



**AMALIE Arena Media Clips**  
**Tuesday, February 6, 2024**

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## **Lightning getting defense help coming out of NHL All-Star break** **Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

BRANDON — When the Lightning resume play Wednesday in New York, they are expected to have two of their top defensemen back from injury.

Following his team's first practice out of the All-Star break, head coach Jon Cooper said Monday he expects both Mikhail Sergachev and Erik Cernak to play against the Rangers at Madison Square Garden.

Sergachev hasn't played since taking a puck off the back of his left skate on Dec. 19, missing the past 17 games. Cernak has missed the last seven, his most recent action Jan. 11 against the Devils.

Sergachev, Cernak and Haydn Fleury, who missed the past 12 games after initially stepping in for Sergachev, were full participants at Monday's practice. Sergachev reclaimed his role on the team's second power-play unit, and he and Cernak play important minutes on the penalty kill.

Their absences forced the Lightning to tap into their defense depth. Rookies Emil Lilleberg and Max Crozier, neither of whom were with the organization this time last season, made their NHL debuts — and immediate impressions.

"It shows they're ready to play in this league, and it goes to show we have really good depth in our organization and in our pipeline," defenseman Victor Hedman said. "I think those guys have done a tremendous job of stepping in in their absence, and we wouldn't be in this situation without those guys' contributions.

"We're obviously very excited to get guys back, but we know if someone goes down we have a lot of good players that are ready to step in and contribute right away."

Defenseman Erik Cernak is ready to return to the Lightning lineup after missing the past seven games with an injury.

Crozier was optioned back to AHL Syracuse during the break, but the 23-year-old Lilleberg remained on the roster. If Monday's practice pairings were any indication, he might have solidified a spot in the lineup. Lilleberg skated in the third pairing alongside Nick Perbix, with Calvin de Haan and Fleury forming a projected fourth pairing.

Sergachev, Cernak and Fleury returning would give the Lightning eight healthy defensemen, so they'd likely have to trim that total by one.

"There's probably going to be some tough decisions to be made," captain Steven Stamkos said. "It's probably a good thing, but guys have played their way into the mix and we've needed that. They've been a huge part, but you're never going to replace guys like Cerny and Sergy on the back end with the amount of minutes, the situational awareness they have, the experience."

Forwards Tanner Jeannot and Austin Watson, who were on injured reserve before the break, also practiced Monday. Cooper said he hopes Jeannot, who has missed the last nine games, can return during the four-game road trip that ends Feb. 13 in Boston, though he won't be available to start it.

To accommodate, the Lightning recalled forward Mitchell Chaffee from Syracuse. Chaffee played the last two games before the break after Watson was injured.

## **Teammates don't dog Nikita Kucherov's All-Star skills performance** **Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

BRANDON — Lightning standout right wing Nikita Kucherov told teammate Mikhail Sergachev that those cries Kucherov was hearing from the Scotiabank Arena crowd in Toronto during last week's All-Star Game skills competition weren't actually boos.

"Kuch said that they were yelling 'Kuch,' not 'Boo,'" said Sergachev, tongue firmly in cheek, following Monday's practice at the TGH IcePlex, the team's first workout since returning from the All-Star break.

During the skills competition Friday, Kucherov refused to race the clock after early muffs in the passing and stick-handling events that took him out of the running and drew a chorus of boos from the Toronto crowd. And it added another chapter to his enigmatic persona.

Inside the Tampa Bay locker room, Kucherov's teammates know his value. He was the league's leading scorer at the break and is a major reason why the Lightning are back in the thick of the playoff race, even if his season has been largely ignored in Hart Memorial Trophy frontrunner conversations.

"Saw some of it," Lightning captain Steven Stamkos said of the skills event. "It felt like everyone was talking about Kuch, but we don't care. We know what we have in Kuch and what he's done, what he's capable of when the game's on the line. He's proved it this year. So, if anything, maybe it's an extra motivation for him. Who knows? But as long as he keeps playing the way he has, we're going to be happy."

As he typically does, Kucherov certainly did things his way in the skills competition, even playing to the crowd throughout the boos. But not everyone found Kucherov's showing funny.

"I'm not sensing a lot of intensity here," ESPN play-by-play man John Buccigross commented during the passing competition. "This is a bad look, quite frankly." Reaction on social media lambasted Kucherov, with some suggesting the league should suspend him.

But the skills competition — especially the new format that debuted — is catered to league darlings like the Oilers' Connor McDavid and Avalanche's Nathan MacKinnon, players whose jaw-dropping speed and stick handling put the NHL on top-10 highlight lists. And sure enough, at the end of the day, it was McDavid who was posing for photos, smiling with a \$1 million check for winning the event.

But anyone who watches the Lightning closely knows Kucherov doesn't race a stopwatch. He's not trying to be the fastest skater or the fanciest stick handler. Instead, he's taking 300 rims a day to get a feel for the puck on his stick, so he can anticipate how to handle it in a game situation.

Kucherov is at his best when he's slowing things down, dissecting the ice with his vision and making plays look easy — whether it's setting up a teammate or creating a scoring chance for himself — because he's thinking a step ahead of his competition.

"Some people just don't understand what happened and they're barking at him and being mad but when you're going in that skills competition and you lose the puck in the first three seconds, you have no chance," Sergachev said. "And then I didn't see a reason for him to go and try to beat McDavid because those drills are (made) for McDavid because he's doing them in the summer. Kuch is never doing them in the summer."

"So he did it at his speed, and most of the time, he plays that speed, too. So I'm not mad and it was actually really entertaining and people talk about it, so it's good for everybody, I guess."

Boo birds are nothing new for the Lightning.

At last season's All-Star Game in Sunrise, home of the cross-state rival Panthers, both Kucherov and Lightning goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy were booed by the South Florida crowd. Afterward, Vasilevskiy embraced the reception, saying he saw it as a compliment that he was doing something right, and he wished every building was like that.

## Tampa Bay Lightning return from All Star break: Everything You Need To Know

### Erik Erlendsson (Lightning Insider)

**BRANDON** – The Tampa Bay Lightning returned to the ice on Monday for the first time since January 27. And, perhaps for the first time since the end of training camp in October, the ice was full of players.

On the ice at TGH IcePlex, the Lightning had eight defensemen, 14 forwards and two goaltenders. That includes all five players who were injured and out of the lineup just over a week ago when the Tampa Bay Lightning defeated the New Jersey Devils.

That list consisted of: Mikhail Sergachev, Erik Cernak, Haydn Fleury, Tanner Jeannot and Austin Watson. Additionally, forward Mitchell Chaffee was recalled from Syracuse after being reassigned during the break (the Crunch are off until Friday).

The first practice was at a good pace and with good energy, considering the amount of time away.

“When you get a break like that, and especially to see a lot of the injured guys on the ice and looking like they’re ready to go, it’s just kind rejuvenating,” Lightning head coach Jon Cooper said. “There’s 32 games left. We put ourselves in the position that we’ve wanted to be all year long. Now the big message was making sure that we don’t find ourselves on the outside looking in. So there’s a lot of good energy out there.”

Cooper said there is a good feeling that of all the players still out with injury will be back sooner rather than later. Most notably among that group is Sergachev, who has been out since taking a puck off his foot in a game on December 19 against St. Louis. After initially thinking the injury would be more short term, it extended to beyond a month.

“At first I thought it was kind of good for me to take a break, mentally,” Sergachev said. “But then I started getting mad because at some point it wasn’t getting better, kind of just got stale. And then took a brake from skating and that kind of help. I started getting better and feeling good. But the first half of the of this break was tough.”

Based on practice on Monday, Erik Cernak will also be ready to return when the Lightning play at Madison Square Garden on Wednesday as he was paired with Sergachev during drills. Haydn Fleury, who has been out January 2. Jeannot, who has missed eight games, and Watson, who has missed the past two games, are a bit further off, though Cooper added he hopes that Jeannot will be able to return by the end of the four-game road trip.

But Chaffee’s presence back with the team suggests that neither of the forwards will be ready for Wednesday.

In order to activate Sergachev off long term injured reserve, however, they do need to make at least one roster move. As of Monday, Jeannot and Watson were still on injured reserve, though Fleury was moved off LTI prior to the All Star game.

The good news in all of this is that, with three defensemen sidelined for the better part of at least the past month, the void was not felt. Not that having Sergachev and Cernak out for an extended period of time is anything the Lightning would want to deal with, but not noticing their absence is a silver lining.

That’s because the play of Emil Lilleberg, Declan Carlile, Jack Thompson and Max Crozier at various points was well above expected. That’s particularly true of Lilleberg, who was the only player not sent

down to Syracuse over the bye week. The 22-year-old has been rock solid in his 10 games to date while averaging just under 16 minutes of ice time per game.

Based on practice pairings Monday, Lilleberg appears as if he will be in the lineup on Wednesday as he was paired with Nick Perbix.

“We’ve had some young guys come in and play really well,” captain Steven Stamkos said. “You look a couple months ago and we had some injuries you didn’t know what the D corps was going to look like. Now there’s probably going to be some tough decisions to be made. It’s probably a good thing but guys have played their way in into the mix. And we’ve needed that, they’ve been a huge part. But you’re never going to replace guys like Cherny and Sergey on the back end with the amount of minutes and situational awareness, they have the experience. So we’ll get those guys back, hopefully get up to full speed pretty quick. We’re going to have to rely on on them for sure.”

With the idea that a roster move will need to be made ahead of Wednesday’s game, it’s a good idea to keep an on the waiver wire as the only players who do not require waivers to be reassigned to Syracuse are Lilleberg and Chaffee. Among the candidates to keep an eye on are Alex Barre-Boulet and Fleury.

Barre-Boulet has seen his most extensive amount of time up with the Lightning this season and has reached career highs in six goals and nine points in 32 games. But he has been in the lineup just once in the past eight games and twice in the past 11 games. With Chaffee up, Walteri Merela still in the plans though he was sent to Syracuse last week and the play of Gage Goncalves in his two game appearance, Barre-Boulet appears to have been passed by on the depth chart and Barre-Boulet is in the last year of his contract.

Fleury played well after Sergachev was injured but appeared in just five of the opening 32 games.

The waiver wire hits at 2 p.m. on Tuesday and players will clear or be claimed by another team by Wednesday at 2 p.m. Sergachev would need to be activated off LTI before the game against New York, so a roster move would need to be made by that time.

Here’s how the lines looked at practice:

**Paul-Point-Kucherov**

**Hagel-Cirelli-Stamkos**

**Eyssimont-Motte-Sheary**

**ABB (Jeannot)-Glendening-Chaffee (Watson)**

The defensive pairings were:

**Hedman-Raddysch**

**Sergachev-Cernak**

**Lilleberg-Perbix**

**de Haan-Fleury**

And, of course, the goaltenders:

Vasilevskiy

Johansson