



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips
Thursday, January 4, 2024**

1. Isaac Howard and Team USA advance to semifinal-round at World Junior Championship – Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)
2. How Lightning’s slim margin for error put them on thin ice in Winnipeg – Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)
3. Short-handed Lightning open road trip with loss in Winnipeg – Associated Press
4. The Backcheck: Lightning fall to red-hot Jets – Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)
5. Tampa Bay Lightning dress an odd lineup to start road trip – Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)

Isaac Howard and Team USA advance to semifinal-round at World Junior Championship Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)

The Tampa Bay Lightning haven't had many first-round picks in the NHL Draft over the past several years. But in 2022, the Bolts held the 31st overall pick and used it to select Isaac Howard, a left wing from Hudson, Wisconsin who is now playing a pivotal role for Team USA at the 2024 IIHF World Junior Championship.

The annual under-20 tournament features top prospects from around the globe competing for a chance at a gold medal. In the past, Lightning stars like Steven Stamkos, Victor Hedman, Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point and many more have all competed in the tournament.

This year, Howard is the lone Tampa Bay prospect participating in the tournament, skating on the second line for Team USA and earning time on the power play as well.

Through four preliminary-round games, the U.S. posted a perfect, 4-0-0 record with wins over Norway, Switzerland, Czechia and Slovakia.

Howard has been a big factor in Team USA's early success, finding the back of the net in each of the four preliminary-round contests. Through the first four games, Howard recorded five goals and one assist for six points with a +9 rating and 16 shots on goal. He also helped the U.S. defeat a pesky Czechia team with the game-deciding goal in the shootout.

Playing in the quarterfinals on Tuesday, Team USA defeated Team Latvia 7-2 with Howard recording one assist and firing three shots on goal. With the win, the U.S. will play Team Finland in the semifinal-round on Thursday with a chance to advance to the Gold Medal Game for the fourth time in the past eight years.

Team USA will look for Howard to continue producing offensively. His five goals are tied for the second-most among all skaters at the tournament, while only seven players have recorded more points than Howard's seven. His +9 rating is tied for the highest plus/minus rating among all skaters at the event.

Once the World Junior Championship is over, Howard will return to Michigan State University to finish his college hockey season. Through 18 games with the Spartans this year, Howard has scored five goals and added 15 assists for 20 points. The shifty forward has already bested his point total from his freshman year at University of Minnesota-Duluth, where he picked up 17 points in 35 games with six goals and 11 helpers.

Whether the U.S. wins or loses on Thursday, the team will play their final game of the tournament on Friday with the Bronze Medal Game set for 9 a.m. ET and the Gold Medal Game concluding the event with a 1:30 p.m. ET puck drop that afternoon. With just two wins needed to head home with a gold medal, Team USA will hope Howard can stay hot with goals like the one below.

How Lightning's slim margin for error put them on thin ice in Winnipeg **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — The Lightning felt they played well enough Tuesday in Winnipeg to earn points. Despite taking a first-intermission lead and trailing by only a goal entering the third period, they opened their three-game road trip with a 4-2 loss to the Jets.

Tampa Bay entered Wednesday one point out of the last Eastern Conference playoff spot. Because they've played more games than many other teams, they are tied for 11th in the conference in points percentage.

They've left themselves a razor-thin margin for error — or misfortune, which came into play Tuesday — and created an uphill climb for themselves with wildly inconsistent play as they approach the midseason marker.

As of now, the Lightning are on pace for 86 points, hardly enough to ensure a playoff spot. They must play their best hockey in the second half or put themselves in danger of missing the postseason for the first time since 2016-17.

In recent years, the Lightning were able to solidify their playoff position by Jan. 1, which allowed for some second-half hiccups.

This year, they can't afford that luxury. Here's why.

Blue-line injuries have tested depth

The Lightning have overcome their share of injuries this season, but a barrage to their defense corps has tested their depth.

Mikhail Sergachev, who was only expected to miss a week after taking a puck to the back of his left foot on Dec. 19, has missed six games. Haydn Fleury did an admirable job filling in but is week-to-week after taking a hard hit on New Year's Eve against Montreal. Erik Cernak also exited that game after taking a hard hit.

The injuries forced the Lightning to play with five defensemen Tuesday. Though they played well with just four when Cernak and Fleury were knocked out mid-game against the Canadiens, the challenge of playing short-handed was evident two nights later in Winnipeg.

Players like the extra minutes, so they play more freely and don't worry about making a mistake. But when they are hemmed in their own end for long stretches, shifts can quickly catch up with them, as was the case Tuesday.

When some of the injured players are your top penalty killers (like Sergachev and Cernak), it becomes important to avoid taking penalties. Tuesday, back-to-back penalties early in the third clearly took the steam out of the Lightning.

Stars' mistakes have altered games

When you need points, your top players have to lead the way. And with the exception of league points leader Nikita Kucherov, there's been some uneven play from the team's other stars. Even Kucherov has made his share of plays he'd like back, especially with some costly turnovers while trying to do too much.

Tuesday, goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy was called for tripping right after the Lightning killed off a tripping penalty against Kucherov. Whether the call should have been made — it rarely is — could be debated, but it put pressure on the Lightning's penalty kill.

It wasn't Vasilevskiy's costliest mistake. While trying to clear a puck, he was overwhelmed by the Winnipeg forecheck, and his attempt to get the puck to Conor Sheary at the blue line was intercepted by former Lightning forward Vladislav Namestnikov.

It gave Nikolaj Ehlers an open look in the slot that Vasilevskiy had little chance against. The goal turned the tide, giving the Jets a two-goal lead. And given the way Winnipeg has played defense, it was tough for Tampa Bay to get back into the game.

Of course, the Lightning wouldn't want anyone other than Vasilevskiy in net. But in the rare instances when their best players make costly mistakes, they seem to be game-altering ones.

Roster crunch is even more real

Having the personnel to help is one thing. Being able to call it up is another challenge, especially when every dollar matters with the Lightning squeezed up against the salary cap.

Tampa Bay is used to cap gymnastics, but injuries have forced it to improvise. After it was determined that Fleury's injury was week to week, he was placed on long-term injured reserve. That created enough cap space to call up Philippe Myers, who carries a significant \$1.4 million hit.

The Lightning had the option of playing short a man (under 18 skaters) Tuesday to trigger a roster emergency exemption to call up a player for Thursday's game in Minnesota at a \$0 cap hit. But since they elected to play with an extra forward to give them 18 skaters, they don't have that ability.

That might mean the team believes Sergachev or Cernak should be ready by Thursday. Otherwise, it will result in a long night for the five defensemen who have logged longer ice times, something that isn't sustainable over the long haul. It's also an indicator this will be the roster the Lightning will need to lean on moving forward to make the postseason. There's not room for much movement.

Short-handed Lightning open road trip with loss in Winnipeg

Associated Press

WINNIPEG, Manitoba — Rick Bowness wasn't impressed with the way the Jets started Tuesday's game against the Lightning, but it was the ending that counted for the coach.

Nikolaj Ehlers scored a late third-period goal to help the Jets seal a 4-2 victory over the Lightning that gave them a third consecutive win and extended their point streak to nine games (7-0-2).

The streak tied a franchise record set in December 2005 by the Thrashers.

"(Tuesday night) wasn't a Picasso by any stretch early in the game," Bowness said. "But when we got our legs going and started to play Winnipeg Jet hockey, when we get committed to that, there's not a team in this league we can't beat."

Neal Pionk, Alex Lafallo and Morgan Barron, with an empty-netter and an assist, also scored for the Jets (23-9-4) in front of 14,157 fans at Canada Life Centre. Former Lightning player Vladislav Namestnikov contributed three assists.

Connor Hellebuyck made 33 saves for Winnipeg to boost his record to 18-6-3 in 27 games.

"We know how to grind these games out now," Namestnikov said. "It was a close game, but we stuck with it and got the win."

Nikita Kucherov had a goal and assist and Steven Stamkos also scored for the Lightning (18-16-5), who have lost three of their past four games coming out of the holiday break.

"We trust in what we have and we've just got to keep believing, that's the bottom line," said Lightning defenseman Victor Hedman, who had 29:14 of ice time.

"Winnipeg has a great record for a reason, and a solid team, well-coached, great goaltending. But I think we stood up pretty good and I felt like we could have gotten points out of this one."

Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 23 shots for Tampa Bay, which only had five healthy defensemen in the lineup.

"I thought we played a pretty darn (good) road game," Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper said. "It was tough to get scored on in the first five minutes of the second (period), but we were doing what we wanted to do and it was tough that we couldn't get that second (goal)."

The Lightning led 1-0 after the first period, but the Jets went ahead 2-1 after the middle frame.

Stamkos recorded his 16th goal of the season with a one-timer during a power play at 6:18 of the opening period.

Tampa Bay got called for delay of game with 18 seconds remaining in the opening period, but Winnipeg couldn't capitalize with the extra man.

The Jets soon scored at even strength when Brenden Dillon sent a slap pass to Pionk in front of the net and he redirected the puck past Vasilevskiy at 4:44.

"Honestly, we made eye contact in the corner and I said, 'This might happen' and I actually got a piece of it and it went in. I couldn't believe it," Pionk said.

lafallo made it 2-1 off a rebound at 9:13.

The Lightning had the man advantage four minutes later, but Hellebuyck turned aside a couple of close-in shots to preserve the lead. Tampa Bay outshot the Jets 25-15 through two periods.

The Jets got four shots on goal in another power play early in the third, but couldn't beat Vasilevskiy. The Lightning goalie was called for tripping less than a minute later, but Winnipeg didn't even get a shot on net in the man advantage.

Ehlers shot from a bended knee and beat Vasilevskiy at 15:13 and Barron put one into an empty net with 2:07 remaining.

Kucherov scored on the power play with 37 seconds remaining, which extended his goal-scoring streak to four games.

Up next

Jets: Begin a three-game road trip Thursday against the San Jose Sharks.

Lightning: Play the second match of a three-game road trip Thursday against the Minnesota Wild.

The Backcheck: Lightning fall to red-hot Jets

Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)

With injuries to Erik Cernak, Haydn Fleury and Mikhail Sergachev, the Tampa Bay Lightning were only able to dress five defensemen Tuesday night and fell to the Winnipeg Jets by a score of 4-2 at Canada Life Centre.

Coming into the contest, Winnipeg had gone 25 straight games without allowing an opponent to score more than three goals. With a strong performance from Connor Hellebuyck and 23 blocked shots from his teammates, the Jets were able to push that streak to 26.

The Lightning came out of the gate with pace and scored the first goal of the game when Steven Stamkos lit the lamp on the power play at the 6:18 mark of the first period. With Adam Lowry in the penalty box for high-sticking, Stamkos set up in his office at the left circle and hammered a one-timer pass Connor Hellebuyck off a pass from Victor Hedman with Nikita Kucherov picking up the secondary helper.

Winnipeg pushed back after the Stamkos goal, but Tampa Bay did a nice job keeping the puck to the outside and didn't give up many high-danger scoring chances. As a result, they took the 1-0 lead to the locker room for the first intermission with an 11-7 shot advantage.

And while the Bolts were able to outshoot the Jets once again in the second period, Winnipeg still managed to outscore Tampa Bay 2-0 and go into the second intermission with a 2-1 lead.

Neal Pionk got the first Jets goal when he redirected a slap pass from Brenden Dillon past Andrei Vasilevskiy at the 4:44 mark. Then, 4:29 later, Alex Lafallo jumped on a rebound in front of the net and quickly fired a shot into the back of the net to give Winnipeg the lead.

Going into the third period trailing by one, the Lightning's comeback effort was stalled for the opening seven minutes or so with Kucherov getting whistled for tripping at the 2:20 mark before Andrei Vasilevskiy was also called for tripping nearly three minutes later.

The Bolts successfully killed both penalties, but a strong Jets team limited the scoring chances against and, when Tampa Bay did get looks at the net, Hellebuyck stood tall in his crease to maintain the one-goal lead for the Jets.

Nikolaj Ehlers made it 3-1 with 4:47 left in regulation before Morgan Barron added an empty-net goal at the 17:53 mark to make it 4-1.

Kucherov added a power-play goal late in the contest to make it 4-2, but it was too late for the Lightning with the puck hitting the back of the net with only 36.8 seconds remaining.

The loss pushed Tampa Bay's record to 18-16-5 this season with a road mark of 7-11-2. The Bolts are 5-5-0 in their last 10 contests.

Bolts by the Numbers

- Steven Stamkos opened the scoring with his 16th goal of the season and 202nd career power-play goal. With his goal, Stamkos tied Steve Yzerman for the 18th-most power-play goals in NHL history. Only five players in NHL history have scored more power-play goals with a single franchise than Stamkos.

- Victor Hedman picked up the primary assist on the power-play goal by Stamkos, as well as the power-play goal by Kucherov, and is up to 38 points on the year with five goals and 33 assists.

- Nikita Kucherov scored his 10th power-play goal of the year and recorded the secondary helper on the Stamkos goal. He continues to lead the NHL with 63 points this season and has logged 27 goals and 36 assists through just 38 games.

- Kucherov, Stamkos and Hedman all connected on a goal for the 77th time, placing them second in the NHL since 2013-14 behind the former Bruins trio of Patrice Bergeron, Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak, who combined for 94 goals.

- Brayden Point picked up the secondary assist on the Kucherov power-play goal and is up to 40 points on the season with 17 goals and 23 assists through 39 games.

Bolts Quotes

- Jon Cooper: "I thought we played a pretty darn good road game. It was tough to get scored on in the first five minutes of the second, but we were doing what we wanted to do. It was tough that we couldn't get that second one. We did everything we could to try and get it. They just weren't dropping for us."

- Victor Hedman: "I think today we played good enough to win. For us, we trust in what we have and we've just got to keep believing. That's the bottom line. Winnipeg has a great record for a reason and a solid team that's well coached with great goaltending. But I think we stood up pretty good and I felt like we could've got a point out of this one."

- Victor Hedman: "I think we started really well. I thought our first period was great. Second period, I think they took advantage of a couple longer shifts for us and were able to score."

- Conor Sheary: "We've just got to find a way to win. I think, especially on the road, we've been struggling a little bit. We just have to find a way to keep our game simple for the whole game. I think we're doing it in spurts, but not for 60 minutes, and that's hurting us right now."

Krenner's Three Stars

1. Connor Hellebuyck
2. Vladislav Namestnikov
3. Victor Hedman

Lightning Look Ahead

- Thursday, January 4 at Minnesota Wild, 8 p.m. ET, Xcel Energy Center
- Saturday, January 6 at Boston Bruins, 7 p.m. ET, TD Garden
- Tuesday, January 9 vs. Los Angeles Kings, 7 p.m. ET, AMALIE Arena

Tampa Bay Lightning dress an odd lineup to start road trip

Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)

WINNIPEG – The start of the New Year brought about something new – and unusual – for the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Tampa Bay had to head on the road to start a three-game trip facing one of the top teams in the league. The Winnipeg Jets entered Tuesday as the best 5-on-5 team in the league, allowing just 49 goals at 5-on-5, the best in the league, while scoring 81 for a goal differential of plus-32. The Jets had allowed three-or-fewer goals in 25 consecutive games, which dates back to November 2 when Vegas scored five goals.

The task of getting out of Winnipeg with two needed points was difficult before Tampa Bay even stepped off the plane.

But as they suited up to take the ice, they had an alignment that is rarely – if ever- utilized in the NHL.

Because of injuries suffered by Erik Cernak and Haydn Fleury on New Year's Eve against Montreal and with Mikhail Sergachev still sidelined with an injury to his foot, the Lightning did not have enough healthy defensemen to put in the lineup.

While the set up of 11 forwards and seven defensemen is a conventional set up, Tampa Bay went the other way and were forced to dress 13 forwards and five defensemen. The five healthy players on the backend were Victor Hedman, Nick Perbix, Calvin de Haan, Darren Raddysh and Phil Myers (who was called up on Monday while Sean Day was sent down to Syracuse).

International games typically allow teams to dress 20 skaters, which generally means either 13 forwards and seven defensemen or 12 forwards and eight defensemen.

But what the Lightning were forced into on Tuesday is virtually unprecedented at the NHL level, even in the age of the salary cap crunch.

That is at the top of what we're talking about from the loss at Winnipeg.

THEY DRESSED WHAT, NOW?

Sergachev missed his sixth consecutive game on Tuesday after taking a puck off his foot against **St. Louis** before Christmas. Sergachev has been skating and practiced with the team last week, but was not able to return. Cernak took a hard hit from Josh Anderson on Sunday against Montreal, and though he is listed as day to day, he wasn't able to play. Fleury, meanwhile, was placed on injured reserve on Monday after he took a puck off his hand and is out week-to-week.

So the reason why Tampa Bay was forced to dress just five defenseman is salary cap related. And the Lightning have been in a similar situation before, including around two years ago in Los Angeles when Tampa Bay could only dress four defensemen against the Kings.

Tampa Bay is up against the salary cap ceiling and does not have enough available space to make a callup. Cernak and Sergachev both are on the active roster even though they are unable to play. But since Conor Sheary, who missed Sunday with an apparent hand injury, was able to return, the Lightning were able to dress a full allotment of 20 players, including 18 skaters.

That's an important note, which I'll explain in a minute.

As one would expect, the ice times were a bit whacky.

Hedman played nearly half the game, logging 29:14 of ice time. Perbix played 26:17, Darren Raddysch 22:30, de Haan 21:17 and Myers 17:35. And three forwards – Alex Barre-Boulet, Austin Watson and Sheary – all played less than nine minutes.

It was odd and different to deal with, but, “it’s definitely not the reason we lost,” Hedman said.

Now the question is whether or not Tampa Bay will have to dress the same lineup on Thursday in Minnesota if neither Sergachev or Cernak are ready to return. The answer seems to be, most likely. While there is a provision in the CBA that allows for emergency recalls, it may not apply to the current situation.

Because the Lightning were able to dress 20 players for Tuesday’s game, the emergency exemption does not appear to apply to this situation. To utilize the emergency exemption, which permits a team to call up a player who carries a salary cap hit of less than \$875,000, the team must have less than \$875,000 in available cap space and play one game with less than 20 players dressed.

Though Tampa Bay has less than \$875,000 in available cap space, they were able to dress 20 players on Tuesday, so the emergency contingency does not appear to apply in this case.

A NEAR PERFECT START

In recent games, the Lightning have needed to find a spark, something to snap them into the game. Whether that’s been a Brandon Hagel fight or an unusual goal scored against the riled up the crowd, those moments have spurred Tampa Bay to inspired play.

Having to play a game with five defensemen and 13 forwards seemed to have Tampa Bay’s attention from the start. They were on pucks, they were forechecking, committed to defending, forwards were helping back. It was a near perfect road start.

“I thought we played a pretty darn good road game,” head coach Jon Cooper said. “We were doing what we wanted to do.”

Tampa Bay finished the period with 62-percent of the shot attempts, 57-percent of the scoring chances, 63-percent of the high danger chances and 65-percent of the expected goals.

But the only goal they scored came courtesy of a Steven Stamkos one-timer from the left circle 6:18 into the game. Tampa Bay kept pressing for the second goal to build on that lead. It didn’t come, and that was sort of foreboding.

“It was tough that we couldn’t get that second one,” Cooper said. “We did everything we could to try and get it, they just weren’t dropping for us.”

SHOWING SIGNS IN THE SECOND

Tampa Bay needed to get that second goal. And they did push to get it.

But 4:44 into the second, the game was tied as the Lightning were caught scrambling with their defensive coverage. Three players were all on the same side of the ice trying to challenge the puck near the right point. The puck moved back to the left point and defenseman Neil Pionk, who was at the right half-boards, found a seam right through four Tampa Bay players for a middle-slot redirect.

It was a sign of things to come.

Five minutes later, Alex Iafallo was in the right place at the right time when Cole Perfetti's shot attempt hit the skate of Tanner Jeannot and bounced right to an open Iafallo to put Winnipeg in front.

Tampa Bay spent the rest of the period just trying to hang on and stay within a goal. Halfway through the period, the scoring chances in the second were 12-4 in favor of the Lightning. They finished 15-11 for Tampa Bay by the end of the period.

"I thought our first period was great . . . second period wasn't," Sheary said. "I think they took advantage of a couple longer shifts for us and were able to score."

FADING DOWN THE HOMESTRETCH

The game played out like a thoroughbred sprinting out of the gates reaching the first leg with the lead only to be passed before reaching the quarter pole and unable to kick down the end.

The Lightning were only trailing by a goal but it might as well have been a three-goal lead with the climb Tampa Bay had to make against the Jets. Winnipeg essentially leaned on the Lightning and wore them down. Halfway through the third period, Tampa Bay had just two shots on goal. Hard to find the equalizer when you rarely have the puck.

"Just kind of couldn't grasp any momentum the third," Cooper said. "Then they got the third one and that made a steep hill for us."

That third one came as Andrei Vasilevskiy tried to send a pass up the ice to try and catch two Winnipeg players in the zone and start a rush up ice. But his pass hit Vladislav Namestnikov in the slot that allowed him to feed it back to Nikolaj Ehlers with 4:47 left.

The Jets added an empty netter before Nikita Kucherov scored a power play goal in the final minute to cap the scoring.

ROAD WOES CONTINUE

Tampa Bay's record away from home has been less than stellar. Tuesday dropped their road record to 7-11-2. The seven away wins are tied for the sixth fewest in the league and the 16 road points are tied for the eighth fewest in the league.

Tampa Bay has allowed 84 goals on the road, the third most in the league behind only Chicago and San Jose. That's not the type of company the Lightning want to keep.

"We're just going to have to find a way to win, I think especially on the road," Sheary said. "We've been struggling a little bit. We just have to find a way to keep our game simple for the whole game. I think we're doing in spurts and not for 60 minutes and that's pretty much it."

Tampa Bay's goal differential on the road is minus-23.

NOTES

Tampa Bay placed D Hadyn Fleury on injured reserve. . . . The Lightning scratched D Erik Cernak (day to day) and D Mikhail Sergachev, who missed his sixth consecutive game. . . . C Steven Stamkos recorded his 32nd career goal in 44 career games against the Jets franchise. . . . Stamkos registered his 202nd career power play goal to tie Steve Yzerman for 18th on the all-time list. . . . The Jets became the third team in the NHL's expansion era (since 1967-68) to allow three or fewer goals in at least 26 consecutive contests. The other teams to do so are: the Wild (35 GP in 2014-15) and Blues (27 GP in 2011-12). . . . Kucherov, Steven Stamkos and Victor Hedman all connected on a goal for the

77th time – that places them second in the League since 2013-14 behind the former Bruins trio of Patrice Bergeron, Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak (94x since 2013-14). Kucherov entered the NHL in 2013-14. ... The 77 times Kucherov, Stamkos and Hedman have all connected on a goal also ties them for the most all-time among current teammates (with Alex Ovechkin, Nicklas Backstrom and John Carlson).

MY THREE STARS

1. Jets G Connor Hellebuyck – Stopped 32 shots to take life out of the Lightning in the final 25 minutes
2. Jets C Vladislav Namestnikov – Three assists, plus-3
3. Lightning D Victor Hedman – Two assists, nine shot attempts, four blocked shots, 29:14 of ice time