



AMALIE Arena Media Clips
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'Very good chance' Lightning's Vasilevskiy returns during road trip **Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — Lightning coach Jon Cooper on Wednesday opened the window for goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy to return within the next week.

After missing the start of the season while recovering from surgery to repair a herniated disc in his lower back, Vasilevskiy is in line to return sometime during the road trip that starts Friday night in Carolina.

Asked following Wednesday morning's skate if it is possible Vasilevskiy returns during the trip, Cooper responded, "There's a very good chance."

After playing the Hurricanes, the Lightning will return home briefly before traveling to Denver for the front end of back-to-back games Monday against the Avalanche and Tuesday vs. the Coyotes in Tempe, Arizona.

Wednesday marked eight weeks since Vasilevskiy had microdiscectomy surgery on Sept. 28. He was placed on long-term disability injured reserve at the beginning of the regular season and already has met the 10-game, 24-day to be eligible to return. Because he was on the opening-night roster, the Lightning will be salary-cap compliant once they send interim backup Matt Tomkins to AHL Syracuse.

Despite some pedestrian numbers, Jonas Johansson (8-4-4, 3.44 goals-against average, .894 save percentage) has filled in well for Vasilevskiy. Johansson entered Wednesday's game against Winnipeg leading the league in games played (16), minutes (958) and goals allowed (55) while facing 69 more shots on goal (517) than any other goaltender in the league (San Jose's Mackenzie Blackwood was second at 448).

"Goaltending has not been an issue for us," Cooper said. "They give us a chance to win games. ... Our game has been inconsistent. Not inconsistent that it's 30 minutes on, 30 minutes off. It's been 53 minutes on, seven minutes off. ... We've got more wins than losses, and if we weren't getting great goaltending we probably wouldn't have done that."

When Andrei Vasilevskiy might return to Tampa Bay Lightning net Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)

TAMPA – The Tampa Bay Lightning enter Thanksgiving holding down a playoff spot.

Historically speaking, that's a good indicator they will be playing postseason hockey come April.

Not many thought the Tampa Bay Lightning would sit in this spot nearly a quarter in the season, especially when news broke that All Star goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy would miss the first two months of the season following back surgery.

But now, Vasilevskiy's return seems imminent as the team gets set to embark on a three-game road trip starting Friday.

Thanksgiving Day marks eight weeks since Vasilevskiy underwent surgery on his back. The recovery timeframe at the time of the procedure was 8-10 weeks before he would be back playing. Now that the eight-week benchmark is here, Vasilevskiy's return could happen as soon as Friday.

Vasilevskiy has been back at practice with the team for the past week-plus, taking live shots for the first time since the start of training camp in September. He's been on the ice for morning skates, staying out late to get in more work.

And if everything is cleared by the medical staff and the surgeon who performed the procedure, the five-time Vezina Trophy finalist and 2021 Conn Smythe Trophy winner will be back in net to bolster the roster.

Lightning head coach Jon Cooper was asked Wednesday what the chances were Vasilevskiy would play on the upcoming road trip.

His response: "There's a really good chance."

Tampa Bay plays at Carolina Friday night before a two-game, back-to-back set in Colorado and Arizona on Monday and Tuesday. Ideally, Vasilevskiy would be in net Friday against the Hurricanes, then have two days off between games, serve as the backup in Colorado on Monday and get the second half of the back-to-back against the Coyotes.

Johansson, a former member of the Avalanche, seems to be in line to start in Denver.

The first sign of Vasilevskiy's return will be to keep an eye on the waiver wire as Matt Tomkins requires waivers to be assigned to the Syracuse Crunch. Though with an open roster spot at the moment, it's conceivable they could keep Tomkins, who has made three starts this season, in the short term to make sure Vasilevskiy gets through his first start without any issues.

Vasilevskiy won't see any sort of rehab time or a conditioning assignment before he returns to the crease. During the 2018-19 season when he missed a month with a fractured in his foot, he immediately returned and stopped 48 shots in a 4-1 victory against Toronto.

In his absence, Jonas Johansson has taken on a bulk of the workload, starting 17 of the 20 games, including Wednesday against Winnipeg. Johansson has logged the most minutes in the league at 958:07 entering Wednesday. He has also faced the highest amount of shots on goal, 516, which is 68 more than anybody else in the league.

Johansson is 8-4-4 with a 3.44 goals against average and .893 save percentage.

“He’s been outstanding for us,” Cooper said. “Goaltending has not been an issue for us. They give us a chance to win games. And nobody’s perfect any night. Once we get more consistent then the goaltending will be better, and that’s with any team. But Jo and the amount of starts he’s made has been great for us. We’ve got more wins and losses and if you weren’t getting great goaltending that probably wouldn’t look that way.”

With Vasilevskiy set to return, it should only get better.

Lightning's overtime loss to Jets gives them 3 points of emphasis

Kristie Ackert (Tampa Bay Times)

TAMPA — The Lightning are not there yet. Wednesday night, a Victor Hedman giveaway led to Adam Lowry's decisive goal in a 3-2 overtime loss to the Winnipeg Jets at Amalie Arena. Nearly a quarter of the way through the season, Tampa Bay still is struggling to find a consistent identity.

The loss was the Lightning's first in four games, but they collected points in each of those games, tying their longest points streak of the season. As they approach the second quarter of the season, they have a 9-6-5 record and are positioning themselves for a playoff spot.

They know they have to keep improving, though.

"We're getting better. We're just getting better as a team. And you want to see that in the group," head coach Jon Cooper said. "It's unfortunate, we lost some leads early in the season. But I think we're gaining some of those points back with the way we've rebounded.

"But if you're going to ask me at the quarter pole, are we a better team today than we were opening night? I'd sit here and say, no doubt."

It hasn't been an easy process over the first 20 games. The Lightning have been without Andrei Vasilevskiy, their Vezina Trophy-winning goaltender, and have been trying to incorporate new players and new systems into a veteran team.

"It's getting there. I think we're a better team now than we were at the beginning of the season," captain Steven Stamkos said. "So, that's what you want to do. You want to progress as a team as you go throughout. So, we're collecting points as we go. That's what you want to do on this little homestand that we had, so time to go on the road and see if we can carry that over."

Here are three things the Lightning need to take away from Wednesday's loss.

Avoid early holes

Of their 20 games this season, the Lightning have ended the first period trailing in 10.

They found themselves facing a two-goal deficit 13:06 into Wednesday's game after Josh Morrissey scored on a rebound from the left circle at 5:29 and Mark Scheifele deflected a Morrissey slap shot past Jonas Johansson with 22 seconds remaining in Mikhail Sergachev's hooking penalty.

"Again, we spot a team a two-goal lead but do a good job of coming back and getting a point," Stamkos said. "But it felt like a winnable game for our group in here. We had some chances, but maybe we've fallen victim to some untimely plays again.

"We're talking about it. ... It's not going to happen in one night, but that's points in four straight games. It's just a little sour right now, because I thought we should have had two points."

Keep feeding Stamkos

Stamkos may have found his footing on this homestand. He entered the three-game stretch at Amalie on a dry spell, having not scored a goal in three straight games and with just one in the previous seven.

But with his power-play goal with 1:54 to play in the first period Wednesday, Stamkos has scored in three straight games.

With his 198th career power-play goal, he surpassed Jarome Iginla (197) and tied Brian Bellows (198) for 20th-most in NHL history. Alex Ovechkin is the only active player with more (300).

Stay up on their toes

The slow starts have given the Lightning considerable experience at coming back. So when they went into the locker room tied at 2 after Brayden Point's tying goal 6:13 into the second period, there was no real concern.

Cooper told his players they just had to go back out and lean on the Jets like they had Monday against the Bruins in a 5-4 overtime win.

Instead, the Jets outshot the Lightning 8-4 in the final period of regulation and 3-1 in overtime.

"We did have some zone time and some close calls and stuff like that, but we didn't lean on them like I thought we could have," Cooper said. "Then you make those blunders in overtime, which was tough because I thought the guys on the ice at the time (Hedman, Point and Anthony Cirelli) had a really good game. But it just got away from us at the end, and unfortunately that ended up in the back of the net.

"But there was a lot of good from it (Wednesday). I just don't know if we got tired at the end. We played this game a little bit on our heels and not on our toes in the third period, and eventually it cost us."

Tampa Bay Lightning see “winnable” game get away. Five thoughts from an OT loss. Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)

TAMPA – The Tampa Bay Lightning remain rough around the edges 20 games into the season.

When one edge looks as if its about to be polished, a new rough edge pops up. That’s how the process goes. You keep working the the cloth, try to round out those edges looking to smooth things out.

The Tampa Bay Lightning capped off a three-game homestand with a 3-2 overtime loss to Winnipeg. The Lightning claimed five out of a possible six points on the homestand and have now collected points in four consecutive games.

During the homestand, the Lightning showed they are starting to find their game on a more consistent basis. That they can continue pushing forward with the process when they get behind. They can actually win a game in overtime.

But they remain far from a finished product a quarter into the season.

Five thoughts from a Thanksgiving Eve contest.

THE FORCE IS STRONG WITH THESE ONES

Earlier in the season, when things would start to slip in Tampa Bay’s game, they would start to slide. The game would start to get away and they were not able to corral things in quickly. That’s how they lost leads and let points slip away from them twice against Toronto. Or teams would surge and take advantage of Lightning mistakes.

But in all three games on the homestand the Lightning trailed at some point in the game. In two games, the were behind 2-0. Twice they trailed in the third period.

In all three games, Tampa Bay secured points. While trailing and having to comeback is not how it’s drawn up on the whiteboard, there is a different feeling about the team right now. A higher confidence level.

“It’s the belief, we have some confidence from doing that coming back and winning some games,” captain Steven Stamkos said. “Knowing that we’ve had success doing that, so that helps, but it’s certainly not a recipe. We want to cut that back a little bit. But we were playing well, it’s just you get down one and then they get a power play goal and now you’re down two. But we didn’t put our tail between our legs. We took the pace of that game forward and ultimately tied it.”

The confidence helps to fuel the mindset to be able to come back when down. But there is more to it, according to head coach Jon Cooper.

“We’re getting more comfortable with our game, we’re getting more comfortable with our teammates,” Cooper said. “Guys are slotting into roles and we’re just getting better. I think where there was as little uncertainty in the first 10-12 games or whatever, there’s not much uncertainty now. The guys they know what they have to do. We’re playing a much more consistent 60 minute game.”

JOHNASSON’S LAST STAND?

Jonas Johansson was again strong in goal for Tampa Bay. At 5-on-5 play, he stopped 25-of-26 shots against, saved all five high danger chances against. The only 5-on-5 goal he allowed came as he made a save on Dylan DeMelo's shot from the center point and kicked out the rebound to his right. But Josh Morrissey dropped down to the circle and quickly sent the puck on net where Johansson nearly slid over in time but the puck slipped through him.

His play in net kept Tampa Bay in the game. And in overtime, he was stellar before a second Tampa Bay turnover in the overtime allowed Winnipeg to go back the other way and Neal Pionk found Adam Lowry on the backdoor play.

Johansson made his 20th start of the season on Wednesday and has helped put Tampa Bay in a playoff position, heading into Thanksgiving in third in the division.

But Andrei Vasilevskiy's return appears imminent as he's expected to be activated off injured reserve on the upcoming road trip. Not many would have predicted the Lightning would be in this spot when Vasilevskiy underwent back surgery on September 28.

But Johansson has picked up points in 13 of his 17 starts this season, picking up 21 out of a possible 34 points. That's a point percentage of .618, and if he continues to produce points at that pace, the Lightning are in good shape goaltending-wise moving forward.

SMALL STEP BACK IN THE THIRD

One of Tampa Bay's attributes in the 3-0-1 run in the past four games has been their play in the third period. While they have allowed five third-period goals in these four games, they have not allowed a ton of chances.

Against Chicago, the Lightning allowed just two shots on goal in the third, one in the final 18 minutes. Against Edmonton to open the homestand, they held the Oilers to 11 shots at even strength. The Bruins had just five shots on goal (although three went in) and against Winnipeg the Jets had eight shots on goal.

But in the third on Wednesday, it was Tampa Bay that had only four shots on goal. In a game that was tied through two periods, that was not the type of push need to get the next goal.

"We get to the third and we talked about how we played in the third against Boston and let's go do the same here and lean on them," Cooper said. "We did just the opposite. They didn't really lean on us but in the third period we did have some zone time and some close calls and stuff like that, but we didn't lean on him like I thought we could."

WOE-VERTIME STRIKES AGAIN, BUT IMPROVEMENTS

Tampa Bay looked as if they put their overtime issues behind them with the victory against Boston.

The Lightning won faceoffs. They possessed the puck. They didn't chase. And they won on a Brandon Hagel breakaway.

Tampa Bay lost the first two faceoffs in overtime. They did possess the puck, and did win the final two faceoffs. But they didn't do much with their possession, turning it over twice. The first by Nikita Kucherov outside the offensive blueline that led to two Grade A chances. Then it was Victor Hedman with an ill-advised pass that was intercepted and sent the Jets back the other way, with Neal Pionk finding Adam Lowry for a backdoor conversion.

In six overtime games this season, the Lightning have lost five. In the five overtimes, Tampa Bay has been outshot 17-2. That's six lost points.

If the Lightning had won half of those overtime games, they'd be tied for second in the division.

"It felt like a winnable game for our group," Stamkos said. "I know we had some chances but maybe falling victim to some untimely plays again. We were talking about it, we try and improve I think we are. It's not going to happen in one night. That's points in four straight games (but) it's just a little sour right now because I thought we should have had two points."

SERGACHEV STRUGGLES CONTINUE

Defenseman Mikhail Sergachev continues to have his negative moments and impact on the game. It feels like when a mistake is made that leads to a goal against that Sergachev is in the middle of it, if not the cause.

Sergachev is a minus-13 on the season, which is the sixth worst in the league. There are only four San Jose Sharks and Seattle's Matty Beniers ahead of him. In the 20 games to date, Sergachev has been a minus 12 times. He's been a minus-2 or worse five times.

While plus/minus is not the end-all stat when figuring out defensive prowess, it does stand out when it's outside the rest of the team.

Sergachev finished as an even for Wednesday's game, but it doesn't mean he didn't have a negative effect on the game.

On the first Winnipeg goal, he was behind the net with the puck on his stick, only to have his backhand pass attempt to Erik Cernak was taken away by Cole Perfetti. Ten seconds later, the Jets were in front and never trailed the rest of the game.

The second Winnipeg came on a power play with Sergachev in the penalty box for a hooking call.

By the end of the game, Sergachev wound up with the most ice time (24:00) and most even strength time 22:39.

NOTES

Tampa Bay scratched LW Alex Barre-Boulet and D Haydn Fleury. ... Steven Stamkos scored his 198th career power-play goal. He surpassed Jarome Iginla (197) and tied Brian Bellows (198) for 20th most in NHL history (since power-play goals were first tracked in 1933-34). Alex Ovechkin is the only active player with more (300). ... Brayden Point scored his 59th goal since the start of last season, surpassing Leon Draisaitl (58) for the fourth most over that span. The only players with more are David Pastrnak (73), Connor McDavid (70) and Mikko Rantanen (66). ... Tampa Bay is 1-5 in overtime this season and has dropped nine of the past 10 games decided in overtime. ...

MY THREE STARS

1. Jets C Adam Lowry – Game-winning goal, six shot attempts
2. Jets D Josh Morrissey – Goal, assist, four blocked shots
3. Lightning C Brayden Point – Goal, five shots on goal

Crunch fall to Comets, 4-1 **Syracuse Crunch**

SYRACUSE, N.Y. – The Syracuse Crunch fell to the Utica Comets, 4-1, tonight at the Adirondack Bank Center.

The loss moves the Crunch to 8-5-0-2 on the season and 1-2-0-0 in the 14-game season series against the Comets.

Crunch goaltender *Brandon Halverson* stopped 19-of-22 shots before being relieved by *Hugo Alnefelt* in the second period. Alnefelt went on to stop all six shots he faced. Erik Källgren recorded the win blocking 25-of-26 shots. The Syracuse power play went 0-for-4, while Utica was 1-for-4.

Utica was first on the board with a power-play goal eight minutes into the game. Santeri Hatakka threw a cross-zone feed for Timur Ibragimov to fire in a one-timer from the right circle.

The Comets doubled their lead with a shorthanded goal early in the middle frame. Kyle Criscuolo skated the puck down the left side on an odd-man rush and sent a pass ahead for Shane Bowers who got behind the defense. Xavier Parent then made it 3-0 at 9:32 during a 2-on-0 play with Cal Foote. Two minutes later, Criscuolo jammed the puck in during a scramble in front of the net.

Ilya Usau stole one back for the Crunch late in the game when he came in on a 2-on-1 rush and ricocheted his cross-slot feed off a defender's stick and in, but the team ran out of time for a comeback.

The Crunch return home to host the Comets on Friday.

Crunchables: *Ilya Usau* has goals in back-to-back games.