 

**AMALIE Arena Media Clips
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**Five things we learned from the Lightning’s preseason opener
Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

The Lightning opened their preseason schedule Tuesday night in Carolina — their first of seven exhibition games and front end of back-to-back road contests.

There’s only so much you can glean from the first preseason game. With the rosters a mix of regulars and prospects, they aren’t very representative of what we’ll see when the regular season arrives.

“There’s so much more time in the preseason,” Lightning coach Jon Cooper told reporters in Carolina. “It’s great for these guys to get their feet wet. You want to come away with a ‘W,’ there’s no doubt about that, but you keep up that effort that a lot of guys gave tonight and we’ll be OK.”

There are still definitely several things of which to take note as the preseason continues. Here’s what stood out from the Lightning’s 5-2 loss to the Hurricanes.

Alex Barre-Boulet made a strong first impression

Barre-Boulet is in his sixth Lightning training camp, and at age f 26, he’s still trying to find a way to stick. It looks like he might have more of an opportunity than previous seasons, because he’s been lined up on the third forward line and the second power-play unit for most of camp. He didn’t wait to make an impression, scoring the Lightning’s first goal of the preseason on the power play. Barre-Boulet showed confidence with the puck, skating along the top of the right circle, then taking space the Carolina defense gave him into the high slot and beating Hurricanes goaltender Fredrick Andersen with a quick wrister into the back of the net. Ultimately, the way Barre-Boulet plays away from the puck is what will earn him a roster spot, but Tuesday’s showing was a strong start. “It’s always good to get that one out of the way,” Barre-Boulet said. “...But I’ve got to focus on the 5-on-5 first. But it was good for my confidence.”

We saw a glimpse of a potential new lockdown line

One line we’ve seen frequently during training camp is the second line of Brandon Hagel, Anthony Cirelli and Conor Sheary, and we saw the unit together on Tuesday night. They’re an intriguing line and one we’ve sort of seen in the past with Sheary essentially replacing the departed Alex Killorn. Their style of play seems to mesh well; they are three relentless puck hounds who are aggressive on the forecheck and determined to establish offensive zone time. That’s going to be important for the Lightning moving forward. On Tuesday night, the Hagel-Cirelli-Sheary line dominated zone time, creating 15 shot attempts, and allowing just one shot on goal in 10:15 of ice time. Sheary scored the Lightning’s only even-strength goal in front on a deflection. “I think it took us a while to create that chemistry and I think that’s normal, but as the game went along we started to find each other’s instincts and started to see where each other were going to be,” Sheary said. “I think they like to hound pucks in the offensive zone and play off the rush and those are two things I think I do pretty well.”

The Lightning’s top power-play unit returns mostly intact, having only to replace Killorn down low, but there are open spots on the second unit. On Tuesday night, candidates for that unit made their first audition. Besides Barre-Boulet, Sheary saw time on the first unit along with Hagel and Nick Paul. Tanner Jeannot saw minutes in the bumper position on the second power-play unit. And Cirelli, who is the leading candidate to replace Killorn down low on the first power-play unit, was getting adjusted to that spot on the second unit Tuesday night. The power-play unit scored on Barre-Boulet’s goal, but went scoreless on back-to-back man advantages. Jeannot had a great chance in front, but couldn’t convert. Still, it wasn’t bad for an opening act and the units will become more clear as the preseason progresses.

Perhaps the most disappointing part of Tuesday’s game occurred when the Lightning allowed a game-tying goal on the shift after Barre-Boulet’s opening score. It’s something that happened to the Lightning too often last season, as Gage Goncalves was battling for possession in the corner and the puck kicked out to the front of the net, gift-wrapped to Jayden Halbgewachs for a goal just eight seconds after Barre-Boulet’s goal. The Lightning also could have protected the front of the net better, as Carolina scored on two shots from the point on goals by defensemen Caleb Jones and Tony D’Angelo, and another Hurricanes goal came on a bad line change, so there will be plenty of coaching moments when the coaches go over the game film. “Some unfortunate plays,” Cooper said. “Our guys, they tried to do the things we asked of them. As that game went on, I thought the ice was tilting in our favor. We had chances, we just lacked a little finish tonight.”

The young players need to shoot more

There should be plenty of minutes for Lightning prospects looking to make an impression on the coaching staff, but those opportunities dry up quickly. After the Lightning play their first four preseason games in a five-day stretch, more minutes will go to regulars as they focus on getting ready for the regular season. On Tuesday, you would have liked to have seen more aggressiveness from the team’s prospects shooting the puck. Outside of Barre-Boulet and Gabriel Fortier, who had three shots and five attempts, the Lightning prospects looking to separate themselves were largely hesitant trying to create in the offensive zone.

**Andrei Vasilevskiy returns to Lightning practice
Eduardo Encina (Tampa Bay Times)**

BRANDON — Lightning goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy, who had been largely absent through the first four days of training camp, returned Tuesday following the team’s off day.

Asked about Vasilevskiy’s absence Sunday, coach Jon Cooper said the team’s star goaltender was “wrestling with some things physically,” but added that he wasn’t concerned Vasilevskiy would miss an extended amount of time.

Sure enough, Vasilevskiy took the ice before Tuesday’s non-game group practice and appeared to be testing an injury during his position group work with goaltender coach Frantz Jean. He met with team athletic trainers afterward, then participated in the ensuing practice.

Vasilevskiy, who was not made available to media, switched out with backup goaltender Jonas Johansson during the drills portion of the practice, then opened the 20-minute game scrimmage that followed in net.

“He’s on his own program, so I can’t really talk about that,” Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev said. “But you know, obviously it’s nice to see him. He was making some saves and working through it, so hopefully he’s going to get better and get back on the ice soon because he’s the best player on our team.”

The Lightning open their seven-game preseason schedule with road games on back-to-back nights tonight in Carolina and Wednesday in Nashville. Vasilevskiy will play no earlier than the fifth preseason game Oct. 3 against the Panthers in Orlando, Cooper said Sunday.

After last season’s first-round playoff loss to Toronto, Vasilevskiy said he didn’t feel in sync with his body after the 30- to 35-game mark in the regular season, when he said small injuries started to creep in. Last week, Vasilevskiy said he felt mentally and physically refreshed from a longer offseason, and he planned to focus more on his recovery this season.

**Lightning take calculated risk with backup goaltender Jonas Johansson
Kristie Ackert (Tampa Bay Times)**

BRANDON — Most of the hockey world was a little surprised when the Lightning opted to sign Jonas Johansson this offseason. The 28-year-old goaltender was one of them, he admits. It was unexpected, but exciting, when his agent called him with the news Tampa Bay wanted him to back up Andrei Vasilevskiy.

“It’s a great organization. I was really excited when I heard there was some interest in having me coming here,” Johansson said last week after practice at TGH Ice Plex. “So, I was just super excited from the start and I’m super glad, super happy to be here and I’m going to make the most out of this opportunity.”

Coming off his best season since being drafted out of his native Sweden in 2014, Johansson has the talent but doesn’t fit the mold of recent Lightning backups. Last season, it was 38-year-old Brian Elliott, who had 14 years in the league before coming to Tampa Bay in 2021-22, playing behind Vasilevskiy.

Goaltending coach Frantz Jean admitted that with the Lightning payroll so close to the salary cap, the team is taking a “calculated risk” going with the younger, unproven backup.

But he said it is also the time in Vasilevskiy’s career to make that transition.

“The last probably three backups, we went with older guys. There was a reason for it. It was by design, because Vasy was so young and was coming into the league and we wanted him to have as much support as possible and a veteran voice beside him in the dressing room,” Jean said. “Now, you fast forward eight, nine, 10 years later, and Vasy is much older and didn’t need to have a veteran guy and that veteran voice.

“So, this is where the younger kids come in, and a guy like Jonas Johansson comes in and brings a different energy,” Jean continued. “He brings the up-and-comer energy and the kid that wants to learn and the kid that’s driven, that wants to become, down the road, a Vasy. So, it brings a little bit that new dynamic into the dressing room that we didn’t have in a long time, and that’s healthy.”

Johansson, signed to a two-year $1.5 million contract, has just 35 NHL games on his resume, going 11-13-4 with a 3.32 goals-against average and .887 save percentage.

The 61st overall pick of the Buffalo Sabres in the 2014 draft, he also played with the Panthers and Avalanche.

Johansson had his best season last year with Colorado, going 2-0-0 in three games, including two starts, stopping 68 of 73 shots. His .932 save percentage and 2.1 GAA were the best of his four seasons in the NHL. In 26 games in the AHL in 2022-23, he had a 2.33 GAA and 9.20 save percentage.

“Last year was really good,” Johansson said. “I was in a place where I liked where we lived. My family and I liked it off the ice, too. And I was healthy all year. We had a good team, a good group of guys. So, just a good year overall for me.”

The Lightning also see potential to build off that year. They like Johansson’s size and mobility in the crease.

“He’s got really good feet, and that’s one thing that I always look at at a goaltender and as an organization,” Jean said. “There’s not that many 6-5 guys around playing in the minors. So, that was attractive to us. And he had a really good year in the minors last year, and when he played NHL games and played on a good team, he played well in the games he played.

“For us, I mean, with the cap situation we’re in, like, we’ve got to take some ... risks, and bringing in an unproven young goaltender is one. But in the type of prospect that he is, it is a calculated risk for us.”

Despite the trend across the NHL to cut back on goaltenders’ work loads, Vasilevskiy and the Lightning are not looking to cut down on the number of games he plays. Still, he admitted in May he was physically worn down at the end of last season.

Johansson knows his job is to make the Lightning comfortable with him in the crease when Vasilevskiy isn’t there and prove he belongs.

“I think it’s just about having good habits and being ready,” Johansson said. “... For me, like last year, I never know what’s going to happen or when the opportunities kind of show up. So, you’ve just got to be ready for it, and it’s going to be the same this year.”

**Lightning drop preseason opener to Carolina
Chris Krenn (TampaBayLightning.com)**

In the first preseason game of the 2023-24 season, the Tampa Bay Lightning opened the scoring with a goal from Alex Barre-Boulet, but eventually fell 5-2 to the Carolina Hurricanes at PNC Arena in Raleigh.

The Lightning faced a test early in the opening period when Gage Goncalves was sent off for holding just 2:44 into the game, but in the first special teams opportunity of the night, Tampa Bay came out on top and successfully killed off the penalty to get back to even strength.

Then, with 5:11 left in the first, it was the Bolts turn on the power play when Brendan Perlini was whistled for slashing Tanner Jeannot in the Carolina zone. With a first unit of Darren Raddysh, Brandon Hagel, Nick Paul, Conor Sheary and Barre-Boulet, the Lightning opened the scoring 50 seconds into the man advantage with Barre-Boulet netting the first goal of Tampa Bay’s preseason.

Taking a pass from Raddysh near the top of the right circle, Barre-Boulet calmly skated into the high slot and wired a perfect shot over the blocker of Frederik Andersen and into the top left corner to make it a 1-0 game with 4:21 left in the first. Sheary picked up the secondary assist on the goal.

“It’s always good to get that one out of the way,” said Barre-Boulet. “At the same time, it’s preseason. It was a power-play goal. I’ve got to focus on the five-on-five play first, but it’s good for confidence.

“The first game is always the hardest. You have to remember all the systems that you practice during camp. You play with a lot of new guys. But I think we did good.

“Obviously I played with Jeannot and Paul the first two scrimmages, so I think our chemistry was pretty good tonight.”

The Bolts quickly saw the 1-0 lead vanish when Japlen Halbgewachs jumped on a loose puck in front and jammed it past Hugo Alnefelt to tie the game just eight seconds after the Barre-Boulet goal.

Two minutes and 13 seconds later, the Lightning quickly found themselves trailing when Caleb Jones floated a shot from the point that found its way through traffic and into the back of the net to give the Hurricanes a 2-1 lead with two minutes left in the first.

After failing to score on two chances with the man advantage in the second period, the Bolts surrendered a third goal to Carolina when Tony DeAngelo hammered a slap shot past Alnefelt to make it 3-1 with 3:13 left in the middle frame.

Going into the third period in a two-goal hole, Tampa Bay got caught in a line change early and allowed Noel Gunler to get in all alone before beating Alnefelt to the glove side to make it 4-1 with 15:48 left in regulation.

But just as Carolina responded quickly when Tampa Bay opened the scoring in the first, the Bolts answered with a goal from Sheary just 1:16 after Gunler made it 4-1.

Working to maintain possession in the offensive zone, Hagel sent a pass to the point for Raddysh, who quickly fired a wrist shot towards the net where Sheary was waiting to redirect the puck past Pyotr Kochetkov and make it 4-2 with 14:32 remaining.

“It’s always good to see a puck go in,” Sheary said. “Coming to a new team, you want to get that first one out of the way. I know it’s preseason, but it definitely feels good to score. I didn’t know I had an assist, so that’s nice.”

Skating on a line with Hagel and Anthony Cirelli, Sheary’s style of play meshed well with the two forwards that have a knack for hounding pucks and forcing turnovers in the offensive zone.

“I think it’s tough when you’re playing your first game and Shears did a heck of a job,” said Lightning head coach Jon Cooper. “He’s got a motor himself. Your first one’s always tough because in practice, you’re playing your own teammates. It’s much different than when you’re playing against opponents.

“As this game went on, I thought everybody got better. As for Shears in his first game with us, he was great. There’s so much more time left in this preseason. It’s great for these guys to get their feet wet. You want to come away with a W. There’s no question about that. But if you keep up that effort a lot of the guys gave tonight, we’ll be OK.”

While Tampa Bay continued to push in an effort to tie the game, the deficit was too much to overcome after Kieffer Bellows jumped on a rebound in front of the Lightning net and jammed it past Alnefelt to make it 5-2 with 12:20 remaining.

That score would hold until the sound of the final buzzer, despite the Bolts finishing the game with a 28-24 shot advantage over the Canes.

“It’s going to say 5-2 against us, but I didn’t think we deserved that result,” Cooper said. “Just some unfortunate plays. A tough change and one ends up in the back of our net. None of the guys were meaning for that to happen.

“Another tough bounce and the puck’s in the net. But other than that, our guys tried. They tried to do the things we asked of them. As that game went on, I thought the ice was tilting in our favor.

“We had chances. We just lacked a little finish tonight. But I liked the way the guys responded. Every time we kind of got knocked down, they came right back. That’s a good sign for a lot of those guys in that room.”

The Lightning will travel back to Tampa Tuesday night before jumping right back on a plane Wednesday afternoon for a flight to Nashville and an 8 p.m. ET matchup against the Predators at Bridgestone Arena. Fans can stream the contest live at [NHL.com/Lightning](https://www.nhl.com/lightning/).