an anomaly. By the playoffs, he was unquestionably one of the Lightning's top players. He's been able to have a normal offseason and is clearly embracing a bigger leadership role as veterans continue to depart.

Consider those factors and there's enough to believe that Cirelli can jump from a 40-point player to a 60-point producer. And others will take notice.

Waltteri Merela will score 10 NHL goals this season

This is a bold one, but Merela has already made the case that he's worth going out on a limb for.

He might not make the opening night roster, but Merela has certainly shown he's worthy of a roster spot. While his NHL arrival might not be immediate, he definitely has worked his way to the top of the short list of forward callups if a hole opens up.

Because he's playing in North America for the first time, he could be better suited to start the season at AHL Syracuse so he can continue adjusting to smaller rinks and a faster pace. That way he's a more complete player when he comes to Tampa Bay because once he's here, the Lightning prefer that he remains for good.

But it shouldn't take that long. Merela has a winning pedigree after claiming back-to-back championships in Finland's top pro league. He already has shown a strong work ethic.

He has size and can skate. He can kill penalties. He is a relentless forechecker, which will suit him well in the bottom-six role that he'd likely have initially.

But he can also play in front of the net and outrace opponents, which will earn him scoring opportunities, and maybe even some looks on the power play or in a top-six forward position.

When you consider that, it's not necessarily a reach to think he could reach double digits in goals. Remember, Ross Colton scored nine goals in 30 games when he received his first taste of the NHL as a midseason callup in 2020-21. Merela could be next.