



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips
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A tribute to Steven Stamkos' trademark shot as he nears team record **Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — Through his 16 seasons wearing a Lightning sweater, it has been Steven Stamkos' trademark. It is fueled by both power and precision, equal parts mechanics and artistry.

When the delivery is well-placed and his blade hits the puck just right, it barely makes a sound.

It is Stamkos' patented one-timer slap shot.

This weekend, Stamkos is expected to play in his 1,038th game with the Lightning (who host games Saturday and Sunday), becoming the franchise's all-time leader in games played, passing Vinny Lecavalier.

Stamkos' impact on the Lightning is tremendous.

Since he arrived in 2008 as an 18-year-old, the Lightning have grown into one of the league's model franchises. Stamkos has captained back-to-back Stanley Cup-winning teams, and the Lightning have made four trips to the Cup final.

"I've loved every second of it," Stamkos said. "A lot of great times, some tough times. ... I think to be part of that, that's what makes it even more special — to go through those tough times to see something through. For me, that means the most."

Stamkos has persevered through several major injuries to rewrite the Lightning record books. He is the franchise's all-time leader in points (1,091), goals (530), power-play goals (201) and game-winning goals (80). He's won two Rocket Richard Trophies, posted 50-goal and 60-goal seasons, and reached the 100-point mark just two seasons ago. Last season he was the recipient of the Mark Messier Leadership Award, given since 2006-07 by the Hall of Famer himself to "the player who exemplifies great leadership qualities to his team, on and off the ice, during the regular season and who plays a leading role in his community growing the game of hockey."

Without question, Stamkos is a future Hockey Hall of Famer. He will not only go down as one of the best professional athletes in Tampa Bay sports history, but as one of the best scorers of this generation.

But when you think of Stamkos and his game on the ice, it's his deadly shot from his "office" in or around the left circle that's his trademark.

"He's worked on it a lot and still works on it to this day," said defenseman Victor Hedman, who often has fed Stamkos for the forward's one-timer since coming to the Lightning in 2009. "So it just goes to show that when you work on something, you get good at it, and when you're good at it and keep working, you're going to become great at it. It's one of those things that makes players in this league special."

Practice makes perfect

Growing up, Stamkos said his shot was the weakest part of his game. He was a smaller kid and he could skate, though he wasn't a natural shooter.

His father, Chris, took him to a shooting instructor outside Toronto at the age of 8 or 9. He would go home and practice shooting in the basement of his family's Markham, Ontario, home. From then, he never stopped shooting — and always kept practicing his one-timer.

“Obviously, as you physically mature and get stronger, the velocity starts to come,” Stamkos said. “For me, it’s always been the technique. If you can learn those mechanics as young as possible, everything just kind of flows from there.”

“There’s a lot that goes into it,” he added. “It’s hand placement, it’s torque in your hips. It’s opening your feet up a certain amount where you can clear the hips. There’s a lot of technical stuff that is involved in it, but that’s just something I’ve just always kind of had.”

Stamkos’ teammates, even ones who have played with him for years, marvel at how effortless he makes his one-timer look. They know there’s so much to it, but he makes the shot look so crisp so easily.

“It comes off hot, but it doesn’t look like he’s swinging at it very hard, right?” center Brayden Point said. “It’s just so smooth.”

Added Hedman: “He just has a read of when to shoot it hard and when to kind of lay off a little bit. He’s got a good feel for where to put the puck. You have to have some good vision to kind of see where the D is and where the goalie is.”

Lightning forward Conor Sheary spent the last three seasons with the Capitals playing with Alex Ovechkin, also regarded as having a top one-timer. But Sheary said Ovechkin and Stamkos are much different in their approach.

“It doesn’t overpower anyone, but he’s just accurate with it and he’s consistent with it,” Sheary said of Stamkos’ shot. “It just pops off the stick differently. Ovi’s is powerful and you almost never know where it’s going. When Ovi shoots the puck, it’s almost like, ‘Get out of the way’ because it’s heavy. But Stamkos, I feel like he gets in his position and he’s able to be accurate with it and consistent with it.”

“It almost doesn’t make a sound because he has it so perfectly down,” Sheary added.

Success in silence

The game has changed over the course of Stamkos’ career, and opponents focus on taking space away from him along the left wing, particularly on the power play.

But Stamkos said he’s learned that passes to him don’t need to be perfect. He was pickier when he was younger, but he’s adjusted, knowing the most important component of one-timer success is catching the goaltender off guard.

That’s really where Stamkos continues to hone his shot, taking purposely off-target passes at the end of practice, so he can work on shooting off his back foot, or front foot and still getting a shot off.

“The thing that I’ve probably been better at than most is just having a bigger wheelhouse per se where it doesn’t have to be the perfect pass,” Stamkos said. “I’ve worked on that over the years where it’s just getting the puck off quick because the goalie’s not set. You don’t necessarily need to have a perfect shot or pick a corner. It just can beat the goalie because he’s not there. ... I still try to get that shot off.”

But the ones that Stamkos does catch perfectly on his blade, they are almost silent.

“The best shots, you almost don’t even hear leaving your blade,” Stamkos said. “It feels almost like the puck’s weightless. ... You know when you catch a clean one, you just feel it right away, and then it’s a matter of did you hit the net? Because if you did, it probably went in.”

Added Hedman: "Mostly, the sound I hear from the shot is the puck in the net and then you hear Hammer Time. That's the sound that I really think about when I think about his shot; it's his goal song."

4 reasons for the Lightning's ugly loss to the Rangers **Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — Coach Jon Cooper circled the six games ending December — including five at home — as a crucial stretch for the Lightning. They need to start compiling points, especially at Amalie Arena.

After winning the first three games, the Lightning have now dropped two straight — both against Eastern Conference foes — following their 5-1 loss to the Rangers on Saturday night.

New York forward Artemi Panarin recorded a hat trick, scoring twice in a third period in which the Rangers (25-9-1, 51 points) had just seven shots on goal.

With the loss, the Lightning (17-15-5, 39 points) sit a point outside the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference going into Sunday's home contest against Montreal.

"We can't go 3-3 on this little stretch here. If we happen to win (Sunday), go 4-2, hey, we'll take that," Cooper said. "We've got to take some points here and get some momentum going on the road."

Here are four reasons the Lightning fell short on Saturday:

Costly errors continue to kill

The Lightning outshot the Rangers 35-21 and allowed only 37 shot attempts on the night. But as has been the case this inconsistent season, egregious errors ended up in the back of their net.

"We actually talked about that," Cooper said. "With this group, they can play 57 minutes of solid hockey and three minutes that go awry and the puck ends up in the net."

Two of the Rangers' first three goals were a result of odd-man rushes. The first came off a Nick Perbix turnover in the offensive zone that created a 2-on-1 before Victor Hedman blew a tire trying to make a play. Bad coverage through the neutral zone allowed Blake Wheeler to flip a pass into the air over two Lightning skaters to Vincent Trocheck and Chris Kreider for a 2-on-1.

"That's something you talk about when you're in minor hockey, the shift after a goal is a big one right?" captain Steven Stamkos said. "It was a play where we were a little in between and stuff like that happens, mistakes happen."

Too often chasing

The Lightning haven't been a good comeback team. When they have a lead after one period, they are 11-1-2. But they're 6-14-3 when trailing or tied at the first intermission.

They trailed by two just 7:36 into the game Saturday. Mikey Eyssimont's goal with just less than five minutes left in the first period was negated by a goaltender interference call.

Despite a 5-on-5 that created 52 shot attempts and 26 on goal, the Lightning manufactured no offense in even strength. Rangers goaltender Igor Shesterkin made it difficult for the Lightning, shopping all 29 even-strength shots he saw.

"It's a combination of not scoring as much as we'd like probably in 5-on-5, because that'll alleviate some of those swings where you can get a couple goals and we're feeling a little different about ourselves and we're not feeling like we need to press or chase or make a risky play," Stamkos said.

Unable to get over the hump

A look at the numbers showed that the Lightning completely controlled the second period, outshooting the Rangers 13-5 and consistently hemming New York in its own end. Nikita Kucherov's power-play goal with 2:21 left in the period was the reward they needed, but allowing Kreider's goal just 51 seconds later took the air out of Amalie Arena. The Lightning were outscored 2-0 in the third.

"We wish we could take that back 30 seconds before it happened," Cooper said. "That was a tough one to give up just in the sense that we basically had the puck in their zone the whole time and got one back and with a minute and a half left to go down 3-1, that was tough for us."

A rough night for Hedman

Hedman has too often been the Lightning's last line of defense when an odd-man rush heads into the defensive zone, and on most nights, he's best able to make a play with his skating and his reach. Saturday was not one of those nights for Hedman, who was a minus-3.

Before Hedman spun out of the play on the Rangers' first goal, he couldn't make a play on Trocheck with his stick, leaving New York with a 2-on-0. On the Rangers' second goal, Trocheck found a soft spot on the ice behind Hedman and Perbix.

Hedman was then caught flat-footed in the final period on Panarin's second goal, in which the Rangers forward dodged a poke check and created space for an open snap shot past Andrei Vasilevskiy at the right circle.

Tampa Bay Lightning dealt another blow on home ice **Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)**

TAMPA – Heading into New Year's Eve Eve, the odds were stacked against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Facing the top-ranked New York Rangers, even coming off a back-to-back the night before in Sunrise, was going to take a top effort from the Lightning. The task, perhaps, was going to be even more daunting because the Rangers lost on Friday at Florida. The Rangers have lost consecutive games only once this season as they have climbed to the top of the league standings.

By the end of the night, the numbers showed that the Lightning *did* put forth a top effort. The kind of performance that should have netted a positive result.

But by the time the buzzer ended the game, the only numbers that mattered were on the scoreboard as Tampa Bay allowed at least five goals in a game for the eighth time this season, and the 21st time they have allowed at least four goals in a game.

Saturday was Game No. 37 on the season.

What we're talking about after a 5-1 loss to the Rangers.

IS IT THE SYSTEM?

Every season brings about changes to the way a team plays. A system is put in place, the structure of how a team will play, usually specific to the defensive zone.

In addition to the numbers above, where Tampa Bay has allowed at least four goals in a game (including empty net goals against) 56-percent of the total games played. That number is not sustainable for a team that wants to play in the postseason.

Tampa Bay allows 3.46 goals per game, which is 27th in the league.

So the question was posed to Lightning head coach Jon Cooper after the game about whether or not the new tweaks to the system, with the season nearly at the halfway point, is working to expectations.

"It's not really crazy new," Cooper said. "The other thing is if, if you're looking . . . we had 80 shot attempts. And they had 37. I'll take that all day. You hold a team to 37 shot attempts in a game, 21 shots – they got a bunch of freebie shots at the end. After two periods, they had 14 shots. So I don't know if your question is valid."

Certainly on Saturday the system wasn't exactly to blame for another game with an inflated number of goals against.

New York's first goal came after Victor Hedman went back to play, misplayed and blew a tire, which lead to a 2-on-0 break for the Rangers. And if Nick Perbix had not stopped skating at the blue line, perhaps he would have been in position to disrupt the pass from Vincent Trocheck over to the goal-scorer, Artemi Panarin.

The second goal, not exactly system related as Tampa Bay's three forwards had their men marked up high in the zone. But Hedman was chasing Trocheck in the corner and when the puck went back up high, and Trocheck went to the net, Hedman stayed along the boards. That left Perbix alone in front of the net as he marked his man, leaving Trocheck alone in front to punch in a rebound with no resistance.

The third Rangers' goal, again, not exactly a system issue. With the puck in the offensive zone in the corner, Blake Wheeler flipped a puck up and over two Lightning players to Trocheck for a 2-on-1 that Chris Kreider finished off on what proved to be the back-breaking goal. Tyler Motte and Calvin de Haan were the two that were caught out of position, but again, not system related.

And the fourth goal came when Hedman lost a one-on-one play against Panarin, who was able to pull wide and beat Vasilevskiy to the far post, a shot he needs to stop.

The fifth goal was a late power play marker from Panarin, who finished off the hat trick.

So each of the first four goals came off of either lost positioning, bad break and poor decisions. On this night, the poor defensive showing was not related to Tampa Bay's defensive structure.

ABOUT THOSE NUMBERS,

When you look inside the numbers, they point to what should have been a better showing for the Lightning.

In all situations, Tampa Bay out-attempted the Rangers 79-37. The 37 shot attempts against is the lowest allowed by the Lightning this season and the fewest New York has generated. Tampa Bay owned 64-percent of the scoring chances.

Even MoneyPuck had Tampa Bay at 56.5-percent on their "Deserve-to-Win" meter, a number that grew exponentially late in the third period when the game was already decided.

"We had some some good looks, it just felt like the little mistakes that we made they all ended up in the net," captain Steven Stamkos said. "So you look at those shots at the end of the game and, they are what they are (but) usually you win those types of games. But we haven't been on the right end of a few of those games this year, so it's tough."

Impressive numbers. Unimpressive result.

"We had some good O-zone time and just couldn't put it in the back of the net," Nick Paul said. "Going forward, we just have to find ways to win games and bear down in those moments and climb back and get on top. We did some good things out there, but we also made some mistakes that cost us. When you're playing a team like that, you have to limit those mistakes. I thought we did a lot of good things, but we just have to do it for a full 60. We can't have those mental breakdowns."

UNDERSERVED SECOND PERIOD

Tampa Bay entered the second down two goals. They were in the same situation just over a week ago against Vegas, erupted in the second period and won the game 5-4. That is always present in a similar situation.

The Lightning played the second period on Saturday the same way, minus a Brandon Hagel fight.

Tampa Bay 70-percent of the attempts, 76-percent of the scoring chances, 75-percent of the high danger chances and 82-percent of the expected goals. Those are numbers of a team that dominates a period.

The Lightning worked and worked and worked in the period. They were finally rewarded for that work with a power play goal by Nikita Kucherov, his 25th goal of the season second to only Auston Matthews. Tampa Bay was back in the game.

Until they weren't

Less than a minute later, 51 seconds to be exact, the Rangers regained the two-goal lead and took the life right out of the building with 90 seconds left in the second period.

It's a back-breaker.

"That's something you talked about when you're in minor hockey, the shift after goal is a big one," Stamkos said. "Unfortunate it's a play where we were a little in between. Stuff like that happens. Mistakes happen. It was just a tough, tough time. But that's the way it went tonight."

Tampa Bay should have won the second period. They came out with a tie.

SO MUCH BLUE

Amalie Arena is used to seeing plenty of blue in the stands. But on Saturday, the shade of blue was Broadway.

Throughout the game chants of "Let's Go Rangers" broke out throughout the building. Fans in front of the press box get pointing out that it was Igor Shesterkin's birthday on Saturday. There are a numerous amount of hat tossed on to the ice when Panarin scored his third goal. A strong portion of the crowd roared with each New York goal.

Don't think the players don't notice that in their home arena, something that hasn't happened over the past handful of seasons as the Lightning were among the league's elite. That hasn't been the case this season, and it's noticeable.

"I don't know if tonight felt like a home game," Stamkos said.

SIXTH OF THE SIX

When Tampa Bay returned from the West Coast with a 2-3 record, Cooper put an emphasis on the final six games of the month.

The Lightning were off to a great start with wins over St. Louis, Vegas and at Washington. But they've stumbled with losses to Florida and New York.

The final game of the stretch comes on New Year's Eve against Montreal.

It's all but a must-win game.

"We can't go three-and-three on this little stretch here," Cooper said. "If we happen to win (Sunday), and it's four-and-two, we'll take that. But we can't we can't come out of this three-and-three heading on the road against Winnipeg, who's one of the best teams in the west, and Minnesota, who doesn't seem to lose much anymore and then Boston. So we have to take some points here, get us a little momentum going on the road."

Tampa Bay will reach the midway point of their schedule by the end of the coming road trip. They currently have the 10th best points percentage in the Eastern Conference while most other teams have games in hand.

It's already getting late and it's past early.

“We need to get back at it,” Stamkos said. “The good thing in these types of games, you play tomorrow. and find a way to win. We need to start a stretch here where you put together a string of at least getting points in games to keep ourselves in this race.”

NOTES

Tampa Bay C Steven Stamkos appeared in his 1,037th career game to tie Vinny Lecavalier for most games played in franchise history. ... D Mikhail Sergachev missed his fourth consecutive game with a lower body injury. ... The Lightning scratched D Sean Day, RW Austin Watson and Sergachev. ... Connor Sheary only took two shifts in the second period and did not play in the third. He took a hit from Jacob Trouba on his first shift of the second, tried to come back but was unable to return. Sheary, who missed a month of time with a hand injury, was spotted looking to get his left pinky finger wrapped before he returned. Cooper said Sheary was still being evaluated after the game.

MY THREE STARS

1. Rangers RW Artemi Panarin – Hat trick, plus-3, six shot attempts
2. Rangers G Igor Shesterkin – Stopped 34 shots, 2.18 goals saved above expected
3. Rangers C Vincent Trocheck – Goal, three assists, plus-4