



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips  
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## **As Lightning held on to win opener, newcomers made big contributions** **Kristie Ackert (Tampa Bay Times)**

BRANDON — For Lightning newcomers Luke Glendening and Jonas Johansson, there was no easing into things at the end of Tuesday's season-opening 5-3 win over the Predators.

With the Lightning protecting a one-goal lead, the Predators pulled their goaltender and tested Tampa Bay's ability to fend off an extra attacker for more than two minutes.

"You know, they got some chances, but (goalie Johansson) was super solid back there," forward Glendening said following Wednesday's practice at TGH Ice Plex. "It's not something we practiced, but I think it's something that you just rely on the principles of it and knowing your reads. I think, for the first time for us, it went well."

Defending against an extra attacker was not something the Lightning were able to practice during their exhibition games because they had a late lead in most of them. So it was an early regular-season test of how they are able to blend in some of their new faces and work together under pressure.

The Predators pulled Juuse Saros for the final 2½ minutes. Nashville got four shots on goal, but Johansson, making his Lightning debut in place of injured Andrei Vasilevskiy, blocked each one.

"It's hard, because it's not something you get to practice a ton, and it's really hard to replicate 5-on-6 (situations in practice) without really blasting pucks at guys, and nobody wants to do that," coach Jon Cooper said Tuesday. "So other than kind of showing the guys what to do, you get (practice) in your games.

"That's what you've got to give the guys credit for, because they did a heck of a job. (The Predators) had good skill players out there, so they're going to get some looks. But we were in lanes, we got the pucks when we had to and at the end, some big faceoffs helped us out."

Cooper called it "a good test for us" and said his team passed it.

"Hopefully, we're in some of those situations again where teams have to pull their goalies," he said. "That'd be a good sign for us."

Those important late-game faceoffs are one reason the Lightning brought in Glendening in the offseason on a two-year, \$1.6 million deal.

The 34-year-old, who played 10 seasons in the NHL with the Stars and Red Wings before joining the Lightning, is exceptional at winning faceoffs. Over his career, Glendening has scored double-digit goals only three times, but he has won 55.7% of his faceoffs. Last season with Dallas he won 59%.

Glendening won 9-of-13 (69%) Tuesday, including two with his team down a man in the final minutes.

Assistant coach Jeff Blashill is familiar what Glendening brings to the ice. He coached the Michigan native with the Red Wings and had him in the minor leagues as well.

"(Glendening) was converted from winger to center, and one of the things that he needed to do when he was in (AHL) Grand Rapids to get the callup to Detroit was get better in the circle, and he really went to work at it," Blashill said. "It was really awesome to see. He's an athlete, so he gets better at things when he works, and he's got a great work ethic."

“So, I watched him go from being an OK guy in the circle in the (AHL) to becoming an elite guy there, and then an elite guy in the NHL. He studies it hard. He takes things from other centers around the league, and he’s just become a real great faceoff guy and can kind of do it on both sides a little bit, which a lot of guys can’t.”

Glendening said Tuesday’s game was a good chance for the new additions to mesh with the core players. Nashville’s late barrage was a good experience they can build from.

“There are things we can improve, for sure,” Glendening said, “but I thought for a first game it went pretty well.”

No news on Motte

Forward Tyler Motte, who left in the second period with an apparent hand injury, did not practice. Blashill said Motte was day to day as the team awaited more information from the medical staff.

**Not sure how good the Lightning will be, but this could be a fun ride  
John Romano (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — On the first night of a new season, the game felt young again.

Not spectacular. Not dominant. Maybe not even playoff-worthy. Just energetic and fresh.

And, if you've been living and dying with the Lightning for the past 1,200 days or so, it felt like bliss.

This is what the absence of expectations can do for a community. And for a team.

It allows you to enjoy life's little victories.

That's what Tampa Bay's season-opening 5-3 win against Nashville felt like on Tuesday. The opponent wasn't very good and, at times, the execution was haphazard. The Lightning committed too many penalties and blew leads in both the second and third periods.

And it didn't matter one bit.

You see, the Lightning are no longer the sexy beasts of the NHL. They don't need to concern themselves with style points, or worry what the talking heads on ESPN might have to say. They are just another team with a handful of stars and a puncher's chance at playing meaningful games beyond April.

"Everybody contributed right down the line. Everybody had something to do with this win tonight," coach Jon Cooper said. "If we're going to have success as a team, it's going to come from everybody."

This team's identity is yet to be determined. It feels like a distant cousin to the group that won three conference titles, one Presidents' Trophy and two Stanley Cups from 2019-22. There might be some common DNA, but the personality is going to feel totally different.

If they have swagger, it will need to be earned. If the offense is high-octane, it will need to prove it. If the defense can survive a couple of months with Andrei Vasilevskiy on the mend, it will be the talk of the league.

So what did the first 60 minutes of the season suggest?

That anything is possible.

Jonas Johansson was solid, if unspectacular, as Vasilevskiy's replacement in the net. The power play was dangerous. The penalty kill was even better. But, of course, this was not a rigorous challenge. The Predators were a step below mediocre last season, and they may have fallen further down the stairs.

In moments such as this, it doesn't pay to be too critical or too enthusiastic.

"Everybody contributed in their own way," Cooper said. "Sometimes you don't show up on the points side of the ledger, but a lot of guys were winning faceoffs or blocking shots ... a lot of things you don't normally see on the scoresheet."

In the days before the opener, Cooper talked about the team's energy and it wouldn't be a surprise if that was a euphemism for youth. Of all the changes in the offseason, the disappearance of some graybeards was probably the most noticeable.

Corey Perry, Brian Elliott and Pierre-Edouard Bellemare were all 37 last season. Pat Maroon was 34. Alex Killorn and Ian Cole were 33. The Lightning signed a few 30-something replacements, but they have also integrated a handful of younger players onto the roster.

The Lightning might have lost experience and grit, but they hopefully gained speed and exuberance.

"Our team, our staff, our management are really good at picking good guys," said forward Nick Paul, who scored two power-play goals against Nashville. "A lot of guys that come into this room are good guys and are here for a reason. They're not just here for their skill but they're here for off-ice as well. When you have guys who are coming in who are awesome guys, it's easy to be a teammate and play together and build chemistry."

Let's be honest, there was also a fair degree of good fortune in this game. There was a three-minute span early in the third period when the Predators had a goal waved off for goaltender's interference, the Lightning scored on a power play and then scored again on a Brandon Hagel penalty shot.

Later, after Nashville had tied the score, the Lightning scored on another power play after an iffy high-sticking penalty that looked like a splendid acting job by forward Conor Sheary.

Given all that went right for the Lightning, it's fair to wonder if the mood will feel so bright with a three-game road trip in the immediate future.

And there's nothing wrong with that. Given the state of the roster, there are bound to be growing pains. There will be setbacks and frustrations.

But unlike past seasons when standards and expectations were through the roof, every loss won't feel like a personal slight.

The Lightning gave you plenty of reasons to be excited on the season's first night.

There are 81 more to go and, for a change, the pressure is on everyone else.

So sit back, and enjoy the ride.

**LeBrun: The Lightning's options in net? The latest on Steven Stamkos' contract? Catching up with GM Julien BriseBois**  
**Pierre LeBrun (The Athletic)**

One game isn't a big deal, especially for a championship-pedigree team like the Tampa Bay Lightning.

But seeing Jonas Johansson stop 28 of 31 shots in an opening-night win Tuesday had to feel like somewhat of a relief for the Bolts and their fans as they begin what could be a two-month stretch to start the season without superstar goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy.

"The truth is, he's had a really good camp," Lightning general manager Julien BriseBois told The Athletic of Johansson on Wednesday morning. "When we signed Jonas Johansson, obviously we didn't expect that Andrei Vasilevskiy was going to be out for the first two months of the season. At the same time, we signed Jonas because we liked the toolset and we think there is still some untapped potential."

Well, and the price was right for a cap-strapped team, Johansson coming in at \$775,000 per season on a two-year deal. That is also the average annual value for the backup to the backup, Matt Tomkins.

The Lightning have surprised some observers by not claiming a goalie on waivers so far, but that's not to say a goalie move still can't happen. All options remain on the table.

"Our job is to always be on the lookout for opportunities to improve our team," BriseBois said. "And that's true whether our No. 1 all-world goalie is injured or not. We're always looking for opportunities to improve our team. Right now, with Andrei Vasilevskiy going on long-term injury exception, we have some cap space to play with.

"At the same time, we're going to have to be able to get cap compliant when he does return in a couple of months. But in the short term, we have over \$8.5 million of cap space."

Which as BriseBois said, could mean keeping extra players around, recalling different players or, yes, claiming someone off waivers if need be or even making a trade.

But the GM also stressed that the Bolts like Tomkins, too.

"We think he's got tools," BriseBois said of the 29-year-old journeyman who has yet to play his first NHL regular-season game. "He's got size. We think he's a goaltender who went over to Europe and continued to grow his game. He's got an incredible mindset, a great work ethic. Played in high-pressure games for Team Canada at the Olympics and did well there. We think he has what it takes to be an NHL goalie.

"The sample we have working with him over the past month or so, he's proven us right."

So if we were going read between the lines here, I suspect the Lightning will try to hang in there for now with what they have in net, but if they need to re-visit that before Vasilevskiy returns, they certainly have the cap flexibility to do so.

The most important factor is that the Lightning don't want to dig a hole early. Having a good start to the season is paramount.

“We need to bank points early,” BriseBois said. “To set ourselves up to, at some point, try to secure a playoff spot. That’s first and foremost. We need a good start.”

And if the Lightning can do that, they hope to be in a position to add closer to the trade deadline.

In the meantime, and no doubt influenced by the Vasilevskiy injury to some degree, the Lightning have been a fashionable pick by some pundits to slide right out of a playoff spot. Some see their window closing.

I asked BriseBois if his team had taken notice of those takes.

“I think ultimately it’s irrelevant whether people pick us to win the Stanley Cup or pick us to miss the playoffs,” he said. “It will play no role whatsoever in what’s actually going to occur during the course of the season.

“At the end of the day, our team needs to go out there and win hockey games and accumulate points to secure a playoff spot. When I look at our roster, I think we have what it takes.”

The Bolts went into the offseason with the point of emphasis being defensive improvement — being harder to play against and reducing scoring chances against.

“That was guiding a lot of our decisions in the offseason,” BriseBois explained. “We looked for players who could help us establish our relentless forecheck, who could add speed to our team, who could play within structure, who could defend and help us keep the puck out of our net and help us protect leads.

“When I look at our team right now, I think it’s a much better defensive team and I think it’s a much faster team. That gives me reason to hope we can have a successful season.”

And while there are a number of new faces on the roster, the core remains the core. There’s some benefit, too, in losing in the first round of the playoffs last spring after three straight trips to the Cup Final: fresher legs for the older core guys.

“The word that the players have been using in my conversations with them is ‘fresh,’” BriseBois said. “They feel fresh, and they feel like the energy around the team is fresh. They feel like all the new guys are bringing in freshness. There’s a good vibe. I see the hunger still. Everything is set up for us to be successful and have a good season. Now we just have to go out there and do it.”

There is the matter of Steven Stamkos hanging over the team, though. The Lightning captain, who can be an unrestricted free agent after this season, made headlines on the opening day of camp last month when he answered a question about not signing an extension this past summer and made it clear he was disappointed by that.

“It was something that I expressed at the end of last year that I wanted to get something done before training camp started,” Stamkos told Tampa media members on Sept. 20. “There haven’t been any conversations.”

He added: “I guess that was something that I didn’t see coming, but it is what it is.”

You can’t blame Stamkos for feeling that way, given his stature in the organization, and seeing a fellow captain and contemporary like Anze Kopitar get a two-year extension one year ahead of time in Los Angeles.

Either way, Stamkos’ comments got noticed throughout the league, to be sure.

“First of all, I would say Steven didn’t go out there and make headlines. He was asked a question and he answered it honestly,” BriseBois said. “And his answer was not a surprise to me because it’s the same thing he told me in our conversations during the offseason.

“So people made headlines with his honest answer, but he didn’t go out there to make headlines. I know that wasn’t his intent. I fully understand his position. I knew that would be his position when I met with him in the offseason. When we had these conversations, I understand that this was not his preference and he was disappointed that we didn’t work on getting a deal done prior to starting the season. And if I were him, I’d be disappointed, too.

“So I fully get it from his standpoint.”

But unless something changes, it’s been made clear to everyone involved that the Lightning plan to wait until after the season to engage on the contract front.

“Ultimately I made the decision that it’s in the best interest of our organization to wait until after the season to see what we have here, see how we perform, see how all these different, new pieces fit,” BriseBois said. “Then we’ll be in a better position to make the best decision to set ourselves up for continued success. Because ultimately, I’ve stated that I think it would be great for the organization for Steven to finish his career here. He wants that. But what we want is for Steven to finish off his career in Tampa and for the club to continue to be legitimate Stanley Cup contenders for the remainder of his tenure.”

Reading between the lines again here, I suspect this is about seeing where Stamkos’ game is at after this season — he turns 34 in February — but also about seeing if the organization still is playing like an elite Cup contender.

As far as whether BriseBois is concerned if this could be a distraction in the meantime, he answered shortly and firmly: “No.”

Of course, Stamkos will have to answer questions about it, especially when his team travels to face his hometown Maple Leafs, but everyone is ready for that.

“Steven and I both want the same thing, we want to bring the Cup back to Tampa,” BriseBois said. “And right now, that’s where our focus is.”