



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips
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Lightning's Andrei Vasilevskiy expected to miss first two months of season **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

BRANDON — Less than two weeks before the start of the regular season, the Lightning will have to prepare for life without All-Star goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy, at least for the short term.

The former Vezina and Conn Smythe trophy winner is expected to miss the first two months following surgery Thursday morning to fix a herniated disk in his lower back.

Vasilevskiy, the backbone of back-to-back Stanley Cup titles in 2020 and 2021, is the biggest reason players in the Lightning dressing room continue to believe they can contend for a championship every season despite ongoing roster turnover and improving opposition.

A team can't win the Cup in the first two months of the season, but it can fall out of the race in that time. Now, the Lightning's goal is to stay afloat in an improved Atlantic Division without their best player. And to do it, they expect to lean on a pair of goaltenders with very little NHL experience.

Lightning goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy attempted to play through the pain before it was decided he would need surgery.

"Everyone is committed to doing that, to having a good start to our regular season," general manager Julien BriseBois said. "In order to do that, we need to have a good end to our training camp. It has gone really well so far, and we feel we have the players in place in order to do that to compete while we're waiting for Andrei to come back and bank points so we set ourselves up to eventually to secure a playoff spot."

Vasilevskiy's peculiar absence from the ice during the first week of camp was a precursor, but he attempted to play through the pain before it was decided he would need surgery.

BriseBois said the injury is unrelated to those Vasilevskiy said in May that he played through last season. The goaltender first felt the issue in August and received an injection that temporarily relieved the pain and allowed him to prepare as usual for the season.

Vasilevskiy, 29, felt the issue again during his first training camp practice on Sept. 21 and left the ice prematurely. He received treatment and a second injection last week, which helped but didn't resolve the issue. He returned to practice Tuesday and Wednesday but was clearly still bothered physically.

"The medical opinion was that he should go ahead and have surgery," BriseBois said. "That was the only way to fully recover from the herniated disk.

Lightning goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy underwent back surgery on Thursday and is expected to miss the first two months of the season.

"We fully expect him to make a full recovery and for him to be back to being his old self again. It's going to take some time here. ... The doctor's opinion was that based on how powerful an athlete Andrei is and how flexible an athlete he is that, if anything, those attributes will help him make a full recovery."

For now, BriseBois said the Lightning will go with the goaltending group the team currently has. It will lean on newcomer Jonas Johansson, who was signed to a two-year NHL contract after a strong season in Colorado's system; and Matt Tomkins, who was inked to a two-year, two-way deal.

BriseBois said the team is not currently pursuing external option, though he didn't rule it out.

The Lightning think highly of the 28-year-old Johansson, a 6-foot-5, 220-pound Swede who takes up space in the net.

He is coming off an AHL season in which he posted a 2.33 goals-against average and .920 save percentage in 26 games with the Avalanche's top affiliate. He was 2-0 with a 2.10 GAA and .932 save percentage in three NHL games with the Avs.

Lightning goaltender Jonas Johansson watches from the net during training camp earlier this month at TGH Ice Plex in Brandon.

Though as a whole Johansson's numbers — a 3.35 GAA and .886 save percentage — in 35 career NHL games with Colorado, Buffalo and Florida leave much to be desired, he signed a one-way deal in July worth the league-minimum average annual value of \$775,000.

Tomkins, 29, has yet to play in an NHL game. Previously a member of the Blackhawks organization, he spent the past two seasons playing in Sweden, posting a 20-12-0 record with a 2.53 GAA and .911 save percentage in 32 games with Farjestad.

"We brought those goaltenders ... because we see potential in them," BriseBois said. "We think they're strong goaltenders right now. Obviously, no one is going to replace Andrei Vasilevskiy. He's the best goaltender in the world. And we're not going to go get a goaltender compared to him in the short term. But we think that the goaltenders that we have are able to get the job done and carry the load in the meantime."

The Atlantic Division is expected to be much improved from top to bottom this season. In the past several years, the Lightning have had strong starts to put themselves into the playoff picture. Without Vasilevskiy, that becomes a tougher task. The beginning of the season includes seven games against division opponents among the first 13, including two against the Maple Leafs and two against an improved Senators squad.

LeBrun: Andrei Vasilevskiy injury leaves Lightning between a rock and a hard cap

Pierre LeBrun (The Athletic)

The NHL's busiest netminder has been shelved for the opening two months of the season. So what now for Andrei Vasilevskiy and the Tampa Bay Lightning?

The team announced Thursday that Vasilevskiy underwent "a successful microdiscectomy this morning to address a lumbar disc herniation," news that was first tweeted by NHL analyst colleague Kevin Weekes of ESPN.

Vasilevskiy has played more games, including the playoffs, than any other NHL goalie over the past four years — which led some to wonder whether, in the era of sports science and load management, No. 88 was playing too much. So if there's any silver lining in losing arguably the best goalie in the world for 10 to 12 weeks, it's that he'll have a reduced workload this season, to be sure.

The flip side is that his injury could leave the Bolts in a hole they can't dig themselves out of in the standings of the ultra-competitive Atlantic Division.

So what are the options to keep the Lightning afloat until he's back?

My understanding is that everything is on the table, but salary-cap implications will obviously limit what they can pull off. They have next to no cap space (like just about every NHL contender), and they want to be in the best shape possible, cap-wise, when Vasilevskiy returns. That doesn't give them a ton of flexibility.

Vasilevskiy makes \$9.5 million against the cap and is eligible to go on long-term injured reserve, which would allow the Lightning to go over the cap by that amount — but then they'd need to get back under the cap when he's back. And the bottom line is that Tampa Bay wants to have as strong a roster as possible at that point.

So I would interpret that as they aren't going to spend a whole lot on another goalie in the interim.

Jonas Johansson is No. 2 on the depth chart, the next man up at this point. He has appeared in 35 career NHL games in parts of four seasons in Buffalo, Colorado, Florida and Colorado again. The 2014 third-round pick of the Buffalo Sabres signed a two-year deal at a bargain \$775,000 per season with the Bolts on July 1, replacing veteran Brian Elliott as the Lightning's backup. The 28-year-old Johansson put up a .920 save percentage in 26 games with the AHL Colorado Eagles last season.

Still, I'm guessing the Bolts will look at a few things.

The most obvious unrestricted free-agent option would be to bring back Elliott, 38, who remains unsigned and hasn't retired. Or there's Jaroslav Halak, who is skating and training in Boston, where he still keeps a home. I suspect his agent, Allan Walsh, was on the phone with Lightning general manager Julien BriseBois within about 30 seconds of the Vasilevskiy news emerging Thursday. Halak, 38, remains determined to find an NHL home this season, from what I'm told.

The other avenue for the Lightning is to simply wait until other teams have to put their No. 3 goalies on waivers for the purpose of AHL assignment. Several veteran netminders could be in that mix unless their teams keep three goalies on the active roster to start the season. Let's see what happens with the likes of Martin Jones in Toronto, Magnus Hellberg in Pittsburgh and Anthony Stolarz in Florida.

In any case, if the Lightning do anything, it almost assuredly has to be a cheap salary. And they might decide to ride it out internally to start the season anyway.

Andrei Vasilevskiy has back surgery, expected to miss first 2 months of season: How the Lightning adjust

The Athletic Staff, Shayna Goldman

Tampa Bay Lightning goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy had back surgery to address a lumbar disc herniation, the team announced Thursday. Here's what you need to know:

Vasilevskiy is expected to miss the first two months of the season.

In 2022-23, Vasilevskiy went 34-22-4 with a 2.65 goals against average and .915 save percentage. His 34 wins rank fifth in his nine NHL seasons.

The Lightning finished 46-30-6 last season before losing to the Toronto Maple Leafs in the first round of the playoffs.

The Athletic's instant analysis:

What losing Vasilevskiy means for the Lightning

Losing Vasilevskiy for this significant of a period of time is going to hurt the Lightning. Before this injury, Tampa Bay was considered a playoff team, just with lower chances relative to years past. All of the subtractions they've been forced to make are starting to add up, which makes high-end performance from core players, like their goaltender, all the more important.

LeBrun: Andrei Vasilevskiy injury leaves Lightning between a rock and a hard cap

Vasilevskiy is a bonafide number one goalie, who started more than 70 percent of the Lightning's games last year. And he was an elite difference-maker for a team that allowed more shots and quality chances relative to the last five years. Vasilevskiy rose to the challenge, with 34 quality starts, ranking sixth in the league. Despite a challenging workload, Vasilevskiy is coming off one of his best seasons yet — he saved 26.4 goals above expected in 60 games. — Goldman

How the Lightning adjust without Vasilevskiy

Vasilevskiy's level is one few could match, especially Jonas Johansson. Johansson has struggled relative to his workload in a backup capacity over the last few years with his worst coming between Florida and Colorado in 2021-22 when he conceded 16.4 more goals than expected based on his workload. He did rebound last year with the Avalanche in three appearances, but this is obviously not the netminder any team — especially one with playoff aspirations like the Lightning — could want.

Moving forward with Johansson as the starter for two months seems like a poor scenario for Tampa Bay. But its options are obviously limited considering its current salary bind. Twenty-two-year-old Hugo Alnefelt can move up to share the crease, but management is likely to see if there's an affordable option on the market as well. Goalies including Michael Hutchinson, Jaroslav Halak, and last year's backup, Brian Elliott are still unsigned. Other options include finding a goalie on waivers, or trying to make a trade for someone with a low cap hit. — Goldman

Backstory

Vasilevskiy, 29, entered the league in 2012 when the Lightning drafted him No. 19. He is a five-time All-Star, a two-time Stanley Cup champion and the 2019 Vezina Trophy winner.

Vasilevskiy is one of the best active goalies in the playoffs. Through 110 career playoff games, Vasilevskiy is 65-42 with a 2.37 goals against average and .921 save percentage and won the Conn Smythe Trophy in 2021. His 65 playoff wins are second among active goalies, behind Marc-Andre Fleury.