



AMALIE Arena Media Clips
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Lightning at crossroads: 'They don't feel like they're done,' but what comes next? **Joe Smith (The Athletic)**

TAMPA, Fla. — The other day, Blake Coleman was scrolling on his phone and found a photo he could barely believe.

It was the team photo of the Tampa Bay Lightning from the 2020 Stanley Cup championship. Players were huddled around hockey's holy grail, smiling, but the photo had been edited to put shadows over the players who are no longer with Tampa Bay. Only three years and change later, eight players remain. *Eight*.

"Just crazy," said Coleman, who played for the Lightning from 2019 to 2021 and is now with the Calgary Flames.

"Wild," said Ryan McDonagh (Lightning 2017 to 2022, now Nashville Predators).

"Not many of us left," said Pat Maroon (Lightning 2019 to 2023, now Minnesota Wild).

Had there not been a pandemic-forced flat salary cap — it's gone up just two million over the past five seasons — the Lightning's back-to-back Cups might have just been the start. "We would have won probably three or four in a row with the group we had," Coleman said.

"We would have been the Oilers of the '80s and Islanders of the early '80s," coach Jon Cooper said. "We pretty much were that. To be able to go to three finals in a row, win two, with a previous final (2015) not too far in the rearview mirror, these guys have been the standard of excellence for a decade.

"What's great about this group is they don't feel like they're done."

All great rosters, whether they reach dynasty status or not, eventually crumble, though. The late '70s Montreal Canadiens. The '80s New York Islanders and Edmonton Oilers. The '90s Detroit Red Wings. The Chicago Blackhawks, three-time champions from 2010 to 2015, tanked last season. The Pittsburgh Penguins, three-time champions from 2009 to 2017, are in danger of missing the playoffs for the second straight season.

"The salary cap," as longtime general manager Ken Holland once said, "is undefeated."

This is where Lightning GM Julien BriseBois is hoping to buck the trend. Tampa Bay already defied the odds in going to four Cup Finals and two more Eastern Conference finals (coming one game away from winning both) over a remarkable eight-year span. That included the stretch of a flat salary cap and two expansion drafts.

However, the reality is that the Lightning are as vulnerable this season as they've been in a decade. They're not nearly as deep. Eight different rookies have made their NHL debuts for them this season. The blue line and the room's leadership group haven't been the same since McDonagh was traded in 2022. After ranking fifth in the league during their three Cup Final seasons from 2019-20 to 2021-22 (2.73 goals against per game), they were 14th last season (3.07) and are 23rd in 2023-24 (3.30).

Their offense still ranks 11th in the NHL (3.32 goals per game), but even as other offenses around the league have boomed, there's been a dip in Tampa Bay. They were fourth in the league from 2019-20 to 2021-22 (3.40 goals per game). And they're 24th in five-on-five scoring per 60 minutes (2.39), per Natural Stat Trick, after ranking sixth during the Cup Final seasons (2.70).

For the first time since 2017, when they missed the playoffs by a point, it looks like the Lightning will be in a fight for a spot until the end.

“We used to be up there all the time,” goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy said. “We didn’t really think that we might not make the playoffs or something. It wasn’t an issue for five, six seasons. But now we’re — I wouldn’t say we’re an ‘average’ team, but we’re in a playoff race now.

“We don’t have the same team we had in previous years.”

But that doesn’t mean the Lightning aren’t a threat. They feel like they’ve turned a corner in recent weeks, including winning five of their past six heading into a matchup against the Philadelphia Flyers. Vasilevskiy, who missed the first couple months of the season due to back surgery, is finding his game. Nikita Kucherov is playing the best hockey of his life — even better than his 128-point Hart Trophy season in 2017-18.

“On most nights, he carries us,” Cooper said.

Their blue line, banged up and half-filled with unknowns, has seen rookies Emil Martinsen Lilleberg and Maxwell Crozier provide much-needed depth. In their most recent six-game stretch, the Lightning allowed three or fewer goals in each game.

And the core still has a championship feel: Vasilevskiy, Kucherov, Brayden Point, Steven Stamkos and Victor Hedman.

“I do believe,” said Hall of Fame coach Scotty Bowman, who attends most Lightning home games. “I mean, they’re not the same team. They have to be healthy, though. When you’ve got guys like Kucherov and Point, they’ve got that winning pedigree.”

The Lightning are clearly not as strong as their Cup-winning predecessors. The departures of McDonagh, Ondrej Palat, Alex Killorn, not to mention Coleman, Yanni Gourde, and Barclay Goodrow, have chipped away at their armor. BriseBois has done his best to support the core, adding Brandon Hagel and Nick Paul, with Mikhail Sergachev stepping into McDonagh’s role and Erik Cernak still there.

You can see the issue, though, when you compare the rosters from those championship teams to this one. Here’s a look at how the Lightning compared to average Cup champions (our Cup checklist) in 2019-20, 2020-21 and now:

Some of this is that the team’s stars just haven’t hit the level that’s expected of them in these pivotal roles, with Stamkos standing out. But what’s most glaring is the weakness of supporting staff.

Brian Engblom, the Lightning color analyst, played on some of those dynasty Canadiens teams in the late ’70s as they began to decline in the early ’80s, supplanted by the Islanders and Oilers. He said that transition, coming back to the pack, can be challenging mentally.

“It’s the expectations,” Engblom said. “They’re still trying to figure that out. Who are we? What are our best assets besides the top guys? The D core is still trying to figure that out. The bottom six guys don’t have quite the identity that the team has been used to.

“That’s a big adjustment for the guys who have been there all through the Cups and had the great teams. It’s different. You get on unique teams and it makes you appreciate it, that’s for sure. Even when you’re down, you’re like, ‘We can win this game.’ Now you’re trying to execute the best you can and hope for the best outcome.”

Luckily for the Lightning, it looks like they will have time to figure it out. Every playoff contender this season has flaws, and as of Monday morning, their playoff odds still looked good, per *The Athletic's* Dom Luszczyszyn.

"I'm bullish on (the Lightning)," said former Cup champ Mike Rupp, an NHL Network analyst. "I'd much rather (play against) the Toronto Maple Leafs in the playoffs than Tampa. I'd much rather see the Vancouver Canucks in the playoffs as far as the matchup than Tampa. There's still a fear factor that I think they bring. It's personally hard to count them out."

Rupp pointed out how the Lightning manufactured their momentum-swinging Gourde line after a couple of trade-deadline moves in 2020, and how neither of the Penguins' back-to-back Cup teams in 2016 and 2017 were dominating all season long.

"They were a team that people were like, 'Oh are they gonna make the playoffs?' 'Oh my gosh, is this window closing?'" Rupp said. "And all of a sudden, they fell upon their third line with (Nick) Bonino, (Carl) Hagelin and (Phil) Kessel.

"The Lightning have something that no one else has right now is they've got stars at all positions, and even with (Vasilevskiy) not really looking like the (Vasilevskiy) we're used to, he's still Vasilevskiy. If they just get in and see what happens."

Vasilevskiy is a key wild card. He was the backbone of the Cup Final teams but wasn't nearly as sharp in last season's first-round loss to the Maple Leafs, giving up four or more goals in three straight games. Vasilevskiy missed the first month of this season due to back surgery, a microdiscectomy to address a lumbar disk herniation. Some around the team were surprised he made it back even that fast, his season debut on Nov. 24.

He said getting his nervous system back to the same level takes time, but he might have turned a corner recently, winning four of his past five starts with a .921 save percentage.

"It's been a little challenging after surgery," Vasilevskiy said. "Through the work, through the games, even bad ones, I'm trying to get back into shape, I guess. And just get back to my level and help our team win.

"Obviously, I have to be better. It starts with me. I have to put my s— together and I have to start stopping the puck."

Vasilevskiy has played in 447 career games, but he jokes his 110 playoff games should count as double. If so, the extra miles are on a lot of legs in Tampa. Stamkos and Hedman are 33, Kucherov 30, Vasilevskiy 29, Point 27. Those are the same players who will have to carry the Lightning if they're to make another run.

It feels like a crossroads. BriseBois says he's not trading the pending unrestricted free agent Stamkos, but there's still uncertainty about whether the longtime face of the franchise is here beyond this season.

Stamkos didn't hide his disappointment at the lack of talks over the summer, making it clear he wants to stay and finish his career in Tampa Bay, where the father of two has put down roots. BriseBois said he still envisions re-signing Stamkos but that it's always about the "collective," needing to know he can build a Cup contender around him.

“As you progress and you have a family and your decisions become a little different, you have to start thinking about your future a little bit more,” Stamkos said. “There’s nothing I can do but go out and try to do my best and try to help the team.”

Stamkos’ longtime best friend, Hedman, could be in that same spot next season. You’d think the Lightning find a way to keep one, if not both. But video tributes have become almost a nightly occurrence at Amalie Arena. “It’s just the tough part of the business,” Hedman said.

Business. McDonagh was told three days after playing with a mangled finger in the Cup Final in 2022 that he needed to be moved (even with a no-trade clause). Getting put on waivers was a possibility. That’s the harsh part of these moves. BriseBois told him he had no choice due to the cap.

Maroon, a huge part of the culture of those Cup teams, was dealt in July. Veterans like Luke Schenn and Zach Bogosian were put on waivers. Same with Tyler Johnson.

BriseBois has said when you win a championship with someone, it bonds you forever. But he’s had to take the emotions out of his decisions to keep the window open.

“You have to do your job and you have to make the decision with equanimity,” BriseBois said. “At the same time, the way you deliver those decisions, you try to do it with as much humanity as possible. ... Sometimes, I do a better job than others.

“At the end of the day, we accomplished a lot in the last decade or so, but it’s about accomplishing more. Every decision is made, whether it’s a trade, player contract or waiver pickup, it’s about accomplishing more.”

Either way, BriseBois doesn’t have the assets to make that big of a splash at this year’s trade deadline. The Lightning don’t have a first-rounder in the next two drafts and have no 2024 second-rounder. Their prospect pool has some bright spots but should be near the bottom of *The Athletic*’s leaguewide rankings when they come out in the spring. Nick Perbix, a sixth-rounder, and Darren Raddysh, an undrafted free agent, have surprisingly stepped into the top four. Crozier has shown some promise, as has Lilleberg, who only brought a couple of changes of clothes after getting called up a few weeks ago but might be staying for a while. Walteri Merela scored his first goal last week, and 2022 first-rounder Isaac Howard did well at the world juniors.

“We still have a really good core here, and we won those championships and those guys, we’re still young,” Stamkos said. “It’s the pieces you try to build around those players, and we’ve been able to do a really good job at finding those guys.

“It’s still tough. You want to try to keep those teams together, but it’s impossible with the cap situation. Guys have to step up. Young guys have to come in and play well. You need those core guys to continue to play at a level to help the team win.”

“It’s on us to steer the ship,” Hedman said.

And on Cooper, the league’s longest-tenured coach. The Lightning have constantly tweaked their systems over the years, including changing their defensive zone approach this season. In years past, part of the job for coaches was managing minutes and injuries to keep everyone fresh for the playoffs. Now they’ll be fighting to the end.

“I mean, we’ve been spoiled,” Cooper said. “It’s a great challenge and one we’re embracing.”

Rupp said he believes the window is open in Pittsburgh, and if that's the case, "I sure as hell believe it's still open in Tampa." What happened to Chicago, Los Angeles and Pittsburgh will eventually be Tampa Bay's fate, though.

"We had to deal with a flat salary cap and two expansion drafts in six years," BriseBois said. "That has redistributed the talent regardless of who wins the Cup. ... Teams that were at one time higher up in the standings have been pulled to the middle, and teams at the bottom are pulled to the middle. A lot of teams are not that different from the other, including the team that will win the Stanley Cup this year.

"That's the reality we had to face. The competitive balance in the league is like it's never been before. I really like the players on my team, and I believe in those players, and I believe we can accomplish great things. Every year, every team gets to write the story of its season, and I think this team has the potential to write a really great ending."

From unknowns to international success stories with the Lightning **Eduardo A. Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

When the Lightning signed Finnish forward Waltteri Merela and Norwegian defenseman Emil Lilleberg to contracts back in June, the moves didn't receive much attention.

On the surface, the two-way signings seemed to be depth moves with the purpose of stocking inventory at AHL Syracuse with an eye that both play could, but not necessarily earn a role, with the NHL team.

Now, with both players regulars in a Lightning lineup decimated by injuries, the acquisitions show the savviness of the organization's international pro scouting department.

"You'd have to say it's kind of helped keep us afloat," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said of the additions. Merela and Lilleberg are two of eight rookies who have made their NHL debuts for the team this season.

The players they're replacing are considered week-to-week. Merela is, in part, filling a forward spot left open by an injury to Tanner Jeannot, and Lilleberg is the Lightning's third left-shot defenseman with Mikhail Sergachev and Haydn Fleury both on long-term injured reserve. They won't return until after the All-Star break (Feb. 1-4) at the earliest.

In setting a roster that has lost many key pieces due to cap constraints in recent offseasons, general manager Julien BriseBois has done a tremendous job of finding replacements with similar skill-sets. Doing so with international professionals is more difficult because of the differences between the European game and the North American one: different rink sizes, pace and physicality of the game and the quality of talent, among them. There's no guarantee players coming from overseas will make the adjustment.

Both Merela and Lilleberg have, and quickly.

"If we go back, less than a year ago, Emil Lilleberg and Waltteri Merela weren't part of our organization," BriseBois said. "And now they're two of our best prospects, two of our best young players."

Merela liked that the Lightning knew how he could fit into their organization. He had won back-to-back championships in Finland's top professional league and had played for Finland in the World Championships. Though Merela improved his game in Tappara's two championship runs, he wasn't the team's leading scorer. But what stood out was the two-way game displayed by a plus-44 his last three seasons in Liiga, including a league-best plus-31 in 2021-22.

The Lightning's Finland scout, Kari Kettunen, initially tracked him and he soon was on the radar of director of player personnel Jamie Pushor. They told Merela what they envisioned his role being, a bottom-six forward who would add speed and strong forechecking to the bottom two lines and play the penalty kill.

"Some of the teams I talked to, they just noticed that I've been doing good," Merela said. "They didn't actually know what they're getting or what they're looking for. They just get a couple of guys from Europe and hope that one of them breaks into the league. It's more hope versus knowing what the guy can do.

"(The Lightning) know what they're doing and what type of guys they're looking for. They don't just go for maybe the best points guys in Europe. They want to know what type of guy you are and what type

of player and what type of skill-set do you have, and that they can adapt here. They knew what they wanted, and they had a really good, really good explanation of those things.”

The path for Lilleberg was slightly different. He’s only the ninth player from Norway to play in the NHL, and the first to make his debut since 2016. At 22, he is three years younger than Merela, so his resume isn’t as deep, but he played well for two seasons in Sweden’s top pro league and had strong international showings representing Norway.

Merela surprisingly made the Lightning roster out of training camp, but after going scoreless in his first 14 games, he was reassigned to Syracuse, where he initially struggled to adapt to the AHL game. Merela has to adjust to playing bigger minutes, and he said that the game is more physical in the AHL, the pace is different because prospects are desperate to make plays, and playing most games on the weekends made the routine different.

Lilleberg stood out in Syracuse with his physicality, and after 31 games, posting one goal and 12 points and a plus-4, he was recalled on Jan. 5. He’s been a regular in the Lightning lineup pretty much ever since. A week after Lilleberg was called up, the Lightning brought up Max Crozier, Lilleberg’s pairing partner in Syracuse, and the two have settled into a rare all-rookie third defensemen pairing.

“We didn’t necessarily expect (Lilleberg) to be here as long as he has been, but he’s been doing well and there’s been no reason to send him back yet,” BriseBois said. “So, he gets to stay in the lineup and help us win games. ...

“In the last few years, we haven’t had a lot of injuries. We haven’t had a lot of opportunities to recall guys. And maybe some of our players were more ready than we thought, but they just weren’t given the opportunity.”

After a slow start, Merela recorded seven points in his first five January games, including four goals, and was recalled from Syracuse a week ago. In his first game back last Thursday, Merela scored his first NHL goal. He’s also been a regular, essentially taking Alex Barre-Boulet’s spot because he fills the grit of a bottom-six role better.

Both still have had growing pains — learning on the fly at the NHL level — but are now important players for the Lightning.

“The whole staff and their management and staff, they try to help you and they push you to be better all the time,” Merela said. “I work with (assistant coach Jeff Halpern) every day after practice here on things that are going to make me a better player. I think a lot of those things that we worked on here and didn’t pay off here yet, but I think they paid off in the AHL. And now I hope they’re going to keep developing and pay off here.”

Nuts & Bolts: Three-game trip wraps up in Philly **Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)**

Everything you need to know ahead of Tampa Bay's matchup against the Philadelphia on Tuesday.

When: Tuesday, January 23 - 7:00 p.m. ET

Where: Wells Fargo Center - Philadelphia, PA

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 Sunday's Game (subject to change)

Steven Stamkos - Brayden Point - Nikita Kucherov

Brandon Hagel - Anthony Cirelli - Nick Paul

Mikey Eyssimont - Tyler Motte - Conor Sheary

Austin Watson - Luke Glendening - Waltteri Merela

Defensemen

Victor Hedman - Darren Raddysh

Calvin de Haan - Nick Perbix

Emile Lilleberg - Max Crozier

Goaltenders

Andrei Vasilevskiy

Jonas Johansson

Tuesday's Matchup

The Lightning and Flyers are playing the first of three matchups this season and the first of two meetings at Wells Fargo Center...The Bolts posted a 2-1-0 record vs. PHI last season, including a 1-0-0 record at Wells Fargo Center and a 1-1-0 record at AMALIE Arena...Nikita Kucherov (2-3—5) led all Tampa Bay skaters in points and assists vs. PHI last season and was tied for the team lead in goals...Steven Stamkos has picked up points in six of his last seven games vs. PHI (4- 7—11) and 12 of the last 14 meetings (9-16—15)...Stamkos has pointed in three consecutive contests at PHI (1-3—4) and has found the scoresheet in eight of the last 10 meetings at PHI (3-7—10)...Kucherov has posted a multi-point effort in eight of his last 11 games vs. PHI (4-17—21) and has points in 10 of his last 13 games vs. PHI (6-17—23)...Brayden Point has found the scoresheet in nine of his last 12 contests vs. PHI (7-5—12)...Victor Hedman has picked up points in eight of his last 11 games vs. PHI (2-13—15)...In 15 career starts vs. PHI, Andrei Vasilevskiy is 12-3-0 with a .930 save percentage, 2.24 goals against average, three shutouts and one assist...The Lightning have scored three or more goals in 12 of the last 14 games vs. PHI (61 total goals)...The Bolts have scored a power-play goal in nine of the last 12 matchups vs. PHI...The Lightning have won seven consecutive contests at PHI...Tampa Bay is 8-2-0 in their last 10 games at PHI and 9-1-0 in the last 10 meetings overall...The Bolts have won 12 of the last 13 matchups vs. PHI and outscored the Flyers 61-32 over the 13 meetings...Tampa Bay is 52-45-3 with eight ties all-time vs. PHI, including a road record of 23-22-1 with seven ties...Martin St. Louis (15-43—58) holds the Lightning franchise records for career points and assists vs. PHI, while Stamkos (27-25—52) leads the way in goals.

Injuries

Erik Cernak - Upper-body - Week-to-Week

Haydn Fleury - Upper-body - Week-to-Week

Mikhail Sergachev - Upper-body - Week-to-Week

Tanner Jeannot - Lower-body - Week-to-Week

The Road Ahead

Thursday, January 25 vs. Arizona Coyotes

Saturday, January 27 vs. New Jersey Devils

Wednesday, February 7 at New York Rangers

The Backcheck: Lightning's win streak ends in Detroit **Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)**

Going into the second half of a back-to-back set on a five-game win streak, the Tampa Bay Lightning fell to the Detroit Red Wings 2-1 Sunday night at Little Caesars Arena.

The Bolts opened the scoring at the 8:45 mark of the first period when Victor Hedman capped off a beautiful give-and-go with Nikita Kucherov and buried his ninth goal of the season to give the Lightning a 1-0 lead.

Taking a drop pass from Brayden Point just inside the Detroit blue line, Kucherov sent a pass to Hedman, who immediately dropped the puck back to the All-Star winger. Skating to the top of the left circle, Kucherov had the attention of everyone on the ice before dishing a pass across the zone to the right faceoff dot, where Hedman was waiting to fire a one-timer past Alex Lyon for the game-opening goal.

Unfortunately for the Lightning, that was the only time the puck would cross the goal line behind Lyon, who went on to finish the night with 28 saves on 29 shots against.

With 1:31 left in the first period, Andrei Vasilevskiy made the initial save on a shot from the slot off the stick of Lucas Raymond, but the puck soared into the air and ended up behind the Tampa Bay goaltender before eventually finding its way into the back of the net.

Tampa Bay was only able to muster 10 shots on goal through the opening 40 minutes and leaned heavily on Vasilevskiy, who was fantastic between the pipes for the Bolts, making multiple 10-bell saves throughout the contest.

It took a breakaway for Detroit to beat Vasilevskiy a second time with Daniel Sprong getting behind the Lightning defensemen and firing home his 12th goal of the year at the 8:58 mark of the first. That would go down as the final goal of the contest.

Despite a less than satisfactory opening 40 minutes, Tampa Bay pieced together a strong third period, outshooting the Red Wings 19-4 during the final frame. But Lyon made some key saves for Detroit and, while the Bolts came inches away from tying the game on multiple occasions, the team just couldn't find a way to will the puck over the line before the final horn sounded.

Vasilevskiy finished the night with 33 saves on 35 shots against in one of his best performances of the season. The Lightning fell to 24-18-5 on the campaign with a road record of 9-13-2 and will wrap up the three-game road trip with a battle against the Philadelphia Flyers Tuesday night at Wells Fargo Center.

Bolts by the Numbers

- Victor Hedman scored his ninth goal and is up to 45 points on the season (9-36—45). Hedman ranks third among all Lightning skaters in points this season, trailing Nikita Kucherov (28-48—76) and Brayden Point (21-27—48). Hedman finished the night with eight shots on goal, tied for the third most in his career.

- Nikita Kucherov recorded the primary assist on Hedman's game-opening goal and his up to 76 points on the year (28-48—76). He's notched 43 points over his last 26 contests vs. Detroit (19-24—43).

- Brayden Point picked up the secondary helper on Hedman's goal and pushed his season point total to 48 (21-27—48).

Bolts Quotes

- Jon Cooper: "You just can't play a one-period game in this league and expect to win. We had a chance and the only reason we had a chance is because our goalie gave us a chance. We get that goal semi-early in the game that was a heck of a play by those guys and as soon as that happened, our game went south and they turned it up a notch."

- Brayden Point: "The shots kind of tell the tale of those two periods. I think it was 30-10 after two. In a game like this with a team we're chasing, it's definitely not good enough. We tried to come out in the third and we played a good third, but too little too late. Vas kept us in it for the most part, but we couldn't get it done in the third."

- Cooper: "If you want to make the playoffs, you can't lay an egg like that against a team you're going neck and neck against. We reeled off five in a row just to pull us back into a race and now we've got a chance to say, 'Hey, we've arrived,' and we failed tonight. As disappointing as it is, we can salvage this trip against a team that we're neck and neck with again. Hopefully we can learn from tonight and take a little momentum from what we did in the third to the next game."

- Victor Hedman: "We just didn't have it in the first two. We came out battling in the third and really pushed and showed what kind of team we are when we do that. It's unfortunate that that we let it slide in the first two and we just weren't able to come back."

- Cooper: "The last few weeks, we've elevated our game. Our attention to detail, our work ethic, all those things have been outstanding. Are you going to play like that every single game? You're not. Any coach will tell you everybody's got their ups and downs. But our downs have happened early in the year and now we need to have a heck of a lot more ups... Surprised? Yes. Disappointed? Yes. But we can't look back now. This game is behind us and now we have to go into another tough building in Philly and play a team that's having a heck of a year."

Krenner's Three Stars

1. Andrei Vasilevskiy
2. Alex Lyon
3. Daniel Sprong

Lightning Look Ahead

- Tuesday, January 23 vs. Philadelphia Flyers, 7 p.m. ET, Wells Fargo Center
- Thursday, January 25 vs. Arizona Coyotes, 7 p.m. ET, AMALIE Arena
- Saturday, January 27 vs. New Jersey Devils, 7 p.m. ET, AMALIE Arena