 

**AMALIE Arena Media Clips
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1. Why keeping Steven Stamkos in a Lightning uniform is no easy task – Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)

**Why keeping Steven Stamkos in a Lightning uniform is no easy task
Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

TAMPA — Lightning captain Steven Stamkos and general manager Julien BriseBois can agree on one thing: Both want Stamkos, the longtime face of the franchise, to remain in Tampa Bay for the remainder of his career.

But keeping Stamkos, who can be an unrestricted free agent after this season, in a Lightning uniform isn’t going to be easy.

BriseBois’ main goal has been to ensure that the Lightning remain a Stanley Cup contender despite the inevitable roster overhaul that happens in the salary-cap era. He has had to watch important players leave via free agency and trade others to remain under the cap, but the Lightning continue to be in the Cup conversation.

Last week, BriseBois didn’t hesitate to tout Stamkos’ value: He’s still an elite player. He has been durable in his early 30s, and he has made an incredible impact on the community. BriseBois would hate to think of Stamkos playing elsewhere, and he knows Lightning fans feel the same way.

But fear of that possibility is creeping in.

Stamkos, in the final season of his eight-year contract with an annual cap hit of $8.5 million, had hoped to have an extension in place before the start of training camp last week. BriseBois said he will wait to see how the season plays out before he can begin the number-crunching necessary to try to fit Stamkos into the future payroll.

If BriseBois is able to re-sign Stamkos, it might be his most impressive work yet.

Here are the main obstacles he faces in keeping Stamkos.

Amount tied up in big contracts

The Lightning already have more than half their payroll locked into five players for 2024-25: goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy ($9.5 million cap hit), forwards Nikita Kucherov ($9.5 million) and Brayden Point ($9.5 million), and defensemen Mikhail Sergachev ($8.5 million) and Victor Hedman ($7.875 million). That’s nearly $45 million.

Another major part of ensuring the Lightning remain competitive has been locking up their young core for the extended future. Eight-year extensions for Sergachev, forward Anthony Cirelli ($6.25 million) and defenseman Erik Cernak ($5.2 million) kick in this season. Forward Brandon Hagel’s eight-year extension ($6.5 million annual hit) begins next season.

That means for 2024-25, the Lightning already have $75.115 million committed to 16 players under NHL contracts, according to salary website CapFriendly.

Salary cap uncertainty

The cap has increased just $2 million since 2019-20, in part because of the memorandum created to extend the collective bargaining agreement through the pandemic years, when teams lost revenue.

Though the Lightning appear to have made their way through the worst of that and the cap is projected to increase by $4 million, to $87.5 million, next season, the uncertainty surrounding that number has to be a major factor behind BriseBois saying he needs to wait until the end of the season to decide on Stamkos.

League revenues that could bump the cap higher for 2024-25 would make it easier to re-sign Stamkos but also give other teams the opportunity to get him in free agency.

Also, another tough decision looms. Hedman can be a free agent after 2024-25.

The cap is expected to jump to a projected to $92 million for 2025-26, but BriseBois already has to be wondering whether he can keep both Stamkos and Hedman..

Stamkos’ status among free agents

Stamkos unquestionably wants to remain in Tampa. He is coming off a two-year stretch in which he has averaged 38 goals and 95 points while missing just two regular-season games. If he continues to show anything close to that kind of production and durability, it won’t matter that he will be 34 in February. He arguably would be the top unrestricted free agent available.

The Maple Leafs’ Auston Matthews could have been a free agent after this season, but he signed a four-year, $53 million extension last month that makes him the NHL’s highest-paid player. The only potential unrestricted free agent who comes close to Stamkos is the Maple Leafs’ William Nylander, who is coming off a 40-goal, 87-point season and will be 28 after this season.

With added cap space next offseason, more teams will have room to spend, seemingly creating more suitors for Stamkos. Any team would covet adding a player who has won two titles and can still put up 80 points a season.

Similar recent attempts have failed

Before Stamkos, Alex Killorn and Ondrej Palat expressed their desire to remain in Tampa Bay as they approached free agency. Like Stamkos, they were homegrown players the organization wanted to retain.

The Lightning made an attempt to keep both — they were made shorter average annual value, longer-term offers — but both had the opportunity to make much more money elsewhere and ultimately pursued those opportunities.

Palat, who left after the 2021-22 season, became a leader on an up-and-coming Devils team. Killorn, who left after last season, will have the same opportunity this season with a young Ducks squad.

The situation is different with Stamkos. He has been the face of the Lightning since he was drafted in 2008. Sentiment will play a large role on both sides. On the other hand, Stamkos has seen, too, that players can find fits — and success — outside Tampa Bay.