



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips  
Wednesday, December 27, 2023**

1. What we know about the Lightning coming out of the holiday break – Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)
2. Nuts & Bolts: Rivalry renewed with the Cats – Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)

## **What we know about the Lightning coming out of the holiday break** **Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — The Lightning are still a few games away from the official midpoint of the regular season, but the three-day holiday break offers the chance to really put their season into perspective.

The team has had its share of ups and downs, battling for consistency game to game, period to period and sometimes shift to shift. Despite that, the Lightning sit in the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference through 35 games, tied with the Capitals at 39 points. But they're still the conference's second wild card based on points percentage.

They went into the break riding a three-game win streak, capped by a big shootout road win over the Capitals on Saturday night that brought them back into a playoff spot and proved they could claim the type of tight, low-scoring games they know they have to win in the postseason.

As we come out of the break, here are five things we know about the Lightning:

### Still face an uphill climb

Earning a playoff spot isn't going to be easy. The early-season inconsistencies have closed the Lightning's margin of error, and that's a new feeling for this group, which in recent seasons has entered the new year in strong positioning for a playoff spot.

Even though the Lightning sit in the eighth and final playoff position in the East, they rank 10th based on points percentage because they have played more games than many of their conference competition.

The Lightning are 7-5-3 against the Eastern Conference, a record that needs to improve down the stretch as head-to-head games against conference teams become more important. They end this month with a huge three-game homestand that begins Wednesday against the Panthers, followed by a back-to-back set Saturday and Sunday against the Canadiens and the Rangers.

A win over Florida Wednesday and a Toronto loss to Ottawa would springboard the Lightning into second place in the Atlantic. That's how close the standings are, so the opportunity is there.

### Must become a better road team

It's a problem that's dated to last season, with the Lightning 7-10-2 away from Amalie Arena. Their struggles are rooted in an inability to keep the puck out of their own net, as they've allowed 76 goals on the road (4.0 a game), second-most in the league only behind San Jose (78).

In some of their road losses, early deficits snowballed on them quickly, forcing them to chase the game and many times leave defensive holes that let the opponent keep momentum.

"More consistency and probably have a little bit more attack to our game," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said when asked what he'd like to see more of on the road. "For some reason ... our offense has kind of stalled a bit on the road, and we're falling behind. That's the big one in that you don't want to be chasing the game. So it'd be nice to get the lead on the road for a bit."

### Need more consistency from 5-on-5

The Lightning have allowed 82 goals in 5-on-5 play, tied with Chicago for third-most in the league behind Columbus (85) and San Jose (92). They've been able to compensate for that with one of the NHL's top power-play units; the Lightning's 30.4% success rate is second in the league, trailing only

to the Rangers (31.1). But on the nights when the power play is off or they're not drawing penalties, scoring has consistently been a grind.

It's not due to a lack of opportunities. In 5-on-5 play, the Lightning have 821 scoring chances, second-most in the league, but their 70 5-on-5 goals are tied for 10th. Their shot percentage on high-danger scoring chances in 5-on-5 is also relatively pedestrian — a 19.18% mark that ranks 12th — so they also need to convert more of their best opportunities

### No concerns about Andrei Vasilevskiy

Vasilevskiy had a rocky start in his return, but over his last nine games showed the game-changing impact the Lightning need him to make in net. He is 7-2-0 with a .925 save percentage. In four of those nine games, he allowed one goal or fewer.

In games in which he allowed three or four goals, his stat lines didn't reflect how well he played, often because his line of sight was taken away or a bad bounce went off a stick or a skate.

For a player coming off major back surgery who jumped right into game action, you'd actually expect him to take more time to find his footing. But Vasilevskiy has been great. He's bailed his teammates out many times, keeping the Lightning in the games that otherwise could have gone south quickly because of the number of high-danger chances they allowed

### Can compete for a Stanley Cup

Few will say it, but Nikita Kucherov might be the best player in the game right now. He leads the league in scoring with 57 points and is on pace for 136, which would surpass the career-best 128 he had in his Hart Trophy season of 2018-19. A focus on shooting more also could net him his first 50-goal season.

Brayden Point and Steven Stamkos can be streaky, but have taken over games this season like few players can. Nick Paul's increased offensive role has led to a strong rebound season, and Brandon Hagel continues to emerge as one of the league's top, young two-way forwards.

Victor Hedman is back in the Norris Trophy conversation after a year away, and it as important as ever to the jelling of the Lightning's defenseman corps, which has struggled with cohesion adapting to a new defensive zone scheme. There's no player you'd rather trust than Hedman.

The players Lightning general manager Julien BriseBois brought in to make the team more stout defensively — Luke Glendening and Tyler Motte — have brought plenty of grit and likely contributed more offensively than expected early on.

## **Nuts & Bolts: Rivalry renewed with the Cats** **Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)**

Everything you need to know ahead of Tampa Bay's matchup against the Florida Panthers on Wednesday.

**When:** Wednesday, December 27 - 7 p.m. ET

**Where:** AMALIE Arena - Tampa, FL

**TV coverage:** Bally Sports (check local listings)

**Radio coverage:** 102.5 MHz-FM, Lightning Radio 24/7

**Where to stream it:** BallySports.com

### **Lines from Saturday's game (subject to change)**

#### *Forwards*

Nick Paul - Brayden Point - Nikita Kucherov

Brandon Hagel - Anthony Cirelli - Steven Stamkos

Tanner Jeannot - Luke Glendening - Conor Sheary

Mikey Eyssimont - Tyler Motte - Alex Barre-Boulet

#### *Defensemen*

Victor Hedman - Nick Perbix

Haydn Fleury - Erik Cernak

Calvin de Haan - Darren Raddysch

#### *Goaltenders*

Andrei Vasilevskiy

Jonas Johansson

### **Wednesday's Matchup**

The Lightning and Panthers are playing the first of three matchups this season and the first of two meetings at AMALIE Arena... Tampa Bay posted a 2-2-0 record vs. FLA last season, recording one win at home and one win on the road...Nikita Kucherov (1-4—5) and Brayden Point (4-1—5) were tied for the Bolts team lead in points vs. FLA last season with Point leading the way in goals and Kucherov pacing the team in assists...Point is riding an eight-game point streak vs. FLA (8-2—10) and has scored a goal in seven of those eight contests...Point has scored a goal in five consecutive home games vs. FLA (5-1—6)...Kucherov is riding a six-game point streak vs. FLA (4-9—13) and has recorded two or more points in seven of his last 12 contests vs. FLA (9-15—24)...Kucherov has points in 10 of his last 11 home games vs. FLA (7-9—16)...Steven Stamkos has recorded more career goals and points vs. FLA than he has against any other NHL franchise (39-38—77, 64 GP)... Stamkos has found the scoresheet in five of his last six contests vs. FLA (5-4—9)...Conor Sheary has posted 11 points over his last 14 games vs. FLA (3-8—11)...Tyler Motte has found the scoresheet in six of his nine career contests vs. FLA (2-4—6)... Victor Hedman has recorded 10 points over his last 10 games vs. FLA (2-8—10) and has 11 points over the last 11 meetings at AMALIE Arena (4-7—11)...Mikhail Sergachev has pointed in three of his last four contests vs. FLA (1-2—3)...In his 14 career home games vs. FLA, Andrei Vasilevskiy is 10-4-0 with a .928 save percentage, 2.51 goals against average and one assist... Over the last 20 meetings between Tampa Bay and FLA, the winning team has scored four or more goals 16 times...The Bolts are 6-4-0 in their last 10 homes games vs. FLA and 4-6-0 in the last 10 meetings overall...The Lightning are 69-62-13 with 10 ties all-time vs. FLA, including a home record of 41-25-6 with six ties...Stamkos (39-38—77) holds the Tampa Bay franchise records for career goals and points vs. FLA, while Vincent Lecavalier (26-42—68) leads the way in assists.

**Injuries**

Mikhail Sergachev - Lower-body - Day-to-day

**The Road Ahead**

Saturday, December 30 vs. New York Rangers

Sunday, December 31 vs. Montreal Canadiens

Tuesday, December 2 at Winnipeg Jets