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600467 NBCSports.com / Staal practices with Rangers, participates in drills
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600469 NBCSports.com / L.A. captain on Murray firing: “We weren’t a hungry team”
600470 NBCSports.com / PHT's Three Duds of the Week: Crawford, Fowler and Brown
600471 NBCSports.com / Lightning's Connolly injures Panthers prospect with controversial hit
600472 NBCSports.com / Up yours, Tampa: Winnipeg claims Miettinen
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600479 CNN/Sports Illustrated / Snub of Jimmy Howard is baffling
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600481 Sportsnet.ca / Concussions, Sutter & CFL
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Boudreaux has done it all, seen it all

By MARK WHICKER

As the Ducks' coach, Bruce Boudreau is 1-3-1. That is not good. But there are worse things. Like 0-0-0.

Boudreau endured a three-day eternity between his firing in Washington and his hiring in Anaheim.

Since the beginning of the 1996-97 season, Boudreau had been a head coach for every game, somewhere, leaving a trail of drills, greaseboards, expletives and attaboys from Biloxi, Miss., to Manchester, N.H.

Before that he coached the Fort Wayne Komets, and met his wife, Crystal, who has been on the ride ever since.

"She's a true hockey wife," Boudreau said the other day. "My first wife was great, too. But she wanted to stay in the same spot. So I tried to do something else. Her sister was a teacher and made up a resume for me. I didn't even know what that was.

"I was one of three finalists for a personnel director's job, and I found out I'd have to be negotiating with city unions and I said, 'Whoa, I can't do that. I'm a hockey guy.' She wanted to start a new life and that was that."

Fort Wayne's rival was Kalamazoo, coached by Ken Hitchcock, who is now coaching St. Louis and won the Stanley Cup with Dallas in 1999.

"He had a real good player named Rob Brown so one night he used only two lines the whole game," Boudreau said. "I'm stubborn, too, so I played two lines right along with him."

"I actually got my third line out there once," Hitchcock said.

"But did he (Hitchcock) remember who won?" Boudreau retorted. "I do. It was 2-1 for Fort Wayne. Ian Boyce scored with two minutes to go."

Only 17 seasons ago.

Boudreau coached in the Colonial, International, East Coast and American Hockey leagues. He was the traveling secretary and sometimes the promotions man.

As a player in Cincinnati he found himself chasing penguins down the ice. Another night, the club gave out 10,000 keys, one of which would turn the engine to a new car.

"The dealership loved it, because all those people went down there," Boudreau said. "And we had a crowd of 15,000."

In Biloxi he knew the fans weren't coming to see faceoff techniques. "I had to figure out what state Mississippi hated the most," Boudreau said.

There were many options, but he announced his Sea Wolves "would beat the hell out of Louisiana," which meant Lafayette and Baton Rouge.

He meant that literally. One player, Kevin Evans, logged 505 penalty minutes one season. But his best fighter was Roger Maxwell, a 6-foot-3, 240-pounder.

"He went up to the American League, but when the next season started we offered to pay his way down to Biloxi for one last game," Boudreau said. "And we drew 8,000 or an exhibition."

He coached minor league teams to four finals and two championships. His Manchester Monarchs, a Kings' affiliate, were ambushed by Hamilton, a Canadiens' affiliate. "They brought up a goalie named Carey Price from junior," Boudreau said.

Which reminded him of a series he lost as a player, because the Montreal farm club brought up Patrick Roy.

His life is one small world on ice.

He played with Dallas in the late '70s and two of his teammates also became Ducks coaches: Ron Wilson and Randy Carlyle. A current NHL general manager, Jim Rutherford, was a goalie.

If he did not become an NHL coach by age 53, he would no longer worry about it. It happened when he was 52, and Washington called him up from Hershey on Thanksgiving Day.

On the two-hour drive to D.C., Boudreau rehearsed his first speech. Then, when the Capitals gathered around him, he threw it out. "I just said what I'd normally say, and let's go play," he said.

The Capitals went 37-17-7 and were the No. 3 seed in the East, and Boudreau was voted the league's top coach. He was 100 games over .500 for four years.

A mediocre start this year sent him packing, and General Manager George McPhee explained that Boudreau had "emptied the bucket."

This is the "different voice" theory. Boudreau points to Nashville's Barry Trotz and Buffalo's Lindy Ruff, the two longest-serving active coaches.

"What, do they get their vocal cords changed?" he asked.

"I think what you see in Bruce's teams is a great deal of joy," Hitchcock said. "There is an edge there but it's a different edge. They play with a fluidness about them. They have fun at the rink."

"If I have a strength, and that's for others to decide, it's that anything one of my players has been through, I've been through," Boudreau said. "I've been called up, sent down. I can identify with all that."

Now he tries to identify the Ducks. It might be more complicated than chasing penguins.

Orange County Register: LOADED: 12.14.2011
First look at new Anaheim Ducks restaurant

by Nancy Luna

The Anaheim Ducks Breakaway Bar & Grill officially opens Wednesday at John Wayne Airport’s new Terminal C wing.

During a Tuesday preview event, the media got a sneak peek of the full-service restaurant which pays homage to Orange County’s hockey team.

Here’s the lowdown:

The restaurant is located between gates 18 and 19. Part of the restaurant’s dining room faces the tarmac, giving diners a full view of the runway. If you enjoy watching planes land and takeoff and baggage being loaded, this is a good hangout.

If you sit at the bar, you won’t see any runway action as there’s a wall blocking the view of the air strip.

Three food items were circulated for sampling: Shrimp Tacos: served with caramelized onions, queso fresco and avocado crema; Stacked Rib Eye Sandwich: served on a toasted brioche bun and topped with Tillamook cheddar, crispy onions, bacon, barbecue sauce, and mayonnaise; Charcuterie: appetizer of serrano ham, piccante salami, pickled onion and fig jam on a toasted raisin bread. My favorite item was the rib eye sandwich. The steak was cooked to perfection, and the combination of barbecue sauce and mayonnaise gave the sandwich a rich and sinful fatty flavor. (I’m not going to cover the drinks today because Booze on a Budget blogger Paul Hodgins joined me for the preview, and plans to give his full report later this week.) *****to see food and restaurant pics

Overall menu prices: $5.49 to $15.99 for appetizers, soups and salads; $6.19 to $15.89 for hot dogs, sandwiches and burgers; $11.99 to $13.99 for flatbreads.

Of all the food concessions now open at the airport, the Ducks restaurant appears to offer the most variety of breakfast items. On the menu: breakfast burrito, yogurt parfait, egg and cheese panini, chilaquiles, eggs/bacon/potatoes/toast, blueberry pancakes and steel cut oatmeal.

Prices: $6.19 to $11.99

While waiting for your flight, you won’t miss any sporting events at this bar. The tiny 2,400-square-foot restaurant and bar features eight flat screen TVs.

Orange County Register: LOADED: 12.14.2011
New Duck Pelley 'really excited'

By ERIC STEPHENS

ANAHEIM – The acquisition of workmanlike center Rod Pelley from the New Jersey Devils on Monday got one of the Ducks particularly excited.

Defensman Nate Guenin played with Pelley for four years at Ohio State and smiled about the good times they had in Columbus before displaying his excitement over becoming teammates again with a longtime friend.

"I was ecstatic," Guenin said. "One, he's one of my best buddies so that's awesome. Two, I know the type of player he is and the mentality and the positive energy that he'll bring to the room. We're struggling here and he's brings some new life.

"I'm sure it'll take no time at all for everybody to see what type of guy he is and the character he has."

Pelley, 27, has played 211 NHL games, all of them with the Devils after being signed as an undrafted free agent. The native of Kitimat, B.C., played in 74 games last season and 63 in 2009-10 but saw action in only seven contests this season under new New Jersey coach Peter DeBoer.

Learning of the trade while with the Devils in Tampa Bay ahead of a game against the Lightning, Pelley said he had "a lot of time for it to sink in over the plane ride."

"Being with the Devils for the last six years, there's definitely a way things are done," he said. "You kind of get into that groove so this definitely is new for me. It's exciting. It's a new challenge.

"I think challenges only make you better. I'm really excited to get going."

KOIVU 'BETTER' 

Lubomir Visnovsky (broken finger) practiced again and appears to be a certain possibility for Wednesday’s game against Phoenix, but Saku Koivu (lower body) only skated with the rehabilitating Jason Blake under the watch of strength coach Sean Skahan and left the ice before his teammates jumped on.

"I think one of them is more possible than the other right now," Ducks coach Bruce Boudreau said. "Looks like Lubo is more possible than Saku. At the same time, Saku said he felt a lot better today and I'm hoping he takes the morning skate and gives me a better answer or an answer I'd like to hear better."

Boudreau said he wouldn't be averse to playing Koivu if the center gave him the OK that he's ready to play providing he does skate. Koivu missed his first game of the season Saturday in Nashville.

When asked if he'd prefer Koivu have a full practice under his belt, Boudreau said, "In a perfect world, yes."

"But it's not like he's a 21-year-old," the coach said. "He knows how to manage his body and everything else."

Meanwhile, Blake did some very light shooting before going through some strenuous skating drills. The winger has been out since the home opener after having the tendons above his left wrist cut by the skate blade of San Jose defensemen Brent Burns.

'ENERGETIC' PRACTICE

The Ducks were put through the paces over the past two days and Boudreau said he was simply glad to have lengthy practice sessions after jumping right into his new job on Dec. 1 and preparing his team for games every other night along with his first trip with them this past weekend.

"I thought they practiced real hard yesterday," Boudreau said. "They were pretty energetic today. As a coach, you always want to practice. It's what makes the team successful. And that's why training camps are training camps and you get them all on the same page.

"The more practice time we have at this stage, the better it is."

Orange County Register: LOADED: 12.14.2011
King-sized effort
Marchand, Rask lift shorthanded Bruins

By Kevin Paul Dupont
Globe Staff / December 14, 2011

easily to a 3-0 win over the Kings last night at the Garden, looking very much like a team that won a Stanley Cup just six months ago, even though captain Zdeno Chara (injured knee) was missing, along with top checking center Greg Campbell (fractured bone in foot).

Brad Marchand scored a couple of goals (Nos. 10, 11). Tuukka Rask turned back 41 shots, including 20 in the third period, for his first shutout of the season. And overall, the Bruins tooled the Kings like a bunch of church league bantams at the faceoff dot, winning 64 percent of the drops, including a pair by Patrice Bergeron that led directly to Marchand’s strikes.

Neat. Tidy. Impressive. Good teams win when they are minus key players.

On the other hand, the beleaguered Kings, losers of five straight, too often played like a luxury Christmas line of misfit toys. They’ve got some real talent in their lineup, but their underperformance this season cost Terry Murray his job as coach on Monday and they didn’t look much better, or cohesive, under interim coach John Stevens last night.

“I thought they played a hard game,” said Bruins winger Rich Peverley, whose first goal since Nov. 12 provided the 1-0 lead in the first period.

“They put up a lot of shots, but they’re looking for their identity. They fired the coach so obviously they are trying to change things.”

Meanwhile, the Bruins are trying to be the first club since the Red Wings in 1997 and ‘98 to repeat as Cup champions. After opening the season playing like a new TV drama crying out to be canceled in the first month, they have swash-buckled their way through the last seven weeks with a 16-2-1 mark, pushing the Flyers for the top spot in the Eastern Conference.

They have won two straight and they’ll try for win No. 20 tonight in Ottawa.

Rask was the key to win No. 19. Though the Kings didn’t test him greatly, they eventually gained critical mass in the offensive end, generating 80 shots to Boston’s 46. Forty-one of those made their way to Rask, but his own shot management and the puck control of his makeshift defensive corps did a decent job of not allowing LA much in the way of key follow-up chances.

Rask, who was brought in to relieve two-time Vezina winner Tim Thomas after two periods Saturday night in Columbus, is supposed to yield to Thomas this evening. That was the plan announced by coach Claude Julien following yesterday morning’s workout. But Julien hinted after the shutout, the ninth of Rask’s career, that he could come back with the Finnish goalie again - what would be only his second back-to-back start this season.

“Tell you tomorrow,” a smiling Julien said.

Peverley’s strike, the first of the three the Bruins scored at even strength, came at 6:32 on a sweet feed from emergency call-up Zach Hamill. Peverley streaked the slot and Hamill, with help from Benoit Pouliot, dished from goal line to create for Peverley to make the easy forehand tap past Jonathan Quick.

“That,” said Julien, referring to Hamill’s dish, “is a play that NHL players make.”

Marchand’s first came at 7:43 into the second on a textbook predetermined play that had Bergeron flitching the puck from Colin Fraser on a draw to Quick’s right. Bergeron pulled back the puck cleanly to Marchand, standing some 15 feet behind him, and Marchand snapped off a quick one-timer to the top left corner.

“We’ve tried that a lot this year and it hasn’t worked,” said Marchand. “A lot has to go right. It’s nice when it works.”

Marchand’s second, the jawbreaker, came 5:35 into the third, Bergeron catching him with a pass near the crease moments after the crafty center added one to his pile of 13 faceoff wins. Cutting left to right across the top of the paint, Marchand finished with a nifty backhander, and down went the sun on Sunset Boulevard.

“If he’s not the best, he’s one of the best in the league,” said Marchand, referring to Bergeron’s faceoff prowess. “And that’s big, because you don’t want to spend the whole night chasing pucks.”

Had Chara been among the back-line six-pack, little chance the Kings would have fired 80 shots. Such volume is a clear indicator that Julien will have to get his blue liners, including returnee Steven Kampfer, to tighten up their spacing and rub out advances before the opposition crosses the blue line. Teams with greater confidence than the Kings likely would have made some hay with such a great number of chances.

“I could feel the momentum changing a couple of times,” said Rask. “Maybe we weren’t our sharpest in the third period. Some of that was because [Chara] was missing, and some of it is that we have to tighten up, too. But, it wasn’t too bad.”

In fact, it was two points, and right now the Bruins keep piling them up.

Hamill assists victory
Call-up fills in for Campbell

By Jake Seiner
Globe Correspondent / December 14, 2011

With Gregory Campbell out for last night’s game against the Kings with a foot injury, coach Claude Julien needed a centerman.

The front office suggested Zach Hamill, a 23-year-old natural center who’d put up a 7-7-14 line in 25 games as a winger with Providence this season. After last night’s 3-0 win over the Kings, Julien had plenty of praise for the former first-round pick and the folks who recommended his emergency recall.

"Management are the ones who see him more in Providence than I do," Julien said. "We needed a centerman, and from what I was told, he was the best candidate to come in and fill the hole. They obviously made the right choice."

Hamill stepped into Campbell’s vacant spot on the fourth line, and wasted little time proving he belonged.

Rich Peverley, Benoit Pouliot, and Hamill teamed up to give the Bruins a first-period lead, dizzying defenders in an effort that left Hamill with a passing lane to goaltender Jonathan Quick’s right.

Hamill held as Peverley circled toward the goal before sliding a pass across the slot, hitting Peverley in stride.

"It was right on my tape," Peverley said. "Great pass by [Hamill]. I just tried to go back door, the guy kind of had me and I just tried to beat him to the net, and like I said, [Hamill] threaded the needle there."

"That was a play that NHL players make," Julien said. "Right on the tape and an easy tap-in for [Peverley]."

It was Hamill’s second helper in three games this year. The first came in his season debut, Nov. 10 against Edmonton. That primary assist came on a similar pass that threaded three Oilers below the dots, landing right on Jordan Caron’s waiting stick.

"He’s done that a few times for us," Julien said. "When we say he’s a first-round pick, he’s a pretty skilled player. He showed that right off the bat."

Hamill was drafted eighth overall in the 2007 draft as a center, and has played as a pivot for most of his career. This year, though, he has taken his reps at wing for Providence.

Hamill moved back to center last night, both so Julien could keep some continuity with his other lines, and also because of confidence Hamill had provided the coach as a pivot in previous appearances.

"He’s been really reliable in his own end," Julien said after yesterday’s morning skate. "All I can say is when we had him up here, the games he played for us, I really liked what he brought to the table."

Hamill had another strong defensive outing, finishing with two takeaways, two blocked shots, and no turnovers in 9:48 of ice time.

The performance once again forced the Bruins decision-makers to take note of Hamill, who has spent most of his four-plus seasons in the AHL.

"Going down’s always tough," Hamill said. "When you come up here, you want to be ready and make the most of your opportunities."

"When he came up [after playing wing] this year, it certainly didn’t take away from his playmaking abilities," Julien said. "He’s been playing wing this year because we feel he has a better chance of cracking the lineup down the road playing at wing. We’re pretty deep at center, and that’s something he’s adjusted well to."

Marchand has 2 goals in Bruins' 3-0 win over Kings

By Jimmy Golen
AP Sports Writer / December 13, 2011

BOSTON—Boston Bruins coach Claude Julien has long insisted that he has two No. 1 goalies.

Only now is Tuukka Rask getting the chance to prove it.

Appearing in his second straight game, Rask stopped 41 shots for his first shutout of the season on Tuesday night while leading the Bruins to a 3-0 victory over the Los Angeles Kings. Brad Marchand scored twice as Boston played without top defenseman Zdeno Chara and top goalie Tim Thomas.

"It's something every team wishes they had, that luxury with two guys. And we have that," Julien said after giving Thomas the night off to rest him for Wednesday's game in Ottawa. "Whenever called upon, Tuukka made big saves."

Rich Peverley also scored for the defending Stanley Cup champions, who won for the 16th time in 19 games despite playing without Chara because he injured his left knee in Saturday's game in Columbus.

Julien said Chara would make the trip to Ottawa for Wednesday night's game.

Rask spent last season as the backup for Thomas, who won the Vezina and the Conn Smythe Trophies while playing every minute of Boston's postseason run to the title. Rask needed more than a month to get his first win this season and was playing a little less than once a week before relieving Thomas on Saturday night after he allowed three goals in the first two periods against Columbus.

Rask shut out the Blue Jackets the rest of the way, then extended his scoreless streak to 95 minutes, 10 seconds on Tuesday with his first shutout since March 1. He faced 13 shots in the second period and 20 in the third.

"We were just trying to protect our lead," Rask said. "Probably some part of that is 'Z' missing, but we also need to tighten things up."

Jonathan Quick stopped 19 shots for the Kings, who lost their fifth consecutive game and their first since coach Terry Murray was fired on Monday and replaced with assistant John Stevens in an attempt to awaken the underachieving team from its early-season slumber.

"There's going to be things that go on outside the locker room that you can't control," Quick said. "No matter what happens, you've got to come into the game with the same mentality.

"There's a lot of stuff going on, but that's no excuse. You can't take stuff like that and call it as a distraction and use it as a reason not to win the game."

Stevens said he liked what he saw, in spite of the result.

"I really thought they expended a lot of energy tonight trying to win a hockey game," he said. "I really thought they acted like professionals tonight and really tried to focus on the game and trying to win."

Los Angeles, which had not reached the playoffs in eight years, made consecutive postseason appearances under Murray, who compiled the best winning percentage (.560) of any coach in franchise history. But he was fired when a four-game losing streak dropped the Kings to 13-12-4.

Despite adding Mike Richards and Simon Gagne in the offseason, the Kings have not scored more than two goals in a game in nine tries since Thanksgiving -- an NHL-worst 2.24 goals per game -- while falling to 11th in the Western Conference standings.

But they weren't any more successful on Tuesday under Stevens.

Peverley made it 1-0 in the first, then the Bruins took a 2-0 lead in the second when Patrice Bergeron won a faceoff and slid it back to Marchand for the wrist shot. In the third, the Bruins again scored after a faceoff -- this one not as clean, but clean enough for Marchand to collect the puck and skate in front before beating Quick with 14:25 to play.

NOTES: Rask had never faced Los Angeles. ... The Bruins were also without F Gregory Campbell (foot). ... Daniel Paille, who sustained a concussion on Thursday, returned after missing just one game. ... The Kings began a four-game road trip. ... Since coming to Boston in 2006, Chara has missed only 13 games, and the Bruins are 5-5-3 in those games.

Los Angeles 0 0 0--0
Boston 1 1 1--3

First Period--1, Boston, Peverley 5 (Hamill, Pouliot), 6:32.
Second Period--2, Boston, Marchand 10 (Bergeron), 7:43.
Third Period--3, Boston, Marchand 11 (Bergeron), 5:35.

Shots on Goal--Los Angeles 8-13-20--41. Boston 12-7-3--22.


December 13, 2011|Kevin Paul Dupont, Globe Staff

THIRD PERIOD
All done on Causeway. Bruins 3, Kings 0
First shutout of season for Rask. Two goals for Marchand.
Kings have now lost five straight. Bruins dashing out of here to play in Ottawa Wednesday night.
Just 2:34 to go. Bruins closing in on fourth shutout of season, first for Rask
16:35 -- Kampfer second minor (holding) of night.
Now 9:17 to go in period. Will Rask earn his first shutout of the season?

SECOND PERIOD
Bruins win 21 of 31 faceoffs (68 percent) through two periods. Kings land only 21 of their 51 shots on Rask. Bruins land 19 of 39 against Quick and pot two for the 2-0 lead.
Now 40 minutes complete. Bruins, 2-0. Looks like easy passage to win No. 19.
Kings now with brief 5-on-3 PP chance.
Kampfer in box with 4:30 to go in period. Bruins still with 2-0 lead.
Kings need to exhibit some pushback here or will seal their fifth straight defeat.
7:43 -- Boston, 2-0. Marchand snaps one-timer by Quick after Bergeron schools Fraser on faceoff in circle to Quick's right.
6:10 gone. Bruins still with 1-0 lead. Kings look a little better, but still not able to take advantage of the fact Chara is out of Boston's lineup.

FIRST PERIOD
First 20 minutes in the books. Bruins with 1-0 lead and Kings playing like a bunch of misfit toys.
Bruins come up empty on another power-play chance. Bruins using combination of Ference-Peverley and Seidenberg-Corvo at points. Obvious absence of Chara.
Bruins fourth line tonight: Paille-Hamill-Thornton.
6:32 -- Bruins, 1-0. Peverley with easy forehand tap in open right side off clean feed by Hamill. Good cycling by Bruins. Peverley's first goal since Nov. 12, second since Oct. 18.
4:15. Ex-UMaine star Dustin Penner misses wide open right side of net on 2-on-0 break with Gagne. Brutal.
Bruins get nothing with early PP chance. No. 1 unit with Peverley and Ference at points, followed by Seidenberg and Corvo.

Ex-UMass-Amherst star Jonathan Quick in net for Kings. Tuukka Rask for B's.
Slight surprise. Jordan Caron scratched. Danny Paille and Zach Hamill both in lineup for Bruins.
About 10 minutes from puck drop, Bruins vs. Kings, here at TD Garden.
Steve Kampfer in team captain Zdeno Chara.
No one wearing the 'C' tonight for Bruins. Chris Kelly, Patrice Bergeron and Andrew Ference all wearing the alternate captain’s 'A'.
@GlobeFluto has moved into coffeehouse position in Ottawa, awaiting arrival of Bruins for match there tomorrow night vs. Senators.

The Bruins are back on the job tonight on Causeway Street vs. the L.A. Kings, who are one day removed from firing coach Terry Murray. This will be the only time this season that the Crowns visit the Hub of Hockey.

The Bruins will be without both team captain Zdeno Chara (wrenched knee) and checking-line center Greg Campbell (fractured bone in foot). Coach Claude Julien said Chara will make the trip to Ottawa, where the Bruins play Wednesday night, which would seem to make him a possibility to suit up. Campbell, said Julien, will not travel north.

Danny Paille, believed to have suffered a slight concussion Thursday night, practiced in the morning workout and said he would be available if needed. However, he underwent a neurology exam yesterday and the club maintained today that it had yet to receive the results. Pending those results, no telling if Paille is eligible to play tonight.

If Paille can't play, look for former first-round pick Zach Hamill to take his roster spot. Hamill was summoned yesterday from AHL Providence on emergency recall.

Brad Marchand was tagged with a $2,500 fine for slew-footing Penguins defenseman Matt Niskanen last Monday in Pittsburgh. Julien denounced such moves by his pesky winger, saying, "I want him to be a good brat, not a bad brat."

And Julien on the kind of bite $2,500 would have been during his days of playing minor-league hockey: "That would have been my yearly salary....I didn't even get that as a signing bonus."

Puck drop: 7:05 p.m. EST

Records: Bruins 18-9-1; Kings 13-12-4.

TV/radio info: NESN (Jack Edwards, Andy Brickley, Naoko Funayama), 98.5 The Sports Hub (Dave Goucher, Bob Beers)

Projected lineup:
Milan Lucic-David Krejci-Nathan Horton
Brad Marchand-Patrice Bergeron-Tyler Seguin
Benoit Pouliot-Chris Kelly-Rich Peverley
Jordan Caron-Zach Hamill-Shawn Thornton
Dennis Seidenberg-Johnny Boychuk
Steve Kampfer-Joe Corvo
Andrew Ference-Adam McQuaid
Tuukka Rask
Tim Thomas

Injured: Zdeno Chara, Greg Campbell, Daniel Paille

As far as evenings of entertainment go, last night at TD Garden was not of the five-star variety.

But considering the Bruins were missing captain Zdeno Chara and fourth-line center/penalty killer Gregory Campbell, they put the two points in the bank and headed off to Ottawa.

The B’s got a goal in each period, including a pair from Brad Marchand (Nos. 10, 11), and a shutout performance from Tuukka Rask (41 saves) to beat the floundering Los Angeles Kings, 3-0.

Rich Peverley (No. 5) also scored in the workmanlike victory.

With the absence of Chara, the Bruins defense played reasonably well, and when the Kings got some good scoring chances, Rask was there to make the stop for his first shutout of the season and ninth of his career.

“We’re a pretty confident group,” said defenseman Andrew Ference, who played 24:42, more than four minutes over his season average. “All of us went through what it takes to be champs and played in pressure situations against good lines. I don’t think anyone feels out of their comfort zone. It’s just a matter of a couple of extra minutes for us to spread out a bit amongst ourselves.

“But I don’t think anyone’s trying to do any more than what they normally do or prepare any differently.”

Dennis Seidenberg was the team leader in minutes at 27:05, including 5:20 of penalty-killing time, while Johnny Boychuk (22:38) and Adam McQuaid (18:02) saw some increased minutes on the blue line.

Coach Claude Julien liked the way his Chara-less defense played, though he did think the Bruins could use some tightening up.

“Our team as a whole I probably wasn’t as happy with the space we gave them to skate through the neutral zone and the time that they got to make plays,” said Julien. “I thought we were a little bit lazy in that regard. That’s the second game in a row we’ve given up 40 shots and we need to be a little bit better closing. We’re certainly going to address that before (tonight’s game against the Senators).”

The B’s best period was the first, when they looked like they might knock out the Kings, who fired coach Terry Murray (replaced by John Stevens) on Monday. They settled for a 1-0 lead after 20 minutes.

Zach Hamill, called up from Providence for the injured Campbell, continues to be something of a revelation in his fourth pro year. He initiated the first goal by stripping Jack Johnson of the puck behind the net, and, after getting it back on a cycle, set up Peverley for an easy tap-in. It was Peverley’s first goal since Nov. 12.

“They definitely haven’t been going in as easy this year, so it’s nice to get one,” Peverley said.

The Bruins were strong in the faceoff circle, winning 64 percent, and their second goal came right off a draw in the second period. Patrice Bergeron (13-of-19 on faceoffs) beat Colin Fraser cleanly in the left dot and drew it back to Marchand at the top of the circle. LA goalie Jonathan Quick got a piece of Marchand’s hard wrister but couldn’t stop it.

The B’s killed off three power plays in the last seven minutes of the second period, and when Marchand tucked another past Quick at 5:35 of the third, thanks to a hard-working helper from Bergeron, the only drama left was whether Rask would get the shutout. He had to work for it, but he got it, making a few excellent saves down the stretch.

“I just tried to save every puck,” said Rask. “There were a couple of tough chances in the end, but that was it.”

Brad Marchand skates along fine line


Say this much for Brad Marchand: When the Bruins winger gets caught doing something naughty, he usually admits to the offense.

Such was the case yesterday when Marchand was asked about the $2,500 fine he incurred from the NHL for his obvious slew-foot of Pittsburgh Penguins defenseman Matt Niskanen last week.

"It was definitely a slew-foot and those are dangerous plays. Guys can get hurt off that. It's something I shouldn't have done. They penalized me for it and it's time to move on now," said Marchand, who moved on very well by scoring two goals in the B's 3-0 win over the Kings last night at the Garden.

Marchand was aware of his transgression immediately and knew there was going to be a price to pay, so at the time he offered Niskanen a chance to punch him in the nose. The combatants wound up with matching fighting majors.

"I realized it was a bit of a cheap shot and I wanted to get it over with, I guess," said Marchand, who received a two-game suspension last season for a head shot on the Columbus Blue Jackets' R.J. Umberger.

Coach Claude Julien let Marchand know how he felt about the slew-foot.

"When it happened, I addressed it right after the period. There are certain things that we all can deal with with certain players and what they do, but slew-footing is not something I like to see, whether it's for us or against us," Julien said. "If he's going to be doing that, he's going to get fined and he's deserving of it. He has to own up to his mistakes and he's done a good job of that. We're talking about a young player who is trying to find that fine line and not crossing it.

"There are times when he does (cross the line). Again, we've addressed it. I want him to be a good brat, not a bad brat. I used that term with him and that means don't cross the line and I thought he did that time. His response was, 'I thought I was going to get away with it.' That's not what you want to see from your players."

Marchand usually does pretty well when he gets in Dutch with his boss. On Nov. 15 against the New Jersey Devils, Julien benched Marchand for much of the second period, and Marchand then scored off the opening faceoff in the third.

Then came last night's response to the fine and Julien's lecture.

"You just want to be able to bounce back and it doesn't affect you and it doesn't bother your game," Marchand said. "I haven't played my best as of late and it's nice to be able to bounce back here."

Chara takes trip

Zdeno Chara, out for the game with an apparent knee injury, traveled with the team to Ottawa last night. While it would seem unlikely that the defenseman will play tonight against the Senators, the B's have two practice days in Ottawa before playing a Saturday matinee vs. the Flyers in Philadelphia.

Center Gregory Campbell, who has a fracture in his foot, did not travel with the team...??

Daniel Paille returned to the lineup last night after suffering a mild concussion last Thursday. The winger said he felt good in 11:30 of ice time, even after taking a hard hit early from Kings forward Dustin Brown.

"I told him, 'Thanks, I needed that,'" Paille said.

Royal upheaval

The Kings arrived Monday, practiced at the Garden and then-general manager Dean Lombardi fired coach Terry Murray, replacing him with assistant John Stevens on an interim basis. Some prognosticators had Los Angeles in the Stanley Cup finals and the Kings arrived at last night's game in 12th place in the Western Conference.
Finally, Zach Hamill’s prospects rise

By Stephen Harris | Wednesday, December 14, 2011 | http://www.bostonherald.com | Boston Bruins

Zach Hamill belongs in the discussion about the difficulty of looking at an 18-year-old kid and predicting if and when he will make it as an NHL player.

At the 2007 draft, Bruins scouts regarded Hamill so highly as an all-around center that the team used its No. 8 overall pick on the youngster from Vancouver. Hamill was seen as a talented scorer who was also a highly responsible defensive centerman.

The B’s brass believed that Hamill would be a No. 1 center, a two-way standout, a key guy in the varsity lineup before too many years went by.

Things did not, of course, work out quite as planned, giving yet another prime example of how uncertain this whole scouting and drafting business is.

Watching the smallish Hamill play against NHL competition the last three years in training camp, preseason games and the odd big league appearance, he just did not look like a top prospect, lacking size and quickness.

“Sometimes with those first-round picks you get close to a finished product right off the bat,” said one veteran scout at TD Garden last night. “With other kids, you have to wait for the growth.”

Lo and behold, at age 23, Hamill suddenly looks like a legitimate NHL player. He was a solid three-zone contributor last night in the Bruins’ 3-0 victory over the rather lifeless Los Angeles Kings, setting up Rich Peverley for an easy goalmouth tap-in off a beautiful offensive zone cycle early on. Later, he blocked two shots and won a couple of draws. He just looked good.

“He’s a pretty skilled player, he showed that right off the bat,” B’s coach Claude Julien said. “It was a play that NHL players make. He had a good heads-up, (a pass) right on the tape and an easy tap-in for Pev. He’s done that a few times for us. He’s been a good player. I was happy with him the first time he came up (for two games in early November) and I was certainly happy (last night). He was really good in our own end as far as supporting and battling. I was really pleased with his game.”

Hamill has played seven NHL games. He has four assists and is a plus-6.

Though a right winger at Providence (AHL) this season, he stepped back to his natural position to fill in for injured fourth-line center Gregory Campbell.

“For my sake, it’s good if I can show them I can be versatile,” said Hamill. “If they need me, I can play any position. I’m glad to be able to play both. When I’m called up, I just want to make the most of every chance I get.”

Hamill opened some eyes this season. His entry-level contract ends this summer, and he will be a restricted free agent. He has shown enough that if the B’s don’t want to re-sign him, it’s a safe bet other teams will.

“Not only has he not looked out of place, he’s done good things,” said the pro scout. “That pass he made was great. At 18, his skating was the hurdle he had to get over. But at 23 now, he’s a much different skater. He’s still can’t really get away from guys in an explosive way like a (Brad) Marchand or (Tyler) Seguin, but his skating is adequate.

“And you see the hockey sense, the skills, the poise, the ability to make plays in small areas. That’s the appetizing part, the part you get excited about.

“Every game he’s had up here, I’ve been impressed with how poised he is with the puck. ???. I’ve been very impressed by his ability at this level to make plays at this speed, to think the play out and have the patience and ability to turn it into something.”

For Zach Hamill, that has to be good news. It was just a question of time.

Brad Marchand has 2 goals in Bruins’ 3-0 win over Kings

By Associated Press | Tuesday, December 13, 2011 | http://www.bostonherald.com | Boston Bruins

BOSTON - Boston Bruins coach Claude Julien has long insisted that he has two No. 1 goalies.

Only now is Tuukka Rask getting the chance to prove it.

Appearing in his second straight game, Rask stopped 41 shots for his first shutout of the season on Tuesday night while leading the Bruins to a 3-0 victory over the Los Angeles Kings. Brad Marchand scored twice as Boston played without top defenseman Zdeno Chara and top goalie Tim Thomas.

"It's something every team wishes they had, that luxury with two guys. And we have that," Julien said after giving Thomas the night off to rest him for Wednesday's game in Ottawa. "Whenever called upon, Tuukka made big saves."

Rich Peverley also scored for the defending Stanley Cup champions, who won for the 16th time in 19 games despite playing without Chara because he injured his left knee in Saturday's game in Columbus.

Julien said Chara would make the trip to Ottawa for Wednesday night's game.

Rask spent last season as the backup for Thomas, who won the Vezina and the Conn Smythe Trophies while playing every minute of Boston's postseason run to the title. Rask needed more than a month to get his first win this season and was playing a little less than once a week before relieving Thomas on Saturday night after he allowed three goals in the first two periods against Columbus.

Rask shut out the Blue Jackets the rest of the way, then extended his scoreless streak to 95 minutes, 10 seconds on Tuesday with his first shutout since March 1. He faced 13 shots in the second period and 20 in the third.

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"There's going to be things that go on outside the locker room that you can't control," Quick said. "No matter what happens, you've got to come into the game with the same mentality."

"There's a lot of stuff going on, but that's no excuse. You can't take stuff like that and call it as a distraction and use it as a reason not to win the game."

Stevens said he liked what he saw, in spite of the result.

"I really thought they expended a lot of energy tonight trying to win a hockey game," he said. "I really thought they acted like professionals tonight and really tried to focus on the game and trying to win."

Los Angeles, which had not reached the playoffs in eight years, made consecutive postseason appearances under Murray, who compiled the best winning percentage (.560) of any coach in franchise history. But he was fired when a four-game losing streak dropped the Kings to 13-12-4.

Despite adding Mike Richards and Simon Gagné in the offseason, the Kings have not scored more than two goals in a game in nine tries since Thanksgiving - an NHL-worst 2.24 goals per game - while falling to 11th in the Western Conference standings.

But they weren't any more successful on Tuesday under Stevens.

Peverley made it 1-0 in the first, then the Bruins took a 2-0 lead in the second when Patrice Bergeron won a faceoff and slid it back to Marchand for the wrist shot. In the third, the Bruins again scored after a faceoff - this one not as clean, but clean enough for Marchand to collect the puck and skate in front before beating Quick with 14:25 to play.

NOTES: Rask had never faced Los Angeles. ... The Bruins were also without F Gregory Campbell (foot). ... Daniel Paille, who sustained a concussion on Thursday, returned after missing just one game. ... The Kings began a four-game road trip. ... Since coming to Boston in 2006, Chara has missed only 13 games, and the Bruins are 5-5-3 in those games.
Weber's returns causes Ruff to improvise
Sabres coach opts to dress seven defensemen for game against Ottawa

By Mike Harrington
News Sports Reporter

Published:December 14, 2011, 12:07 AM

It looked like Lindy Ruff was going to have a tough choice to make with his defense corps Tuesday night. Instead, the Buffalo Sabres coach deferred a dicey decision and dressed all seven healthy blueliners against the Ottawa Senators.

The dilemma was posed by the return of Mike Weber, who suffered a broken rib Nov. 16 against New Jersey and missed 11 games. Tuesday's game was just his fourth of the season as he spent most of the season's first six weeks as a healthy scratch.

Prevailing wisdom was that rookie Brayden McNabb would probably go back to Rochester when either Weber or Tyler Myers was ready to return. That wisdom went out the door Tuesday upon Weber's return. McNabb stayed in the lineup — and so did the struggling Marc-Andre Gragnani, who seemed on the verge of being a healthy scratch.

"He's earned a spot right now the way he's played," Ruff said of McNabb. "We look at it that we've got to win games. When we get even more numbers back, maybe things change."

As the Sabres' injuries piled up, Weber could only watch. There was no way to accelerate his progress to get him back on the ice any sooner.

"It was one of those things where bone takes a certain amount of time to heal so I was kind of stuck," Weber said. "It didn't matter what I did or how hard I worked. You can't make bone grow."

The one positive thing about the injury was that Weber was able to resume skating almost immediately, allowing him to keep his conditioning level close to game shape. Weber played a solid 16 minutes, 31 seconds and had a game-high three hits.

"That's why 'Jeep' [assistant coach James Patrick] skates us the way he skates us and [strength and conditioning coach] Doug McKenney does the things he does," Weber said. "It felt good to be back. I would have liked to have had it in a win but it's always nice to be back and be a part of the team and have a solid effort. I need to have more of those nights."

Gragnani, meanwhile, played a season-low 9:46 and even took shifts as a winger on the fourth line. He had earned most of the playing time this season while Weber was watching.

"It's just the way it goes. I can't control those things," Weber said. "I can't change what happened the first 20 games or the fact I got hurt and missed another three weeks. I can control what I do tonight and here forward. Hopefully it's 53 straight starting here."

Paul Gaustad returned to the lineup after missing three games because he tweaked his shoulder during the Ryan Miller-Jordin Tootoo scrum Dec. 3 in Nashville. Patrick Kaleta [groin] is just about ready but sat out for the fifth straight game and ninth in the last 10.

Gaustad is second in the NHL in faceoff percentage at 58.1 after going 10-5 Tuesday. The Sabres went 29-24 in the circle after going 77-86 in the three games Gaustad missed.

The return of Weber and Gaustad means the Sabres' injured list is down to six (Kaleta, Myers, Brad Boyes, Nathan Gerbe, Jochen Hecht and Corey Tropp).

Ottawa forward Colin Greening, who had a game-high nine shots on goal, bumped Miller at the buzzer of regulation and was immediately challenged by Sabres defenseman Christian Ehrhoff. The two exchanged plenty of
Ryan Miller has a higher panic threshold than most folks in Sabreland. A lot of people are calling for changes — big, little, any — in order to get a disjointed Buffalo club on a suitable path. The goaltender doesn't seem ready to blow up the organization.

After yet another loss, though, he does want a few things different.

"I don't think it's time to panic, but it's time to build a game that we need to be competitive and be a playoff-caliber team," Miller said Tuesday after his team coughed up a late lead in a 3-2 overtime loss to Ottawa. "We have to iron some stuff out. We need to be better individually in a lot of little areas. It's up to us to identify how we can help the team and get to work in practice and come execute.

"Right now, I don't know quite what it is. It's probably a little bit between the ears."

It certainly was a mental lapse on the winning goal. Drew Stafford let Jared Cowen get open in front of the net just 45 seconds into overtime. Cowen scored on the Senators' 44th shot, dropping the Sabres to 3-5-3 in their last 11 games. The First Niagara Center crowd walked out the doors disappointed for the 12th time, with the Sabres falling to 6-9-3 in Buffalo.

"We've got to find ways to lock it down and find ways to be desperate," Miller said after his busiest night of the season. "It's just up to everybody to find a way to improve. Come to the rink and start playing the game we need because we don't have a lot of home games left before we have a tough stretch on the road. It's critical to get this ironed out."

Even before the mistake on the winning goal, the Sabres were slumping. They had things in control with a 2-1 lead, then they boxed themselves in. A run of three straight penalties turned the momentum toward the shot-happy Sens. Ottawa took 23 of the 26 attempts during one stretch.

"It's not the way we want to compete and battle," Sabres captain Jason Pominville said. "Until everyone's on the same page, we're going to have a tough time winning games."

The 18,690 fans were just settling in when they got the feeling it could be a long night. The Senators' Milan Michalek scored 69 seconds into the game, with groans, boos and general unrest rippling through the arena.

The Sabres jumpstarted their offense by pressuring the Ottawa defense. The forced turnovers led to goals by Paul Szczechura and Tyler Ennis just 88 seconds apart late in the first period.

The Sabres continued pressing the Senators early in the second, taking nine of the first 11 shots. Three straight runs to the penalty box turned the game the other way. Stafford's high-sticking penalty carried into the third period, allowing the Senators to maintain control. They took nine of the first 10 shots, with the eighth tying the game.

Peter Regin's attempt from the right point sailed past the net-front screen of Nick Foligno and into the left side of the net with 12:33 remaining.

"It's a product of handling the puck," Sabres coach Lindy Ruff said. "We started it at the start of the second period, some careless plays, and those careless plays led to penalties, and that hurt us."

The Sabres fell to 1-1-2 during their five-game run at the foot of Washington Street. The finale is Friday when Toronto visits. After that, the Sabres play five of six on the road, including trips to Pittsburgh, Toronto and Washington.

The penultimate game at the homestand featured a lengthy closed-door meeting.

"It was a very winnable game for us," defenseman Jordan Leopold said. "A couple mental errors and some plays that we didn't execute, and the puck's in the back of our net. We're getting toward one-third of the way through the season, and things have got to start clicking. There is no excuse. We should have had two points."

The daily Sabres medical report comes with a twist today: Paul Gaustad (shoulder) and Mike Weber (rib) will be back in the lineup tonight against the Ottawa Senators, but does Weber’s return mean an instant ticket back to Rochester for rookie Brayden McNabb?

Nope.

Coach Lindy Ruff was coy on his plans but said in no uncertain terms that McNabb, whose physical presence has been impressive in his seven-game stint, is staying in the lineup for now.

"He's earned a spot right now the way he's played," Ruff said today. "We look at it that we've got to win games. When we get even more numbers back, maybe things change. There's a lot of factors that you guys have mentioned that you have to evaluate on. Some of it is dictated by other stuff."

Specifically, we asked Ruff about salary cap concerns and such. It seems the Sabres don’t have to make a real decision until Tyler Myers is ready, which is still a few weeks away. With Weber back and McNabb staying in, you wonder if the struggling Marc-Andre Gragnani will be in the press box. Everyone can see how tough it's been for Gragnani lately, but he’s somehow plus-5 in the last four games and a team-best plus-11 on the season -- tops among NHL rookies. So it will be interesting to see what the Sabres do.

As for Weber, his broken rib has healed sufficiently to let him play in just his fourth game of the season.

"I'm a little bit ahead of schedule," Weber said today. "That's just because I was feeling so good, was able to get the proper rest and strengthening working out. It was a bone, it wasn't anything muscular. Four days after I got hurt, I was back skating and working out fullbore. I'm just happy that's over and I'm ready to get back.

"I can't change what happened the first 20 games (when he was a healthy scratch 15 times) or the fact I got hurt and missed another three weeks. I can control what I do tonight and here forward. Hopefully it's 53 straight here."

The Sabres are 8-1-0 in their last nine against the Senators, who come to town two points behind the Sabres but in a 1-3-2 slide. The goaltending matchup will be Ryan Miller vs. Craig Anderson.

---Mike Harrington

Canada cuts Sabres’ prospect from junior team

December 13, 2011 - 8:49 AM

Jerome Gauthier-Leduc, the Sabres’ prospect who set a record by scoring in eight straight games this season, will not get a chance to show his skills on the international level. Canada made its first round of cuts to the world junior roster, and Gauthier-Leduc was among them.

The defenseman, selected in the third round of the 2010 draft, has 18 goals and 47 points in 31 games for Rimouski of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League.

Defensive man Mark Pysyk, the first-round pick in 2010, remains hopeful of playing in the world juniors, as does blue-liner Jamie Oleksiak. The world juniors, held last winter in Buffalo, will begin Dec. 26 in Edmonton and Calgary.

Lindy Ruff has had his moments this year, but one thing you can always count on is his ability to make himself clear. He has no qualms with identifying players by name and doesn't often mince words. He'll call a spade a spade, as he likes to say, when facing the harsh realities after a game.

The reality Tuesday night was Drew Stafford's blown coverage, more than anything else, contributed to the Sabres suffering another loss at home. He was responsible for defenseman Jared Cowen and instead allowed him to roam freely for the winner in the Senators' 3-2 overtime victory in First Niagara Center.

"Staff was supposed to stay with his guy," Ruff said. "He was with him at the top of the circle and just let him go. There was nothing else to that play."

Really, what else could he say?

Ruff has been seeing the same problems from behind the bench that everyone else has noticed from the seats or the recliner at home. Thomas Vanek and Jason Pominville have combined for 24 goals and 61 points in 30 games, but his roster had been dragged down with too many passengers sitting in first-class seats without paying the fare.

His biggest beef before the game was his second line, where Derek Roy has been cruising on autopilot with Tyler Ennis and Stafford. Ruff counted eight scoring chances between them and no goals for them in a 4-1 loss to the Rangers last weekend, several more chances and one goal Tuesday. At some point, it stops being bad luck and starts being bad play.

"It's time for Ennis, Stafford, Roy to make a difference inside of games," Ruff said. "I can't stand here and tell you they did a great job because they had the chances. Great chances are only good when they end up in the back of the net."

Roy and Stafford, both of whom were on the ice for the deciding goal Tuesday, have been dreadful for most of the season. Ennis was sidelined with a high-ankle sprain, but he was virtually absent when healthy. The gory details: Roy has one goal in his past 13 games, Stafford one in 17 and Ennis two all season, including one against Ottawa.

They played better Tuesday if one goal and several missed scoring chances equates to improvement. They came together for a pretty goal in the first period, but it still wasn't good enough.

Roy started the goal when he swiped the puck away from rookie defenseman David Rundblad in the Ottawa zone. Stafford had the puck in the left circle, waited for Ennis to curl into the slot and made a nice feed to the creative young winger. Ennis made a quick move, faked Craig Anderson to the ice and found the top corner for a 2-1 lead.

For a few moments, they breathed life into the morgue known as First Niagara Center. Whatever positive vibe they inspired dissipated with blown chances over the final two periods before Roy and Stafford watched the final goal.

Here's a telling statistic: The Sabres are 10-1-3 this season when Roy has a point, which means they're 5-11-0 when he's been shut out. They fell to 7-2-3 when Stafford had a point and 2-0-1 when Ennis reaches the score sheet. If the Sabres are going anywhere, they need more from all three.

"It's not a one-line team," Roy said. "Watching the teams that go deep in the playoffs, they always have depth. Everyone is scoring and making plays. You need the depth in your lines. Everyone needs to be going."

Roy had averaged 26 goals and 70 points for four years before recording a point per game last season, but was on pace for 19 goals and 52 points this year. Stafford, who had 31 goals last year, was on pace for 14 goals and 40 points. Both are under contracts paying them $4 million per season. Ennis
Game Story: Predators 2, Flames 1

By Scott Cruickshank, Calgary Herald

December 14, 2011 12:08 AM

THREE STARS
1. Calgary G Miikka Kiprusoff: Stunning display of goaltending, even by his lofty standards. Manages to keep hopped-up hosts close.
2. Nashville RW Craig Smith: Rookie leads team in scoring for a reason. Every time there's a Preds attack, he's present. One helper.
3. Nashville G Pekka Rinne: Not nearly as busy as his countryman, but spectacular in the dying minutes of the third period.

WHY THE FLAMES LOST
Because they keep surrendering shots. The Flames, on average, allow 29.5 shots per game. On this night, the Preds needed only 32 minutes to get to 30.

Because they cannot stop Preds' hot power play. In the five games previous, Nashville had gone 7-for-14. Tuesday, it goes 1-for-3. And the Flames earn only one power-play opportunity, period.

FLAMES
Forwards

C. Glencross O. Jokinen J. Iginla
B. Comeau M. Backlund L. Stempniak
A. Tanguay R. Horak B. Morrison
T. Kostopoulos M. Stajan T. Jackman

Defence

C. Butler J. Bouwmeester
D. Smith S. Hannan
T. J. Brodie B. Carson

Goalies

M. Kiprusoff
L. Irving

PREDATORS
Forwards

M. Erat D. Legwand C. Smith
S. Kostitsyn M. Fisher P. Hornqvist
C. Wilson N. Spaling J. Tootoo

M. Halischuk J. Smithson B. McGrattan

Defence

R. Suter S. Weber
F. Bouillon K. Klein
R. Josi J. Hillen

Goalies

P. Rinne

SCRATCHES

Calgary — D Cory Sarich, D Joe Piskula, G Henrik Karlsson (knee), D Mark Giordano (hamstring), D Anton Babchuk (hand), LW Rene Bourque (sick), RW David Moss (foot). Man-games lost: 96

Nashville — C Kyle Wilson. Man-games lost: 68

SUMMARY

Predators 2 Flames 1

First Period
1. Nashville, M Halischuk 6 (B McGrattan, R Josi) 11:43.
Penalty — J Bouwmeester Cgy (Hooking) 1:53.

Second Period
2. Calgary, C Glencross 9 (D Smith) 6:12.
Penalties — T Kostopoulos Cgy (Interference) 14:41; R Josi Neh (Holding) 19:03.

Third Period
Penalty — B Morrison Cgy (Interference) 3:01.

Shots on goal by

Calgary 6 17 13 — 36
Nashville 18 17 10 — 45


Referees: Dennis LaRue, Kelly Sutherland.

Linesmen: Scott Driscoll, Mark Wheler.

Att. at Nashville, Ten. — 14,813.

NEXT UP

The Flames flutter southward to prepare for Thursday's meeting with Teddy Purcell and the Tampa Bay Lightning (5:30 p.m., SN 960, Sportsnet) at the St. Pete Times Forum.

Flames buzzing about Darryl Sutter’s link to L.A.

“(Coaching) is where Darryl’s niche is,” says brother Brent

By SCOTT CRUICKSHANK, Calgary Herald December 14, 2011 1:06 AM

Craig Conroy remembers it very clearly.

He remembers sitting in the dressing room — it’s the first intermission of a game against the San Jose Sharks — and watching as Steve Montador gets absolutely roasted by the new boss.

He remembers standing up, interrupting the trade, blasting the blaster.

He remembers not getting another shift that night.

“I probably should have just shut up, but I didn’t,” Conroy, chuckling, is saying during Tuesday’s morning skate at the Bridgestone Arena. “You know when you get fed up with stuff? Then I’m thinking, I’m not going to play at all. How stupid am I?”

But next game out?

He gets a tonne of ice time.

This is Conroy’s point — that, yes, Darryl Sutter’s whip cracks louder than most, but it never turns into a grudge.

“From that moment on, I knew that anything Darryl did wasn’t personal,” says Conroy, now a member of the Flames’ braintrust. “This is the way he coaches. As soon as players find out that it’s not personal when he’s coming at you . . . it’s just about hockey, winning. He’s a great coach. One of the best I’ve had.”

rumours of Sutter’s imminent hiring by the Los Angeles Kings had the rink buzzing Tuesday.

Could it be true?

Might the Kings, freshly shed of Terry Murray, hire Sutter?

Makes sense. After all, Los Angeles general manager Dean Lombardi and Sutter go back to their days in San Jose.

And the thoughts of many observers is that Sutter, while not a great general manager (enough said), is, in fact, a very good coach.

With the Flames, Sutter worked the bench for 210 games, going 107-73-30. If his three years in Chicago and six in San Jose are included, his record is 409-320-131.

“To me, (coaching) is where Darryl’s niche is,” said Flames coach Brent Sutter, the younger brother. “I believe it’s something Darryl’s always wanted to continue to do. When he was coaching, he was a good coach.”

Which is why the Flames are perhaps not entirely thrilled by the development.

Sure, they gave the Kings permission to approach Sutter. But what happens if, in the snug Western Conference, the Jolly Rancher gets the Kings rolling?

“I think, if he gets the job, he’s going to do well, just like Ken Hitchcock is doing (in St. Louis),” says Conroy. “You know how Darryl is — he gets a lot out of guys. The team’s going to do well with Darryl . . . they’d have success. It’s too bad they’re in the west.

“If it does happen, there’ll be some intense games between the Flames and Los Angeles.”

All four dates remain — Jan. 14 and March 28 at the Scotiabank Saddledome; Jan. 19 and Feb. 18 at the Staples Center.

“It’s hard to say you wish him the best because I imagine they’ll be fighting us . . . there’s only so many (playoff) spots,” says Jarome Iginia. “He’s a very intense guy, but he’s also a very smart hockey guy. As a coach, he’s demanding — probably runs in the family.

“When it was going bad, everybody — literally, everybody — took the brunt of it at some point. But every day wasn’t a whip. Certainly there are days when he may not love you, or vice versa . . . but I’ve only got good things to say about him as a coach.”

Hired by the Flames on Dec. 28, 2002 — yes, the same date as last season’s dismissal — Sutter coached three seasons: mopping up after Greg Gilbert was canned; taking the team to its first playoff berth in seven years (and to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final) in 2003-04; capturing the Northwest Division in 2005-06, the first post-lockout season.

Conroy says it is Sutter’s in-game touch that makes him such a shrewd bench-boss.

“Darryl had a knack for putting guys out and getting something big to happen,” he says. “Ville Niemenen. Or Chris Clark. It’s easy to put Jarome out, but it’s the other guys. Stephane Yelle. We had success with maybe not the best teams, but he got as much as he could out of every single guy.”

The day he arrived in Calgary, Sutter, after being introduced to the players in the dressing room, politely asked the team’s brass to leave so he could address the players.

“He wanted to be with just his team,” recalls Conroy. “He just kind of laid it out, ‘This is what it’s going to be like, where we’re going to go, how we’re going to do it.’ It was a very short meeting. And away we went. Darryl’s good. He’s quick.

“He can push the right buttons at the right time. You knew what your role was. If you did it? Great. If you didn’t? You heard about it.”

Flames’ offence fails Kiprusoff in Nashville defeat
Bizarre faceoff formation the straw that broke the camel’s back

By Scott Cruickshank, Calgary Herald December 14, 2011 12:11 AM

NASHVILLE
Brent Sutter, on the visitors’ bench, was leaning over to address one of his lines.
When the Calgary Flames coach stood back up, he couldn’t believe what he saw on the ice.

For the neutral-zone draw, defenceman Scott Hannan had cozied up to the left-wing position and forward Brendan Morrison had assumed a spot way back on defence.
But before Sutter could bark, the puck skittered wide to Nashville Predators rookie Craig Smith and Morrison, all alone, was forced to haul him down.

Penalty.

Thirty seconds later, the Preds, one of the hottest power-play crews in the NHL, converted — Colin Wilson breaking the third-period deadlock with the winning goal.

“We never line up like that and I don’t know why we did.” Sutter muttered after the 2-1 loss Tuesday at Bridgestone Arena. “At that point in time, it’s intelligent hockey — you’ve got to play smart. You’ve got to think it the right way. A mental breakdown on our part or it’s an even hockey game. I talked to both of them after. We can’t have that happening at this time of the year.”

Perhaps it’s petty to single out one minor penalty in a 60-minute contest, but, between these foes, there is never much separation.

“A poorly executed play on the faceoff,” said Morrison, busily throwing himself under the bus. “I got caught maybe standing a little still. Their guy, they shoot it forward, and he takes off. A tough penalty to take by me … and we lose the game because of it. I probably should have waved Hanner off when he moved up. Olli (Jokinen), I don’t think, knew that we had (switched). Their centreman was aware, so he shot it out.”

“I take the penalty, and that’s the game,” Morrison added.

Things had been downright crummy in the early going, too — Miikka Kiprusoff was forced into a half-dozen fantastic saves in the first period.

Meaning, all in all, this was a wasted opportunity.

Because, thanks to their recent goodness (three straight wins, 6-1-1 in their last eight), the Flames could’ve moved into a tie for eighth spot in the Western Conference.

But they hit a sour note in Music City.

“Just because we lost one game, it’s not the end of the world,” countered Curtis Glencross, who, with a dashing display, had eluded every local defender on his way to expertly depositing a backhander over Pekka Rinne’s mitt at 6:12 of the second period — which had squared things. “You guys are sounding like it’s such a let-back for us. We’ve been playing well. We’re going to keep going, we’re going to get focused for the next game.”

But, yes, the Flames had been keenly aware of the conference ramifications.

“We knew that,” Morrison said. “We talked about it going into the third. We’re pretty disappointed. We feel we gave away points.”

Added Alex Tanguay: “We’ve been battling extremely hard to get back in the thick of things and here we are.”

Winning streak busted — and a season-high 45 shots permitted — the flu-ridden Flames continue their road trip Thursday against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Sutter hopes his boys can recover their grit in time.

“Too many soft plays,” the coach said. “It’s certainly not something I’m happy about, the first period. It was disappointing to play that way and put it on our goalie’s shoulders like that. Our engagement wasn’t there and our softness was way too high.”

When the clubs met Oct. 22, Rinne shut out the Flames 2-0.

In the Nov. 29 rematch, Kiprusoff blanked the Predators 1-0.

Meaning everyone had been anticipating a goaltending duel. They got one — eventually.

The Preds, in the opening 20 minutes, drilled 18 shots at Kiprusoff — only one, Matt Halischuk’s, was good enough to elude the Flames netminder.

“If we’d just played a smarter, better first period, we probably come out of here with some points,” said Tanguay. “We have to make sure we’re ready, especially on the road, in the first period.

“We’ve been slow starters, kind of waiting to see what kind of game the other team wants to play.”

When the Flames did finally find their legs, Rinne was a wall.

“All you’re thinking about since our last game is, ‘OK, we’re right there, we want to take that next step,’ ” said Sutter, whose record dips back to .500, 14-14-2. “Yet we let them dictate the game at the start.”

Jolly Rancher news creating a buzz

Scott Cruickshank

Yes, Brett Carson (fresh off a conditioning stint in Abbotsford) is playing tonight.

No, Rene Bourque (sidelined by a wicked stomach bug) is not.

But the big news around the rink this morning in Nashville was the Los Angeles Kings’ hiring of — or, at the very least, keen interest in — Darryl Sutter, former bossman of the Calgary Flames.

“He cares a lot,” said Scott Hannan, defenceman of the Calgary — and one-time player of Sutter’s back in their San Jose Sharks days. “He has a lot of emotion that he brings to the game. You know, when you step into that room, when you step onto that ice, you have to play a certain way for him. It’s demanding hockey.

“He helped me out a lot early in my career with the way he made you play. If you didn’t play that way, you weren’t going to play. That’s the way he was there.”

Hard to imagine that Sutter has changed. Even a bit.

His way or the highway — in very straightforward terms.

“There’s not much second-guessing in what you’re supposed to do,” said Hannan. “If you don’t do it, you don’t play too much. There were games like that early in my career. He didn’t let you feel your way through a game, that’s for sure. That makes you realize that every shift matters, every shift counts. It made me a better pro-hockey player.”

And not just a whip-cracker was the Jolly Rancher.

“In the end, you knows he cares about you,” Hannan said. “There were times away from the rink and with your family . . . he was a very great guy with that. Always talking to your family. I think Darryl is a good man.”

*****

For the keeners, here’s how they’ll line up tonight in Music City:

Glencross/Jokinen/Iginla
Tanguay/Horak/Morrison
Comeau/Backlund/Stempniak
Kostopoulos/Stajan/Jackman

Butler/Bouwmeester
Hannan/Smith
Brodie/Carson

With G Miikka Kiprusoff in net.

Canes fight back, fall 2-1 in overtime

From staff reports

TORONTO Tim Connolly scored his second goal of the game at 44 seconds of overtime to lift the Toronto Maple Leafs to a 2-1 win over the Carolina Hurricanes on Tuesday night.

The Leafs center went to the goal and had an empty net to shoot at when Joffrey Lupul's shot dribbled past Cam Ward.

Ward, who made 36 saves, broke his stick on a goal post in frustration after the winning goal.

James Reimer finished with 17 saves for the Maple Leafs. It was his first victory since returning to the lineup following six weeks of concussion-like symptoms.

Alex Ponikarovsky scored for the Hurricanes.

The offense didn't come until the late stages of the third period.

Connolly broke a scoreless tie by tipping home Clarke MacArthur's shot at 15:46 before Ponikarovsky tied it at 18:06 on a power play. Lupul was in the penalty box when the former Leaf converted a cross-crease pass.

The Leafs carried the play offensively, but weren't able to generate many chances against Ward.

The Hurricanes starter had vowed to be better after getting pulled in two of his past three starts, including Carolina's 4-2 loss in Winnipeg on Friday when he vented on the bench after getting the hook by new coach Kirk Muller.

On Tuesday, he was solid as Toronto outshot the Hurricanes 26-12 through 40 minutes and stood tall during a Leafs power-play chance early in the third period.

For the Leafs, Reimer had to endure long stretches of inactivity. One of his best saves came off a Chad LaRose shot on a short-handed rush that he got a shoulder on.

The banged-up Hurricanes have struggled since Muller replaced Paul Maurice as coach on Nov. 28.

The team is just 1-5-1 under Muller and faces an uphill struggle to reverse the course with leading scorer Jeff Skinner out with an undisclosed injury.

Toronto, meanwhile, faces a tough weekend with a visit to Buffalo on Friday and a home game against the Vancouver Canucks on Saturday.

Notes: Skinner missed his second straight game for Carolina. The team is expected to update his condition Wednesday. ... Leafs tough guy Colton Orr was scratched for a ninth straight game. ... Toronto captain Dion Phaneuf played his 500th career NHL game.

Canes' Faulk gets one answer, awaits another

By Chip Alexander

TORONTO Did he or didn't he? Will he or won't he?

Canes' rookie defenseman Justin Faulk said today he did not have the answer to either of two questions: did he score his first NHL goal Friday against the Winnipeg Jets, and will he play for Team USA in the upcoming 2012 World Junior Championship?

Faulk was credited with the goal but said the puck might have been tipped by Pat Dwyer or Jiri Tlusty. But Canes' media relation manager Kyle Hanlin soon ended the suspense: the puck was touched by Jets defenseman Johnny Oduya and the goal officially given to Faulk.

"Obviously it's pretty exciting to get the first one and get it out of the way," Faulk said. "It should give me a little confidence boost there. It's nice."

So much for that. As for the World Junior, Faulk said he has spoken with Ron Francis, the Canes' director of hockey operations about the team allowing him to compete again for Team USA -- Faulk was on the U.S. team last year and has participated in the U.S. National Team Development Program.

"(Francis) asked me if I had any preference on it and I said I didn't really want to be the one making that decision," Faulk said. "I'll leave it up to them."

"I will never, ever be disappointed to play for USA Hockey. I've played for USA Hockey the last three years of my life and played on the U.S. team for two years. If I get a chance to wear the jersey it's obviously a thrill for me.

"At the same time it's amazing to be in this league. You never want to do anything that might cost you a spot on the team or anything. That's why I'm leaving it up to them to make that decision. We'll see what happens."

In 15 games for the Canes, Faulk is averaging 21:48 in ice time, second only to Joni Pikanen on the team. He has points in his last two games after notchng an assist against the Oilers, had 24:17 TOI against the Jets and is manning a point on the Canes' first power-play unit.

General manager Jim Rutherford said the Canes might wait until the World Junior deadline, just before Christmas, to make a final decision on allowing Faulk to play in the event in Calgary and Edmonton.

Faulk scored the winning goal for the U.S. against Sweden in the gold-medal game of the 2010 IIHF World U-18 Championship in Belarus. He was second among U.S. defensemen in scoring with four points in the 2011 World Junior in Buffalo as the U.S. took the bronze.

And about that first NHL goal. Faulk said he wasn't sure if anyone kept the puck but equipment manager Bob Gorman said the puck was in the Canes' possession, so Faulk will get to keep it.

Skinner out tonight, to be evaluated

By Chip Alexander

TORONTO Canes forward Jeff Skinner will miss tonight's game against the Toronto Maple Leafs and his return won't be determined until a medical evaluation in Raleigh.

Skinner, the Canes' top scorer, missed the Winnipeg game Friday. He is out with an undisclosed injury and has spent the past few days with his family in nearby Markham.

Canes coach Kirk Muller said Sunday that Skinner -- who absorbed a big hit from Edmonton's Andy Sutton in Wednesday's game -- did not have any concussion issues. General manager Jim Rutherford was more cautionary today, saying Skinner is not feeling well and that the team would wait on the medical evaluation before making a decision on his playing status.

"He's a big part of this team and we're going to miss him and his skill level," Muller said after today's morning skate. "We'll evaluate him when we get back to Raleigh."

Captain Eric Staal was at the skate at Air Canada Centre after returning to the team following the birth Sunday of his son. Staal said his wife, Tanya, and the baby are doing well and he's ready to play.

Staal has a three-game point streak (2 goals, 3 assists) and has three goals and six assists in his last seven games for the Canes (9-18-4), who have lost eight of the last nine and are 1-5 under Muller.

"Obviously a very tough start for our team," Staal said. "It snowballs in the wrong direction and it gets difficult to climb out.

"Any time you play in Toronto it's fun. For us we're excited and looking for a win and no better place than here."

Cam Ward will be in goal for the Canes and James Reimer for the Leafs tonight. Reimer has started three of the past four games for Toronto (15-11-3) and is 0-2-1. He allowed four goals on 25 shots Friday as the Leafs lost at Washington 4-2 in their last game.

The Canes have placed goaltender Justin Peters of the Charlotte Checkers (AHL) on re-entry waivers with the purpose of recalling him, Rutherford said today. Mike Murphy was recalled last week from the Checkers and has played in two of the last three games.

Connolly’s overtime goal sinks Hurricanes

By CHIP ALEXANDER

TORONTO The Carolina Hurricanes are finally coming home after a four-game, nine-day road trip, though Canada that at times seemed as if it was 99 days long.

It didn’t help any that the trip ended in another loss.

The Toronto Maple Leafs won 2-1 in overtime Tuesday at Air Canada Centre, on Tim Connolly’s second goal of the game. Connolly tipped a rebound 44 seconds into the overtime to end it.

The Leafs (16-11-3) had taken a 1-0 lead on Connolly’s first goal, with 4:14 left in regulation. But the Canes responded.

After Jiri Tlusty was high-sticked by the Leafs’ Joffrey Lupul, a power-play goal by Alexei Ponikarovsky with 1:54 remaining tied the score 1-1 and appeared to give the Canes (9-18-5) needed momentum.

The Hurricanes played a second straight game without leading scorer Jeff Skinner, who has an undisclosed injury. Carolina general manager Jim Rutherford said Tuesday that Skinner would be evaluated by doctors today in Raleigh to determine when he can return and play.

Rutherford said Skinner had not been feeling well the past few days but that the team did not know the nature of the injury.

For much of the game, the Canes and Leafs went end to end, looking to take the lead. But the Canes’ Cam Ward and the Leafs’ James Reimer made all the stops they needed until the final minutes of the third.

Ward got more work than Reimer, who was making his fourth start since returning from a long absence caused by concussion-like symptoms. And it was important Ward got the work done after being pulled in two of the last three games.

In Friday’s game in Winnipeg, Ward was benched during the second period of a 4-2 loss and had an angry outburst on the bench that was highly emotional and uncharacteristic. Ward said he would put it behind him and be ready for the Leafs, and he was.

It didn’t take long for Ward to be tested. Four minutes into the game, the Leafs’ Phil Kessel and Lupul had a two-on-one rush into the Carolina zone, but Ward smartly stopped Kessel’s shot from the right circle.

"He gave us a chance to win tonight and that’s all you can ask," Canes coach Kirk Muller said of Ward. "He was really strong, the strongest game I’ve seen him play since I’ve been here. "That’s the Cam we know. If he plays like that we’ll get some results to start working his way." The guys played hard tonight and took it right to the end. A lot of good things."

The Hurricanes killed off two Leafs power plays in the third period. Chad LaRose had a good shorthanded opportunity on the first penalty kill. But Reimer made the stop to keep the game scoreless.

Kessel, tied for the NHL lead with 18 goals, was a pest throughout the game, floating around in the offensive zone, looking to be the sniper. Lupul also was a threat but Ward was tested from several different angles and shooters.

Canes captain Eric Staal was at Tuesday’s morning skate after returning from Raleigh, where his wife, Tanya, gave birth to the couple’s second son on Sunday. Staal extended his point streak to four games with an assist on Ponikarovsky’s goal.

"It would have been nice to end this trip with a 2-2 record," Staal said. "It was one of those games that was pretty close and could have gone either way. "It didn’t go our way, but we liked our compete and our work and Wards’ played well and can build off this game.”

Staal said he was not surprised to see Ward rebound strongly after the Winnipeg debacle. "He’s got so much God-given ability," Staal said. "He’s one of those guys who puts a lot of pressure on himself personally. "It’s been a tough year, not just for him but for a lot of people here. He just has to control what he can control and he did a good job of it tonight. I thought he was our best player and kept us in it."

"Everybody battled hard and it was a pretty fast game,” Ponikarovsky said. "They got the tip-in but we fought back at the end and got the goal on the power play.”It was a big effort from everybody. Great game by (Ward). We just have to keep battling and get through it."

Ponikarovsky said he believed the late Canes goal could provide a big boost going into overtime. "We worked as hard as we can to swing the momentum to our advantage,” he said. "Today wasn’t in our favor but we got a point out of it."

Ward had 13 saves in the opening period. The Canes had just five shots in the period and went on the power play just 27 seconds into the game after the Leafs’ Cody Franson flipped the puck over the glass for a delay-of-game penalty.

Pat Dwyer had one offensive chance on the power play but Reimer stopped Dwyer’s shot at the shortsute post.

The Leafs’ first-period power play came after Tuomo Ruutu was called for tripping. Ward had to make a nice pad save on a shot from Mikhail Grabovski.

After opening the trip with a 7-6 loss against the Calgary Flames, the Canes gave Muller his first win as coach Wednesday with 5-3 victory over the Edmonton Oilers. They lost Friday against the Winnipeg Jets.

TORONTO — Tim Connolly scored his second goal of the game at 44 seconds of overtime to lift the Toronto Maple Leafs to a 2-1 win over the Carolina Hurricanes on Tuesday night.

The Leafs center went to the goal and had an empty net to shoot at when Joffrey Lupul’s shot dribbled past Cam Ward.

Ward, who made 36 saves, broke his stick on a goal post in frustration after the winning goal.

James Reimer finished with 17 saves for the Maple Leafs. It was his first victory since returning to the lineup following six weeks of concussion-like symptoms.

Alex Ponikarovsky scored for the Hurricanes.

The offense didn’t come until the late stages of the third period.

Connolly broke a scoreless tie by tipping home Clarke MacArthur’s shot at 15:46 before Ponikarovsky tied it at 18:06 on a power play. Lupul was in the penalty box when the former Leaf converted a cross-crease pass.

The Leafs carried the play offensively, but weren’t able to generate many chances against Ward.

The Hurricanes starter had vowed to be better after getting pulled in two of his past three starts, including Carolina’s 4-2 loss in Winnipeg on Friday when he vented on the bench after getting the hook by new coach Kirk Muller.

On Tuesday, he was solid as Toronto outshot the Hurricanes 26-12 through 40 minutes and stood tall during a Leafs power-play chance early in the third period.

For the Leafs, Reimer had to endure long stretches of inactivity. One of his best saves came off a Chad LaRose shot on a short-handed rush that he got a shoulder on.

The banged-up Hurricanes have struggled since Muller replaced Paul Maurice as coach on Nov. 28.

The team is just 1-5-1 under Muller and faces an uphill struggle to reverse the course with leading scorer Jeff Skinner out with an undisclosed injury.

Toronto, meanwhile, faces a tough weekend with a visit to Buffalo on Friday and a home game against the Vancouver Canucks on Saturday.

NOTES — Skinner missed his second straight game for Carolina. The team is expected to update his condition Wednesday. ... Leafs tough guy Colton Orr was scratched for a ninth straight game. ... Toronto captain Dion Phaneuf played his 500th career NHL game.
Let the rivalry begin anew

By Chris Kuc

Roughly, say, around the George Bush administration was the last time the Blackhawks played a game in Minnesota against a team that was also among the class of their conference.

That's the George H.W. Bush presidency, not the most recent Bush to occupy the White House.

Throughout the 1980s and into the '90s, the Hawks battled the Minnesota North Stars for supremacy of the Norris Division in a bitter rivalry that matched no other in the history of either franchise. The teams met six times in contentious postseason series during a span from 1982 to 1991. When the Stars left for Dallas after the 1993 season, the rivalry disappeared as Minnesota was without an NHL team until 2000 when the Wild were born. With just four appearances in the playoffs — none against the Hawks — since then, the Wild haven't exactly been a force and games between the teams mostly have been limited to mostly meaningless regular-season contests.

That changes Wednesday night when the Hawks and Wild will hit the ice at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, Minn., for a showdown between the top two teams in the Western Conference. It could be a precursor of a rivalry for years to come as the teams will be situated in the same eight-team conference starting next season courtesy of NHL realignment.

"As far as my memory goes back this is probably as big a game (between the teams) as there has been this early in the season," said veteran winger Andrew Brunette, who played six seasons with the Wild — including the last three before signing with the Hawks. "I absolutely remember the old Norris Division. I grew up in Ontario so we had all the Norris Division games (on TV). Playing there for as long as I did, I know the fans will be excited (when) they're back in the same division because it's a natural rivalry."

The Wild have been the surprise of the league this season, accumulating the most points in the NHL with 43 entering its game Tuesday night against the Jets. The Hawks are right on their tail in the West with 40 points.

"Seeing them ahead of us and getting a chance to go at it in their building it definitely will be a game that's easy to get up for," said goaltender Ray Emery, who will make his third consecutive start for the Hawks.

The Wild rely on a stingy defense that allowed 2.10 goals per game before Tuesday and have no players in the Top 25 in scoring. The Hawks, meanwhile, have posted big offensive numbers with an average of 3.20 goals per game and have Jonathan Toews, Patrick Sharp, Marian Hossa and Patrick Kane all among the top 15 scorers.

"They're an unbelievable team this year," Kane said. "One of the things about them is you can't really put your finger on what makes them so good. It's just a collective team effort. (It's) a lot of defense, a lot of checking (and) not giving up too many goals.

"This is a big game for us. We definitely want to make up some ground on them and try to catch them in the West. Hopefully you can win a game and show them how good we are and show them we're for real too. I'm sure they're probably thinking the same thing, especially with the (down) years they've had in the past. We're not going to take them lightly."

Blackhawks at Wild preview

Staff

TV/radio: 6:30 p.m. Wednesday; Versus; WGN-AM 720.
Series: First meeting.
Last meeting: Hawks won 4-2 on Feb. 28 in Minnesota.
Probable goalies, rec, gaa
Hawks, Ray Emery, 6-1-2, 2.69
Min, N.Backstrom, 11-5-2, 2.08

Team comparison

HAWKS
(18-8-4) CATEGORY WILD (20-8-3)
3.20 (4) Goals for 2.50 (22)
2.97 (20) Goals against 2.10 (3)
18.9 (9) Power-play pct. 17.0 (19)
77.4 (27) Penalty-kill pct. 85.4 (9)

Averages, rankings through Monday.

Storyline: The Hawks put their four-game road winning streak on the line against the Wild, who are 10-4-1 at home this season. The Hawks, 9-6-1 on the road, are led in scoring by Jonathan Toews with 17 goals and 15 assists. The Wild are playing the second of back-to-back games after losing 2-1 to the Jets in Winnipeg on Tuesday night.

Bickell primed to show he belongs

By Chris Kuc,

Bryan Bickell plans to make the most of his latest opportunity to stay in the Blackhawks' lineup.

A healthy scratch the last five games, the winger is expected to return Wednesday night when the Hawks face the Wild in St. Paul, Minn., in a showdown between the top two teams in the Western Conference.

Bickell's path back was cleared when the Hawks assigned Ben Smith to Rockford of the American Hockey League on Monday night.

"I'll take the opportunity and I have to do the best I can do with it," Bickell said after Tuesday's practice at the United Center. "I wasn't playing my best and through the last couple of weeks I've been realizing what I need to do to stay focused for every shift every game."

Through 24 games this season, Bickell has three goals and two assists but failed to record a point in November. That led to his being a healthy scratch while coach Joel Quenneville turned to John Scott and then Smith to fill his role.

"It was quite frustrating," Bickell said of sitting out. "The first couple of games I think I was hard on myself. I have to take it on the ice and pick up my work ethic."

Quenneville had Bickell skating on a line with Andrew Brunette and center Dave Bolland during Tuesday's practice.

"We like (Bickell's) speed, we like his size (and) physicality," Quenneville said. "He had a really strong year for us (in 2010-11) and a good start and we want to get him back to that pace."

Seasoning: As for Smith, Quenneville said the rookie needs to be playing more than the 10 minutes, 47 seconds of ice time he averaged in seven games with the Hawks.

"We want him playing more," Quenneville said. "He's in a position where we can get him back there to get that game back to where he finished (last) season with us."

Call him starter: Ray Emery will make his third consecutive start in goal, and fourth in the last five games, when the Hawks face the Wild. Meanwhile, No. 1 netminder Corey Crawford will continue to watch from the bench.

"When a goalie gets a chance you don't want to disrupt it," Quenneville said. "You give him some confidence by putting him back in the net. (Emery has) given us what we're looking for and Crawford is working on his game, anticipating a chance."

Reality shot: Before Wednesday night's game, Versus will premier "NHL 36," a series of 10 episodes that will shadow NHL players for 36 consecutive hours. First up is Hawks winger Patrick Kane, who had a camera crew following him last week.

"It's 36 hours with a camera in your face and a microphone on (so) it's a bit different," Kane said. "It was pretty cool having a camera following you around to see what you're doing in your daily life. It was kind of weird when you'd be taping your sticks and there's a camera in your face (but) it was fun nonetheless."

Bickell back in Blackhawks' plans; Emery to start

By Chris Kuc

Bryan Bickell is getting another chance to prove he belongs in the Chicago Blackhawks' lineup.

The winger will replace rookie Ben Smith, who was sent to Rockford of the American Hockey League on Monday, when the Hawks face the Western Conference-leading Wild in Minnesota on Wednesday night.

"Ben was working hard here to show himself that he wants to be here (but) unfortunately he's gone down," Bickell said following Tuesday's practice at the United Center. "I'll take the opportunity and I have to do the best I can do with it."

Bickell has been a healthy scratch for five consecutive games after having recorded no points during the month of November.

"It was quite frustrating," Bickell said of sitting out. "The first couple of games I think I was hard on myself. I have to take it on the ice and pick up my work ethic and work hard and show coach (Joel Quenneville) I want to be in the lineup and stay (there)."

"I just need to be ready," Bickell added. "I wasn't playing my best and through the last couple of weeks I've been realizing what I need to do to stay focused and to be ready for every shift every game. (Quenneville's) told me to be ready and I think I am."

Quenneville said Bickell, who skated with center Dave Bolland and fellow winger Andrew Brunette during Tuesday's practice, can be a difference-maker.

"We like (Bickell's) speed, we like his size (and) physicality," Quenneville said. "I just think he had a really strong year for us (in 2010-11) and a good start and we want to get him back to that pace."

Meanwhile, Ray Emery will make his third consecutive start in goal when the Hawks face the Wild. The veteran has performed well during that span and has kept No. 1 netminder Corey Crawford on the bench.

"When a goalie gets a chance to get the net you don't want to disrupt it," Quenneville said. "You give him some confidence by putting him back in the net. He's given us what we're looking for and at the same time Crawford is working on his game, anticipating a chance to get back in. It's a healthy situation that Ray is playing well. He deserves to keep going."

The Blackhawks know that stats don’t tell the whole story

By ADAM L. JAHNS

Every team has bad games. But for the Blackhawks, there are two horrendous ones that skew their stats and raise doubts.

Thanks to ugly losses to the Vancouver Canucks (a 6-2 rout on Nov. 6) and the Edmonton Oilers (a 9-2 disaster on Nov. 19) — in which they allowed a combined nine power-play goals — the Hawks have one of the worst penalty-kill rankings.

Also, their goal differential of plus-7 would be better if not for those two losses.

But looks, as they say, can be deceiving.

With a matchup looming Wednesday against the NHL-leading Minnesota Wild in St. Paul, Minn., the Hawks have proved that those two games and other rough ones are just exceptions to what is otherwise a pretty good start to the season.

“ar've played some good games since that time,” coach Joel Quenneville said. “It’s a situation where we’ve had some good stretches this year and we’ve had some stretches where we’re ugly. But recently, we’re trending in the right direction.”

Those losses to the Canucks and Oilers are by far the two worst for the Hawks through 30 games. Take those two games out of the equation and the Hawks’ numbers dramatically change. Their goal differential becomes a solid plus-18 and their penalty kill improves to 85 percent from the current 77.4.

The altered penalty-kill rating would put them among the top 10 in the league instead of the bottom five. And the adjusted plus-18 mark would be the third-best mark in the Western Conference heading into Tuesday’s games.

“It’s always tough when you see those numbers that don’t look so good,” forward Patrick Sharp said. “You try to justify or think ‘Why are they that bad?’

“I like our penalty kill. I think it’s been real strong as of late. We had a bad run there for two or three games where we had seven or eight goals against. That’s going to kill the numbers especially early on the season. But I don’t know if the numbers matter as much as the on-ice play.”

Unlike last season, the Hawks are finding ways to manufacture points and remain in contests they’re not particularly impressive in such as Sunday’s overtime win against the San Jose Sharks. They are 9-2-4 in one-goal games this season.

“There’s been a couple of ugly games lately where we’ve been going to a shootout or the overtime period, but it doesn’t matter to us,” Jonathan Toews said. “We want to find a way to win. Even those tough games we have that confidence we can pull it out.”

Their game against the Wild, which played in Winnipeg on Tuesday, promises to be another tight game. The Wild have been the NHL’s biggest surprise, winning with a commitment to a system and solid goaltending.

It also will be a chance for the Hawks to prove they’re better than what some of their numbers say.

“The last couple years they haven’t been an easy team to play against, so that defensive style is taken up another notch this year,” Toews said. “We’ll be ready to stay in another tight low-scoring game.”

Andrew Brunette not Wild about facing former team

By ADAM L. JAHNS

Most players are excited to play against former teams. Andrew Brunette is the exception.

Brunette will face the Minnesota Wild for the first time after spending the last three seasons (six of the last nine) with Minnesota.

"I'm not excited," he said Tuesday. "It's not fun. I don't think when you play somewhere for so long that it's one I circle and look forward to. You just kind of want to get it over with, get a win and get the heck out of there."

Brunette signed a one-year, $2 million contract with the Hawks after recording 18 goals and 46 points for the Wild last season. The Wild missed the playoffs the last three seasons, but Brunette isn't surprised by their rise to the top of the league this season.

"They've seemed to get back to their way of playing," Brunette said. "Historically, or since their existence, the staple of their game is a strong, disciplined hard-working system."

Blackhawks' Kane enjoys taste of ‘reality’

By Tim Sassone

Now Patrick Kane knows how the stars of reality TV feel.
The day-in-the-life series “NHL 36” by NHL Original Productions debuts
Wednesday at 5:30 p.m. on Versus, with Kane the series’ first subject.
Cameras followed Kane around for 36 hours last week at home and away
from the rink for the 30-minute documentary.
“It’s 36 hours, camera in your face, microphone on, it’s a little different,”
Kane said. “You feel bad for the reality stars who have to go through it
every day.
“It was fun and a different experience. It was pretty cool thinking a camera
was following me around to see what you’re doing throughout your daily life.
I tried not to change things and just be myself. Hopefully it turns out good.”
Being the first player chosen for the series is further proof of Kane’s status
as one of the league’s superstars.
“I think that’s pretty special,” Kane said. “For whatever reason, I was picked.
I think we kind of jumped on the opportunity and said we’d do it right away,
maybe that’s why.
“We had the day off Sunday (Dec. 4), so I did some different things. I
watched some football, went to lunch, went to the Blackhawks store, walked
around the city. Monday was a game day (against Phoenix).
“It was kind of weird, you’re sitting there taping your sticks and there’s a
camera in your face.”
Western showdown:
Call it the biggest game so far for the Hawks, who play Western Conference
leader Minnesota at the Excel Energy Center on Wednesday night.
The surprising Wild took a seven-game winning streak into their game at
Winnipeg on Tuesday.
“Watching them you have an appreciation for how well they check and how
well they’re playing in their team game,” Hawks coach Joel Quenneville
said. “Whether it’s timely saves or timely goals, they have a lot of things
going in a positive way for them. They have a good, young team and it’s a
fun place to play.”
Rookie Wild coach Mike Yeo certainly is the leading candidate for the
Adams Trophy as coach of the year.
“They’ve been an unbelievable team this year,” Patrick Kane said. “You
can’t really put your finger on what makes them so good. It’s just a
collective team effort.
“This is a big game for us. We definitely want to gain some ground on them.
Hopefully we can win the game and show them we’re for real, too. We’re
not going to take them lightly.”
It’s Emery again:
Joel Quenneville will give backup goalie Ray Emery his third straight start in
Wednesday’s game against the Wild.
Emery has won his last three starts over St. Louis, the Islanders and San
Jose and is 6-1-2 for the season.
“When a goalie gets a chance to get the net you don’t want to disrupt it,”
Quenneville said. “You let him go and give him some confidence by putting
him back in net. He’s giving us what we’re looking for. Ray deserves the
chance to keep it going.”
Hawks want Bickell to be a factor again

By Tim Sassone

Maybe this isn’t Bryan Bickell’s final chance with the Blackhawks, but the left winger knows he might be running out of opportunities to show last season was no fluke.

After sitting out five games because of ineffective play, Bickell will be back in the lineup for Wednesday’s key Western Conference showdown with Minnesota.

Bickell went the whole month of November without a point and lost his edge from a physical standpoint. He has 50 hits in 24 games, but coach Joel Quenneville says he needs to see more.

“With his speed and his size and his presence he should be, whether it’s more hits, more of a factor,” Quenneville said. “We saw that a lot over the last year and I think we need to see that more consistently in his game. If he does that, then he’s a player you can use in all situations and you have a real appreciation what he brings to our lineup as well.”

Bickell, who had 17 goals and 37 points last season and 2 more goals in 5 playoff game, admits he has lost his focus from a mental standpoint but has learned from his time on the sidelines.

“I have to pick up my work ethic and show the coach I want to be in the lineup and stay in the lineup,” Bickell said. “I need to be game in and game out the way I can, be physical and contribute to the team any way I can.

“Being out, I wasn’t playing my best. Through the last couple weeks I’ve been realizing what I need to do to stay focused and be ready for every shift every game.”

It has been a frustrating few weeks for Bickell, who is minus-8 with just 3 goals. Bickell showed a big wrist shot last season that we haven’t seen much of this year.

“It’s still in there,” Bickell said. “The shots haven’t been going in like last year.”

In addition to missing games, he has been working hard after practices and morning skates with assistant coach Mike Kitchen.

“I know I’ll be in better shape,” Bickell said. “Kitchen, he likes the bag skates and he’s been putting it to me and John (Scott) since we’ve been out. I know I don’t have any more bag skates with Kitch because it’s not pleasant.”

Bickell earned the chance to get back on the ice after rookie Ben Smith was returned to Rockford on Monday.

“Unfortunately he’s gone down, but I’ll take the opportunity and do the best I can do with it,” Bickell said.

Quenneville said Smith was sent down to play more in offensive situations.

“We want him playing more,” Quenneville said. “His upside is offensive, and I think not playing the quantity and quality that we would like or he would like, with having an extra guy around here we’re in a position to get him back there and get his game back to where he finished (last) season.”

Battle Notes: Blackhawks at Wild

SCOTT KRINCH

Blackhawks at Wild

Where? When? Television?
Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, MN; 6:30 p.m.; Versus

Where they stand
Blackhawks: 18-8-4 (40 points) - First in Central Division, Second in Eastern Conference
Wild: 20-8-3 (43 points) - First in Northwest Division, First in Eastern Conference

Last game
The Blackhawks are coming off a 3-2 OT victory against the Sharks on Sunday night. Patrick Sharp scored the game-winning goal at the 4:26 mark of overtime. Andrew Brunette had some late heroics, scoring a goal to tie the game at the 18:54 mark of the third period. Ray Emery picked up the victory in his second straight game since taking over for Corey Crawford.

The Wild fell, 2-1 to the Jets on a late goal in third period by Jeff Little of Winnipeg. Guillaume Latendresse scored the only goal for Minnesota and Mikko Koivu and Dany Heatley added assists.

Who's Hot?
The stars have been shining bright for Chicago this month. Sharp leads the Blackhawks in goals (5) and points (8) in the month of December. Marian Hossa, Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane have each notched seven points in December.

Minnesota has spread around the wealth so far this month. Kyle Brodziak leads the team in goals (4) and is tied in points (6) with Koivu and Pierre-Marc Bouchard.

Storylines
The Blackhawks are looking for their third straight victory and trying to state their case for why they're the top team in the Eastern Conference.
Can Emery continue his winning streak since taking over for Crawford?
How will the 'Hawks fare against Minnesota's stingy defense, who has only allowed 2.10 goals per game?

Between the pipes
Emery for the Blackhawks
Undecided for the Wild

Prediction
Blackhawks 2, Wild 1

Avalanche defeats San Jose in shootout

By Adrian Dater
The Denver Post

Avalanche fans can be excused for often feeling and looking scared about what's in front of them. There has been a lot of frustration over the last calendar year, and theirs was a team that entered Tuesday night in last place in the Northwest Division against a team with a string of top regular-season finishes over the years in the San Jose Sharks?.

But there is one time when Avs fans start to smile, maybe even talk a little trash to the opponent about what lies ahead. That is shootout time.

Winning in a shootout for the 16th time in the last 17 outings, the Avs recovered from blowing a lead in the final minute of regulation to beat the Sharks 4-3 at the Pepsi Center. Rookie Gabriel Landeskog made it look easy, putting a puck past Sharks goalie Antti Niemi in the fifth round of the shootout to give the Avs the lead that goalie Sem- yon Varlamov preserved with a save on the Sharks' Brad Winchester?.

The win snapped a three-game losing streak for the Avs and extended their home win streak to four. How does a team that finished 29th last year and came in as cellar dwellers in the Northwest win almost every time in a shootout?

"We usually find enough goals to win, and we've had really good goaltenders in the shootout," said Avs forward Matt Duchene?, whose third-period power-play goal gave the Avs a 3-2 lead that held up until San Jose's Patrick Marleau? scored with 22 seconds left with the extra attacker. "Varly is outstanding, (Craig) Anderson was great and so was (Peter Budaj?)."

The Avs had some bad moments in the second period, allowing two goals to trail 2-1 entering the third. They stood around too much on the goals against, but otherwise they played a solid game, outshooting San Jose 33-30. Daniel Winnik? scored at 6:31 of the third to tie it, putting home the rebound of an Erik Johnson? blast from the point. On the Avs' only power play of the night, the passing was crisp and clean, and Duchene finished it off with his 11th of the season at 11:51.

"We stuck with the game plan. I thought we played the right way for the majority of the game," Avs coach Joe Sacco said. "We've had a good record for a while in shootouts, obviously. I thought from start to finish we played a solid game."

Varlamov was victimized by poor play in front of him on the tying goal, as the Avs failed to clear the puck out when given the chance and too many forwards "overextended their shifts." Sacco said. But Varlamov put the goal behind him to play well in OT and, other than a Joe Pavelski? shot that dribbled through his pads in the third round of the shootout, he stopped everything from there. Varlamov is now 5-0 in shootouts this season, as is the team.

"Every shot is very tough in a shootout. I just wait and try to see what is going to happen," Varlamov said. "It is very tough to play against the Sharks. They are a really good team, a very aggressive team. Every game is huge for us and for the fans, especially at home."

The Avs also got a sensational goal from rookie Stefan Elliott in the first period, a coast-to-coast job.

"A great individual play there," Sacco said.

Said Elliott: "It was nice to see the puck go in there. It's been a bit for me. I'm just trying to be solid in my own end first and go from there."

Footnotes. Brandon Yip?, who had zero points through his first nine games, was a healthy scratch for the Avs .... Varlamov has allowed two goals on 16 shootout attempts this year.

Varlamov leads Avalanche over Sharks 4-3 in SO

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER — Semyon Varlamov made 27 saves, Gabriel Landeskog scored the decisive goal in a shootout and the Colorado Avalanche beat the San Jose Sharks 4-3 on Tuesday night.

Matt Duchene, Stefan Elliott and Daniel Winnik had regulation goals for the Avalanche. Milan Hejduk also scored in the shootout.

Antti Niemi made 30 saves, Dan Boyle had a goal and an assist and Jamie McGinn and Patrick Marleau also scored for the Sharks. San Jose is 2-5-2 in its last nine games.

Hejduk scored on the first attempt of the shootout and Joe Pavelski tied it in the third round. Landeskog beat Niemi in the fifth round before Varlamov stopped Brad Winchester to end it.

San Jose trailed 3-2 late and pressed for the equalizer, getting it with 22 seconds left. With Niemi off for an extra skater, Marleau chipped in a pass from Logan Couture to send the game into overtime.

Duchene made it 3-2 with his 11th goal of the season with 8:09 left.

Winnik made it 2-all with his fourth goal of the season and his first since Nov. 4. He grabbed Erik Johnson’s rebound in front of Niemi, skated around the back of the net and stuffed the puck into the open goal with 13:29 left in regulation.

San Jose tied it early in the second on a power play. With TJ Galiardi off for high sticking, Boyle sent a shot toward the Colorado net and McGinn tipped it past Varlamov at the 3:16 mark.

It was McGinn’s seventh goal of the season.

Boyle gave the Sharks the lead with his second goal of the season. He pinched in, picked up Pavelski’s rebound between the circles and beat Varlamov with a wrist shot with 6:21 left in the second period.

Elliott broke a scoreless tie with a great individual effort late in the first period. The rookie picked up the puck in the Colorado end, skated through the Sharks defense and beat Niemi with a shot from the right circle with 16.6 seconds left. It was Elliott’s third goal of the season.

The teams generated few quality chances before Elliott’s goal. Both clubs had 11 shots on goal in the period.

Notes: Colorado C Paul Stastny was back in the lineup after missing three games with a torso injury. ... The Sharks’ power-play goal was their first in five games and second in the last nine.

Michael Arace commentary: Back from bench, Jackets’ Mason enjoys taste of victory

By Michael Arace
The Columbus Dispatch Wednesday December 14, 2011 5:37 AM

Goaltender Steve Mason lost his starting job on Nov.?15. At that point, the Blue Jackets were 3-13-1, their playoff expectations were vaporizing and nobody, save for the visiting teams, wanted to see Mason in Nationwide Arena. He was booed during introductions.

After a month on the shelf, Mason was tossed in against the Vancouver Canucks, the defending Western Conference champions, winners of their previous nine games. Granted, Curtis Sanford needed a break, but wasn’t Allen York available?

There was no poking fun on this day, Blue Jackets coach Scott Arniel looks like a genius, and Mason is smiling. Imagine that, Mason, smiling.

Mason played through a blunted skate-blade in the second period, rose from what looked like a serious injury in the third and beat the Canucks 2-1 in a shootout last night. A crowd of 15,808 marveled — and cheered. The fans did not see this coming.

Late in the third period, Mason went into the splits for a kick save and the game stopped as he writhed in pain. It looked as if he had ripped a groin off the bone. More than five minutes passed before he was able to rise and leave the ice.

As it turned out, it was just a wicked cramp in his right quadriceps. He was given a quick massage and some fluids, and he returned.

“I need an IV,” he said later.

Why did he come back?

“I spent so much time on the bench already,” he said. “It was a difficult situation for the Sandman (Sanford); he was coming in cold, and that’s not fair to him. I just wanted to win the game so badly — not just for myself, but for the team as a whole.”

Mason went out with 6:46 left in regulation and returned with 3:44 to play. He got the Blue Jackets to overtime, which was not an easy thing — not against the Canucks. In overtime, he made a neat kick save on Mason Raymond that helped the cause.

In the shootout, Mason stopped one of two Canucks shooters, and that was good enough on a rare night when the Jackets converted on all three of their tries.

Mason was named the first star and he took a quick turn on the ice, handed his stick to a kid in the crowd and headed back down the runway. He was tired, and dehydrated — but he felt the moment, heard the cheers. How could he not? He knows the other side of it so well.

“It’s never fun to get booed in your own building,” Mason said. “At the same time, you have to let it roll off your back because you still have to stop the puck. … This, it’s a great feeling.”

The Jackets are 6-4-3 in their past 13 games. They now have a clue on defense. Sanford has benefited. Mason finally got a turn.

“There were games early on there where we were giving up 12 odd-man rushes in a game,” defenseman James Wisniewski said. “That’s ridiculous. Our penalty kill was around 75 percent. We’re playing better — and (Mason) played huge tonight. I wanted him to get the win so desperately.”

He needed it.

“There have been some growing pains,” Mason said. “The guys have been working hard to improve, and so have I. I still think I can be an elite goalie in this league. I have no doubt I’ll get there through the hard work I’m putting in with (goalie coach) Ian Clark.”

Such was one of the themes that went around the locker room last night. It has been a hard go for Mason, and for the team, but no one is bailing on him, or the team. So beating the Canucks in such dramatic fashion felt good.

“Obviously, we all believe in him,” captain Rick Nash said. “We’ve seen him do the job before. Everyone — myself included — has peaks and valleys. It’s nice to see Mase win one like that. Like I said, we know what he can do.”

It is but one game, nothing more or less. Mason does not make it out to be any bigger.

He will have some fluids, get back to practice and see if he can do it all over again, when he gets the chance.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 12.14.2011
Blue Jackets 2, Canucks 1 (SO): A building block

By Aaron Portzline
The Columbus Dispatch Wednesday December 14, 2011 5:34 AM

After one month out of action, Steve Mason was summoned to start last night for the Blue Jackets against the Vancouver Canucks, who might be the biggest test in the NHL for any goaltender, much less one covered in a fine layer of rust.

Blue Jackets coach Scott Arniel, asked to explain his decision to thrust Mason into a game against the highest-scoring club in the Western Conference, responded with a question of his own: “Why not?”

But that flip response does not represent the nerves that were twittering behind the scenes last night, as Mason — the once (and future?) franchise goaltender — skated out to face not only the Canucks, but a home crowd that has taken to booing and jeering him through a string of losses.

What played out, then, was only somewhat short of stunning:

Mason, large and confident, made 30 saves in the Blue Jackets’ 2-1 shootout win before 15,808 in Nationwide Arena.

“More so for the mental side of Steve, that was a big, big game,” Arniel said.

Mark Letestu, Rick Nash and James Wisniewski scored for the Blue Jackets in the shootout, and only Alex Burrows was successful in the Canucks’ two attempts.

The Blue Jackets had lost nine straight to Vancouver (0-6-3) before last night, and here was Mason — out of action since Nov. 7 — leading the way.

“It felt absolutely great to be out there,” Mason said. “I’ve worked very hard since I’ve been out. I think I’ve matured in a lot of ways. Nobody likes to sit and watch, but you have to make the most of it and you have to be ready.

“It felt great to be a part of (the win), though. I’m not going to lie about that.”

There was a superhero aspect to the performance, too.

Mason did the hyper-splits with 6:46 left in regulation, his legs stretching to an almost obtuse angle. Everyone who saw the replay likely winced.

Mason rolled to his left and writhed in pain, punching the ice. His right thigh muscle had been twitching with cramps for most of the game, prompting him to chug Gatorade and Pedialyte during the first two intermissions.

This one, though, was a full-on clutch, forcing Curtis Sanford to play for 3:02 of the third.

“Massive spasm,” Mason said. “I pretty much collapsed on the dressing room floor and had guys rubbing it. We got it under control after a few minutes.

“I wasn’t sure if (Arniel) wanted me back in there, so I said, ‘Arnie, can I go?’ He said, ‘If you’re ready.’ So in I went.”

The Blue Jackets took a 1-0 lead in the first period on Jeff Carter’s sixth goal of the season.

It stayed 1-0 until the 8:03 mark of the third when Vancouver’s Maxim Lapierre snuck past Carter in the slot and buried a bang-bang pass from Chris Higgins.

That was the Canucks’ 25th shot.

There was a sense of great relief in the Blue Jackets’ dressing room.

“We were playing terrible when he was in the nets early in the season,” Wisniewski said. “For us to play like we did, and have him play like he did, it’s the perfect scenario, and I’m happy for him.”
Blue Jackets notebook: Wisniewski goal in shootout a winner

By Shawn Mitchell
The Columbus Dispatch Wednesday December 14, 2011 5:32 AM

The game-ending shootout goal scored by James Wisniewski wasn’t pretty, but there were no style critics in a jubilant Blue Jackets dressing room last night after a 2-1 win over the Vancouver Canucks.

“I can’t say much,” said chuckling center Jeff Carter. “I’m not too good in the shootouts. He’s got one more (shootout goal) than me this year.”

Wisniewski, a slap-shooting defenseman, said he thought about taking a slap shot but instead chose finesse.

He faked a shot, made a backhand deke and pulled the puck back to his forehand before slipping it between the far post and the outstretched pad of Vancouver goaltender Roberto Luongo.

“With that move, you’re all in,” Wisniewski said. “You either get to slide it in the empty net or you shove it in his pads.”

Wisniewski’s goal seemed to transpire in slow motion, but it gave the Blue Jackets an insurmountable 3-1 edge in shootout goals.

Wisniewski said the earlier conversions by No.?1 shooter Mark Letestu and No.?2 Rick Nash took the pressure off.

The Blue Jackets led 2-1 after two rounds when Wisniewski took his turn.

“I had to score to win or (Steve Mason) had to make a save to win,” Wisniewski said. “Those are probably your best odds. So it was a little bit looser going out there on that shootout than going out there knowing you have to score.”

Wisniewski improved to 3 of 6 in shootouts. He said he was told that he would be the third shooter as soon as the final horn ended overtime.

It was the third time in Blue Jackets history that they converted all three of their chances in a three-round shootout.

Quick return

Blue Jackets right winger Derek Dorsett could return to the ice as soon as today, coach Scott Arniel said.

Dorsett suffered what appeared to be a severe injury to his lower left leg during a loss to Boston on Saturday, but it wasn’t as bad as it looked.

“From what it looked like when it happened to where it is now … we were expecting something long, long term,” Arniel said. “He twisted his whole leg there in a crazy fashion, and somehow he’s coming out of it.”

Dorsett had been the Blue Jackets’ hottest player before the injury, with four goals in his previous seven games.

“We think we dodged a bullet,” general manager Scott Howson said.

To the front

Center Sammy Pahlsson did not play because of illness. The Blue Jackets are carrying only 12 uninjured forwards, so defenseman Aaron Johnson switched positions and played 6:39 at right wing on the fourth line with Letestu and Jared Boll.

Johnson has experience as a forward. He switched to right wing and played there regularly late in the 2006-07 season for the Blue Jackets.

Banger

Cody Byers made his Blue Jackets debut after being called up from minor-league Springfield on Monday to fill in for Dorsett.

“I wasn’t expecting it at all,” Byers said. “I feel like I can contribute offensively, but I don’t base my game on that. It’s just doing the little things, playing simple, being sound defensively. Bang some bodies and grind away.”

Slap shot
Jackets-Canucks summary

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Columbus won shootout 3-1

FIRST PERIOD: Scoring — 1. Columbus, Carter 6 (Wisniewski, Letestu), 10:32 (pp). Penalties — H.Sedin, Van (cross-checking), 8:30; Tyutin, Col (tripping), 8:30; Kesler, Van (cross-checking), 9:53; Weise, Van (hooking), 14:52; Byers, Col (high-sticking), 17:13.

SECOND: Penalties — Brassard, Col (tripping), 1:38; Johansen, Col (tripping), 7:33; Burrows, Van (goaltender interference), 16:00.


SHOOTOUT: Vancouver 1 (Hodgson NG, Burrows G); Columbus 3 (Letestu G, Nash G, Wisniewski G).

Shots on goal: Vancouver 5-14-11-2—32; Columbus 10-11-6-3—30. Power plays: Vancouver 0 of 4; Columbus 1 of 3. Goalies: Vancouver, Luongo 11-6-2 (30 shots-29 saves); Columbus, Mason 4-12-1 (31-30), Sanford (13:14 third, 1-1), Mason 4-12-1 (16:16 third). A: 15,808. T: 2:33.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 12.14.2011
These losses bug him.

Coach Scott Arniel said the ways in which the Blue Jackets have lost — blown leads and boneheaded mistakes — have made this season all the more trying. "If teams are taking games away from us because they're better than us, you wouldn't be so frustrated," Arniel said. "But when you gift-wrap a few of them, it's really frustrating."

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 12.14.2011
Columbus Blue Jackets

Season status report

Wednesday December 14, 2011 5:29 AM

3: Consecutive games in which Blue Jackets center Jeff Carter has scored a goal. Carter opened the scoring last night with his sixth goal of the season.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 12.14.2011
Mason confident in return as Blue Jackets top Canucks in shootout  

By Aaron Portzline  
The Columbus Dispatch Wednesday December 14, 2011 4:42 AM  

After one month out of action, Blue Jackets goaltender Steve Mason was summoned to start tonight against the Vancouver Canucks, who might be the biggest test in the NHL for any goalie, much less one covered in a fine layer of rust.  

Blue Jackets coach Scott Arniel, asked to explain his decision to thrust Mason into a game against the highest-scoring club in the Western Conference, responded with a question of his own: "Why not?"  

But that flip response does not represent the nerves that were twittering behind the scenes last night, as Mason — the once (and future?) franchise goaltender — skated out to face not only the Canucks, but a home crowd that has taken to booing and jeering him through a string of losses.  

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"Moreso for the mental side of Steve," Arniel said, "that was a big, big game."  

Mark Letestu, Rick Nash and James Wisniewski scored for the Blue Jackets in the shootout, and only Alex Burrows could score for the Canucks.  

The Blue Jackets had lost nine straight (0-6-3) to Vancouver before tonight, and here was Mason — out of action since Nov. 15 — leading the way.  

"It felt absolutely great to be out there," Mason said. "I've worked very hard since I've been out. I think I've matured in a lot of ways. Nobody likes to sit and watch, but you have to make the most of it and you have to be ready.  

"I really wanted to win this game, not just for me but for the team as a whole. It felt great to be a part of it, though. I'm not going to lie about that."  

There was a superhero aspect to the performance, too.  

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"We were playing terrible when he was in the nets early in the season," defenseman James Wisniewski said. "For us to play like we did, and have him play like he did, it's the perfect scenario, and I'm happy for him."  

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 12.14.2011
Brad Richards is happy in his new home and happy with his decision this summer to leave the Stars.

That doesn't mean he didn't like Dallas, it's just that the Stars weren't offering what the Rangers were -- and that doesn't just mean a nine-year contract worth $60 million.

"Where they were at the time, there was just so much uncertainty, and I had been through that before," he said of a shaky ownership situation that led to his departure from the Tampa Bay Lightning in the trade that brought him to the Stars. "I'm happy to be here with an original six team. There's great tradition here."

In fact, the move to New York couldn't be working out better for Richards. The Rangers are 17-7-4 and he has 11 goals and 14 assists.

"The team has had a chance to grow together for a few years, and I got to jump in at the right time," Richards said. "The staff has been here, the young guys know what's needed of them, it's a team game, nothing more than that."

He also said he likes the Stars and what they are doing.

"We were a good team last year and could have been in the top five in the conference, that's how close it was," he said of a squad that crumbled down the stretch under the weight of several injuries. "I'm not surprised that they're right there" this season.
Stars' Mark Fistric finishes three-game suspension, could return Thursday

MIKE HEIKA
Staff writer
mheika@dallasnews.com
Published: 13 December 2011 09:37 PM

Briefly: Brad Richards played in his 800th career regular-season game Tuesday night, while Stars winger Loui Eriksson played in his 400th. ... Mark Fistric served the third game of a three-game suspension for charging and is eligible to return Thursday against the Islanders. ... Adam Pardy and Toby Petersen were healthy scratches for the Stars. ... Sean Avery was a healthy scratch for the Rangers. ... Steve Ott went 10-5 in the faceoff circle.

Former Star Jeff Woywitka thrilled by role with Rangers

MIKE HEIKA
Staff writer
mheika@dallasnews.com
Published: 13 December 2011 09:38 PM

Defenseman Jeff Woywitka, who played 63 games with the Stars last season, has always maintained a positive attitude, and said that's helped him land in great gigs like the one he has now with the Rangers.

Woywitka signed with Montreal in August, was put on waivers in October, was picked up by the Rangers, and now is playing on one of the best teams in the NHL.

"You just have to be patient and believe in yourself and believe it will work out," Woywitka said of a pro career that has spanned 10 years and five different organizations. "This is such a great place for me to be right now, but I never would have guessed I would be here."

Holy goalie! Stars’ Bachman shuts out Brad Richards, Rangers in 1-0 win

Associated Press

Published: 13 December 2011 07:05 PM

NEW YORK (AP) — Richard Bachman’s second NHL win was hardly routine. It’s not often a goalie has more open-ice hits than goals allowed.

The Dallas Stars newcomer followed up a victory in his first start with a 34-save effort in a 1-0 win over the New York Rangers on Tuesday night.

Bachman wasn’t beaten by any pucks, and he even earned a tie in a race for one in the first period, when he sped out of his crease in a chase for a loose puck in the left circle. The goalie arrived at the same time as onrushing Rangers forward Carl Hagelin and collided with him.

Hagelin was sent off for charging, Bachman shook off the hit and went on to a flawless performance.

“You kind of expect to get hit, but I didn’t expect my helmet to fly off, and I am sure that made it look a lot worse than it was,” said the 24-year-old goalie from Salt Lake City. "No way do I blame him for hitting me. I came out and we both kind of got to the puck at the same time, and that's what happens."

No one could have predicted that would be the keynote play in the game until defenseman Trevor Daley broke the deadlock with just 4:59 left.

Since being recalled from the Texas Stars on Nov. 27, Bachman has played in three games — the past three on Dallas’ schedule. After stopping all 11 shots he faced in a one-period relief appearance at San Jose last Thursday, Bachman made 27 saves in a 2-1 victory at Los Angeles on Saturday.

Two starts, two wins, one goal against.

"I don't think it really has sunk in quite yet," Bachman said. "As the game goes on and stuff, I tried just to settle in and not think too much about what was going on and the score and where I was playing.

"When you look back and think about the game we just had and the win, it's pretty exciting."

It seemed neither team would break through, as few scoring chances were generated during the slogfest that included multiple whistles for icing and offside. But Daley finally found the net, finishing off a give-and-go play with Mike Ribeiro in the closing minutes.

Henrik Lundqvist was the hard-luck loser despite making 27 saves and shaking off a second-period injury. The Rangers lost for only the third time in 10 games (7-2-1). It was a disappointing finish for Brad Richards, who played his first game against the Stars since he signed a nine-year, $60 million deal with the Rangers in July.

After defenseman Jeff Woywitka turned over the puck in the New York zone, Daley fed the puck to Ribeiro, took a return pass from him and streaked down the middle to beat Lundqvist from in close for his third goal this season.

"I tried to stay patient," Lundqvist said. "He kind of went side to side a couple of times, and Daley finally threw it between my pads. I probably could’ve played it differently and made the save. It's frustrating not to come with any points."

That was all the offense Dallas needed to win for the fourth time in six games.

New York went 0 for 4 on the power play, including two chances in the third period — one after Dallas took the lead — and was shut out for the third time this season.

"This is a grind game," Stars coach Glen Gulutzan said. "We just wanted to make sure we utilized their bench a little bit and kept the game in the trenches so we could give ourselves a chance on the road."

The Rangers received a major scare in the second period when Lundqvist was felled by a drive from Starsdefenseman Sheldon Souray, who is known to have one of the NHL’s hardest slap shots.
Morning skate NY Rangers No Avery, but plenty of drama

Mike Heika / Reporter
mheika@dallasnews.com | Bio
12:41 PM on Tue., Dec. 13, 2011

Both the Stars and NY Rangers will use the same lineups they did in their last games  a 6-1 win for the Rangers over Florida and a 2-1 win for the Stars over LA.

That means Sean Avery will be a healthy scratch for the Rangers and won’t face his old teammates.

Still, there should be plenty to like about tonight’s contest at Madison Square Garden. Brad Richards and Jeff Woywitka are both in the lineup for New York and played for the Stars last season. Radek Dvorak seemed to have plenty of jump at the morning skate, playing the building where he had the most offensive success in his career.

Here are expected lineups:

DALLAS
Loui Eriksson-Jamie Benn-Michael Ryder
Brenden Morrow-Mike Ribeiro-Steve Ott
Eric Nystrom-Vernon Fiddler-Radek Dvorak
Jake Dowell-Tom Wandell-Tomas Vincour
Sheldon Souray-Stephane Robidas
Nicklas Grossman-Trevor Daley
Alex Goligoski-Philip Larsen
Richard Bachman

NY RANGERS
Ruslan Fedotenko-Brad Richards-Ryan Callahan
Artem Anisimov-Derek Stepan-Marian Gaborik
Brandon Dubinsky-Erik Christensen-Brandon Prust
Brian Boyle-John Mitchell-Carl Hagelin
Ryan McDonagh-Dan Girardi
Michael Del Zotto-Steve Eminger
Jeff Woywitka-Anton Stralman
Henrik Lundqvist

The Rangers have a ton of great players, and Lundqvist (the twin brother for former Stars center Joel Lundqvist) has a 10-2-1 record with a 1.91 goals-against average and a .934 save percentage in his last 13 games.

But keep an eye on two guys you might not have seen before.
Derek Stepan has really made a push as the No. 2 center. He has 19 points in his last 19 games and is coming off a game in which he had two goals and one assist.

Meanwhile, Dan Girardi has stepped in for the injured Marc Staal and been nothing short of spectacular.

Girardi leads all NHL players in time on ice at 27:41. He has three goals and six assists for nine points and is plus-6. He also has 79 blocked shots (2nd in the NHL among defensemen) and 74 hits (8th in the NHL among defensemen) to go with 21 takeaways (4th in the NHL among defensemen).

Some quotes from the morning skate:

"For me it's not as much, but certainly for the guys in that locker room it is. You hope - and it usually does take place - that your players rise a little bit to a level. That's what we are hoping for tonight. We'll see what matchups they want tonight, if any, and we'll go from there. We know he's out there, we know he is a great player. Just hope our battle and compete level are higher because of that fact."
— Stars coach Glen Gulutzan on facing Brad Richards

"You still miss all of your buddies and talk to them as much as I can. Loui (Eriksson) still sends his little chirps once in a while, but I definitely miss all of those guys for sure."
— Brad Richards on his old teammates

"The team has had a chance to grow together for a few years, and I got to jump in at the right time. The staff has been here, the young guys know what's needed of them, it's a team game, nothing more than that."
— Brad Richards on his new teammates

"We were a good team last year and could have been in the top five in the conference, that's how close it was. I'm not surprised that they're right there (this year)."
— Brad Richards on the Stars

Mike Heika answers your questions each week in the Inside the Dallas Stars newsletter. Here is a sample of this week's newsletter:

Q: I know Jamie Benn says he is OK playing center (based on his interviews). However, do you think he would score more from the wing? If he were moved back to wing, obviously we would need to move a current center to the first or second line. If not, then we would need to trade for a center or bring one up from Austin. I am thinking that with Burish coming back, we have a lot of players wanting to play. A trade might be possible. However, I am leading up to Travis Morin. In 23 games with the Texas Stars, he has 4G and 18 A (a -9). Just what a center is supposed to do. He is 27 and should be ready. Since we are in a good spot in the standings, it may be too early for this move. Of course, I am a fan of his and of Fraser. Maybe we are saving them for next year!

Dick C.

HEIKA: Hey Dick, I'm actually with you in believing that Jamie Benn would be best used as a wing. However, the way the Stars are set up right now, they want to see if he can be a top-level, two-way center in the mold of Ryan Kesler. I can appreciate that, and I can understand the reasoning, because, frankly, they don't have a top-line center in the organization other than Mike Ribeiro. I just don't think Travis Morin is the man to make that jump. Quite honestly, Tom Wandell would probably be more suited to an audition as Benn's center.

So, I'm fine with Benn working at this to see what his potential might be, but I also would be on the lookout for an NHL-proven top-line center with the thought that Benn should eventually move back to left wing.

I know the Stars disagree with us, but that's what makes sports fun.

Heika: The opportunity is there for Bachman to seize the backup goalie role

Published: 13 December 2011 07:45 AM

Mike Heika answers your questions each week in the Inside the Dallas Stars newsletter. Here is a sample of this week’s newsletter:

Q: What are the chances that Richard Bachman stays as the back-up and the Stars trade Andrew Raycroft?

Mark F.

HEIKA: The good thing for the Stars is they have six more games until Christmas, when Kari Lehtonen might possibly return from his groin injury. Those six games will be imperative in collecting data before they make a very important decision on goaltending. If Bachman seizes the opportunity, the guess is they keep him up and find something else to do with Raycroft (a trade or a move to the minors). After all, when Lehtonen does return, I don’t think it’s smart to play him on the rotation of 8-out-of-every-10 games that the Stars have chosen to play him over the past two seasons. If they give Lehtonen more rest games (which they should), they are going to have to have confidence in their back-up to play a significant role. That player could be Bachman if he proves it in the interim, it could be Raycroft if he proves it in the interim ... or it could be a goalie acquired in trade if neither Raycroft nor Bachman can prove himself.

Heika: Once Fistric comes back, Larsen will stay with team, Vincour goes back to minors

Published: 13 December 2011 07:43 AM

Mike Heika answers your questions each week in the Inside the Dallas Stars newsletter. Here is a sample of this week’s newsletter:

Q: What do the Stars do when Mark Fistric comes back and they have eight healthy defensemen? I sure hope they’re not thinking about sending Philip Larsen back to the minors.

Tim in Dallas

HEIKA: Because the Stars traded Krys Barch, they have an open roster spot. That means they could keep both Larsen and Tomas Vincour when Fistric returns from his three-game suspension on Thursday and then make the tough decision to allow the most effective players to play. That could mean that both Fistric and Adam Pardy are healthy scratches going forward. The problem with that plan is that when Adam Burish returns from his broken hand (possibly as early as Monday), then either Larsen or Vincour have to go back.

If I had to guess at this, I would say that should everyone be healthy on Monday, Vincour will go back to the minors and Larsen will stick around. That would mean eight defensemen and two healthy scratches on D, but I don’t think that’s any more challenging than two healthy scratches on the forward side.

I think they would keep Larsen for the short-term, play him or Fistric when the situation calls for it and run with that until it becomes cumbersome.

Stars to face Brad Richards for first time; could also see two other former teammates

By MIKE HEIKA
Staff Writer
mheika@dallasnews.com

There was likely little chance the Stars were going to sign Brad Richards last summer. The high-scoring free agent center made it clear pretty early on that he wasn't interested in a contract extension unless the team had resolved nagging ownership issues, and the Stars weren't sold until last month to Canadian businessman Tom Gaglardi.

Richards eventually signed a nine-year, $60 million contract with the New York Rangers.

"It's nobody's fault that I left [the Stars], it was my decision and I take full accountability for it," Richards told the New York Post. "The three [full] years I was there, we didn't make the playoffs, and the organization wasn't spending the money that six, seven or eight other teams were in the tough Western Conference."

When the Stars play against the Rangers Tuesday at Madison Square Garden, they'll get their first glimpse of Richards, who led Dallas in scoring in 2009-10 with 91 points, the second most points in a single season for any player since the team moved from Minnesota, behind Mike Modano (93 points in 1993-94).

"Well, there was no way we were going to be able to sign Brad for $60 million, so we had to go in a different direction," said Stars GM Joe Nieuwendyk. "It just seems so long in the past now. Honestly, we've turned the page and he's turned the page, and we're both moving forward."

Richards has 25 points (11 goals, 14 assists) in 27 games with the Rangers, and New York has the second best record in the NHL at 17-6-4. For players who got to be good friends with Richards, the game will have a different feel.

"It's just like seeing Marty (Turco) in Chicago, Hully (Brett Hull) in Detroit or Mo (Mike Modano) in Detroit," Stars captain Brenden Morrow said. "It's strange to see those guys on other teams, but you get used to it. For the first shift, it might be strange seeing him in a Rangers uniform, but after that it's just another game."

Richards told the Post that he too will handle the emotions of the game.

"There are a lot of good people there and I have a lot of good friends there, but I'm not looking back," Richards said. "That's the business we're in."

Nieuwendyk used the money he might have paid to Richards to sign six free agents in July -- Sheldon Souray, Vernon Fiddler, Radek Dvorak, Michael Ryder, Jake Dowell and Adam Pardy -- while still staying close to the NHL minimum in spending.

"We've adjusted well to it, and they've all really done a good job," Stars defenseman Trevor Daley said of the newcomers. "Richie is a special player. It would be nice to have him and what we've got, but we feel we've got a good team. Joe's done a great job in getting the pieces he felt we needed. It's been working out."

Nieuwendyk said he hopes to build on the short-term contracts of the veterans, along with the youth of developing players.

"I believe we have a team that can win right now, but I also believe we can position ourselves going forward," Nieuwendyk said. "We have at least four very good prospects who will likely move to Texas (of the AHL) next year. We have players developing there right now. We have guys like Jamie Benn and Tomas Vincour and Philip Larsen and Richard Bachman, who are helping us now. You have to build at several different levels, and you have to be patient."

In addition to Richards, the Rangers also have former Stars center Sean Avery and former Stars defenseman Jeff Woywitka.

Avery was signed by the Stars to a four-year, $15.5 million contract in 2008, but was placed on re-entry waivers in 2009 and claimed by the Rangers. The Stars have been paying half of his salary since then and will end that commitment this season by paying him $2 million.

Because the Stars still take a salary cap hit for that money, they had to adjust to the loss of that cap hit in October when Avery was sent to the minors by the Rangers and the Stars fell below the NHL's salary floor. Dallas made a trade for Eric Nystrom from Minnesota at the time simply to add his $1.4 million contract to get above the floor. However, since that trade, Nystrom has been on a roll and is tied for the team lead in goalscoring with 10.

Avery was recalled by the Rangers on Oct. 30 and has played 15 games since, scoring three goals. In games in which Avery has played, the Rangers are 11-3-1. He was a healthy scratch Sunday in New York's 6-1 win over Florida, but that was the second night of back-to-back games.

Woywitka played 63 games with the Stars last season and had two goals and nine assists. He was unsigned as a free agent in the summer and eventually signed a two-way contract with Montreal on Aug. 15. He was claimed by the Rangers on waivers Oct. 6 to help fill the gap left by Marc Staal, who has been out all season with a concussion. He has played 21 games for the Rangers this season with a goal and four assists while averaging 10:42 in ice time.
Richard Bachman to get start in Tuesday's game against Rangers

By MIKE HEIKA
Staff Writer
mheika@dallasnews.com
Published: 13 December 2011 06:39 AM

Stars rookie goalie Richard Bachman will start in goal Tuesday against the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden, coach Glen Gulutzan said after practice Monday.

"Bacher is going to go tomorrow," Gulutzan said. "It's an opportunity for him to showcase himself with us. It's an opportunity to solidify him in our plans and what we're doing. We have to evaluate him, just like we are Lars (Philip Larsen), Vinny (Tomas Vincour) and all these guys that are coming up. We want to see where they stand. It's a good opportunity for him to showcase himself."

Bachman, 24, had 26 saves in a 2-1 win over Los Angeles Saturday, his first ever NHL start.

Adam Burish to be at Stars watching party Tuesday in Dallas

By MIKE HEIKA  
Staff Writer  
mheika@dallasnews.com  
Published: 13 December 2011 06:34 AM

While the team is on a five-game road trip, the Stars are hoping to still get some fan excitement going in North Texas. So they will hold two watching parties Tuesday night at Frankie’s in Dallas and Forth Worth.

Adam Burish, who is sidelined by a broken hand, will be at the Dallas watching party, which will mark the first time a current player has attended one of the parties.

Both parties begin at 6 p.m., as does the game against the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden. Both locations will be serving free pizza during the game. Additionally, the Ice Girls will be in attendance giving away prizes in Dallas and Forth Worth.

Here are the locations for Frankie’s

Frankie’s Uptown  
3227 McKinney Avenue Suite 102  
Dallas, TX 75204  

Frankie’s Fort Worth  
425 West 3rd St.  
Forth Worth, TX 76102

You judge the numbers: what was lost and gained by Brad Richards leaving Dallas

Published: 13 December 2011 05:25 AM

A statistical comparison between Brad Richards, who left the Stars in free agency after last season, and the six free agents the Stars signed in the off-season:

<table>
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<th>Pos.</th>
<th>Player, new team</th>
<th>2011-12 salary</th>
<th>Contract</th>
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$800,000

1 yr, $800,000

1

1

2

D

Adam Pardy

$2 million

2 yr, $4 million

0

1

1

D

Sheldon Souray

$1.65 million

1 yr, $1.65 million

4

9

13

Figures from capgeek.com

Stars replay: Richard Bachman earns first NHL shutout

MIKE HEIKA
Staff writer
mheika@dallasnews.com
Published: 13 December 2011 11:42 PM

STARS 1, RANGERS 0

Three stars
1. RICHARD BACHMAN, Stars: First shutout in second NHL start.
3. Trevor Daley, Stars: Huge goal for the second straight game.

1st
Both teams were cautious and tried to counterattack. Shots on goal were even at 8-8. Stars had a shaky moment when Bachman skated out of his net and collided with Rangers forward Carl Hagelin. Bachman wasn't injured.

Stars 0, Rangers 0

2nd
Both teams earned some good chances, but nobody could break through against Bachman or Lundqvist. Lundqvist took a Sheldon Souray shot to the collarbone and was in pain for a while, but he shook it off and continued to play.

Stars 0, Rangers 0

3rd
The Rangers earned two power play opportunities but couldn't cash in against strong Stars penalty killing. Dallas meanwhile took advantage of a neutral zone turnover with a great counterattack. Brenden Morrow picked up a puck in the neutral zone and pressed into the offensive zone. He fed Trevor Daley, who sent the puck cross ice to Mike Ribeiro and then took it back while driving the net. Daley faked Lundqvist and stuffed the game's only goal between his pads at the 15:01 mark.

Stars 1, Rangers 0

Little man, big saves: Stars' Richard Bachman coming through at right time

MIKE HEIKA
Staff writer
mheika@dallasnews.com
Published: 13 December 2011 10:18 PM

NEW YORK — The Richard Bachman story continues to grow, even if his coach sometimes refers to him as “the little guy.”

Bachman, the smallish goalie from the AHL, didn’t just win his second NHL start Tuesday, he dominated. The 24-year-old netminder stopped 34 shots against a New York Rangers team with one of the best records in the NHL, backstopping the Stars to a 1-0 victory.

“It’s very impressive,” Stars coach Glen Gulutzan said of Bachman walking into an intense Madison Square Garden and shutting out the 17-7-4 Rangers. “I’ve never seen the little guy get rattled. He’s got a calm demeanor and is a very intelligent goalie, and he doesn’t panic or get rattled easily, and that’s a good quality for a goaltender.”

Listed at 5-10, Bachman looks out of place in a league that has plenty of goalies 6-4 or taller. But the 2006 fourth-round draft pick from Colorado College has shown at every level that he’s a battler, and he’s doing it now at the ultimate level.

“It’s amazing, it’s fun,” Bachman said. “I try not to get too nervous and stay on the same routine just to calm the nerves, but you have to walk in past all of the famous people who have played here, and you do get a little jitters. And I think it took a little while to get loose, but I kind of settled in for the third.”

If Bachman was nervous, he didn’t show it. He turned away shots early, survived a collision with Rangers forward Carl Hagelin and then was outstanding during two third-period penalty kills.

“I thought tonight maybe there were a few more things lying around him than usual, but he made some huge saves,” Gulutzan said. “The 2-on-1… and then right at the end, the slap shot from the point that he saw at the last minute. When you get saves like that in somebody else’s building, it lends itself to getting a few points.”

Bachman’s heroic turn couldn’t come at a better time for the Stars. Kari Lehtonen is sidelined by a groin injury that could keep him out until after Christmas. Veteran backup Andrew Raycroft struggled in back-to-back games, allowing five goals in each. But Bachman has walked into Los Angeles and New York and won intense, low-scoring games in the span of four days. He is 2-0-0 with a 0.43 GAA and .986 save percentage.

“We’re really not that surprised,” said Trevor Daley, who scored a huge goal for the second game in a row. “Every time he’s been up, he’s been great, and he’s living up to the expectations.”

The win pushes the Stars to 17-11-1, good for 35 points and first place in the Pacific Division. And to credit only Bachman wouldn’t be fair. The Stars have been fairly healthy the past two games and have played a very solid team game. Players such as Eric Nystrom, Philip Larsen and Jamie Benn contributed strong defensive play, while Gulutzan spread his minutes.

What’s more, the team stayed patient in being able to beat Henrik Lundqvist, who had the Rangers on a 7-1-1 roll entering the game.

“This is a grind game, and we have to grind it out,” said Gulutzan. “We have to play hard to win, and we’re accepting that game to game. Teams that stick with it the longest are the teams that will stand at the end, so we just have to stick with it.”

And if that means standing on Bachman’s shoulders right now, “the little guy” seems to be ready to handle the weight.

Former Red Wing Sheldon Kennedy testifies before Congress about sex abuse

By FREDERIC J. FROMMER

WASHINGTON — Former Detroit Red Wings forward Sheldon Kennedy, who was sexually abused by a junior coach in Canada, told Congress today that the key to preventing abuse is training adults who oversee youth sports.

“Punishing the bad guys makes us feel good, but it does not fully solve the problem,” Kennedy said at a Senate hearing.

Kennedy was testifying on the same day that former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was scheduled to face his accusers at a preliminary hearing in Pennsylvania, but Sandusky waived that hearing. Sandusky, who faces more than 50 counts related to the sexual abuse of 10 boys over a 12-year period, has acknowledged horsing around and showering with boys, but has denied sexually abusing them.

Last week, Kennedy’s former coach, Graham James, pleaded guilty in Canada to sexual assaults involving two former players, including former NHL star Theoren Fleury. The coach had already served 3 1/2 years in prison for abusing other players, including Kennedy. James was quietly pardoned for his crimes in 2007, leading to public outcry.

Today’s hearing by a Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions subcommittee is the first one Congress has held in the wake of the Penn State scandal.

Kennedy and Fleury both have become outspoken advocates for abuse victims. Kennedy is the co-founder of an organization called Respect Group, which has launched an online training program to educate adult youth leaders on abuse, bullying and harassment prevention. He said that his experience with the group has taught him that “educating the good people — the 99% of our population — is our best defense to prevent abuse,” and that training must be mandatory.

Without mentioning the Penn State scandal by name, he offered similarities between the two situations.

“In my case, my abuser was International Hockey Man of the Year,” he said. “In Canada, that gave him almost godlike status. Sound familiar? The man who preyed on me took advantage of his position as a coach to look for children who were especially vulnerable — single-parent households, families with drinking problems, boys who needed a father figure, etc. These kids — and often their parents, too — looked up to him as a hero. This was someone who could make their dreams come true, and he used that trust to hurt them.”

At Penn State, officials say the allegations were not immediately brought to the attention of authorities even though high-level people at the university apparently knew about them. The scandal led to the ouster of Hall of Fame football coach Joe Paterno and longtime college president Graham Spanier. Two other Penn State officials who are charged with perjury and failing to report the assaults maintain they are innocent.

Sen. Bob Casey, a Pennsylvania Democrat who requested the hearing, has introduced legislation that would strengthen child-abuse reporting requirements.

Casey said that, beyond that bill, “We need to take a broader look at federal legislation on this issue to ensure that we are doing everything possible to protect children.”

Kennedy said that in every child-abuse case, including his own, there are people who have a “gut feeling” that something is wrong but don’t do anything about it.

“Their attitude was ‘I don’t want to get involved,’ ‘it’s not my problem,’ he said, adding that pedophiles and predators count on that ignorance or indifference.
PITTSBURGH -- The Red Wings skated away with a victory Tuesday night after their Russian outperformed the Penguins' Russian.

Pavel Datsyuk scored one goal and set up another to deliver a 4-1 final at Consol Energy Center.

BOX SCORE HERE

"I thought he was dominant down the stretch in the game," Wings coach Mike Babcock said. "He turned his game up. That's what he tends to do in the bigger moments."

Danny Cleary scored twice and Johan Franzen netted one on the power play as the Wings won for the third straight time, and improved their road record to 7-7 for the season. The Penguins had to make do without superstar Sidney Crosby and top defenseman Kris Letang, both of whom are dealing with concussion symptoms, but Evgeni Malkin did all he could to make up for their absences, scoring once and hitting two posts.

Datsyuk and Malkin, both Russian, battled all night, for as Datsyuk said, "no friends on the ice."

Malkin was the first to find the back of the net, with 4.5 seconds to go in the first period. The Wings were threatening down low when Brooks Orpik blocked a Niklas Kronwall shot, and the puck squirted out to James Neal. Neal immediately sent the puck to Malkin, who raced up the ice, and, with Brad Stuart the only Detroit defenseman back, beat Jimmy Howard with a wicked wrist shot from the circle.

Datsyuk replied with four minutes to go in the second period. Todd Bertuzzi rattled Matt Niskanen along the end boards to free the puck, and Datsyuk spun a backhand behind Marc-Andre Fleury.

"Thanks to Bert, he gave me good pass, and lots of chance to think about what I do," Datsyuk said.

It was a shot few goalies could have saved.

"Pavel is just so good," Howard said. "The way he rolls his wrists over, you can never tell - that's one thing that's so hard about the backhand for a goalie, because the forward can disguise the shot. When it's on the backhand, the curve is going the other way, so you have a hard time reading where it's going to go."

Datsyuk intercepted Matt Cooke's clearing pass to set up Franzen's power play goal at 5:15 of the third period. That gave Datsyuk his eighth multi-point game since Nov. 19.

"He's one of the best in the world," Howard said. "He does everything so well, whether it's playing defensively, trying to be a shut-down guy, and then he also generates offense for us."

Franzen's goal pulled the Wings to a 2-1 lead, but they had to work very hard to protect that as penalties by Jiri Hudler gave the Penguins four minutes with the extra skater.

"We came up with some big kills when we needed to," Cleary said.

Cleary provided breathing room when he tipped in Chris Conner's pass at 15:36 and scored again with seconds remaining.

"It was a tight game, especially in the first," Cleary said. "Malkin had a lot of good chances. We got that first one, that was key, and Pav made a great play on the second one. It was a good road game for us. I thought we played OK in the first, not great in the second, and good in the third."

The game was the only meeting of the season between the rivals from the '08 and '09 finals, and lacked some pizzazz with Crosby's absence. The Penguins have only had him for a quarter of their games this season, though, and still feature a lineup potent enough to get 26 shots on net and one which outworked the Wings much of the second period.
First period: Jimmy Howard made a big save on Jordan Staal during a Pittsburgh power play, and the Wings had good movement on a power play of their own that overlapped the Penguins' by 8 seconds. The Wings were working the puck down low in the last minute of the period when Niklas Kronwall's shot was blocked by Brooks Orpik. James Neal collected the loose puck and fed Evgeni Malkin, who raced up the left side and took advantage of Brad Stuart being the only defenseman back to wire a wrist shot behind Howard with 4.5 seconds to go.

Second period: Malkin nearly made it 2-0 a minute into the period on a power play, when his shot slipped beneath Howard and through the paint, but the puck bounced off the left goalpost. The Wings didn't have much success getting any shots through Marc-Andre Fleury. The first line finally made a dent at 16:01. Todd Bertuzzi checked Matt Niskanen behind the net, knocking the puck loose and out to Pavel Datsyuk, who whirled a fast backhand shot for his ninth goal.

Third period: Datsyuk fired a backhand pass to Johan Franzen for a power-play goal at 5:15. Danny Cleary came through with a huge goal with 4:24 left to give the Wings breathing room. Cleary scored again into an empty net at 19:54.

Overheard: Cleary, on Malkin's last-minute goal in the first: "The timing of the goal doesn't really affect us in here that much. We just want to make sure we get the next one."

PITTSBURGH -- The Red Wings skated away with a victory Tuesday night after their Russian outperformed the Penguins' Russian.

Pavel Datsyuk scored a goal and set up another in a 4-1 victory at Consol Energy Center.

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"Even without Sid and a few of their guys," Babcock said, "they are very deep and they're well-coached. So it's fun to play against them."

The Wings have outscored their opponents, 16-4, during this latest winning stretch.
Detroit Red Wings

Danny Cleary clicks with 2 goals in Red Wings victory over Penguins

By Helene St. James

Detroit

PITTSBURGH -- Danny Cleary played the sort of game Tuesday that makes his coach happy: Kill penalties. Shoot the puck. Go to the net.

Cleary's reward was his first two-goal game of the season -- both in the third period -- to help the Red Wings beat the Penguins, 4-1, at Consol Energy Center.

"I thought Cleary was outstanding," coach Mike Babcock said. "Six shots on goal tonight, two goals. Just did all things right."

The Wings have counted on Cleary for points the past few seasons, but he had such a sluggish start this season that he lost his top-six forward spot and landed on the third line. He has found good chemistry with Darren Helm at center and either Chris Conner or Justin Abdelkader on the opposite wing, though, and has scored four goals in the past eight games.

"It's not good to see -- it's awesome," Pavel Datsyuk said. "I love it. If lots of lines score, it helps us. Danny score two, it's awesome. Now, it's a fun locker room." (Datsyuk was asked next about the team's defensive play, but he wasn't done talking about Cleary, saying, "Sorry, I am little bit thinking about Danny Cleary still. Can you repeat question?").

Cleary is a good skater and responsible defensively, and he is valuable as a checker and penalty killer, especially against the Penguins, who were 0- for-4 with the man advantage. But for a guy who was second on the team with 26 goals last season and is a three-time 20-goal scorer, seeing the puck go in is satisfying. Cleary scored his first when he skated into the slot and redirected a centering pass from Conner, then weaved in for an empty-net goal with seconds remaining.

"I'm playing a lot of penalty kill, not playing on the power play, so for our line, it's important to be good five-on-five, give energy, be good defensively," Cleary said. "You can see as Conner's gotten more comfortable in the lineup, he seems to be making more plays. He's a talented little player, tenacious on the puck. He made a nice play there."

Bylsma big on Wings: During a news conference Tuesday morning, Pittsburgh coach Dan Bylsma segued from a brief injury update on his team (Sidney Crosby still out with concussion symptoms) to the night's opponent. "Detroit Red Wings, I love to talk about them," he said. Being from Grand Haven, it's a lifelong habit, plus he used to play for Babcock in Anaheim. "We watch the Red Wings a lot," Bylsma said, "whether it's because I grew up in Michigan and being a Red Wings fan, or because they're an elite team and a better team. I try to learn something from everybody, and I learned a lot from Mike Babcock as a coach, and am still watching their team, and still watching what they do to see if there's not something there."

Pavel Datsyuk ignites offense as Red Wings beat Penguins

By Ted Kulfan
The Detroit News

Pittsburgh—Those worries about Pavel Datsyuk not scoring early this season have disappeared. Datsyuk has returned to creating and scoring goals, and the Wings were the better for it Tuesday, in a 4-1 victory over the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Datsyuk scored one goal and set up Johan Franzen for another as the Wings won their third consecutive game.

Danny Cleary scored two goals in the third period, including an empty netter, to close out the Wings scoring.

The Wings (19-9-1, 39 points) have won three consecutive games. The Penguins (17-10-4, 38 points) have lost three of four with injuries mounting, including star center Sidney Crosby (concussion).

With the Wings on the power play early in the third period, Datsyuk intercepted a clearing pass near the top of the circles and backhanded a pass to Franzen.

Penguins goalie Marc-Andre Fleury was screened by Tomas Holmstrom, and Franzen found a small area above Fleury’s shoulder for his team-leading 14th goal at 5:15.

Datsyuk tied the score at 1 in the second period with his ninth goal.

Todd Bertuzzi took control of the puck in the corner, and found Datsyuk between the hashmarks. Datsyuk unleashed a backhand that flew over Fleury at 16:01.

After a ragged start to the season, Datsyuk has found his scoring ways. Datsyuk has 20 points (seven goals, 13 assists) over his last 13 games.

Evgeni Malkin had the Pittsburgh goal, his 11th, at 19:55 of the first period.

More top Penguins could be out against Wings tonight

By Ted Kulfan
The Detroit News

Pittsburgh — The Red Wings could be facing a Pittsburgh team that's a shell of its usual self Tuesday night.

The Penguins are definitely without star forward Sidney Crosby and defensemen Kris Letang and Zbynek Michalek, all out with concussion symptoms.

But star forwards Evgeni Malkin (undisclosed injury) and Jordan Staal (lower-body) are both game-time decisions for the Penguins.

Coach Mike Babcock maintains it doesn't make a difference for the Wings, who are preparing no differently from normal.

"I'll put my guys out there and he'll (Penguins coach Dan Bylsma) follow," Babcock said.

But he added: "Every time you go into an opposing (arena), you hope they have their best lineup, best goalie, and they play their best game and you win."

Even with so many key players out, Niklas Kronwall sees the Penguins as a deep and talented team.

"They showed it pretty good last year for everyone with their two big guys out (Crosby, Malkin); they had a heck of a season," said Kronwall.

The Penguins earned 106 points but lost a seven-game first-round playoff series to Tampa Bay. "They ran out of gas at the end, but it's pretty impressive what they did last year. Even this year, without Crosby, all the guys have stepped up into a leadership role."

The Penguins, with 38 points, trail only the Flyers in the Eastern Conference this season.

Ex-Red Wing urges training to combat sexual abuse

By Frederic J. Frommer
Associated Press

Washington—A former NHL player who was sexually abused by a junior coach in Canada told Congress Tuesday that the key to preventing abuse is training adults who oversee youth sports.

"Punishing the bad guys makes us feel good, but it does not fully solve the problem," ex-Detroit Red Wing Sheldon Kennedy said in prepared remarks at a Senate hearing.

Kennedy was testifying on the same day that former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was scheduled to face his accusers at a preliminary hearing in Pennsylvania, but Sandusky waived that hearing. Sandusky, who faces more than 50 counts related to the sexual abuse of 10 boys over a 12-year period, has acknowledged hazing around and showering with boys, but has denied sexually abusing them.

Last week, Kennedy's former coach, Graham James, pleaded guilty in Canada to sexual assaults involving two former players, including NHL star Theoren Fleury. The coach had already served 3½ years in prison for abusing other players, including Kennedy. James was quietly pardoned for his crimes in 2007, leading to public outcry.

Tuesday's hearing by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee is the first one Congress has held in the wake of the Penn State scandal.

Kennedy and Fleury have both become outspoken advocates for abuse victims. Kennedy is the co-founder of an organization called Respect Group, which has launched an online training program to educate adult youth leaders on abuse, bullying and harassment prevention. He said that his experience with the group has taught him that "educating the good people — the 99 percent of our population — is our best defense to prevent abuse," and that training must be mandatory.

Without mentioning the Penn State scandal by name, he offered similarities between the two cases.

"In my case, my abuser was International Hockey Man of the Year!" he said. "In Canada, that gave him almost God-like status. Sound familiar? The man who preyed on me took advantage of his position as a coach to look for children who were especially vulnerable (single parent households, families with drinking problems, boys who needed a father figure, etc.). These kids — and often their parents too — looked up to him as a hero. This was someone who could make their dreams come true and he used that trust to hurt them."

At Penn State, officials say the allegations were not immediately brought to the attention of authorities even though high-level people at the university apparently knew about them. The scandal led to the ouster of Hall of Fame football coach Joe Paterno and longtime college president Graham Spanier. Two other Penn State officials who are charged with perjury and failing to report the assaults maintain they are innocent.

"In every case of child abuse — certainly in my own — there are people who had a 'gut feeling' that something was wrong but didn't do anything about it," Kennedy said. "Their attitude was 'I don't want to get involved,' it's not my problem; he couldn't possibly be doing that; or the authorities will take care of it." He said that pedophiles and predators count on that ignorance or indifference.

Kennedy said that like most boys growing up in Canada, he dreamed of playing in the NHL.

"But it's not my dream that I'm best known for — it's my nightmare," he said.

The junior hockey system Kennedy played in is a prime steppingstone to the NHL. Many players between the ages 16 of 20 live far away from home with local host families, known as billets. Junior coaches hold strong sway over their lives and futures in the sport. Kennedy said that he didn't tell anyone of the abuse he didn't believe anyone would believe him.
Ex-Wing Jason Williams back in NHL with Penguins

By Ted Kulfan
The Detroit News

Pittsburgh— Jason Williams' career has gone through some twists and turns.

Williams started his NHL career in 2000 as a free agent, signing with the Red Wings after going undrafted.

Along the way, he's played for the Blackhawks, Thrashers, Blue Jackets and Stars — with several stops in the minors.

Now he's in the Penguins minors — well, he was, anyway.

Tuesday, he was called up to face his former team, one that hasn't gone through as much change as he has.

"(The Red Wings) find players who play a certain way and plug into their system," said Williams, who didn't have a shot on net in 10 minutes 46 seconds in the Red Wings 4-1 road victory over the Penguins.

Williams used Darren Helm as an example of the Red Wings' successful approach.

"He comes in, he's a good energy guy, good penalty killer and fast, and he reminds you of Kris Draper," Williams said. "He's good on faceoffs, and physical.

"They seem to find a way of finding players who can fit into their system well. They're just not after a top draft pick. They're after someone who has good character and a guy who has won a championship or two in the junior level, or somewhere, and they just (seem) to find their type of players."

As for his career path, Williams was just hoping this promotion was one that would keep him in the NHL.

"It's good to be back (in the NHL)," said Williams, who was expected to contend for a spot out of camp, but a groin injury forced him to miss the exhibition season. "I couldn't get into any games and it didn't give me any chance to show my stuff. But I tried to keep a positive attitude and work hard."

Words of praise

Penguins coach Dan Bylsma , a Grand Haven native, has a history with Red Wings coach Mike Babcock.

While playing with the Ducks, Bylsma's coach was Babcock.

And after he retired, Bylsma was an assistant in the Ducks minor league system under Babcock.

So, it's no surprise when Bylsma heaps praise on Babcock.

"I watch the Red Wings a lot, whether it's because I grew up in Michigan and being a Red Wings fan, or because they're an elite team, we watch them a lot," Bylsma said.

"I try to learn something from everybody and I learned from Mike Babcock as a coach. I still watch their team and watch what they do to see if there's something there (to learn)."

Ice chips

Danny Cleary had two goals in the victory, a huge bonus for a Red Wings offense.

"It's not good, it's awesome," said Pavel Datsyuk (one goal, one assist) of the diversity of the offense. "I love it. When a lot of lines score, it helps us."

... Chris Conner (Westland) had a memorable return to Pittsburgh, where he played last season. Conner had an assist and keyed a penalty kill that blanked four Pittsburgh power plays.

... Bylsma, on the loss: "They played very well defensively. They didn't allow us to hold the puck in the neutral zone."
Pavel Datsyuk scores, assists to lead Red Wings past Penguins, 4-1

Ansar Khan

PITTSBURGH -- Pittsburgh's Russian star, Evgeni Malkin, was dominant early, taking the puck to the net with authority, scoring a goal and banging a couple of other shots off the goal post.

But it was Detroit's Russian star, Pavel Datsyuk, who made the difference in the end, scoring a nifty goal and making a terrific play to set up Johan Franzen's game-winner, as the Red Wings defeated the Penguins 4-1 on Tuesday at the Consol Energy Center.

The Red Wings evened their road record to 7-7-0. They are 10-2 in their past 12 games.

Goaltender Jimmy Howard is the main reason — he made 25 saves to improve to 18-6-1. But getting Datsyuk on a roll has been crucial. He has 19 points (seven goals, 12 assists) in the past 12 games, including eight multiple-point games.

"He's one of the best in the world," Howard said. "He does everything so well, whether it's playing defensively, trying to be a shut-down guy, and then he also generates offense. He's got a killer backhand and made a great pass to Mule (Franzen)."

The killer backhand came at 16:01 of the second period, one which the Penguins had been dominating. But when Todd Bertuzzi hit Matt Niskanen behind the net, stealing the puck and setting up Datsyuk for his wicked backhand from the slot, the game was tied 1-1 and the momentum shifted Detroit's way, where it stayed.

"I wish I shoot it like forehand, but it's a situation where I'm in the middle of ice, I want to use (backhand)," Datsyuk said. "Bert gave me good pass, give me a good chance. I had lots of time to think about what to do."

Datsyuk then showed his tremendous hand-eye coordination by batting down Matt Cooke's clearing attempt and setting up Franzen, who fired a wrist shot past Marc-Andre Fleury on the power play at 5:15 of the third period, snapping the 1-1 tie.

"To get the first one was key, and Pav made a great play on the second one, Mule with the great shot," Danny Cleary said. "It was a good road game for us."

Cleary wrapped it up with a couple of goals after the Red Wings killed a pair of penalties on Jiri Hudler in the third.

Cleary scored at 15:36, capping a three-on-two rush by driving the middle and converting a pass from former Penguin Chris Conner. Cleary also scored into an empty net with six seconds remaining.

"For first 10 minutes of the second period, I felt they competed harder than we did, won more battles, were taking the game a little bit," Red Wings coach Mike Babcock said. "We really dug in at that point and played well for the last 30 minutes.

"They got a really good team, even without Sid (Crosby, out with concussion-like symptoms) and a few of their guys (defensemen Kris Letang and Zbynek Michalek also were out). They're very deep and well-coached. It's fun to play against them, and tonight was a good win for our team."

The Red Wings have allowed two or fewer goals in 20 of their 29 games.

Howard's only blemish came with 4.5 seconds remaining in the first, when Malkin, whose status wasn't determined until game time due to an undisclosed ailment, scored on a two-on-one.

"I think I was a little fortunate tonight," Howard said. "Malkin was able to sneak a couple through, but I got a good portion of the puck, so sometimes you get the bounces."

"Every single time he touched the puck, it seemed like something was happening. He's a great player."

He said the same of Datsyuk, who has rounded into form after a puzzling start in which he tallied only 10 points (two goals, eight assists) in 16 games.

"Good players find a way to get going," Babcock said. "Their pride is on the line, they're competitive, and Pav's a workaholic. I'm not too concerned about him.

"I thought he was dominant down the stretch and really turned his game up. That's what he tends to do in the bigger moments."

Evgeni Malkin, Jordan Staal playing for Penguins

By Ansar Khan

PITTSBURGH -- Quick pregame update.
Centers Evgeni Malkin and Jordan Staal are playing tonight for the Pittsburgh Penguins against the Detroit Red Wings at the Consol Energy Center.
Both were game-time decisions after the morning skate.
Red Wings might be facing decimated Penguins team, as Evgeni Malkin, Jordan Staal questionable

By Ansar Khan

PITTSBURGH -- The Detroit Red Wings could be facing an extremely decimated Pittsburgh team tonight at the Consol Energy Center (7 p.m., Fox Sports Net Detroit).

Already missing star Sidney Crosby (post-concussion symptoms) and top-four defensemen Kris Letang and Zbynek Michalek, the Penguins could be without centers Evgeni Malkin and Jordan Staal as well.

Coach Dan Bylsma said after today's morning skate that Malkin (undisclosed) and Staal (lower-body injury) are game-time decisions. Malkin has four points in the past two games and is tied with James Neal for the team lead with 28 points. Staal didn't play in the last game.

"Don't have any details on Geno (Malkin), can't tell you what the lineup is going to be like," Bylsma said.

Red Wings coach Mike Babcock said the potential absence of Pittsburgh's top three centers won't affect what he's trying to do with match-ups.

"The good thing about it is I don't have to make any of those decisions," Babcock said. "I'm going to put my guys out on the ice and then he's going to follow, so (Bylsma) can make all those decisions."

The Red Wings will go with the same lineup they have been using lately, just switching their second and third defense pairings:

Franzen-Datsyuk-Bertuzzi
Filppula-Zetterberg-Hudler

Cleary-Helm-Conner
Miller-Abdulkader-Holmstrom

Lidstrom-White
Kronwall-Stuart

Kindl-Ericsson

Howard (starting)

Conklin

Marc-Andre Fleury is starting in net for the Penguins. He will be attempting to win his 200th NHL game (199-132-39). He is 4-4-0 lifetime in the regular season vs. Detroit. Howard is 1-0-1 vs. Pittsburgh.

Former Red Wings forward Jason Williams, 31, was recalled from Wilkes Barre-Scranton for tonight's game. It will be his second game as a Penguin. He has 17 points (three goals, 14 assists) in 20 games with the AHL club.

Penguins' James Neal knows his team must play physical against Red Wings

By Ansar Khan

PITTSBURGH -- After today's morning skate at the Consol Energy Center, several Pittsburgh Penguins talked about the challenges of facing the Detroit Red Wings:

--James Neal: "To get the puck behind them you got to crash the net, make it a hard game for them. Zetterberg, Datsyuk, Filppula, Hudler, Helm, they all got great skills, they want the puck as much as possible. You can't get caught watching, you got to be physical. Just make it a hard game for them all over the ice. Be physical, get pucks deep, try not to let them have a chance to play with the puck. They're top of the charts for skill level, you need to play them physical. Those guys are going to be hard to handle, Zetterberg, Datsyuk, they got that top-end skill. We just need to be physical on them and try to keep them away from their game as much as possible."

--Steve Sullivan: "They play a very good system, they play with pace, they're a good forechecking team and they have talent. "We've got to push the pace, make sure we're playing our system."

--Goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury: "They're fast, very similar to us. They're a well-rounded team. They have so much skill up front, their D are contributing, makes them a hard team to defend."

Penguins coach Dan Bylsma noted Detroit's power play has been around 20 percent the last several games and how well their top two lines are playing.

He said Johan Franzen "a lot of times drives this team, power play and five on five."

“We're expecting a tough team to play against defensively -- they don't give up a lot -- but also a team that's going to come at you pretty hard with some speed and skill, and have a dangerous power play as well."

Red Wings would like to measure themselves against Sidney Crosby-led Penguins

By Ansar Khan

DETROIT -- While Sidney Crosby’s absence enhances the Detroit Red Wings’ chances against the Pittsburgh Penguins tonight at the Consol Energy Center, they realize it’s not good for the NHL that one of its biggest stars is sidelined again.

"Obviously, we’d like Sid to be playing. As a league, you want him to be playing," Red Wings coach Mike Babcock said. "When you’re playing another team, you want their best goalee, you want their best players. You want to find out if you’re any good or not.

"In saying that, you also want points."

The Penguins announced Monday that Crosby is out indefinitely, following a recurrence of concussion-like symptoms that idled him for 61 games before his return on Nov. 21.

But Crosby’s absence didn’t prevent the Penguins from beating the Red Wings twice last season, 4-1 in Pittsburgh on Jan. 18 and 5-4 in a shootout in Detroit on March 21.

The Penguins still are formidable, led by Evgeni Malkin and James Neal.

"They have great structure," Detroit defenseman Niklas Kronwall said. "The coach (Grand Haven native Dan Bylsma) has done a great job making sure everyone is on the same page. They don’t live or die with one guy.

"Last year when you look at what they did, it’s pretty remarkable, being able to play that well without (Crosby and Malkin for much of the season). Guys like (Jordan) Staal (who’s questionable with a lower-body injury), (Chris) Kunitz and (Tyler) Kennedy really stepped it up, reached another level.”

The Red Wings had a heated rivalry with the Penguins from their matchups in the 2008 and ’09 Stanley Cup finals.

"It’s just become one of those teams that you love to play against," Kronwall said. "It’s a great matchup. It’s always good, high-intensity games."

The problem is they have played each other only four times in the past two seasons, and tonight’s game is their lone meeting this season.

“When you’re not playing more games, it’s hard to keep that rivalry going,” Red Wings captain Nicklas Lidstrom said, "but I still think you’ll see two competitive teams and two very even skilled teams, and I think the rivalry is going to come up again.”

Crosby has missed two games since being elbowed in the head by Boston’s David Krejci on Dec. 5. He said Monday that he is not back to square one, that he feels better than he did a year ago. There is no timetable for his return.

"I got to make sure with these sort of things that I’m careful and I’m 100 percent before I come back," Crosby said.

He has not played against the Red Wings since March 22, 2010, a 3-1 Detroit victory at Joe Louis Arena that ended with a scuffle. Crosby slashed Henrik Zetterberg as time expired. Goaltender Jimmy Howard took exception, giving Crosby a face wash.

Despite their heated battles, the Red Wings respect Crosby’s importance to the game.

"Absolutely, we need him," Zetterberg said. "You saw those games he came back and played (he has 12 points in eight games this season), the boost that came with it. You want him to be healthy and back playing."

Said Howard: "He’s one of the best in the game. He’s great for our sport. It hurts us when he’s not playing. With that being said, they’re still dangerous."

Road record must improve

The Red Wings need to be more dangerous on the road, where they are 6-7-0, since 11 of their next 14 games are away from home.

Babcock doesn’t have many answers as to why his team hasn’t played better on the road.

"What have we done at home that we’re not doing on the road?" Babcock said, "Why can’t we play with the pace and the tenacity we can at home? Is that matchups? Is that specialty teams? What is that? We got to find a way to be better."

Detroit had the league’s second-best road record in 2010-11 (26-11-4).

"Last year we were a very patient team on the road, waited for opportunities," Lidstrom said. "This year we haven’t done that. Specialty teams have been a big part of that. Our penalty killing hasn’t been as strong on the road. When you let in a goal or two, it’s hard to score goals on the road."

Conner to face former team

Red Wings forward Chris Conner played 68 games for the Penguins during the past two seasons, picking up nine goals and 10 assists. He scored on a penalty shot against Detroit last season.

"I don’t know if there is any extra (motivation), but maybe a little bit," Conner said. "At the same time, any game in this league I want to keep playing and prove that I can play here and do the right things to help the team win."

He said of his time with Pittsburgh: "They treated me great. It’s a great organization."

Conner has played five games in a row since being recalled from the Grand Rapids Griffins, moving ahead of rookie Cory Emmerton in the pecking order.

"(Conner) has got to do what he’s got to do to scratch and claw and keep (the job)," Babcock said. "Keep working hard, blocking shots, being good defensively, being relentless on the puck and good things will happen to him."
RED WINGS: Crosby won't play for Pens tonight

By Chuck Pleiness
Macomb Daily Sports Writer

DETROIT – The one and only regular season meeting between the Wings and the Pittsburgh Penguins will be played without one of the league’s top stars – Sidney Crosby.

Crosby will miss his third straight game tonight due to a recurrence of concussion-like symptoms after he was elbowed in the head by Boston’s David Krejci last Monday.

“You have to be sure with these sorts of things, careful and aware that I am 100 percent before I come back,” Crosby said during his media availability in Pittsburgh.

It’s not the news the Wings, who didn’t know Crosby’s status for the game after practice, were hoping for.

“He’s the face of hockey, has been since he came into the league pretty much,” Niklas Kronwall said. “It’s huge for the game of hockey to have a guy like him back. The way he came back, the whole league was watching that game, just enjoyed watching that game.”

In Crosby’s first game back, he had two goals and two assists against the New York Islanders.

“You want to see him healthy, you want to see him back playing,” Henrik Zetterberg said. “(The league) needs him. You saw those games he came back and played, the boost that came with it. You want him to be healthy and back playing. We all need him.”

“You want the star players to be playing,” Nicklas Lidstrom said. “To help promote the league and do everything they can to be on the ice. It’s not good when the top guys aren’t there.”

“Obviously, we’d like Sid to be playing, as a league you want him to be playing,” Wings coach Mike Babcock said. “I think you want all the good players every night. When you’re playing another team, you want their best goalie, you want their best players.”

Crosby missed 61 games, dating back to last season and has played in just eight this season, recording a pair of goals and 10 assists.

Crosby did say he doesn’t feel as bad as he did nearly a year ago.

“You want him playing,” Jimmy Howard said. “He’s one of the best in the game. He’s great for our sport. It hurts us when he’s not playing. With that being said, they’re still dangerous. (James) Neal is playing real well as is (Evgeni) Malkin.”

The Wings lost two meetings with the Penguins last season, both without Crosby in the lineup.

“There’s a guy named Malkin who’s pretty good, too,” Babcock said. “Malkin is a star, he won the Conn Smythe the year they won the Cup. They’ve got lots of good players. They’re a good hockey team. Obviously, we’d like to have Sid in the game because it’s important for the game. He’s an elite, elite player. He does things the right away. You’re cheering for him when you’re not playing.”

Back in Pitt

Chris Conner played 68 games over two seasons with the Penguins before signing with the Wings this offseason.

“I’m going to treat it like any other game, go out there and play hard, but I’m excited and looking forward to it,” Conner said. “I don’t know if it’s any extra (motivation) but maybe a little bit.”

Conner played 60 games last season in Pittsburgh and had seven goals and nine assists.

“It’s a matter of what I wanted to do,” Conner said when asked if Pittsburgh had offered him a contract prior to free agency. “They treated me great. It’s a great organization there. Obviously, I got no complaints about how they treated me.”

Road woes

Last year, the Wings had a better record on the road than they did at home. This season, it’s the complete opposite.

Detroit is 12-2-1 at Joe Louis Arena and 6-7-0 on the road.

“What have we done at home that we’re not doing on the road? Why can’t we play with the pace and the tenacity we can at home? We’ve been fine, but we haven’t been near as good,” Babcock asked. “Is that match-ups? Is that specialty teams? What is that? We’ve got to find a way to be better.”

One area one would think would account for such a poor record on the road is the Wings’ overall penalty-kill ranking, which is 22nd in the league. However, that’s not the case. Detroit’s penalty kill ranks 11th on the road and 26th at home.

“Whatever it is, we did just the opposite last year, did real well on the road,” Lidstrom said. “For whatever reason, we haven’t played as well on the road. Last year we were a very patient team on the road, waited for opportunities. This year we haven’t been able to do that.”

“Specialty teams have been a big part of that too,” Lidstrom added. “Penalty killing hasn’t been as strong on the road. When you let in a goal or two it’s hard to score goals on the road.”

Detroit Red Wings beat injury-plagued Penguins

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Evgeni Malkin spent two periods making the Pittsburgh Penguins forget all about Sidney Crosby.

He couldn't make it three.

Pavel Datsyuk had a goal and an assist, Jimmy Howard stopped 25 shots and the Detroit Red Wings roared to a 4-1 victory over the injury-depleted Penguins on Tuesday despite a brilliant effort from Malkin.

The dazzling Russian scored his 11th goal of the season and hit the post twice in more than 23 minutes of mostly brilliant play, but ran out of steam as the Red Wings pulled away in the third period.

"Every single time he touched the puck it seemed like something was happening," Howard said. "He's a great player, there's no way around it; he makes things happen when he's out there."

The Red Wings countered with balanced play led by Datsyuk, who steadied Detroit with a second-period goal to even things up before the Red Wings scored three times in the third.

"It was a great momentum boost for us," Howard said of Datsyuk's ninth goal of the season. "They were sort of carrying the play there in the second period and it's just a great shot by Pavel."

One that gave the Red Wings the boost they needed to win in Pittsburgh for the first time in three seasons.

"Detroit is a good team, they played quick," Malkin said. "We had a couple of mistakes. In the last 10 minutes, we played bad and we didn't have a chance to win."

Crosby missed his third straight game and 23rd overall with concussion-like symptoms. Pittsburgh defensemen Kris Letang, Zbynek Michalek and Robert Bortuzzo are also out while dealing with similar issues.

The Red Wings publicly lamented the chance to play Pittsburgh at full strength in the renewal of a heated rivalry that saw the teams split a pair of thrilling Stanley Cup finals in 2008 and 2009.

They weren't complaining, however, after spending much of the night trying to keep Malkin in check. He gave the Penguins a 1-0 lead with a breathless end-to-end rush to just before the end of the first period and nearly made it 2-0 early in the second when his shot glanced off the post and momentarily stopped on the goal line before being swiped out of danger.

The Red Wings took advantage of the reprieve, with Datsyuk evening the game at 1 in the second period before Detroit poured it on the third, scoring three times in the game's final 15 minutes.

Johan Franzen scored his team-leading 14th goal to give Detroit the lead before Danny Cleary added a pair of late insurance scores as the Red Wings handed the Penguins their first regulation loss to a Western Conference team this season.

"It was a good road game for us," Cleary said. "I thought we played OK in the first, not great in the second, good in the third."

Pittsburgh fell to 1-2-0 in the three games since Crosby was sidelined with a recurrence of concussion-like symptoms. The two losses have come to the league's elite. Philadelphia handled the Penguins for long stretches in a 3-2 win last Thursday, and the Red Wings played lights out in the third.

"There were lots of loose pucks right around the cage," Pittsburgh's Matt Niskanen said. "We just weren't able to capitalize. I thought our guys went to the net hard, but they managed to keep them out of the net."

Howard was stellar when he needed to be in winning his league-leading 18th game. Pittsburgh's Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 21 shots while failing to win the 200th game of his career.

Pittsburgh fell to 12-8-3 when Crosby doesn't play, a routine that's become all too common over the past year. He missed 10 months after taking a shot to the head in consecutive games last January before returning on Nov. 21.

He scored twice and added 10 assists in eight games, but hasn't played since a 3-1 loss to Boston last week and said Monday he's out indefinitely.

The Penguins clearly need him against the league's better teams. The Flyers dictated play last week and Pittsburgh couldn't respond after the Red Wings got going in the third period.

"For the first 10 minutes in the second period I felt they competed harder than we did and won more battles and, to me, were taking the game a little bit," Detroit coach Mike Babcock said. "Then I thought we really dug in at that point and played well for the last 30 minutes."

NOTES: In addition to Crosby, Bartuzzo and Steve MacIntyre were also scratched by the Penguins. ... Mike Commodore and Cory Emmerton were scratched by the Red Wings. ... The Penguins travel to Ottawa on Friday while Detroit plays in Nashville on Thursday.

Hall fired up for return to Oilers lineup
Young star has been out for past seven games with shoulder injury

By Jim Matheson, edmontonjournal.com December 13, 2011

EDMONTON - Unless Taylor Hall flunks coach Tom Renney's Wednesday morning fitness test - a simulation of a hard game-type shift - before the Edmonton Oilers jet to Phoenix, you'll see Hall on the left wing with captain Shawn Horcoff and Ales Hemsky against the Coyotes Thursday night.

That'll be 19 days and seven games he'll have missed since his left shoulder got the worst of a hellacious hit from Colorado Avalanche defenceman Ryan Wilson in Denver on Nov. 26. So, the club's two-to-four-week prognosis was pretty accurate.

In a twist, Wilson is hurt now, out with a suspected concussion.

Hall doesn't anticipate failing Renney's exam.

"He says he doesn't have to even take it," Renney said, laughing.

There's not a lot of studying for it. "I've trained hard in the time I've been off. Fortunately it was an upper-body injury so I could do a lot of leg stuff," Hall said.

He's not worried about how the shoulder will react to a hit. He took the wallop from Wilson then got cross-checked on the left arm by Kyle Quincey after returning briefly. The Oilers didn't say if he'd sprained the shoulder or there was a slight dislocation. Just that it wasn't a major deal.

"I've had a couple of instances where I was really battling Monday and today (Tuesday) and if it wasn't strong enough it wouldn't have held up. I'm pretty confident," he said.

"Seven games out for me felt like an eternity ... this is the first time I've been hurt in a season and I've come back. It's new territory for me, but I've worked as hard as I can in practice to get the timing back. Last year I was done for the rest of the season (high-ankle sprain, missing the final 17 games)," said Hall.

With Hall back (18 points in 22 games, missing one other game with the flu), left-winger Ryan Smyth will likely move to the third line with Eric Belanger and Ryan Jones.

"I've played with Horc and Hemmer before I was hurt, for the last year and a half, and felt really good with those two guys. We'll have some chemistry," said Hall. "I really like playing with Horc because he wins a lot of faceoffs and we start out with the puck. Hemmer is so skilled and creative and you have to be ready all the time for the puck, but I've gotten used to that."

Hall said he might have felt some twinges in his shoulder in junior in Windsor, but as he said "if you took an MRI of an entire hockey player's body, there would be so many nicks and little tears. It's something you battle through, but I never had a problem and never missed games with any shoulder thing (until now)."

"He'll help the depth of our attack, balance it out," said Renney. "Taylor goes real hard at both ends ... his work habits and his enthusiasm, of course, is there."

The Oilers are 2-5 without Hall, 2-6 if you count the setback in Denver when Hall didn't play the last two periods. They've sorely missed Hall's ability to push back defences with his foot-to-the-floor speed, although he may have been told by the coaching staff that sometimes caution over valour is fine if he is risking some major pain for minor gain. Nobody's going to rip on him if he takes a little more care with his body in races for the puck or charging down the boards. If that means gearing down just a little, every now and then, so be it.

"You don't ever want to take anything away from how Taylor plays, but he has to be a little more aware of where he is in relation to the checking," said Renney.

Renney will keep Sam Gagner on the left side with Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Jordan Eberle, and will see how Smyth, who has looked a little tired the last few games (no points in the last four games, 20 minutes a night) and will still get power-play time, looks with Belanger and Jones.

"Smytty has a real influence in our roster in the core area. He's got such good work habits that that line could end up scoring a lot of goals for us. It's not something for sure I'll use in Phoenix, but I want to look at it for a couple of days (practice). I don't mind the combination," said Renney.

EDMONTON - Edmonton Oilers defenceman Ladislav Smid hopes his mouth is ready for turkey dinner in 11 days.

Smid's yap took a beating when he took a stick from the Flames' Olli Jokinen last Saturday in Calgary. Smid took stitches on the inside of his lip, some teeth got chipped and knocked awry, and there was a pool of blood. But he came back and played.

"Pretty uncomfortable, but thank God nothing major," said Smid. "A few dents but they were repaired (Monday). Nothing was broken. It's tough eating and Christmas is coming, though. I'm grumpy in the mornings right now because the mouth swells up during the night. Worst feeling ever."

The swelling hasn't gone down but he'll live with it.

"This is nothing like what happened six years ago (when he was in the minors in the Anaheim Ducks' farm system). I lost all my front teeth. I had 50 stitches inside my mouth and 15 outside. They put implants in and put in extra bone chips. It was disgusting. I was spitting out pieces of stick two weeks later," said Smid. "A guy tried to slash me."

While Smid was talking about his dental repairs, teammate Andy Sutton kidded him about going on and on.

"Geez, I'm sick and tired of them writing about your eight-game suspension," said Smid, laughing. "I've been stepping up for this guy on camera, saying it was B.S. and I feel badly for him because he plays hard."

"The important thing is I came back in the game, blood everywhere, man," said Smid.

"He's a warrior," smiled Sutton. "His mouth is made of wood."

Smid said he wouldn't be wearing a cage to protect the mouth, but he'll likely be trying out a mouthguard. He wasn't wearing one when he was injured. Khabibulin gets a break. There's a conspiracy lurking around every corner, so when Nikolai Khabibulin gets a second straight "maintenance day," the alarm bells ring - not loudly, but they're ringing. Coach Tom Renney swears Khabibulin isn't hiding an underlying injury - goalie coach Fred Chabot put the gear on for practice Tuesday at Millennium Place - but Renney did say the soon-to-be 39-year-old Khabibulin is "sore." Renney says Khabibulin doesn't have a groin injury, something that's bothered him in the past. But he must be hurt a bit, or why wouldn't he play in Calgary last Saturday night after a sparkling effort against Colorado the night before? They were back-to-back games, but it was against a rival and only a half-hour flight to Calgary.

"Just taking advantage of the schedule (no games Sunday through Wednesday); this is a great opportunity for us to give Khaby some rest. He was lights-out for us at the start and we're hoping he'll be lights-out again," said Renney. "We're just using this to check his hips, groins, shoulders, maintenance. This is really good time for that." Skinner may have concussion Sutton's crushing hit on Jeff Skinner in the dying minutes of last Wednesday's loss to the Carolina Hurricanes may have given the youngster a concussion. Skinner is home with his family in Markham, Ont., after not playing in Winnipeg against the Jets on Friday night. The Hurricanes are only saying he's out with an upper-body injury. Skinner talked of the hit after the Oilers game, saying he should have been more aware, and didn't seem to have a head problem. Sutton was suspended eight games for an earlier hit against 'Canes winger Alexei Ponikarovsky. This 'n that Corey Potter (high ankle-sprain) skated with Ryan Whitney Tuesday morning but Renney intimated Potter's fitness might not quite be up to par to play against the Coyotes. "We're not fast-tracking him. I just wanted him with Whitney because he'd played there before getting hurt," said Renney. Potter might make his return on Saturday in San Jose, instead. If so, Jeff Petry will play with Whitney, and Colten Teubert will be with Theo Peckham as the third defence pair ... Magnus Paajarvi was on the fourth line with Anton Lander and Ben Eager at practice but the clock is ticking on how long he stays with the club. He's been a healthy scratch for five games now and his ice-time is dwindling. With Taylor Hall returning and three forwards out in Oklahoma City (Josh Green suspension; Linus Omark, broken foot and Teemu Hartikainen, shoulder), the Barons could use some help. Gilbert Brule and Philippe Comet are also banged up. When asked if Paajarvi was going to the minors soon for a few weeks, Renney laughed. "Five weeks in a row you've asked that question," said Renney. "It's a fair question. We're at the point where we have to make a strong decision." ... The Coyotes beat the Oilers 4-2 in Phoenix Nov. 5, the only meeting between the clubs. ... Barons defenceman Kirill Tulupov, who gave Ben Eager a concussion with a huge hit in the Joey Moss Cup game in training camp, was just suspended two games in Oklahoma City for flipping the bird in last weekend's game against Texas Stars. The obscene gesture means Tulupov didn't play against Texas Wednesday and will also miss Saturday's game with rival Houston.

Khabibulin not on ice for second straight day

December 13, 2011. 1:14 pm • Section: Oil Spills

Should we be alarmed that goalie Nikolai Khabibulin again didn't have the gear on Tuesday.
Alarmed no? Concerned maybe.

That's two days off in a row, with no practice for the Edmonton Oilers Monday, and a backup assignment to Devan Dubnyk in Calgary last Saturday after dazzling against Colorado Avalanche Friday night at Rexall Place. That's four days and no work. OK, Khabibulin turns 39 in a month, so it's not like he needs extra ice-time.

Let goalie coach Fred Chabot fill in, flashing the leather as he did at Millennium Place Tuesday morning.

But...

Coach Tom Renney admits Khabibulin is a little sore but swears there's nothing wrong with the goalie.

"Groin injury?" he was asked.

"No," said Renney.

"Has he gone ahead to see his family in Phoenix?" he was asked.

"No," said Renney.

"Maintenance day again. Just taking advantage of the schedule (game last Saturday at the Saddledome and the next one Thursday in the desert).
Great opportunity to make sure he's rested and ready to go. He was lights out to start with (first month) and when he gets back, we hope he is again," said Renney.

So they're not hiding a real problem?

"He's sore but it's nothing. They're just treating his body. They check hips, groins, shoulders."

If he's not on the ice Wednesday at Rexall Place before the team's afternoon flight to Phoenix, then we worry.

He must have nicked something after dazzling against Colorado Avalanche at Rexall Place last Friday when he was one of three stars. You would think they would have come back with their No. 1 against the Flames-short trip, even on a back-to-back. But Dubnyk got the start. He was very good giving up two goals and making half-a-dozen excellent stops. It was one of his better performances in the last few weeks. But Khabibulin is their starter.

He's got a 1.95 average, .933 save percentage and he's won 10 of their 14 games. Of goalies playing at least 15 games, he's got the fourth best average (Brian Elliott, Jimmy Howard and Tim Thomas are ahead of him), and his save percentage is better than everybody except the Blues Elliott and the Bruins' Thomas

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Taylor Hall was on a line with Shawn Horcoff and Ales Hemsky at practice, which looks like a keeper for the Coyotes as long as he passes Renney's fitness test Wednesday morning. Ryan Smyth was on the third line with Eric Belanger and Ryan Jones. The first line-Sam Gagner-Ryan-Nugent Hopkins and Jordan Eberle stayed the same. The fourth line had Anton Lander with Magnus Paajarvi and Ben Eager with Lennart Petrell and Darcy Hordichuk as extras. There's a good possibility Paajarvi might be going to the minors soon, however, with the farm club hurting at forward with two major injuries (Linus Omark, foot and Teemu Hartikainen, shoulder) and Josh Green suspended for four games. Gilbert Brule and Philippe Cornet are also banged up.

Defenceman Corey Potter (high ankle sprain) skated with Ryan Whitney at practice but he might be a game away from playing. He might not return until Saturday in San Jose.

Hemsky adapting to new role

It's surprising, considering the reckless abandon with which he plays the game, that Thursday marks the first time in Taylor Hall's career that he will be available to play.

The sophomore winger is expected to play when the Edmonton Oilers travel to Phoenix to face the Coyotes.

"Last year I didn't get to come back, this is kind of new territory for me," said Hall. "I'm just working as hard as I can in practice to get the timing back that's going to help me out.

"I have to do a test (Wednesday) just to see if my fitness is at par. I have a feeling it will be and if it's good on that front, then I think I'll be ready."

Hall has been out since Dec. 9, after suffering a shoulder injury against the Colorado Avalanche.

The Oilers winger sustained the injury when he was hammered into the boards by Avalanche defenceman Ryan Wilson.

He returned to the contest, but a subsequent crosscheck by Kyle Quincey put Hall out for the remainder of the game.

"I'm excited to get back in the lineup, it's been a long time," Hall said. "Seven games has felt like an eternity and I want to get back out there, help the guys as much as I can and get back to finding my game."

Hall had seven goals and 11 assists in 22 games prior to getting hurt.

The Oilers, meanwhile, have gone on to lose five of the seven games he's been out of the lineup.

"He helps give us attack depth," said Oilers head coach Tom Renney. "I think that if you look at the way the lines are set up right now, each one is a little different from the others in terms of how they can be effective offensively.

"Taylor happens to work hard both ways and we need that part of the game as well in terms of coming back to his own end."

Hall has been working out hard to try and rehab his shoulder and get back into the lineup. On Tuesday he was involved in a spirited practice with the club.

The Oilers have had the benefit of four days between games after losing 3-0 to the Calgary Flames Saturday.

"There were a couple of instances (Monday) and today where I was really battling and felt good," said Hall. "It held up and it feels strong, so I'm pretty confident that I'm going to be feeling good."

Last year, Hall suffered a season-ending ankle injury when he got tangled up after a fight with Columbus Blue Jackets forward Derek Dorsett.

He had the entire off-season to recover and didn't have to worry about trying to regain his timing when returning to training camp.

Such won't be the case this time around as Hall will find himself playing catchup trying to make up for lost time.

"I think timing is probably the biggest part of it," Hall said. "In practice I've tried to work as hard as I can to simulate a game-type atmosphere. To be honest, in my whole junior career, in my NHL career, I've never come back from an injury."

Skating on a line with Shawn Horcoff and Ales Hemsky on Tuesday, Hall will probably start with the pair against the Coyotes.

It's a good fit for the former first overall pick who was developing a good rapport with the veterans prior to getting hurt.

"I like playing with Horc and Hemmer," Hall said. "Before I got hurt, I was really feeling good with those two guys and they're guys that I've played with for the last year and-a-half now so we kind of have some chemistry.
Hemsky adapting to new role

By DEREK VAN DIEST, QMI Agency

EDMONTON - Ales Hemsky is starting to come to terms with his new role.

No longer an automatic selection on the first power play, and not always tapped to hop over the boards when the Edmonton Oilers need a goal, the talented winger has taken a backseat to the team's youth movement.

It's a different situation having had to carry the club offensively for so many years.

"It's tough, I'm not playing the way I want, but we have a lot of good players on the team and you have to take the opportunity you have and show them you can do something," Hemsky said. "Maybe I'm not playing in the situations I normally play, but whenever they put me on the ice, I have to take advantage of those situations and do something with that and show them I can do it."

Hemsky is down in the list of Oilers offensive producers this season with three goals and 11 points in 19 games.

At his best the Oilers winger is usually good for a point-per-game production, but injuries have slowed him down and he's still battling back from off-season shoulder surgery that set him back early this year.

"It's a little bit awkward, but it's hockey you're going to go through some low points and you're going to go through some high points, but it's a long season so you have to deal with it. It's your job," Hemsky said. "I'm not complaining, I feel pretty good actually. I don't think I'm getting put into the situations I was before and this is kind of a different role for me. I'm just trying to be positive about it and help the team."

It's been a long time since an Oilers coach has had options other than Hemsky to put in offensive situations.

But with Ryan Nugent-Hopkins taking the league by storm with 13 goals and 32 points in his first 30 NHL games, Jordan Eberle having a solid second season with 31 points and Ryan Smyth showing flashes of inspiration with 26 points, Oilers head coach Tom Renney does have alternatives.

However, the Oilers would like nothing more than to see Hemsky score at the rate he's proven more than capable of doing in the past.

"We have more tools and we have more weapons, naturally," said Renney. "I think we have to utilize Ales more under those circumstances. He's doing everything he possibly can to play within the realm of how we're trying to play."

Hemsky is adamant he's not feeling sorry for himself and is confident he'll be able to rediscover his game with the ice-time he's given.

"Every opportunity I have I will try my best to help the team," he said. "I'm not complaining. They are playing well. It is what it is and you just have to deal with it, that's all."

Brodeur leads Devils past Panthers 3-2 in SO

The Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. -- Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias scored in the shootout and Martin Brodeur stopped both Florida attempts to lift the New Jersey Devils to a 3-2 victory over the Panthers on Tuesday night.

Elias and Zach Parise had the New Jersey goals in regulation. Brodeur made 24 saves to help the Devils rally from a two-goal deficit for their fourth win in five games.

Kris Versteeg scored twice for Florida, which dropped its third straight. Jose Theodore stopped 32 shots.

Parise tied it 2-all at 7:40 of the third period. Henrik Tallinder's slap shot from straight on just inside the blue line went wide of the net to Theodore's right. The puck ricocheted off the end boards and went right to Parise, who slammed it in for his 10th goal.

Versteeg's short-handed breakaway goal at 7:29 of the second gave Florida a 2-0 lead.

Shortly after a faceoff at center ice, Versteeg stick-checked the puck away from Tallinder. Versteeg took control of the puck and skated in alone on Brodeur before firing a shot high past the goalie's glove side.

Just 56 seconds after Versteeg's second goal, Elias made it 2-1.

Kovalchuk had the puck behind the Devils' net and sent a pass to Parise in the left circle. Parise drew several players toward him before passing the puck to Elias at the right side of the net. It was Elias' 10th goal.

Adam Larsson's turnover deep in the New Jersey zone led to Versteeg's goal that gave Florida a 1-0 lead at 15:10 of the first period.

Larsson was in the right corner when he attempted a weak backhand pass. Stephen Weiss intercepted in the circle and skated in on Brodeur. The Florida forward deked as he skated across the front of the net, causing Brodeur to hit the ice. Weiss then sent a pass back to Versteeg, who scored his team-leading 14th goal.

New Jersey's Petr Sykora missed an opportunity to score the decisive goal in the final seconds of regulation when, standing just outside the crease, he redirected a pass from Mark Fayne wide of an open net.

NOTES: It was the second meeting of the season for these teams, both in Florida. The Panthers overcame a 3-0 deficit to win 4-3 on Nov. 21.... Florida's four-game homestand continues against Calgary on Friday, Carolina on Sunday and Phoenix next Tuesday.... New Jersey's NHL-leading penalty-killing unit was needed only once, successfully killing Dainius Zubrus' tripping penalty midway through the third period.... The Devils improved to 12-5-0 in one-goal games. It was their fifth straight one-goal game.

Ilya Kovalchuk scored the winner in the shootout as the New Jersey Devils rallied for a 3-2 win over the Florida Panthers.

Zach Parise and Patrik Elias each had a goal in regulation while Kovalchuk added two assists for the Devils, who have won four of five. Martin Brodeur stopped 24 shots and both shooters he faced in the shootout.

Kris Versteeg scored both goals for the Panthers, who have lost three straight.

In the first round of the shootout, Kovalchuk banged a wrister in off the right post. Brodeur then made stops on Tomas Fleischmann and Versteeg before Elias sealed the win with a shot between the pads of Theodore.

A poor turnover from New Jersey in its own end led to the first Florida goal as Stephen Weiss picked off a weak pass from Adam Larsson at the low right circle, skated to the left and fed it back over to Versteeg, who flicked it past Brodeur 15:10 into the first.

Skating shorthanded, Versteeg picked the pocket of Henrik Tallinder and skated down the other end where he buried a wrister over the glove of Brodeur at the 7:29 mark.

Less than a minute later, New Jersey got one back when Elias swept home the puck from the low right circle off a broken pass.

The Devils then tied the game at the 7:40 mark of the third period when Tallinder's blast from the high slot bounced off the backboards to the left of the net and came back out to Parise, who slipped it past Theodore.
New Jersey Devils (15-13-1) at Florida Panthers (16-9-5), 7:30 p.m. (ET)

By Sports Network

The top team in the Southeast Division, the Florida Panthers, will commence a four-game homestand tonight versus the New Jersey Devils from BankAtlantic Center.

Florida hasn't played up to its top billing as of late, having dropped two straight since a three-game winning streak and five of its last nine games. It went 1-1-1 on a three-game road trip and concluded the trek with Sunday's lopsided 6-1 loss at the hands of the New York Rangers.

Erik Gudbranson scored his first NHL goal for the Panthers in the first period and Scott Clemmensen made 11 saves in the third. Jose Theodore started for Florida, but was yanked after giving up six goals on 22 shots in the first two periods.

"Any time you get a tail-kicking like that you always hear things from coaches like 'the will to compete.' Obviously, their 'want' was higher than ours," said Panthers coach Kevin Dineen. "That's an old-fashioned tail-kicking for sure."

The Panthers are 6-2-4 as the host this season and will also welcome the Flames, Hurricanes and Coyotes to town. Florida went 3-0-1 on its most recent four-game homestand (Nov. 19-Nov. 25) and is 4-0-1 in its last five contests in Sunrise. Center Mark Cullen is questionable for Tuesday's game with an upper-body injury.

New Jersey has won three of four games since a four-game slide and recorded a 5-4 win over Tampa Bay on Monday in the opener of a brief two-game road trip.

Zach Parise and rookie Adam Henrique both posted a goal and two assists, while Ilya Kovalchuk, Petr Sykora and Dainius Zubrus also scored for New Jersey, which improved to 9-8-0 away from home this season.

Johan Hedberg earned his ninth win of the season with a 32-save performance.

"A big two points tonight," New Jersey coach Peter DeBoer said on the club's website. "It was important; we came out and got a win. We wanted to start the road trip right and we did that."

Devils forward Cam Janssen missed his fourth straight game due to a bruised chest and is expected to return soon. He was just activated from injured reserve. In other team news, the Devils acquired defenseman Kurtis Foster and goaltender Timo Pielmeier from Anaheim in exchange for blueliner Mark Fraser, center Rod Pelley and the club’s seventh-round choice in the 2012 NHL Entry Draft.

Tuesday’s game between New Jersey and Florida is the second of four matchups this season. The Panthers took the first encounter by a 4-3 score at home and has won four of the past six meetings between the two clubs. The Devils lead the all-time series with Florida by a 43-22-9 difference, including a 20-13-5 mark in the previous 38 road games.

Florida Panthers fall to New Jersey Devils in final shootout

By GEORGE RICHARDS

Jose Theodore gave up six goals Sunday night against the Rangers, but Panthers coach Kevin Dineen looked at that outing as more fluke than the norm.

With that in mind, Theodore was back between the pipes Tuesday against the Devils. Theodore rewarded Dineen’s faith by stopping 32 shots in a 3-2 shootout loss to New Jersey at BankAtlantic Center.

The Panthers are 1-4 in shootouts this season — all coming at home and —have scored just one goal in those five contests. Marcel Goc, who could be out until the New Year, scored to lead Florida to a 3-2 shootout win over Tampa Bay in the home opener.

Despite their third loss in a row, the Panthers gained a point over second place Washington, which lost to Philadelphia on Tuesday night. The first-place Panthers have a seven point lead on the Capitals once again.

“We weren’t very good and we have to go back, have a few good practices and the next few days will be big for us,” said Kris Versteeg, who scored both of Florida’s goals but is now 0-for-4 in the shootout. “We weren’t good enough all night and that will happen sometimes. We should be thankful we have a point. [Theodore] saved us all game. He’s the reason we got to overtime. We should have pushed back.”

Theodore’s game Sunday definitely looks like an anomaly as he had only given up four goals once in a game this season and had given up three goals or fewer in 16 in a row heading into New York.

Theodore let Sunday’s game roll off him as he was loose after Tuesday’s morning skate, wearing a retro Chicago Bears T-shirt with a Yankees cap tilted to the side.

On Tuesday, he was forced to be at his best as the Panthers struggled for offense once Versteeg gave them a 2-0 lead with another two goal performance against the Devils.

The Panthers were outshot 16-6 in the second period and 5-1 in the third. Florida’s one shot in the third was its fewest in a single period this season. The Panthers came hard at Martin Brodeur in overtime but none of their four shots found the back of the net.

In the shootout, Ilya Kovalchuk (5-for-6 this season) scored for the Devils as did Patrik Elias. Florida only got two shots as it shot second; Tomas Fleischmann and Versteeg were stopped.

Florida took a 1-0 lead in the first after a sweet pass from Stephen Weiss found Versteeg on the right side of Brodeur. In the second, Versteeg got loose on a penalty kill and walked in on the Devils’ Hall of Fame goalie to make it 2-0. Elias scored less than a minute after Versteeg’s second goal to make it 2-1, with Zach Parise tapping a puck off the back wall past Theodore to tie with 7:40 into the third.

Fleischmann had a chance to give the Panthers the lead but hit the post with 5:16 left.

“We were lucky to get one [point],” defenseeman Ed Jovanovski said. “We had a lot of turnovers and that’s eventually going to bite us. We’ll take the point and put it in the bank but we could be a lot better.”

AROUND THE ICE

• Rookie defenseman Erik Gudbranson was held out of Tuesday’s game with leg tightness after Sunday’s game against the New York Rangers. Dineen said Gudbranson could be out a few games; Gudbranson said if the medical staff would have let him, he would have played against the Devils.

With Gudbranson out, Keaton Ellerby was back in the lineup for the first time since Nov. 25.

• Center Tim Kennedy cleared waivers Tuesday and was assigned to Florida’s AHL affiliate in San Antonio. With Kennedy gone, Mike Santorelli was back in the lineup after being benched Sunday against the Rangers. Santorelli centered the fourth line with Matt Bradley and Krys Barch.

• Barch, acquired from Dallas last week, fought for the third time in four games and also took a delay of game penalty. He has now spent 21 minutes in the penalty box, already seventh-most on the Panthers this season.

• Panthers prospect Quinton Howden was being treated for concussion-like symptoms after being hit by Brett Connolly during a Team Canada world junior intrasquad scrimmage Monday night. Howden could miss some time but his condition isn’t too serious. Howden also suffered a concussion during Panthers training camp and didn’t participate in any on-ice activities before being sent back to his Canadian junior team.

• Marlins outfielder Logan Morrison dropped the ceremonial first puck Tuesday while wearing a customized Panthers jersey with his No. 20 on the back.

Florida Panthers Shut Out in Shootout AGAIN ... Cats lose Fourth Straight Shootout 3-2 to Jersey Devils ... Quinton Howden Hurt ... Krys Barch Likes Penalties Apparently

Jose Theodore gave up six goals Sunday night against the Rangers, but Panthers coach Kevin Dineen looked at that outing as more fluke than the norm.

With that in mind, Theodore was back between the pipes Tuesday against the Devils. Theodore rewarded Dineen’s faith by stopping 32 shots in a 3-2 shootout loss to New Jersey at BankAtlantic Center.

The Panthers are 1-4 in shootouts this season – all coming at home – and have scored just one goal in those five contests. Marcel Goc, who could be out until the New Year, scored to lead Florida to a 3-2 shootout win over Tampa Bay in the home opener.

Despite the loss, the Panthers gained a point over second place Washington. The first-place Panthers have a seven point lead on the Capitals once again.

“We weren’t very good and we have to go back, have a few good practices and the next few days will be big for us,” said Kris Versteeg, who scored both of Florida’s goals but is now 0-0-4 in the shootout.

“We weren’t good enough all night and that will happen sometimes. We should be thankful we have a point. [Theodore] saved us all game. He’s the reason we got to overtime. We should have pushed back.”

Theodore’s game Sunday definitely looks like an anomaly as he had only given up four goals once in a game this season and had given up three goals or fewer in 16 straight heading into New York. Theodore let Sunday’s game roll off him as he was loose after Tuesday’s morning skate, wearing a retro Chicago Bears t-shirt with a Yankees cap tilted to the side.

On Tuesday, he was forced to be at his best as the Panthers struggled for offense once Versteeg gave them a 2-0 lead with another two goal performance against the Devils.

The Panthers were outshot 16-6 in the second period and 5-1 in the third. Florida’s one shot in the third was its fewest in a single period this season. The Panthers came hard at Martin Brodeur in overtime but none of their four shots found the back of the net.

In the shootout, Ilya Kovalchuk (5-for-6 this season) scored for the Devils as did Patrik Elias. Florida only got two shots as it shot second; Tomas Fleischmann and Versteeg were stopped.

Florida took a 1-0 lead in the first after a sweet pass from Stephen Weiss found Versteeg on the right side of Brodeur. In the second, Versteeg got loose on a penalty kill and walked in on the Devils’ Hall of Fame goalie to make it 2-0.

Elias scored less than a minute after Versteeg’s second goal to make it 2-1, with Zach Parise tapping a puck off the back wall past Theodore to tie with 7:40 into the third.

Fleischmann had a chance to give the Panthers the lead but hit the post with 5:16 left.

“We were lucky to get one [point],” defenseman Ed Jovanovski said. “We had a lot of turnovers and that’s eventually going to bite us. We’ll take the point and put it in the bank but we could be a lot better.”

AROUND THE ICE

Rookie defenseman Erik Gudbranson was held out of Tuesday’s game with leg tightness after Sunday’s game against the New York Rangers. Dineen said Gudbranson could be out a few games; Gudbranson said if the medical staff would have let him, he would have played against the Devils.

With Gudbranson out, Keaton Ellerby was back in the lineup for the first time since Nov. 25.

() Barch, acquired from Dallas last week, fought for the third time in four games and also took a delay of game penalty. He has now spent 21 minutes in the penalty box, already seventh-most on the Panthers this season.

() Panthers prospect Quinton Howden was being treated for concussion-like symptoms after being hit by Brett Connolly during a Team Canada world junior intrasquad scrimmage Monday night. Howden could miss some time but his condition isn’t too serious.

Howden also suffered a concussion during Panthers training camp and didn’t participate in any on-ice activities before being sent back to his Canadian junior team.

-George Richards

NEW YORK — At 19-years-old, Erik Gudbranson is learning a lot about life, including his craft as a defenseman in the National Hockey League.

Gudbranson played just his 24th professional hockey game on Sunday. It came against the famed Rangers at the ‘world’s most famous arena.’ It is at Madison Square Garden where the Panthers prized prospect-turned-regular may have learned more about what it takes to make it in the NHL than he did in any of his previous games or weeks of training camp.

The NHL is a league of give and take. In one moment, Gudbranson is celebrating after scoring his first NHL goal. Not long after, he’s limping to the ice after taking a couple of rough hits. Mind you, Gudbranson laid out some doozies of his own. Yet the picture of him slowly skating off the ice pretty much summed up Florida’s 6-1 loss to an unforgiving Rangers team that night.

“Some of the goals were bounces, some were mistakes,” Gudbranson said after a game in which he left with less than 10 minutes remaining. He said he suffered a charley horse and should be back in the lineup Tuesday against the Devils. “I take full responsibility for the third goal. It was just one of those games and their tough to be in. You need to bounce back in the next one.”

Like many of his teammates, Gudbranson will take home a souvenir from the big city. Although unlike the watches and leather belts and expensive winter coats, Gudbranson will likely hold on to his keepsake from New York for a long time.

Like Keaton Ellerby did last season, Gudbranson scored his first NHL goal at the Garden against the Rangers. Like Ellerby, the team grabbed the puck after it went past Henrik Lundqvist so to present it to the rook in a proper way.

Of course, an NHL equipment manager’s ‘proper way’ is to put white stick tape around the rubber puck and write the puck’s significance on the tape with a black Sharpie. There will be no ceremony; Gudbranson will likely find the puck sitting in his locker on Tuesday.

“It was nice to score. It was a good goal at the time and it’s nice to get that monkey off my back,” Gudbranson said. “But it’s overshadowed by the night. This is a new league. Guys hit hard and you have to hit harder. I took one in the corner. That’s the way it is.”

The Panthers have high hopes for Gudbranson, a player considered part of Florida’s future success. The third overall pick in 2010, it appeared Gudbranson would play for the Panthers as an 18-year-old. Only he and the Panthers couldn’t work out a contract and Gudbranson was returned to his junior team. It was probably for the best.

Gudbranson played in Florida’s first 11 games before “given a break,” by coach Kevin Dineen. Gudbranson watched six of the next 10 games from the press box as Ellerby replaced him in the lineup. Gudbranson got back on the ice on Nov. 23 and hasn’t sat since. He played in his 10th consecutive game Sunday.

“He’s played extremely well the past two weeks,” Dineen said. “I went through a long experiment and I know it’s no fun for Keaton right now. But it’s not good to keep flip-flopping guys. Just to keep both fresh is self-defeating. I made a decision not based on potential or contract, I did it on performance. I felt Gudbranson’s body of work was deserving of staying in the lineup. He’s building confidence.”

The Panthers had considered loaning Gudbranson to Team Canada so he could play in the popular world juniors tournament. Had he gone back, Gudbranson would be a candidate to captain the Canadian team.

Only the Panthers decided against it for various reasons. One is, Gudbranson has become a regular in the lineup. That, and he played for Canada last year. He’s a professional now.

Gudbranson also knows he needs to keep moving forward. After Sunday’s game, it’s very possible he’ll find himself in the press box again Tuesday.

Ellerby, after all, has been good about being replaced. The two are good friends — “I love Goody; he’s an unbelievable kid who has played well and well enough to stay in the lineup,” Ellerby said — but he wants to play too. If he gets into the lineup Tuesday, he’s going to do everything he can to stay in it.

Gudbranson understands that just as Ellerby does. The Panthers have carried seven defensemen all season yet only need six per game. Someone has to be the odd man out. Lately, it’s been Ellerby.

“It sucks. You want to be playing, but the team has been winning so I support the guys and am doing the things off the ice to help us be successful,” said Ellerby, who has been scratched eight straight games in favor of Gudbranson. “You can’t let this put you in a bad mood. You have to be a good team guy.”

() The Panthers put center Tim Kennedy on waivers Monday in order to return him to AHL San Antonio. Florida have been carrying an extra forward — center Mike Santorelli was benched Sunday — and could get Marcel Goc (concussion) back this week.

RockiesTUESDAY: DEVILS AT PANthers
When, Where: 7:30 p.m.; BankAtlantic Center, Sunrise
TV/Radio: FSN/560-WQAM
The series: Devils lead 43-24-7
The game: The Devils had lost five of seven before playing at the equally-struggling Lightning on Monday. The Devils are expected to start Martin Brodeur in net Tuesday. In the previous meeting last month, Jersey had a 3-0 first period lead before Florida stormed back for a 4-3 win. The Panthers have won four of the past five at home (4-0-1) and will play seven of their next nine in Sunrise.

Posted by George Richards
Florida Panthers get 'Old Fashioned Tail Kicking' as NY Rangers Roll 6-1 ... Cats Coming Home for Seven of Next Nine.

NEW YORK – The Panthers haven't offered too many stinkers this season, but Sunday's game against the Rangers definitely fits that category.

It's hard to remember a worse effort by one of the league's most surprising positive stories this year.

The Panthers did little right Sunday and the Rangers pounced, rolling to a 6-1 win at Madison Square Garden. Florida heads home as Sunday's game was the sixth in the Panthers' past seven that was away from Sunrise.

Florida has seven of its next nine at home. Of these seven road games, the Panthers went 3-3-1.

Florida's five-goal loss is tied for its biggest margin of Roadhouse defeat at MSG, matching a 5-0 loss on Feb. 24, 2008.

"Any time you get a tail kicking like that, you say things like 'the will to compete'," coach Kevin Dineen said. "It was obvious their will was greater than ours. When we play well, we travel as a unit. We were really spread out, very individualistic. We didn't play as a group. That's an old fashioned tail kicking for sure."

Despite the loss, Florida goes home after playing arguably its hardest stretch of games more than just Roadhouse familisurviving as it continues to lead the Southeast Division by six points. The Panthers 10 road wins is tied for most in the league. Florida's 18 road games is also tied for a league-high.

Sunday's rout sure didn't start out that way as the Panthers went into the first break still in the game. The Rangers led 2-0 in the opening period off goals by Brad Richards and Artem Anisimov, but 40 seconds after the second goal, rookie Erik Gudbranson got his first NHL goal by whiping a shot from the blue line.

"It's nice to score, but I'm pretty sure it's completely overshadowed," Gudbranson said. "You can't win every game and this was a tough one. It was one of those nights."

The Panthers hoped the Rangers were a little tired after Saturday's win in Buffalo, yet should have known better. New York is now 4-0-1 in the second game of a back-to-back set this season (3-0 at MSG) Familyguychickenand a very impressive 24-8-3 in such situations over the past three seasons.

Florida gave the Rangers what they wanted early as New York drew three penalties in the opening period – scoring on two of them. By contrast, the Panthers went 0-for-7 on the power play – their worst showing since a 3-2 loss to the Flyers last month.

"We didn't allow ourselves to hang in with the game," defenseman Brian Campbell said. "They came out hard and we weren't prepared from the get-go. We took three penalties. We can't do that. We haven't played like that all season."

Things soured for Florida in the second. Derek Stepan stole the puck in the Florida zone on one power play chance and weaved through the defense. Stepan's shot beat Jose Theodore with one second left on Florida's advantage for the shorthanded marker.

Theodore, who hadn't surrendered more than three goals in a game since giving up four against the Lightning on Oct. 17, was pulled after giving up six in the opening two periods. The Rangers got their fifth and sixth goals a minute apart late in the second.

Dineen said he thought about pulling Theodore earlier, but let him play the first two periods. Scott Clemmensen started the third.

The last time Theodore gave up six goals in a game was in a 7-4 loss to the Panthers at BankAtlantic Center on April 11, 2009.

AROUND THE ICE

Matt Bradley returned to the lineup for the first time since being hurt Nov. 15 in Dallas. It was thought Santorellinewcomer Krys Barch would be the healthy scratch, but instead, Dineen decided to bench Mike Santorelli.
Florida Panthers Have a Blast in Central Park as they Get Back to their Roots.

NEW YORK – Brian Campbell sat on the stanchions of the rink along with three of his teammates, his feet dangling over the edge over the ice as if he was a little kid once again.

On Saturday, Campbell wasn’t alone in feeling like he had gone back in time. The entire Panthers team hopped into the past as they took to the open ice at the Lasker Rink in Central Park in Manhattan, playing childhood games on the small slab of ice more so than they did and real practicing in the early winter chill of the great outdoors.

The Panthers coaching staff got in on the fun as well. Head coach Kevin Dineen and crew donned colorful team practice jerseys and participated while wearing red ski caps with the New York Fire Department logo on the front.

Dineen said center Stephen Weiss picked out the different teams that skated and competed in feats of IMG_0355skill; Weiss also came up with the idea the coaches wear the ‘FDNY’ toques.

“There are a lot of smiles out here,” Dineen said after the lighthearted hour long practice was almost finished. “The fun factor was very high.”

Dineen seems to have been pushing all the right buttons when it comes to his dealing with the Panthers in his first few months as head coach.

After talking about the disappointment of losing 2-1 in overtime to Buffalo on Friday, Dineen became jovial when talk turned to the possibility of Saturday’s ‘pond practice’ outdoors in Central Park.

The Panthers equipment staff were first to arrive at the outdoor facility around 11:30 on Saturday morning with the already-dressed team showing up on a charter bus a few minutes later. The players walked down a set of stone steps into the rink while wearing gym shoes, their skates hanging from their sticks as if they were meeting their friends at the municipal rink.

And, yes, they kind of were. The team started the day off by signing autographs for the crowd that gathered. On the ice, things were loose. Goalies Jose IMG_0361Theodore and Scott Clemmensen, like everyone else, left their pads at home. That’s perhaps what Theodore loved most.

“It was a lot of fun and I think I’m ready to play on the point [of the power play],” Theodore said after putting a puck into the net. “It was the perfect weather, not too cold. We had a real good time out here that’s for sure.”

When the skate was close to being done, the Panthers gathered at center ice for a team photo that included those who work at the rink and helped make Saturday happen.

Although the Panthers haven’t practiced outdoors in the past decade it’s becoming a popular option for IMG_0365teams when they come to New York. With a lack of ice in the city, teams are looking at the outdoor rinks as an opportunity for team bonding as much as a chance to stay loose. The Toronto Maple Leafs practiced at Lasker last Sunday as part of their father’s trip; the Philadelphia Flyers have worked outdoors as well.

This may not be the Panthers only trip here if Dineen has any say in it.

“It’s been a hard schedule, there’s a lot of time on the road,” he said.

“Also the ones that stick out at the end of the season. It was a good day for the IMG_0368Florida Panthers. It was a great day for all of us. We got back to our youth.”

Rookie defenseman Erik Gudbranson will remain with the Panthers and will not be loaned to the Canadian national team for the upcoming world junior tournament. The 19-year-old played in his 23rd game with the Panthers on Friday and has played in nine consecutive games.

“He’s a member of the Florida Panthers and has earned that right from the first day of training camp,” assistant coach Gord Murphy said.

“Obviously it was a tough decision. Playing for Team Canada is a big deal but he’s played in it already. We just look at it that he’s a member of our team and an important member of our team. We don’t want to lose players for any reason, although this is a big honor. He’s a valued member of our team and we need him.”

() With Mikael Samuelsson ready to dive into the lineup full time and Marcel Goc and Matt Bradley gearing up for a return, Evgenii Dadonov was deemed expendable and sent back to AHL San Antonio on Saturday. Dadonov was given a prime spot on Florida’s top line last week after Kris Versteeg was hurt; he disappointed and was scratched the next game.

“He had some real timely giveaways [Friday] so he needs to go to San Antonio and get his game in order,” Dineen said.

SUNDAY: PANTHERS AT RANGERS

When, Where: 7:30 p.m.; Madison Square Garden, New York

TV/Radio: FSN; 560-WQAM

The series: Rangers lead 38-30-6

The game: The Panthers took the opening game of the series with a 2-1 win on Thanksgiving week. The Rangers played at Buffalo on Saturday night and sent out backup Martin Biron, meaning Henrik Lundqvist will likely go against Jose Theodore and the Panthers. Florida had its three-game winning streak snapped with a 2-1 overtime loss at Buffalo on Friday. The Panthers have won 10 away games this season.

Posted by George Richards

Florida Panthers Central Park Practice Is a GO

BUFFALO -- The Panthers will have a rare outdoor practice Saturday at the Central Park Lasker Rink in Manhattan.

Weather permitting, Florida is expected to start skating around 11:30 a.m.

For those in the city, admission is free and open to the public.

The Maple Leafs held a light practice at the Donald Trump-run rink last Sunday.

"It's going to be a little pond hockey," Dineen said. "We're going out in sweats and are going to enjoy. It'll be good. I'm looking forward to it."

For Central Park Panthers updates on Saturday morning, follow here at Twitter.com/OnFrozenPond

Posted by George Richards

Florida Panthers Pick Up Point in 2-1 OT loss to Sabres, 37 Points Tied for Most in East

BUFFALO – The Panthers were a little road weary Friday night after playing their second game in as many nights and sixth of their past seven away from the friendly confines of western Broward County.

The old Panthers would have taken the point in the standings they received after losing 2-1 to the Sabres in overtime with relish, headed on their merry way with smiles as wide as Buffalo’s Peace Bridge.

Well, obviously, these aren't the Panthers most have become accustomed to.

"Losing in overtime has quite a bit of sting to it. There's quite a bit of disappointment," coach Kevin Dineen said moments after Jason Pominville won it for Buffalo on a breakaway 2:19 into the extra frame.

"We're proud of the fact we're playing stingy on defense, but we still have some things to clean up. There's disappointment in the room. There's a half-full look at the glass, we walked out with a point. But we're beyond that as a team."

The point gained in the standings pulled Florida into a tie with Philadelphia atop the Eastern Conference standings. Although the Panthers are statistically still in second, only the Flyers and Florida can claim 37 points in the east. Philadelphia has one more win than the Panthers and two fewer games played.

Still, for a team that finished last in the 15 team division just a few months ago, that's called progress.

"It's too early to be looking at the standings, but it credits our hard work and how far we've come as a team," Jason Garrison said. His ninth goal of the season leads all NHL defenseman and tied the score in the second.

"This is definitely better than the alternative. We have a good mood, atmosphere here. We're all super-competitive and everyone is down right now. But we're coming back to work and finish this road trip strong."

Neither the Sabres nor Panthers will enter Friday's game into a selection of NHL classic games as both teams struggled to create offensive chances. Buffalo took a 1-0 lead with 2:10 left in the first when Derek Roy broke free and scored. Florida countered with 4:12 left in the second as the Sabres had two players in the penalty box. The Panthers took advantage as Garrison whipped a shot from 35 feet out.

The score stayed 1-1 until Pominville got loose after former Panther Jordan Leopold got the puck deep in the Florida zone and sent it out. Pominville raced toward the net and shot one between Scott Clemmensen's legs to end it.

The Panthers once again failed to win a fourth consecutive game; Florida hasn't won more than three straight since Jacques Martin's final year behind the bench in 2008.

Posted by George Richards

BUFFALO -- General manager Dale Tallon didn't travel with the team to Buffalo after Thursday night's victory after visiting a Boston hospital on Thursday morning.

Tallon, 61, was not admitted and was resting at the team's hotel in Boston as of Friday.

Assistant general manager Mike Santos said Tallon was doing fine and could meet the team in New York for Sunday's game against the Rangers.

() Goalie Jose Theodore took Friday off after stopping all 40 shots faced in Thursday's 2-0 shutout victory.

The game was Theodore's 600th in the NHL.

When asked what he received for playing in so many games, Theodore quipped "a tap on the back, a cup of coffee. That's it."

() Rookie defenseman Erik Gudbranson is expected to remain with the Panthers and not be loaned to the Canadian national team for the upcoming world junior tournament.

The 19-year-old played in his 23rd game with the Panthers on Friday and has played in nine consecutive games.

"He's a member of the Florida Panthers and has earned that right from the first day of training camp," assistant coach Gord Murphy said.

"Obviously it was a tough decision. Playing for Team Canada is a big deal but he's played in it already. We just look at it that he's a member of our team and an important member of our team. We don't want to lose players for any reason, although this is a big honor. He's a valued member of our team and we need him."

Hockeycab() If the Panthers practice on Saturday, they will do so in a outdoor setting. Florida has reserved ice at the Central Park Lasker Rink in Manhattan from 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. on Saturday.

Coach Kevin Dineen will not announce his decision to hold the informal workout until the team lands in New York early Saturday morning. The Maple Leafs held a light practice at the Donald Trump-run rink last Sunday.

"This seemed to be a much more romantic place to come and get back to your roots," coach Ron Wilson told the Toronto Star. "Most of our guys, somewhere along the line, played hockey outdoors. This is a great opportunity."

For an update on the Panthers practice schedule, visit Twitter.com/OnFrozenPond or check back here.

Dineen said before Thursday's game that he and his family considers themselves New Englanders after he spent a bulk of his career playing for the Hartford Dinemen/Whalers and later coached the Portland, Maine, Pirates of the AHL.

So beating the Bruins at the Garden on Thursday did take on some extra significance and meaning.

"At the end of the day," Dineen said, "it's always nice coming in here and getting a win. Whether I was wearing [Hartford] green-and-white or Pirate black-and-red into Providence, it's very enjoyable to me to beat these guys."

() Mikael Samuelsson was not in the lineup Friday as Dineen said he would work him back in slowly. But not in the way he described Samuelsson's game on PorscheThursday in Boston: "He was more molasses than Porsche."

Samuelsson was playing in his first game since Oct. 18 because of a groin injury stemming from last May's sports hernia surgery.

Posted by George Richards

Panthers top prospect Howden sustains concussion-like symptoms; Tallon says not serious

by: Harvey Fialkov December 13th, 2011 | 4:51 PM

The Panthers received a scare this week when one of their top prospects, Quinton Howden, sustained concussion-like symptoms after his own teammate from Team Canada, Brett Connolly, hammered him into the boards during an intra-squad game on Monday. They’re practicing for the upcoming World Juniors.

Howden, a 2010 first-round pick (25th) of the Panthers, struggled to get to his feet after the hit and stumbled before getting to the bench. After the game, Hockey Canada announced Howden had an upper-body injury, which in this day and age of the stigma placed on athletes with head injuries seemed ominous, particularly because Howden sustained his first concussion during training camp with the Panthers. TSN has confirmed that Howden is being treated for concussion-related symptoms.

Howden had a neck injury before coming to the Panthers rookie camp this summer and apparently it turned into a concussion after a hit in one of the rookie games. Howden didn’t play any preseason games due to the injury. Howden admitted it was his first concussion to a reporter after he was sent to Moose Jaw (WHL) before the NHL season began. It’s particularly disturbing because of the concussion epidemic in hockey. Penguins superstar Sidney Crosby is out again indefinitely with concussion-related symptoms. NHL superstars Chris Pronger and leading scorer Claude Giroux are also out with concussions.

Panthers GM Dale Tallon just told me that he didn’t think it was serious and, "he’ll be all right," and may still play in the tournament.

"It might’ve been a little bit late," Team Canada coach Don Hay told NHL.com. "We asked him to play more physical tonight and he did that. You’re told to finish checks. I’m sure he didn’t want to hurt him. [Howden] got hit and I think his head went back and hit the glass."

Connolly, the Lightning’s sixth pick of the 2010 draft, was sorry about the hit.

"It’s a tough play. I’m just trying to finish my check and he’s kind of in a vulnerable position. I mean, if I was to go back maybe I would have held up a little bit, but I’m just trying to be intense and finish my checks and obviously I feel bad now. Hopefully he’s not hurt too bad, but definitely could have held up a little bit."

The Panthers top pick this year (third overall), forward Jonathan Huberdeau has been out with a broken foot but he is with the team in an effort to make the final roster which doesn’t have to be finalized until Dec. 25. Huberdeau was swimming instead of skating to accelerate his rehab.

This fear of injuries was probably the main reason why the Panthers had no intention of loaning rookie defenseman Erik Gudbranson to Team Canada. Gudbranson will miss tonight’s game with the Devils because of a charley horse.

Kings fall to Bruins, 3-0, in first game since coaching change
Kings lose their fifth consecutive game and first under interim coach John Stevens.

Associated Press
6:40 PM PST, December 13, 2011

BOSTON — Brad Marchand scored twice and Tuukka Rask earned his first shutout of the season, leading the Boston Bruins to a 3-0 victory over Los Angeles on Tuesday night in the Kings' first game under interim coach John Stevens.

Rask, the backup for Vezina and Conn Smythe Trophy-winner Tim Thomas, made 41 saves to extend his shutout streak to 95 minutes, 10 seconds. Rich Peverley also scored for the defending Stanley Cup champions, who won for the 16th time in 19 games.

Jonathan Quick stopped 19 shots for the Kings, who lost their fifth consecutive game.

The Bruins were without defenseman Zdeno Chara, who injured his left knee in Saturday's game in Columbus.

The Kings fired Terry Murray on Monday and replaced him with his assistant in an attempt to awaken the underachieving team from its early-season slumber.

Los Angeles, which had not reached the playoffs in eight years, made consecutive postseason appearances under Murray, who compiled the best winning percentage (.560) of any coach in franchise history. But he was fired when a four-game losing streak dropped the Kings to 13-12-4.

Despite adding Mike Richards and Simon Gagne in the offseason, the Kings have not scored more than two goals in a game in nine tries since Thanksgiving -- an NHL-worst 2.24 goals per game -- while falling to 11th in the Western Conference standings.

But things weren't much better on Tuesday under Stevens.

Peverley made it 1-0 in the first, then the Bruins took a 2-0 lead in the second when Patrice Bergeron won a faceoff and slid it back to Marchand for the wrist shot. In the third, the Bruins again scored after a faceoff -- this one not as clean, but clean enough for Marchand to collect the puck and skate in front before beating Quick with 14:25 to play.

Kings’ struggles continue in 3-0 loss to Bruins

The Kings are shut out with John Stevens on the bench in place of the fired Terry Murray. L.A. has lost five games in a row and is averaging a league-worst 2.17 goals a game.

Associated Press
10:02 PM PST, December 13, 2011

BOSTON — Boston Bruins Coach Claude Julien has long insisted that he has two No. 1 goalies.

Only now is Tuukka Rask getting the chance to prove it.

Appearing in his second straight game, Rask stopped 41 shots for his first shutout of the season on Tuesday night while leading the Bruins to a 3-0 victory over the Kings. Brad Marchand scored twice as Boston played without top defenseman Zdeno Chara and top goalie Tim Thomas.

Rich Peverley also scored for the defending Stanley Cup champions, who won for the 16th time in 19 games despite playing without Chara because he injured his left knee in a game Saturday in Columbus.

Rask shut out the Blue Jackets the rest of the way, then extended his scoreless streak to 95 minutes, 10 seconds on Tuesday with his first shutout since March 1. He faced 13 shots in the second period and 20 in the third.

Jonathan Quick stopped 19 shots for the Kings, who lost their fifth consecutive game and their first since Terry Murray was fired as coach on Monday and replaced by assistant John Stevens in an attempt to awaken the underachieving team from its early-season slumber.

"There’s going to be things that go on outside the locker room that you can’t control," Quick said. "No matter what happens, you’ve got to come into the game with the same mentality.

"There’s a lot of stuff going on, but that’s no excuse. You can’t take stuff like that and call it as a distraction and use it as a reason not to win the game."

Stevens said he liked what he saw, in spite of the result.

"I really thought they expended a lot of energy tonight trying to win a hockey game," he said. "I really thought they acted like professionals tonight and really tried to focus on the game and trying to win."

The Kings, who had not reached the playoffs in eight years, made consecutive postseason appearances under Murray, who compiled the best winning percentage (.560) of any coach in franchise history. But he was fired when a four-game losing streak dropped the Kings to 13-12-4.

Despite adding Mike Richards and Simon Gagne in the off-season, the Kings have not scored more than two goals in a game in nine tries since Thanksgiving and are averaging a league-worst 2.17 goals a game. They have scored six goals during the five-game losing streak and have fallen to 12th in the Western Conference standings.

Peverley made it 1-0 in the first period on Tuesday, then the Bruins took a 2-0 lead in the second when Patrice Bergeron won a faceoff and slid it back to Marchand for the wrist shot. In the third, the Bruins again scored after a faceoff — this one not as clean, but clean enough for Marchand to collect the puck and skate in front before beating Quick with 14:25 to play.

Kings can't fill in blank, lose to Boston 3-0 in Stevens' first game as interim coach

By Rask, Boston.

BOSTON - The Kings can't pin this loss on Terry Murray.

The offensive funk for the club continued Tuesday night, as the Kings were shut out by Tuukka Rask and the defending Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins 3-0.

It wasn't for lack of trying, however. The Kings had 41 shots on goal, only to have Rask stop them all.

Jonathan Quick stopped 19 shots for the Kings, who lost their fifth consecutive game and their first since their former coach Murray was fired Monday and replaced with assistant John Stevens in an attempt to awaken the underachieving team from its early-season slumber.

"There's going to be things that go on outside the locker room that you can't control," Quick said. "No matter what happens, you've got to come into the game with the same mentality.

"There's a lot of stuff going on, but that's no excuse. You can't take stuff like that and call it as a distraction and use it as a reason not to win the game."

Stevens said he liked what he saw, in spite of the result.

"I really thought they expended a lot of energy tonight trying to win a hockey game," he said. "I really thought they acted like professionals tonight and really tried to focus on the game and trying to win."

The Kings, who had not reached the playoffs in eight years, made consecutive postseason appearances under Murray, who compiled the best winning percentage (.560) of any coach in franchise history. But he was fired when a four-game losing streak dropped the Kings to 13-12-4.

Despite adding Mike Richards and Simon Gagne in the offseason, the Kings have not scored more than two goals in a game in nine tries since Thanksgiving - an NHL-worst 2.24 goals per game - while falling to 11th in the Western Conference standings.

But they weren't any more successful Tuesday under Stevens.

Brad Marchand scored twice as Boston played without top defenseman Zdeno Chara and top goalie Tim Thomas.

"It's something every team wishes they had, that luxury with two guys. And we have that," Bruins coach Claude Julien said after giving Thomas the night off to rest him for Wednesday's game in Ottawa. "Whenever called upon, Tuukka made big saves."

Rich Peverley also scored for the defending Stanley Cup champions, who won for the 16th time in 19 games despite playing without Chara because he injured his left knee in Saturday's game in Columbus.

Julien said Chara would make the trip to Ottawa for tonight's game.

Rask spent last season as the backup for Thomas, who won the Vezina and the Conn Smythe Trophies while playing every minute of Boston's postseason run to the title. Rask needed more than a month to get his first win this season and was playing a little less than once a week before relieving Thomas on Saturday night after he allowed three goals in the first two periods against Columbus.

Rask shut out the Blue Jackets the rest of the way, then extended his scoreless streak to 95 minutes, 10 seconds on Tuesday with his first shutout since March 1.
Stevens postgame quotes (Dec. 13)

Posted by Rich Hammond on 13 December 2011, 7:43 pm

John Stevens’ postgame thoughts…

(on the game…)

STEVENS: “I think we saw a lot of things. I thought the guys tried really hard tonight. I thought they did a lot of good things in the offensive zone, and I thought they expended a lot of energy trying to win a hockey game, considering the emotions that they’ve gone through with Terry being let go, a man they respect enormously. I really thought they acted like professionals tonight and really tried to focus on the hockey game and winning the hockey game.”

(on the Bruins’ chances…)

STEVENS: “I know we’re trying to score, but we don’t want to get away from the fundamentals and the foundation that has been set through Terry’s tenure here. That has really been the key to the success here, is limiting opportunities. I thought we gave them a few too many opportunities, just off our own turnovers. They’re so good at checking in the neutral zone and they come back at you. They’re a really good transition team, so I think we need to keep that kind of an effort going forward in the offensive zone and just be more determined. We’ve talked about this for a while, but we had some really good opportunities that need to end up in the net that didn’t.”

(on the Kings’ start to the game, with the early penalty…)

STEVENS: “I think it forces you to expend a lot of energy, which is not good. Now you’re fighting an uphill battle and you’re trying to play catch-up. That’s never good, especially against a team as good, defensively, as Boston is. You have key guys killing penalties and using up a lot of valuable energy that you want to try to have at the other end. So that’s never a situation you want to be in. I thought we got through it pretty good, and that’s where I thought Quicker really helped us out, when we had the penalty early. You want to get flow on your bench, and you have guys end up sitting there too long and other guys playing too much. Three penalties in the first period, like that, is not a good thing.”

Anze Kopitar’s postgame thoughts…

(on the continued lack of offense…)

KOPITAR: “It’s pretty much the same story, I guess. We’re throwing everything we can out there. I think we had 41 shots and we had a couple of really good opportunities. We hit a couple posts. We’ve just got to keep going. Eventually we’re going to score. Eventually they will go in.”

(on being hurt by the start…)

KOPITAR: “Yeah. We had a penalty and then we had a 2-on-0, where we just couldn’t bury it. That’s what happens. When you’re going good, it seems like every bounce is going with you and helping you out. When you’re going bad, everything is going against you. We can’t feel sorry for ourselves. We’ve got to go. We’ve got to play. With hard work and believing and trusting each other and sticking together, that’s how we’re going to get through this.”

(on the emotions of the day, after Terry Murray’s firing…)

KOPITAR: “A lot of stuff was going on in the last 24 hours. It’s not an excuse, but emotionally it’s tough. Most of the guys haven’t been through that kind of experience. I, personally, hadn’t been through it. I did once, when I was in Sweden, but maybe I was just too young to realize how big of a change that is. We’re going to have to put it behind us. Terry did a great job for us, for three-plus year. Personally, for me, he put a lot into my game and I gained a lot from him. Like I said, we’re going to have to overcome that and start playing again.”
Game 30: Bruins 3, Kings 0 (FINAL)

Posted by Rich Hammond on 13 December 2011, 3:50 pm

Finally, something normal: a hockey game. It's the Kings against the Boston Bruins, with all the action on Fox Sports West and 1150-AM and affiliates, with all the game updates here as well...

THIRD PERIOD

In goal: It's still Quick against Rask.

Bruins 3, Kings 0: Just like in the second period, the Bruins got a goal from Brad Marchand after an offensive-zone faceoff win by Patrice Bergeron. This time, Marchand beat Jack Johnson to the front of the net, took the puck to his backhand and tucked it around Quick to give the Bruins a three-goal lead 5:35 into the third period. End of game: The Kings outshot the Bruins 41-22 but were shut out for the third time this season and have now gone nine consecutive games without scoring more than two goals.

SECOND PERIOD

In goal: It's still Quick against Rask.

Bruins 2, Kings 0: The Bruins took a two-goal lead at the 7:43 mark. Patrice Bergeron won an offensive-zone faceoff back to Brad Marchand, who one-timed a shot from the top of the left circle that beat Quick cleanly. End of period: The Kings outshot the Bruins 12-7 in the second period but went 0-for-3 on the power play, including a 5-on-3 advantage that lasted 29 seconds.

FIRST PERIOD

Mitchell out: Willie Mitchell will not play tonight because of a lower-body injury, the Kings said. It's not immediately known whether the injury is related to Mitchell's previous groin injury. Davis Drewiske replaced Mitchell. Trevor Lewis and Alec Martinez were healthy scratches. In goal: It's the Kings' Jonathan Quick against the Bruins' Tuukka Rask.

Bruins 1, Kings 0: The Kings killed an early penalty, but the Bruins took the lead at the 6:32 mark. Jack Johnson lost the puck in the corner of the Kings’ zone. Rich Peverley went to the net on a backdoor play, beat Andrei Loktionov, took a centering pass from Zach Hamill and tapped a one-timer past Quick from close range. Benoit Pouliot also got an assist. End of period: For the Kings, it was another scoreless first period and another first-intermission deficit. Shots on goal were 12-8 in favor of the Bruins.

Mitchell out, day-to-day

Posted by Rich Hammond on 13 December 2011, 3:46 pm

Willie Mitchell will not play tonight because of a lower-body injury, the Kings said. It’s not immediately known whether the injury is related to Mitchell’s previous groin injury.

[UPDATE: Davis Drewiske replaces Mitchell in the lineup. Trevor Lewis and Alec Martinez will be the Kings’ healthy scratches.]

What a 48-hour period it was for Dean Lombardi. Sometime Sunday, Lombardi made the decision to fire Terry Murray. At the crack of dawn Monday, he made the cross-country flight to Boston, rode to the team hotel and delivered the news to Murray. Lombardi then talked to the assistant coaches, then held a meeting with the players in which he, according to a couple people in attendance, was highly critical of the team’s effort of late but also took responsibility on himself for perhaps not creating the right mix of players. This morning, Lombardi was at the morning skate, looking (understandably) a bit tired. As for the next coach, Lombardi once again deflected talk of Darryl Sutter, but it’s clear that there really are no other candidates at this point. Before the skate, Lombardi spoke generally about the search and what’s he’s looking for, going forward…

(on his timeline for hiring a new coach…)

LOMBARDI: “I think it’s safe to say, as short as possible. I think you’ve still got to try to do it right. How long do I want? I want it done yesterday, but sometimes things don’t always work according to the time frame you want.”

(on the type of personality he’s looking for in a new coach…)

LOMBARDI: “Well, any time you bring in a different leader, there’s going to be a difference. Nobody is exactly the same. I think a lot of this, I think when the players look around the room, they believe they’re better than some of these teams that have beaten them, but there’s a mental thing that has to get through to them, an emotional side. They have to look at themselves and then bond together. You can never forget those fundamentals that have been ingrained in them. But there is a side in this game — and I know it’s changed — but it still is an emotional game. For whatever reason, this team, at times, did not look emotionally charged. So I do think that has to be the focus. But again, I’ve said this to the players, as individuals. We don’t want to change our game. We want to add to our game. I don’t even want to forget that we’re one of the top teams in the league defensively. That was critical, to put that in place, but we’ve got to add to our game, and part of adding to our game right now is learning to deal with expectations and raising our emotional level and fighting through mentally. I think that’s where we are.”

(on whether the players, coaches and management all share that responsibility…)

LOMBARDI: “No question. In the end, the players own the team. That’s where you want to get to. The management and coaches provide the direction and provide the guidance. But I think on any great team, essentially it’s the players who have ownership, who point it in the right direction and they take over. That’s where you want to get to. We can’t go out there and play for them. The coach and the GM are only as good as the players. So clearly, if they have ownership in the team, they’re going to have pride in the team and they’re going to figure out, emotionally and mentally, what has to get done. I think that’s where we’re got to break through.”

(on what he’s looking for under a new coach…)

LOMBARDI: “Certainly Murph has taught them the right way. There’s no better coach in terms of playing the game properly and being prepared. But I think a lot of this fallout right now is mental. When you heighten the expectations on a team, it’s a whole different mindset. When you don’t look like you reach that bar, then you start wallowing in bewilderment. I think they need to regroup mentally, go back to basics mentally and start building themselves back up. To me, given the talent in that room, they’re capable of much more, and to me it’s all between the ears.”

(on John Stevens taking over on an interim basis…)

LOMBARDI: “He’s a real pro, he’s a good man and he will never back down from a challenge. We’re in a tough spot right now. We’ve got ourselves in a little bit of an ambush, but I think he’s the type of guy that can keep us focused until we can do what we’ve got to do.”

(on whether he’s ever seen a team, collectively, struggle to score as much as the Kings…)

Tonight, John Stevens will be in charge behind an NHL bench for the first time since Dec. 3, 2009, before he was fired in Philadelphia. [Thanks to Kevin Kurz for the correction.] In parts of four seasons as Flyers coach, Stevens went 120-109-34. Stevens is not in an unfamiliar spot tonight, taking over for Terry Murray as the Kings’ interim coach. Eight games into the 2006-07 season, with the Flyers off to a 1-6-1 start, coach Ken Hitchcock was fired and Stevens was hired. In his first game — Oct. 26, 2009 — the Flyers beat the Atlanta Thrashers 3-2 in a shootout. Tonight, Stevens gets a second “first game,” and after today’s morning skate, he talked about taking over and about the emotions of the previous 24 hours.

STEVENS: “It was a difficult day yesterday for everybody, taken by surprise and then a quick turnaround, trying to get ready for Boston here. I’m not going to lie to you. It’s not an easy thing to go through, certainly not for us. I think we all have to take some responsibility for the situation that we’re in, and that goes for Jamie (Kompon) and I as well. There’s big expectations on this team. The ironic thing is, that’s because of the great job that Terry did here. That’s why we’re considered a team that could do damage in the West, because of the respect that he brought here during his time here. Dean met with the players last night, to explain what was going on, and we met as a staff with the players today, just to try to tackle a few things. We’re going to meet tonight again and revisit some issues. Specifically, I don’t think there’s a whole lot that we can get through right now, and I don’t know that there’s a whole lot we need to get through right now. It’s about coming together as a team, playing hard for each other and depending on some of those fundamentals that Terry put in place during his time here.”

Question: In terms of on the ice, what can be done to change things?

STEVENS: “It’s no secret. The elephant in the room here is that we’re not scoring enough. We told the players, ‘We didn’t say you can’t score, we said you’re not scoring.’ What we’d like to see from our team tonight is not to put ourselves in a situation where we’re beating ourselves, and allow our team game to get us going, by getting pucks deep, by allowing the puck to do the work for us and by getting pucks to the net. We would like to see the team really dig in on the north side of the red line. That’s something that we’re really going to challenge the guys to do tonight. Again, I’m not going to use the term, ‘We can’t score.’ We’re not scoring, and we need to. I think we all need to take responsibility for that, and I think we’ve got to dig in on the north side of the red light.”

Question: You’ve been through this before, taking over a team during a season. What can you do, as a coach, to help the team get through the emotions of today?

STEVENS: “It was a pretty somber mood here today. I think Terry has an enormous amount of respect from every guy in that locker room, and certainly everybody affiliated with the team. So it’s not surprising that there’s a very somber mood over the team. We felt it was very important to skate as a group today, and just kind of work through it. It’s a process you have to go through. There’s no quick fix for it. There’s no lightning in a bottle. We talk about the process all the time, but it’s very important that we work through the process, because of what just transpired.”

Question: Will you stay with the same lineup you practiced with yesterday?

STEVENS: “To be honest with you, it’s been such a tight turn. We found out late yesterday afternoon, what was going on, and we were preparing for Boston like we always do. What we’ve decided to do is put everybody in warmup, everybody that’s available and not injured, and we’re going to decide on our lineup after warmup. In all likelihood, I wouldn’t expect to see wholesale changes.”

Question: Do you feel more prepared now than when you took over (as interim coach) in Philadelphia?

STEVENS: “I don’t think there’s any question about that. When you haven’t been a coach in the National Hockey League, and when we talk about that process, that was a difficult thing for a guy who had never been a coach in the National Hockey League. Certainly I was confident in my abilities to coach at that level, but the schedule is different, the matchups are different, you don’t know the league that well, travel. There’s a lot that goes into it, but having been in the league now for a while, as a head coach and now as an assistant coach, and having had a chance to see the Eastern and Western Conferences, I think I’m a much better coach today than I was then, and hopefully I’m a better coach tomorrow than I am today.”

Question: In some ways, is it better to go through this on the road, with the entire group together?

STEVENS: “I don’t know. That’s a good question. I’m not sure I know the answer to that. It is good that we’re in a confined space and that we’re forced to be together, probably more than we would be at home. But I think if this happened at home, we would try to find a way to spend a lot of time together anyway. But certainly being on the road, I guess it helps a little bit, because you travel together and you’re forced to have meals together and spend time together. I can honestly say I’m not sure there’s ever a good time to do this.”

Question: When you talk about putting everyone in warmups, is that also about team unity, having the whole group together on the ice?

STEVENS: “These are dark days in the game, certainly for me. There have been a couple of these days for me, three including the one with myself. They’re probably the days I hate the most, but in hockey, the one thing you can always lean on is the group, and I think that’s what we’re trying to do, keeping everybody involved as much as possible.”

If there’s anyone who might be able to see the positive in a midseason coaching change, it’s Rob Scuderi. Scuderi played for Pittsburgh when, with 25 games remaining in the 2008-09 season, the Penguins fired Michel Therrien and replaced him with AHL coach Dan Bylsma. The Penguins went on to win the Stanley Cup. Certainly, though, that isn’t the norm, and after today’s morning skate, Scuderi quietly reflected on the firing of Terry Murray and the future…

SCUDERI: “Our performance cost someone their job, certainly someone we all looked up to and, we thought, did a great job with this team for the last few years. … It’s a little quick to be totally focused, but we do have a game tonight. As far as the game is concerned, we have to do our best to try to put it behind us and play and try to win the game. But the feelings are still there. It’s a little uneasy. You come in and it’s a different routine, a different pregame skate, the meeting is at a different time, and that’s part of having a new coach and having a new schedule and that’s fine, we’ll get used to it. But it takes a little time.”

Question: What can you guys do to turn things around?

SCUDERI: “Scoring some goals would be nice. I think Terry talked about it, and we talked about it this morning. It’s going to be an overall team effort. It’s not like we’re singling out the forwards against the D, or anything like that. It’s got to be a team effort. The D can do a little more, try to keep some pucks in and try to keep the flow of the game going, maybe move the puck faster. Anything we can do individually, to help the team overall, is what we’re trying to do on the offensive part of the game.”

Question: A lot of people talk about the emotions. Can a team be too emotionally charged for a game like tonight?

SCUDERI: “It happens. I’ve been through it before with a new coach. It happens relatively quick, and the next game is a little strange. Fortunately, the good thing for us is that our system isn’t changing too much. I’m sure there’s some adjustments that coach Stevens will want to do, and it’s up to us to make those, but I don’t think we’re going to have too much of a change because of our success defensively.”

Brown on coaching change, future

Posted by Rich Hammond on 13 December 2011, 11:25 am

Coaching changes in Los Angeles are certainly nothing new for Dustin Brown. Brown was a second-year pro when Andy Murray got fired near the end of the 2005-06 season, and an established player when Marc Crawford got fired two years later. Now, it’s Terry Murray, as Brown prepares to play for his fifth coach in his eighth NHL season (with likely a sixth coach on the way). After practice today, Brown talked about the coaching change and the necessary direction of the team…

BROWN: “I’ve been through this before. It’s not an easy thing to go through. It’s really hard to kind of put into words how you feel, as a group of guys in here, when something like this happens. I think the best thing we can do, as players, is come together and work through it. It’s part of being a professional athlete, going through days like this. It’s up to the players in here to come together and step up and play. We’ve got two points that we need tonight. It’s definitely not a normal situation, but that should be our focus going in. We’ve got two points, and we need them.”

Question: Were you surprised by the move?

BROWN: “To some extent, yeah. We know we’ve been struggling. We know the situation at hand. I think guys were probably a little surprised with the timing, I guess, but management felt they needed to make the decision they did. The players, we knew we needed to be better and that something was going to change if we didn’t get better. It happened pretty quick.”

Question: Do you think drastic changes are needed here?

BROWN: “Regardless of how we play the game, I think it’s more about our attitude, honestly. The difference, the parity, especially in the West, the teams are so close. It’s more about the type of attitude we bring to the game. We have to have a better, more hungry attitude. We weren’t a hungry team. We’ve got to get back to getting on the puck and having that attitude, that swagger. You look at the top teams in the league, they all have an attitude. Minnesota is probably a good example of that. I don’t think, if you looked on paper, they are the best team in the league, but right now they’re playing with attitude. We, as a team, as a group of players, have to find that team attitude.”

More on Sutter’s potential hiring

Posted by Rich Hammond on 13 December 2011, 10:56 am

There have already been significant discussions between the Kings and Darryl Sutter, regarding Sutter becoming the next Kings’ coach. If the sides work out an agreement — Sutter would also have to reach a financial agreement with the Calgary Flames, in terms of the rest of his contract — Sutter could be announced as the Kings’ coach this week, although it’s unlikely that he would be behind the bench Thursday in Columbus. Sutter also helps tend to the family farm in Alberta and might need some time to get his personal affairs in order.

For his part, before today’s morning skate, Dean Lombardi only repeated what he said yesterday, that he had no timetable for the hire.

Tuesday skate update

Posted by Rich Hammond on 13 December 2011, 9:29 am

John Stevens said that all available players will go into the pregame warmups tonight, and then he will decide the lineup, but Stevens also said not to expect "wholesale changes." Stevens said, in regards to the team's response to Terry Murray's firing, that tonight's game would be "less about the Xs and Os and more about the guts of the game."

Stevens and Jamie Kompon will be behind the bench but will have to shuffle duties a bit. Stevens will handle the forwards and Kompon will handle defensemen. More notes and quotes to come, including player reaction to Murray's firing.

Kings looking at Sutter

Posted by Rich Hammond on 13 December 2011, 8:21 am

The Kings have sought permission from the Calgary Flames to speak with Darryl Sutter as Terry Murray’s replacement, a source said this morning. Sutter left his role as Calgary’s general manager last December but remains under contract with the Flames. There’s no indication as to when Sutter might take over. John Stevens will coach tonight’s game at Boston, with Jamie Kompon as his assistant coach. Kings general manager hired Sutter as his coach in San Jose in 1997.

Final thoughts on Murray firing

Posted by Rich Hammond on 13 December 2011, 8:15 am

In the end, it really wasn’t about “system” with Terry Murray. Almost any system, delivered from the right coach in the right way, can have success. Players wearing sneakers, using brooms instead of sticks? Well, maybe not, but find the right coach to make the players believe in a system, and it will work. Murray’s system in 2008 looked the same as it did in 2011, and if anything, it got less defensively restrictive.

So while it’s certain a cliche’ to say the players “tuned out” a coach, that doesn’t mean it’s always inaccurate. Upon Murray’s arrival in 2008, the Kings badly needed discipline and structure. In Marc Crawford’s final season, the Kings ranked 14th in goals per game and 28th in goals against. To be fair, Crawford didn’t have a lot to work with, but Crawford’s ability to nurture and guide younger players was also called into doubt, and bringing in the experienced, stately Murray was seen as a move that would greatly improve the Kings’ defense and help bring along the younger players, at a time when the Kings were starting to hand control of the locker room to players such as Dustin Brown and Anze Kopitar. Crawford often yelled at players; Murray would talk to them, teach them.

For a while, it worked. Players bought in and the Kings steadily improved. By the end of Murray’s second season had a young core of talent, including Norris Trophy finalist Drew Doughty, and a trip to the playoffs for the first time in eight years. Then slowly, perhaps even at a glacial rate, it started to slip. Be careful, also, not to drop all of this on Murray’s shoulders. Players should bear a huge responsibility. Even if they have “tuned out” a coach, they’re still well-paid professionals who should be giving a full effort under any circumstances. Don’t let Lombardi off the hook, either. Is it possible that some of his recent acquisitions — Simon Gagne and Dustin Penner, at a combined $7.75 million? — deserve a bigger share of the blame?

Ultimately, though, Lombardi wasn’t going to fire himself and there’s only so many in-season roster changes that can be made, so it’s usually the coach who takes the fall. Even if you’re all-in with the idea that players “tuned out” Murray, it’s still tough to know when that shark has been jumped. When, exactly, did the players “tune out”? All at once, or one by one? To what extent? That’s only known internally, and it’s never expressed publicly. In the end, though, when a team looks stale and isn’t winning at the expected rate, the coach will take the fall. Some of the criticism of Murray is shortsighted. Blaming him for Matt Moulson’s lack of development? Moulson was in the Kings’ system for three seasons. Moulson spent exactly 24 regular-season days (seven games) playing under Murray, much of which was spent on the first line, before he was assigned back to Manchester by Lombardi.

On the other hand, there’s often a reason why the shelf life for coaches isn’t long these days. Motivating players in today’s game isn’t the same as it used to be, and the right touch must be used. For those who read my interview with Lombardi a few days ago, it’s what I was trying to determine. Were the Kings’ problems “micro” or “macro”? Did they have a dozen different problems, or just one big problem, meaning that the collective attitude in the locker room was wrong? It was ironic that, on his last day on the job, Murray talked about the need for the Kings to avoid “robotic” play. Too often this season, that’s exactly what it looked like on the ice. And again, even after watching the Kings for the entire season, I still can’t say, with confidence, who deserves the bulk of the blame for that. The GM, for perhaps building the wrong team? The coach, for not getting through to players? Or the players, for ultimately not being accountable for themselves? There are many different opinions, but only one end result: a new coach.

Just thought I’d share some thoughts. Nothing earth-shattering or even particularly insightful, maybe. The Kings are scheduled for an 11:30 a.m. (local time) morning skate today. Should be an interesting day.

Midseason replacements: do they work?

Posted by Rich Hammond on 12 December 2011, 7:46 pm

Today, Terry Murray became the fifth NHL coach to be fired this season. How has it worked out for the other four? Well, mixed bag.

– St. Louis was 6-7-0 when it fired Davis Payne. Ken Hitchcock is 11-2-3.
– Carolina was 8-13-4 when it fired Paul Maurice. Kirk Muller is 1-5-0.
– Washington was 12-9-0 when it fired Bruce Boudreau. Dale Hunter is 3-3-0.
– Anaheim was 7-13-4 when it fired Randy Carlyle. Boudreau is 1-3-1.

So, among the four, only St. Louis has improved thus far, although that has been a dramatic improvement. We’ll see where the Kings end up. Also, for an interesting conversation between two great hockey pundits about today’s news, check out this story from ESPN.com’s Scott Burnside and Pierre LeBrun.

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA - A rivalry has been born 450 miles north of St. Paul.

In a game that made you wish realignment could start tomorrow instead of a year from now, the Wild and Winnipeg Jets introduced themselves Tuesday night, and it wasn't for the faint of heart.

It was fast. It was physical. It was intense. It was exhilarating.

And ... it was downright deafening, as the 15,004 fans that packed the MTS Centre sounded like they were 50,004 strong during an eardrum-bursting outcry of incessant, passionate noise.

In a battle of attrition, it was the Jets who snapped the Wild's seven-game overall winning streak and seven-game road winning streak as Bryan Little scored a power-play goal with five minutes left for a 2-1 victory.

The game featured end-to-end action, big hits, a sensational goalie duel and one heck of a fight when Clayton Stoner deflected partner Greg Zanon and challenged Tanner Glass to a lengthy toe-to-toe bout. It came after Glass crushed Zanon in the corner on a forecheck.

Guillaume Latendresse, in a surprise return to the lineup from a concussion, scored a 5-on-3 goal.

With Matt Cullen sick, Latendresse returned after practicing for the first time Monday.

As coach Mike Yeo said, it wasn't ideal, but the Wild had no extra forwards and "these were the circumstances we were dealt with."

But with the score tied at 1-1, Stoner airmailed a puck into the stands for a delay of game penalty. With one second left in the power play, Dustin Byfuglien's either misfired shot or his nifty pass landed right on Little's stick at the side of the net. He buried it, and the Jets, who had won four in a row before a beatdown in Motown Saturday, prevailed.

It was just a tremendous hockey game, with the encore in St. Paul on Feb. 16 and hopefully, five to six times a year if the NHL Players' Association ratifies the realignment plan the Board of Governors approved in Pebble Beach last week.

Latendresse eased in, playing less than three minutes in the first period, but he topped five in the second and scored on Mikko Koivu's rebound on a two-man advantage. It was Latendresse's fourth goal in his past five games, but the one scoreless game was the one he was concussed in on Nov. 10.

Latendresse nearly scored three more times on one suffocating shift later in the period, but Ondrej Pavelec denied them all. The Jets tied it on Zach Bogosian's first of the year. It came after he picked off Latendresse's attempted clear off the side wall and after several close calls at the Wild net.

Niklas Backstrom was outstanding in goal for the Wild, robbing Kyle Wellwood and Andrew Ladd on one sequence, Bryan Little on another and Jim Slater on back-to-back chances. Pavelec swallowed pucks early, turned away Pierre-Marc Bouchard's breakaway stab and gloved down another Bouchard chance.

With 1:06 left, Winnipeg's Zach Bogosian was assessed a boarding major and game misconduct when he drove Pierre-Marc Bouchard face-first into the boards. Bouchard's nose was gushing blood.

Pavelec robbed Kyle Brodziak from point-blank for one of his 33 saves on the power play.

The crowd, as advertised, was as loud and enthusiastic as you get in the NHL.

The fans cheered the good, booed the bad -- both when it came to their team and the officials, like when referee Chris Rooney waved off a Byfuglien goal because Wellwood impeded Backstrom's ability to make the save.

The crowd especially gave it to Dany Heatley.

Either fans booed Heatley because that's just what you're supposed to do in Canada or because he asked out of Atlanta umpteen years ago.

A look at the Wild's Wednesday night matchup against the Chicago Blackhawks:

Preview: With the Blackhawks waiting in St. Paul while Minnesota played Tuesday in Winnipeg, the NHL-leading Wild returns home for the first time since Dec. 2. The Wild has won eight of its past 10 at home. This is a battle between the top two teams in the Western Conference. Chicago has won six of its past eight. The Wild is 5-9 in its past 14 against Chicago and has lost three in a row at home by an 11-3 margin.

Players to watch: Blackhawks LW Andrew Brunette, who spent the previous three years in a second stint with the Wild, returns for the first time. He has scored 59 goals at Xcel Energy Center -- second to Marian Gaborik's 109. Former Wild first-round draft pick Nick Leddy is tied for 19th in defensemen scoring with 17 points. Jonathan Toews, Patrick Sharp, Marian Hossa and Patrick Kane have combined for 53 goals and 125 points. Sharp has a six-game point streak (six goals, nine points). ... Wild LW/RW Dany Heatley played in his 700th NHL game Tuesday at Winnipeg. Since joining the NHL in 2001, he ranks third in goals (334), fifth in points (710), first in power-play goals (132) and second in game-winning goals (60).

Numbers: The Blackhawks average 3.2 goals per game, second most in the West, and give up 2.97, fourth most in the West. ... The Wild has lost 113 man games to injury, the Blackhawks 21. ... The Wild has more victories against the Blackhawks (24) than any other team outside of the Northwest Division. ... The Wild is 2-0-1 in the second game of back-to-backs.

Injuries: Wild C Matt Cullen (illness) and G Josh Harding (whiplash) are questionable. RW/LW Devin Setoguchi (knee), D Justin Falk (upper body) and D Marek Zidlicky (concussion) are doubtful.

With Wild short forward, Latendresse to return from concussion after one practice

Posted by: Michael Russo

Afternoon from Winnipeg, where there was a pretty eventful morning down at the MTS Centre before the first-ever Wild-Winnipeg game.

According to coach Mike Yeo, Matt Cullen was hit by a flu bug last night and had a rough night. So the team will try to send him back to Minnesota today for some rest and it’s hopeful he can be ready for the Blackhawks game tomorrow.

But with no extra forwards after Jeff Taffe was reassigned, the Wild went from looking like it may have to play seven defensemen (Nate Prosser) to hustling Guillaume Latendresse into tonight’s lineup after only one practice.

The plan is to activate Latendresse off injured reserve by the 4 p.m. deadline. No other roster move would have to take place because the Wild had 22 players on the active roster, four on IR (23 is maximum roster).

Latendresse has missed 15 games since Nov. 10 when he suffered a concussion. He was injured in the second period at San Jose when checked into the boards by Doug Murray, but Latendresse wonders if the injury actually occurred the game before when he was driven face-first into the glass in what I thought was a dirty hit by Calgary’s Mark Giordano.

Latendresse had a bloody nose, but he says he didn’t feel concussion-like symptoms until after the Murray hit. But like is often the case with concussions, sometimes symptoms don’t arise until after the fact.

Coach Mike Yeo said Latendresse will start on the fourth line and he’ll ease him into the game, but while he may play fourth-line minutes, it sounds like Latendresse will be spotted into situations where he can be productive, like on the power play and with more offensive players than Colton Gillies and Brad Staubitz.

As of now, it looks like Cody Almond will start by centering Casey Wellman and Pierre-Marc Bouchard. But remember, Wellman and Bouchard can play center, so on changes on the fly, perhaps Latendresse gets shifts with the second line.

“I’ll talk to the coach during the game and see how I feel,” Latendresse said. “With the adrenaline, sometimes you don’t feel you’re tired because you’re in game. I’ll just try to get into the game and get into the flow and have some fun, I guess.”

Again, he wasn’t supposed to play, so this was a huge surprise to him, but he said, “Why wait?” In other words, what good would another practice or two do?

Well, it’ll be interesting because he has missed a month and his stamina could be an issue. Remember also, the Wild has another game tomorrow against Chicago, so maybe if Cullen comes back, Latendresse gets that game off. Just conjecture, but you’d hate to see the guys strain a muscle rushing back.

Latendresse was starting to feel and look good, like his old self, when he got hurt. The Wild is 12-3 without him.

Niklas Backstrom will start. Matt Hackett will back him up.

Injured Josh Harding, Marek Zidlicky and Justin Falk (Winnipeg native) did skate.

That’s it. Talk to you tonight.

Update: Cullen sick, Latendresse will play for Wild

Posted by: Michael Russo

Morning from icy Winnipeg, my first-ever trip into Manitoba.

update to update: In a surprise, Guillaume Latendresse will return from a concussion and play tonight -- after only one practice -- because Matt Cullen is sick.

and in an earlier update from the Wild skate ... with Cullen out, Cody Almond is centering Casey Wellman and Pierre-Marc Bouchard. With Jeff Taffe reassigned with Cal Clutterbuck back, the Wild has no extra forwards, so therefore the surprise insertion of Latendresse.

I will update blog after skate.

Zack Phillips was among seven roster cuts by Team Canada this morning at the world junior championships selection camp in Calgary. Brett Bulmer sticks for now, but by my count, there should be at least seven more forward cuts. It's ultra-competitive. Remember, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins didn't make last year's team, and Phillips, lighting up the Q, was considered very much a long shot.

So, the Wild went from having a potential of up to eight prospects in the tournament to seven.

Here's a look at who, from this story that ran in Monday's paper.

Antti Miettinen was claimed off waivers by Winnipeg. He signed a two-year, $3 million deal yesterday with Tampa Bay. Because he was joining the NHL in the middle of the year from the KHL, he had to pass through waivers.

Winning Wild: Minnesota leads NHL at 30-game mark

Article by: DAVE CAMPBELL, Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. - The Minnesota Wild are playing for their third head coach in four seasons, they haven't won a playoff series in nearly nine years and their roster is mostly recognizable to mainstream sports fans outside of — or even in — the state.

Here they are, though, leading the NHL with 43 points at their 30-game mark.

"There's a lot of belief right now that we're for real, and if there's a reason why we feel that way, it's because of the way we come to the rink and the way we prepare," center Kyle Brodziak said after their seventh straight victory, Saturday at Phoenix.

Brodziak, the third-line center, leads the team with 10 goals. In the league? He's tied for 40th, the most obvious sign of a balanced offense that has used a so-far unwavering commitment to new coach Mike Yeo's system to reach a 20-7-3 record. That's the best start in the franchise's 11-year history, thanks to three separate winning streaks of five games or more.

"It's all pointed toward the players and the way that they came into camp and the attitude they brought right from day one," Yeo said after Monday's practice. "They're the ones that are out there laying it on the line. They're the guys that are out there blocking shots and paying the price, so the credit goes to those guys."

The 37-year-old Yeo looks younger than half of his players, but he has commanded an unquestionable respect.

"There's accountability. There's an exception here that we want to build a winning team and a winning culture and we just can't accept bad games," second-line center Matt Cullen said. "You're going to lose from time to time, but it's not going to be because of a lack of effort."

At first glance, with Dany Heatley the biggest name and a team goal total of 2.5 per game that ranks just 22nd in the NHL, this is the same type of trapping, patient squad that Jacques Lemaire presided over. His teams generally got a lot out of a little skill, but beside the run to the Western Conference finals in 2003 they've had a perennially mediocre record since entering the league as an expansion franchise.

But there are differences. Yeo raved about Brodziak's refusal to sacrifice his defensive positioning and tenacity despite his uncharacteristic scoring spurt, but from lines one to four this is as deep as the Wild have ever been. There is more skating and a noticeably stronger forecheck and less hesitation to shoot the puck.

"A lot of teams play the same way," Cullen said. "It's a matter of being committed to it, and everybody's bought in."

The entire system is as stocked with legitimate prospects as it has been in years, too, the product of several trades and signings general manager Chuck Fletcher has pushed through to supplement the three drafts he has supervised since taking over for the fired Doug Risebrough.

Minnesota's minor league affiliate in Houston has the second-best record in the 30-team American Hockey League, and goalie Darcy Kuemper was picked Monday as the AHL's Player of the Week.

Kuemper's honor was made possible when regular goalie Matt Hackett was recalled by the Wild last week as injury insurance. With Niklas Backstrom already bothered by a groin problem, Josh Harding hurt his neck just 71 seconds into the game at San Jose last Tuesday during a freak collision with a teammate's stick.

So in went Hackett, who won his NHL debut and the game after that while stopping a combined 76 of 78 shots. Hackett, who set a record by starting his career with 102 minutes and 48 seconds without giving up a goal, was named the NHL's "Second Star" for the week.

Good goaltending has long been the Wild's best attribute, from Manny Fernandez and Dwayne Roloson in the early years to the Backstrom-Harding duo they've had more recently. They're sixth and seventh in the league, respectively, with a .932 save percentage, and Minnesota's 2.1 goals-per-game average is third in the NHL.

The nets are only as sound as the defense in front of them, though, and the blue line has been another bright spot this season, despite the trade for Devin Setoguchi that sent All-Star Brent Burns to the Sharks.

Puck-moving young players like Jared Spurgeon and Marco Scandella have shined, playing for Yeo for another year. One of the reasons why Fletcher picked him to replace Todd Richards was the familiarity factor for their prospects. They learned Yeo's system with the Aeros in the AHL last season. The Wild have created some clear synergy between their team and their farm club, putting the call-ups in better position to play well when they're summoned. Staying healthy enough to withstand any midwinter lulls in performance will be important, as it is every year with every team.

Harding has been cleared to play again, and bruising right wing Cal Clutterbuck will be back on the first line for Tuesday's game at Winnipeg after missing the last week with a lower-body injury. Three others who have been out longer were also on the ice for Monday's practice: left wing Guillaume Latendresse (concussion), defenseman Marek Zidlicky (concussion) and defenseman Justin Falk (upper body injury).

For now, they'll be brought back slowly. The Wild have been playing fast enough not to miss them.

Wild's Latendresse gets the call following month on sideline

Article by: MICHAEL RUSSO

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA - Guillaume Latendresse missed almost all of last season because of five surgically-repaired abdominal and hip ailments, but the Wild power winger says the last month missed with a concussion felt longer.

"Because when I got injured, I was feeling really good and thought my game was coming back to the way I felt two years ago. Now, I just want to get that game back," Latendresse, 24, said.

Latendresse, who scored 25 goals in 55 games two years ago, scored three goals in three games before being hurt Nov. 10. He missed the next 15 games, but when Matt Cullen was stricken with the flu Tuesday and the Wild was without an extra forward, Latendresse rushed back against the Winnipeg Jets with only one practice under his belt.

He scored in the second period to give the Wild a 1-0 lead in what turned out to be a 2-1 loss.

"The plan was not playing [Tuesday], but things change quickly. I'm just happy. I've got no pressure," said Latendresse before the game, referring to the fact the Wild was 12-3 without him. "The team is playing great. The team was not waiting for me to come back to make a change. Guys [stepped] up and played amazing hockey. I just want to get into the vibe of that team. I want be part of that winning mentality."

Latendresse started on the fourth line with Darroll Powe and Brad Staubitz, but coach Mike Yeo eased Latendresse into situations where he could produce, like the power play, where he scored on a 5-on-3 in the second period.

Latendresse wasn't worried about stamina after being trained the past two weeks on and off the ice by strength coach Kirk Olson.

"Why wait? What is one more practice going to change?" Latendresse said. "I just feel good. It's good to smile again. That's what my girlfriend was saying. Concussions are not fun.

"If I get a headache, I'm like, 'Is that [the concussion]?' Every day I have something, I'm like, 'Oh, is it that?' At some point you have to get over it. I want to play. I think that's how you feel better. But I feel good."

Heatley's long gone

Dany Heatley's last year with the Atlanta Thrashers was in 2003-04, but the Winnipeg media surrounded the Wild winger Tuesday morning like he'd be a Jet today if he didn't request a trade by the Thrashers, the team that drafted him second overall in 2000.

"It was a little bit sad [to see the Thrashers move], but this is a great hockey city and they've shown it so far," Heatley said.

The only member of the Jets still left from Heatley's Thrashers days is video coach Tony Borgford.

Heatley ingratiated himself quickly into MTS Centre Tuesday morning by exploding a piece of glass behind the Jets bench with a shot.

"They can bill me," Heatley quipped. "It wasn't even a hard shot."

Etc.

• Wild prospect Zack Phillips was one of seven players cut from Canada's world junior championships selection camp Tuesday. Brett Bulmer made it through the first round of cuts.

• The Jets claimed former Wild winger Antti Miettinen of waivers from Tampa Bay. The Lightning signed Miettinen, 31, on Monday. He played in Russia's Kontinental Hockey League earlier this season.

600303  Minnesota Wild

Game recap: Wild at Winnipeg

Staff

GAME RECAP

STAR TRIBUNE’S THREE STARS

1. Evander Kane, Winnipeg: Provided energy all night long, was a plus-2, took three shots and delivered four hits.

2. Bryan Little, Winnipeg: Scored the winning goal on a third-period power play.

3. Ondrej Pavelec, Winnipeg: Goalie gave his team the chance to win by making 24 saves, including 27 over the final two periods.

By THE NUMBERS

1 Second left in Winnipeg’s power play when Little scored the winning goal.

25 Saves for Wild goalie Niklas Backstrom, including several highlight-reel stops.

Little's late goal lifts Jets to 2-1 win over Wild

Associated Press

WINNIPEG, Manitoba - Bryan Little scored a power-play goal with 5 minutes remaining in regulation, lifting the Winnipeg Jets to a 2-1 victory over the Minnesota Wild on Tuesday night.

Zach Bogosian also scored and Ondrej Pavelec stopped 34 shots to help the Jets win for the eighth time in their last nine at home.

Guillaume Latendresse scored for Minnesota and Niklas Backstrom had 25 saves as the league-best Wild snapped their seven-game winning streak. Minnesota also ended a seven-game road winning streak, tops in the NHL this season.

Little's 11th goal of the season came at the end of a Wild penalty and extended his points streak to six games. Dustin Byfuglien and Blake Wheeler assisted on the goal, which came at the end of a slick passing play.

Minnesota had a power play with 1:06 left to go in the third when Bogosian was called for boarding and a game misconduct, but the Wild couldn't get the puck past Pavelec.

Backstrom made a couple of key saves late in the scoreless first period before Minnesota took a 1-0 lead at 4:39 of the second on a two-man advantage. Latendresse took a rebound off Mikko Koivu's shot and put the puck over Pavelec, who rolled on his back to try to make the save.

The assist extended Koivu's points streak to five games. Dany Heatley, playing in his 700th NHL game, also assisted on the goal to extend his points streak to seven games.

The lead lasted less than four minutes as the Jets started swarming around Minnesota's end. Bogosian scored his first of the season when he stopped a clearing attempt, put the puck down and fired a shot from just inside the blue line that beat Backstrom at 8:37.

The Jets had a goal waved off because of goaltender interference with 2:46 left in the period.

Minnesota, which dropped to 20-8-3 on the season, was playing the finale of a five-game road trip. The Wild's 43 points are two ahead of Philadelphia, which beat Washington 5-1 on Tuesday.

Notes: The Jets opened a six-game homestand, improving to 14-12-4 at MTS Centre. ... Minnesota's longest winning streak in franchise history is nine games, set in 2007.

Guillaume Latendresse returns to Wild lineup after month on sideline

By Bruce Brothers

WINNIPEG, Manitoba - Opportunity presented itself Tuesday and Guillaume Latendresse jumped on it.

Latendresse had the perfect explanation for stepping back into the lineup against the Winnipeg Jets on Tuesday night after only one full practice with the Wild: "Why wait?"

The 24-year-old winger from outside Montreal was sidelined by a concussion since Nov. 10 but was working out at home while the Wild played and won the first four games of this five-game road trip.

It was a big step for him to rejoin Wild practice Monday in St. Paul, bringing an end to a string of unrewarding workouts with two players and a goalie. Joining the full team on Monday and then participating in Tuesday's morning skate before its game against the Jets at the MTS Centre were just the ticket.

"I felt great," he reported. "Why wait if you have an opportunity? What is one more practice going to change?"

The opportunity arose when center Matt Cullen was sent home Tuesday because of the flu. Coach Mike Yeo needed a forward, and Latendresse was the extra one on this trip.

"Ideally, probably we would have liked to give him some more time, but these are the circumstances that we're dealt with," Yeo said. "He's comfortable and he's ready to go."

Latendresse, who missed all but 11 games of last season with a series of abdominal problems and five surgeries, says he was just hitting his stride again when he suffered a concussion after consecutive hits in road games against Calgary and San Jose.

"Before I got injured, I was feeling really good," he said. "I thought my game was coming back, the way I felt two years ago, and I just want to get that game back."

Latendresse scored 25 of his 27 goals after he was traded to Minnesota in late November of the 2009-10 season. He said missing 15 games heading into Minnesota's first game at Winnipeg was almost more difficult for him than being on the shelf a year ago.

"It's been a long year last year," he said, "and I felt this one was longer than last year. Playing 25 games in two years, usually I'm not the kind of player that misses a lot of games. All my life I was playing all the time."

"It's just bad luck; it's part of the game. Now all those things are done and I just want to look forward, try to play my best."

Latendresse came to Winnipeg with the team simply to work out.

"The plan was not playing," he said. "Things change quickly. But I'm just happy. I got no pressure, just go out there and have fun."

Latendresse, who had four goals and four assists in his first 14 games before being hurt, said he was mighty grumpy while sitting out, so much so that even his girlfriend told him he never smiled anymore.

"It's good to smile again," Latendresse said.

Jets add Miettinen: The Jets claimed former Wild forward Antti Miettinen on waivers and expect to get the Finnish winger into their lineup as soon as Miettinen can make travel arrangements to North America for himself and his family.

Miettinen, 31, became a free agent from the Wild on July 1, signed to play in Russia's Kontinental Hockey League, and had two goals and six assists in 20 games for the Kazan Ak-Bars. He got his release to return to the NHL and signed a two-year contract with the Tampa Bay Lightning, who needed Miettinen to clear waivers before they could add him to their roster. Instead, the Jets grabbed him.

"I'm happy for him," former Wild teammate Mikko Koivu said after Minnesota's morning skate. "They got a good player here."

Briefly: The Wild also brought injured defensmen Marek Zidlicky and Justin Falk to Winnipeg. Devin Setoguchi did not make the trip. Minnesota's healthy scratch against the Jets was defensemen Nate Prosser.
Winnipeg claims former Wild forward Antti Miettinen

By Bruce Brothers

WINNIPEG, Manitoba - The Winnipeg Jets claimed former Minnesota Wild forward Antti Miettinen on waivers today and expect to get the Finnish winger into their lineup as soon as Miettinen can make travel arrangements from Finland to North America for himself and his family.

Miettinen, 31, became a free agent from the Wild last July 1 and signed to play in the Kontinental Hockey League, getting two goals and six assists in 20 games for the Kazan Ak-Bars. But he arranged for his release to return to the NHL and signed a two-year contract with the Tampa Bay Lightning, who needed Miettinen to clear waivers before they could add him to their roster.

Instead, the Jets grabbed him.

"I'm happy for him," former Wild teammate Mikko Koivu said today after Minnesota’s morning skate prior to the Jets-Wild game tonight. "They got a good player here."

Miettinen had 16 goals and 19 assists for 35 points for the Wild last season, playing on a line with Koivu and Andrew Brunette.

Minnesota Wild's Latendresse to return tonight against Winnipeg

By Bruce Brothers

WINNIPEG, Manitoba - Guillaume Latendresse, sidelined by a concussion since Nov. 10, will step back into the lineup for the Minnesota Wild tonight when they play the Winnipeg Jets at the MTS Centre.

Latendresse, who missed 15 games, has had just one practice with the Wild and was not expected to move into the lineup so quickly. But when center Matt Cullen came down with the flu Monday night, coach Mike Yeo made the decision to go with Latendresse.

"Not what we anticipated," Yeo said. "Ideally, probably we would have liked to give him some more time, but these are the circumstances that we're dealt. He's comfortable and he's ready to go."

Yeo said he will try to limit the ice time for Latendresse, who had four goals and four assists in his first 14 games before being injured.

"I'll see how I feel," Latendresse said. "With the adrenaline sometimes, you don't feel you're tired."

Latendresse will begin the game on Minnesota's fourth line and center Cody Almond will take Cullen's place on the second line between Pierre-Marc Bouchard and Casey Wellman. Yeo said that because of Latendresse's goal-scoring ability, he expects to move personnel around at times and will also try to get the 6-foot-2, 230-pound Latendresse onto the ice for power plays.

Yeo said Niklas Backstrom will start in goal for the Wild and Matt Hackett, who took a puck to the throat in practice Monday in St. Paul, is not hurt and will back up Backstrom. Goalie Josh Harding continues to recover from a neck injury and participated in the team's morning skate.

Jets 2, Wild 1: Bryan Little late power-play goal ends Wild win straight at seven

Pioneer Press

RECAP: Winnipeg got a power-play goal from Bryan Little with five minutes left in the third period and held on for a victory in front of a raucous full house of 15,000-plus Tuesday night at the MTS Centre, ending Minnesota's seven-game winning streak.

Neither team scored until Guillaume Latendresse converted a 5-on-3 power play 4:39 into the second period for a 1-0 Minnesota lead. But the Jets roared back, with Zach Bogosian's rocket from the point making it 1-1 four minutes later.

MEANING: These teams will be in the same conference next season, and their first meeting since the Jets moved from Atlanta indicated there will be some wild matches between the two in the future.

ETC.: Wild winger Dany Heatley played in his 700th game and assisted on the first goal.

- Bruce Brothers

UP NEXT: Blackhawks, 6:30 tonight, Xcel Energy Center, Versus, KFXN-FM 100.3

Wild-Jets rivalry is born in 2-1 Winnipeg win

By Bruce Brothers

WINNIPEG, Manitoba - Tuesday night's game between the Wild and the Winnipeg Jets was everything expected between longtime rivals.

Except...this was the first meeting between the Wild and the team that relocated to Winnipeg from Atlanta.

It had dozens of scoring chances, a fight, a scary injury and nonstop intensity, resulting in a 2-1 victory for the Jets at the rock-concert loud MTS Centre.

The Wild lost for the first time in eight games - and they also lost forward Pierre-Marc Bouchard, who was crumpled into the boards by the Jets' Zach Bogosian near the end of the third period. Bogosian knocked Bouchard's face into the ledge that holds the glass.

There was no report on Bouchard's condition after the game, played in front of deafening decibel levels from the Jets' 14th consecutive sellout crowd.

"It was a pretty good atmosphere," said Wild winger Guillaume Latendresse, who was summoned to the lineup after missing 15 games with a concussion to replace Matt Cullen, who was ill. "It's always fun to score, but when you lose the game, you don't have the same feeling. We lost the two points tonight."

Was this the start of a rivalry?

"It definitely felt like it," Wild center Kyle Brodziak said.

The seven straight victories might have spoiled the Wild a bit. Brodziak, goalie Niklas Backstrom and coach Mike Yeo all talked about how the Wild weren't quite up to their previous level even though they outshot the Jets 35-27.

"I don't think we're thrilled about the way we played," Brodziak said.

Part of that might have been because of the Jets; they have a 10-4-0 home record and seem to feed off the energy of one of the most boisterous buildings in the NHL. To say Winnipeg has fallen in love with its new NHL team is an understatement.

The 13,000 season tickets were gobbled up within minutes of going on sale last summer. When Jets-themed license plates went on sale Monday, people lined up to get them and most locations that carried them sold out quickly. More than 10,000 at $70 a pop were purchased.

"Fans here, they want to be not just into the game, they want to be on the bench," Jets coach Claude Noel said Tuesday morning. "It's really interesting. I don't know if it's because it's a new team, but I've never seen that."

The initial excitement when Winnipeg landed the old Atlanta Thrashers franchise on May 31 was something to see, according to Winnipeg TV-radio commentator Shane Hnidy, a former Wild defenseman who was born in nearby Neepawa, Manitoba, and lives in Winnipeg.

"It's hard to get a ticket," he said. "I get a lot of people asking me and it's an easy answer: "Sorry, can't help you."

Winnipeg and the Twin Cities are just 386 miles apart.

"We're so close to each other it'll be kind of a natural rivalry," said Twin Cities native Blake Wheeler, a forward for the Jets. "I think we'll get pretty familiar with these guys over the next few years. It's going to be some really tough games. Hopefully, we'll have the better end of it."

The Jets did Tuesday night, thanks to goals by Bogosian and Bryan Little.

Those, the hit against Bouchard and a few other extracurricular pushing and shoving matches left the Wild feeling unhappy.

"I think you could see that the two teams don't like each other out there," Yeo said, "and I'm sure the next one will be very interesting, as well."
Montreal Canadiens

Youngsters power Canadiens past Islanders

sean gordon

MONTREAL- From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

The irrationally exuberant point of view is that the Montreal Canadiens, who have at least one point from their last six games, are beginning to round into form.

The terminally pessimistic riposte: yeah, but their closest rivals have games in hand, they've blown comfortable leads in three of their last four, and the man who saved them from certain defeat on Tuesday was Al Montoya, who doesn't even play for Montreal.

No matter, the Habs emerged 5-3 winners from a scruffy contest with the New York Islanders and are tied on points for eighth in the Eastern Conference.

"We found a way to win," deadpanned goaltender Carey Price, "usually we find a way to lose."

That much is certainly true. On seven other occasions this year the Habs have blown late leads and had to settle for an overtime or shootout point.

And against the NHL's other shootout and OT kings - the Islanders and Habs have conspired to lose more overtime games and shootouts than any other NHL teams - it took several acts of magnanimity from Montoya, who was weak on three of the four goals he gave up, not to push this one into extras.

It also required a savvy pass from centre Lars Eller to fourth-line pivot Petteri Nokelainen for the Habs to get their noses ahead after squandering a 3-1 lead (Montoya waved at Nokelainen's long slap shot), and a fluttering empty-netter from Hal Gill that only barely trickled over the goal line in the dying seconds.

Price, who turned in several solid saves in the late going, admitted afterward that the Habs' propensity for flitting away leads has had a snowball effect.

"It's something that weighs on your mind after a while. Players'll tell you different, but they're lying," he said. "When you come into a third period you always think about a little bit, but it's been a recurring thing and it can't happen like that."

The Canadiens also won at home for just the fifth time in 16 starts, and given they play twice more at the Bell Centre this week (Thursday against Philly, Saturday against New Jersey), it was a welcome relief.

"It hasn't been hard enough lately for the opposition teams, hopefully we can build on this," said Eller.

Stopping the streaking Flyers may be a tall order, but if the Habs can snap out of the inconsistency that's hit them all year, a fillable one.

More crucial is the Devils game - after their overtime defeat of Florida late Tuesday. New Jersey is level on points with Montreal for eighth spot in the East, but they have a game in hand, and the 11th-placed Washington Capitals have played two fewer than Montreal but are only two points back.

But over the last 10 days the Canadiens, after an injury-marred opening to the season and a couple of long-ish losing streaks, have fulfilled the minimum requirement in their plan to secure a playoff spot.

That is: gaining at least six out of every 10 possible points between now and the end of the season.

And the optimists will see plenty of reason to think more points will soon be on offer.

It's tempting, in assessing the Canadiens, to focus on the marquee performers, the big-ticket guys, the goaltender, the newly-acquired puck mover on the blue line.

But another storyline is also emerging for the followers of the bleu-blanc-rouge.

Games are generally remembered for eye-popping goals or saves that defy credibility, but Tuesday's 5-3 triumph over the New York Islanders may be remembered for more subtle plays.

Like miniscule centre David Desharnais holding off halting defenceman Milan Jurcina, dancing around the Islander end on a second-period four-on-four, and making as deft a pass as you'll see on the Erik Cole power-play marker that gave Montreal a 3-1 lead early in the third period.

Pointless in his last four games, Desharnais also got a helper on a Hal Gill empty-netter that sealed a 5-3 win.

Desharnais is the increasingly assured pilot of the Habs' de facto top line with Erik Cole and Max Pacioretty, and habitually faces the opposition's top unit.

"It's pretty sweet, and it just gives you the taste for more," Desharnais said before the game.

He didn't become a full-time NHLer until age 24 and was a week into his call-up from the American Hockey League at this time last year.

"No one can say he hasn't established himself as an NHL player. His line is the most dangerous one every night, and it goes through him," said winger Mathieu Darche, who played with Desharnais with the Hamilton Bulldogs for parts of two seasons (Darche also scored for Montreal on Tuesday, his first in 24 games). "I'm so happy for him . . . I knew he was good enough, he just needed his chance."

The Habs would of course blow their 3-1 lead, as is their wont, as Josh Bailey and John Tavares brought a game Islanders' squad back with third-period tallies.

But it didn't matter because the night's other standout performer, Eller, set up the winner.

That was Eller's notable contribution to the scoresheet, but his best moment was a mid-second-period deke that carried him through two defenders and was saved from being a goal by Montoya's right toe.

"In some games you get it going, in others you don't have it really. It's a great atmosphere at home and it makes you want to do something extra," said Eller, who said his growing confidence is making him bolder with the puck.

A lot of credit for Tuesday's win must also go to Price, who stoned Pierre-Alexandre Parenteau late, the Habs are now level on points with Ottawa for the eighth and final playoff spot. It was a second straight win, the Habs haven't lost a game in regulation in the month of December.

Earlier this week, Montreal defenceman P.K. Subban indicated that he planned to loosen a barrage of trash-talk text messages to Tavares, his childhood pal.

But it was Tavares and his line who had the upper hand in the early going, when Subban went into the corner under pressure from Matt Moulson - another Toronto-area native who has trained with both Subban and Tavares - he made a catastrophic error.

His backhanded clearing attempt went straight to Parenteau, and the winger slipped a pass to Moulson, who had beat Subban out of the corner, and calmly slid the puck past a helpless Price.

It didn't take long for Montreal to respond. Andrei Kostitsyn gathered a puck in neutral ice, banked it off the boards, and chased it down as teammate Chris Campoli, in his first game back since missing 28 with an injury, attracted a defender.

Kostitsyn's finish appeared to surprise Montoya, who wasn't set, new acquisition Tomas Kaberle earned his third assist in two games as a Hab on the play.

And then came a rare moment of karmic justice; three days after having a goal taken away by Cole's goal-line tap-in in New Jersey, the long-suffering Darche finally potted a shot for the first time since October.

That it was also an outrageous flub by Montoya was clearly immaterial to the 35-year-old journeyman's evident joy and relief as he celebrated the goal.

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 12.14.2011
Grinders put Montreal Canadiens over the Islanders 5-3

By PAT HICKEY, The Gazette December 13, 2011

The skinny: Petteri Nokelainen scored on a one-timer at 13:45 of the third period to snap a 3-3 tie and the Canadiens went on to beat the New York Islanders 5-3 Tuesday at the Bell Centre. Josh Bailey and John Tavares scored third-period goals to bring the Islanders back from a 3-1 deficit. Andrei Kostitsyn, Mathieu Darche, Erik Cole and Hal Gill scored the other Montreal goals, while Matt Moulson opened the scoring for the Islanders.

What's it mean: The Canadiens have won two games in a row for the first time since Nov. 10-12 and the victory moved the Canadiens into ninth place in the Eastern Conference. Buffalo, New Jersey and Montreal each have 33 points, but the Canadiens have played one more game.

Fourth line comes through: Secondary scoring made the difference as fourth-liners Darche and Nokelainen each scored with shots from the point. Al Montoya got a piece of Darche's shot at 13:29 of the first period, but it bounced past him on the blocker side. The goalie never saw Nokelainen's game-winner. The Finn came off the bench on a line change and was in full stride when he one-timed a pass from Lars Eller.

Kostitsyn does it all: The book on Kostitsyn says he has one of the best shots in the NHL, but he displayed more than a shot on the Canadiens' first goal. Kostitsyn chipped the puck off the board from the neutral zone. Chris Campoli was unable to reach the pass because he was tied up by Steve Staios, but Kostitsyn caught up with the loose puck and beat Al Montoya to the far side.

Special delivery: The power play is starting to show signs of life with Tomas Kaberle and Campoli playing the quarterback role. The power play went 1-for-4 with Cole giving the Canadiens a 3-1 lead at the 31-second mark of the third period. The Canadiens managed a dozen shots with the extra man and the goal showed they understand the concept of finding the open man. P.K. Subban faked a shot from the blueline and passed to David Desharnais as he drove to the net. Desharnais found Cole in the slot. The penalty kill was again superb in a limited role as the Islanders were shut out on their three power plays and were limited to one shot on goal.

Kaberle streaking: Kaberle arrived in Montreal with nine assists in 29 games, but the change of address seems to be agreeing with him. He picked up an assist on Kostitsyn's goal and has three assists in two games.

What's next: The Canadiens have two more home games before they go on their annual Christmas holiday trip, which will see them play six games on the road from Dec. 19 to Dec. 31. The Philadelphia Flyers are at the Bell Centre on Thursday and the New Jersey Devils visit on Saturday.

Islanders, Habs both struggle to score

By Stu Hackel

It's a battle of the two lowest scoring teams in the Eastern Conference tonight in Montreal. But Mike Boone was right. The Islanders are coming to town and, just like when Santa comes, you'd better watch out.

They may be seven points behind the Habs in the standings, but over the last 10 games, the Islanders have a better record than the Canadiens (11 points out of a possible 20 as opposed to Montreal's 10 of 20). When these teams met last month, New York was in the midst of a cold streak. They beat the Habs on Long Island 4-3, but that was only their second victory in 12 games and they'd go on to drop their next four.

That awful stretch may have killed their playoff hopes but since then, the Islanders have gotten 10 of a possible 14 points, their only regulation loss coming on Saturday to the Penguins, a game which they led until a phantom elbowing major called on defenseman Travis Hamonic (video) while the Isles were already shorthanded turned the game in Pittsburgh's favor as the Isles fell apart. It was their first regulation loss since Nov. 25.

During their recent good run, the defeated the Devils, Sabres, Stars and Lightning, and got two regulation ties against the Blackhawks and one against Flyers. But they have not played as well in their last two games, an OT loss to the Blackhawks and that regulation defeat at the hands of the Penguins. It's something they'll try to reverse at the Bell Centre tonight.

What's been working for the Islanders? For one thing, their three-man goalie rotation is down to one. Al Montoya has played in each of the last eight games and, until the last two games in which he surrendered 10 goals, his season stats had been very strong - a 2.07 GAA and a .933 save percentage. They are a bit inflated now, Evgeni Nabokov, who had been out with a groin injury, has been reactivated and will back up tonight.

Up front, the Isles line of Matt Moulson (pictured), John Tavares and P.A. Parenteau continues to be a bonafide top NHL threesome. Moulson has eight goals and three assists in his last seven games (and he, too, has not done well in the last two, going pointless, so that was 11 points in five games), including a four-goal game against Dallas 10 days ago. Tavares leads the team with 23 points, the other two are tied for second with 22. Moulson now has 14 goals.

Some secondary scoring is emerging as well. Kyle Okposo, for example, who had been playing so poorly he was a healthy scratch the last time the Isles played the Canadiens, has four goals and three assists in the last nine games. Former first round draft choice Josh Bailey, who picked up only his third point of the season in the win over the Canadiens, has a goal and four assists in the last nine games. Rookie forward David Ullstrom, who hadn't scored in his first seven NHL games, has two goals in his last three.

The Islanders defencemen are also chipping in, led by Mark Streit who has four points in the last four games. Streit is also leading the Isles in ice time, averaging over 24 minutes per game.

The guy to watch in terms of physical play is winger Matt Martin, who leads the team with 121 hits and 47 penalty minutes. Tavares and Marty Reasoner will likely take all the important faceoffs. Tavares wins over 53 percent of his draws, Reasoner over 52.

Most recently, the Isles power play, which was hot until a few games ago, has faltered. They had gone 8-for-18 during a six game stretch but in the last two games, they're only 1-for-13. For the season, they are mid-pack with a 17.4 success rate. But on the road the Isles power play is stronger, clicking on 20 percent of their chances. The Habs' strong PK will see a lot of that first line with Streit and Brian Rolston on the points in the first wave, but the second unit is uncertain after the failures of the last two games.

The Islanders penalty kill has not been one of their strengths this season. They rank 21st in the league, killing off only 80.8 percent of their times shorthanded. On the road, they're at 79 percent, 25th in the league.

Here's how the Islanders are likely to line up for tonight's game:

Matt Moulson, John Tavares, P.A. Parenteau

Michael Grabner, Frans Nielsen, Kyle Okposo

David Ullstrom, Josh Bailey, Brian Rolston
Tim Wallace, Marty Reasoner, Matt Martin
Mark Streit, Travis Hamonic
Dylan Reese, Steve Staios
Milan Jurcina, Mike Mottau
Al Montoya
Evgeni Nabokov

Canadiens could use some of Chelios's grit

By RED FISHER, The Gazette December 14, 2011 3:08 AM

Your Canadiens, it seems, have developed a talent for keeping their devoted fans on the edge of their highpriced seats.

Such as on Tuesday, when they held a 3-1 lead seconds into the third period and then allowed the No. 27-ranked Islanders to tie the score in the 12th minute. You could almost feel the air going out of the balloon at that point until, that is, centreman Petteri Nokelainen got the winner in this 5-3 victory with only his second goal in 29 games a little more than two minutes later.

However, you take the points where and how you can get them, particularly on a night when the Islanders' defenders and goaltender Al Montoya were in a giving mood in the first period as well as on the winner.

Put it this way: I suspect that even Montoya feels he should have stopped the goals by Andrei Kostitsyn and Mathieu Darche - after Matt Moulson opened the scoring.

All of which brings me to my friend Chris Chelios, a guy who never was in a giving mood during his 26-season career. The reason: on Monday, he was inducted into the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame.

We're talking about a defenceman who led the Canadiens with 55 assists in his first full season with the team in 1984-85, and whose 55 assists four years later were a teamhigh. About a guy who fought for his team, played hurt for his team and never complained about the injuries. He was, in every way, dedicated to "taking one for the team."

Chelios played hard every night. It's why he was devastated when, after six seasons with the Canadiens and only one year after he won his first Norris, he was sent to Chicago for Denis Savard. To this day, he doesn't understand the reason for it.

The Canadiens have had a small group of elite defencemen over the years led by Doug Harvey, Larry Robinson, Serge Savard and Guy Lapointe. And you can be sure Chelios will join them in the Hockey Hall of Fame when he becomes eligible in 2013.

If you don't think so, answer this: how many other defencemen do you know who played 1,651 games in 26 seasons, scored 945 points, won three Stanley Cups, three Norris Trophies, made four Olympic appearances for the United States, won a gold medal with Team USA at the 1996 World Cup of Hockey and a national championship in 1983 with the University of Wisconsin?

Robinson once described him this way: "He's simply a junkyard dog who makes millions. He'll do whatever it takes to defend his end of the ice. He'll break your ankle with a slash or put his stick right through you if he has to."

The story is told that when Chelios was traded to Detroit, winger Darren McCarty strolled over to the rack in the team's dressing room and grabbed some of his new teammate's sticks. "First time I've ever been this close to one of these without it being broken over my head!" McCarty said.

He was a special player who never held anything back - on and off the ice. He often spoke when he should have been listening. He has lashed out at commissioner Gary Bettman on several occasions. He has unloaded on the Players' Association from time to time for reasons he has been right more often than wrong. He has criticized some players.

Nobody really knew what they were getting when Chelios was drafted in the second round, 40th overall, in the 1981 entry draft. Mark Hunter, Gilbert Delorme and Jan Ingman had been taken in the first round. Chelios even wasn't the team's first pick in the second round.

He had played with Junior B teams, and at some point down that road had decided to quit hockey. He changed his mind when he was convinced to try out with a Tier-2 team in Moose Jaw that was in need of a defenceman and responded to the challenge with 12 goals and 31 assists in 53 games.

He joined the Canadiens for 12 games in the 1983-84 season. It was in the following year that he delivered 55 assists in 74 NHL games - the first step in his Hall of Fame career.
Nashville Predators take their best shots at win

Josh Cooper

Nashville Predators' fourth line produces offense

 Predators vs. Flames

The strategy was simple but obvious from the Nashville Predators on Calgary goaltender Miikka Kiprusoff: Shoot and shoot often.

Using that gameplan, just enough pucks found their way past the Flames' goaltender in a 2-1 Predators victory in front of an announced crowd of 14,813 at Bridgestone Arena on Tuesday.

Nashville's shot total of 45 was easily its highest of the year. Its previous best of 35 came against San Jose on Nov. 5.

"Kiprusoff is such a good goalie, you want to put a lot of pucks towards the net, and create some chances," Nashville Coach Barry Trotz said. "They've been playing too well, and he has been playing too well. You have to put volumes of pucks at him. You have to have some net presence."

The Predators (15-11-4) have won their last three games, including two in a row at home, and all by one goal. Nashville has two games left on this homestand (vs. Detroit on Thursday and St. Louis on Saturday). Tuesday was also the third straight game Nashville scored a power-play goal.

Colin Wilson scored with the man-advantage with 16:29 left in the third period for the eventual winning goal. Wilson put home a rebound off Craig Smith's shot.

"I was on the goal line and the puck came right to me and I got it over his pad," Wilson said.

It was one of the few times Kiprusoff was unable reach the puck. In the first period alone, Kiprusoff made two saves by extending his right pad and stopping point-blank shots by David Legwand and Martin Erat.

"He has really quick legs and gets from side to side really well," Wilson said. "If you're not going to beat him for the first shot, you have to get him with the second one."

Nashville Predators' fourth line produces offense

Josh Cooper

Though the Predators consider themselves a team without set forward lines, when the unit designated as the fourth line scores, it often indicates a pretty good night for Nashville.

The reason? Teams don’t often expect offense out of the fourth line.

On Tuesday, the trio of Jerred Smithson, Brian McGrattan and Matt Halischuk scored the first goal of the game. It was the first time the Predators had scored first since Dec. 1 against Vancouver.

“Anytime you’re going to have success, you need everybody scoring. Tonight, we were able to get our first goal from our fourth line, and that was huge for us,” Nashville Coach Barry Trotz said. “I think sometimes … your fourth line doesn’t always get the accolades the scorers do. They grind it out, they kill penalties, they do all the grunt work sometimes. Tonight, they got a big goal and got us off to a great start.”

McGrattan fired a shot on net, and Halischuk swiped the backhand rebound past Calgary goaltender Miikka Kiprusoff. McGrattan picked up his second assist of the season on the play. Both have come against the Flames — his former NHL team.

“I feel great, feel more comfortable with every game and getting a chance to get some good ice time on the fourth line,” McGrattan said.

Geoffrion sent down: The Predators sent forward Blake Geoffrion to Milwaukee on Tuesday. Geoffrion had just two assists in 19 games. He missed the last six games with an upper-body injury.

Geoffrion is one of two younger players who helped Nashville in its playoff run last year, who were sent to the minors. Defenseman Jonathon Blum was assigned to Milwaukee on Monday.

“They’re really first-year players, and they haven’t gotten as much traction as they had last year,” Trotz said. “The whole idea is getting them playing so they can come back and get some traction in our lineup, so they’re not just struggling all year.”

First in a long time: The Predators hadn’t defeated the Flames at home since Jan. 15, 2008, a span of six games.

“I didn’t know that until you brought that up, thanks,” Trotz joked following the game. “Now that I know that stat, I can go forward.”

More power: The Predators scored on the power play for the sixth straight game. Colin Wilson’s goal in the third period proved the game-winner.

Predators shoot just enough to get past Flames, win third straight

By David Boclaire

It was not exactly a case of "he shoots, he scores."
It was more like, "he shoots and shoots and shoots and shoots and shoots a few more times before he manages to score."

The Nashville Predators set or matched season-highs for shots in a period, shots in a game and combined shots for both teams yet did not even reach their season average for goals scored in a 2-1 victory over the Calgary Flames on Tuesday. Regardless, the triumph was their third straight — also a season-high.

“We were trying to get pucks to the net, bodies to the net," left wing Colin Wilson said. "That’s how we got our two goals. They were two greasy goals. They weren’t big plays or anything like that.

“So that’s exactly what we were trying to do.”

The reason for that approach was Flames goalie Miikka Kiprusoff. He had allowed two goals in two previous meetings this season the last of which was a 1-0 Calgary victory on Nov. 29.

The Predators had a combined 40 shots in those two contests. This time, they had 18 at the end of the first period, which matched their high-water mark for any period in the current campaign. They ripped off 17 more in the second and the 35 total — with 20 minutes to play — was as many as they had in any entire game.

Despite all of that, it was 1-1 until Wilson scored on the power play 3:31 into the final period. He knocked home the rebound of a shot by Craig Smith, whose team-high seven shots equaled the most by a Nashville player so far this season.

"Kiprusoff is such a good goalie, you want to put a lot of pucks toward the net and you want to create some chances,” coach Barry Trotz said. "... You have to put lots of pucks at him, you have to have some net presence and you have to convert. We had some great chances in the first, and we didn’t convert. We could have pulled away early on them, and we didn’t.”

The final shot tally was 45-35 in Nashville’s favor. The combined total (80) exceeded by seven the Predators’ previous high set Nov. 5 in an overtime loss at San Jose.

Pekka Rinne, who had allowed one goal on 62 shots in the two earlier meetings with the Flames, made more saves this time than in either of those contests.

Calgary matched the Predators with 17 shots in the second period and had a 13-10 edge in the third, thanks to six shots in the final 1:35 — after Kiprusoff was pulled for an extra attacker.

“They had six guys on the ice and we kept them outside and blocked a few shots, but we couldn’t get the puck out of the zone,” Rinne said. “They did a really good job there. It was a little bit hectic, but I think it was still under control.”

Matt Halischuk put Nashville on top with a rebound chance at 11:43 of the opening period. Calgary evened it with Curtis Glencross’ goal at 6:12 of the second.

Every Nashville skater except tough guy Brian McGrattan had at least one shot on goal. Seven had three or more.

Wilson had only two — the one on which he scored and a backhand chance with 5:26 remaining. The latter ended up in Kiprusoff’s glove and left Wilson muttering and barely resisting the urge to snap his stick against the boards.

“I wanted to score that goal,” Wilson said. “If you make a move like that I really want to score, but at the same time if I would have scored that one we really would have put them in a tough spot. So it got a little frustrating.”

Geoffrion joins Blum in Milwaukee as Predators look for more from youngsters

By David Boclair

Barry Trotz talked recently about one of the significant differences players face when they get promoted to the National Hockey League from the developmental circuit, the American Hockey League.

The Nashville Predators coach spoke at length about how savvy NHL veterans can deceive younger players into thinking one thing when the reality is something quite different.

“The biggest difference between the American League and the NHL is there’s a lot more baiting,” Trotz said last Saturday. “Guys can bait you in terms of situations. They’re smarter. … There’s a lot more of that deception that happens in this league.”

As it turned out, it was the Predators who were fooled.

Center Blake Geoffrion was reassigned to Nashville’s AHL affiliate, the Milwaukee Admirals on Tuesday, a day after the same move was made with defenseman Jonathon Blum.

Both players made their NHL debuts during the second half of the 2010-11 season and remained with the Predators through the franchise’s longest playoff run to date. They showed enough during that time to convince franchise management they had established themselves as NHL players and, consequently, had an impact on what the team did — or did not — do during the offseason.

Now they are back with the Admirals and scheduled to make their 2011-12 AHL debuts Friday in the first of three games in three days.

“Based on where they were last year … they haven’t had the year this year that we expected,” Trotz said following Tuesday’s 2-1 victory over Calgary. “One of the things that you tend to overlook because guys come up during the playoffs and they play … you think of them as second-year players. They’re really first-year players.”

What has not changed is the fact that each still is a top prospect. Blum, after all, was a first-round draft choice (23rd overall) in 2007 and Geoffrion was Nashville’s top pick (second round) a year earlier.

“They haven’t really gotten as much traction as they had last year,” Trotz said following Tuesday’s 2-1 victory over Calgary. “The whole idea is getting them playing so they can come back and get some traction in our lineup so that they’re not struggling all year.

“You’re confidence goes and you’re not playing. They’re still pretty young players. … They just have to play and when they come back they’ll be better off for it.”

Geoffrion was activated from the injury list, where he had been since the start of December, prior to being sent down. He had no goals and two assists in 19 appearances.

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By David Boclair

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Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias scored in the shootout and Martin Brodeur stopped both Florida attempts to lift the New Jersey Devils to a 3-2 victory over the Panthers on Tuesday night.

Elias and Zach Parise had the New Jersey goals in regulation. Brodeur made 24 saves to help the Devils rally from a two-goal deficit for their fourth win in five games.

Kris Versteeg scored twice for Florida, which dropped its third straight. Jose Theodore stopped 32 shots.

Parise tied it 2-all at 7:40 of the third period. Henrik Tallinder's slap shot from straight on just inside the blue line went wide of the net to Theodore's right. The puck ricocheted off the end boards and went right to Parise, who slammed it in for his 10th goal.

Versteeg's short-handed breakaway goal at 7:29 of the second gave Florida a 2-0 lead.

Shortly after a faceoff at center ice, Versteeg stick-checked the puck away from Tallinder. Versteeg took control of the puck and skated in alone on Brodeur before firing a shot high past the goalie's glove side.

Just 56 seconds after Versteeg's second goal, Elias made it 2-1.

Kovalchuk had the puck behind the Devils' net and sent a pass to Parise in the left circle. Parise drew several players toward him before passing the puck to Elias at the right side of the net. It was Elias' 10th goal.

Adam Larsson's turnover deep in the New Jersey zone led to Versteeg's goal that gave Florida a 1-0 lead at 15:10 of the first period.

Larsson was in the right corner when he attempted a weak backhand pass. Stephen Weiss intercepted in the circle and skated in on Brodeur. The Florida forward deked as he skated across the front of the net, causing Brodeur to hit the ice. Weiss then sent a pass back to Versteeg, who scored his team-leading 14th goal.

New Jersey's Petr Sykora missed an opportunity to score the decisive goal in the final seconds of regulation when, standing just outside the crease, he redirected a pass from Mark Fayne wide of an open net.

NOTES: It was the second meeting of the season for these teams, both in Florida. The Panthers overcame a 3-0 deficit to win 4-3 on Nov. 21. ... Florida's four-game homestand continues against Calgary on Friday, Carolina on Sunday and Phoenix next Tuesday. ... New Jersey's NHL-leading penalty-killing unit was needed only once, successfully killing Dainius Zubrus' tripping penalty midway through the third period. ... The Devils improved to 12-5-0 in one-goal games. It was their fifth straight one-goal game.

Devils Rally From Two-Goal Deficit, Topping Panthers in Shootout

By LYNN ZINSER

The concussion news continued to grow worse for the N.H.L. on Tuesday, with the Philadelphia Flyers announcing that Claude Giroux would be out indefinitely with a head injury.

The news comes a day after Pittsburgh’s Sidney Crosby, perhaps the league’s best player, was out again with a recurrence of concussion symptoms, which had kept him out of the Penguins’ lineup for most of this year. Giroux’s injury costs the league its leading scorer — he has 39 points in 28 games — and a star player on a team leading the Eastern Conference.

It was a startling development for the Flyers, who announced Monday that Giroux’s injury did not appear to be serious and that he was feeling better. They also said Monday that he would not play Tuesday night.

Giroux was accidentally kneed in the back of the head by his teammate Wayne Simmonds in Saturday’s game.

“Claude reported not feeling very good today,” Flyers General Manager Paul Holmgren said in a statement. “Over the past few days, his symptoms have gradually gotten worse.”

Head injuries have taken a toll on the Flyers this season, with forward Brayden Schenn also out with a concussion and defenseman Chris Pronger experiencing postconcussion symptoms and heading to Pittsburgh for examination by concussion specialists there.

On Tuesday night, Scott Hartnell extended his goal-scoring streak to six games and Philadelphia won in Washington for its sixth straight victory, 5-1.

DEVILS 3, PANTHERS 2 Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias scored in a shootout and Martin Brodeur stopped both Florida attempts, lifting the Devils over the host Panthers on Tuesday night, 3-2.

Elias and Zach Parise scored for the Devils in regulation. Brodeur made 24 saves to help the Devils rally from a two-goal deficit for their fourth win in five games. Kris Versteeg scored twice for Florida, which dropped its third straight. Jose Theodore stopped 32 shots.

Parise tied it, 2-2, at 7 minutes 40 seconds of the third period. Henrik Tallinder’s slap shot from straight on just inside the blue line went wide of the net to Theodore’s right. The puck ricocheted off the end boards and went right to Parise, who slammed it in for his 10th goal. The Devils’ Petr Sykora missed an opportunity to score a decisive goal in the final seconds of regulation when, standing just outside the crease, he redirected a pass from Mark Fayne wide of an open net.

CANADIENS 5, ISLANDERS 3 Petteri Nokelainen scored with 6:15 remaining as Montreal recovered after giving up a two-goal lead in the third period to send the visiting Islanders to their third straight loss.

Nokelainen drove a slap shot past Al Montoya from the right point for the tiebreaking goal moments after Montreal wasted a 3-1 advantage.

Matt Moulson gave the Islanders a 1-0 lead with his team-leading 15th goal 7:50 into the game. They tied it in the third on goals by Josh Bailey and John Tavares.

FLYERS 5, CAPITALS 1 Scott Hartnell extended his goal-scoring streak to six games, Marc-Andre Bourdon got his first N.H.L. goal and visiting Philadelphia beat Washington to extend its winning streak to six games.

The Flyers built a 4-0 lead in the second period and coasted to the finish. Ilya Bryzgalov stopped 31 shots, the lone flaw in his performance a tap-in by Jeff Halpern with 6:01 left.

JETS 2, WILD 1 Bryan Little scored a power-play goal with five minutes remaining in regulation as Winnipeg ended visiting Minnesota’s seven-game winning streak.

BLUE JACKETS 2, CANUCKS 1 James Wisniewski had the last of Columbus’s three shootout goals and Steve Mason made several big stops in his first game after a 27-day benching to lead the Blue Jackets over visiting Vancouver.

SENATORS 3, SABRES 2 Jared Cowen scored 45 seconds into overtime, giving Ottawa a victory in Buffalo.

Milan Michalek, who had added his league-leading 19th goal, left the game with five and a half minutes left in the second period after colliding with Erik Karlsson.

RED WINGS 4, PENGUINS 1 Pavel Datsyuk had a goal and an assist and Jimmy Howard stopped 25 shots to lead visiting Detroit over injury-depleted Pittsburgh.

IN OTHER GAMES Tim Connolly scored his second goal of the game at 44 seconds of overtime to lift host Toronto over Carolina, 2-1. ... Brad Marchand scored twice and Tuukka Rask earned his first shutout of the season, leading host Boston to a 3-0 win over Los Angeles in the Kings’ first game under the interim coach John Stevens. ... Colin Wilson scored a power-play goal at 3:31 of the third period to give host Nashville a 2-1 win over Calgary. ... Milan Hejduk and Gabriel Landeskog scored in the shootout to send host Colorado past San Jose, 4-3.

BARNABY AVOIDS JAIL TIME The former N.H.L. player Matthew Barnaby has avoided jail time and potential deportation to Canada by pleading guilty to four violations related to the New York drunken-driving arrest that got him fired as an ESPN hockey analyst.

Devils' Henrik Tallinder hurt when slashed in wrist by Brian Campbell

Rich Chere

SUNRISE, Fla. -- Devils defenseman Henrik Tallinder left the BankAtlantic Center with an ice bag on his left wrist, the result of being slashed by Florida Panthers defenseman Brian Campbell with 2:28 remaining in overtime.

Tallinder said he did not have X-rays on the wrist, but that could occur tomorrow when the Devils are back home following their 2-0 road trip to Florida.

The Devils, who blew a 3-0 lead in losing to the Panthers on Nov. 21, overcame a 2-0 deficit this time in a 3-2 shootout victory.

Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias scored in the shootout while Martin Brodeur stopped Tomas Fleischmann and then Kris Versteeg.

Versteeg had scored both Florida goals.

"I stopped him on the shootout," Brodeur said, "so I'm happy about that one. He's good."

SUNRISE, Fla. — Rookie defenseman Adam Larsson made another costly mistake Tuesday that left the Devils’ coaching staff scratching their heads.

But that is the learning process for a young player expected to become a future NHL star.

What remains baffling is the team’s inclination for allowing short-handed goals. After giving up their league-leading ninth this season, the Devils had to battle from behind to pull out a 3-2 shootout victory over the Florida Panthers at the BankAtlantic Center.

Trailing, 2-1, in the third period the Devils evened the score when Zach Parise scored his 10th goal of the season. Defenseman Henrik Tallinder fired a shot wide of the net and Parise played the carom off the end boards to score from the bottom of the left circle at 7:40.

The Devils got goals from Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias in the shootout and Martin Brodeur stopped both shots he faced.

Acquired in a trade with the Ducks on Monday, Kurtis Foster flew from Anaheim to Dallas that night and arrived in Texas at 10:30 p.m. He said he tried to get some sleep at midnight and got up at 3:30 a.m. Tuesday to catch a 5:45 flight to Florida.

Foster was practicing with the Ducks on Monday when general manager Bob Murray called him off the ice.

"I didn’t see it coming with the Devils but I definitely wasn’t happy in Anaheim this year," said Foster, who played only nine games for the Ducks this season. "I wasn’t actively looking for a move but when I was called off the ice I figured something was up. When it was New Jersey I was pretty excited.

"We had a 1 p.m. practice and I got called off the ice 10 minutes into it. Bob Murray told me they were going to move me but he couldn’t tell me where yet. He had to make sure everybody knew before I knew where. I was showered and ready to go, not really knowing where I was going. But I knew I was going somewhere.

"It’s kind of a weird feeling to be told you’re being moved but he doesn’t tell you where. He did say it was a good situation for me and the best thing for my career going forward. When you have a GM telling you that, you know it’s a good thing."

Foster and Kovalchuk were impressive with one-timers during a second-period power play after Ed Jovanovski was sent off for high-sticking David Clarkson at 5:40.

Nevertheless, the Devils failed to score and then gave up their ninth short-handed goal of the season. Tallinder, approaching the blue line, was stripped of the puck by Kris Versteeg for a breakaway.

Skating in alone Brodeur, Versteeg scored his second goal of the game and 15th of the season. It was the fifth short-handed goal allowed by the Devils in their last nine games.

The Devils got one back at 8:25 when Elias scored his 10th goal. Kovalchuk centered a pass from the goal line to Parise as he drove to the net. Parise made a clever pass to Elias below the right circle for the goal that got the Devils back into the game.

The glaring giveaway from Larsson led to a Florida goal at 15:10 of the opening period. Brodeur had just weathered a flurry of shots when Larsson controlled the puck in the right corner. For some reason the young blue liner back-handed a blind pass out from the corner onto the stick of Stephen Weiss in the right faceoff circle.

After faking Brodeur, Weissdish ed off to Versteeg for his 14th goal.

Foster said his injury problems were history. Playing for Jacques Lemaire in Minnesota, Foster suffered a broken left femur when he was checked into the boards by San Jose’s Torrey Mitchell on March 20, 2008. He missed the rest of that season and almost the entire 2008-09 season, requiring surgery in which a metal rod was inserted into his left leg.

He suffered a related problem before this season began.

"I have a metal rod and two screws at the bottom and a screw at the top. There was a wire that went around the actual femur that was a twist tie against the bone," Foster said. "For some reason the day before camp I got inflammation. The wire had actually moved and was sticking into the muscle. One of the wires in my leg moved and was sticking int o my quads. I had to have it cut out.

"So they just went in and clipped it right at the bone and I haven’t had a problem since. Now it’s clipped out and it won’t happen again. I had the four-week recovery from the surgery but my leg feels good and I feel good."

Devils and Panthers still thinking about last meeting

Rich Chere

SUNRISE, Fla. -- The last meeting between the Devils and Panthers was on the minds of both teams.

Back on Nov. 21 at the BankAtlantic Center the Devils had a 3-0 lead but wound up losing the game, 4-3.

"I think we have to play 60 minutes. We got off to a good start and sat on it," said goalie Martin Brodeur, who played that game and was set to start Tuesday night’s rematch.

"What’s tough with them is they have three good puck-moving defensemen. It’s more than their forwards. That’s a dimension maybe they didn’t have before."

It was a big game for the Panthers.

“We started that game well. We played well the first 7-8 minutes. Then all of a sudden the wave of Devils talent really came at us," coach Kevin Dineen recalled. "I think that was one of those games we really felt strongly that we could come back. Our team was confident and playing well.

"That was a real character builder for our team. It was certainly one of the games that sticks out so far this year on the positive side. We don’t want to play that formula too often where you get down by three and have to scratch and claw to get your way back. But it certainly makes for a quality matchup moving into tonight’s game."

Dineen’s squad has played well all season. They haven’t lost more than two games in a row in regulation time, but they are coming off a 6-1 loss to the Rangers at the Garden.

“A lot is going on. You get in the holiday season and people are thinking about things away from the rink. It will be good to get a focus here in our own building," Dineen said.

New York was a distraction.

“You catch a team coming off a road game and they played a good game in Buffalo and then came and spanked very good at home," Dineen said of the Rangers. "Sometimes you take your beating and you move on. I think there were a lot of things we picked up that have crept into our game over the last two weeks. It makes it a lot easier to address when you get a whooping like that.

“We were not very strong on the puck and they took advantage of us. We’ve always prided ourselves on having a lot of speed. It seems like we were in the bus lane instead of in the far left. When a team is coming at you like that you like to respond with your own speed and we didn’t do that.”

And yet he enjoyed the trip to New York.

“You walk away from it after losing as badly as we did in New York after really a great day and a half,” Dineen reflected. “There is some balance in life and we really enjoyed everything that New York City has to offer around the holiday season. Then you end up with a pretty good tail-kicking there.

“There is some enthusiasm around here for Panther hockey and we want to continue that with our performance on the ice.”

Jose Theodore was in goal against the Rangers, as he will be against the Devils.

“He’s the right guy for the job,” Dineen said. “He’s played extremely well for us and given us a chance to win every night. He threw a stinker at us, like the rest of the crew, the other night. Now you rebound and come back.”

SUNRISE, Fla. -- Devils coach Pete DeBoer said there was no reason to be alarmed that center Travis Zajac did not take part in today's optional morning skate.

Zajac is still on track for a return Friday night at home.

"Just a maintenance day. No red flags or anything," DeBoer said. "We're still looking at a return potentially on Friday. He's been pushing pretty hard lately and getting a little bit stiff so we backed him off for a day."

DeBoer said center Jacob Josefson, out with a fractured right clavicle, is still 4-8 weeks away from returning but is working out off ice. He is not yet skating.

"I think he's eight weeks from surgery now. I think it was a pretty significant injury. Not season-ending," the coach said. "I see him in the gym on a daily basis now. He's doing weights. He hasn't hit the ice yet. He's coming along. I'd guess he's 4-8 weeks away."

With Kurtis Foster making his Devils debut against the Panthers, Alex Urbom was scratched. Cam Jansen's return to the lineup meant that Nick Palmieri was a healthy scratch.

Foster traveled from Anaheim on Monday and the rest of the way from Texas today, getting up at 3:30 a.m. for a 5:45 a.m. flight to Florida.

"I've seen it before. A lot of times your first game with a new team is on adrenalin and it doesn't really factor in. It usually catches up to you on day two or three," DeBoer said. "We're not going to put too much on his plate tonight but obviously we're hoping for the best."

DeBoer is hoping for help on the power play.

"It's no secret that our power play has struggled from a numbers point of view and some of that we feel has been a lack of a shot at the top to take some pressure off Kovy (Ilya Kovalchuk) on the one side and Patrik (Elias) on the other," DeBoer said. "This guy has made a living doing that and we're excited to have him here and work with him."

Foster said he hopes to play solid defensively as well as add some offense.

"That's not going to be an option," DeBoer said with a laugh. "And I don't think it will be an issue. Adam Oates has coached him before. This guy played for Jacques Lemaire for 3-4 years in Minnesota and Jacques spoke highly of him. I don't see that as an issue."

DeBoer on facing the Panthers, who have a dynamic top line: "I'd like to think we're a couple of lines deep. Obviously right now Kovalchuk (Adam) Henrique and (Zach) Parise are really playing well. I think Elias, (Dainius) Zubrus and (Petr) Sykora have the potential and have done it in the past to be a really good line. We need multiple lines going. That's the key for us. It's not necessarily our top guys outperforming theirs."

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, the Devils' top five games-played leaders since Lou Lamoriello became GM in 1987-88 are Martin Brodeur (1,148), Ken Daneyko (1,148), Patrik Elias (990), Scott Stevens (956) and Scott Niedermayer (892).

New Devils defender Kurtis Foster to make debut against Panthers

By Rich Chere/

SUNRISE, Fla. -- Defenseman Kurtis Foster will make his Devils debut Tuesday night against the Florida Panthers at BankAtlantic Center.

Acquired in a trade with the Ducks on Monday, Foster flew from Anaheim to Dallas that night and arrived in Texas at 10:30 p.m. He said he tried to get some sleep at midnight and got up at 3:30 a.m. Tuesday to catch a 5:45 flight to Florida.

"Coming to a new team I think I'll get a little burst of adrenaline and energy," he said of being tired. "I'm very, very happy. I think my wife will have a hard time leaving California. She enjoyed the beach life there. If I can chip in and do what (the Devils) think I can do and what I think I can do, hopefully I can help the team get into the playoffs, do some damage and you never know where we can go from there.

"You never want to be traded, but when you are you know the team you are going to likes you and wants you. It's always a good feeling. Even though I've moved on and this is my fourth team in a couple years it is exciting. It's nice to know I'm still wanted out there and I think I can really help this team."

Foster was practicing with the Ducks on Monday when general manager Bob Murray called him off the ice.

"I didn't see it coming with the Devils but I definitely wasn't happy in Anaheim this year," said Foster, who has played only nine games for the Ducks this season. "I wasn't actively looking for a move but when I was called off the ice I figured something was up. When it was New Jersey I was pretty excited.

"We had a 1 p.m. practice yesterday and I got called off the ice 10 minutes into it. Bob Murray told me they were going to move me but he couldn't tell me where yet. He had to make sure everybody knew before I knew where. I was showered and ready to go, not really knowing where I was going. But I knew I was going somewhere. It's kind of weird feeling to be told your being moved but he doesn't tell you where. He did say it was a good situation for me and the best thing for my career going forward. When you have a GM telling you that you know it's a good thing."

He has a few connections to the Devils. He played with Ilya Kovalchuk in Atlanta, was coached by Jacques Lemaire in Minnesota and Adam Oates in Tampa Bay.

"(Murray) told me it was the Devils I was pretty excited," Foster said. "I don't see the Devils a lot. I don't know a lot of the players on the team. I played with Kovy before in Atlanta and I know Adam Oates from Tampa Bay. I know Jacques Lemaire is a big influence here and I had him for four years in Minnesota. I knew it was a good organization."

It was during his time in Minnesota that Foster suffered a broken left femur when he was checked into the boards by San Jose's Torrey Mitchell on March 20, 2008. He missed the rest of that season and almost the entire '08-09 season, requiring surgery in which a metal rod was inserted into his left leg.

Over the injury, Foster signed with the Lightning as a free agent. The following year he couldn't turn down a two-year contract offer from the Edmonton Oilers on July 1, 2010. The deal pays him $1.8 million per season.

He was surprised to be traded by the Oilers to Anaheim for Andy Sutton on July 1 this past summer and never felt he was in the picture with former Ducks coach Randy Carlyle after he suffered complications from his leg surgery.

"I have a metal rod and two screws at the bottom and a screw at the top. There was a wire that went around the actual femur that was a twist tie against the bone," Foster said. "For some reason the day before camp I got inflammation. The wire had actually moved and was sticking into the muscle. One of the wires in my leg moved and was sticking into my quadis. I had to have it cut out.

"So they just went in and clipped it right at the bone and I haven't had a problem since. Now it's clipped out and it won't happen again. I had the four-week recovery from the surgery but my leg feels good and I feel good. I'm just excited for tonight."

The problem was in getting playing time in Anaheim.

"I came in in a tough spot. I missed preseason, all of exhibition and all of training camp with the injury in my leg," he explained. "I got it fixed, missed five weeks and kind of started behind the eight ball. Randy Carlyle is a pretty tough coach. If you start behind the eight ball you start from behind. It was a tough start for me.

"I felt fine when I got in the lineup but we kind of struggled. We had Lubomir Visnovsky and Cam Fowler playing a lot of offensive minutes. It was tough for me to get in. So I'm excited with the change. I think what I do can help this team."

The Devils got Foster and minor league goalie Tim Pielmeier from the Ducks for Mark Fraser, Rod Pelley and a seventh-round draft pick in 2012.

"Knowing what New Jersey is all about I want to try to play as solid defensively as I can. But my game is shooting the puck and creating as much offensively (as he can)," Foster said. "I know Kovy likes to play the left side on the power play and I like to play the right side, so hopefully it's a match that works out. I'll try to get him the puck as much as I can in a position where he can shoot. Make sure I get as many of my shots through, too. If I can generate a little bit of offense, help out the PP and play an all-around solid game, that's kind of what I'm hoping for."

He went over some things with Oates during the optional morning skate.

Why hasn't Foster stayed longer with one NHL team rather than moving around so much?

"Minnesota was my longest stint," he said. "I was four seasons there but I missed a whole season with my broken leg. I fell behind the eight-ball. When I came back I got in 10 games and they brought in a new GM and new coach and went in a different direction.

"That led me to Tampa, where I kind of revived my career a little bit with Adam, Rick Tocchet and Stammer and those guys. After that I just decided to go to Edmonton on a contract I couldn't really give up. I thought it was going to be a situation beneficial for me. At the end of the day it didn't work out the way I planned.

"Getting traded to the Ducks was a little surprising. I didn't see it coming. I don't know what they were looking for. I think they were looking for a guy who could step in and help out when needed."

He ma

Right winger Cam Janssen will return to the lineup after suffering a chest injury in Winnipeg Dec. 3.

"I'm very excited," Janssen said of getting back into the lineup.

Foster said: "It's been a long travel day last night and today. Hopefully I get some adrenaline going. I'm sure I'll be fine tonight."

Kurtis Foster joins Devils in time for optional morning skate

Rich Chere/

SUNRISE, Fla. -- Devils general manager Lou Lamoriello was waiting outside the BankAtlantic Center when newly-acquired defenseman Kurtis Foster arrived directly from the airport.

Foster, carrying his Anaheim Ducks equipment bag, was ushered in by the GM and taken to coach Pete DeBoer's office. He will wear No. 2.

Devils assistant coach Adam Oates had Foster in Tampa Bay. In his one season with the Lightning, Foster scored 42 points (eight goals, 34 assists) in 71 games with 48 penalty minutes.

Under Jacques Lemaire in Minnesota 2005-06, Foster scored 10 goals with 18 assists in 58 games.

The entire Devils squad came to the arena for a team meeting, but most did not take part in the optional skate.

Foster was one of only three defensemen to skate, along with Matt Taormina and Alex Urbom.

Forwards who skated were Cam Janssen, Mattias Tedenby, Tim Sestito, Nick Palmieri and Ryan Carter.

Both goalies were on the ice.

Center Travis Zajac, recovering from Aug. 18 Achilles tendon surgery, is with the team and was at the arena early. He did not, however, take part in the optional skate.

Foster, 30, was acquired on Monday in a trade with the Ducks. The Devils also received minor league goalie Timo Pielmeier in exchange for defenseman Mark Fraser, forward Rod Pelley and a seventh-round draft pick in 2012.

The Panthers, who host the Devils Tuesday night, held a full morning skate. It will be Jose Theodore vs. Martin Brodeur.

Panthers goalie Scott Clemmensen will not face his former team. Clemmensen had meniscus surgery on his knee and missed 5-6 weeks and then a groin injury.

"I'm just getting back into it," he said. "I'm good, finally. This is the first time since training camp I feel good. Trying to get into it. It feels funny to have played only four or five games this close to Christmas."

SUNRISE, Fla. — Devils defense man Henrik Tallinder left the BankAtlantic Center with an ice bag on his left wrist, the result of being slashed by Florida Panthers defense man Brian Campbell with 2:28 remaining in overtime.

Tallinder said he did not have X-rays on the wrist, but that could occur tomorrow when the Devils are back home following their 2-0 road trip to Florida.

The Devils, who blew a 3-0 lead in losing to the Panthers on Nov. 21, overcame a 2-0 deficit this time in a 3-2 shootout victory.

Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias scored in the shootout while Martin Brodeur stopped Tomas Fleischmann and then Kris Versteeg.

Versteeg had scored both Florida goals.

"I stopped him on the shootout," Brodeur said, "so I'm happy about that one. He's good."

SUNRISE, Fla. — Rookie defenseman Adam Larsson made another costly mistake tonight that left the Devils' coaching staff scratching their heads. But that is the learning process for a young player expected to become a future NHL star.

What remains baffling is the team’s inclination for allowing short-handed goals. After giving up their league-leading ninth this season, the Devils had to overcome a two-goal deficit to pull out a 3-2 shootout victory over the Florida Panthers at BankAtlantic Center.

"Again we (gave up) a short-handed goal. I don’t know what’s going on with us," said Ilya Kovalchuk. "But we never gave up."

On the contrary. The last time they faced the Panthers the Devils blew a 3-0 lead in a 4-3 loss in South Florida. This time they redeemed themselves by overcoming a pair of Kris Versteeg goals.

The Devils are almost unbeatable in shootouts this season, raising their record to 7-1 as Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias scored goals and Martin Brodeur stopped Tomas Fleischmann and Versteeg.

“I stopped (Versteeg) in the shootout,” Brodeur said, “so I’m happy about that one. He’s good.”

The only serious concern came when defenseman Henrik Tallinder was slashed on the left wrist by Panthers blue liner Brian Campbell with 2:28 remaining in overtime. Tallinder was in immediate pain and complained that no penalty was called.

He left the arena with an ice bag on his wrist and said no X-rays had been taken. However, that could happen when the team is back home today.

A glaring giveaway by Larsson led to a Florida goal at 15:10 of the opening period. Brodeur had just weathered a flurry of shots when Larsson controlled the puck in the right corner. For some reason the young defenseman backhanded a blind pass out from the corner onto the stick of Stephen Weiss in the right faceoff circle.

After faking Brodeur, Weiss dished off to Versteeg for the goal.

"He’s a young kid. We knew he was going to make some mistakes," coach Pete DeBoer said. "We have veteran guys make mistakes, too. Tally (Tallinder) made a mistake on the one. Kovy has made that mistake before, so we’re not going to point fingers. We worked through the mistakes we made and found a way to win."

Tallinder’s mistake came when Versteeg stripped him of the puck while carrying it up ice on a Devils power play midway through the second period. Versteeg scored on a breakaway at 7:29.

It was the fifth short-handed goal the Devils have allowed in their last nine games.

“That (short-handed goal) was two defense,” DeBoer said of having Tallinder and Mark Fayne on the ice. "What do we go to next, three defensemen?"

Patrik Elias got one goal back 56 seconds later — his 10th — and the Devils trailed by one entering the third.

They evened the score when Zach Parise scored his 10th goal of the season. Tallinder fired a shot wide of the net and Parise played the carom off the end boards to beat goalie Jose Theodore from the bottom of the left circle at 7:40.

Elias, who scored the shootout goal that assured the victory, said the Devils had talked about blowing the lead last time against the Panthers.

“We wanted to get the win for Pete,” he said.

A little revenge?
Devils are 7-1 in shootouts after topping Panthers

By Rich Chere/

SUNRISE, Fla. — The Devils are virtually unbeatable in shootouts. After tonight's 3-2 victory over the Florida Panthers in which Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias scored in the shootout while Martin Brodeur stopped both shots he faced, the Devils are 7-1 this season.

"You've got great goaltending at one end, guys (Brodeur and Johan Hedberg) that excel in the shootout from a save perspective. And you've got fantastic skill at the other end with the first three guys we've shot with," coach Pete DeBoer said. "I think we've only once or twice gotten into the fourth shooter. Those guys have been money all year."

Kovalchuk scored first against Panthers goalie Jose Theodore. Zach Parise was stopped, but Brodeur closed the door on Tomas Fleischmann and Kris Versteeg. That allowed Patrik Elias to end it by scoring.

"We have the guys who've always been pretty solid," Elias said.

Kovalchuk added: "We have some guys who can do it and we're confident in our goalies."

Newly-acquired defenseman Kurtis Foster sat back and watched.

"It's pretty nice when you have those three guys who can come over the boards," Foster said. "Kovy is pretty amazing. We all know why he's scored 50 goals in this league. Zach made a great shot. He's is so intense you can see how upset he is when he misses his shot. Then Patrik made a nice shot. It was nice we didn't have to wait for another save."

In his Devils debut Foster was paired on defense with Bryce Salvador in the first few minutes of the game, but was quickly put with Matt Taormina.

"I started with Sal. After one shift we got changed. I don't know if they didn't like that one shift or what," Foster said. "It was nice playing with Taor (Taormina). He's a little guy that skates really well and moves the puck well, so it definitely works with me."

"Parise was originally credited with an assist on the goal by Elias, but told the officials that he did not touch the puck. So Kovalchuk and Salvador got the assists."

The Devils captain is skilled enough to make a pass that clever.

"I'd love to take credit for it, but I was going for the one-timer and their guy got his stick on it," Parise confessed.

SUNRISE, Fla. — Martin Brodeur became the Devils’ games-played leader in the era of Lou Lamoriello as general manager (since 1987-88) when he faced the Florida Panthers tonight at the BankAtlantic Center.

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, the Devils’ top five games-played leaders since Lamoriello became GM in 1987-88 are Brodeur (1,149), Ken Daneyko (1,148), Patrik Elias (990), Scott Stevens (958) and Scott Niedermayer (892).

Brodeur faced Jose Theodore.

Defensiveman Kurtis Foster, acquired in a Monday trade with the Anaheim Ducks, made his Devils debut and was paired on defense with Bryce Salvador. Other defense pairings: Henrik Tallinder and Mark Fayne, Matt Taormina with Adam Larsson.

Alex Urbom and Nick Palmieri were scratches as newly-acquired defensemen Kurtis Foster made his Devils debut and Cam Janssen returned from a sternum injury.

Tallinder appeared to be slashed on the hand at 2:32 during a scoring chance in front.

Brodeur made a big stop on Jovanovski at 3:58.

This will be the 10th straight Panthers game to be decided by one goal.

The Devils outshot the Panthers, 34-26.

THIRD PERIOD

The Devils evened the score, 2-2, when Parise scored his 10th goal of the season. Tallinder fired a shot wide of the net and Parise played the carom off the end boards to score from the bottom of the left circle at 7:40.

With six seconds left, Sykora missed an open net on a feed from Fayne.

The Devils were outshooting the Panthers, 33-22.

End of period: Devils 2, Panthers 2

SECOND PERIOD

Devils defensive pairings: Taormina and Foster; Salvador and Larsson. Tallinder and Fayne remain together.

Foster and Kovalchuk were impressive with one-timers on a power play after Ed Jovanovski was sent off for high-sticking Clarkson at 5:40.

Nevertheless, the Devils failed to score and then gave up their ninth short-handed goal of the season. Tallinder, approaching the blue line, was stripped of the puck by Versteeg for a breakaway.

Skating in alone on Brodeur, Versteeg scored his second of the game and 15th of the season. It was the fifth short-handed goal allowed by the Devils in their last nine games.

The Devils got one back at 8:25 when Elias scored his 10th goal. Kovalchuk centered a pass from the goal line to Parise as he dove to the net. Parise made a clever pass to Elias below the right circle for the goal which got the Devils back into the game.

With 6:22 left in the period, Kovalchuk almost knocked Panthers defensemen Keaton Ellerby into the Devils’ bench as he delivered a big hit.

Kovalchuk drilled Tomas Fleischmann into the boards with 1:15 left, which nearly turned into a brawl in the Panthers’ zone. Dmitry Kulikov and Mike Weaver received roughing minors for the Panthers whiel Kovalchuk and Parise got the same.

The Devils were outshooting the Panthers, 29-21.

End of period: Panthers 2, Devils 1

FIRST PERIOD

The Devils started the Petr Sykora-Patrik Elias-Dainius Zubrus line with Tallinder and Fayne on defense. Other lines: Zach Parise-Adam Henrique-Ilya Kovalchuk; Eric Boulton-Ryan Carter-David Clarkson; Mattias Tedenby-Tim Sestito-Janssen.

Janssen announced his return almost immediately, dropping his gloves to fight Krystofer Barch at 3:13. Both players landed punches in the lengthy bout, with Janssen dropping to his knees twice while throwing punches and taking them in return.

Tedenby’s pass gave Kovalchuk a chance at 6:02 but Theodore made the stop.

Parise’s shot at 11:31 handcuffed Theodore as it appeared to drop, but the Florida goalie made the save.

A glaring giveaway from Larsson led to a Florida goal at 15:10. Brodeur had just weathered a flurry of shots when Larsson controlled the puck in the right corner. For some reason the young blue liner back-handed a blind pass out from the corner onto the stick of Stephen Weiss in the right faceoff circle.

After faking Brodeur, Weiss dished off to Kris Versteeg for his 14th goal.

The Panthers outshot the Devils, 15-13.

End of period: Panthers 1, Devils 0

SUNRISE, Fla. — The last meeting between the Devils and Florida Panthers was on the minds of both teams.

Back on Nov. 21 at the BankAtlantic Center the Devils had a 3-0 lead but wound up losing the game, 4-3.

"I think we have to play 60 minutes. We got off to a good start and sat on it," said goalie Martin Brodeur, who played that game and was set to start tonight’s rematch.

"What’s tough with them is they have three good puck-moving defensemen. It’s more than their forwards. That’s a dimension maybe they didn’t have before."

It was a big game for the Panthers.

"We started that game well. We played well the first 7-8 minutes. Then all of a sudden the wave of Devils talent really came at us," coach Kevin Dineen recalled. "I think that was one of those games we really felt strongly that we could come back. Our team was confident and playing well.

"That was a real character builder for our team. It was certainly one of the games that sticks out so far this year on the positive side. We don’t want to play that formula too often where you get down by three and have to scratch and claw to get your way back. But it certainly makes for a quality matchup moving into tonight’s game."

Dineen’s squad has played well all season. They haven’t lost more than two games in a row in regulation time, but they are coming off a 6-1 loss to the Rangers at the Garden.

"A lot is going on. You get in the holiday season and people are thinking about things away from the rink. It will be good to get a focus here in our own building," Dineen said.

New York was a distraction.

"You catch a team coming off a road game and they played a good game in Buffalo and then came and spanked very good at home," Dineen said of the Rangers. "Sometimes you take your beating and you move on. I think there were a lot of things we picked up that have crept into our game over the last two weeks. It makes it a lot easier to address when you get a whooping like that.

"We were not very strong on the puck and they took advantage of us. We’ve always prideed ourselves on having a lot of speed. It seems like we were in the bus lane instead of in the far left. When a team is coming at you like that you like to respond with your own speed and we didn’t do that."

And yet he enjoyed the trip to New York.

"You walk away from it after losing as badly as we did in New York after really a great day and a half," Dineen reflected. "There is some balance in life and we really enjoyed everything that New York City has to offer around the holiday season. Then you end up with a pretty good tail-kicking there.

"There is some enthusiasm around here for Panther hockey and we want to continue that with our performance on the ice."

Jose Theodore was in goal against the Rangers, as he will be against the Devils.

"He’s the right guy for the job," Dineen said. “He’s played extremely well for us and given us a chance to win every night. He threw a stinker at us, like the rest of the crew, the other night. Now you rebound and come back."

Devils: Travis Zajac still on target for Friday return; Jacob Josefson 4-8 weeks away

By Rich Chere/

SUNRISE, Fla. — Devils coach Pete DeBoer said there was no reason to be alarmed that center Travis Zajac did not take part in today's optional morning skate.

Zajac is still on track for a return Friday night at home.

"Just a maintenance day. No red flags or anything," DeBoer said. "We're still looking at a return potentially on Friday. He's been pushing pretty hard lately and getting a little bit stiff so we backed him off for a day."

DeBoer said center Jacob Josefson, out with a fractured right clavicle, is still 4-8 weeks away from returning but is working out off ice. He is not yet skating.

"I think he's eight weeks from surgery now. I think it was a pretty significant injury. Not season-ending," the coach said. "I see him in the gym on a daily basis now. He's doing weights. He hasn't hit the ice yet. He's coming along. I'd guess he's 4-8 weeks away."

With Kurtis Foster making his Devils debut against the Panthers, Alex Urbom was scratched. Cam Janssen's return to the lineup meant that Nick Palmieri was a healthy scratch.

Foster traveled from Anaheim on Monday and the rest of the way from Texas today, getting up at 3:30 a.m. for a 5:45 a.m. flight to Florida.

"I've seen it before. A lot of times your first game with a new team is on adrenalin and it doesn't really factor in. It usually catches up to you on day two or three," DeBoer said. "We're not going to put too much on his plate tonight but obviously we're hoping for the best."

DeBoer is hoping for help on the power play.

"It's no secret that our power play has struggled from a numbers point of view and osme of that we feel has been a lack of a shot at the top to take some pressure off Kovy (Ilya Kovalchuk) on the one side and Patrik (Elias) on the other," DeBoer said. "This guy has made a living doing that and we're excited to have him here and work with him."

Foster said he hopes to play solid defensively as well as add some offense.

"That's not going to be an option," DeBoer said with a laugh. "And I don't think it will be an issue. Adam Oates has coached him before. This guy played for Jacques Lemaire for 3-4 years in Minnesota and Jacques spoke highly of him. I don't see that as an issue."

"DeBoer on facing the Panthers, who have a dynamic top line: "I'd like to think we're a couple of lines deep. Obviously right now Kovalchuk (Adam) Henrique and (Zach) Parise are really playing well. I think Elias, (Dainius) Zubrus and (Petr) Sykora have the potential and have done it in the past to be a really good line. We need multiple lines going. That's the key for us. It's not necessarily our top guys outperforming theirs."

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, the Devils' top five games-played leaders since Lou Lamoriello became GM in 1987-88 are Martin Brodeur (1,148), Ken Daneyko (1,148), Patrik Elias (990), Scott Stevens (956) and Scott Niedermayer (892).

New Devils defense man Kurtis Foster is expected to make his debut against the Panthers on Monday night.

"I didn't see it coming with the Devils but I definitely wasn't happy in Anaheim this year," said Foster, who has played only nine games for the Ducks this season. "I wasn't actively looking for a move but when I was called off the ice I figured something was up. When it was New Jersey I was pretty excited.

"We had a 1 p.m. practice yesterday and I got called off the ice 10 minutes into it. Bob Murray told me they were going to move me but he couldn't tell me where. He had to make sure everybody knew before I knew where. I was showered and ready to go, not really knowing where I was going. But I knew I was going somewhere. It's kind of weird feeling to be told your being moved but he doesn't tell you where. He did say it was a good situation for me and the best thing for my career going forward. When you have a GM telling you that you know it's a good thing."

He has a few connections to the Devils. He played with Ilya Kovalchuk in Atlanta, was coached by Jacques Lemaire in Minnesota and Adam Oates in Tampa Bay.

"When (Murray) told me it was the Devils I was pretty excited," Foster said. "I don't see the Devils as a lot. I don't know a lot of the players on the team. I played with Kovy before in Atlanta and I know Adam Oates from Tampa Bay. I know Jacques Lemaire is a big influence here and I had him for four years in Minnesota. I knew it was a good organization."

It was during his time in Minnesota that Foster suffered a broken left femur when he was checked into the boards by San Jose's Torrey Mitchell on Mar. 20, 2008. He missed the rest of that season and almost the entire 08-09 season, requiring surgery in which a metal rod was inserted into his left leg.

Over the injury, Foster signed with the Lightning as a free agent. The following year he couldn't turn down a two-year contract offer from the Edmonton Oilers on July 1, 2010. The deal pays him $1.8 million per season.

He was surprised to be traded by the Oilers to Anaheim for Andy Sutton on July 1 this past summer and never felt he was in the picture with former Ducks coach Randy Carlyle after he suffered complications from his leg surgery.

"I have a metal rod and two screws at the bottom and a screw at the top. There was a wire that went around the actual femur that was a twist tie against the bone," Foster said. "For some reason the day before camp I got inflammation. The wire had actually moved and was sticking into the muscle. One of the wires in my leg moved and was sticking into my quad. I had to have it cut out.

"So they just went in and clipped it right at the bone and I haven't had a problem since. Now it's clipped out and it won't happen again. I had the four-week recovery from the surgery but my leg feels good and I feel good. I'm just excited for tonight."

The problem was in getting playing time in Anaheim.

"I came in in a tough spot. I missed preseason, all of exhibition and all of training camp with the injury in my leg," he explained. "It got fixed, missed five weeks and kind of started behind the eight ball. Randy Carlyle is a pretty tough coach. If you start behind the eight ball you start from behind. It was a tough start for me.

"I felt fine when I got in the lineup but we kind of struggled. We had Lubomir Visnovsky and Cam Fowler playing a lot of offensive minutes. It was tough for me to get in. So I'm excited with the change. I think what I do can help this team."

The Devils got Foster and minor league goalie Timo Pielmeier from the Ducks for Mark Fraser, Rod Pelley and a seventh-round draft pick in 2012.

"Knowing what New Jersey is all about I want to try to play as solid defensively as I can. But my game is shooting the puck and creating as much offensively (as he can)," Foster said. "I know Kovy likes to play the left side on the power play and I like to play the right side, so hopefully it's a match that works out. I'll try to get him the puck as much as I can in a position where he can shoot. Make sure I get as many of my shots through, too. If I can generate a little bit of offense, help out the PP and play an all-around solid game, that's kind of what I'm hoping for."

He went over some things with Oates during the optional morning skate.

Why hasn't Foster stayed longer with one NHL team rather than moving around so much?

"Minnesota was my longest stint," he said. "I was four seasons there but I missed a whole season with my broken leg. I fell behind the eight-ball. When I came back I got in 10 games and they brought in a new GM and new coach and went in a different direction.

"That led me to Tampa, where I kind of revived my career a little bit with Adam, Rick Tocchet and Stammer and those guys. After that I just decided to go to Edmonton on a contract I couldn't really give up. I thought it was going to be a situation beneficial for me. At the end of the day it didn't work out the way I planned.

"Getting traded to the Ducks was a little surprising. I didn't see it coming. I don't know what they were looking for. I think they were looking for a guy who could step in and help out when needed."

He ma

Right winger Cam Jansen will return to the lineup after suffering a chest injury in Winnipeg Dec. 3.

"I'm very excited," Jansen said of getting back into the lineup.

Foster said: "It's been a long travel day last night and today. Hopefully I get some adrenalin going. I'm sure I'll be fine tonight."

Kurtis Foster joins Devils in time for optional morning skate

By Rich Chere

SUNRISE, Fla.  — Devils general manager Lou Lamoriello was waiting outside the BankAtlantic Center when newly acquired defenseman Kurtis Foster arrived directly from the airport.

Foster, carrying his Anaheim Ducks equipment bag, was ushered in by the GM and taken to coach Pete DeBoer's office. He will wear No. 2.

Devils assistant coach Adam Oates had Foster in Tampa Bay. In his one season with the Lightning, Foster scored 42 points (eight goals, 34 assists) in 71 games with 48 penalty minutes.

Under Jacques Lemaire in Minnesota 2005-06, Foster scored 10 goals with 18 assists in 58 games.

The entire Devils squad came to the arena for a team meeting, but most did not take part in the optional skate.

Foster was one of only three defensemen to skate, along with Matt Taormina and Alex Urbom.

Forwards who skated were Cam Janssen, Mattias Tedenby, Tim Sestito, Nick Palmieri and Ryan Carter.

Both goalies were on the ice.

Center Travis Zajac, recovering from Aug. 18 Achilles tendon surgery, is with the team and was at the arena early. He did not, however, take part in the optional skate.

Foster, 30, was acquired on Monday in a trade with the Ducks. The Devils also received minor league goalie Timo Pielmeier in exchange for defenseman Mark Fraser, forward Rod Pelley and a seventh-round draft pick in 2012.

The Panthers, who host the Devils Tuesday night, held a full morning skate. It will be Jose Theodore vs. Martin Brodeur.

Panthers goalie Scott Clemmensen will not face his former team. Clemmensen had meniscus surgery on his knee and missed 5-6 weeks and then a groin injury.

"I'm just getting back into it," he said. "I'm good, finally. This is the first time since training camp I feel good. Trying to get into it. It feels funny to have played only four or five games this close to Christmas."

A.

“I don’t know about revenge,” DeBoer said. “It was a good hockey game. I liked the way we played. I thought we were on our toes for the entire 60 minutes and got rewarded with two points. I thought it was a just result.”

They finished 2-0 on their brief trip to Florida this week.

“That was a big win for us,” Brodeur said. “A big road trip.”


Rich Chere/

SUNRISE, Fla. — Rookie defenseman Adam Larsson made another costly mistake tonight that left the Devils’ coaching staff scratching their heads. But that is the learning process for a young player expected to become a future NHL star.

What remains baffling is the team’s inclination for allowing short-handed goals. After giving up their league-leading ninth this season, the Devils had to overcome a two-goal deficit to pull out a 3-2 shootout victory over the Florida Panthers at BankAtlantic Center.

“Again we (gave up) a short-handed goal. I don’t know what’s going on with us,” said Ilya Kovalchuk. “But we never gave up.”

On the contrary. The last time they faced the Panthers the Devils blew a 3-0 lead in a 4-3 loss in South Florida. This time they redeemed themselves by overcoming a pair of Kris Versteeg goals.

The Devils are almost unbeatable in shootouts this season, raising their record to 7-1 as Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias scored goals and Martin Brodeur stopped Tomas Fleischmann and Versteeg.

“I stopped (Versteeg) in the shootout,” Brodeur said, “so I’m happy about that one. He’s good.”

The only serious concern came when defenseman Henrik Tallinder was slashed on the left wrist by Panthers blue liner Brian Campbell with 2:28 remaining in overtime. Tallinder was in immediate pain and complained that no penalty was called.

He left the arena with an ice bag on his wrist and said no X-rays had been taken. However, that could happen when the team is back home today.

A glaring giveaway by Larsson led to a Florida goal at 15:10 of the opening period. Brodeur had just weathered a flurry of shots when Larsson controlled the puck in the right corner. For some reason the young defenseman backhanded a blind pass out from the corner onto the stick of Stephen Weiss in the right faceoff circle.

After faking Brodeur, Weiss dished off to Versteeg for the goal.

“He’s a young kid. We knew he was going to make some mistakes,” coach Pete DeBoer said. “We have veteran guys make mistakes, too. Tally (Tallinder) made a mistake on the one. Kovy has made that mistake before, so we’re not going to point fingers. We worked through the mistakes we made and found a way to win.”

Tallinder’s mistake came when Versteeg stripped him of the puck while carrying it up ice on a Devils power play midway through the second period. Versteeg scored on a breakaway at 7:29.

It was the fifth short-handed goal the Devils have allowed in their last nine games.

“That (short-handed goal) was two defense,” DeBoer said of having Tallinder and Mark Fayne on the ice. “What do we go to next, three defensemen?”

Patrik Elias got one goal back 56 seconds later — his 10th — and the Devils trailed by one entering the third.

They evened the score when Zach Parise scored his 10th goal of the season. Tallinder fired a shot wide of the net and Parise played the carom off the end boards to beat goalie Jose Theodore from the bottom of the left circle at 7:40.

Elias, who scored the shootout goal that assured the victory, said the Devils had talked about blowing the lead last time against the Panthers.

“We wanted to get the win for Pete,” he said.

A little revenge?
By Rich Chere

SUNRISE, Fla. — The Devils are virtually unbeatable in shootouts.

After tonight's 3-2 victory over the Florida Panthers in which Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias scored in the shootout while Martin Brodeur stopped both shots he faced, the Devils are 7-1 this season.

"You've got great goaltending at one end, guys (Brodeur and Johan Hedberg) that excel in the shootout from a save perspective. And you've got fantastic skill at the other end with the first three guys we've shot with," coach Pete DeBoer said. "I think we've only once or twice gotten into the fourth shooter. Those guys have been money all year."

Kovalchuk scored first against Panthers goalie Jose Theodore. Zach Parise was stopped, but Brodeur closed the door on Tomas Fleischmann and Kris Versteeg.

That allowed Patrik Elias to end it by scoring.

"We have the guys who've always been pretty solid," Elias said.

Kovalchuk added: "We have some guys who can do it and we're confident in our goalies."

Newly-acquired defenseman Kurtis Foster sat back and watched.

"It's pretty nice when you have those three guys who can come over the boards," Foster said. "Kovy is pretty amazing. We all know why he's scored 50 goals in this league. Zach made a great shot. He's is so intense you can see how upset he is when he misses his shot. Then Patrik made a nice shot. It was nice we didn't have to wait for another save."

In his Devils debut Foster was paired on defense with Bryce Salvador in the first few minutes of the game, but was quickly put with Matt Taormina.

"I started with Sal. After one shift we got changed. I don't know if they didn't like that one shift or what," Foster said. "It was nice playing with Taor (Taormina). He's a little guy that skates really well and moves the puck well, so it definitely works with me."

"Parise was originally credited with an assist on the goal by Elias, but told the officials that he did not touch the puck. So Kovalchuk and Salvador got the assists."

The Devils captain is skilled enough to make a pass that clever.

"I'd love to take credit for it, but I was going for the one-timer and their guy got his stick on it," Parise confessed.

Devils Notes: Pelley, Frazier traded to Ducks for defenseman Foster

Tom Gulitti

The Devils acquired defenseman Kurtis Foster and goaltender Timo Pielmeier from Anaheim on Monday for seldom-used center Rod Pelley and defenseman Mark Fraser along with a 2012 seventh-round draft pick.

Devils GM Lou Lamoriello said Foster "probably" will join the team in time for tonight's game in Florida, but he did not know if he would play. Pielmeier, who has been playing for Elmira in the ECHL, will be assigned to the minors.

Foster, 30, had a goal and an assist in nine games with the Ducks. Lamoriello believes the 6-foot-5, 226-pound Carp, Ontario native can help the Devils' power play with his big, right-handed shot.

"He’s really a power-play specialist and his shot is what intrigues you," Lamoriello said.

Foster played under former Devils coach Jacques Lemaire in Minnesota and had a career season in 2009-10 with Tampa Bay, putting up eight goals and 34 assists in 71 games, when current Devils assistant Adam Oates was working for the Lightning.

After that, Foster signed a two-year, $3.6 million contract with Edmonton but was with the Oilers for only one season before being traded to Anaheim.

"He went through situations in Anaheim where there were power-play people ahead of him and in Edmonton it was a similar situation," Lamoriello said. "So, he hasn’t played that much this year. But we know enough about him."

Pelley and Fraser each passed through waivers twice this season. The Devils activated RW Cam Janssen (bruised sternum) from IR but held him out of Monday’s game to let him get in one more on-ice workout after the morning skate. To activate Janssen, they placed D Anton Volchenkov (hand) on IR. Lamoriello said Volchenkov should be back by the end of the week.

Bergen Record LOADED: 12.14.2011
Devils notes:

Staff

Foster debuts
Defenseman Kurtis Foster played 21:53, including nearly six minutes on the power play, and had four shots on goal in his Devils’ debut after being acquired from Anaheim on Monday in a trade that sent center Rod Pelley and defenseman Mark Fraser to the Ducks.
Foster, 30, had a long journey from Anaheim through Dallas on Monday night to get to BankAtlantic Center in time for the Devils’ optional morning skate Tuesday, but was "pretty excited" about the trade and wanted to get in the lineup right away.
"I think by the end of the OT I was taking some short shifts, but I felt pretty good out there," Foster said. "I think the adrenaline kept me going all night."

Zajac on Friday?
Although center Travis Zajac did not skate Tuesday morning for what Pete DeBoer called "just a maintenance day," the Devils coach said it is possible Zajac will make his season debut Friday against Dallas.
Zajac is recovering from Aug. 18 surgery to repair a torn left Achilles’ tendon.
"No red flags or anything," DeBoer said. "We’re still looking at a return potentially on Friday and it was just he’s been pushing pretty hard lately and getting a little bit stiff, so we just backed him off for a day."
DeBoer said center Jacob Josefson is still "probably four to eight weeks away" from returning from a fractured right clavicle.
Josefson was injured Oct. 21 against San Jose when he slid right-shoulder-first into the end boards. He had surgery the next day to help set the bone, which was broken in two places.

Bergen Record LOADED: 12.14.2011
Zach attack keys Devils’ Fla. sweep

By MARK EVerson

SUNRISE, Fla. — These two signaled Zach is back.

Devils captain Zach Parise had been finding his way after missing most of last season to knee surgery. He found it on this two-game, two-night, two-victory trip to the Sunshine State.

Parise again looked like the player who was the first Devil to notch four straight 30-goal and back-to-back 80-point seasons, their leading point-getter three consecutive campaigns before knee surgery KO’d him last year.

Parise is hitting his stride just as usual partner Travis Zajac is ready to start his season, probably Friday, after Achilles tendon surgery. The Devils, winners of 4 of 5 since a four-game skid, could become formidable again.

Parise had a goal and an assist in the Devils’ 3-2 shootout victory over the Panthers here last night, following a 1-2-3 performance in their 5-4 triumph in Tampa Monday, his first three-point game since April 10, 2010.

The Devils’ captain had been warming up, with seven points in seven games before compiling five during this Florida pair. But more than the scoring figures, he was again a buzzsaw in the offensive zone, giving foes no time to make plays. He was stopped in the shootout, but he was a major reason the Devils gained anything after a two-goal deficit.

“Outstanding. Really finding his form. He was a dominant guy in both games,” said coach Pete DeBoer, downplaying the idea of getting any personal revenge on the team that fired him in April.

Last night, Martin Brodeur was again perfect in the shootout, lifting New Jersey’s breakaway contest record to 7-1 this season, 9-1 after regulation. Ilya Kovalchuk and Patrik Elias ensured Parise’s miss didn’t matter.

“Those guys have been money all year,” DeBoer said.

The Devils have made a ritual of either overcome deficits or blowing leads. Last night was the former. Prize draftee Adam Larsson committed a brutal giveaway to Stephen Weiss, who handed right to Kris Versteeg for an open net 15:10 into play.

Freshly arrived defenseman Kurtis Foster made his Devils debut and moved straight onto the point on the first power play, adding an impressive shot. Henrik Tallinder, however, coughed up New Jersey’s NHL-worst ninth short-hander of the season, pickpocketed by Versteeg for a breakaway goal at 7:29 of the second, his 15th.

Patrik Elias started the comeback with his second goal in 12 games to halve New Jersey’s deficit 56 seconds later. Ilya Kovalchuk freed a puck in the left corner and centered to the circle, where Parise knocked it right, giving Elias an open side for his 10th.

“Lucky bounce,” Elias said.

Tallinder atoned for his earlier error by assisting on Parise’s tying goal at 7:40 of the third. Tallinder’s blue-line shot caromed off the end boards and Parise was charging from the left side to match Elias for the team lead with his 10th.

Zajac did not skate in yesterday’s morning workout, but DeBoer said the team’s top center had not suffered a setback in his comeback from Achilles tendon surgery. “Just maintenance. No red flags,” DeBoer said. “We’re still looking at his return potentially Friday [vs Dallas]. He’s been pushing pretty hard and he’s getting a little stiff.”

Foster plans to make Devils debut tonight

By MARK EVerson

More SUNRISE, Fla. — Kurtis Foster didn’t know which team he was joining when he left Ducks practice in California on Monday, and after finding out, had to layover in Dallas for a 5:45 a.m. flight here. Yet the just-acquired defenseman still planned to make his Devils debut against the Panthers on Tuesday night.

“It’s been a long travel day and last night, but once I get the adrenaline going, I’m sure I’ll be fine,” Foster said after practicing with a few new teammates during a very optional workout here this morning.

“We had a 1 o’clock practice yesterday, and I got called off the ice about 10 minutes in,” Foster said. “[Ducks GM] Bob Murray told me they were going to move me, but couldn’t tell me where yet. So I was showered and ready to go, not really knowing where. As I drove home, he gave me a call and told me ‘The Devils.’

“I talked to Lou [Lamoriello], then I got home, had a couple hours to pack and was on a flight to Dallas, got in around 10:30 p.m. Tried to get some sleep, around midnight, and was up at 3:30 a.m. to catch a 5:45 a.m. flight and got here right before I came to the rink.”

Foster, 30, was acquired by the Devils from the Ducks on Monday with farmhand goalie Timo Pielmeier of Germany for seldom-used defenseman Mark Fraser, center Rod Pelley and a seventh-round pick.

Devils coach Pete DeBoer left the practice rink Tuesday morning before confirming Foster’s plan to be in the lineup.

The 6-5 defenseman was traded to the Ducks on July 1 by Edmonton for Andy Sutton, but missed training camp and the start of the season when wire wrapped around a rod in his femur unraveled and penetrated his quad muscles, causing inflammation and pain, requiring surgery.

“I missed all of exhibition and training camp because of my leg. I missed five weeks and was kind of behind the 8-ball,” Foster said. “Randy Carlyle is a pretty tough coach to start from behind the 8-ball with.”

Foster was a second-round pick by Calgary in 2000, and began his career with Atlanta before making his mark under Jacques Lemaire in Minnesota. He suffered a broken leg chasing down an icing in 2008, and it cost him nearly a year of play, and now, more.

Lamoriello said he acquired Foster for his shot and power-play work.

“My game shooting the puck and creating as much offense as possible,” Foster said.

It appeared Foster would take the lineup spot of either Matt Taormina or Alexander Urbom after both played in Monday night’s 5-4 victory at Tampa Bay.

Canadiens bounce back to beat Islanders, 5-3

AP

More MONTREAL — Petteri Nokelainen scored with 6:15 remaining as the Montreal Canadiens recovered after giving up a two-goal lead in the third period, beating the New York Islanders 5-3 Tuesday night.

Nokelainen drove a slap shot past Al Montoya from the right point for the tiebreaking goal moments after Montreal squandered a 3-1 advantage. Hal Gill added an empty-netter in the final minute for his first goal of the season.

Andrei Kostitsyn and Mathieu Darche gave the Canadiens a 2-1 lead in the first period. Erik Cole extended the margin to two goals 31 seconds into the third when he scored on a power play.

Carey Price made 29 saves for the Canadiens, who won for just the fifth time in 13 home games to end a four-game skid at the Bell Centre (0-1-3).

Matt Moulson scored in the first period for the Islanders and they tied it in the third on goals by Josh Bailey and John Tavares.

Bailey drew the Islanders to 3-2 when he beat Carey Price with a back hand at 5:18. Tavares pushed home a loose puck in the crease with about 8 1/2 minutes left for his 10th goal.

Moulson gave New York a 1-0 lead with his team-leading 15th goal 7:50 into the game. Al Montoya stopped 24 shots for New York, which has lost three straight (0-2-1).

Newly-acquired defenseman Tomas Kaberle got his third point in two games with Montreal with an assist on Kostitsyn's goal, which tied the score 1-1 at 9:15 of the first.

Darche put the Canadiens ahead at 13:28 when he beat Montoya with a long slap shot from above the right faceoff circle.

Cole made it 3-1 when he blasted David Desharnais' pass between the Islanders goalie's pads from the goalmouth.

Former Islanders defenseman Chris Campoli returned to the Canadiens' lineup for the first time since Montreal's first game of the season.

Montreal's Travis Moen left the game after he was struck on the foot by a shot in the first. He did not return.

NOTES: The Islanders were without RW Nino Niederreiter, who suffered a concussion Saturday on a hit by Dallas' Mark Fistric. Though no penalty was called on the play, Fistric was suspended for three games by NHL disciplinarian Brendan Shanahan for leaving his feet to deliver his check. ... Canadiens D Alexei Emelin was left out of the lineup for the first time in 15 games.

Habs snuff out Islanders’ comeback

Staff

MONTREAL — Al Montoya stopped 24 shots, but it was not enough as the Islanders’ winless streak hit three games.

“They battled and that’s what you look for,” coach Jack Capuano said after his team’s 5-3 loss to the Canadiens. “We’re down by two goals and we kept coming, we didn’t quit. Those guys aren’t going to quit. There’s no excuses for losing and sometimes you get sick and tired of hearing it but it was a game that I thought we at least come out with a point for sure.”

Matt Moulson scored in the first period for the Isles and they tied it in the third on goals by Josh Bailey and John Tavares. But Petteri Nokelainen scored with 6:15 remaining as the Habs recovered after giving up a two-goal lead.

“Well, we tried to lose it there at the end,” said Carey Price, who made 29 saves. “We’ve got to make it the hard way but at least we got it done.”

Nokelainen drove a slap shot past Montoya from the right point for the tie-breaking goal moments after Montreal squandered a 3-1 advantage.

“We got caught out there a little bit tired and we just lost coverage there,” said Isles forward Brian Rolston.

Hal Gill added an empty-netter in the final minute for his first goal of the season. Andrei Kostitsyn and Mathieu Darche gave Montreal a 2-1 lead in the first period. Erik Cole extended the margin to two goals 31 seconds into the third when he scored on a power play.

Bailey drew the Islanders to 3-2 when he beat Carey Price with a back hand at 5:18. Tavares pushed home a loose puck in the crease with about 8 1/2 minutes left for his 10th goal.

“You have to respect teams and, like the Islanders tonight, they have good skills,” Nokelainen said. “If you give them room they will score.”

Rough night for Montoya in Isles' 5-3 loss

by ARTHUR STAPLE

MONTREAL -- Al Montoya has grabbed a few extra points for the Islanders of late. Tuesday night, he gave at least one back.

The Islanders' goaltender gave up three bad goals, including the winner to break a tie with 6:15 to play, in a 5-3 loss to the Canadiens at the Bell Centre.

After the Islanders scored twice in the third to erase a 3-1 deficit, former Islanders first-round pick Petteri Nokelainen scored on a 50-foot slap shot past Montoya to lose a very winnable game on the road.

Montoya said he was screened by Steve Staio on the shot, but Jack Capuano didn't seem too interested in that explanation. "I'm not going to comment on that," Capuano said of his goaltender. "You guys watched the game."

Montoya (24 saves) sandwiched a brilliant second period around a rough first and the bad goal in the third.

The Isles fell behind 3-1 just 31 seconds into the third when Michael Grabner overcommitted to the left point on a Canadiens power play and the confusion left David Desharnais open to feed Erik Cole for a redirect.

"I made a lot of mistakes, I had a bad night," Grabner said. "But we battled back."

The revival started with Josh Bailey's pretty, patient backhand to beat Carey Price at 5:18 off two nice assists by Brian Rolston and Mike Mottau. There were a handful of chances to tie in the next five minutes, including three whacks from in close by Frans Nielsen as the Canadiens' defense turned jittery.

Another shift around the Canadiens' net resulted in John Tavares jamming home his 10th of the season with 8:32 to play. The Islanders were humming, playing the same strong game they did at the start of the night.

"We have to find a way to win that game," said Matt Moulson, who scored his 15th at 7:50 of the first after a terrible giveaway by the Canadiens' P.K. Subban. "When we got back to chipping the puck and going on the forecheck, we had some success."

Staked to the first-period lead, Montoya gave up a couple he'd like back. Andrei Kostitsyn scored off a sharp angle with Montoya deep in his net to tie it at 9:15. At 13:28, Montreal forward Mathieu Darche took an end-of-shift, 55-foot slap shot that squeezed through Montoya for a 2-1 Canadiens lead.

"That's one I should have stopped, no excuses," Montoya said. "I liked the way I responded after that."

He did have a brilliant second period, when the Isles took three minors. Montoya robbed Cole on the power play from point-blank range, then got a toe on Lars Eller's break-in attempt, two of 15 second-period stops.

But Nokelainen's blast -- his second of the season and 19th career goal in 218 games -- proved to be the killer.

"A great shot off the post," Montoya said. "I had no eyes on it."

Montoya ramped up his game at just the right time for the Isles, when both Evgeni Nabokov and Rick DiPietro were out with groin injuries. But Montoya has allowed 10 goals in the last two games and, with Nabokov back after a month on injured reserve, Montoya may not have such a light grip on the top spot.

"We owe him a lot more than he owes us at this point," Bailey said. "He's been stellar all year. He still gave us a chance to win this one, and we've got to find a way."

NY Rangers offense stalls as Henrik Lundqvist on short end of 1-0 loss to Dallas Stars

By Pat Leonard

Henrik Lundqvist kept Tuesday night's game scoreless through 55 uneventful minutes, but with the Rangers offense sputtering, a disappointing loss remained just one mistake or bad bounce away.

That came when defenseman Jeff Woywitka cleared the puck into the neutral zone but off the boards and onto the stick of Stars forward Brendan Morrow in the third period. He fed Mike Ribeiro, who sent it back across in front to defenseman Trevor Daley. And Daley juked and beat Lundqvist five-hole with 4:59 remaining.

The Rangers then squandered their fourth power play of the game, and fell to Dallas, 1-0, ending a two-game winning streak before they take a road trip for games at St. Louis on Thursday and Phoenix on Saturday.

Stars goaltender Richard Bachman got his first-ever NHL shutout in his third-ever appearance in an NHL game and only his second pro start. The 24-year-old was recalled from the AHL on Nov. 27 after the Stars' number one goalie Kari Lehtonen suffered a groin injury.

Bachman made 26 saves in a win over the Kings on Saturday in his first career start, earning Tuesday night's against the Rangers, in which he made 34 stops.

Lundqvist (27 saves) was sharp, but The King gave the Rangers a scare when he stayed down on the ice after blocking a high slap shot in the second period.

Dallas defenseman Sheldon Souray's slapper from the point appeared to hit Lundqvist in his left collarbone, just below his mask and above his left shoulder pad. Trainer Jim Ramsay rushed to the net to attend to Lundqvist, but eventually the goaltender rose to his feet and finished the game.

Later that period, Ryan McDonagh almost scored the Blueshirts' fourth shorthanded goal in their last four games, but Bachman got his glove out to stop the one-timer off a pass from Brandon Prust on the 2-on-1.

Brad Richards ended up pointless against his former team.

Richards won a Stanley Cup with Tampa Bay in 2004 but was eventually dealt to Dallas in Feb. 2008. He played the next three seasons with the Stars, tying a career high with 91 points in the 2009-10 season. But when his contract was up this past offseason, he took his talents to the Big Apple, signing a nine-year, $60 million deal.

John Tortorella walked out of the visitors' locker room in Buffalo on Saturday, turned and saw HBO's cameras.

"There's nowhere to go," the Rangers coach said, shaking his head, and he whipped back through the door.

For four weeks beginning Wednesday at 10 p.m., fans will be able to follow Tortorella through that door on HBO's "24/7 Flyers/Rangers: Road to the Winter Classic," the second year the network will run the show.

The big question is, how much raw behind-the-scenes Torts will viewers get to see, considering he and the Rangers run a tight ship?

"There's a few zingers out there," said Brad Richards, who won a Stanley Cup in Tampa Bay under Tortorella before reuniting with him on the Rangers this offseason. "But overall, he's been a little calmer than he used to be. Obviously winning helps, too."

Asked if he would "alter a word that you say" with the cameras rolling, Tortorella said: "You know what? No. But it will be tough to keep up with Bruce Boudreau, who last year as coach of the Washington Capitals dropped 29 f-bombs in the first episode alone, the first coming just 1:11 in. (Don't worry, we'll keep a Torts curse counter going).

"I don't want you to think it's just a "---damn free-for-all in that locker room every night, screaming and yelling and all that," Tortorella said Sunday, "because that's not what happens."

The reality is, Torts could be on his best behavior, but he'll likely be a big part of the show. So for those who plan to tune in, here is the Daily News' Tortorella Translator to help you navigate the coach's unique turns of phrase:

"AGAIN": Tortorella's way of emphasizing a point or reminding you that he's said it before, even if he has never said it before.

"THE PROCESS": A player's physical/mental maturity and growth as a hockey player and teammate, structured and tailored to a specific system or style of play.

"WE SUCKED FROM HEAD TO TOE": What Torts thought of his team's 2-0 loss in Edmonton on Oct. 22 - his best postgame rant of the season to date.

"AWAY FROM THE PUCK" vs. "OFF THE ICE": The former describes how a player positions himself, thinks and acts when he does not control the puck; the latter comes up when Tortorella describes a player as a person, not just a hockey talent.

AVERY ALL A-Wonder if we'll see any follow-up to this Twitter exchange between Sean Avery and 19-year-old model Kate Upton, who is also a Rangers fan and attended the Blueshirts' game against the Penguins on Nov. 29:

Avery on Nov. 30, from @imseanavery: "@KateUpton since u couldn't stop looking @HLundqvist30 last night now u can follow him.......#sorryhesmarried"

Upton on Dec. 1, from @kateupton: "Weren't you supposed to be focusing on a game?...at least we all agree I wasn't staring at you."

NY Rangers’ Sean Avery pesters model Kate Upton on Forward pokes bombshell about staring at star goalie

By Pat Leonard

We wonder if we’ll see any follow-up to this Twitter exchange.

New York Rangers forward Sean Avery - who goes by the handle @imseanavery on the social networking site - is a pest for NHL opponents and now, it seems for 19-year old bombshell models.

Well, one bombshell model to be specific: Kate Upton.

Upton, who is a Rangers fan and attended the Blueshirts’ game against the Penguins on Nov. 29, received this message from Avery on Nov. 30:

"@KateUpton since u couldn't stop looking @HLundqvist30 last night now u can follow him.......#sorryhesmarried."

The fiesty Sports Illustrated swimsuit model, whose homemade video doing the "Dougie" at a Clippers game went viral in April, didn't take Avery's barb silently.

On Dec. 1, she wrote back "Weren't you supposed to be focusing on a game?...at least we all agree I wasn't staring at you."

Slam!

Daley's late goal gives Stars 1-0 win over Rangers

Slap Shots Blog

More Trevor Daley broke up a scoreless game with 4:59 left, Richard Bachman made 34 saves to win his second straight start, and the Dallas Stars beat the Rangers 1-0 on Tuesday night.

It appeared neither team would be able to break through, as few scoring chances were generated during the slogfest that included multiple whistles for icing and offsides.

But Daley finally found the net, finishing off a give-and-go play with Mike Ribeiro in the closing minutes. That was enough to give Bachman the win in his second career start. He also beat Los Angeles 2-1 on Sunday at the start of Dallas' five-game trip.

Paul J. Bereswill for The New Yo

Henrik Lundqvist lays on the ice after the puck hits him under his mask during the second period.

Henrik Lundqvist was the hard-luck loser despite making 27 saves and shaking off a second-period injury. The Rangers lost for only the third time in 10 games (7-2-1).

Rangers come up empty in snore-fest

By LARRY BROOKS

The glass was half-full with thanks that Henrik Lundqvist took the full force of Sheldon Souray’s second-period blast from the top of the left circle on the left shoulder and not his left collarbone, and thus was merely sore — easy for anyone else to say — instead of suffering a fracture on the shot.

The glass however was half-empty with the zero the Rangers put on the scoreboard in last night’s 1-0 defeat to Dallas at the Garden in a game essentially devoid of emotion, artistry and entertainment value.

“There was not a whole hell of a lot of hate out there,” coach John Tortorella said after the match in which Trevor Daley broke through at 15:01 of the third to end the soporific scoreless deadlock in which neither team was able to generate a semblance of sustained pressure.

The Rangers were undone as much by their own inability to avoid unforced errors as they were by the Stars’ persistence in clogging the middle that accounted for little time and less space through the neutral zone. Unable to create a rush game, the Blueshirts had little more success on the forecheck, unable to generate an uptempo attack.

And when they were able to create a chance against an impressive 24-year-old rookie goaltender Richard Bachman, who has allowed one goal in 140 minutes in the last week over his first three NHL appearances this season, there were no second chances.

“Mike didn’t hit me in the head,” said The King, who went down and was attended to on the ice by medical trainer Jim Ramsay. “I knew it was going to be hard, and when it hit me I first thought it was my collarbone, but then after 20 or 30 seconds I could feel it was my shoulder.

“I’m just glad it didn’t hit me in the head,” said The King, who went down and was attended to on the ice by medical trainer Jim Ramsay. “I knew it was going to be hard, and when it hit me I first thought it was my collarbone, but then after 20 or 30 seconds I could feel it was my shoulder.

“It’s sore now, and I know it’s going to be tight [today], but it won’t be that bad to keep me from playing [tomorrow in St. Louis].”

Just about every Ranger seemed a half-step or a half-thought behind. Thus, there was a succession of off-side infractions and icings. The power play, which had been 10-for-37 over the previous nine games, was stagnant and toothless, failing on four advantages.

Pucks were given away, including the one sent into the neutral zone by Jeff Woywitka that led to the rush that culminated in Daley’s winner off a nice zig-zag play, the most creative of the night by either side.

Lundqvist was not to blame for either the goal or the sleepy nature of the match. The Stars never pressed the issue. The Rangers couldn’t when they tried, though they had a tad more success in getting the puck in deep in the third.

“You could tell whoever blinked first [was going to be in trouble],” Tortorella said. “We blinked.”

The Rangers thus joined the announced crowd of 18,200 fans in the stands who were blinking all night just so they could keep their eyes open.

Hagelin's speed impresses Rangers coach

By LARRY BROOKS

Back in the '70's when Montreal had Yvan Cournoyer in the lineup, the Canadiens had a play where they'd flip the puck out of either their own or the neutral zone and let the winger nicknamed "The Roadrunner" use his unparalleled speed to chase it down and thus create scoring opportunities off the rush. Now that the Rangers have their own uniquely gifted skater in left winger Carl Hagelin, the Blueshirts are developing a similar approach in seeking to exploit the 23-year-old Swedish born rookie's world-class speed.

"Hags is so fast straightforward, his first couple of strides are probably the quickest I've seen, so that if he sees we have control of the puck, he should just go," John Mitchell, who has played on Hagelin's line both with the AHL Whale and since their Thanksgiving recall to the Rangers, said before last night's 1-0 Garden defeat to the Stars.

"Even if the puck goes all the way down to end, all he has to be is even with the defense when he starts to go in order to win the race. We know his speed is a weapon that we can use as an edge. Haggy reads the play very well; he knows when to go and we know when he's going."

Coach John Tortorella said Hagelin is likely the fastest player he's ever coached, noting Tampa Bay winger's Martin St. Louis "quickness," but acknowledging the Ranger freshman for "his top-end speed."

"We don't sit down as a coaching staff and so much as make plays for him, but there are definitely situations where it's more advantageous for him not to have the puck so that we can chip it into areas where he can chase it down," the coach said. "We want to play a tempo game, a forecheck game and Hags adds to that.

"What he is with his legs is the way we want to play. He's a really good fit."

Hagelin's speed in pursuit of a headman pass up left wing created last night's most interesting play. Chasing the puck in the left circle as Dallas goaltender Richard Bachman left his net to clear it, the Blueshirts' left wing turned his back and came to a stop in order to avoid a head-on collision.

Regardless, after slight contact on which the netminder fell back, Hagelin was called for charging by referee Ian Walsh in as comically an incorrect call as possible.

"No way do I blame him for hitting me," Bachman said after registering his first career shutout in his second NHL start. "We both got to the puck at just about the same time, and that's what happens."

It also happens that Tortorella, irate after the call, told Hagelin upon his return to the bench, "to do it again.

"The goalie charged him," the coach said. "I told Hags to do it again, to go after the puck because that's his job."

"It should have been a non-call. I think sometimes they think they have to call something."

Lindy Ruff could not be reached for comment.

Goaltenders beware, because Hagelin will continue to fly down the wing. The Rangers scored their fourth goal in their 6-1 victory over the Panthers on Sunday after center Brian Boyle's chip off the defensive-zone right wall was collected by Hagelin, whose rush led to a jam attempt by Mitchell before Steve Eminger pounded home the rebound.

"I tried to make that play the night before in Buffalo, too," Boyle said. "We know that when he's going, to just put it in an area for him to track it down."

"It's a situation that the more we play together, the better we know each other and can read off each other, but it's definitely something we've talked about as a line."

Hagelin, who scored twice in Saturday's 4-1 victory, including a shorthanded goal off a left wing rush, had six points (3-3) with a plus-seven rating in nine games prior to last night's match.

The rookie, who is the Rangers' fastest straightaway skater since Gene Carr wore the Blueshirt three decades ago, said that while he looks to exploit his speed on those type of "area plays," it's critical he not turn up ice too soon.

"I can't take off if I'm not sure we have control," said Hagelin. "Last game, I knew Brian was going to get it out, so that's when I went."

"It's not something we can do all the time, but when we have control, I make eye contact with my linemates or the defense and then I can release. As long as we have possession, it's a good play because I can win the race."

Or as they said back when Cournoyer was terrorizing the opposition throughout a 428-goal Hall of Fame career: "Beep-beep."

Michael Rupp, who has been sidelined since Oct. 24 with a torn ACL for which he underwent surgery on Nov. 9, said that he must test the his left knee more rigorously in practice before he knows whether he is close to a return.

"I need to find a way to really test it," said Rupp, who will accompany the club on its trip to St. Louis and Phoenix on which it departs today. "I've been doing kind of rolling starts, and even the first couple of times I was doing that, the knee would blow up, but I have to do stops-and-starts to know whether I can play."

"If it doesn't respond properly to that, then I may have to take longer. But if it does, I think I'll be fine."

There's an outside chance that Rupp could play against the Coyotes on Saturday night on the trip that begins with a match against the Blues tomorrow night.

Marc Staal joined the team for yesterday's morning skate as did Wojtek Wolski, rehabbing from Nov. 7 sports hernia surgery. Both will accompany the club on the trip, though neither is close to returning. ... Michael Sauer, concussed on Dec. 5, has not been around the team since then and will not be on the trip. There is no ETA regarding the defense's return.

Tortorella moved Brandon Dubinsky up from the fourth line to skate on the left with Brad Richards and Ryan Callahan beginning with the shift at 14:02 of the second and kept him there for the duration. Ruslan Fedotenko, who opened in that spot, got just 2:32 on three shifts in the third period.

Rangers blanked by Stars' rookie goalie

By ZACH SCHONBRUN.

After lighting up the scoreboard in their last two games, the Rangers had reason to expect continuing offensive success against Dallas last night.

They were facing goalie Richard Bachman, whose NHL experience spanned all of three games.

But there was Bachman at the end, stopping everything the Rangers threw at him. Then a goal by the Stars' Trevor Daley at 15:01 of the third period was enough to beat the Rangers, 1-0, at Madison Square Garden.

"I don't know who he is," Rangers coach John Tortorella said of Bachman, "but he's played well for them."

Bachman, who saved 26 of 27 shots in his first career start on Saturday, stymied the Rangers with 34 saves and kept Dallas in the game long enough for Daley's shot to squirt under Henrik Lundqvist.

"I got in position and he kind of went side-to-side a couple of times and then finally got it between my pads there," said Lundqvist, who made 27 saves. "It's frustrating not to come up with any points in this game."

After three games in four days, the Rangers were far from as crisp as they were in Sunday's 6-1 win over Florida. The game began slowly, with both teams seemingly feeling each other out for most of the first period. They totaled only seven shots in the first 12 minutes.

The Stars came into the game 30th in the league in total offense, having scored just 13 goals in their last eight games. But the Rangers could not find the right combination against Bachman, who is replacing the injured Kari Lehtonen.

Bachman is only 5-10 and 175 pounds, which is undersized for a goaltender these days, but he smothered the net. He was rarely forced into any incredible saves, but consistently made the routine ones. When asked afterward if the game was the highlight of his young career, Bachman agreed.

"Overall, I think that's No. 1 right now," the 24-year-old said. "It was a lot of fun."

Lundqvist had a scare midway through the second period when a blast from Dallas' Sheldon Souray caught him in a tender spot by the left shoulder. It sent the goalie sprawling, but after trainer Jim Ramsay came out to check on him he stayed in the game.

"I got lucky," Lundqvist said. "At first I thought it was the collarbone. It felt like the whole shoulder was a couple feet behind me."

The defensive stalemate puzzled Tortorella, who credited Dallas' defense and blamed some missed opportunities. Center Brad Richards, facing his former team for the first time, said the Rangers didn't get in close enough to capitalize on rebounds.

"We had pressure, we had chances," winger Ryan Callahan said. "It's just a matter of doing that consistently and I don't think we did that tonight."

Notes & quotes: Tortorella said injured forward Mike Rupp (left knee surgery) has been cleared for contact and soon could return to the lineup for the first time since Oct. 24. But injured defensemen Mike Sauer and Marc Staal (concussions) remain out indefinitely. . . . Winger Sean Avery was a healthy scratch for the second straight game.

Bergen Record LOADED: 12.14.2011
Richards: Coming to Rangers was written in the Stars

NorthJersey.com

Brad Richards never wanted to leave Tampa Bay and was stung when the Lightning traded him to Dallas. That wasn’t the case, though, this off-season, as he made it clear he would not re-sign with the Stars, even if he called leaving his teammates “tough.”

“It just didn’t work out,” Richards said. “It was time we start over.”

Richards faces the Stars, who visit Madison Square Garden tonight, for the first time since signing a nine-year, $60 million deal that almost ensures he will retire a Ranger.

For Richards, the Rangers provided a stability he could not achieve in Dallas.

“We were not in the playoffs for three straight years, and we were not spending the money that six, seven, eight teams are in a tough Western Conference,” Richards said. “I wanted that stability. It’s nobody’s fault.”

Tom Hicks, the Stars’ former owner, began experiencing financial troubles shortly after the Stars acquired Richards from the Lightning – where he won a Stanley Cup with current Rangers coach John Tortorella in 2004 – on Feb. 26, 2008.

In actuality, Richards escaped the Lightning’s tumultuous times under bickering former co-owners Oren Koules and Len Barrie, who forced then-Lightning general manager Jay Feaster into dealing Richards shortly after purchasing Tampa Bay.

The Rangers just won at Tampa Bay, 4-2, on Dec. 3, in a victory Richards admitted was special after he lost in his two trips back with the Stars.

The Stars reached the Western Conference finals in 2008 after acquiring Richards but did not reach the playoffs again during his time in Dallas.

Hicks reportedly kept the Stars’ payroll nearly $11 million below the salary cap. The league eventually took over managing the club until it could be sold at auction.
Rangers blanked by Stars’ rookie goalie

By ZACH SCHONBRUN.

After lighting up the scoreboard in the last two games, the Rangers had reason to expect more offensive success against Dallas Stars rookie goalie Richard Bachman.

But Bachman -- whose NHL experience spanned all of three games coming in -- calmly withstood the test. And a late goal by the Stars’ Trevor Daley was enough to beat the Rangers, 1-0, Tuesday at Madison Square Garden.

The loss ended the Rangers’ two-game run, but they are still 6-3-1 in their last 10 games. Nonetheless, it wasn't quite the showing against a beatable Dallas team that the Rangers were expecting.

Daley’s shot squirted under Rangers goalie Henrik Lundqvist with just under five minutes remaining in the game, ending a surprising defensive stalemate. The Rangers had scored 10 goals in their last two games. Bachman made 34 saves while Lundqvist stopped 28 of 29 shots.

The Rangers weren't nearly as crisp as they were in Sunday's 6-1 win over Florida. The game began slowly, with both teams seemingly feeling each other out for most of the first period. They totaled just seven shots in the first 12 minutes.

The Rangers had a power-play opportunity after a hooking penalty on Tom Wandell early in the second, but didn’t convert it after two missed shots by Brad Richards. The defense also stood tough for two Dallas power-play opportunities; the Rangers have killed off 16 consecutive penalties.

The Stars came into the game 30th in the league in total offense, having scored only 13 goals in their last eight games. But the Rangers could not find the answer against Bachman, making just his second career start Tuesday in place of injured Kari Lehtonen.

Bachman is just 5-10 and 175 pounds -- undersized for a goaltender these days -- but has so far been a pleasant surprise for Dallas. In his first start Saturday, he saved 26 of 27 shots.

Tuesday, he was never forced to make any incredible saves but consistently made the routine ones.

Lundqvist continued his stretch of excellent play even after a scare midway through the second period, when a blast from Dallas’ Sheldon Souray caught Lundqvist in a tender spot by the left shoulder. It sent the goalie sprawling forward, but after trainer Jim Ramsay came out to check on him, he stayed in the game.

The Rangers’ defense continued to play shorthanded without Mark Staal and Mike Sauer, both out indefinitely with concussions. In their absence, Steve Eminger, Michael Del Zotto and Anton Stralman have had significant roles.

But Jeff Woywitka’s failed clear late in the third period resulted in Dallas’ best goal-scoring chance. And Daley took advantage.

Notes & quotes: Coach John Tortorella said injured forward Mike Rupp (left knee surgery) has been cleared for contact and could soon return to the lineup for the first time since Oct. 24 . . . Sauer remains out indefinitely and will not be making the road trip this week . . . Staal and forward Wojtek Wolski (sports hernia surgery) skated with their teammates Tuesday morning. There is still no timetable for Staal’s return . . . Winger Sean Avery was a healthy scratch for the second straight game.
NHL players right to check their heads

Gregg Krupa

Detroit — A half hour after absorbing an unexpected, whip-lashing hit from a Sabres player, Justin Abdelkader walked around the Red Wings dressing room.

Despite the aches and bruises routine after an NHL game, he was clear-eyed and ready for action, again.

"I'm fine," Abdelkader said.

But the game was over. And, these days in hockey, that was all for the good.

After the hit in the third period a dozen days ago, Abdelkader felt something in his head, hesitated, and then skated to the bench. A trainer approached and spoke into his left ear.

Abdelkader stood, walked off the bench and into the dressing room.

The Red Wings led 3-0. But the services of their most physical defensive forward would have been useful closing out a road game.

Abdelkader never returned.

"I had to go through all of that stuff," Abdelkader said, about policies regarding concussions. "So, everything's fine."

Sidney Crosby did not receive the same consideration 11 months ago.

The NHL Protocol for Concussion Evaluation and Management — the "stuff" Abdelkader referred to — was effective March 16, three months after Crosby sustained a head-rattling hit and played the next game, sustaining another.

Due to another check or maybe the simple exertion of playing eight games in 14 days, Crosby is again out indefinitely.

The good news about his long waltz with post-concussion syndrome is the NHL acted to limit similar circumstances.

Heavy hits

But the league must act again, and soon, with firm intention to separate the great game from the Neanderthal pursuits that some inattentive critics now busily attribute to it.

Banning fighting is counterproductive. Fighting often deters the improper actions that lead to head injuries.

Yes, the enforcers Derek Boogaard and Bob Probert fought a lot and their brains suffered the extensive trauma caused by blunt and brutal impacts. But doctors do not know if punches or body checks caused most of the damage.

Even without fighting, hockey always will be game of blunt and brutal impacts. And, properly understood and implemented, fighting helps prevent illegal checks, which generally seem a greater source of brain injury than punches.

Banning incidental hits to the head also has been floated. But what happens then when 6-foot-5 Dustin Byfuglien cleanly checks 5-8 Chis Conner? Should we ban Byfuglien, Conner or checking?

For such reasons, the NHL is smart to install as its top cop the player who in the last two decades most embodied a large man's physical style with properly-conceived fighting, scoring skills and an intellect capable of cogent analysis — former Red Wings star Brendan Shanahan.

Show some respect

But the NHL must go farther.

It should do what some long ago urged: Reduce the size and inflexibility of shoulder and elbow pads.

Anyone observing the utter speed of NHL hockey — and in person, not on television where the movement of the camera discounts velocity — understands the players never were intended to be linebackers.

Hockey is not football. Players should not be equipped as if it were.

Remember Shanahan's old shoulder pads? He preserved them from his days in junior hockey. They were like the smaller, softer padding hockey players wore when body checks were less dangerous, and more frequently from the hip.

Bring them back. Mandate it.

And the players were long ago big enough. The NHL should, at long last, adopt substance abuse rules that exceed the current testing during exhibitions and regular-season games to expose players to detection 365 days per year.

The tests used are for every performance-enhancing substance banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency except one: human growth hormone.

HGH should be tested for beginning this off-season.

The players, their families, coaches and friends, also bear new responsibilities. Players must respect each other, and that respect — as corny as it sounds — must be abiding.

The inculcation of that discipline must begin, not on the first day of camp, but when sons and daughters are playing mini-mites and mites.

As for fans, the next time they glory in a purposeless fight started to preserve the career of some untalented player, or the next time they are tempted to call a player wimpy when he misses a few games out of concern for his brain, they should ask themselves if they are any improvement on the perverse spectators of ancient Rome.

It is important. Those who never liked the game or cared to understand it have the NHL in their cross-hairs, once again. They are intent on bans and prohibitions.

And little do many of them know of hockey.

Elbow, shoulder pads under scrutiny in bid to reduce NHL head injuries

David Shoalts

Published Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2011 8:50PM EST
Last updated Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2011 5:52AM EST

With the NHL's biggest star, Sidney Crosby, and leading scorer, Claude Giroux, out indefinitely with head injuries along with at least 25 other players, the league's concussion problem is worse than its leaders like to admit.

While medical experts and others are calling on the NHL to introduce more severe penalties for all hits to the head and for fighting, the players' equipment remains an issue. The NHL and the Canadian Hockey League, which is made up of the three major-junior leagues across Canada, are using softer elbow pads and shoulder pads but it is not known for sure if this is making a difference in the number and severity of head injuries.

An NHL executive said Tuesday the league is working to make shoulder pads, which were softened and reduced in size by the start of the 2010-11 season, even smaller. Critics have long complained shoulder pads are so big and hard that they act as body armour in big hits, leaving many players concussed.

Crosby is back on the injured list just eight games after he returned from a concussion as the result of a blow on the head from an elbow pad. Giroux was concussed when a Philadelphia Flyers teammate, Wayne Simmonds, accidentally hit him on the head with his knee pad. Many of the other concussions on the NHL's injury list were caused by shoulder hits to the head.

Kris King, the NHL's senior vice-president of hockey operations, said even though the league and the NHL Players' Association mandated soft-cap elbow and shoulder pads, with at least half an inch of padding over any hard plastic caps, over the last several years, and reduced the size of the shoulder pads, efforts are continuing to make the shoulder pads smaller yet. The NHL made soft-elbow pads mandatory in 2003 and did the same with shoulder pads for the 2010-11 season. The CHL introduced them this season as part of a strategy to reduce concussions.

King said the NHL's statistics show the number of concussions from blows by elbows to the head is "enormously reduced" since 2003. However, he said the statistics for those hits plus shoulder hits to the head that result in concussions will not be made public until the NHL's annual general managers meetings in March.

CHL president Dave Branch and Ron Robison, commissioner of the Western Hockey League, both said they will not have suitable statistics about the effect of the softer pads on head injuries until later in the season.

Dr. Charles Tator, a neurosurgeon at Toronto Western Hospital and a leading expert in concussions, said the NHL and other leagues need to keep working on the elbow and shoulder pads.

"We should be changing the elbow pads and the shoulder pads so they go back to what they were meant to be," Tator said. "They defend the wearer, not offend the opponent."

The NHL's equipment modifications are being overseen by Brendan Shanahan, the senior vice-president of hockey operations and player safety. He will give the NHL general managers a report in March, and King said if the NHLPA agrees, the smaller shoulder pads could be in use by the start of next season.

While many of the hard plastic caps on the elbow pads and shoulder pads in use now were eliminated or covered by softer padding, King said the league is testing a prototype now from equipment manufacturer CCM that has "very limited hard plastic. The rest is different grades of foam."

King said the new shoulder pads are being tested in games by 12 players and they are "slimmer, more streamlined." The league is also working with other manufacturers and expects more prototypes to be available soon.

"It's an area we're continually monitoring and trying to get to where we used to be before equipment got big," he added. "We want to aggressively work with the NHLPA on this."

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 12.14.2011
The puck remains the same

roy macgregor
From Wednesday's Globe and Mail
Published Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2011 6:10PM EST
Last updated Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2011 11:57PM EST

It is the game's one constant.

Everything else in hockey has changed - the rules, the players, the protective equipment, the nets, sticks, skates, boards, glass, standings, ticket prices, even the ice itself - but not the puck.

It remains as defined by Rule 13.1 of the NHL official rulebook: "The puck shall be made of vulcanized rubber, or other approved material, one inch (1") thick and three inches (3") in diameter and shall weigh between five and one-half ounces (5 1/2 oz.) and six ounces (6 oz.)."

That tiny rubber disc hit the news this past week when it brought an end to the NHL's current Iron Man streak, stopping the remarkable run of Tampa Bay Lightning forward Martin St. Louis at 499 consecutive games. St. Louis took a puck in the face during practice, the edges of the puck cutting him badly and the impact fracturing nasal and orbital bones.

There still would have been damage, obviously, but Harry McEachern can't help but wonder if it might have been lessened if only the NHL had elected to go with a puck he helped Dave Hay develop more than half a century ago.

McEachern, now 87 and retired in Hudson, Ohio, was working for Polysar Ltd. in Sarnia when Hay - whose father, Hockey Hall of Famer George, had played for the Detroit Red Wings - came up with a puck made of butyl rubber that was the same size and weight as the puck in the rulebook but had somewhat different characteristics.

The new puck required no freezing, as is still done to NHL pucks in order to keep them from bouncing. Butyl rubber, McEachern says, is an "energy-absorbing material" that doesn't bounce well. The puck appeared to slide more easily on the ice and, mysteriously, caused very few cuts when flying up into players' faces.

"If it came in touch with the skin," McEachern says, "it didn't break. I can't explain it."

Local leagues experimented with the new puck for a couple of seasons in the late 1950s and the Red Wings tried them out in practice and were suitably impressed. But the league never adopted it.

The butyl puck today stands in the land of pretenders who could not bump the puck first developed by Art Ross, Eddie Shore and others in the 1930s and manufactured by Tyer Rubber of Andover, Md. In March of 1951, the Art Ross Puck - U.S.A. patent 2226156 - was named the official NHL disc. Today, the official puck is manufactured by Soucy Baron of St. Jerome, Que., shipped to InGLasCo in Sherbrooke, stamped with appropriate logos and delivered around the league.

In the decades since McEachern and Hay thought they had reinvented the hockey puck, hockey historian J.W. (Bill) Fitsell says there have been numerous attempts to come up with something new, including a U.S. initiative to replace the black puck with a red one - more patriotic, the argument went, by having a red puck with blue lines and white ice.

The most famous attempt, surely, was Fox TV's so-called smart puck, during the network's lame attempt to give NHL hockey a national platform. FoxTrax was hilarious to Canadians, who couldn't get enough of laughing at the blue streak on their screen that often showed the puck flying about the first two rows of seating.

There have also been attempts to apply reflective materials - the Glowpuck and Firepuck - and even a plan to outfit pucks with internal sensors that could tell, for example, precisely whether a smothered puck had crossed the goal line. In that case, price was obviously prohibitive: Unlike in children's leagues, fans don't throw pucks back in the NHL.

McEachern and Hay still believe their long-ago improvement was the best of them all - a puck that slid better, didn't bounce and, most significantly, didn't appear to do the same physical damage that today's errant pucks can cause.

As for practicality, McEachern fondly remembers that when they tried it out with the Red Wings, Gordie Howe had the only question that truly mattered to the players.

"Will it go in the net?"

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 12.14.2011
Crosby ordeal proves we still have much to learn about concussions

david shoalts
Toronto- Globe and Mail Blog
Posted on Tuesday, December 13, 2011 3:31PM EST

The concussion debate is never far from the surface and it is raging again now that Pittsburgh Penguins superstar Sidney Crosby is on the sidelines again following a hit to the head that seemed innocuous at the time.

One thing everyone can agree on, from sensible fans to players to coaches to general managers and the medical professionals, is that there is still much to be learned about concussions. The field is such that one expert, Dr. Charles Tator, a neurosurgeon at Toronto Western Hospital, said Tuesday the only treatment scientifically proven for concussions is rest.

"In terms of anything to accelerate recovery, we have zero [treatment]," Tator said.

However, thanks to doctors like Tator, who founded ThinkFirst Canada, one of the leading sources for information on brain and spinal-cord injuries, and Dr. Paul Echlin of London, Ont., a sports-medicine specialist who also studies concussions, more information becomes available to the public by the month.

Echlin established the Sport Concussion Library, which launched a web site last week, www.sportconcussionlibrary.com. It serves as a free information resource for players, trainers, parents, teams, educational institutions or anyone else who wants to know more about concussions.

ThinkFirst Canada made a 25-minute video, Smart Hockey, which shows how concussions happen, their effects and what can be done to reduce the chance of suffering one while playing hockey. Several well-known hockey players like Tessa Bonhomme and Patrice Bergeron, who dealt with a severe concussion and returned to play for the Boston Bruins, appear on the video, which can be found here (http://www.thinkfirst.ca/programs/hockey.aspx).

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 12.14.2011
Crosby's concussion-like symptoms simply spell concussion, top neurologists say

Joseph Hall

When it comes to a concussion, you either have one or you don't.

So when sports team officials announce that a player is suffering from "concussion-like symptoms," they're actually fudging the facts of an injury, two of Canada's top neurosurgeons suggest.

"There is no (clinical) term 'concussion-like.' You either have one or you don't," Dr. Charles Tator, a Toronto Western Hospital neurologist says of the phrase.

"It's a make-believe term that I think teams cook up to avoid the issue that a player has had a concussion."

Tator, a leading advocate for head protection in sports, points to the case of Maple Leafs goalie James Reimer, who was out of the lineup for six weeks this season with what the team claimed was something only akin to concussion.

"And if you look at those films when he got hit, it was a terrible hit . . . to the head and they called it 'concussion-like,'" Tator says.

"They didn't own up to the fact that he had a concussion."

The same terminology was used again this week to describe Pittsburgh superstar Sidney Crosby's condition, when the Penguin said he wasn't sure when he would return after coming back from a major concussion.

Tator says there are currently no medical scans or blood tests that can give a conclusive physiological diagnosis of concussion.

But, he says, there are several standardized lists of symptoms that allow physicians to determine if such an injury has been suffered.

One of the most important of these is the so called Sports Assessment Concussion Tool, or SCAT 2, which lists some 22 symptoms that are consistent with the syndrome's presence.

These include effects like headache, dizziness, nausea or frank unconsciousness, Tator says that occur in the immediate wake of an injury.

Longer-term symptoms include such things as light sensitivity, ringing in the ear, emotional changes or memory loss.

"And we say one or more of those symptoms make the diagnosis of concussion," Tator says.

While trainers, parents and coaches should be familiar with these signs, such oral examinations require both a competent physician and a compliant patient to come to a clinical conclusion of concussion.

"The actual diagnosis is made by an actual health care professional like a medical doctor," Tator says.

"You also need an (honest) patient. You need those two to dance here."

Players who "fudge it" during a concussion examination make it "hopeless" to come to an accurate diagnosis, Tator says.

Dr. Michael Cusimano, a neurosurgeon at St. Michael's Hospital, agrees that "concussion-like symptoms" point to a simple conclusion.

"I think they do have a clinical meaning, they mean you've had a concussion," Cusimano says. "These (terms) are euphemisms they are using. That's what it sure sounds like to me."

Cusimano is part of an international research race to discover blood markers that would provide a clearer diagnosis of concussion, in the same vein as the enzymes that are currently used to show that a heart attack has occurred.

Cowen the hero in Senators' overtime win

Posted on 13 December 2011. By Allen Panzeri Tags: Ottawa Senators

BUFFALO, N.Y. - Jared Cowen saved the day for the Ottawa Senators after they almost threw another game away.

He scored 45 seconds into overtime, off a pass from Erik Karlsson, to help the Senators break a three-game losing streak and get out of Buffalo with a 3-2 win.

This came after the Senators blew a 1-0 first-period lead and had to fight back from a 2-1 deficit.

However, the victory was muted with the loss of Milan Michalek, who opened the scoring with his league-leading 19th of the year and then was injured in a huge collision with Karlsson about 4:30 into the second period. The two collided just inside the Buffalo blue line.

Michalek suffered an upper body injury and didn't return to the game. It wasn't immediately known how serious the injury was or whether he'd be able to play Wednesday against the Boston Bruins. Coach Paul MacLean said he'd be re-evaluated in Ottawa.

Karlsson said the collision was simply bad luck.

"They had the puck and I read the guy's pass and stepped up," he said.

"(Michalek) was coming full speed to back check. I was only looking for their guys, not ours, and we collided pretty hard there.

"We were both going forward. I haven't talked with him so I don't know what happened to him. I'm fine, though. It's just bad luck."

On the winning goal, Cowen knew he was taking a big chance going deep to the front of the Buffalo net. Both he and Karlsson were deep below the blue line.

"When I was going down, I was thinking it was a gamble," said Cowen.

"I wasn't sure if I should be there but obviously it worked out. It's good to get a win."

Peter Regin, with his second of the season, also scored for the Senators.

Paul Szczechura and Tyler Ennis scored for the Sabres, who had a players-only meeting after the game.

Craig Anderson faced 29 shots while Ryan Miller faced 44.

The first period began promisingly for the Senators, with a deft back pass from Jason Spezza to Michalek, open in the slot, for a 1-0 lead just 69 seconds into the game. Couldn't have scripted it much better.

And for the next 15 minutes, the Sabres didn't get much, a few shots but nothing worrisome.

The Senators just couldn't stand prosperity, though.

In a little more than a minute from 14:16 to 15:44, the Senators themselves changed the complexion of the game through a handful of horrifying turnovers that gave the Sabres a 2-1 lead.

Szczechura got the first after almost every Senator on the ice misplayed the puck, while Ennis got the second after David Rundblad started a three-way Buffalo passing play by putting a clearing pass right in Derek Roy's stick. Anderson never had a chance.

Division rivals make for tough games for Sens

Posted on 13 December 2011. By Allen Panzeri

Including Tuesday’s game against the Senators, the Sabres will play four of their next five games against division rivals.

For the Senators, including Tuesday’s, it’s three in four.

In what is probably the league’s tightest division, that gives these games extra weight.

Before Tuesday’s games, Boston sat four point clear of the pack, but only three points separated the second-place Maple Leafs from the fifth-place Senators.

"Those division games are big opportunities for us to either climb or push someone back,” said Buffalo captain Jason Pominville.

"If you look at our division, every team is pretty good and right in the hunt, so those division games are really important.

"You're so close to being one of the top teams in the division, and so close to being one of the bottom teams. There's not a big difference."

Jason Spezza tries as best he can to regard all points as equal, no matter what division or conference they come from.

But when you lose two points to a division rival, it's tough to make them up, with shootouts and three-point games.

"We know this is a team we're very tight with in the standings and a team we'll probably be competing with down the stretch," he said.

"So we definitely look at it as a more important game.

"We feel like this is a team we're going to have to beat out to make the playoffs, so they're important games.

"I don't think we look at the standings as much now, or the significance of the points. But we have talked about these points being just as important now as in March when we're fighting for a playoff and you can really see who you're fighting against.

"Us, Toronto, Montreal and Buffalo - we're all lumped together now. We're eventually going to have to play each other a bunch and weed the weaker teams out, so you want to be sure you're getting your wins while you can."

Butler must shoot or sit
24 shots in 21 games just doesn't cut it for a sniper

By DON BRENNAN, QMI Agency

BUFFALO - What's Bobby Butler's problem this season?

Seems simple enough. He has 24 shots in 21 games. Tough to be a sniper when you're not pulling the trigger.

Having tested goalies just three times in his past five games, Butler was a healthy scratch on Tuesday night against the Sabres.

Butler scored 45 goals in 106 games for the organization in 2010-11, but in 65 periods of play this season he has just two - and he got them both in the same period.

As a guy they're paying over a million a year for this season and next, the Senators want to get Butler going.

"Confidence is a big thing for goal scorers," said coach Paul MacLean, who knew a thing or two about putting the pea in the pond when he played. "You just need one to go in, off your rear-end. But you have to make sure you're shooting the puck. The concern for me is the last couple of games Bob hasn't been getting any shots."

Butler has spent some time on the first line, but probably not enough. Of course, Milan Michalek has become the better option as Jason Spezza's right winger.

"I just need to get my confidence back. If I get the puck, shoot it," said Butler. "I talked with coach it was very positive. Just got to get back to doing what I do."

How come he's not shooting more?

"I'm just not getting the puck ... not shooting enough," he said. "I've been trying to do all the little things ... if I'm not getting the puck I can't shoot it ... a little bit of everything."

He needs to have the best shot in NHL history to put one in from the pressbox, but if a goal scorer isn't even shooting, that's where he belongs.

STARTS AND STOPS

On his new mask that Craig Anderson will debut Wednesday vs. the Bruins and use only when the team wears its heritage jersey, Anderson's mask is from 1917-24. How much did he know about Benedict?

"Zero," said Anderson. "Obviously it's from a different era. Sometimes it's good to read up on some of the history. His is very interesting. He was the first guy to wear that leather Hannibal Lecter mask."

The most interesting stat about Benedict comes from the 1926-27 season, when he was with the Montreal Maroons. Benedict's goals-against average was a paltry 1.49, but his record was barely over .500 at 20-19-4. Of the 20 wins, 13 were by shutout ...

After Saturday's game, Vancouver fans were accusing Nick Foligno of stomping on the leg of Alex Burrows, who Ottawa fans would say deserved it. "I honestly don't even remember (the incident)," Foligno said, before adding sarcastically: "I was just on fire that night, eh? I'm hitting heads and stomping on people. I'm a danger to myself" ...

Tuesday's game was the 300th of Foligno's career. He did not ask the schedule maker to fix things so it would be in his hometown, but it did turn out that way. His personal highlights include scoring his first NHL goal (which he celebrated with a Mike Foligno leap) and scoring in the playoffs. By this stage, he'd like to have more than one playoff goal and more than 10 playoff games under his belt. "I just enjoy playoffs," he said. "The series two years ago with Pittsburgh was one of the highlights of my career. It was just so exciting. I really thought we had a chance to win that one. You get that close and it makes you really hungry for more." Foligno hasn't done the leap again. "That was just for my dad," he said. "Maybe if I score a big Stanley Cup playoff goal, it'll be just out of pure excitement more than anything."

STUFF I THINK I THUNK

Erik Karlsson's struggles continued. The Senators defenceman has had a rough handful of games, and against the Sabres he also took a big hit - from Milan Michalek - in a collision inside the Buffalo blue line. Karlsson dusted himself off and continued to play when it looked like he wasn't going to be able to ... You are reading this column, and so is play-by-play great Dean Brown. "My thoughts on Cheapskates is it's one of the most enjoyable reads in the National Hockey League," said Brown. "It's where the average hockey fan can find out things about the game you can't find anywhere else." He said more, but my tape recorder is old and I couldn't make it out ... Konopka, who was raised 35 minutes from Buffalo in Niagara-on-the-Lake, was involved in a pretty good scrap with Cody McCormick in the first period.

He took a right uppercut that knocked his helmet flying, but he wound up putting the Sabre down with a couple of shots at the end. "I try to play hard every night," he said. "Whatever the coach asks me to do, I'll do. If it's win faceoffs or play physical, or if he asks me to tape sticks in the parking lot, I'll do that too. You've got to be a team guy. The team comes first." ...

Was gonna complain that the breakfast buffet at the hotel didn't have any meat Tuesday, but in the overall scheme of things, that's small potatoes ... The Sabres have been much better on the road (8-3-0) than at home (7-9-2 before Tuesday) this season. "We'd like to know the reason, it'd be easy to correct it if we could find out," said captain Jason Pominville. "There's a few hiders here and there. We've said it a lot - you try to overdo it at home. You stay a little extra out there and your shifts get a little too long. You try to make that extra play, but there's no reason to do that. The fans are here to see a win."

KONOPKA KORNER

QMI: You correctly predicted Baylor's Robert Griffin III (RG3) would win the Heisman Saturday. Did anybody else on the planet?

Konopka: "What about that fight in the Cincinnati-Xavier game? That's the best basketball punch I've seen. The other guy wasn't looking." 

QMI: Yeah, by Cincinnati's Yancy Gates. He's got a wicked right.

Konopka: "I'll fight that guy. See if you can set it up. I want an exhibition. We can give the money to charity."

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 12.14.2011
BUFFALO - Bobby Butler has found his way back to the pressbox.

With no points and just three shots on goal in the five games since he was last a healthy scratch, the Senators winger was kept on the ice after his teammates finished their morning skate Tuesday at First Niagara Center.

Zenon Konopka returns to the lineup to take Butler's spot against the Sabres.

"Zenon has played well for us on that fourth line," said coach Paul MacLean, who wants to use Konopka's faceoff skills to get puck possession. "We tried to have Bobby stay around and shoot some pucks today, to see if he can shoot some in the net."

Butler, who scored 45 goals in 106 games for the organization last season, has just two goals in 21 games thus far in 2011-12. He scored both in the same period.

"I've just got to get my confidence back," said Butler.

The Senators will be trying to snap a three-game losing streak Tuesday. Craig Anderson will also be attempting to redeem himself after getting pulled in the third minute of the team's last visit to Buffalo.

"For us, we've got to focus on what we can control," said Anderson. "We can't focus on what the other team is doing, or what the refs are doing.

"You've got to look in the mirror and make sure you're doing everything you possibly can.

"If you're doing everything you possibly can, and the guy next to you is doing everything he possibly can, more times than not you'll get a positive result."

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 12.14.2011
Giroux out indefinitely with concussion

By Marc Narducci
INQUISER STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON - The Flyers can't seem to catch a break on the injury front. The latest hammer to drop included news that Claude Giroux, who entered Tuesday leading the NHL with 39 points, has a concussion and will be out indefinitely.

Giroux was injured on Saturday when teammate Wayne Simmonds inadvertently kneed him in the head. Now his return doesn't appear to be imminent.

"Claude reported not feeling very good today," general manager Paul Holmgren said in a statement that was released Tuesday morning. "Over the past few days his symptoms have gradually gotten worse. He will be out indefinitely with a concussion."

Prior to Tuesday's game at the Verizon Center against the Washington Capitals, Holmgren expanded on the situation.

"Over last few days his symptoms have gotten worse," Holmgren said. "He skated a little bit [Tuesday] and didn't feel that good, like himself."

The Flyers had said on Monday that Giroux was making progress. Holmgren said originally it appeared as if Giroux didn't have a concussion.

"He didn't have concussion symptoms right away," Holmgren said. "It was more whiplash and discomfort in the next."

All that would change.

"As the last few days have transpired, it became more and more that he didn't feel like himself, was sluggish and that is the reason we are doing this," Holmgren said.

Giroux skated both Monday and Tuesday, according to Holmgren.

"I don't know if it is any good news, but after 15 minutes or so once he stopped skating [on Tuesday], he did start to feel better," Holmgren said.

"But we're going to take it easy with Claude."

Holmgren said they would keep him off the ice on Wednesday and possibly revisit things on Thursday. So much has to do with how Giroux feels each day. The Flyers general manager also said that the team may have to use some tough love.

"He is a stubborn guy and wants to go out there," Holmgren said.

That will only happen when he feels like his old self, according to Holmgren.

For now, Giroux won't be seeing outside doctors the way defenseman Chris Pronger is for his concussion-like symptoms. Pronger will meet with two Pittsburgh concussion specialists on Wednesday.

"Right now we are not going to go that route," Holmgrens said. "We're going to stick with our doctors. "Chris is a little different issue and Claude will stick with our doctors."

Giroux didn't undergo baseline testing on Tuesday, but he had on Monday.

"He did it [Monday] and it was not bad," Holmgren said.

The Flyers have weathered so many key injuries and entered Tuesday as the top team in the Eastern Conference with 39 points.

Still, seeing a player who has been listed as a major Hart Trophy candidate as MVP leave the ice, the Flyers understandably were concerned following their morning skate.

"He's a guy that you can't really replace," forward James van Riemsdyk said. "It will take a lot of people to step it up and try to fill the role he plays."

It is certainly an expanded role.

"He does everything for us, penalty kill, power play, scores big goals, takes big hits, blocks shots, he does it all," van Riemsdyk said. "So we will all kind of have to step up our game here."

Knowing how dominant Giroux has been made his situation even more difficult for his teammates to cope with.

"You don't want to see anybody go down, especially our best player," said Giroux linemate Scott Hartnell. "When he is in the lineup and doing his thing, we are obviously a very dangerous team."

Read more:
http://www.philly.com/philly/sports/flyers/20111213_Giroux_out_indefinitely__with_concussion.html#ixzz1gTzKwTCP

Watch sports videos you won't find anywhere else.Getting accustomed to key injuries has become a way of life for the Flyers.

"Things like this happen," Hartnell said. "You want him to get healthy and feel better and get back in the lineup."

Without Giroux, Flyers offense clicks in 5-1 win over Caps

By Marc Narducci
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON - The Flyers have rallied around a unified battle cry, one that basically suggests that the troops have to dig a little deeper in these injury-plagued times.

So on the day they found out that the NHL's leading scorer, Claude Giroux, is out indefinitely with a concussion, the Flyers received key offensive contributions from some old standbys along with a newcomer to the scoring sheet.

It all added up to a 5-1 win over the Washington Capitals at the Verizon Center, extending the Flyers winning streak to six games.

"I thought it was one of our better games, just complete from start to finish," Flyers coach Peter Laviolette said.

The Flyers (19-7-3) continue to lead the Eastern Conference with 41 points.

"We have a good team," said defenseman Kimmo Timonen. "It doesn't matter how many guys we are missing I think we showed today we can play pretty good hockey against a pretty good team out there."

Everybody from Laviolette to each of the players talked about the importance of carrying a little extra offensive weight in the absence of Giroux.

And the Flyers did plenty of heavy lifting.

Five different players scored.

It's probably no coincidence that Scott Hartnell has scored in every game of this six-game winning streak.

Hartnell was one of the players who talked about picking up the slack for his injured linemate Giroux and he did exactly that, scoring the game's first goal on a wrist shot - the 200th of his career - that was an indication of the difficult night Capitals goalie Tomas Vokoun would have.

It was a soft goal, but the Flyers weren't complaining.

In fact, Vokoun was pulled after two periods with the Flyers holding a 4-0 lead.

The Flyers put things away with three second-period goals, the first scored by an unlikely source.

Defenseman Marc-Andre Bourdon scored on a wrist shot inside the blue line on a pass from Zac Rinaldo. Jody Shelley provided a screen and it initially appeared as if he tipped it in, but the puck apparently went off the stick of Washington's Mathieu Perreault.

"I was happy but I didn't even know it was me who scored," Bourdon said. "I shot the puck and thought maybe it tipped off one of their guys or thought maybe Shell scored."

After some reflection, it hit Bourdon what he had achieved.

"I thought about it after the period and started to realize I scored in the NHL," Bourdon said. "It's kind of a dream and great that I helped the team win because that is what I care about."

The goals kept coming. Wayne Simmonds made it 3-0, scoring in his third straight game. Simmonds did a great job of keeping the puck in the zone and skated from behind the net to tip in a shot by Andrej Meszaros.

Maxime Talbot made it 4-0, scoring on a wrist shot that quite frankly Vokoun should have had.

Jake Voracek scored the fifth goal on a third period tip-in against Washington goalie Michal Neuvirth.

Washington averted the shutout on a tip-in by Jeff Halpern with 6 minutes, 1 second left in the third period.
Flyers React To News Of Giroux's Concussion

WASHINGTON -- Flyers general manager Paul Holmgren said that Claude Giroux has a concussion and will be out indefinitely.

Holmgren released this statement following the morning’s skate at the Verizon Center in preparation for tonight’s game with the Washington Capitals.

"Claude reported not feeling very good today," Holmgren said. "Over the past few days his symptoms have gradually gotten worse. He will be out indefinitely with a concussion."

The news hit the players hard, yet another injury to such a vital component. Giroux leads the NHL with 39 points.

"We found out this morning," said rookie Sean Couturier, who is expected to replace Giroux on the top line between Jaromir Jagr and Scott Hartnell, although coach Peter Laviolette said he hasn’t announced anything official. "He’s a big part of this team and will be hard to replace but at the same time for guys to step up."

Hartnell has similar sentiments.

"You don’t want to see anybody go down especially our best player," Hartnell said. "When he is in the lineup and doing his thing we are obviously a very dangerous team."

Getting accustomed to key injuries has become a way of life for the Flyers.

"Things like this happen," Hartnell said. "You want him to get healthy and feel better and get back in the lineup."

The Flyers had said on Monday that Giroux was getting better Now he is out indefinitely.

"The guys we put in the lineup have gone out and played hard every night," Laviolette said. "We haven’t won every game but certainly there has been a consistent effort. I expect no different today."

Bryzgalov To Start

Goalie Ilya Bryzgalov, who was pulled with 13 minutes and one second left in Saturday’s 5-2 win over visiting Tampa Bay due to a lower body injury, will start in goal tonight, according to Laviolette.

Giroux has concussion

Claude Giroux, who leads the NHL with 39 points, will be sidelined indefinitely with a concussion, the Flyers announced.

"Claude reported not feeling very good today. Over the past few days, his symptoms have gradually gotten worse," GM Paul Holmgren said in a statement.

Holmgren contradicted the statement he released Monday, saying Giroux was "continuing to feel better."

Giroux was accidentally kneed to the back of the head by teammate Wayne Simmonds in Saturday's 5-2 win over Tampa Bay.

With Giroux sidelined, 19-year-old rookie Sean Couturier will get a chance to display his offensive skills on the top line, centering Jaromir Jar and Scott Hartnell.

Giroux is the second Flyer with a concussion; Brayden Schenn also has one, and Chris Pronger is experiencing concussion-like symptoms. Pronger will be evaluated by two concussion doctors in Pittsburgh on Wednesday.

Schenn was scheduled to skate after the regulars had a workout Tuesday morning at the Verizon Center. There is not timetable for his return.

The injury-plagued Flyers' five-game winning streak will be in severe jeopardy when they face Washington on Tuesday night at the Verizon Center.

The Flyers will be without their top offensive player, Giroux (39 points, best in NHL) and their best defender, Pronger.

Washington's Alex Ovechkin has 37 points (22 goals, 15 assist) in career 23 games against the Flyers. The Caps have won two straight.

This is the first meeting between the Eastern Conference rivals in D.C. this season. The Caps won at the WFC, 5-2, on Oct. 20. In that game, Ovechkin scored a pair of goals, and three of the Caps' goals deflected off a Flyer.

Goalie Ilya Bryzgalov will start for the Flyers and face Tomas Vokoun. Bryz left Saturday's win over Tampa Bay with a lower-body injury, but practiced Monday.
Flyers' Giroux remains sidelined with concussion

By FRANK SERAVALLI
seravaf@phillynews.com

WASHINGTON - Not wanting to succumb to the dreaded "C" word, Claude Giroux decided to lace his skates up for a quick spin around the ice by himself yesterday morning.

His skate lasted only 15 minutes, telling Flyers general manager Paul Holmgren all he needed to know.

"He didn't feel that good," Holmgren said. "He didn't feel like himself."

For the first time since Giroux was rocked by an accidental knee to the head by teammate Wayne Simmonds on Saturday night, the Flyers officially labeled the NHL's leading scorer as concussed. Giroux failed a baseline concussion test on Monday. There is no timetable for his return.

"Over the last few days, the symptoms have gradually worsened," Holmgren said. "Obviously, we're concerned. Claude is one of our better players. We're just going to err on the side of caution."

Holmgren said Giroux, who remained in Philadelphia as the Flyers traveled to Montreal late last night, will take a complete day off today before being evaluated again.

Even though the Flyers now have three key cogs in their lineup - Chris Pronger, Brayden Schenn and Giroux - out indefinitely with concussions, Holmgren did say there is a positive to Giroux' situation. For now, it's actually twofold.

One: Giroux felt better once his physical exertion slowed. Two: Giroux will not accompany Pronger to Pittsburgh today to be examined by concussion specialists, a sign that his situation might not be as serious.

"If there's any good news in this, it's that once he stopped skating, he did start to feel a little bit better," Holmgren said. "We're just going to stick with our doctors for now."

On Monday, Holmgren told a reporter in Chicago that their concern surrounding Giroux regarded a whiplash effect from Simmonds' knee. Curiously, the website CrossingBroad.com reported (with one photo, submitted by a reader) that Giroux got into a minor fender-bender in his black Chevrolet Camaro outside the Wells Fargo Center on Saturday morning before the game when he rear-ended the car in front of him.

"That wasn't related to this at all," Holmgren said, confirming the accident. "Other than that, he had a bad day."

News of Giroux' concussion comes only a day after the Penguins announced that Sidney Crosby, who missed 68 straight games between Jan. 5 and Nov. 21, will be out indefinitely again after running into teammate Chris Kunitz on Dec. 5. Crosby has helped spur hyper-awareness about concussions throughout NHL locker rooms.

"It's raised the awareness," Holmgren said. "Sidney is probably the best player in the league. The protocol that we use to treat players has changed drastically over the years. That's a good thing. We're looking after the players."

No matter the treatment, the trouble with concussions is that you just never know. This is the first reported concussion of Giroux' career. For now, the Flyers will take it slow.

"He's a stubborn guy," Holmgren said. "He wants to get back in the lineup. We might just have to pull back the reins a little bit. So much depends on how the player feels. There's times that he feels good and there's other times that he doesn't. We'll just kind of play it by ear."

A serving of Sestito

Phantoms tough guy Tom Sestito was recalled yesterday to begin serving his two-game regular season suspension that was handed down by NHL dean of discipline Brendan Shanahan back in September. Sestito boarded the Rangers' Andre Deveaux in a Sept. 26 preseason game and was suspended for the remainder of the preseason and two additional regular-season games.

Sestito, who will accompany the team in Montreal, is not expected to play. Once Sestito finishes his time, he will likely be loaned back to Adirondack in exchange for another forward - such as Eric Wellwood or Ben Holmstrom - who would serve as insurance for the Flyers' road-heavy December schedule.

After Saturday's matinee with the Bruins, the Flyers do not play another game inside the Wells Fargo Center until Jan. 5.

'24/7' debuts tonight

Around 10 o'clock tonight in Montreal, nearly every eyeball associated with the Flyers will be glued to HBO for the premiere of the "24/7 Flyers/Rangers: Road to the NHL Winter Classic." The behind-the-scenes, hourlong show is the first of four episodes that will air on consecutive Wednesdays. You may want to bring ear plugs, though, for any kids who haven't yet gone to bed.

Depleted Flyers cruise past Capitals

By FRANK SERAVALLI
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WASHINGTON - Skating without linemate Claude Giroux for the first time all season, Jaromir Jagr was worried that the Flyers' injury depleted lineup couldn't hang with the Washington Capitals.

"I wasn't very confident about [last night's] game when we lost 'G,'" Jagr said. "We lost the best player in the league. It's not easy to play without him."

Last night, the Flyers made a believer out of Jagr. They didn't just hang with the Capitals; they pounded them. With Sean Couturier taking Giroux' place, Jagr's other linemate - Scott Hartnell - scored the first of five straight Flyers goals as they steamrolled Washington, 5-1, at the Verizon Center for their sixth straight win.

It was the Flyers' first regulation win against Washington in two seasons. And they did it with contributions from guys who, well, haven't been regular contributors.

Consider: Marc-Andre Bourdon collected his first NHL goal, Jody Shelley netted his first point since Jan. 14, and Jake Voracek posted only his second goal since Nov. 5. In all, 13 of the Flyers' 18 skaters found their way onto the score sheet.

"It says a lot about this team," Jagr said. "All four lines played really good hockey. We've had tough injuries. Everyone else has kept winning."

And it wasn't only the Flyers' winning streak that has continued. Hartnell pushed his career-high scoring streak to six games, which ties him with Nashville's Patric Hornqvist for the longest goal-scoring streak in the NHL this season.

Wayne Simmonds also scored in his third straight game, setting a new career high. Simmonds now has four goals in his last four games after going seven straight without a single point.

"I thought that was one of our better team games," coach Peter Laviolette said. "Just a complete, start-to-finish, all lines, the goaltender, everyone was going."

With the win, the Eastern Conference-leading Flyers trail Minnesota by two points - with one game in hand - for the overall lead in the league standings.

Oh, and the Flyers held Alex Ovechkin off the score sheet for the first time since Jan. 6, 2009. It's only the fourth time in 24 meetings with the Flyers that Ovechkin hadn't collected at least one point. Back on Oct. 20, Ovechkin torched the Flyers for two goals in a 5-2 win. For his career, Ovechkin has 22 goals and 15 assists in 24 games against Philadelphia.

Last night, he just didn't seem to quite fit in with new coach Dale Hunter's patient system. Even with a two-goal hole, the Capitals' offense sat back in neutral-zone trap.

"It's nice when you don't let him score," fellow Russian Ilya Bryzgalov said with a smile. "He's a great player."

Bryzgalov, who stopped 31 of 32 shots, was one Jeff Halpern blemish away from his 25th career shootout. He has been in net for all six straight wins.

Last night, though, Shelley epitomized the Flyers' team effort. With Giroux still dazed by Saturday's accidental knee to the head from Simmonds, Shelley was forced into the lineup for the first time since Nov. 26. He has been a healthy scratch for 13 games this season, yet he impacted the game-winning goal off Bourdon's blade.

Shelley screened Capitals goalie Tomas Vokoun, as Vokoun was unable to pick up the redirection off his own defenseman Mathieu Perrault's stick midway through the second period. He was credited with a secondary assist on the play, only his 54th point in 11 entire NHL seasons.

"When you come back into the lineup, you don't want to be the [water] cooler, so to speak," Shelley said. "It's nice to come back and contribute."

Both Voracek and Laviolette sensed a feeling in the locker room that everyone needed to step up in Giroux' absence, as he joined Chris Pronger and Brayden Schenn on the injured list.

"No one talks about Claude being out," Shelley said. "But guys realize in certain situations that they need to take advantage of their opportunities. We're happy for 'Coots' [Couturier] to step into that spot, to see Bourdon get more minutes than ever before. Everyone gets excited for that. It's a great feeling."

Slap shots

The Flyers look to win their seventh straight game tomorrow night in Montreal. It would be their first seven-game streak since 2002 . . . The Flyers now have 11 road wins (11-3-1) in only 15 road games, eclipsing their 9-1-5 start on the road in 1979-80 . . . Since Claude Giroux was carrying the extra "A" for alternate captain in the absence of Chris Pronger, Giroux "A" was handed off to Jaromir Jagr . . . The AHL announced yesterday that Flyers Hall of Famers Bobby Clarke and Bill Barber will be the honorary captains for the AHL All-Star Classic on Jan. 29-30 at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City.

Giroux out indefinitely with concussion

By Marc Narducci
Inquirer Staff Writer

WASHINGTON - The Flyers can't seem to catch a break on the injury front. The latest hammer to drop included news that Claude Giroux, who entered Tuesday leading the NHL with 39 points, has a concussion and will be out indefinitely.

Giroux was injured on Saturday when teammate Wayne Simmonds inadvertently kneed him in the head. Now his return doesn't appear to be imminent.

"Claude reported not feeling very good today," general manager Paul Holmgren said in a statement that was released Tuesday morning. "Over the past few days his symptoms have gradually gotten worse. He will be out indefinitely with a concussion."

Prior to Tuesday's game at the Verizon Center against the Washington Capitals, Holmgren expanded on the situation.

"Over the last few days, his symptoms have gotten worse," Holmgren said. "He skated a little bit [Tuesday] and didn't feel that good, like himself."

The Flyers had said on Monday that Giroux was making progress. Holmgren said originally it appeared as if Giroux didn't have a concussion.

"He didn't have concussion symptoms right away," Holmgren said. "It was more whiplash and discomfort in the neck."

All that would change.

"As the last few days have transpired, it became more and more that he didn't feel like himself, was sluggish and that is the reason we are doing this," Holmgren said.

Giroux skated both Monday and Tuesday, according to Holmgren.

"I don't know if it is any good news, but after 15 minutes or so once he stopped skating [on Tuesday], he did start to feel better," Holmgren said. "But we're going to take it easy with Claude."

Holmgren said they would keep him off the ice on Wednesday and possibly revisit things on Thursday. So much has to do with how Giroux feels each day. The Flyers general manager also said that the team may have to use some tough love.

"He is a stubborn guy and wants to go out there," Holmgren said.

That will only happen when he feels like his old self, according to Holmgren.

For now, Giroux won't be seeing outside doctors the way defenseman Chris Pronger is for his concussion-like symptoms. Pronger will meet with two Pittsburgh concussion specialists on Wednesday.

"Right now we are not going to go that route," Holmgren said. "We're going to stick with our doctors. "Chris is a little a different issue and Claude will stick with our doctors."

Giroux didn't undergo baseline testing on Tuesday, but he had on Monday.

"He did it [Monday] and it was not bad," Holmgren said.

The Flyers have weathered so many key injuries and entered Tuesday as the top team in the Eastern Conference with 39 points.

Still, seeing a player who has been listed as a major Hart Trophy candidate as MVP leave the ice, the Flyers understandably were concerned following their morning skate.

"He's a guy that you can't really replace," forward James van Riemsdyk said. "It will take a lot of people to step it up and try to fill the role he plays."

It is certainly an expanded role.

"He does everything for us, penalty kill, power play, scores big goals, takes big hits, blocks shots, he does it all," van Riemsdyk said. "So we will all kind of have to step up our game here."

Knowing how dominant Giroux has been made his situation even more difficult for his teammates to cope with.

"You don't want to see anybody go down, especially our best player," said Giroux's linemate Scott Hartnell. "When he is in the lineup and doing his thing, we are obviously a very dangerous team."

Getting accustomed to key injuries has become a way of life for the Flyers.

"Things like this happen," Hartnell said. "You want him to get healthy and feel better and get back in the lineup."

Contact staff writer Marc Narducci at 856-779-3222, mnarducci@phillynews.com, or @sjnard on Twitter.
WASHINGTON - The Flyers have rallied around a unified battle cry, one that basically suggests that the troops have to dig a little deeper in these injury-plagued times.

So on the day they found out that the NHL’s leading scorer, Claude Giroux, is out indefinitely with a concussion, the Flyers received key offensive contributions from some old standbys along with a newcomer to the scoring sheet.

It all added up to a 5-1 win over the Washington Capitals at the Verizon Center, extending the Flyers winning streak to six games.

"I thought it was one of our better games, just complete from start to finish," Flyers coach Peter Laviolette said.

The Flyers (19-7-3) continue to lead the Eastern Conference with 41 points.

"We have a good team," said defenseman Kimmo Timonen. "It doesn't matter how many guys we are missing I think we showed today we can play pretty good hockey against a pretty good team out there."

Everybody from Laviolette to each of the players talked about the importance of carrying a little extra offensive weight in the absence of Giroux.

And the Flyers did plenty of heavy lifting.

Five different players scored.

It’s probably no coincidence that Scott Hartnell has scored in every game of this six-game winning streak.

Hartnell was one of the players who talked about picking up the slack for his injured linemate Giroux and he did exactly that, scoring the game’s first goal on a wrist shot – the 200th of his career – that was an indication of the difficult night Capitals goalie Tomas Vokoun would have.

It was a soft goal, but the Flyers weren't complaining.

In fact, Vokoun was pulled after two periods with the Flyers holding a 4-0 lead.

The Flyers put things away with three second-period goals, the first scored by an unlikely source.

Defenseman Marc-Andre Bourdon scored on a wrist shot inside the blue line on a pass from Zac Rinaldo. Jody Shelley provided a screen and it initially appeared as if he tipped it in, but the puck apparently went off the stick of Washington’s Mathieu Perreault.

"I was happy but I didn’t even know it was me who scored," Bourdon said. "I shot the puck and thought maybe it tipped off one of their guys or thought maybe Shell scored."

After some reflection, it hit Bourdon what he had achieved.

"I thought about it after the period and started to realize I scored in the NHL," Bourdon said. "It’s kind of a dream and great that I helped the team win because that is what I care about."

The goals kept coming. Wayne Simmonds made it 3-0, scoring in his third straight game. Simmonds did a great job of keeping the puck in the zone and skated from behind the net to tip in a shot by Andrej Meszaros.

Maxime Talbot made it 4-0, scoring on a wrist shot that quite frankly Vokoun should have had.

Jake Voracek scored the fifth goal on a third period tip-in against Washington goalie Michal Neuvirth.

Washington averted the shutout on a tip-in by Jeff Halpern with 6 minutes, 1 second left in the third period.
Flyers Notes: Workhorse Carle logging minutes

WASHINGTON - Even with all their injuries, the Flyers have eight players who have participated in all 29 games, including Tuesday's matchup at the Verizon Center against the Washington Capitals.

One of them is defenseman Matt Carle, who entered Tuesday second on the Flyers in time on ice, averaging 22 minutes, 26 seconds per game.

Only Chris Pronger, who has averaged 22.28, but has appeared in just 13 games, has a higher average among Flyers.

The Flyers are without their top defenseman Pronger, out while recovering from knee surgery and dealing with concussion-like symptoms, and their top offensive player, Claude Giroux, sidelined with what the team said on Tuesday was a concussion.

Still, the team entered Tuesday leading the Eastern Conference with 39 points.

There have been other key injuries this season but Carle has taken a practical outlook.

"You look around the league and every team has to deal with injuries in some form," Carle said following Tuesday's morning skate. "You would rather have the injury bug now than in April or May."

Carle said he is encouraged by how everybody has been chipping in.

"The young guys have gotten their chance and really done a good job," he said.

Besides Carle, the other Flyers who had appeared in the first 29 games were Sean Couturier, Wayne Simmonds, Scott Hartnell, Maxime Talbot, Andrej Meszaros, Kimmo Timonen and Jake Voracek.

Giroux had appeared in all 28 games.

Series debut

The HBO series 24/7, which spotlights the Flyers and Rangers heading up to their Winter Classic meeting Jan. 2 at Citizens Bank Park, debuts 10 p.m. on Wednesday.

The HBO cameras have been around the Flyers extensively the last few days in preparation.

Barber, Clarke honorary captains

Flyers Hall of Fame forwards Bill Barber and Bob Clarke will serve as honorary captains at the 2012 American Hockey League All-Star Classic, to be staged Jan. 29-30 at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City.

Each year, the All-Star Classic honorary captains stand on the team benches during the skills competition and All-Star Game, and are recognized for their careers at the annual AHL Hall of Fame Inductions and Awards Ceremony.

Barber actually began his professional career in the AHL with the Richmond Robins in 1972.

- Marc Narducci

Nine in a Row for Tocchet

Notable: Tocchet entered the last 10 minutes of the third period without a goal in three of the nine games ... The Flyers were just 2-3-4 over the nine games ... The goals were Nos. 31 through 43 for the season for Tocchet. He finished the season with 45 ... The streak was stopped at Chicago by Blackhawks goalie Alain Chevrier, who stopped all five of Tocchet's shots on March 22.

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Tim Kerr, Kerry Huffman
Jagr Impressed With Flyers' Mental Toughness

WASHINGTON – Jaromir Jagr has been around a long time, and has won two Stanley Cups while scoring 656 goals. Jagr is not easily impressed, but one could tell how highly he thought of the Flyers effort in Tuesday's convincing 5-1 win over the Washington Capitals at the Verizon Center.

It appears as if every Flyer, including Jagr, was wondering how the team would react to the news on Tuesday that Claude Giroux would be out indefinitely with a concussion.

Giroux has such respect in the locker room and the players appeared to use his injury as a rallying cry.

"it was a big win," said Jagr, who assisted on the game's first goal by Scott Hartnell.

How big?

"We lost the best player in the league and it is not easy to win without him," Jagr said. "Hopefully we will play this way until he comes back."

The Flyers continue to show a mental toughness that has earned them the top spot in the Eastern Conference.

The two most difficult things to do are win when missing key players and to win on the road.

The Flyers so far are 2 for 2 in that aspect.

They are now 11-3-1 on the road. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, the Flyers have never had 11 wins in their first 15 road games before this season.

Jagr has seen a lot and he seems to be enjoying this Flyers team, one that doesn't get rattled very easily.

Counting Tuesday's win, the Flyers are in a stretch of playing seven of their next eight on the road and the lone home game is against defending Stanley Cup champion Boston.

"The next two weeks we play so many great teams on the road, plus a home game against the champions," Jagr said. "Plus you lose Giroux and (Chris) Pronger. This will be kind of the next challenge for us."

It's a challenge that Jagr seems to enjoy. Not only has he enjoyed his brief time in Philadelphia, but Jagr admires the mental makeup of this team.

"What we've done says a lot about our team," Jagr said.

The Flyers have won while injured and won on a road. And most of all, they have won over a veteran like Jagr, who is enjoying how his new teammates go about their business, along with the accompanying results.

Posted by Marc Narducci @ 11:51 PM Permalink | 5 comments
Giroux out indefinitely with concussion

By Wayne Fish Staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, December 13, 2011 6:47 pm

WASHINGTON — Claude Giroux was skating around the ice back in South Jersey on Tuesday with the faint hope that his head would somehow miraculously clear.

It didn’t. And hours later, the Flyers made the official announcement that the NHL’s leading scorer has a concussion and will be out of action indefinitely.

Contrary to reports from the Flyers that Giroux had been feeling better the past few days, the very opposite was true.

“Claude, over the last few days, the symptoms have gotten gradually a little bit worse,” general manager Paul Holmgren said prior to Tuesday night’s game at the Verizon Center. “He skated a little bit today. Didn’t feel that good. Didn’t feel like himself. If there’s any good news there, after 15 minutes, once he stopped skating, he started to feel a little bit better.”

Better, but not enough to consider skating on Wednesday. Holmgren said Giroux, who was injured in a collision with teammate Wayne Simmonds in Saturday night’s game against Tampa, will not be allowed on the ice until Thursday at the earliest.

“We’re just going to take it easy with Claude,” Holmgren said. “We’ll probably just give him some time off tomorrow and visit it again on Thursday. Obviously, we’re concerned. Claude is one of our better players and he’s off to a great start this season. We’re going to err on the side of caution here.”

The Flyers now have three players — Giroux, captain Chris Pronger and Brayden Schenn — on the shelf with concussions. Holmgren reiterated the rest of the roster has to pick up the slack if the recent run of success is to be continued.

“We’re missing Claude and Chris and it’s pretty hard to replace those guys,” Holmgren said. “Other guys have played better. We’re just going to have to ask guys to do the same thing. There are never real breaks in the schedule in our league. We just need to keep rallying around each other.”

As for Pronger, who’s sidelined with both concussion symptoms and recent knee surgery, he’s scheduled to meet with neurologists Dr. Joe Maroon and Dr. Mickey Collins in Pittsburgh on Wednesday.

“I think he (Pronger) is looking forward to tomorrow,” Holmgren said. “Maybe he can get some news that’s good from the doctors in Pittsburgh. We have to try to find out what’s going on.”

Holmgren said he isn’t sure why there are so many concussions in the NHL this year, the most noteworthy belonging to superstar Sidney Crosby.

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Holmgren expects to have a tough time keeping Giroux from testing himself on the ice.

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NOTES

Scott Hartnell’s goal was the 200th of his NHL career. His six-game scoring streak is the longest by a Flyer since Jeff Carter scored in six consecutive games from Feb. 8 to March 3, 2010, which surrounded the Vancouver Winter Olympics break. Hartnell has a chance to tie his career-high for overall consecutive games with a point (seven) on Thursday in Montreal. In addition, Hartnell’s streak ties Patric Hornqvist of Nashville as the longest goal-scoring streak in the NHL this season.

Wayne Simmonds has goals in three straight games, the longest streak of his career. . . The Flyers beat the Caps in regulation time for the first time in 10 games, dating back to Feb. 24, 2009. The Caps were 7-0-3 against the Flyers in 10 games since then. . . This is just the fourth time in 24 games against the Flyers that Alex Ovechkin has not recorded a point. . . Jody Shelley recorded an assist tonight, which was his first point since he scored a goal on Jan. 14, 2011 at Atlanta.

The Flyers’ 11-3-1 road mark is the first time they have recorded 11 wins in their first 15 road games. Their previous best was 9-1-5 in the first 15 road games of 1979-80, at the start of their record 35-game (25-0-10) pro sports unbeaten streak. The Flyers are on pace for 30 road wins, which would shatter the franchise record of 24 road wins set in 2002-03. That year, the Flyers were 8-4-3 through their first 15 road games.

VOORHEES — With his front teeth missing, 19-year-old Sean Couturier bears a slight resemblance to a young Bob Clarke.

And with NHL leading scorer Claude Giroux (head injury) expected to miss at least the next two Flyer games, Couturier may have to start playing like Clarke once did to fill the substantial void.

Not that Couturier already hasn’t been playing beyond his years. He’s among the NHL rookie leaders in plus-minus and penalty kill minutes.

That’s why coach Peter Laviolette used Couturier on his first line between Jaromir Jagr and Scott Hartnell in Giroux’s absence to finish up Saturday night’s 5-2 win over Tampa.

And it’s a good bet that Couturier will be back in that spot on Tuesday night when the Flyers visit Washington for their first game against the Capitals this season.

The 6-foot-3, 200-pound Couturier doesn’t seem to rattle easily, so if he’s feeling any nerves about this big game in the nation’s capital, he’s not letting it show.

“Obviously it’s a big spot to be in,” Couturier said after Monday’s practice at the Skate Zone, “but I’m just going to be myself and do whatever I can to help the team.”

Although Couturier hasn’t registered a point in his last 14 games, he’s gotten a big vote of confidence from Laviolette, who’s told him to just stick to what he’s been doing.

“It’s a great chance for me to show what I’ve got offensively,” he said. “But I’ve got to stay myself and play my game and do all the small details that I’ve been doing all year.”

On Monday, general manager Paul Holmgren announced that Giroux was feeling better for a second consecutive day, continues to be monitored by team doctors, but would not be making the two-game trip to Washington and Montreal (Thursday).

Couturier has the kind of talent that can allow him to shift gears and play with the big boys.

“You have to be always ready when they’re out there,” Couturier said of Jagr and Hartnell. “Some passes you don’t expect sometimes those guys can make so I’ve always got to be ready if I play with them.”

Already, Couturier is off to what could be the finest season ever started by a Flyer 18-year-old rookie and now this. A bit overwhelming?

“I haven’t really had much time to think about it,” he said. “Obviously, it’s something special that not a lot of people can live. I’m just trying to enjoy the experience.”

Jagr responded with a laugh when asked to compare Couturier’s play with his own when he was 19.

“The first game was a tough time,” he recalled. “My first game in the NHL was actually in Washington. Everybody was skating this way and I was skating (another way). I was a disaster.”

Laviolette wouldn’t commit to a lineup for D.C. but did use Couturier on the line in practice.

“Just based on the way he finished the game the other night, we thought he did a good job,” Laviolette said, “so we put him there in practice.”

So now the Flyers are without captain Chris Pronger (scheduled to be examined by neurologists in Pittsburgh on Wednesday), Giroux and Brayden Schenn (concussion).

But the Flyers are playing well as a cohesive unit, have won five games in a row and continue to jockey for the conference lead.

Asked about the depleted lineup, Daniel Briere said it’s all about picking up the slack for the fallen.

“Well, we have to keep doing the same thing we’ve done,” he said. “We missed Pronger for many games. It gave other guys a chance to step up, have more responsibilities, the same way we go about our business.

“Yes, Claude is a major part of our offense. We have to play without him. We can’t sit back and feel sorry for ourselves. That’s the last thing that’s going to help us. We have to keep doing the same thing we have, keep working hard … we’re known as a team that works hard, skates hard. We have to keep doing the same thing.”

WASHINGTON — The Flyers keep losing players and winning games. Despite having their two best players, Claude Giroux and Chris Pronger, out of the lineup with concussions, the Flyers rolled over the Washington Caps 5-1 on Tuesday night at the Verizon Center for their sixth straight win.

With Giroux out of the lineup, coach Peter Laviolette went ahead with his plan to put Sean Couturier in Giroux’s spot on the top line with Jaromir Jagr and Scott Hartnell and it worked just fine.

The victory keeps the Flyers in first place in the Eastern Conference.

Practically half the Flyers’ lineup is now made up of youngsters but the Flyers aren’t missing a beat.

That’s a credit to a group that is adhering to the coach’s system.

“I just feel more comfortable here because all the guys are in the right spot, they know the system,” said rookie defenseman Marc-Andre Bourdon, who picked up his first NHL goal. “When I take the puck in the corner, there’s always an outlet for me. I play with Matt Carle, he gives me good passes. It makes it easier.”

The Flyers got goals from Hartnell (extending his streak to six games), Bourdon, Wayne Simmonds, Max Talbot and Jake Voracek, while goaltender Ilya Bryzgalov won his sixth straight decision, just missing a shutout.

“Losing Claude Giroux, that’s a big loss,” Jagr said. “He’s the best player in the league. When you lose someone like that, it affects everybody. But you have to give credit to all the players, for stepping up.

“We wanted to make sure we played well defensively. We lose Giroux, Chris Pronger and we keep winning ... that’s a positive.”

Defensiveman Braydon Coburn likes the way his team continues to play a structured game.

“It’s good that we’ve had this kind of adversity and we’re responding,” he said. “I think it goes back to having guys who want to contribute when someone goes down. The young guys are contributing — it’s a baptism by fire out there.”

The Flyers never gave the Caps a chance in this game.

Hartnell gave the Flyers a 1-0 lead at 16:16 of the first. His fairly innocent shot from the left circle found its way through Tomas Vokoun’s pads.

In the second period, Bourdon scored when his long shot nicked off the stick of Washington defenseman Mathieu Perreault and past Vokoun at 7:33.

At 14:19, the Flyers made it 3-0 when Andrej Meszaros’ point shot was tipped into the net by Simmonds.

Talbot picked up a goal at 17:30 to make it 4-0, then Voracek scored at 5:26 of the third period relief goalie Michael Neuvirth) to complete the Flyer scoring.

Meanwhile, the Flyers defense really kept the high-powered Capitals from getting consistent pressure on Bryzgalov, who has not lost since Nov. 21.

“We miss those injured guys but it’s a team sport,” Kimmo Timonen said. “If everybody is doing their job, we have a good team. It doesn’t matter how many guys are missing. Those are tough injuries but we have to move on.”

Laviolette could find little fault in the effort.

“I was really happy, I thought it was one of our better team games,” Laviolette said. “It was just a complete ... all lines, all defensemen, goaltender (effort). I do think (this game) had some significance. You’re missing Chris, Claude, I do think it’s important to get a win. The guys all chipped in. It was a statement that we can keep winning.”
Giroux out indefinitely with concussion

By Wayne Fish

WASHINGTON — Claude Giroux was skating around the ice back in South Jersey on Tuesday with the faint hope that his head would somehow miraculously clear.

It didn’t. And hours later, the Flyers made the official announcement that the NHL’s leading scorer has a concussion and will be out of action indefinitely.

Contrary to reports from the Flyers that Giroux had been feeling better the past few days, the very opposite was true.

“Claude, over the last few days, the symptoms have gotten gradually a little bit worse,” general manager Paul Holmgren said prior to Tuesday night’s game at the Verizon Center. “He skated a little bit today. Didn’t feel that good. Didn’t feel like himself. If there’s any good news there, after 15 minutes, once he stopped skating, he started to feel a little bit better.”

Better, but not enough to consider skating on Wednesday. Holmgren said Giroux, who was injured in a collision with teammate Wayne Simmonds in Saturday night’s game against Tampa, will not be allowed on the ice until Thursday at the earliest.

“We’re just going to take it easy with Claude,” Holmgren said. “We’ll probably just give him some time off tomorrow and visit it again on Thursday. Obviously, we’re concerned. Claude is one of our better players and he’s off to a great start this season. We’re going to err on the side of caution here.”

The Flyers now have three players — Giroux, captain Chris Pronger and Brayden Schenn — on the shelf with concussions. Holmgren reiterated the rest of the roster has to pick up the slack if the recent run of success is to be continued.

“We’re missing Claude and Chris and it’s pretty hard to replace those guys,” Holmgren said. “Other guys have played better. We’re just going to have to ask guys to do the same thing. There are never real breaks in the schedule in our league. We just need to keep rallying around each other.”

As for Pronger, who’s sidelined with both concussion symptoms and recent knee surgery, he’s scheduled to meet with neurologists Dr. Joe Maroon and Dr. Mickey Collins in Pittsburgh on Wednesday.

“I think he (Pronger) is looking forward to tomorrow,” Holmgren said. “Maybe he can get some news that’s good from the doctors in Pittsburgh. We have to try to find out what’s going on.”

Holmgren said he isn’t sure why there are so many concussions in the NHL this year, the most noteworthy belonging to superstar Sidney Crosby.

“I don’t know,” he said. “If you look at the league this year, I think concussions are down from last year. Sidney is the best player in the league and it’s probably raised the awareness, I guess. The protocol we use to treat these players has changed. I think that’s a good thing, we’re looking after the players.”

Holmgren expects to have a tough time keeping Giroux from testing himself on the ice.

“He’s a stubborn guy, he wants to get back in the lineup,” Holmgren said. “We might just have to pull the reins in on him. We talk a lot during the day to see how he’s doing. So much of it comes down to how the player feels. There are times when Claude feels good and times when he doesn’t.”

Holmgren said Giroux took a baseline test on Monday and “it was not that bad.”

Scott Hartnell, Giroux’s linemate, said he suffered two memorable concussion-causing incidents early in his career in Nashville. He learned the hard way how not to put himself at risk.

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Giroux feels better, to be re-evaluated Monday

By Wayne Fish Staff writer

Sunday morning looked a little better than Saturday night for Claude Giroux and the Flyers.

Giroux had to leave Saturday night's game against Tampa Bay late in the second period after his head was hit by the knee of teammate Wayne Simmonds.

While the decision to keep Giroux out of the remainder of the game was characterized as "precautionary," the Flyers no doubt are concerned about the possibility of a concussion.

They already have Brayden Schenn on the sidelines with a confirmed concussion and captain Chris Pronger is experiencing concussion-like symptoms.

General manager Paul Holmgren gave an upbeat report on Giroux late Sunday afternoon.

"Claude felt better this morning," Holmgren reported through the team's public relations department. "He will be evaluated again tomorrow (Monday) morning."

Giroux leads the National Hockey League in scoring with 39 points and his presence in the lineup is vital.

"He's our best player," linemate Scott Hartnell said. "He's a big catalyst for us. He's so strong with pucks. He's great defensively. We know what he can do offensively as well. Obviously, if he is out, we're going to miss him big time."

Holmgren also said that goaltender Ilya Bryzgalov, who left Saturday night's game midway through the third period with an unspecified injury, should be available for duty in Tuesday night's game at Washington.

If Giroux is unable to play against the Capitals, the Flyers have a spare forward (Jody Shelley was a healthy scratch Saturday night) or could call someone up from Adirondack.

But the Flyers obviously are hoping that this is a short-term thing for Giroux.

At the same time, they want to make sure he's healthy before a return.

"You look around the league the last few years, it is a scary injury, starting with Sidney Crosby," Daniel Briere said. "We want to be on the safe side. You want to hope that it is not the same thing. After a day or two he is going to feel better and ready to go back."

Giroux doesn't get injured often so this is sort of new territory for the Flyers.

"Claude has been playing on a different stratosphere here for us," Holmgren said, "so it obviously hurts."

Snider into U.S. Hall

Flyers owner Ed Snider, who brought hockey to Philadelphia in 1967, will be inducted into the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame in ceremonies in Chicago on Monday night.

In an interview on NHL commissioner Gary Bettman's satellite radio program, Snider said he was honored to be recognized.

"Well, I am very honored to be inducted into the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame because I have been involved in hockey in the United States since 1967," Snider said. "When I started, there were six U.S. players in the league and now there are well over 200. We have seen it grow tremendously, not only at the NHL level, but at the amateur ranks, the college ranks and throughout the United States.

"The organization has done a great job and I am glad to be recognized as one of the people that helped U.S. Hockey grow."

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Flyers brass finally calls Giroux ‘concussed’

By ANTHONY J. SANFILIPPO
asanfilippo@delcotimes.com

WASHINGTON — In less than 24 hours, the news about Claude Giroux’s head injury went from typically upbeat to worrisome.

His diagnosis after he was injured Saturday night went from nothing to worry about to a concussion, and then word came via a confirmed Internet report that Giroux had been in a car accident earlier that day.

The sum of all those parts of the equation is Giroux, the NHL’s leading scorer heading into play Tuesday, is out of action indefinitely, joining captain Chris Pronger and rookie Brayden Schenn with similar maladies.

“Claude reported not feeling very good today,” general manager Paul Holmgren said. “Over the past few days, his symptoms have gradually gotten worse. He will be out indefinitely with a concussion.”

Giroux was kneed in the back of the head by teammate Wayne Simmonds, on a strange play in which Simmonds attempted to leap over the fallen Giroux to avoid a collision.

Holmgren said Giroux is also dealing with symptoms akin to whiplash, which brought about a question about an alleged car accident Saturday afternoon involving Giroux.

A report on crossingbroad.com included a photo of a fender bender outside of McFadden’s at Citizen’s Bank Park with a car that supposedly belonged to Giroux.

There was no official confirmation of the incident until Holmgren said Tuesday the report was true.

However, Holmgren was quick to point out that the accident had nothing to do with the injury suffered that night by Giroux, and aside from being coincidental the only thing that the two incidents have in common is it proved Giroux had a bad day.

Nevertheless, the Flyers have three players out with concussions, and when you look around the league and see players like Pittsburgh’s Sidney Crosby and Kris Letang and New York’s Marc Staal still dealing with long-term concussion-related problems, head injuries are seemingly becoming epidemic.

“Concussions in the league are down this year from last year,” Holmgren said. “Sidney’s injury has raised the awareness in the league. The protocol has changed with the way we treat players. That’s a good thing… I’d like to believe it is more awareness (than anything else).”

Except that concussions have been problematic in Philadelphia for the better part of the last 15 years. Eric Lindros. Jeremy Roenick. Keith Primeau. Simon Gagne. Ian Laperriere. The list is long.

And now the Flyers have to play without their best players, one on offense and one on defense for an extended period of time.

“The guys have responded well to everything in general, I guess,” Peter Laviolette said. “Whether it’s the schedule or injury or youth or change, whatever it might be. The guys we put into the lineup have gone out and played hard every night. We haven’t won every game. Certainly, there’s been a consistent effort.”

There has, and the Flyers took their five-game win streak and put it on the line Tuesday against an inconsistent Washington team.

If there’s one thing this Flyers team has been, it’s resilient, and that can go a long way toward success.

Consider last season’s Pittsburgh Penguins finished tied with the Flyers in points atop the Atlantic Division largely without their two best players, Crosby and Evgeni Malkin.

“It’s been awesome,” Jody Shelley said of the way the Flyers have responded to adversity. “All teams want to have that. All teams wonder what happens when you’re down. What happens when things are bad and guys are missing.

“We haven’t spent any time thinking or talking about it as far as Pronger and now Giroux and things like that. That’s just a test of our system and our young energy, I guess.”

Unlike Pronger, who is seeing the same specialists that treated Crosby at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Giroux will continue to be treated and evaluated by the Flyers doctors. That could mean his symptoms aren’t as bad as Pronger’s, but that’s speculative.

“We’re not going to go that route,” Holmgren said. “This is a little bit different than Pronger and we’re going to stick with our own doctors for now.”

Delaware County Times LOADED: 12.14.2011
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Coburn was in Ovechkin’s hip pocket all night, taking away the Caps’ sniper’s space and was very successful in doing so.

Ovechkin was a non-factor and was held without a point for only the fourth time in 24 career meetings with the Flyers.

“He’s a talented player,” Coburn said. “You try to keep the cap on him if you can, but he’s got a bag full of moves. Sometimes you get lucky.”

It wasn’t luck on Talbot’s goal.

Coburn poked the puck off Ovechkin’s stick, drove him into the boards, then poked a pass to James van Riemsdyk, who set up Talbot for the goal.

Jake Voracek stretched the lead to 5-0 in the third period by deflecting a Matt Carle shot past Michal Neuvirth, who replaced Vokoun in the third period.

Only a late goal by Jeff Halpern prevented Ilya Bryzgalov from getting a shutout, but the Flyers goalie looked strong for the third straight game, turning aside 31 shots.

The Flyers (19-7-3, 41 points) held onto first place in both the Atlantic Division and the Eastern Conference and will look to stretch their win streak to seven games Thursday in Montreal.

No Flyers team has won seven straight since Roman Cechmanek and company won eight in a row in January 2002.

Delaware County Times LOADED: 12.14.2011

No Chris or Claude, but Flyers still cruise over Caps

By ANTHONY SANFILIPPO
asanfilippo@delcotimes.com

WASHINGTON --- With each new hurdle, the Flyers are learning something new about themselves: They’ve gotten really good at clearing them. They’ve already proven they can win games without captain Chris Pronger in the lineup, and Tuesday night showed they could do the same thing without the guy who was the NHL’s leading scorer at the time of his injury.

Claude Giroux, who learned that his concussion problems are exacerbated by exertion following a 15-minute skate Tuesday, joined Pronger among the recently concussed Tuesday in Washington, and the Flyers handled the news quite well.

Using a combination of smothering defense, patience with the puck, relentless offensive pressure and timely goaltending, the Flyers dismantled the Capitals 5-1 at Verizon Center, winning their sixth straight game.

It’s the longest win streak for the Flyers since last November, when they also won six straight.

“I’m really happy with what I thought was one of our better team games,” coach Peter Laviolette said. “I think (the win) had some significance. You’re missing Chris and you have Claude come out of the lineup. I think it’s important to come out and have a good win. There’s a belief in the room that we had to cover for them and all the guys chipped in and really covered for the guys that were missing.

“To me, it was a statement that we can keep winning.”

Scott Hartnell provided the emotional lift early for the Flyers, continuing his torrid scoring pace by notchig his 15th goal on a slapper from north of the left circle.

It was the sixth straight game Hartnell scored a goal, a career best.

“On the road when you get the first goal it’s a nice confidence boost,” defenseman Kimmo Timonen said. “It’s always nice to get the first goal on the road, but the feeling in the locker room and on the bench was really good and everyone was excited. It showed on the ice, too.”

In the second period, the Flyers were superb, controlling the play for a good portion of the period and scoring three times on goals that had either fortunate bounces, deflections or poor goaltending on the part of the Capitals.

Marc-Andre Bourdon scored his first NHL goal on a slap shot from the point that kicked off the stick of Mathieu Perreault, but should have been stopped by Vokoun. It wasn’t.

Jody Shelley, who was inserted into the lineup with Giroux out, picked up an assist on the play and nearly tipped the puck himself before it got past Vokoun.

“It comes down to us having a great group of guys and when somebody goes down, everyone feels like the onus is on them to fill that gap,” Braydon Coburn said. “It’s all about accountability. It’s a pride thing. Guys want to keep what we got going on going.

“It’s been good that we’ve had this kind of adversity and we’re responding. It’s very positive.”

Wayne Simmonds got a deflection goal of his own, re-directing an Andrej Meszaros shot through Vokoun for 3-0.

For Simmonds, it was his eighth goal of the season. He has scored in three straight games and four of the last five, so he is nearly as hot as Hartnell.

Max Talbot got the fourth goal on a shot that went off Vokoun’s glove and in – another shot that the Caps’ goalie should have corralled. But the play was created by the fine defensive work by Coburn, who completely shut down Alex Ovechkin.
WASHINGTON — To get to the pulse of Flyers fans, a good option is to take to social media. Whether you favor Facebook or troll along on Twitter, one of the topics that frequently draws the ire of the faithful is Jody Shelley.

There are those who question his contract, claiming $1.1 million is way too much for an enforcer. There are others who doubt his necessity — as Zac Rinaldo seems fearless enough to take on anyone. Then there are those who even question Shelley’s role — if he’s a fighter, why hasn’t he been in a fight this season?

“His presence on the ice speaks for itself because that’s a courageous job that he has,” coach Peter Laviolette said. “In the locker room he’s a good influence and a positive factor. To get him in the lineup is a big boost for our team.”

Shelley returned to action after missing the previous five games to replace the concussed Claude Giroux. While Shelley will never be mistaken for Giroux, his professionalism and team-oriented focus are a coach’s dream.

“I’ve had conversations with him and I know it’s hard for him to not be in the lineup (regularly),” Laviolette said. “I hate delivering that news to him. But he works hard every day and he sets the right examples for young players.”

For his part, Shelley is enjoying being a mentor to younger players, especially a roster chock-full of rookies.

“It’s part of the job,” he said. “I learned early in my career that if you want to be part of something special you have to be part of it in all ways and not just under the bright lights.

“There’s a point in your career where you learn you’re not a young guy anymore and there’s a lot of guys younger than you. There are guys watching what you do and see how you act and when you do that, you need to embrace it and try to help out in any way you can.”

The Flyers think Shelley is that leader. Not a day goes by when questions about the team’s leadership are fired at Laviolette and he doesn’t include Shelley’s name in a group along with Chris Pronger, Kimmo Timonen, Danny Briere and Jaromir Jagr. That’s some special company for a guy with just 18 career goals in 10 NHL seasons. And the young players are leaning on him.

“I take pride in that and when they come to me it makes me proud,” Shelley said. “I remember I used to look up to guys like Lyle Odelein and Luke Richardson and Adam Foote — guys from the old school. You spend a lot of time watching these guys and how they carried themselves in all situations and you realize how that affects a career.”

NOTES: The Flyers recalled Tom Sestito from the Phantoms just before Tuesday’s game. Sestito likely won’t play with the big club and is just with the team for the next two games to serve out the final two games of a five-game suspension handed out to him in the preseason. … Flyers legends Bill Barber and Bob Clarke will serve as honorary captains for the 2012 AHL All-Star Classic in Atlantic City Jan. 29-30. … The first episode of the HBO reality series “24/7 Road to the Winter Classic,” which follows the Flyers and Rangers every day for a month, debuts tonight at 10 p.m.

Delaware County Times LOADED: 12.14.2011
UPDATE: Flyers say Giroux out with concussion

By ANTHONY J. SANFILIPPO
asanfilippo@delcotimes.com

The following is the latest on Anthony SanFilippo’s blog, In The Room.

UPDATE: After getting kned in the back of the head by his own teammate Saturday, Claude Giroux met with team doctors. He later told general manager Paul Holmgren he was already feeling better.

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Then came Tuesday, and this bombshell from the team:

“Claude reported not feeling very good today,” Holmgren said in yet another statement. “Over the past few days, his symptoms have gradually gotten worse. He will be out indefinitely with a concussion.”

First the captain, and stalwart defenseman Chris Pronger. Then uber-rookie Brayden Schenn, now Giroux, battling for the league scoring title through 28 games and having his name tossed about as a Hart Trophy candidate - all saddled with concussions - or concussion-like symptoms in Pronger’s case - and all out of the lineup indefinitely.

“The guys have responded well to everything in general, I guess,” said coach Peter Laviolette, who while maintaining a stoic exterior is likely kicking chairs and cursing his luck on the inside. “Whether it’s schedule or injury or youth or change, whatever it might be. The guys we put into the lineup have gone out and played hard every night. We haven’t won every game. Certainly, there’s been a consistent effort.”

That there has, and the Flyers take their five-game win streak and put it on the line tonight against an inconsistent Washington team without their two most important players.

But, if there’s one thing this Flyers team has been, it’s resilient, and that can go a long way toward success - consider last season’s Pittsburgh Penguins finished tied with the Flyers point-wise atop the Atlantic Division and did so without their two best players -Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin - for much of the season.

“It’s been awesome,” said Jody Shelley of the way the Flyers have responded to adversity. Shelley, by the way, returns to the lineup tonight. “All teams want to have that. All teams wonder what happens when you’re down. What happens when things are bad and guys are missing. We haven’t spent any time thinking or talking about it as far as Pronger and now Giroux and things like that. That’s just a test of our system and our young energy, I guess. Almost like an ignorance to even spend time looking at that.

“I’ve said it before. The 20 guys wearing the Philadelphia Flyers jersey are representing the organization and we play one way and we’re going to do it again. We don’t sit here and look for a crutch. … Since the first moment in camp, it’s been ‘wow, where did this guy come from?’ Or this guys impresses tonight, this week or this month. You have a situation where you have guys waiting to jump into a spot. And show what they got. Look at Couturier. He’s been waiting on the fourth line, he’s got great talent. He’s done a great job. Now he gets an opportunity.”

As for Giroux, unlike Pronger, who is seeing the same specialists who treated Crosby at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center tomorrow, Giroux will continue to be treated and evaluated by the Flyers doctors - at least for now.

That could mean that the symptoms aren’t as bad as Pronger’s, and a more expedited return could be possible, but that's speculative.

Meanwhile the Flyers will try to keep on keeping on against the Capitals with Ilya Bryzgalov back between the pipes tonight.

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Giroux didn’t practice with his teammates, nor did he board the team’s charter train to Washington for tonight’s rivalry game against the struggling Capitals.

That means the NHL’s leading scorer will miss at least one game – and maybe more – after suffering a blow to the head in the second period of the Flyers’ 5-2 win over Tampa Bay Saturday.

Giroux took a knee in the back of his head by teammate Wayne Simmonds, who was trying to jump over his teammate to avoid a collision.

Giroux went to the bench and a few minutes later went to the locker room and didn’t return.

The Flyers have not given an official diagnosis for Giroux – but it’s almost a sure bet that it’s a concussion.

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It is the first game Giroux will miss this season, and it wouldn’t be a surprise to see Giroux miss at least one more – which would be Thursday in Montreal.

“He seems to get better every day,” close friend Danny Briere said. “From the first night we saw him, yesterday and then today. There seems to be a step up every time. I’m hoping and confident that it won’t be too long.

“We have to keep doing the same thing we’ve done. We missed Chris Pronger for many games. It gave other guys a chance to step up, have more responsibilities … Yes, Claude is a major part of our offense. We have to play without him; we can’t sit back and feel sorry for ourselves. That’s the last thing that’s going to help us. We have to keep doing the same thing we have, keep working hard … we’re known as a team that works hard and skates hard. We have to keep doing the same thing.”

Rookie Sean Couturier will step up from the fourth line to replace Giroux between Jaromir Jagr and Scott Hartnell. He looked comfortable there in the third period against Tampa and had a few chances to score, but wasn’t rewarded with a goal.

Still, getting used to playing with one of the greatest scorers in the history of the game can be a little overwhelming for a 19-year-old.

“When you’re on the bench you say, ‘Wow,’ but when you’re out there you’ve got to be ready for those ‘wow’ plays,” Couturier said. “I just have to be ready and prepare to get some nice passes. If you take a look at the last game, a couple unbelievable passes that I should have scored but I maybe wasn’t as ready as I should, so next game, I’ve got to be ready.”

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Ill

There were no updates on the health of either Pronger or Brayden Schenn. The Flyers said Schenn suffered a mild concussion in Phoenix last week, but he hasn’t been cleared to play. Pronger has been dealing with
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Delaware County Times LOADED: 12.14.2011
Winter Classic Countdown: 20

By the Times Staff

Classic Fact: The first Winter Classic was held in Buffalo. The weather was unusually mild, so NBC had snow imported from Montana to make it look more like winter at Ralph Wilson Stadium. As it turned out, it started snowing for real toward the end of the game.

Classic Fact: OK, there’s a big push that has landed Ron Hextall and Bernie Parent for the Alumni Game, and maybe Wayne Gretzky and Mark Messier. But where’s the push to get Brad Park here?

Classic Fact: Penn State will face Neumann in a men’s outdoor hockey game at Citizens Bank Park on Wednesday, Jan. 4 at 8 p.m. Tix are $10 each.

Classic Fact: A goal by Marco Sturm at 1:57 of overtime gave the Bruins a 2-1 win over the Flyers in the 2010 Winter Classic at Fenway Park.

Classic Fact: Hall of Fame and Stanley Cup-winning goalie Bernie Parent will play for the Flyers alumni in their game against the Rangers’ alums Dec. 31 at Citizens Bank Park.

Delaware County Times LOADED: 12.14.2011
Winter Classic: Flyers set fan fest

Published: Tuesday, December 13, 2011

Can't get a ticket to the Winter Classic? You can still get in on the fun.

The Flyers announced they will hold a three-day Fan Fest at Citizens Bank Park to coincide with the outdoor game pitting the orange and black with their arch-rivals, the New York Rangers.

The Winter Classic Fan Fest is set for New Year's Eve, Dec. 31 through Jan. 2. The Flyers-Rangers Alumni game will take place Dec. 31 as well.

The festival will be set up on Citizens Bank Way between Phillies Drive and Pattison Avenue.

Fans can take part in hockey-themed attractions and compete for prizes and giveaways. And of course there will be tents with tons of Rangers and Flyers Winter Classic gear and memorabilia for sale.

Hours are 9 a.m.-5 p.m. on Dec. 31, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Jan. 1 and then 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Jan. 2, the day of the actual Winter Classic Game.

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III

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Delaware County Times LOADED: 12.14.2011
Flyers brass finally calls Giroux 'concussed'

By ANTHONY J. SANFILIPPO
asanfilippo@delcotimes.com

WASHINGTON — In less than 24 hours, the news about Claude Giroux’s head injury went from typically upbeat to worrisome.

His diagnosis after he was injured Saturday night went from nothing to worry about to a concussion, and then word came via a confirmed Internet report that Giroux had been in a car accident earlier that day.

The sum of all those parts of the equation is Giroux, the NHL’s leading scorer heading into play Tuesday, is out of action indefinitely, joining captain Chris Pronger and rookie Brayden Schenn with similar maladies.

“Claude reported not feeling very good today,” general manager Paul Holmgren said. “Over the past few days, his symptoms have gradually gotten worse. He will be out indefinitely with a concussion.”

Giroux was kneed in the back of the head by teammate Wayne Simmonds, on a strange play in which Simmonds attempted to leap over the fallen Giroux to avoid a collision.

Holmgren said Giroux is also dealing with symptoms akin to whiplash, which brought about a question about an alleged car accident Saturday afternoon involving Giroux.

A report on crossingbroad.com included a photo of a fender bender outside of McFadden’s at Citizen’s Bank Park with a car that supposedly belonged to Giroux.

There was no official confirmation of the incident until Holmgren said Tuesday the report was true.

However, Holmgren was quick to point out that the accident had nothing to do with the injury suffered that night by Giroux, and aside from being coincidental the only thing that the two incidents have in common is it proved Giroux had a bad day.

Nevertheless, the Flyers have three players out with concussions, and when you look around the league and see players like Pittsburgh’s Sidney Crosby and Kris Letang and New York’s Marc Staal still dealing with long-term concussion-related problems, head injuries are seemingly becoming epidemic.

“Concussions in the league are down this year from last year,” Holmgren said. “Sidney’s injury has raised the awareness in the league. The protocol has changed with the way we treat players. That’s a good thing… I’d like to believe it is more awareness (than anything else).”

Except that concussions have been problematic in Philadelphia for the better part of the last 15 years. Eric Lindros. Jeremy Roenick. Keith Primeau. Simon Gagne. Ian Laperriere. The list is long.

And now the Flyers have to play without their best players, one on offense and one on defense for an extended period of time.

“The guys have responded well to everything in general, I guess,” Peter Laviolette said. “Whether it's the schedule or injury or youth or change, whatever it might be. The guys we put into the lineup have gone out and played hard every night. We haven’t won every game. Certainly, there’s been a consistent effort.”

There has, and the Flyers took their five-game win streak and put it on the line Tuesday against an inconsistent Washington team.

If there’s one thing this Flyers team has been, it’s resilient, and that can go a long way toward success.

Consider last season’s Pittsburgh Penguins finished tied with the Flyers in points atop the Atlantic Division largely without their two best players, Crosby and Evgeni Malkin.
No Chris or Claude, but Flyers still cruise over Caps

By ANTHONY SANFILIPPO
asanfilippo@delcotimes.com

WASHINGTON — With each new hurdle, the Flyers are learning something new about themselves: They’ve gotten really good at clearing them.

They’ve already proven they can win games without captain Chris Pronger in the lineup, and Tuesday night showed they could do the same thing without the guy who was the NHL’s leading scorer at the time of his injury.

Claude Giroux, who learned that his concussion problems are exacerbated by exertion following a 15-minute skate Tuesday, joined Pronger among the recently concussed Tuesday in Washington, and the Flyers handled the news quite well.

Using a combination of smothering defense, patience with the puck, relentless offensive pressure and timely goaltending, the Flyers dismantled the Capitals 5-1 at Verizon Center, winning their sixth straight game.

It’s the longest win streak for the Flyers since last November, when they also won six straight.

“I’m really happy with what I thought was one of our better team games,” coach Peter Laviolette said. “I think (the win) had some significance. You’re missing Chris and you have Claude come out of the lineup, I think it’s important to come out and have a good win. There’s a belief in the room that we had to cover for them and all the guys chipped in and really covered for the guys that were missing.

“To me, it was a statement that we can keep winning.”

Scott Hartnell provided the emotional lift early for the Flyers, continuing his torrid scoring pace by notching his 15th goal on a slap shot from north of the left circle.

It was the sixth straight game Hartnell scored a goal, a career best.

“On the road when you get the first goal it’s a nice confidence boost,” defenseman Kimmo Timonen said. “It’s always nice to get the first goal on the road, but the feeling in the locker room and on the bench was really good and everyone was excited. It showed on the ice, too.”

In the second period, the Flyers were superb, controlling the play for a good portion of the period and scoring three times on goals that had either fortunate bounces, deflections or poor goaltending on the part of the Capitals.

Marc-Andre Bourdon scored his first NHL goal on a slap shot from the point that kicked off the stick of Mathieu Perreault, but should have been stopped by Vokoun. It wasn’t.

Jody Shelley, who was inserted into the lineup with Giroux out, picked up an assist on the play and nearly tipped the puck himself before it got past Vokoun.

“It comes down to us having a great group of guys and when somebody goes down, everyone feels like the onus is on them to fill that gap,” Braydon Coburn said. “It’s all about accountability. It’s a pride thing. Guys want to keep what we got going on going.

“It’s been good that we’ve had this kind of adversity and we’re responding. It’s very positive.”

Wayne Simmonds got a deflection goal of his own, re-directing an Andrej Meszaros shot through Vokoun for 3-0.

For Simmonds, it was his eighth goal of the season. He has scored in three straight games and four of the last five, so he is nearly as hot as Hartnell.

Max Talbot got the fourth goal on a shot that went off Vokoun’s glove and in – another shot that the Caps’ goalie should have corralled. But the play was created by the fine defensive work by Coburn, who completely shut down Alex Ovechkin.

Coburn was in Ovechkin’s hip pocket all night, taking away the Caps’ sniper’s space and was very successful in doing so.

Ovechkin was a non-factor and was held without a point for only the fourth time in 24 career meetings with the Flyers.

“He’s a talented player,” Coburn said. “You try to keep the cap on him if you can, but he’s got a bag full of moves. Sometimes you get lucky.”

It wasn’t luck on Talbot’s goal.

Coburn poked the puck off Ovechkin’s stick, drove him into the boards, then poked a pass to James van Riemsdyk, who set up Talbot for the goal.

Jake Voracek stretched the lead to 5-0 in the third period by deflecting a Matt Carle shot past Michal Neuvirth, who replaced Vokoun in the third period.

Only a late goal by Jeff Halpern prevented Ilya Bryzgalov from getting a shutout, but the Flyers goalie looked strong for the third straight game, turning aside 31 shots.

The Flyers (19-7-3, 41 points) held onto first place in both the Atlantic Division and the Eastern Conference and will look to stretch their win streak to seven games Thursday in Montreal.

No Flyers team has won seven straight since Roman Cechmanek and company won eight in a row in January 2002.

Delaware County Times LOADED: 12.14.2011
Flyers crush Caps for sixth straight victory

December 13, 2011, 9:26 pm

WASHINGTON – On a Tuesday when the Flyers found they won’t have Claude Giroux’s services for a while – out indefinitely with a concussion – it was business as usual for Peter Laviolette’s team.

Spreading the scoring wealth across the board, the Flyers cruised to a 5-1 victory over the hapless Capitals at Verizon Center for their sixth straight victory.

Thirteen Flyers posted at least a point.

“It says a lot about this team,” said Jaromir Jagr. “I wasn’t very confident about this game when we lost G – we lost the best player in the league.

“It’s not easy to play without him. Guys really stepped it up, really good hockey. That’s what you need when you’re missing players.”

Ilya Bryzgalov, who left early in the third period of Saturday’s win against Tampa Bay with a leg injury, was back in net and finished with 31 saves. He’s won six straight, as well.

“Bryz was outstanding in net,” Laviolette said. “He really covered for the guys that we’re missing. To me it was a bit of a statement that we can keep winning.”

“I thought it was one of our better team games, start to finish. All lines, all defensemen, goaltender. Everybody was going. I was really happy with it.”

They are missing five players with injuries.

“It had some significance,” Laviolette said of the victory. “You’re missing Chris [Pronger], Claude, the leading scorer in the league, I do think it’s important to come out and play a good game and get a win. There’s a belief in the room.”

Nothing seems to rattle the Flyers these days.

“It’s been good that we’ve had this kind of adversity and we’re responding,” Braydon Coburn said. “It’s very positive. It comes back to great guys in the room and having pride and guys who step up when others go down.”

Bryzgalov lost his shutout with six minutes left when Dennis Wideman’s point drive nicked off his glove and Jeff Halpern iced the rebound. Yet, Philly’s favorite Russian seemed very relaxed in net, while keeping rebounds out of harm’s way.

Meanwhile, Dale Hunter’s Caps played a trap, totally unsuited for the likes of Alex Ovechkin and Alexander Semin. Instead of attacking the Flyers with speed, they sat back.

Even Kimmo Timonen said “that line” seems misused playing a 1-2-2.

“These guys are very explosive players,” he said.

And they got scorched.

Ovechkin and Semin were a combined minus-five without a point.

“It’s nice when you don’t let [Ovechkin] score,” Bryzgalov said. “I heard lots of things about him like the media go tough on him.

“He’s a great player and may be hitting a hard time in his career. Let him be, let him relax. Maybe he is carrying too much pressure and blaming himself. But he’s a great player.”

While Bryzgalov was stellar his counter-part, Tomáš Vokoun yielded two Mister Softees.

After a strong Caps’ power play late in the first period, Scott Hartnell took a pass from Jagr on the wing and beat Vokoun through the five-hole. It was a deflating moment for Washington.

It was Hartnell’s 200th career goal. He’s 400-plus from Jagr, but … since moving to the first line in October 22 games ago, Hartnell has 23 points and has scored a goal in six consecutive games for the Flyers.

On this night, rookie Sean Couturier centered Hartnell and Jagr in Giroux’s absence.

Jody Shelley helped the Flyers to a 2-0 lead in the second period, screening out Vokoun on Marc-Andre Bourdon’s shot from the point.

The rookie defenseman wristed a knuckleball that nicked off a Caps center Mathieu Perreault’s stick for Bourdon’s first NHL goal.

“I was happy, but I didn’t even know it was me who scored,” Bourdon admitted. “I shot the puck and I thought maybe it tipped off one of their guys or thought maybe Shelley scored. But I was happy we scored.”

Bourdon has played a tight, physical, yet simple game since being called up from the Phantoms and paired with Matt Carle.

Like Hartnell, winger Wayne Simmonds has had a hot stick lately, as well. He pocketed his fourth goal in five games at 14:19 by redirecting Andrej Meszaros’ point drive to make it 3-0.

That’s two games in succession where the Flyers led by a 3-0 count.

Vokoun wasn’t the only one embarrassed in this one.

With three minutes left in the period, Ovechkin, who often has dominating performances against the Flyers, came up the left boards, tried a fancy move and was stripped of the puck by Coburn.

Off transition just seconds later, Max Ta包容让 one go in the high slot through traffic to make it 4-0. Much like Bourdon’s shot, it was knuckler.

Ever done that before to Ovie?

“I can’t remember,” Coburn replied. “He’s a talented player. You try to keep the best cap him and he has a bag full of moves. Got lucky.”

Hunter pulled Vokoun for Michal Neuvirth to start the third period.

The Flyers added a fifth goal early in the third period on Jakub Voracek’s first goal of the month on a tip of Carle’s point shot.

“The feeling in the locker room was good the whole game, everyone on the bench was excited,” Timonen said. “I think it showed on the ice.”

Flyers may have to rein in antsy Giroux

WASHINGTON -- Although he has been diagnosed with a concussion, Claude Giroux skated Monday and Tuesday. The NHL’s leading scorer seems to be pushing hard for a return to the lineup even though common sense says he should exercise caution.

Just look west to Sidney Crosby for an example, there.

“He’s a stubborn guy and wants to be back,” general manager Paul Holmgren said Tuesday night of his star center. “We may have to pull in the reins.”

Holmgren said Giroux has had good and bad days and conceded that things have “gradually gotten worse.”

“I don't know if there is any good news in this except that after 15 minutes he started to feel better,” Holmgren said.

“We’re going to take it easy with Claude and give him some time off [Wednesday] and revisit it again on Thursday.

“Obviously, we’re concerned. Claude is one of our better players. He’s off to a great start this season. We’re going to err on the side of caution.”

Holmgren said there is no need for him to do anything in terms of his lineup, even though he is missing five players.

The Flyers have not only held their own in the standings, they have also climbed to the No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference.

“We’re missing Claude and Chris Pronger, it's pretty hard to replace those guys,” Holmgren said. “You make a point that other guys have played better. We’re just going to have to ask guys to do the same thing.

“We got a tough opponent tonight, a tough game in Montreal a couple nights from now and then Boston at home. So the schedule, there’s no real breaks in our schedule … We need to continue to rally around each other.”

Holmgren said, for now, Giroux would not be seeking an outside opinion like Pronger, who will be examined by two neurologists in Pittsburgh on Wednesday to determine whether he is concussed and why he hasn’t seen significant improvement in his overall sluggishness.

Holmgren said Pronger “seemed better” Tuesday and was looking forward to getting some answers in Pittsburgh. He also said the defenseman’s surgically-repaired left knee continues to make progress.

Comc Enforcer Shelley returns to lineup vs. Caps

WASHINGTON -- Heeeee's back.

After sitting out five games as a healthy scratch, Jody Shelley makes his return to the Flyers lineup tonight against the Capitals.

Born of necessity given the news that Claude Giroux will be out indefinitely with a concussion.

Shelley has played sporadic minutes in just 10 games this season.

“His presence on the ice speaks for itself,” coach Peter Laviolette said. “The way he plays the game, it’s a courageous job he has. In the locker room, he is a good influence. He can be a positive factor in the room. To get him in the lineup can be a boost for our team.”

Shelley says his yo-yo existence is "just part of the job."

“You learn early in your career, if you want to be part of something, you have to be part of it in all ways,” Shelley said.

“Not just under the bright lights. You got to be ready and prepared, stay motivated and just be ready. That's just part of the job.”

Perhaps because he has averaged just 4:31 this season when he does play, Shelley still doesn’t have a fight.

That figures to change at some point.ast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.14.2011
Flyers alumni to practice before Winter Classic

December 13, 2011, 5:03 pm

Plenty of Flyers fans are more excited for the Winter Classic Alumni Game than for the actual Winter Classic, and I certainly can't blame them.

As a child of the '90s (for the most part), I grew up idolizing players like John LeClair, Eric Lindros and Ron Hextall, to name just a few. But I understand the fear that a number of fans have expressed: that the Alumni Game is one of those ideas that's better in theory than in practice.

Think about it: middle-aged, sometimes out-of-shape former hockey players, some of whom haven't skated much in years? The Alumni Game could be great ... or it could play out much like a beer league hockey game: slow and ugly, in some ways more about the beverages enjoyed after the game (or during, for those in the bleachers) than the game itself.

For those with such concerns, I've got some news that may alleviate fears just a bit: The NHL released its schedule of media activities for the weeks leading up to the Winter Classic, and one event in particular stood out to this reporter: the Flyers alumni are listed as having a practice at the Skate Zone in Voorhees (the Flyers’ practice facility) on Dec. 30 at 4 p.m.

There's no word yet whether the event is open to the public, but if you were a Flyers fan of the '70s ... or '80s ... or '90s ... Well, you might want to mark your calendars. Especially if you weren't able to score tickets to the game itself.

The Alumni Game will be played at Citizens Bank Park on Dec. 31 (New Year's Eve) at 1 p.m. And you can bet that I'll be there.

Clarke, Barber to serve as honorary captains

December 13, 2011, 4:04 pm

Former Flyer greats Bobby Clarke and Bill Barber will be reunited on Dec. 31 at Citizens Bank Park when they skate for the Flyers in the Winter Classic Alumni game.

In addition to that, Clarke and Barber will serve as honorary captains at the 2012 AHL All-Star Classic on Jan. 29-30 at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City, N.J.

Each year, the All-Star Classic honorary captains stand on the team benches during the Skills Competition and All-Star Game, and are recognized for their careers at the annual AHL Hall of Fame Inductions and Awards Ceremony.

Clarke played his entire 15-year professional career with the Flyers, registering 1,210 points and three NHL MVP awards while captaining the orange and black to two Stanley Cup titles.

As for Barber, he began his professional career with the AHL’s Richmond Robins in 1972 before playing 12 seasons with the Flyers. He appeared in six NHL All-Star games, won two Stanley Cups and retired with 420 goals for the Flyers, a franchise record.

Tickets for the 2012 AHL All-Star Classic are on sale now at the Boardwalk Hall box office and all Ticketmaster locations.

The skills competition will take place at 3 p.m. on Sunday, Jan. 29 and the All-Star game will start at 7 p.m. on Monday, Jan. 30.

Of the 562 players to take part in the AHL All-Star Classic since 1995, more than 93 percent have competed in the NHL, including current Flyer Danny Briere.

Last season, defenseman Erik Gustafsson served as the only representative from the Adirondack Phantoms in the 2011 AHL All-Star Classic.

Giroux’s concussion another test for resilient Flyers

WASHINGTON -- Once again, the worst case scenario for the Flyers has unfolded: another player lost to a confirmed concussion.

Flyers general manager Paul Holmgren was hoping Monday night in Chicago that Giroux, who was accidentally kneed in the head Saturday by teammate Wayne Simmonds, was suffering only from whiplash.

That changed Tuesday morning when Holmgren announced that Giroux wasn’t feeling very good, that his symptoms had worsened, and that is now out indefinitely with a concussion (see story).

Giroux, the NHL overall points leader with 39, also leads the team in goals (16) and assists (23). He’s second on the team in power-play goals with five.

Holmgren, who said Monday that Giroux had been making steady progress and feeling better, said in his statement today that his symptoms had gotten gradually worse.

As has been the case all season, the Flyers shrugged their shoulders and went on. Truth is, despite a mounting list of casualties, nothing has been able to fully stop them.

“The guys have responded well to everything in general, I guess,” coach Peter Laviolette said. “Whether it’s schedule or injury or youth or change, whatever it might be. The guys we put into the lineup have gone out and played hard every night. We haven’t won every game. Certainly, there’s been a consistent effort.”

Though the players in the dressing room suspected the worst, they didn’t know until the media informed them that Giroux was out indefinitely.

“I had no clue,” Danny Briere said. “For us, we take it one game at a time. We can’t look too far ahead. We’ll deal with whatever is in front of us. That is all we can do.”

Enforcer Jody Shelley, goes back into the lineup tonight against the Capitals after a five-game absence as a healthy scratch, while rookie Sean Couturier, for the foreseeable future, replaces Giroux between Scott Hartnell and Jaromir Jagr.

The Flyers have been remarkably resilient this season, overcoming the losses of Chris Pronger, which is on-going, James van Riemsdyk, Matt Read, Brayden Schenn, Erik Gustafsson, Andreas Lilja … you get the idea.

“You look at the best teams over the years, most of them have had to deal with injuries and it’s how you react to them,” Briere said. “That’s what says a lot about your team. You don’t see teams rely on one or two guys these days to dominate. You can have 2-3 superstars on a team but it’s your depth players that make a difference.”

The Flyers are 10-4-1 without Pronger this season and have won five in succession without him.

With Pronger and sixth man Lilja out, they’ve imported Marc-Andre Bourdon and Kevin Marshall into the lineup. While you can tell they aren’t as strong on the penalty kill and lack Pronger’s experience on the power play, the Flyers have overcome.

Actually, the power play has risen in the rankings in the past two weeks with a depleted lineup.

They lose Schenn, but there’s Harry Zolniercyztk to take his place.

“We wouldn’t be in the same position if we had to play without Pronger and Giroux the entire year,” Briere said.

For the short while, however, the Flyers are making due and they’re perched as the No. 1 team in the Eastern Conference, too.

“You can do it for stretches here and there and that’s when your depth comes into play,” Briere said. “Look at our third and fourth line and how valuable these guys have been this year. That tells you a lot about our team.”

The Flyers won against Tampa Bay without Pronger, without Giroux and without No. 1 goalie Ilya Bryzgalov, who got hurt in the third period left the game but will make his sixth straight start against the Caps.

“It’s been awesome,” Shelley said the club’s resiliency. “All teams want to have that. All teams wonder what happens when you’re down. What happens when things are bad and guys are missing. We haven’t spent any time thinking or talking about it as far as Pronger and now G and things like that. That’s just a test of our system and our young energy, I guess. Almost like an ignorance to even spend time looking at that.

“I’ve said it before. The 20 guys wearing the Philadelphia Flyers jersey is representing the organization and we play one way and we’re going to do it again. We don’t sit here and look for a crutch. … Since the first moment in camp, it’s been ‘wow, where did this guy come from?’ Or this guy impresses tonight, this week or this month.

“You have a situation where you have guys waiting to jump into a slot. And show what they got. Look at Couturier. He’s been waiting on the fourth line, he’s got great talent. He’s done a great job. Now he gets an opportunity. (see story)

So far this season, the Flyers have lost 68 man games to injury.

Tonight's game notes: Flyers vs. Capitals

Giroux is emerging as the newest "Broad Street Bully"

Flyers vs. Capitals, 7 p.m., CSN

Records
Flyers: 18-7-3 (First in Atlantic Division, First in Eastern Conference)
Capitals: 15-12-1 (Second in Southeast Division, Eighth in Eastern Conference)

Previous games
The Flyers are coming off a 5-2 triumph against the Lightning on Saturday night. Six Flyers had two points apiece that night, including Claude Giroux (two assists) and Jaromir Jagr (goal, assist).

Washington won 4-2 over Toronto on Friday thanks to Dennis Wideman, a veteran defenseman who recorded two goals and two assists for a four-point night.

Who's hot?
Scott Hartnell has scored in five straight games for the Flyers, while Danny Briere has two goals and five assists in five games this month.

For Washington, Nicklas Backstrom has a goal and an assist in each of his last two games.

Storylines
The Flyers are looking for their sixth straight victory, though they'll have to do it without Giroux.

Sean Couturier will be taking Giroux's spot on the top line, flanked by Jaromir Jagr and Scott Hartnell. Couturier doesn't have a point in his last 14 games.

The Caps are 7-0-3 in their last 10 games vs. Philadelphia.

In net
Ilya Bryzgalov will start in goal for the Flyers.

Injuries
Flyers: Chris Pronger (concussion-like symptoms, knee), Andreas Lilja (ankle), Brayden Schenn (mild concussion), Erik Gustafsson (wrist), Claude Giroux (head), Ilya Bryzgalov (lower-body)
Capitals: Matt Hendricks (knee), Mike Green (groin), Jay Beagle (concussion-like symptoms), Tom Poti (groin)

Sound off
On a scale of 1-10, how concerned are you about Claude Giroux's head injury?

Jackson's Five: Flyers put league on notice

JIM JACKSON

The middle of December can be a time when the NHL season drags a little, far enough removed from early season excitement, yet too far away from the race for the playoff spots in earnest. However, this particular December has presented us with many notable developments to maintain our full interest in the Flyers.

Here are five that come to mind, in no particular order:

Flyers climb to top of east
No trophies are handed out for team performances roughly one third of the way into a season. No postseason berths are awarded, either. But the Flyers caught the attention of the rest of the hockey world by surging to the top spot in the Eastern Conference last week and deservedly so. Given their circumstances, it is no small accomplishment.

The Flyers completely transformed their roster over the summer. A slow-to-middling start to the season could have been completely understood. After all, an adjustment period would transpire right? Well, maybe not so much.

Instead, despite using 10 rookies, losing Chris Pronger for an extended period and getting inconsistent goaltending, there are the Flyers looking down at the rest of a very competitive Eastern Conference. Peter Laviolette, his staff and the players deserve a lot of credit for this. The trick is trying to maintain that spot over the coming months.

Ed Snider's well-deserved honor
Flyers' Chairman Ed Snider's induction into the United States Hockey Hall of Fame this week gives us another opportunity to appreciate all that he has done for the sport he has come to love. It should never be forgotten.

Of course, he risked his financial well-being to bring the NHL to Philadelphia back in 1967. Anyone who has worked in the organization or even become a fan of this team will always owe Snider for that alone.

Without the courage of his conviction back then, what has become one of the league's model franchises might never have evolved.

Furthermore, he has run the franchise with his trademark passion, always with the players, past and present, in mind. He has taken care of them on and off the ice, making Philadelphia a preferred landing spot for so many players. His stamp is all over it.

His more recent prized achievement has been the development of the Ed Snider Youth Hockey Foundation. With it, he takes the sport he loves and gives kids a chance to experience it. It's a win-win situation. He helps grow the sport, while giving kids a safe, fun recreational alternative.

Snider's legacy was already firmly entrenched with his Flyers' accomplishments. But somehow, he found a way to enhance it further with the ESYHF. It's only appropriate that the US Hockey Hall of Fame acknowledges that.

24/7 Arrives
The buildup for the Bridgestone Winter Classic has been going on for quite some time. But the anticipation of the event will ramp up measurably this week as the first installment of HBO's 24/7 Flyers-Rangers airs. If the production value is even close to last year's four-part series on the Penguins and Capitals, we are in for quite a treat.

My hunch is the ample animosity that exists between the two rivals will only intensify over the next three weeks. We will also probably learn some things about players and coaches on both sides of the ledger. It should be fascinating.

Realignment
Last week's announcement of the owners' plans to realign the NHL certainly got people talking. Why wouldn't it? When implemented, it will drastically alter the landscape of the league.

In general, I like the new setup. From a Flyers' standpoint, their conference/division keeps them seeing most of their top rivals on a regular basis in the regular season and in all likelihood, more often in the playoffs. That will enhance those rivalries and fan interest in the process. After all, familiarity does tend to breed contempt.

I also approve of fans in each NHL city getting at least one opportunity per season of seeing every team in the league in their home building. It will mean more travel for some clubs, particularly in the East, but from a league standpoint, it's worth it.

I'm not completely sure about the rumblings I'm hearing about re-seeding in the playoffs after the first two rounds. I'm not sure doing away with the historical relevance of East-West Conference championships is worth the 1-4, 2-3 formula for the league semifinals.

In general, though, the realignment plan has me excited for next season. Change isn't always necessarily good. In this case, I think it is.

Concussion Epidemic
Unfortunately, not all of the December developments are positive ones. With news of possible head injuries to Pronger, Brayden Schenn and Claude Giroux (later revealed by general manager Paul Holmgren to be a neck problem), the Flyers have certainly been thrown into the growing concern over concussions in hockey.

The debate over whether head injuries are actually more prevalent in today's game or whether we just know more about them and have a heightened sensitivity can rage on. The fact of the matter is far too many players are being diagnosed with concussions night in and night out. Studies seem to indicate the numbers are down, but when players like Sidney Crosby and Pronger are seeing concussion doctors instead of playing the game, it hardly seems like the problem is going away.

But, what to do? The league is policing head shots as never before. To go much further and cut away the physicality any more could take away one of the aspects that fans truly enjoy about the sport. This is one December issue that will continue to have tremendous impact in months ahead as well. I'm not sure there is any clear cut solution.

Final Words
There will be no dog days of December this time around. There are simply far too many interesting things going on. It will all climax on Jan. 2 with the Winter Classic at Citizens Bank Park. The assortment of storylines will make for an intriguing holiday season.

Phoenix Coyotes bank on resiliency
Aim vs. Ducks is putting end to 2-game skid

By Jim Gintonio - Dec. 13, 2011 10:08 PM
The Arizona Republic

Resiliency has been one of the Coyotes' key attributes, and it is something they will have to draw on Wednesday night as they try to snap a two-game losing streak.

Regardless of the opponent -- the Anaheim Ducks are struggling to stay out of the NHL basement -- defenseman Keith Yandle knows there are questions to be answered as the Coyotes try to end their slide.

"(Shane Doan) said it ever since I've been here: Great teams don't lose back to back, and good teams don't lose back to back to back," Yandle said. "So it's a thing where we've got to come out and play hard and do everything to get a win.

"It's a game we need to prove to ourselves in the locker room again that we are the team that we are."

The Coyotes know that despite the Ducks' woes, they have talent. And a coaching change, Bruce Boudreau taking over for Randy Carlyle, could provide an impetus.

"They've shaken things up," Yandle said. "They're a team that they're going to be able to turn it on at some point because they are so highly skilled. Not only are they skilled, their skilled guys work hard and want to win. It's a team you can't take lightly, doesn't matter where they are in the standings."

Coach Dave Tippett's main focus is getting his team back winning, but he knows the challenges the Ducks present.

"Their top players are all players that want to put heavy pressure on the offensive zone, lots of cycle, lots of stuff around the net," he said. "They're high-skilled, so I don't see that's going to change, and the players haven't changed."

Looking for answers
The Coyotes' power play is last in the league, having been successful only 10 times in 92 opportunities. It's a combination of not drawing penalties and lack of execution, Tippett said.

"Both are concerns," he said. "The ability to draw penalties means you have to beat people one on one, and your ability to have the power play have an impact on the game, that's what we're looking for. Neither of them have been very strong."

As for execution, Tippett pointed to three good opportunities in a 4-1 loss to Minnesota that fizzled because of misplaying one-timers.

Goalies working
Tippett is unconcerned that neither of his goaltenders, Mike Smith and Jason LaBarbera, has played more than 45 games in one season.

"It's not because they haven't wanted to ... they just haven't had the opportunity," he said. "We're going to give one of them the opportunity. Believe me, every guy wants to play more."

Tippett, who was non-committal on Wednesday night's starter, said both had good sessions with goaltending coach Sean Burke on Monday, "and it was excellent out there today."

Ice chip
Defenseman Rusty Kiesla (lower-body injury) did not skate Tuesday and is not on the trip. This will be the third game he has missed.

The Penguins were given a reprieve from their injuries for at least a night against Detroit. It was feared that centers Evgeni Malkin and Jordan Staal would be unavailable Tuesday against the Red Wings — coach Dan Bylsma labeled each of them as "game-time decisions" before the contest — but both played at Consol Energy Center.

Staal is dealing with a lower-body injury; the reason for Malkin's absence at the morning skate remains unknown. Malkin scored his 11th goal of the season in the first period last night. Since the beginning of the 2006-07 season, the Penguins have never played a game minus centers Sidney Crosby, Malkin and Staal.

Although Malkin and Staal were able to play, some of the Penguins admit that dealing with the seemingly unending stream of injuries is becoming tiresome.

"It's been frustrating," Staal said. "There have been quite a few injuries in the past couple of years. It hasn't gotten much better, but hopefully we're getting them out of the way now."

>> Defenseman Zbynek Michalek, out since Nov. 26 with a concussion, practiced with the Penguins for the second straight day during the morning skate. Michalek said he needs to have "a few practices" under his belt before he returns to the lineup.

>> Defensemen Kris Letang and Robert Bortuzzo, both dealing with concussions, did not partake in the morning skate. It remains unknown when either will be able to return to the lineup.

>> Bylsma said there is no update regarding Crosby's health or when he will resume practicing. He last played Dec. 5 against the Bruins.

Detroit's victory thwarted goalie Marc-Andre Fleury's attempt at his 200th career win.
The Penguins play Friday in Ottawa, and they are hoping for better luck in that contest.
"That's a really good team," Malkin said. "And we just made a couple of mistakes."

Scoring summary

First period

Penguins, 1-0 (19:56): D Brooks Orpik blocked a shot in the direction of RW James Neal, whose pass to C Evgeni Malkin sprung the Penguins to an odd-man rush. Malkin fired a wrist shot from the right circle that beat Detroit G Jimmy Howard to the stick side.

Second period

Red Wings, 1-1 (16:01): LW Todd Bertuzzi worked over D Matt Niskanen behind the net, creating a turnover and setting up C Pavel Datsyuk in the slot. Datsyuk whipped a high, backhand shot past Fleury's stick side.

Third period

Red Wings, 2-1 (5:15): LW Matt Cooke's shorthanded clearing attempt was stopped by the shaft of Datsyuk's stick. Datsyuk then found C Johan Franzen, who buried a shot past Fleury.

Red Wings, 3-1 (15:36): LW Danny Cleary tapped in a pass from RW Chris Conner on a two-on-one.

Red Wings, 4-3 (19:54): With Malkin attempting to play the role of goaltender, Cleary scored an empty-netter.


Two Russian superstars put on a show Monday at Consol Energy Center.

One received an exceptional break, while the other endured total frustration.

Red Wings center Pavel Datsyuk scored a goal and made a miraculous setup of another, while Penguins center Evgeni Malkin came tantalizingly close to a big night in Detroit's 4-1 win.

"Not good luck," Malkin said.

Not at all.

Malkin scored with 4.5 seconds left in the first period to give the Penguins a lead, but he could have had three or four goals against Detroit goalie Jimmy Howard.

In the second period, Malkin's shot trickled through Howard and struck the inside of the post. Malkin then lunged toward the net and slapped a shot toward the empty cage, only to see Howard make a dazzling stick save.

Later in a contest that saw Malkin register nine shots — the second most he has produced in a game this season — Howard made spectacular saves on a rush down the right wing and on a slap shot taken from the center point.

For good measure, Malkin hit the post again in the third period.

"He played extremely well tonight," Penguins left wing Steve Sullivan said. "He had a lot of good chances to score. He really gave us a chance to win. It was nice to see him play like that."

It was nice to see him play at all.

Coach Dan Bylsma said before the game that Malkin, who did not participate in the morning skate, was a "game-time decision."

Malkin never seemed to think that he would not play and said he is not injured.

"I feel good," Malkin said. "He just gave me rest."

Datsyuk must be feeling pretty good about himself.

The star center played a terrific game, including his goal on a backhand shot that evened the game late in the second period.

"He is amazing to watch," Detroit captain Nicklas Lidstrom play. "Just watch him play away from the play, his puck retrieval. He never stops."

When Datsyuk wasn't beating the Penguins with his skill, he was doing so with a touch of luck.

The Penguins were killing defenseman Matt Niskanen's penalty in the third period when left wing Matt Cooke attempted to clear the puck. Datsyuk stopped the puck with the shaft of his stick, even though that wasn't his intention.

"It was by accident," Datsyuk said. "I didn't really do anything."

Accident or not, Datsyuk had just made the game's biggest play and then found center Johan Franzen, who buried the game-winner.

Niskanen endured a rough night. He was knocked off the puck by right wing Todd Bertuzzi, who set up Datsyuk's goal in the second period.

Niskanen wasn't thrilled with the holding call he received in the third period.

"I don't know where he was on the ice," said Niskanen, referring to the official who made the call. "It may have appeared that it was worse than what I was really doing. I got caught in a bad position."

Danny Cleary put the game away with a couple of goals late in the third period.
Red Wings slow down Malkin, Pens at Consol

By Josh Yohe, PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Tuesday, December 13, 2011

Center Evgeni Malkin's curious beginning to the day ended in frustration.
Malkin scored once but later hit two posts and was robbed by Detroit goalie Jimmy Howard, as the Penguins ultimately fell to the Red Wings, 4-1, at Consol Energy Center.

Earlier in the day, Penguins coach Dan Bylsma refused to give details regarding Malkin's absence from the morning skate, simply stating that the star was a game-time decision.

The thought of Malkin missing the game caused great concern, considering that centers Sidney Crosby and Richard Park had already been ruled out and that center Jordan Staal was also questionable.

Malkin was the game's dominant player, scoring with 4.5 seconds left in the first period and coming outrageously close to many other tallies.

With the Penguins ahead 1-0 in the second period, Malkin fired a puck that squirted through Howard and bounced off the inside of the post. With the puck still sitting in front of the cage, Malkin lunged into midair and brushed the puck toward the net, only to see Howard make a stunning stick save.

The Penguins came close to tying the game on many occasions, but they missed by inches.

Even the smallest mistakes against the mighty Red Wings can prove costly, and they were for the Penguins, who showed signs of sloppiness after failing to extend their advantage.

Late in the second period, with the Penguins ahead 1-0, defenseman Matt Niskanen was ridden off the puck behind the boards by right wing Todd Bertuzzi. The seemingly innocent turnover resulted in the game-tying goal a moment later when Bertuzzi found star center Pavel Datsyuk, who buried a backhand shot over Penguins goalie Marc-Andre Fleury.

Another Niskanen mistake — he was called for a holding center Johan Franzen early in the third period — resulted in the go-ahead goal for the Red Wings. Left wing Matt Cooke attempted to clear the puck while the Penguins were shorthanded, but Datsyuk made a wonderful play to keep the puck in Penguins territory, and ultimately found Franzen.

Detroit's Danny Cleary put the game away when he scored on a two-on-one later in the third. Cleary later added an empty-netter.

Malkin certainly had his moments in the third period, but was unable to pull the Penguins even. He clanged another puck off the post and was robbed by Howard on a similar play to the one that resulted in his goal.

Malkin drew a late penalty in the third period and finished with nine shots on goal, which was his second highest total of the season.

This night, however, belonged to the Red Wings, who stopped Fleury from earning the 200th victory of his career.
Penguins fall to Red Wings, 4-1

By Shelly Anderson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Red Wings Johan Franzen celebrates after scoring the go ahead goal in the third period against the Penguins.

The Penguins had a difficult time solving Detroit goaltender Jimmy Howard and fell to the Red Wings, 4-1, tonight at Consol Energy Center in the teams' only meeting of the season.

It was the Penguins' first regulation loss against a Western Conference club. They are now 6-1-3 in those games.

The Penguins took a 1-0 lead with 4.5 seconds left in the first period. Evgeni Malkin raced down the right side on a two-on-one with Chris Kunitz, and Detroit's Brad Stuart defending. From the right dot, Malkin whipped a low shot past goaltender Jimmy Howard on the far side.

Brooks Orpik started the play by blocking a Red Wings shot. James Neal got the puck and sent Malkin on his way.

Malkin had been listed as a game-time decision after missing the morning skate for an undisclosed reason.

The Red Wings tied it, 1-1, at 16:01 of the second period when Pavel Datsyuk rifled a backhand shot from the slot past the right pad of Penguins goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury.

Johan Franzen's power-play goal from the left circle gave Detroit a 2-1 lead at 5:15 of the third period. Datsyuk got the puck to Franzen after he intercepted Matt Cooke's clearing attempt.

Detroit pushed its lead to 3-1 at 15:36 of the third period when Dan Cleary scored off of a centering pass from former Penguin Chris Conner during a three-on-two rush.

Cleary added an empty-net goal with 5.9 seconds left in regulation.

The Penguins next play Friday at Ottawa.

Malkin and Staal in lineup for Penguins vs. Detroit

By Shelly Anderson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Centers Jordan Staal and Evgeni Malkin will be in the lineup tonight when the Penguins play the Detroit Red Wings at Consol Energy Center. Both players had been described as game-time decisions for the lineup. Staal missed the team's previous game because of an unspecified injury. Malkin had no known injuries, but he did not participate in the game-day skate. Coach Dan Bylsma declined to say whether Malkin was dealing with an injury, illness, disciplinary issue, etc.

Read more: http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/11347/1196565-100.stm?cmpid=penguins.xml#ixzz1gU2sz6sr

Penguins Notebook: Adams enters 700 career games club

By Shelly Anderson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Forward Craig Adams became the second Penguins player this season to reach 700 career NHL games when he played Monday night against the Detroit Red Wings at Consol Energy Center.

"I'm proud to have played that long," he said. "I don't think they're going to have any ceremonies or anything, but it's a good one."

Forward Richard Park reached 700 games earlier this season, and forward Pascal Dupuis is one game behind Adams in making that 700 club.

Adams, 34, is with his third NHL club. He was claimed off of waivers by the Penguins in March 2009 and has won Stanley Cup titles with them and with Carolina.

"When you look back over a pretty long career, there are a lot of ups and downs, times when things don't look too good," he said. "You don't know how much longer you're going to keep playing. So to still be going, to feel like I have a role here is a good feeling."

Adams, a Harvard graduate, grew up in Calgary, Alberta, but was born in Brunei. He figures if nothing else, he has the market cornered on guys born in that Southeast Asian sultanate who have won two Cup titles.

"I don't think anyone else from Brunei even has one," he cracked.

Injuries

Detroit's injury list going into the game had two names.

The Penguins had nine -- Sidney Crosby, Kris Letang, Zbynek Michalek, Dustin Jeffrey, Robert Bortuzzo, Ben Lovejoy, Richard Park, Brian Strait and Jordan Staal. And that didn't include center Evgeni Malkin, who missed the morning skate, although he and Staal were in the lineup. And it didn't address Jason Williams, who was recalled Tuesday from the American Hockey League.

Red Wings coach Mike Babcock wasn't taking any delight in what might have been tilted scales.

"I'd like Sid to be playing. Malkin, Staal -- all the best players. Letang," he said. "Those are really high-end players. [Marc-Andre] Fleury in net.

"They've got a real good team here. But what they've done, too, in my opinion, is [general manager] Ray Shero [has] done a good job. He adds more."

Babcock said the Penguins acquisition of James Neal and Matt Niskanen in February is a prime example.

"If you keep adding to your team, you have a chance to stay on top," he said.

Which, Babcock figures, puts a team ahead of the pack.

"The way it works is, if you take your turn, you win the Stanley Cup every 30 years. Most of us are too greedy for that," said Babcock, who led Detroit past the Penguins for the 2008 Stanley Cup before the tables were turned the following year.

Next-best place

Speedy winger Chris Conner had his best season in 2010-11 with the Penguins. He had seven goals, 16 points in 60 games, by far the most he has played in the NHL.

Returning after his contract expired in July didn't work out, but Conner found probably the next-best thing – this native of Livonia, Mich., near Detroit signed with the Red Wings.

"Growing up, I was definitely a Red Wings fan," he said. "I used to go to games there once or twice a year with my dad."

"I was excited to have the opportunity to sign with them. They're a great organization. I'm really happy with the situation I'm in right now."
Penguins' 4-1 loss to Red Wings not as bad as it looks

Detroit, Datsyuk flash just enough brilliance to seize momentum after Malkin scores for 1-0 lead

By Dave Molinari, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Penguins coaching staff will break down the tape of this game, and it will turn up more than a few mistakes.

A poor decision here. A missed assignment there. Some sloppy execution at various times.

They will not, however, find the kind of glaring lapses and breakdowns that might be expected in a typical three-goal loss.

Which simply reinforces the point that Detroit, which beat the Penguins, 4-1, Tuesday night at Consol Energy Center, is not a typical team.

The Red Wings might not be terribly spectacular much of the time, but they are exceptionally efficient and opportunistic. And all of that sound, methodical work is wrapped around an occasional spasm of individual brilliance.

The kind Pavel Datsyuk produced several times over the course of this game.

Like late in the second period, when the Penguins were controlling the play and protecting a 1-0 lead.

That score -- and the game -- changed in the span of a few seconds, as Red Wings forward Todd Bertuzzi knocked Penguins defenseman Matt Niskanen off the puck behind the Penguins goal line and fed it to Datsyuk, who whipped a nasty backhand past goalie Marc-Andre Fleury from the slot.

Datsyuk's goal not only tied the score, but short-circuited the momentum the Penguins had been carrying to that point.

"We felt pretty good about our game until maybe they got their first goal," Niskanen said.

The Penguins presumably felt even worse about it after the Red Wings' second goal, another that had Datsyuk's fingerprints all over it.

This time, the Penguins were killing a holding penalty on Niskanen early in the third when Matt Cooke of the Penguins tried to shoot the puck out of the defensive zone.

Datsyuk knocked it out of the air and slipped it to Johan Franzen, who beat Fleury on the stick side at 5:15 to put the Red Wings in front to stay.

Datsyuk is a rare and wondrous talent, though hardly the only one in this game.

Evgeni Malkin of the Penguins did not participate in the morning skate -- his explanation was that "they just gave me a rest" -- and based on the way he performed a few hours later, the coaching staff might want to make a habit of keeping him away from the ice on game days.

He played 23 minutes, 27 seconds, scored the Penguins' only goal, had at least two shots that hit goalposts after eluding Red Wings goalie Jimmy Howard and accounted for nine of the Penguins' 26 shots on goal.

Malkin was typically awful on faceoffs, losing 16 of 20, but that detracted only slightly from his overall performances.

"Every single time he touched the puck, it seemed like something was happening," Howard said. "He's a great player. There's no way around it. He makes things happen when he's out there."

Malkin got his goal with 4.5 seconds left in the first period, pulling in a pass James Neal had banked off the left-wing boards, then charging into the Detroit end on a two-on-one break with Chris Kunitz.

He used Kunitz as a decoy and threw a shot past Howard for his 11th of the season and a 1-0 lead.

That was the only shot that made it into the net behind Howard, however, as Detroit ran off the final four goals of the game.

After Datsyuk and Franzen had put the Red Wings in front, Daniel Cleary added an insurance goal at 15:36 of the third, then scored into an empty net with 5.9 seconds left in regulation.

Franzen's game-winner was the only power-play goal by either team, as Detroit was 1 for 2 with the extra man while the Penguins failed to score on four chances.

"They get [that Datsyuk] goal to draw even," Penguins coach Dan Bylsma said. "The story line after that is they get a power-play goal and we do not."

Red Wings coach Mike Babcock said his penalty-killers "did a good job in the faceoff circle and shooting lanes, and standing at their blue line and getting pucks out."

Of course, those were just a few of the things Detroit did well over the course of the game. The Red Wings are a perennial power, in part, because they minimize their own errors and exploit the ones the opposition makes, regardless of how few there might be.

"When you break down tape, it's a little easier to look at, knowing that you didn't make as many mistakes as you had in the past," Penguins winger Steve Sullivan said. "But you still have to try to find a way to win."

Dave Molinari: DMolinari@Post-Gazette.com or Twitter @MolinariPG.

DENVER -- The Sharks' 4-3 shootout loss to the Colorado Avalanche on Tuesday night was one of those defeats where the losing team might be able to take comfort in a few positive developments.

Patrick Marleau ended a seven-game drought with a timely goal 22 seconds before the end of regulation to force overtime and salvage a point for San Jose. Dan Boyle scored for only the second time this season. The struggling power play came through for just the second time in its past 29 chances.

But comfort-taking was at a minimum because all that was overshadowed by one aggravating reality:

For a second consecutive game -- and the fifth time this season -- San Jose failed to protect a third-period lead, leaving the Pepsi Center without two points at a time when wins have been very hard to come by for a team with high expectations.

"There was that phase in the third period where we sat back on our heels, and you can't win like that," coach Todd McLellan said. "We have the talent and the ingredients to play on our toes, so we've got to fix that."

The defeat left the Sharks with only two victories in their past nine games and sent them home from their three-game trip with a 0-1-2 record.

Even Boyle, a defenseman relied on to generate offense who had gone 14 games between goals, said the blown lead stood out above all else, including his own two-point night.

"We're not scoring very many goals right now, so we've got to keep teams to one or two," he said. "Second game in a row we got the lead in the third and we gave it away."

Ultimately, the loss came in the fifth round of the shootout when Avalanche rookie defenseman Gabriel Landeskog scored and left wing Brad Winchester didn't.

Until that point, San Jose's Joe Pavelski and Colorado's Milan Hejduk were the only two of eight skaters to beat either Sharks goalie Antti Niemi or Colorado netminder Semyon Varlamov.

Going into the final period, it's not as if San Jose hadn't made its share of mistakes, but the Sharks were still ahead.

Colorado took a 1-0 lead late in the first period when San Jose was caught flat-footed on a line change, and rookie defenseman Stefan Elliott scored after going coast to coast with the puck.

Elliott went back to retrieve it at his own goal line, then skated past Jamie McGinn, around Marleau and left Marc-Edouard Vlasic leaning the wrong way before beating Niemi with quick wrist shot at 19:43.

"We got out and just backed right in," Marleau said in explaining what went wrong. "We didn't get up in the neutral zone in order to force him to make a play. We gave him a lot of room to skate."

San Jose put together a stronger performance in the second period to grab a 2-1 lead going into the final 20 minutes, and Boyle was in the middle of both plays.

On the first, there were nine seconds left in a San Jose power play when Boyle's pass from the blue line found McGinn cruising into the slot for a deft deflection. On the second, a shot by Pavelski caromed into the slot off Colorado forward Paul Stastny, and Boyle was able to pounce on it for a 14-foot wrist shot that found the back of the net.

Then came the problematic third period.

With the teams skating four-on-four, Daniel Winnik took a rebound behind the San Jose net and beat Niemi to the other side for a wraparound at 6:31. And at 11:51, Matt Duchene scored with Sharks defenseman Colin White in the penalty box for holding.

Marleau's goal on a nice setup from Logan Couture came with Niemi on the bench in favor of an extra skater.

The Sharks now find themselves on the cusp of being among the teams on the outside looking in when it comes to the playoffs. Yes, that's months away, but lately the NHL has been rough on coaches whose teams have not been playing up to what management sees as their potential. Four bench bosses have been fired -- including those from both Southern California teams.

But McLellan bristled after the loss to Colorado when asked if he was at the point where he was concerned his team's performance might put him in a similar situation.

"No," he said curtly. "I'm not at that point."

McLellan said before the game that his decision to give his players a day away from the rink Monday was tied to his decision to take away their day off on Dec. 4 after giveaways led to a 5-3 loss at home to the Florida Panthers.

"This was one of our longest stretches without a complete day off," he said. "We lost that when we didn't play well and we brought them to the rink."

A week later, the Sharks were playing the second half of back-to-back games on the road when they lost a third-period lead and the game to the Chicago Blackhawks in overtime Sunday.

"That's the Catch-22," McLellan said. "You try to send a message as a coach that you're not happy with their play, but then it comes back to bite you later on with mental and physical fatigue."

Marleau's late tie good for a Sharks point

Associated Press

For some reason, the Avalanche are just about unbeatable in a shootout, so when Patrick Marleau tied it for the Sharks with 22 seconds left in regulation, a sense of the inevitable might have set in.

Semyon Varlamov made 27 saves, Gabriel Landeskog scored the decisive goal in the shootout and Colorado beat the Sharks 4-3 on Tuesday night.

Matt Duchene, Stefan Elliott and Daniel Winnik had regulation goals for the Avalanche. Milan Hejduk also scored in the shootout.

The Avalanche improved to 5-0 in shootouts this season and are 16-1 since December 2009. Landeskog provided the latest winner when he beat Antti Niemi in the fifth round before Varlamov stopped Brad Winchester to end it.

"I don't think we should have been in that spot to begin with, but it was good to come back with that last-minute goal," Marleau said.

Landeskog, a rookie, got his first chance in a shootout. "I had my plan to come down the right side and kind of go low block," Landeskog said. "Luckily it was open and got the shot off. It was a great feeling when I saw it go in."

Niemi made 30 saves. Dan Boyle had a goal and an assist and Jamie McGinn also scored for the Sharks.

San Jose is 2-5-2 in its last nine games.

"We left on the road four days ago, played three games and only gave up seven goals," Sharks coach Todd McLellan said. "Those are pretty good defensive numbers. You should come home with more than two points."

San Jose trailed 3-2 late and pressed for the equalizer, getting it with 22 seconds left. With Niemi off for an extra skater, Marleau chipped in a pass from Logan Couture to send the game to overtime.

Boyle gave the Sharks the lead with his second goal of the season. He pinched in, picked up Pavelski's rebound between the circles and beat Varlamov with a wrist shot with 6:21 left in the second. But the Sharks couldn't hold the lead.

"Second game in a row we had the lead in the third and we gave it away," Boyle said. "It's something that's going to stick out."

Varlamov leads Avalanche over Sharks 4-3 in SO

AP

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Antti Niemi made 30 saves, Dan Boyle had a goal and an assist and Jamie McGinn and Patrick Marleau also scored for the Sharks. San Jose is 2-5-2 in its last nine games.

Hejduk scored on the first attempt of the shootout and Joe Pavelski tied it in the third round. Landeskog beat Niemi in the fifth round before Varlamov stopped Brad Winchester to end it.

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Duchene made it 3-2 with his 11th goal of the season with 8:09 left.

Winnik made it 2-all with his fourth goal of the season and his first since Nov. 4. He grabbed Erik Johnson's rebound in front of Niemi, skated around the back of the net and stuffed the puck into the open goal with 13:29 left in regulation.

San Jose tied it early in the second on a power play. With TJ Galiardi off for high sticking, Boyle sent a shot toward the Colorado net and McGinn tipped it past Varlamov at the 3:16 mark.

It was McGinn's seventh goal of the season.

Boyle gave the Sharks the lead with his second goal of the season. He pinched in, picked up Pavelski's rebound between the circles and beat Varlamov with a wrist shot with 6:21 left in the second period.

Elliott broke a scoreless tie with a great individual effort late in the first period. The rookie picked up the puck in the Colorado end, skated through the Sharks defense and beat Niemi with a shot from the right circle with 16.6 seconds left. It was Elliott's third goal of the season.

The teams generated few quality chances before Elliott's goal. Both clubs had 11 shots on goal in the period.

Notes: Colorado C Paul Stastny was back in the lineup after missing three games with a torso injury. ... The Sharks' power-play goal was their first in five games and second in the last nine.

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Associated Press

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Has anyone seen Blues' forward Chris Stewart?

By ROGER HENSLEY

QUESTION: Big things were expected from Blues forward Chris Stewart this season. But with just four goals and six assists through 29 games, Stewart has been virtually invisible on the ice. What do you think is the cause for Stewart's struggles and what do you think he needs to do to get back on track?

JEREMY RUTHERFORD

Stewart appears to be thinking too much. In hockey, as perhaps in most sports, when you think too much, you're a step behind the play. He's had his good moments and they happen when he's anticipating the play, moving his feet and getting rid of the puck quickly, whether it be a pass or a shot.

It seems as though his troubles are starting to snowball on him. A lot of Blues, for whatever reason, started to play better after the coaching change, but Stewart hasn't been one of them. I thought he'd be better after returning from his three-game suspension, after a chance to hit the re-set. But outside of a few points, that hasn't happened.

I believe he's got to forget what's happened to this point, quit over-thinking and play the way coach Ken Hitchcock is preaching. Stewart can be a dominant player in his league, as Blues fans saw last year, and there's no way it disappeared over night.

DAN O'NEILL

That is the $64,000 question for the Blues. Stewart has scored 28 goals in back-to-back seasons, but he is on pace to score roughly eight goals this season. One factor could be swelled expectations. He came getting attention as a possible 40-goal scorer, before a season that is a contract year. Hard to ignore that environment, particularly after a slow start.

In addition, he got the early suspension for a bad hit, which adds another fly in the brain ointment.

But it's difficult to pinpoint Stewart's problem because he simply has not been engaged. Coach Ken Hitchcock suggested Stewart needs to move his feet more, and be more unselfish with the puck. That's a nice way of saying he needs to battle for the puck, then battle to keep it instead of tossing it elsewhere. He's one of the biggest guys on the ice on any given shift, yet in terms of physical presence, he has been practically invisible.

What Stewart needs most of all right now is some success. He needs a couple of pucks to hit him in the foot, rear-end, head, earlobe ... wherever, and bounce into the net.

The promising part is if Stewart ever gets going, he can score in bunches, as he did last season when he had 15 goals in 26 games for the Blues. If he ever gets going, the Blues will have an offensive force that they somehow have managed to win 17 of 29 games without.

JEFF GORDON

Hockey is not a complicated sport. To get his game back on track, Chris Stewart needs to MOVE HIS SKATES and get where he needs to be when he needs to be there. He needs to get to opposing defensemen in time to body check them. He needs to get on top of the opposing goaltender to cause havoc. He needs to get back and use his strength to backcheck. Size is a great asset in the NHL, only if the player exploits that size in a disciplined yet robust fashion.

KEVIN WHEELER (Host of “Sports Open Line” on KMOX)

I don't know that there is a specific cause. Cold snaps happen and the most important thing for any player in this kind of situation is to keep pushing. Stewart just needs to keep working, try to contribute in other ways and wait for the hot streak to come.

Between November 4th and February 2nd of last season Stewart scored a total of 2 goals in 18 games. Now, he missed the month of December with a broken hand so that was certainly a contributing factor but even before that he had only scored 2 goals in 12 games during the month of November.
Sobotka expected to miss at least two weeks

By JEREMY RUTHERFORD

The St. Louis Blues played the Calgary Flames in St. Louis, Mo.

Blues forward Vladimir Sobotka will be sidelined at least two weeks after being hit by a shot in the left ankle in Monday's practice.

Sobotka left the team's practice facility on crutches and wearing a protective boot. After tests on his ankle, the Blues say it's not broken and surgery won't be needed, but Sobotka's status won't be known until he's re-evaluated in two weeks.

"It doesn't sound too serious in the sense that he's not a surgical candidate or anything like that," Blues general manager Doug Armstrong said. "But we're going to re-evaluate in a couple of weeks."

The Blues are in the middle of a stretch of four days between games. The team is not practicing today but will return to the ice Wednesday before hosting the New York Rangers on Thursday at Scottrade Center.

Armstrong, who is out of town, said the Blues haven't yet discussed calling anyone up from the club's AHL affiliate to replace Sobotka, who has two goals, 10 points and is a plus-9 this season.

"I'll reconnect with (Blues coach) Ken (Hitchcock) later today or tonight and we'll decide what we want to do ... if we want to bring somebody up and how we'll go about that for tomorrow," Armstrong said.

The Blues have 13 forwards on their roster. Winger Chris Porter was a healthy scratch in Saturday's 1-0 win over San Jose, so Porter could be inserted into the lineup for Sobotka. However, the Blues are also awaiting word on the status of Matt D'Agostini, who suffered a head injury in Saturday's game.

D'Agostini left in the second period after a collision and didn't return to the game. He was tested for a concussion, but acknowledged after the game that he was OK. He didn't practice Monday, but Hitchcock said it was because the club was following the NHL's protocol on players who possibly suffered a concussion.

Although the Blues are off today, D'Agostini was scheduled to skate on his own, see how he felt and possibly return to practice tomorrow.

"All indication are that it was just a procedural thing ... he'll be on the ice today and ready to go tomorrow," Armstrong said.

Blues' Elliott has had an unpredictable career

By JEREMY RUTHERFORD

Ranking the surprising developments in Brian Elliott's hockey career, the goaltender's success in the Blues' crease this season may rank third on the list. Fourth if you count a half-hour conversation with NHL legend Bobby Orr.

Elliott, 26, might never have been drafted had his junior team not played 20 minutes from Ottawa Senators scout Frank Jay, who drove to the rink on nights he was "off" because it was close to his home.

Elliott's name wouldn't have been in the draft had Toronto-area goalie coach Ken Boyce not told him he had nothing to lose. His relationship with Boyce only existed because a chance meeting at a sporting goods store.

Elliott never would have experienced an NCAA championship at Wisconsin if prospect Mike Brodeur, the Badgers' first choice at the position, hadn't lost his college eligibility. And the only reason Elliott was on the school's radar was because he was drafted.

"I'm a big believer that everything happens for a reason," Elliott said. "I never really thought being an NHL goalie wasn't an option, so I kept pushing, almost naive. I never wanted to do anything else. When my dad asked me once why I wanted to be a goalie, I said, 'I don't want to come off the ice. I want to make a difference.'"

Elliott certainly has made a difference with the Blues. Jaroslav Halak has played well recently, but without Elliott, the club would not be sniffing fifth place in the Western Conference with 37 points heading into Thursday's game against the New York Rangers. He leads the league in the three major goaltending categories — goals-against average (1.45), save percentage (.947) and shutouts (four).

Elliott's save percentage ranks ahead of Boston's Tim Thomas, Vancouver's Cory Schneider, Edmonton's Nikolai Khabibulin and the Rangers' Henrik Lundqvist, who combined have an average salary of $16.5 million this season. Elliott will make $600,000 after agreeing to a two-year contract with the Blues, who could have sent him to the American Hockey League after training camp and only been on the hook for $105,000.

"You're going to have to look pretty deep to find a story that's bigger than Elliott's story," Blues general manager Doug Armstrong said. "It would be disingenuous to say that we saw this coming and we were smarter than everybody else in the NHL. The reality is, he's come in and done a great job and we're all benefiting from it. If there is a better story in the NHL this year, I'd like to read it."

UNDER THE RADAR

The road to St. Louis for Elliott began in Newmarket, Ontario. He played AAA hockey with York-Simcoe Express, where his coach was former Blue Mike Crombeen and his teammate was current Blues forward B.J. Crombeen.

"Playing with 'Ellis' then, he was an honest, hardworking guy that came to work every day," B.J. Crombeen said. "You could see those habits, that part of his personality, real early. He was always a good goalie for us, but I don't think he was a highly rated prospect."

At age 16, Elliott was not selected in the Ontario Hockey League draft. He later joined the Ajax Axemen Jr. A team, and in 39 games, he had a 3.86 GAA and a .903 save percentage.

"That team he played for was maybe the worst team in Canada at the Tier 2 level," said Jay, the scout from the Senators, who made the short drive from Oshawa. "Brian would see 55-60 shots per game. He would get beat 7-1, 8-3 often, but he never quit and showed a lot of potential. That's why I would go back and see him play."

Elliott was still a relatively unknown prospect and wasn't even sure about his draft status. Boyce, whom the family had met coincidentally while shopping for goalie gear in Toronto, urged him to opt into the 2003 NHL draft.

"Someone called me from the NHL Central Scouting and was asking, 'Are you going to opt in, because you have to do it by tonight?,'" Elliott said. "So I called Ken and he said, 'Why not throw your name in the hat and see what happens?' I signed the form and faxed it in. It came down to that."

DRAFT DAY SURPRISE

On draft day, Elliott was working for Doug Orr, Bobby's younger brother, as a goalie instructor at Seneca College hockey school in Toronto. Elliott hitched a ride home to Newmarket with Doug that day and was startled when he made his way through the front door.

"I said, 'What have you heard today?' Bill Elliott, Brian's dad, recalled.

"I was like, 'What?'" Brian said.

"I said, 'Well, let me congratulate you ... you've been drafted by the Ottawa Senators!'

Those performances in front of Jay, the Senators' scout, had paid off. Elliott was taken in the ninth round, 291st overall, the second-to-last pick in the draft.

"If that's all I had in my hockey career, that would be awesome," Elliott said. "But when somebody sees something in you, you want to prove them right. Being drafted in the ninth round, that was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. If I didn't get drafted that year, I wouldn't have gone to Wisconsin. That connection wouldn't have been made."

Elliott would have returned to junior hockey, but he always had an interest in playing college hockey in the U.S.

"Shortly after the draft, our assistant GM, Peter Chiarelli, sent me an article," Jay said. "It was about the University of Wisconsin being in trouble."

Wisconsin had recruited Brodeur, but he was deemed ineligible after playing in two exhibition games in the WHL. Jay phoned Badgers coach Mike Eaves.

"I said I'm not a salesman," Jay said, "but I gave him Brian's name and I told him that I'm pretty sure that Brian's father Bill has got a lot of tape on him."

Bill Elliott, a longtime TV director in Canada, had "bins of tapes" of Brian patrolling the pipes. He sent Eaves the video and quickly got a phone call.

"He said can you come down this weekend," Bill Elliott said. "We left Wisconsin and we told them we'd talk about it when we got home. But when we got back to the airport, Brian was saying, 'Let's just call them now.'"

A chat with Brian Orr, arranged by Doug, solidified the decision to become a Badger.

"Bobby told Brian, 'Listen kid, you've got the marks ... why don't you go play NCAA hockey in the States?'" Bill Elliott recalled.

ON TO WISCONSIN

Elliott was the backup netminder at Wisconsin for his first two seasons, pitching three shutouts in nine games as a sophomore. He established a reputation early of batting for every puck, whether it was in a game or practice.

"He is a very competitive guy," said Shane Connelly, Elliott's goaltending partner at Wisconsin. "He's not rah-rah. He's really calm, but he hates giving up goals. You could just see how much it burned him."

"I think it's easy not to try," Elliott said. "That's the easiest thing, just to give up. I guess it's pride or something, but it just makes me want to stop everything. If they're going to try, I'm going to try harder."

In 2006, a junior season that was interrupted by a knee injury, Elliott went 27-5 with a 1.55 GAA and a .938 save percentage and eight shutouts in 35 starts. His last win came in the Frozen Four, a 2-1 win over Boston College in the championship game.

"Unbelievable ... that was my best moment up until now," said Elliott, who was an All-American.

START WITH SENATORS

After a decent senior season, Elliott signed with Ottawa, and after starting in the AHL, he was called up by the Senators. In 2009-10, he built a record of 29-18-4, helping the Sens into the playoffs. But in 2010-11, amid team-wide injuries, he had a 12-game losing streak before being dealt to Colorado.
The trade surprised Elliott, but he said, "You just hope for the best and see what happens."

The team climate in Colorado, however, wasn't any better. Elliott went 2-8-1 down the stretch with the Avalanche and ended the season with a combined 3.34 GAA and .893 save percentage.

"I would think that his confidence for whatever reason went south," Jay said.

Elliott was a restricted free agent after the season, but the Avs did not make him a qualifying offer, making him an unrestricted free agent July 1.

"No idea what to expect," Elliott said.

The Blues had three plans for their backup position: sign an experienced goalie, give the job to prospect Ben Bishop or sign a player to a two-way contract to compete with Bishop.

"Elliott was at the top of that (last) list," Armstrong said. "There was real good history with him two years ago that he could compete at this level."

But the Blues were asking Elliott to take a two-way contract.

"It's a tough pill to swallow on that day," he said. "But I've had to work for everything I've had, so I just figured that it was another time to work. I was pretty confident that I could do it again."

Elliott battled Bishop for the job in training camp, and "there was really not enough to differentiate between the two," Armstrong said, "so we went with the more experienced goaltender. From that point on, Elliott has just taken it and run with it."

His record is 12-2 heading into Thursday's start against New York. On NHL.com, Elliott's picture appears three times on the "league leaders" page.

"It's amazing to see your son's picture there," Bill Elliott said. "It's hard to not burst your buttons thinking about it."

Despite Elliott's consistency through 14 starts, allowing more than two goals in a game only once, some continue to wonder if Elliott's bubble will burst.

"There's no indication that what he's doing right now isn't going to last," Armstrong said. "He's big, he's strong, he's very athletic, very technically sound. His demeanor around the team is excellent and his confidence is certainly high."

Blues coach Ken Hitchcock added: "I don't think what we're seeing is an accident or a fluke or just the puck hitting him. To me, he's a perfect product of what happens when you put a lot of work and focus into something."

Asked if he could take any joy from his fourth shutout of the season Saturday, Elliott said: "It makes you smile. But you have to just take it, put it in your back pocket and move on to the next game. I've seen both sides of the sword."

But now, Elliott has a firm group on the sword's handle.

"I didn't think his stats would be this impressive right away," said Connelly, his Badger teammate. "I thought he'd bide his time a little more and build his confidence. But he really had to fight for this, and if you put Brian Elliott in a battle, he's going to come out a winner."

Top goalies by save percentage

Staff

Top five NHL goaltenders by save percentage (through Monday's games):
Name, Team, Save %, 2011-12 AAV*
1. Brian Elliott, Blues, .947, $600,000
2. Tim Thomas, Boston, .938, $5,000,000
3. Cory Schneider, Vancouver, .934, $900,000
4. Nikolai Khabibulin, Edmonton, .933, $3,750,000
5. Henrik Lundqvist, Rangers, .932, $6,875,000
*Annual average value of contract

Foot injury sidelines forward Sobotka

By NORM SANDERS

Hockey pucks keep finding new ways to do damage to St. Louis Blues forward Vladimir Sobotka.

Sobotka was placed on injured reserve Tuesday after being hit in the left foot by a shot at practice the day before. Blues General Manager Doug Armstrong said there is no fracture, but Sobotka is expected to be reevaluate again after two weeks.

Sobotka also missed two games in late November after being hit in the mouth with a puck.

"It doesn't sound like it's too serious, but it's kind of tender right now," Armstrong said Tuesday when asked about Sobotka's latest injury. "I feel for him, he's playing really good hockey for us and you hate to see guys get hurt in practice. It's not great news because we're playing good right now and he's been a big part of that."

Sobotka had become even more valuable since being moved to center by Blues coach Ken Hitchcock. Besides adding more scoring of late, Sobotka also is one of the team's best penalty killers and checkers.

"I feel for him because he's been a big part of our success recently," Armstrong said of Sobotka, who has two goals and 10 points in 27 games along with a plus-9 rating. "He brings the same game every night and he's going to be hard to replace in the lineup. He was playing some of the best hockey he's played since he's been here, for sure."

The Blues recalled winger Evgeny Grachev from minor-league Peoria late Tuesday afternoon. Grachev has two assists in 17 games with the Blues this season.

Armstrong said forward Matt D'Agostini, who left the Blues' 1-0 win Saturday with what was described as an upper-body injury, skated on his own Tuesday and will join the team for practice today.

The Blues don't play again until hosting the New York Rangers on Thursday.

"He should be ready to go," Armstrong said. "All signs are he'll practice full on (Wednesday) and he should be ready to go. It was more a chest hit than anything. I don't think this is an injury, quite honestly, that we're concerned about at all."

Asked about the Blues' trouble scoring goals lately, Armstrong pointed to the team's 11-2-3 record under Hitchcock and NHL-leading 2.03 goals-against average.

"We're in the winning business and we're winning games," he said. "We're creating opportunities. I'd rather win 2-1 than lose 5-4."

Armstrong was asked about the condition of Blues forward Andy McDonald, who has not played since Oct. 13 because of a concussion.

"Still status quo, still having some symptoms and hasn't been around the team," Armstrong said. "I know he's feeling a little bit better, but still symptomatic and still hasn't been around the team."

Armstrong was talking via phone from Calgary, where he was watching two of the Blues' top prospects at Canada's training camp to choose its roster for the World Junior Championships.

Blues prospect Jaden Schwartz was on the squad last year and figures to be there again, while prospect Ty Rattie has looked strong thus far according to Armstrong.

"He's been good the first two scrimmages and he'll get another opportunity (Tuesday night)," Armstrong said.

Roloson feels good even though his play has been far from it

By ERIK ERLENDSSON

Everything Dwayne Roloson is doing these days feels good. His play during games, however, has been anything but.

In fact, over the past month, Roloson’s numbers have dipped to the bottom of the league.

As of Tuesday, Roloson’s 3.67 goals-against average ranked 68th out of 71 goaltenders, while his .882 save percentage ranked next-to-last among goaltenders with at least 10 starts, ahead of only Columbus’ Steve Mason.

Since beating Pittsburgh 5-1 in a 33-save performance, Roloson has lost five consecutive games, allowing four or more goals in all but Monday’s loss to New Jersey, when he was pulled in the first minute of the second period after allowing three goals on 12 shots.

"(Monday) night I felt great. Ottawa I felt good. I feel good, it's just things are finding ways in right now," said Roloson, 42. "There are ways you can analyze everything and come up with a reason, but if you keep trying to find something it becomes mind-boggling and things get worse. In looking at video, things look good, it's just circumstantial and things are going in.”

The coaching staff is trying to allow Roloson to work out whatever kinks are in his game. But he has started just three of the past 10 games and figures to serve as the backup to Mathieu Garon on Thursday when the Lightning host Calgary.

As the losses continue to pile up, results are becoming more paramount. While the team wants to be patient with Roloson in the hope he can rekindle the magic from the second half of last season, finding him the playing time while trying to win games is becoming increasingly difficult.

"We know his game can be (better) and I think it will, he just needs to make sure his attitude remains a positive one, and it has been," Lightning head coach Guy Boucher said. "There are not many issues. He’s just having a tough time. I still have confidence that he will find his way back. He’s very professional and he can’t care more than that.”

Roloson works as hard as anybody on the team. He puts the time in during practice, works with video coach Frantz Jean extensively, on the ice and in the video room, and knows he is counted on.

"Most of the time, when you get into a stretch of games where one goaltender is struggling, we are always trying to find the answer and a lot of times there is not one," Jean said. "A lot of times it’s just a question of keeping working, coming to the rink with a positive attitude and leaving the bag of bricks at the door.

"At some point, things start to turn around. When you are struggling, when you are having a few bad games, it seems every shot is tougher and a little more difficult. But at one point you get that one period or that one game where you start to feel a little more comfortable and you get somewhat of an easier game and then things start shifting the other way.”

Roloson is still trying to find that moment or game to turn the tide. He’s had some solid outings — the victory against Pittsburgh on Nov. 17 and a 1-0 shutout of Winnipeg on Oct. 29 — but has yet to string together more than one or two games to build momentum.

"The confidence level is fine, and I think as a goalie if you lose it then things can get really bad,” Roloson said. "You always have to feel confident, and I am confident. I feel good in practices, and (Tuesday) I felt great, was seeing the puck well. It was just circumstantial factors and the puck went in the net.

Lightning lose Miettinen on waivers to Winnipeg; Downie fined

By ERIK ERLENDSSON

TAMPA Tampa Bay Lightning general manager Steve Yzerman knew signing free agent Antti Miettinen was risky business.

Signed to a two-year contract worth $3 million the previous day, Miettinen was lost on waivers Tuesday to the Winnipeg Jets.

Miettinen, a six-time 10-goal scorer with Minnesota and Dallas, began the season with Ak Bars Kazan of the Russian Kontinental Hockey League. He had to be placed on waivers by Tampa Bay, exposing him to the other 29 teams, in keeping with a clause in the collective bargaining agreement.

Miettinen was released from his Russian contract last week, at which point any team was eligible to sign the unrestricted free agent.

"We sat around and thought about it and if we should just wait, wait, wait but then it might have been too late at some point," Yzerman said. "So, after waiting to see if somebody else would sign him, we felt that if this was something we felt could improve our team now, let's do it. We tried to do it and it didn't work out."

If the situation were reversed, and another team attempted to sign Miettinen first, Yzerman said there was a good chance Tampa Bay would have attempted to claim him off waivers, "depending on the contract."

Foiled in the attempt to strengthen the team, Yzerman said he will have to dip back into his bag of tricks.

"We'll have to see what else we can do," he said.

NOTE: D Evan Oberg was reassigned to Norfolk of the American Hockey League. ... The NHL formally announced a $2,500 fine for RW Steve Downie for his actions during Thursday's game against the Rangers, when he came off the bench to enter an altercation.

St. Pe Tampa Bay Lightning loses Antti Miettinen to Winnipeg Jets

By Damian Cristodero, Times Staff Writer

General manager Steve Yzerman said he wasn't surprised the Lightning lost free agent Antti Miettinen off waivers to the Jets.

"We knew there would be a risk in doing this," he said.

But he also said the system that allows teams to so easily lose a player it worked hard to sign "needs to be tweaked."

"There is a flaw to it," Yzerman said, and added as an alternative, "Maybe you can't be claimed by a team higher than you in the standings."

The Lightning on Monday signed Miettinen to a deal it hoped would scare waiver hunters away: two years, $3 million with a $500,000 signing bonus and a no-move clause.

But because the former Wild star was returning to the NHL from Europe — he played 20 games for Kazan of Russia's Kontinental Hockey League — he also had to clear waivers.

The rule prevents teams from stockpiling players in Europe and bringing them back when needed, thus circumventing the salary cap. But it seems to penalizes teams that sign players.

The Blues were victimized by the Sharks in the same way last season with Kyle Wellwood.

"Not at all," Yzerman said of having hard feelings toward the Jets. "If somebody else signed him, depending on the contract, we would have considered claiming him. We like the player. They were well within the rules and they're entitled to do it."

NOTES: Defenseman Evan Oberg was reassigned to AHL Norfolk. ... The league officially announced Steve Downie's $2,500 fine for Thursday's dustup with the Rangers.

Tampa Bay Lightning loses Antti Miettinen off waivers; GM Yzerman says system needs tweaking

Staff

At about 12:02 p.m. on Tuesday, Lightning coach Guy Boucher walked sternly through the hallway leading to the locker room at the St. Pete Times Forum and said, "We ain't getting him."

Boucher was talking about free agent right wing Antti Miettinen, whom the Lightning signed on Monday to a two-year, $3 million deal. But because Miettinen was returning from Europe -- he played 20 games with Kazan of the Russian Kontinental Hockey League -- he also had to clear waivers. He was claimed by the Jets.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Lightning GM Steve Yzerman said. "We knew there would be a risk in doing this, but we felt after waiting around a week, 10 days, 'we can't wait around all year. Let's take a chance and see what happens."

Yzerman said he has no problem with Winnipeg making the claim.

"Not at all," he said. "If somebody else signed him, depending on the contract, we would have considered claiming him. They were well within the rules and were entitled to do it."

The rule was put in place in order to stop teams from stockpiling players in Europe (thus circumventing the salary cap) and bringing them back to the NHL when needed. But the flaw is that the team that has done all the work signing the player is at a disadvantage when it comes to keeping him. That is why the Lightning tried to make the contract as unfriendly to other teams as possible by signing Miettinen to a two-year deal with a no-move clause.

"I don't know if it's fair or unfair, but there is a flaw to it," Yzerman said. "I think it needs to be tweaked. Maybe, like, you can't be claimed by a team higher than you in the standings, I don't know."

Boucher knows is that this season if not for bad luck, the Lightning would have no luck at all.

"I think we'll put luck aside this year," he said.

As for Miettinen, he added, "He'll have to pack up some snow suits instead of bathing suits."

Can the Leafs take advantage of struggling 'Canes?

James Mirtle
Toronto/Globe and Mail Blog
Posted on Tuesday, December 13, 2011 1:13PM EST

The Carolina Hurricanes are in a tough spot right now, sitting last in the Eastern Conference and with only four wins in their last 16 games. They've changed coaches, bringing in Kirk Muller, but are 1-5-0 under the new bench boss, missing Jeff Skinner and getting desperate. According to sportsclubstats.com, the 'Canes have just a 0.5-per-cent chance of making the playoffs.

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Maple Leafs sliding down a slippery slope

They should be, in other words, a team that a playoff-bound team can beat at home.

"Obviously it's been a very tough start for our team," Carolina captain Eric Staal said. "Things snowballed in the wrong direction and we'll have to climb out. We're still looking for wins."

The 'Canes come into Tuesday's game against the Toronto Maple Leafs with only nine wins on the season and a 4-9-2 road record, but one of their victories came over Toronto only three weeks ago.

The Leafs have had three days off to prepare for this game and have been saying all along they can't afford to take this team lightly, regardless of where they are in the standings.

"We've got to be ready to start," coach Ron Wilson said. "We're well rested. We've had a chance to work on some things that we've let slip over the last couple of weeks, so now we've just got to go and play the game."

"We need the win, but at the same time, they're a great team," netminder James Reimer said. "It's going to be a hard-fought game."

Reimer will start again for the Leafs as they try to get him back on track after missing six weeks with a head injury. He's 0-2-1 with an .864 save percentage since returning and with back-to-back games this weekend, it's safe to say Jonas Gustavsson is about to get another well-deserved start in the near future.

Cam Ward is expected to start for Carolina.

Notebook

- Wilson said the Leafs had practised their struggling penalty kill on Monday by having some of their offensive players simulate what Carolina's power play usually does. (Of note: The 'Canes power play has improved recently under Muller, but it's still not great.) It'll be interesting to see if that helps.

- Matt Lombardi took part in the morning skate for the first time as he recovers from a dislocated shoulder, but his recovery still has him a few weeks away. He had his arm immobilized up until about two weeks ago but said he's happy with the amount of strength that has returned to the arm so far. I still wouldn't rule out surgery, but the team wants to see how he heals.

- Luke Schenn said he has kept in close contact with Tomas Kaberle, his former defence partner who the Hurricanes recently dealt to the Montreal Canadiens. "He thinks it'll be good for him," Schenn said of the trade. "He's always played well in Montreal when we were visiting there. I think he's a player that thrives on playing in a tough hockey market. I want him to do well."

- A question for consideration: Keith Aulie will again be a healthy scratch for this game. How does it make sense to keep him up with the big club when he's only sitting in the press box? Wouldn't a veteran be a better choice to be on hand as a seventh defenceman in case of injury?

Leafs projected lineup

Lupul - Bozak - Kessel
MacArthur - Grabovski - Kulemin
Frattin - Connolly - Armstrong
Steckel - Dupuis - Crabb
Gunnarsson - Phaneuf
Gardiner - Schenn
Liles - Franson
Reimer

'Canes projected lineup (based on last game)
Dwyer - Staal - Tlusty
Ponikarovsky - Ruutu - Jokinen
LaRose - Sutter - Nodl
Bowman - Brent - Stewart
Gleason - McBain
Faulk - Spacek
Allen - Joslin
Ward

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 12.14.2011
For a moment, Ron Wilson was his cantankerous old self on Monday. And given the question was in regards to the standings, it was hard to blame the Toronto Maple Leafs coach.

After all, his team has fallen from first overall five weeks ago into a tie for 12th in the NHL, dropping back into a pack of seven teams clustered between sixth and 12th in the Eastern Conference.

While the Leafs are at the top of that heap with 33 points, they're also just three points from the bottom of the group heading into their meeting Tuesday with the last-place Carolina Hurricanes.

"Oh is it tight?" Wilson asked, sarcastically, of the standings. "Jeez, I didn't know that. Course I'm cognizant [of that]."

"Jeez. I coach the team. We're in the NHL, so you know where you are. Every team is cognizant of that fact."

The Leafs' heady trip to first place was capped off with wins in back-to-back nights in early November, as victories in New Jersey and Columbus gave Toronto a 9-3-1 record for one of the franchise's best starts in its history.

Staying on top, however, lasted all of two days, as the Leafs were blown out 7-0 by the Boston Bruins in their next game.

Since that point, they've won just six of 16 games, going 6-8-2 despite coming out on the right end of a couple 7-1 routs of their own.

In the 10 losses, the Leafs were outscored 43-16, a sign of how badly their goaltending and defensive play have laboured during a road-heavy stretch.

Toronto's schedule isn't particularly difficult for the rest of 2011, with three games against the East's two worst teams - the Hurricanes and New York Islanders - there seems to be a realization in the Leafs dressing room, however, that they need to pick up their play in those next nine games or risk frittering away all of the points they built up to start the season.

"We know the situation," winger Colby Armstrong said. "We know where we are in the standings and we have to get points."

"It comes in waves," Wilson said. "You get hot for a couple weeks and you think you've cleared the gate. The next thing you know, you play .500 for a week and a half, three teams don't lose any games and they're right back in it."

Wilson didn't specify who precisely he was talking about, but the likes of the Montreal Canadiens and Winnipeg Jets have been slowly gaining on Toronto for weeks.

The Leafs' six- and eight-point leads two weeks ago have been cut to just two and three, putting them in a group with three Canadian teams - including the Ottawa Senators - that will likely be fighting to make the playoffs the rest of the way.

If, as was the case last season, 93 points is what it will take to reach the playoffs, the Leafs still need to go 30-23-0 to get there.

With that in mind, Toronto has to step up for games like the one Tuesday and take the allegedly easy two points from a Carolina team currently mired in a season-killing 4-14-1 slide.

"We can't take them lightly at all," netminder James Reimer said. "It's a fine line between winning and losing."

These days, it's also a very fine line between being bad and good, being the Leafs or the Hurricanes and being in or out of the postseason come April.

The standings, in other words, are often of little comfort to an NHL coach, wherever their team may be.
Connolly scores twice as Leafs beat Hurricanes in overtime, 2-1

Mark Zwolinski

Tim Connolly had probably his best night as a Leaf, and while he was being surrounded by a mob of notepads and TV cameras in the post-game dressing room, linemate Colby Armstrong shouted something from across the room.

"Grizzled," Armstrong said in praise of Connolly, who fired both Leafs goals, including the overtime winner, in a 2-1 win over Carolina at the Air Canada Centre.

Connolly, who bagged the winner by following up on a loose puck off a Joffrey Lupul slapshot 44 seconds into the extra frame, left an impression on his mates with his two goals, and his work ethic behind the scenes.

Large portions of Connolly's career have been focused on battles with injuries and rehab. And while the frequency of injuries has actually sparked some criticism for Connolly, his teammates say no one works harder behind closed doors to make up for lost time.

"It was unfortunate he was injured early," Leafs captain Dion Phaneuf, who played his 500th NHL game, said in reference to a pair of injuries earlier this year that sidelined Connolly.

"He works extremely hard and nobody sees it, but we see it behind closed doors and me, personally, I'm very happy for Tim to have that type of game."

James Reimer wasn't tested severely, but still looked sharp in kicking out 17 of the 18 shots he faced for his first win in four games since returning from injury.

This contest was a scoreless deadlock that lasted 55 minutes until Connolly popped the ice-breaker at 15:46 of the third.

But Lupul took a penalty and the Leafs' maligned penalty kill, which had put up two kills earlier in the game, couldn't protect the 1-0 advantage as ex-Leaf Alexei Ponikarovsky banged in the tying goal.

That goal certainly deflated a Leafs effort that saw them dominate much of the game; Toronto outshot Carolina 38-19 and owned a huge advantage in puck possession, time in the offensive zone and scoring chances.

But with Connolly leading the way, and teamed with Armstrong and Clarke MacArthur on a solid, experienced line, the Leafs remained patient.

"We didn't sell the farm to score a goal," Leafs coach Ron Wilson said. "We just kept playing and the goal came. And that's the thing we have to learn."

Consider it a lesson learned. Carolina goalie Cam Ward was brilliant, but much of his success was based on the fact he saw most of the shots he faced from the moment they left a Leaf stick.

Essentially, Toronto turned in a lot of shots and were dangerous on numerous occasions. But a detail in the club's otherwise strong offence - getting bodies in front of the net - continues to be a work in progress.

That's where Armstrong, only two games back himself from injury, helped the Leafs cause.

Armstrong not only predicted Connolly would score the game-winner, he was his usual vocal self, imploring teammates to be patient and to get the so called "dirty" goals because it was that kind of night with Ward playing well - and seeing most of the Leaf shots.

Connolly's first goal was a tipped shot and the only shot that changed direction on Ward up to that time.

"I did ...." Armstrong said with his patented humor when asked if he had a premonition about Connolly winning the game for the Leafs.

"We got lots of chances and it was one of those nights where we were saying we had to score goals like that."

Connolly concurred.
There is no shortage of sympathy for Sidney Crosby around the NHL these days.

News of Crosby's latest setback spread quickly through dressing rooms and prompted many to pass along well-wishes for the Pittsburgh Penguins star on Tuesday morning. More than anything, Crosby's peers hope his return comes quickly.

"This guy's got a drive for the game like no other," said Maple Leafs winger Colby Armstrong, a former Crosby teammate. "It's what he loves to do, I think it's probably where he feels most comfortable - when he's on the ice - as a person. I think obviously when you get that taken away from you it's frustrating and tough.

"All the money in the world can't fix that. I think everybody in the league, whether you know him or don't know him, hopes he comes back and he's healthy." 

Crosby announced Monday that his comeback had been stalled indefinitely following a recurrence of concussion-like symptoms. It came just three weeks after the Penguins captain made a stunning comeback with two goals and two assists against the Islanders in his first game since Jan. 5.

In all, he had two goals and 10 assists through eight games before getting injured during a game against Boston last week.

"I feel bad for him," said Leafs goalie James Reimer, who missed six weeks this season with a head injury.

"Concussion, concussion-like symptoms - anything to do with your head it's (awful). It's honestly the worst injury on earth because there's nothing you can do for it. You feel pretty helpless. You feel bad for (Crosby) and at the same time you feel bad for the game too because he's arguably the best player in the league.

"Fans love to watch him play and we, as athletes and people who play the game, we like to watch him play too. He makes the game exciting and he's great for it."

The issue of concussions in the sport has been making major news for the second straight season. On Tuesday, the Philadelphia Flyers announced that forward Claude Giroux - the NHL's leading scorer - had suffered a concussion. Flyers captain Chris Pronger, Penguins defenceman Kris Letang and Rangers defenceman Marc Staal are among the others currently sidelined with head injuries.

Staal's brother Eric, who delivered the hit that injured him, acknowledged that it's tough to ignore the rash of concussions.

"It seems like a lot of guys," said Eric Staal, the Carolina Hurricanes captain. "You can't play the game being scared, you can't play the game being worried about getting hit. That just gets you in trouble and gets you hurt. ... Unfortunately, some things like that happen and you deal with it when they do."

Maple Leafs defenceman Luke Schenn agreed, noting that it seems to "happen all the time now." His younger brother Brayden - a rookie forward with the Flyers - is nearing a return from a concussion.

Schenn added his voice to the ones hoping that Crosby isn't far behind him.

"You feel bad for him," he said. "You never want it to happen to anyone and especially the best player in our game. It's tough to see and you wish him a healthy recovery as soon as possible."
Leafs really need to work on special teams

By Steve Buffery, Toronto Sun

TORONTO -

It was one of those good news, bad news games for Leafs fans.

The good news, of course, was that the Leafs snapped a two-game, home-ice losing streak with a 2-1 overtime victory over the Carolina Hurricanes.

Also, goaltender James Reimer managed to record a win after going winless in his first three games since returning on Dec. 3 from an upper body injury.

The bad news: The Leafs special teams continue to struggle. Their power play went 0-for-3 against the 'Canes and is now 1-for-15 in the last five games. As for the penalty kill, Carolina's Alexei Ponikarovsky scored a power-play goal with less than two minutes left in the third to force overtime. The Leafs killed off only two of the Hurricanes' three power plays.

If the Leafs, the second-youngest team in the NHL, want to remain in the playoff hunt, eventually they're going to have to turn their special teams around.

WILSON SICK OF DEBATE

Reimer's win will likely alleviate some of the angst in Leafs Nation about whether coach Ron Wilson should give the team's backup goaltender Jonas Gustavsson more playing time. In typical Toronto fashion, there seemed to be a panic over Reimer's mediocre play since returning from his injury, and there was plenty of debate as to whether Wilson should start Gustavsson.

Just a few short weeks ago, when Reimer was still injured, there was a hue and cry for the Leafs to start Ben Scrivens over Gustavsson, after the Monster recorded a couple of shaky starts.

Leaves Nation has to chill. Reimer is the No. 1 and Gustavsson is the No. 2 and that's how Wilson will play it out (unless injuries get in the way). You can tell Wilson is getting tired of the goaltending debate.

When asked following Tuesday's win if he thought Reimer was feeling any extra pressure because of his winless streak, Wilson said: "Geez, if we're feeling pressure (early) in December, we're in a lot of trouble. There's no pressure, or anything like that. We've had two great days of practice, a very professional approach to the game tonight. You wouldn't know that we were one of the youngest teams in the league, how poised we were right through the whole game."

D-MEN WERE D-MEN

The Leafs defence played one of their better games in front of Reimer. Luke Schenn had another one of his solid, quiet games, recording five hits with two blocked shots and was a plus one in 20:27 minutes of action. Dion Phaneuf also had five hits and five shots. Rookie Jake Gardiner, meanwhile, recorded the most minutes of any Leaf with 24:14, though he did look a little shaky at times and wasn't tough enough tying up Ponikarovsky, when the former Leaf scored his seventh goal of the season.

SOMETHING GAME-RELATED

Up until late in the third period, Tuesday's game was one of the dullest affairs played at the ACC this season. Hell, until Tim Connolly scored at 15:46 of the third, the most exciting part of the night was Andy Frost flogging tuna on the scoreboard ... Former Toronto Sun circulation guy John McDermott, wearing a suit made out of carpet samples, sang the national anthems. (The carpet crack is courtesy of Wiarton Willie fan Terry Koshan) ... Leafs GM Brian Burke, aka Big Burkie, tweeted that he MC'd Richard Peddie's retirement party on Monday with Raptors boss Bryan Colangelo. No mention of Lil' Burkie being there ... The early pre-game music at the ACC, from Sirius Satellite Radio, sounded like something played at a 1980's Berlin disco, not a hockey arena. I was waiting for Dieter and his monkey to show up ... Four Hurricanes, Ponikarovsky, Tim Brent, Jin Tuety and Jay Harrison, once played for the Leafs, as well as head coach Kirk Muller. Harrison didn't dress Tuesday night, though.

Toronto Sun LOADED: 12.14.2011
Victory over 'Canes could be Leafs' most impressive

By Rob Longley, Toronto Sun

TORONTO -

In its own way, a 2-1 overtime win over the worst team in the Eastern Conference on Tuesday night might have been one of the Leafs' most impressive of the season.

Stick with me on this.

Of course, it didn't have the flash of 7-1 wins over Washington and Tampa in November, or the two big wins in Madison Square Garden. It didn't have the emotion of a 2-0 shutout over Montreal to start the season or the big road win in Pittsburgh. But in a game that had its own element of desperation, the Leafs found a way to get an important two points.

They found a way to get James Reimer a victory, after three consecutive losses since returning from injury. Reimer did his part too, only facing 19 shots but making a couple big saves when the game was still tied 0-0 in the third.

They found a way to avoid a third consecutive loss, something that still hasn't happened this season. And they found a way to get a win on home ice, even getting the usually dull Tuesday night gathering at the Air Canada Centre excited about it.

But most of all, they found the discipline to stick to their plan even as a scoreless game dragged on and on against an inferior opponent.

"Those are the games you have to win," said Leafs forward Tim Connolly, the undisputed hero of the night with both Leafs goals. "Good teams win games like that. We're trying to establish ourselves as a good team still."

While you can argue that good teams shouldn't have to go the distance against truly bad ones like Carolina, the way the Leafs did it had its own sense of accomplishment.

There was never a doubt who was in control, right from the opening faceoff. But the longer Carolina hung around, the more you sensed something bad was going to happen. The Leafs have come by that reputation honestly in recent years, but on Tuesday they showed signs that perhaps it is beginning to fade.

"We were controlling the speed (of the game), the shot clock, we just had to keep playing the way we were," Leafs coach Ron Wilson said. "We didn't want to sell the farm to try to score a goal. We were patient and we scored with four minutes to go."

Much was made pre-game about this being somewhat of a must-win affair for this time of the season. While that may have been an overstatement, games against Buffalo and Vancouver this weekend look much more enticing going in with a win rather than a third consecutive loss, which could've have been the case if Connolly hadn't jammed in that loose puck 44 seconds into OT.

"If we're feeling pressure the first or second week in December, we're in a lot of trouble," Wilson said. "The guys had a very professional approach to the game tonight. You wouldn't know we were one of the youngest teams in the league by the way we played."

Not to read too much into it, but with the three teams directly behind them in the standings splitting up five points in the standings, the Leafs are well aware of the room for slippage, even in mid-December.

"At this time of year, it might not be February or March yet, but any point you get now is one you can't get down the road," captain Dion Phaneuf said as his team held its ground for sixth place in the Eastern Conference.

"We can see the standings. We know how big they are."

Toronto Sun LOADED: 12.14.2011
Leaves sneak by 'Canes in OT

By Terry Koshan, Toronto Sun
First posted: Tuesday, December 13, 2011 09:45 PM EST

TORONTO -
Cam Ward couldn't stop everything on Tuesday night.
Actually, the Carolina Hurricanes goaltender stopped every Maple Leaf except one.
Tim Connolly scored both Toronto goals, including the winner at 44 seconds of overtime, as the Leafs recorded just their third victory at the Air Canada Centre since the middle of October with a 2-1 triumph against the lowly Hurricanes.

"Not getting frustrated and playing the same way throughout the game made the difference," Connolly said. "We knew we were going to have to grind it out and get a couple of ugly ones.

"That was a big stepping stone for us, a real solid game."

For nearly 56 minutes, Ward, who has a history of playing well against the Leafs, turned aside everything the home team threw at him. But that changed when a tip by Connolly got the Leafs on the scoreboard with less than five minutes to play in the third period. Connolly, a smart veteran whose savvy ways have been a bonus for the Leafs when he has been healthy, deflected Clarke MacArthur's shot behind Ward at 15:46.

After Connolly's goal, however, the Leafs could not kill off a high-sticking minor to Joffrey Lupul. Ex-Leaf Alexei Ponikarovsky, who had six goals in the previous 31 games, got the equalizer at 18:06, easily tapping an Eric Staal centring pass behind Leafs goaltender James Reimer.

But the Leafs didn't roll over. In overtime, Lupul drove to the net and managed to poke the puck loose, putting it into the crease for Connolly to knock into the open net.

The goal made a winner of Reimer, who had not emerged victorious in his previous three games since returning from concussion-like symptoms.
Where Ward stopped 36 Leafs shots, Reimer had to make only 18 saves.

"Winning in this league is so hard, it's ridiculous how hard it is to win," Reimer said. "Just to be able to win in overtime, it feels great. Kudos to the guys, they played great.

"When (the Hurricanes) tied it up, we could have buckled and we didn't. We kept pressing hard. We deserved a bounce like that (on Connolly's winner)."

The win was just the Leafs' second win in six games overall, and was paramount because it meant they did not drop from their sixth-place spot in the Eastern Conference. Coach Ron Wilson scoffed at the idea that there was more pressure, but the fact is, there was no way, Ward or not, that the Leafs should have come that close to losing against a club as bad as the Hurricanes.

For the first time this season, the Leafs were in a game that was tied 0-0 after 40 minutes.

Ward made 26 saves in the first and second periods combined.
And though Ward made a handful of top-notch stops, the Leafs were guilty of not bearing down with lots of consistency. That pattern started to form in the first period when the Leafs had several odd-man rushes but came away with nothing.

Mostly, those chances involved the Lupul-Tyler Bozak-Phil Kessel combination. And if you're unsure, Wilson will tell you that scoring chances don't count, but goals do.

Kessel kept the puck on a 2-on-1 with Lupul, and Ward made a pad save. Another odd-man rush resulted in Kessel firing wide and high over the net.

Reimer, meanwhile, barely was tested through 40 minutes, facing only 12 shots. But he had to be sharp to get his right pad on a low shot by ex-Leaf Tim Brent in the second period with Phaneuf serving an interference penalty. Reimer also made a good save on Jamie McBain during that Carolina power play.

But as Connolly said, the Leafs did not get down on themselves as Ward kept shutting the door. Connolly's leadership helped guide the way.

"He has played really well," Wilson said. "He has done all the things we thought he could do. It does not matter who he plays with, he tries to make those people around him better, and I think he has done that."

ARMSTRONG CHIPS IN
Two games into his return to the Maple Leafs lineup, and Colby Armstrong is surprising himself.

Armstrong quietly registered his first point of the season in the Leafs' 2-1 overtime win against the Carolina Hurricanes on Tuesday night, assisting on Tim Connolly's goal late in the third period.

"I feel surprisingly better than I thought I would," said Armstrong, who missed 23 games with a sprained ankle before getting back into action last Friday.

"You can bag-skate, like I was, but until you get in there and start battling defencemen, there is a big difference. You don't get the same thing until you are actually in the fire. I'm feeling pretty good right now."

Toronto Sun LOADED: 12.14.2011
Time flies when you’re having fun.

Defenceman Dion Phaneuf played in his 500th career NHL game on Tuesday night against the Carolina Hurricanes, and the Maple Leafs captain said he doesn't know where the years went.

"I remember when I first started and Iggy (Calgary Flames star Jarome Iginla) said, 'Enjoy it because before you know it' … I think when I came in he was seven or eight years in the league and he said, 'You'll be there before you know it.' It's quick, it flies by, but it's a lot of fun," Phaneuf said after the Leafs' morning skate on Tuesday.

The 6-foot-3, 214-pounder started his career with Calgary in 2005 and played four-plus seasons with the Flames before being traded to the Leafs in the latter half of the 2009-10 season. Heading into Tuesday's contest, the Edmonton native had recorded 88 goals and 198 assists for 286 points. The hard-hitting blueliner had also racked up 666 penalty minutes, a beast of a number.

Phaneuf's best season came in 2007, his third year in the league, when he had 17 goals and 43 assists.

"The years just seem to fly by and it's my seventh year now. You don't know where the time goes, but I'm really excited about what we have here, being a part of this team and being a part of this organization. We're going in the right direction and we're building something."

EMPATHY FOR CROSBY

Leafs goalie James Reimer feels for Pittsburgh Penguins star Sidney Crosby. Reimer missed 18 games with concussion-like symptoms this season and can relate to what Crosby, who is out again after playing just eight games this year and missing a big chunk of last season, is going through.

"I feel bad for him," Reimer said after the morning skate. "Concussion, concussion-like symptoms … It's honestly the worst injury on earth because there's nothing you can do for it. You feel pretty helpless. You feel bad for (Crosby) and at the same time you feel bad for the game too, because he's arguably the best player in the league."

Reimer returned from his injury on Dec. 3, but had still not won heading into Tuesday night.

LOMBARDI RETURNS TO PRACTICE

Some positive news for the Leafs; Speedy forward Matthew Lombardi was back on the ice with his teammates for the first time since being injured in a game in Nashville on Nov. 17.

"It was just nice to get out there with the rest of the guys and make some passes and get some shots and see how it feels," Lombardi said of testing out his injured shoulder. "It was definitely disappointing having a setback the way I did but, I'm happy with the way things went today."

While there is no timeline for Lombardi's return, he said, "We'll keep pushing it, be real aggressive and see how I do in the next little while."

Lombardi was hurt while taking a faceoff in the second period of the Leafs' 4-1 loss in Nashville. It was just his 19th game since missing the entire previous season with a concussion suffered while playing for the Predators.

EX-LEAF HOMECOMING

There were several former Leafs on the Carolina Hurricanes roster on Tuesday - Jiri Tlusty, Alexei Ponikarovsky, Tim Brent and Jay Harrison - and there would have been one more had long-time Toronto defenceman Tomas Kaberle not been traded to the Montreal Canadiens on Friday.

Leafs blueliner Luke Schenn said he still keeps in touch with Kaberle and that he had texted the Czech to wish him well in his new home.
Leafs legend Bower laces up the pads again

By Ian Robertson, Toronto Sun
First posted: Tuesday, December 13, 2011 03:43 PM EST | Updated: Tuesday, December 13, 2011 07:02 PM EST

MISSISSAUGA -
A big-hearted Whitby dad gave Johnny Bower a pre-Christmas gift the Leafs legend never thought he would see again.

After lining up at the Whitby Mall for Bower's advertised visit, Roger Spivey took the 87-year-old Mississauga resident aside and told him his old goalie pads were in his car.

Bower said he never had a chance to keep them as souvenirs.

"Players weren't allowed to have any of their gear," based on rules set by Harold Ballard, the late penny-pinching owner of Maple Leaf Gardens and the team's principal share-holder, he said.

"We all tried a couple of times, taking a couple of sticks, but I got caught and Mr. Ballard wasn't very pleased with me," Bower said. "You had to turn it in and trainers usually handed them down to the minors."

Hesitant about their authenticity, plus Spivey's motives, he spotted his initials on the old leather-covered pads.

"I was in tears," Bower said.

Bower was born in Saskatchewan and first played professionally in 1944-45 with his hometown Prince Albert Black Hawks, he keeps "really busy" accepting invitations to appear in public.

"I can't say no to the kids," Bower added.

At the mall for autograph-signing, accompanied by ex-NHL defenceman Pierre Pilote, 80, he thought Spivey might want to sell the pads, or get them signed to score better resale value.

"I never asked ... I didn't want to know," said Spivey, 61, who had to adapt the pads because he's slightly taller than Bower. "I played goal for years, but have back trouble now."

With Ballard's legendary stinginess, Bower rightly wondered how the pads left the locker room.

"Tim Horton gave them to my mom for me," around 1968, Spivey confided.

Horton was killed in a 1974 car crash in St. Catharines after playing 24 professional seasons, including the Leafs, met Ethel Spivey where she worked at the Toronto Telegram.

She mentioned her son played defence but wanted to become a goalie but lacked money for required equipment.

Working together in the former newspaper's ad department, when pro hockey players didn't have mega-salaries "they were friends," Roger said of his late mom and the doughnut-coffee chain founder.

Somehow, Horton talked a team manager into donating the pads, which Bower last used during practice.

Spivey was a goalie with several non-professional teams, including once a charity game with the NHL Old-Timers.

Though in fair shape, he restuffed the pads at least twice and re-covered one of them - which Bower regularly slapped with his stick during games.

"To think he used them for such a long time...that's great," he said.

After handing over the faded, creased and worn treasures of games long ago, "Nancy Bower, his wife, paid me the biggest compliment," Spivey said. "She said Johnny hasn't been that happy in years.

"He said he'd never been to a function where anyone ever gave him anything.
Leaves Gameday: Reimer gets the start

TORONTO -

James Reimer is hoping to end his losing streak tonight against Eastern Conference cellar dwellers the Carolina Hurricanes.

The Leafs goaltender hasn't won a game since returning from concussion-like symptoms on Dec. 3. Reimer, who has lost all three of his starts and posted a 3.63 goals-against average since returning from injury, was hurt in a contest against the Montreal Canadiens on Oct. 22 and missed 18 games.

There was some speculation prior to this morning's pre-game skate that Jonas Gustavsson might get the call against the Hurricanes. But the thinking probably was that Reimer needs to get a win to boost his lagging confidence - and who better to achieve it against than struggling Carolina.

"It's a team game and we're all fighting for the win," Reimer said after the skate Tuesday. "Obviously I want to win because I haven't won in a while.

"But the main thing is, as a team we have to go out there and play our hardest and sacrifice for each other, and do what we can to get that much-needed win."

Toronto has dropped six of its past seven games at the ACC and needs to turn that statistic around in a hurry tonight against the Hurricanes. After a trip to Buffalo on Friday, the Leafs return to the ACC for four consecutive games.

Both the Leafs and Hurricanes will be well-rested, with neither having played since Friday night. Toronto should get a little help from the absence of injured Jeff Skinner, Carolina's leading point getter with 12 goals and 12 assists.

LOMBARDI JOINS MORNING SKATE

Speedy forward Matthew Lombardi was back on the ice with his teammates for the first time since being injured in a game against the Predators on Nov. 17.

"It was just nice to get out there with the rest of the guys and make some passes and get some shots and see how it feels," Lombardi said of testing out his injured shoulder. "It was definitely disappointing having a setback the way I did, but I'm happy with the way things went today."

While there is no timeline for Lombardi's return, he said, "We'll keep pushing it, be real aggressive and see how I do in the next little while."

Lombardi was hurt while taking a faceoff in the second period of the Leafs' 4-1 loss in Nashville. It was just his 19th game since missing the entire previous season with a concussion while playing for the Predators.

MILESTONE FOR PHANEUF

Maple Leafs captain Dion Phaneuf will be skating in his 500th NHL game tonight when Toronto hosts the Hurricanes.

"I remember when I first started and Iggy (Jarome Iginla) said, "Enjoy it because before you know it you'll be ... I think when came in he was seven or eight years in the league and he said you'll be there before you know it."

"It's quick, it flies by, but it's a lot of fun."

Phaneuf started his career with Calgary and played four-plus season with the Flames before being traded to the Leafs in the latter half of the 2009-10 season.

Toronto Sun LOADED: 12.14.2011
Blue Jackets slip past Canucks in SO

By Iain MacIntyre, Vancouver Sun columnist December 14, 2011 12:03 AM

COLUMBUS, Ohio - There are no easy games, no weak teams. Every team has good players. Anybody can beat anyone. Blah blah blah.

It's all empty blather until the worst team in the National Hockey League beats the hottest team, and even then it sounds mostly like excuses or rationalization.

The Columbus Blue Jackets, however, are not the worst team in the NHL. Tuesday's 2-1 shootout win against the Vancouver Canucks moved them all the way up to 29th. For the 10th time in 69 days this season, the Blue Jackets look down on someone in the over-all standings.

But they're still looking way up at the Canucks, who woke up in Carolina still the hottest team in the NHL after the Minnesota Wild lost 2-1 later Tuesday to the Winnipeg Jets.

The Canucks are 9-1-1 in their last 11 games and by any measure that is exceptional. But by any comparative statistical measure, Tuesday's setback against a Blue Jacket team that has six regulation wins in 52 games since last February is still disappointing no matter how well their goalie played.

Steve Mason, still trying to find the form that made him rookie-of-the-year three seasons ago, hadn't played in 12 games. For nearly a month, he watched journeyman backup Curtis Sanford play while former Canuck goaltending guru Ian Clark worked at restoring Mason's game and confidence.

If there was any initial rust or self-doubt on Mason or in him, the Canucks failed utterly to exploit it by drifting through a first period in which they were second-best only because three teams can't play one hockey game.

"We could have been just a little less horrible," is how Canuck defenseman Keith Ballard described it. "We were terrible. That was a real bad period for us to start. But we battled real hard. Lou kept us in the game and gave us enough time to score. Their goaltender played real well... and shootouts are hit or miss."

It is always hit or miss in shootouts for Canuck goalie Roberto Luongo, who went 0-for-3 in the skills contest after going 3-for-3 in Thursday's circus win in Montreal.

Luongo, who was nearly as good as Mason and stopped Rick Nash on a third-period breakaway before Canuck Max Lapierre's goal tied it 1-1 at 8:03, backed into his net on shootout goals by Nash and Mark Letestu and was deked by James Wisniewski on the clincher.

"Obviously, it's a close game and a shootout could go either way," Luongo said. "But I've got to make a save. The first couple I was deep and they went roof. The third one I was too far out and he went around me."

Luongo was hard on himself, but not as critical as teammates needed to be on themselves for sleeping through a first period when they should have been trying to buckle Mason and break the spirits of a Columbus team that, despite being competitive, is still 9-17-4.

Instead, Mason gained confidence and the Blue Jackets a 1-0 lead on Jeff Carter's power-play goal at 10:32 when his backhand went under Luongo's pad as the goalie made another frontal snow angel.

The Canucks didn't lose the game until the shootout, but they lost their best chance to win by falling behind, then pedalling like mad the next 38 minutes to try and catch up.

Trailing, Canuck coach Alain Vigneault shortened his bench and one guy left without a seat was rookie Cody Hodgson, who got only two third-period shifts but was still sent out in the shootout to be stopped by Mason. Alex Burrows was the only Canuck shooter to score.

Vigneault denied his lineup is complicated by using a defenceman on the fourth line, although it makes it more difficult for that unit to play regularly and the converted defenceman on Tuesday, Aaron Rome, was eventually switched back to the blueline.

"Usually when we're down, at some point I shorten up the bench and that's what I did in the third," Vigneault said. "I say it many times: there are no easy games in this league. That's a good hockey team there. There might be a perception that we're going to step on the ice and win it very easily. You don't win games easily in this league and tonight was another example."

Canuck Chris Higgins, who got away with an accidental trip on Nash before forcing a turnover that led to Lapierre's goal, said: "[Fans] look at it like a game where 99 times out of 100 we should win, but that's not the case in the NHL. I've been on teams when it's a long season, but you still come to play every night no matter where you are in the standings."

The Canucks got one point when they could have had two. But they got one point when they could have had none, too. And they've 19 points out of the last 22. Hopefully they'll start better Thursday in Carolina when the Canucks face another daunting opponent. The Hurricanes are 28th in the NHL.

ICE CHIP - There was no harm and Ballard didn't feel there was much foul, either, despite a frightening third-period hit in which Blue Jacket rookie Ryan Johansen's shoulder made primary contact with the Canuck's head. "I think he hit me on the shoulder pad," Ballard said. "It's not really my call. I don't think that kid's out there looking to hurt somebody."

Canucks' 'toughness' talk still a sore point

Notebook: Players tired of defending team's composition

By Iain MacIntyre, Vancouver Sun columnist December 13, 2011

COLUMBUS, Ohio - With the Blue Jackets dressing rugged minor-league callup Dane Byers, one game after Ottawa Senator Chris Neil targeted Henrik Sedin, the Vancouver Canucks' toughness continued to be a talking point before Tuesday's 2-1 shootout loss against Columbus.

Vancouver players, often noting the team was tough enough last spring to get to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final against the Boston Bruins, are already tired of defending the Canucks' composition.

"We didn't lose the final because of a lack of toughness," Canuck goalie Cory Schneider said Tuesday morning. "We lost because [Bruin goalie] Tim Thomas stood on his head and we couldn't score any goals. If you think one tough or gritty player would have made a difference in Game 7, I don't think so."

The Canucks lost Game 7 4-0 and Thomas won the Conn Smythe Trophy by allowing only eight goals during a final in which Vancouver's top-ranked power play went 2-for-33.

OH, CANADA: Although fulfilling his dream to play in the National Hockey League, Blue Jackets' rookie Ryan Johansen admits a little part of him is with Team Canada preparing for the world junior championship later this month in Alberta.

Johansen, a 19-year-old forward from Port Moody, was part of the Canadian team that lost the gold-medal game to Russia at last year's world tournament in Buffalo.

The Blue Jackets decided to keep Johansen in the NHL rather than release him this month to play for Canada.

"Who wouldn't want to play for your country at the world juniors?" Johansen said before facing his hometown Canucks. "But I want to keep helping this team get back into the playoff race.

"I have nothing but great memories from Buffalo last year. That was probably the biggest hockey memory I've had in my life, definitely something I'll never forget. It would have been really exciting to go to Calgary and Edmonton - they're going to have some pretty sweet crowds there. I still keep in touch with the guys who are returning [to Team Canada] so I'll be texting them every couple of days to see how things are going."

Things have been going well for Johansen in the NHL except for his offensive finish. Using his size (6-3, 205 pounds) and skill to help ease his transition from junior hockey, the fourth pick of the 2010 draft has been gradually getting more ice time from coach Scott Arniel. But he has gone eight games without a point and 14 without a goal.

"I feel like I'm playing pretty well, Johansen said. "But the only reason I'm not playing really well is the puck's not going in the net for me, so it's frustrating that way."

CRASH CARTER: Johansen isn't the only one struggling to score. Columbus centre Jeff Carter's first period goal was his sixth in 19 games since his blockbuster trade from the Philadelphia Flyers. Linemate Rick Nash has nine goals - and a minus-16 rating - in 30 games. The contracts for Carter and Nash are worth more than $120-million-US.

"It's been a struggle here lately," Carter, set back by a fractured foot, understated. "I want to go out there - and Rick does, too - we want to go out and score some goals, help to get some leads and win games for the team. We've been doing a lot of good things, but we haven't been doing it for 60 minutes. It's something we have to get better at."

NO SWEATT: Protecting their salary-cap space, the Canucks returned emergency callup Bill Sweatt to minor-league Chicago, forcing Vancouver coach Alain Vigneault to use defenceman Aaron Rome on the fourth line for most of the game.
Canucks Game Day: 'A struggle' for Blue Jackets as high-priced Carter, Nash fail to ignite

COLUMBUS, Ohio - For $120 million, the Columbus Blue Jackets have received 14 goals this season from Jeff Carter and Rick Nash - the huge-money forwards who were supposed to lead the franchise towards respectability.

Instead, the Blue Jackets have been last in the National Hockey League for 59 of 68 days this season and their new first line is still trying to ignite and get off the launching pad as Columbus plays the Vancouver Canucks tonight (4 p.m. Pacific time, Sportsnet Vancouver, Team 1040).

After collecting eight points in the first eight games, Nash has only four goals and 13 points in 21 games and is an unfathomable minus-15. Carter, acquired last summer from the Philadelphia Flyers, has five goals and 10 points in 18 games and is trying to overcome a fractured foot.

Who knew the best player on the top line would be Vinny Prospal, who has 23 points in 29 games and is only minus-5?

"It's been a struggle here lately," Carter understated after this morning's skate. "I want to go out there - and Rick does, too - we want to go out and score some goals, help to get some leads and win games for the team.

We've been doing a lot of good things, but we haven't been doing it for 60 minutes. It's something we have to get better at.

"We've been able to get a few [goals] here the last couple of games. We just feel we're on the puck more, skating more. We've just to keep working at it."

Carter, who has goals in the last two games but has been pointless in 11 of his 18 contests, is working hard and is well-intentioned. But with the 11-year, $58-million contract unloaded by the Flyers on Blue Jackets general manager Scott Howson, Carter needs to do more.

So does Nash, the captain who is on a $62.4-million, eight-year deal.

So does James Wisniewski, Howson's big free-agent catch, who has started his six-year, $33-million contract with a minus-15 rating in 21 games. The defenceman, at least, has 15 points.

But none of these players' performances tonight may matter unless goalie Steve Mason isn't better than his numbers of 3.63 goals-against per game and an .875 save rate.

Considered the best young goalie in the NHL when he won the Calder Trophy three years ago, Mason has watched journeyman and ex-Canuck Curtis Sanford play the last 12 games for Columbus.

"I'm sure maybe he thought he'd get thrown in earlier than this," coach Scott Amiel said. "This is his chance. I'm not judging him on this game alone tonight. This is a process for us. We took a step back and wanted to work with him and do the right things. We're concerned about Steve not just this next game, but the rest of the season and next year. Hopefully we've done the right thing so far and it will help him tonight and games after that."

Canucks goalie Roberto Luongo starts his fifth straight game for a team that has won nine of its last 10.

Vancouver may need its top-ranked power play to back off Columbus, which has recalled tough minor-leaguer Dane Byers to replace injured buzzsaw winger Derek Dorsett. The Blue Jackets' penalty kill is last in the NHL.

"We're fine with how they play us," Canuck Daniel Sedin said. "They're going to play us hard and everyone knows we're not going to drop our gloves. That's not what we do. It's been fine how things have been handled this year by our team. As long as our power play keeps producing, we're going to hurt teams."

PLAYERS TO WATCH:

Blue Jackets - After a career-long, 12-game stint on the bench, one-season wonder G Steve Mason gets the start tonight.

Canucks - C Henrik Sedin goes for his 700th NHL point as the Canucks captain moves closer to the franchise's all-time scoring lead.

INJURIES:

Blue Jackets - RW Derek Dorsett (leg), LW Kristian Huselius (groin), D Radek Martinek (concussion) are out. C Sami Pahlsson (illness) is questionable.

Canucks - LW David Booth (knee), C Andrew Ebbett (foot), LW Aaron Volpatti (shoulder) are out. LW Bill Sweatt has been returned to the minors.

Best news
Andrew Ebbett is expected to join the Canucks in Carolina. It couldn't come at a better time.

Best WTF?
Defenceman Aaron Rome started Tuesday's game as a forward and ended it as a defenceman. Why? "Figured we were down by a goal and Aaron is a better offensive defenceman than Andrew Alberts," Alain Vigneault said. "So, we just made that switch. Usually, when we're down, I just shorten up the bench, so that's what I did."

Best prediction
Anyone who had Cody Hodgson getting benched. Seems that big goal in Montreal hasn't bought him a longer leash. He played only 7:51 and didn't see the ice after the five-minute mark of the third. Until the shootout. Maybe he was studying Steve Mason's tendencies to prep himself. Only Dale Weise got less ice time.

Best explanation
Billy Sweatt was reassigned to Chicago and it wasn't cap-related, or emergency recall related. It was the-Canucks-don't-have-a-better-option-on-the-farm related. That's why Rome played forward. "I just think, right now, if you look at what we have available here, that's the best option we have," Vigneault said. "It's a coaching decision as far as discussing with management what our options are. After discussing it with everybody, we all agree, that's our best option right now."

Best shap
"Vintage night: Luongo fails in shootout Cody gets benched and Rome plays multiple positions. Vintage AV." (twitter.com/harry1619)

Luongo has been at his best this trip, when the Canucks have been down and pressing. It's meant he's had to face a lot of odd-man rushes and quality chances.

You may have noticed he's had success charging out further from the crease. He is challenging more than he was last year.

"That's a very good observation," he said. "It all depends on the situation on the rush. But when the guy is coming in and there's a reduced backdoor threat, I want to be more aggressive on them and try to cut away as much of an angle as possible."

COLUMBUS - Cody Hodgson and his teammates were not suffering from post-concussion symptoms to start Tuesday's game. They just played like it.

Comatose in the first, the Canucks made Scott Arniel's decision to start a rusty Steve Mason for the first time in a month look intuitive. They greeted him warmly, worked him in gradually, and ensured he was clear of any traffic, contact and scoring chances for the first 20-25 minutes of the game. It did look very thoughtful. Mason's own family couldn't have done a better job.

"We were horrible, we could have been a little less terrible," Keith Ballard lamented.

No kidding

How bad was it? The Canucks were happy to get out of Columbus with a point, essentially extending Vancouver's current roll to 9-1-1.

The Canucks did improve as the game wore on. So did Mason, who may have found a time tunnel because it sure looked like it was 2008-09 again, his Calder Trophy winning season. Mason was good, great even, and added a dramatic wrinkle after he was forced out of the third period because of agonizing muscle cramps. He returned three minutes later and finished off the Canucks, stopping both Hodgson and Alex Burrows in the shootout, securing a 2-1 Columbus win.

Despite simply giving away the first 20 minutes with five shots and a lone scoring chance, the Canucks had opportunities to win it late. But when Mason couldn't make the save, defenceman John Moore did. He got the last one with his skate with 44 seconds left in overtime, when a Chris Higgins slap pass re-directed through the crease and nearly over the goal line.

Head coach Alain Vigneault started the game with just eleven forwards - Aaron Rome played wing - and ended it with nine as Hodgson and Dale Weise were benched, along with Andrew Alberts, five minutes into the third.

But his team's finish was fine, the start was, well, we'll let Jannik Hansen answer that one.

"It was ugly," Hansen said. "We were a step behind and when you're a step behind in this league, you're far away from everything. When we were dumping in pucks we weren't getting in on them. Then, it was the first pass. Really it was everything. And it set us back for the whole game.

"We're just lucky (Roberto) Luongo was so good."

True, Arniel wasn't the only coach to start the right goalie. Luongo kept the Canucks in it. Even the goal which beat him was played well. Sure, he was on his stomach when Jeff Carter scored a power play goal 10:32 into the first, but he got there attempting a poke check. In that position, his pads were down and he looked like he had the goal line sealed. It was the right play, even if Carter's shot somehow squeaked under his right pad.

After that, Luongo was a scene stealer. His best save was on a Rick Nash breakaway. But as good as he was on the breakaways, is as bad as he was in the shootout. That is what we call a trend.

By the time the Canucks got interested, it was the second period and Mason had found his sea legs. He gloved a Dan Hamhuis slapper, stopped a Higgins backhand in tight, and perfectly tracked two tip shots while the Canucks were on their vaunted power play, one from Henrik Sedin and the other Mason Raymond.

It was impressive stuff, but you wonder how he would have handled it if the Canucks started the game with the same urgency they ended it.

"I didn't think our net presence was nearly good enough," Vigneault said. "But you have to give him and them credit."
Sanford sits as Columbus starts Mason against Canucks

By Jason Botchford, The Province December 13, 2011

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Columbus head coach Scott Arniel is betting the Vancouver Canucks are exactly what Steve Mason needs.

Mason will get his first start tonight since Nov. 15 and it will come against the NHL's best power play and arguably its hottest team. He, of course, will be backstopping a Blue Jackets team that has the worst penalty killing in the league. It's an interesting call for many reasons but mostly because the Canucks are second in goals while the L.A. Kings, who visit Columbus Thursday, are last.

Why not wait until Thursday for Mason to start, to try and make sure you aren't throwing him to the wolves? Arniel is hoping his team will rise to the occasion.

"I just felt this is the one that would be a great challenge for Steve, against one of the best teams in the league," Arniel said.

"I knew it had to be this week. Curtis (Sanford) has played a lot. I actually told Steve on Saturday that he was playing today. He's known for a while. Why this game? I'm not sure."

Sanford, who started 12 in a row, had cooled off since a very good November in which he allowed 12 goals in seven games. In his last two starts, losses to Nashville and Boston, he gave up nine.

So, it's Mason tonight and his abysmal 3-12-1 record which comes with a 3.63 GAA. What has he worked on during his month away from playing? Just about everything, Arniel said, including his fitness.

"He got to do some conditioning things and do some work on areas there that probably needed some improvement," Arniel said.

Questions about Mason's work ethic have dogged him since his breakout rookie season. Arniel believed after the start he had to the year Mason had to take a step back from the game in mid-November to "reload" himself.

"A little bit of everything plays into it," Arniel said. "Once you're not confident, you start to question what you're doing with your technique and how you're playing. But I like to think, the game we're playing as a group right now will be a better game in front of Steve."

"The games early in the year weren't very good and we gave up a lot of quality chances. Steve faced a lot of high-percentage opportunities against him. I think we've played a lot better as a group in front of Curtis, and not because it was Curtis. We went back and worked on a lot of things."

Mason will be facing a very confident Canucks team which is on its first roll of the season, having won nine of ten. The breaking point for the Canucks, the one that really infused them with confidence, was the three-goal comeback against the Montreal Canadiens which started the current five-game road trip.

"That win was huge and it showed a lot of character to come back like that," Alex Burrows said. "We were down 3-0 in a tough away building in Montreal after travelling across the country. It would have been easy for us to pack it in.

"But it showed we have character in this room. And now we believe we can come back in any game, especially with our offence.

"We know we can score goals. If we play well defensively and cut down on scoring chances against, we will do good things."

Defenceman Dan Hamhuis said the team wouldn't have been able to come back if the Montreal game was at the beginning of the year. And it's not because the team is scoring more goals, he said. It's because they're giving up fewer chances.

"We didn't have the confidence then," Hamhuis said.

"But we do now, and a lot of what you're seeing is what we've been working on in practice. We've had a lot of D video sessions, always looking at ways to improve the defence and cut down on scoring chances. That's a huge thing we study on tape.
Canucks Gameday: Vancouver at Columbus

By Gordon McIntyre, The Province December 13, 2011

Canucks (18-10-1) at Columbus Blue Jackets (8-17-4)

4 p.m., Nationwide Arena

TV: Sportsnet Vancouver Radio: TEAM 1040

The Setup

The Canucks: They've won nine of their past 10 games, including the first two on this five-game road trip. There's absolutely no reason the Canucks can't chalk another W tonight.

The Blue Jackets: Things were looking up for the woeful Jackets until they ran into the Canucks late last month. Columbus came into Rogers Arena on Nov. 29 sporting a 4-2-2 run, but since losing to the Canucks they're 2-4-1 in their past seven.

Three things to watch

1. How is Cody Hodgson's head, really? The kid's game -- he wanted to return in the Ottawa outing on Saturday after trying to leave the ice on spaghetti legs -- but concussion symptoms sometimes don't appear until a few days have gone by.

2. The Blue Jackets superpest, Derek Dorsett, won't dress but his injury turns out to be nowhere near as bad as feared after he took an awkward, high-speed tumble on Saturday when he collided with Tim Thomas. Instead of missing the season with a fracture or torn ligaments, the club says he could return in a couple of games or so.

3. Roberto Luongo, who will start his fifth straight game, has a 1.42 goals-against average and .940 save percentage in his last four starts, one of which against Colorado was cut short when he took a puck to the neck barely three minutes into the second period.

By the numbers

14: Ryan Kesler has five goals and nine assists in his past 10 games, in which he was shut-out from the scoresheet just twice. At 7-14-21 in 24 games, his goals production is down but he's on the same points pace he recorded last season.

Leaderboard

Canucks

Goals: 12, D.Sedin
Assists: 25, H.Sedin
Points: 34, D.Sedin
PIM: 65, Lapierre

In Net: Luongo, 11-6-1; 2.71 GAA/SV% .901

Blue Jackets

Goals: 9, Nash
Assists: 16, Prospal
Points: 23, Prospal
PIM: 73, Dorsett

In Net: Mason, 3-12-1; 3.63 GAA/SV% .875

Injuries

Canucks: RW David Booth (knee), IR 3-5 weeks; LW Aaron Volpatti (shoulder surgery), IR rest of regular season; C Andrew Ebbett (foot), out indefinitely.

Blue Jackets: RW Derek Dorsett (leg), day-to-day; LW Kristian Huselius (lower body), 4-6 weeks; D Radek Martinek (concussion), injured reserve.
Hunter pulled Vokoun after that fourth goal and inserted Michal Neuvirth (16 saves), who did not escape the contest unblemished. Jakub Voracek added the final Philadelphia marker when he flagged a shot by Matt Carle out of mid-air to knock it past Neuvirth less than six minutes into the third.

Although Washington responded to the deficit with 17 shots in the third period, and an eventual goal by Halpern to end Bryzgalov’s shutout bid, it all came far too late to swing the balance of this particular contest.

“I think we’re all disappointed in the effort and you don’t offer up many excuses tonight for what happened,” Knuble said. “You get back to it and you get better.”

Capitals notes: Mike Green missed a 15th consecutive game with a strained right groin muscle. He was sent to visit a specialist this week. ... Matt Hendricks missed a third straight outing with a right knee injury.

Hartnell extends goal-scoring streak to 6 as Flyers beat Capitals 5-1 for 6th straight win

By Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Scott Hartnell extended his goal-scoring streak to six games, Marc-Andre Bourdon got his first NHL goal and the Philadelphia Flyers beat the Washington Capitals 5-1 Tuesday night for their sixth straight victory.

Philadelphia, which owns the best record in the Eastern Conference, built a 4-0 lead in the second period and coasted to the finish. Ilya Bryzgalov stopped 31 shots, the lone flaw in his performance a tap-in by Jeff Halpern with 6:01 left.

The Flyers were without the NHL’s leading scorer, Claude Giroux, who is out indefinitely with a concussion. The right wing accumulated 16 goals and 23 assists in Philadelphia’s first 28 games, but in this one the Flyers generated more than enough offense without him.

Washington had its two-game winning streak snapped and fell to 3-4 under coach Dale Hunter. The Capitals’ first three losses with Hunter behind the bench were each by one goal.

The Capitals were 7-0-3 in their previous 10 games against Philadelphia, including a 5-2 win on Oct. 20.

The Flyers killed two Washington power plays in the first period, limited the Capitals to only five shots and took a 1-0 lead at 16:16 when Hartnell took a wrist shot from the top of the left circle that slipped between the legs of goalie Tomas Vokoun.

Hartnell has six goals and two assists during the Flyers’ six-game win streak.

Philadelphia went up 2-0 at 7:23 of the second period when Bourdon took a slap shot from just inside the blue line that ticked off the stick of Capitals defenseman Mathieu Perreault and whizzed past Vokoun, who was screened by Flyers defenseman Jody Shelley. The 22-year-old Bourdon was playing in his 10th NHL game, all this season.

Wayne Simmonds made it 3-0 at 14:19 by deflecting a shot by Andrej Meszaros past Vokoun, and Maxime Talbot scored at 17:33 with a shot that hit Vokoun in the chest and bounded into the net.

After giving up four goals on 21 shots, Vokoun was pulled after the second period and replaced by Michal Neuvirth.

Jakub Voracek put the Flyers ahead 5-0 by deflecting a shot by James van Riemsdyk at 5:26 of the final period.

NOTES: Philadelphia GM Paul Holmgren said the Flyers will be careful with Giroux. “Obviously, we’re concerned. We’re going to err on the side of caution,” Holmgren said. ... Capitals D Mike Green missed a 15th straight game with a strained right groin muscle. He has missed 21 of the last 22 because of injuries. ... Philadelphia is 11-3-1 on the road, the best record in the Eastern Conference.

Over the weekend at the Washington Capitals’ Arlington practice facility, Jason Chimera sprayed water around the dressing room after his group won a scrimmage in a shootout. It was all in jest, as though they had won the Stanley Cup, but it’s the kind of thing that teammates have come to expect from the jovial veteran, who is on pace for a career-best season.

Through the first third of the 2011-12 campaign, Chimera is tied for the team lead in goals (11), second in plus-minus rating (plus-8) and sixth in points (17). The Edmonton native is on pace for 32 goals this season, which would nearly double his previous career high of 17 that he set back in 2007-08 as a member of the Columbus Blue Jackets.

“Honestly, I don’t think anyone would say they thought I’d have 11 goals right now,” said Chimera, 32. “But I think I always had it in me; it’s nice to see it with some consistency. I feel the best that I think I ever have in the NHL, as far as making plays and feeling as though I can contribute.”

In a season with a sloppy beginning for the Capitals, Chimera has been a constant source of energy — both before and after Dale Hunter replaced Bruce Boudreau as head coach — as he found the finishing touch to complement his speed as a member of the team’s checking line.

Given his place as more of a role player in Washington’s lineup, having a regular — and important — duty of thwarting some of the league’s most potent offensive lines, along with common teammates — he’s been on a line with Brooks Laich and Joel Ward the majority of the season — has allowed him to build confidence.

“You come to work, you’re ready for each game and you’re up for each game because you know the task that’s put out for you,” Chimera said. “I think my role has been a little more defined.”

Chimera, who will earn $1.875 million this season, signed a two-year contract extension in September worth $3.5 million. Many have wondered if he should have waited to sign the deal, given his hot start this season. But Chimera is earnest when he says Washington is the best place for him on the ice and for his family; he and his wife Sarah have two children younger than the age of 4.

Which is good for the Capitals, who benefit from his persistently upbeat attitude in the dressing room and the work ethic that accompanies it on the ice.

“He might be on Mountain Dew 24 hours a day,” Ward joked. “He’s always on...??.? Some days when you think you might be a little off, a little tired, he’s still got that gear that he can crank right up. He’s fun to play with and he poses a threat every time he’s out there. When he’s playing with confidence you get out there and you can tell he just wants the puck.”

An increase in ice time has accompanied Chimera’s exploits; he is averaging 14 minutes 26 seconds per game, more than what he’s regularly seen each of the previous two seasons in Washington. But one of the most noticeable adjustments to Chimera’s game since Hunter took over on Nov. 28 has been to work the 6-foot-3, 213-pound winger into the fold on the power play.

Chimera is Hunter’s style of player: a big forward, able to use size to his advantage, never hesitant to drive the net and more than content to score opportunistic, ugly goals in front. Those traits are an asset to the power play and so, in six games under Hunter, Chimera has seen 9:53 of time on the man advantage compared to the 7:13 he saw with the unit in 22 contests under Boudreau.

“That’s something he earned,” assistant coach Dean Evason said. “You get a guy that’s leaving your team in scoring, he should have the opportunity to play on the power play. When Dale arrived he recognized that...??. Dale’s a guy on the power play that he wants you to score from that dirty area and you don’t necessarily score those pretty goals often. Chimera goes to the net and battles, so you put him in that position to succeed so the group can succeed.”
Open thread: Capitals vs. Flyers

By Washington Post

Chat about the game in the comments section below and check back here for lineups as faceoff approaches.

Faceoff: 7 p.m., Verizon Center | TV: CSN | Radio: 1500 AM

Based on warmup here is how the lineup should look against the Flyers:

**Forwards**
- Ovechkin-Backstrom-Semin
- Brouwer-Johansson-Halpern
- Chimera-Laich-Ward
- Eakin-Perreault-Knuble

**Defense**
- Alzner-Carlson
- Erskine-Wideman
- Hamrlik-Orlov

**Goal**
- Vokoun
- Neuvirth

Scratches: Mike Green (strained right groin muscle), Matt Hendricks (right knee) and Jeff Schultz.

**NHL Scoreboard**

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Flyers another measuring stick for Capitals under Dale Hunter

By Katie Carrera

The Capitals have split their six games under Coach Dale Hunter so far, but in their most recent contests the team showed an elevated comfort level with the new system.

Consecutive wins against Ottawa and Toronto last week, before three days off, showed the progress and continued evolution of a group looking to play more sound defensively while not stifling its biggest offensive threats.

With Eastern Conference leading Philadelphia up next on Tuesday at Verizon Center, the Capitals’ proficiency in their new game will face another test.

“Pretty much measured every game,” Hunter said when asked if the Flyers were a stiffer test. “You take one game at a time and you measure by 11 o’clock tonight, how well you did. That’s the attitude you’ve got to take, that you worry about the game at hand and nothing else matters.”

Granted, the Flyers will be without NHL leading scorer Claude Giroux (39) points, captain Chris Pronger and Brayden Schenn, but there’s still plenty of depth to test Washington.

For the Capitals, keeping their momentum rolling after three days off and a road trip later in the week will be important not only to rack up points but continue the assimilation to the different style of play.

“The last couple games I feel we’ve been real good,” Troy Brouwer said about the adjustment process. “We know where to be all over the ice, we have confidence in the new system now. When you’re losing the fist couple games and not getting too many chances it’s tough to kind of stick with it but the guys did, Dale kept reinforcing what we needed to do. Over the last couple games we’ve been really systematically sound, disciplined in our systems and that’s been why we’ve been able to win.”

This stretch between games provided rest for the players, and rather than run the team through lengthy on-ice workouts, Hunter and his staff have kept things efficient on the ice and used video as well to iron out some kinks of the system. Seeing the game plan unfold on the ice against a live opponent, and learning from it, has had advantages.

“We’ve kind of been learning on the fly in games, trying it out in games and that’s been great feedback because there’s video [coaches] go through it again and then you get a result at the end of the night as well,” Mike Knuble said. “He’s almost got to come in and brainwash us a little bit. There’s little things, tendencies to take a risk and try to create an offensive chance where you might have had a green light to do that in the past, you don’t have it as much now. You want to err on the side of a smart play defensively, regroup, play well defensively and try it again.”

Jaromir Jagr makes his return to Verizon Center with Philadelphia

By Katie Carrera

While there were questions about how Jaromir Jagr would fare in his return to the NHL this season, midway through December it seems that those doubts have been put to rest.

Through 24 games with the Flyers this season, Jagr has 24 points (10 goals, 14 assists) and has played an important part in establishing their scoring depth. He’s spent most of the season on a line with Scott Hartnell and the league’s leading scorer, Claude Giroux, who will not play against the Capitals because of a concussion.

Tonight will also mark Jagr’s first trip to Verizon Center since his return to North America this year. While the home crowd may focus on making Jagr feel unwelcome, the Capitals will be trying to make sure he doesn’t have a large impact on the score sheet. In the past five games, Jagr has four goals, three assists and is a plus-2.

“Just playing him last time, he is hard,” Karl Alzner said of Jagr. “He’s great at defending the puck, he’s great with his stick. He still has a little bit of the pre-lockout rules in him, you can tell with his clutching and grabbing and he gets away with it pretty good. He’s a smart player.”

Although he wasn’t in the lineup for the first meeting of the season with the Flyers because of his recovery from offseason shoulder injury, John Erskine had plenty of experience facing Jagr in previous seasons.

“He has real strong legs and he can protect the puck really good so you’ve got to use your stick. If you just go in and try to hit him you’re going to bounce off him a lot,” Erskine said. “You’ve got to play positional on him, use your stick a lot. If not, he’ll find the space.”

By Katie Carrera

Tomas Vokoun to start against Flyers; Matt Hendricks, Jeff Schultz likely scratches

Tomas Vokoun was the first goaltender off the ice at KCI and will get the nod as the Capitals host the Eastern Conference leading Philadelphia Flyers at Verizon Center.

The 35-year-old Czech started the teams’ first meeting of the season back on Oct. 20 when he made 40 saves in the Capitals’ 5-2 win in Philadelphia.

— It appears as though Matt Hendricks will miss a third straight game with an injured right knee. The fourth-line winger took part in extra work, typical of scratches, this morning along with defenseman Jeff Schultz, who was a healthy scratch on Dec. 9 against Toronto.

Coach Dale Hunter confirmed that Hendricks’ injury is the reason he is out of the lineup against the Flyers.

“He’s still day-to-day. He had a good skate today but we’ll see how he is tomorrow,” said Hunter, who added that Hendricks will travel with the team to Winnipeg and Denver.

— Mike Green, who is out of town visiting a specialist about the strained right groin muscle that has held him out of the lineup for 14 consecutive games, was the only player not on the ice for the morning skate.

— Jay Beagle was out on the ice during the morning skate once again making it five consecutive practice days that the winger has worked out on the ice. Beagle has not played since suffering a concussion on Oct. 13 when he was knocked out by Pittsburgh’s Arron Asham.

— The Capitals skated with the same lines that they used each of the past two games on Tuesday morning. If it ain’t broke...

Ovechkin-Backstrom-Semin
Brouwer-Johansson-Halpern
Chimera-Laich-Ward
Eakin/Hendricks-Perreault-Knuble

Flyers prepare to move forward without Claude Giroux

By Tarik El-Bashir

Ilya Bryzgalov was the first Flyers goalie off the ice, and thus, is expected to get the nod tonight against the Capitals at Verizon Center.

The big story this morning, though, was the status of Claude Giroux, the NHL’s leading scorer. The 23-year-old center left Saturday’s game after getting kneed in the head during a collision with teammate Wayne Simmonds and has not skated since.

Although there was initially a hopeful vibe surrounding Giroux’s condition, that went away following today’s announcement.

“Claude reported not feeling very good today,” Flyers General Manager Paul Holmgren said in a statement. “Over the past few days, his symptoms have gradually gotten worse. He will be out indefinitely with a concussion.”

Giroux has 16 goals and 23 assists and is a big reason the Flyers lead the NHL in goals per game (3.61) and sit atop the Eastern Conference standings.

The 23-year-old, who did not travel to Washington, becomes the third Flyer sidelined with a concussion, joining No. 1 defenseman Chris Pronger and third-line center Brayden Schenn.

So far, the Flyers have managed to thrive despite being without key players. But it’s impossible not wonder after this news just how much longer they’ll avoid a dropoff.

Players learned about Giroux’s downgrade in status from reporters as they came off the ice.

“I didn’t know that,” veteran Jody Shelley said. “All teams wonder, what happens when you’re down? What happens when things are bad? What happens when guys are missing?”

“We haven’t spent any time thinking about it, as far as Pronger and now ‘G’,” Shelley added. “That just attests to our system and our young energy, I guess. It’s almost an ignorance to even spend time looking about that. We just stay focused: We’re in Washington with a game.”

With Giroux out, rookie pivot Sean Couturier is expected to remain on the top line in between Scott Hartnell and Jaromir Jagr. Philly’s second forward combo should be Harry Zolnierczyk, Danny Briere and Wayne Simmonds, while the third figures to be James van Riemsdyk, Maxime Talbot and Jakub Voracek.

“The guys have responded well to everything, whether it’s been schedule or injury or youth or change or whatever it might be,” Coach Peter Laviolette said. “The guys we’ve put into the lineup have gone out and played hard every night. We haven’t won every game, but certainly there’s been a consistent effort with the way we’ve played the game, and I would expect no different today.”

Tonight’s game marks the second of four meetings between the rivals. The Caps prevailed in Philly on Oct. 20 after blitzing the Flyers with three goals in a span of 2:25 in the third period en route to a 5-2 win, their sixth straight to open the season.

How long ago that seems. For Washington, at least.

Laviolette said the Flyers are prepared to face a more conservative Caps team under Dale Hunter.

“The team is the same; a lot of the personnel is the same,” Laviolette said. “A little bit of a different style on the forecheck and in the neutral zone.”

“We always give the players information on the opponent,” Laviolette added after a pause. “But we don’t focus on it. We focus on what we do. How we need to play. Hockey for me is a sport that’s more [about] how your team does in making minor adjustments to the opposition as opposed to focusing on the opposition.”

Tomas Vokoun: ‘It was a terrible performance’

By Katie Carrera

While the Capitals’ 5-1 loss to the Flyers was not a particularly memorable evening for anyone in the home sweater, it was an especially forgettable night for starting goaltender Tomas Vokoun.

Vokoun allowed four goals on 21 shots through the first 40 minutes of play — two tallies he would like to have back and two redirections that he could do little to stop — and he did not finish the contest. Tuesday’s game marked the third time this season Vokoun has been pulled from the net.

“It was terrible performance,” Vokoun said afterward. “Certainly not pleasant and it’s unfortunate in a game like that there’s not really much to say. It was a bad performance by me.”

The first goal, may have been the toughest to take. Scott Hartnell took a wrist shot as he skated down the left wing that should have been a routine save, but instead the puck went between Vokoun’s legs and gave the Flyers a 1-0 lead with 16:16 gone in the first. It siphoned the energy out of the building.

The Flyers’ Jakub Voracek, left, has his shot blocked by Tomas Vokoun, one of few good plays in an otherwise miserable night for the Capitals’ goalie. (John McDonnell - The Washington Post) Vokoun acknowledged it was a bad goal afterward, but Coach Dale Hunter said that regardless of the quality of the goal the Capitals need to learn to bounce back and not let a single tally set them on their heels.

“It happens in a game. We’ve got to learn to rebound from it, learn from it and come back,” Hunter said. “We were playing a pretty good first but the game of hockey happens.”

The coach was not particularly harsh when asked about Vokoun’s play specifically.

“We all know he would like a couple back. He knows it. Everybody knows it,” Hunter said. “The other three were tipped out of the air — just tipped and lucky it went in.”

Philadelphia’s second goal wound up going off Mathieu Perreault’s stick in front. The third, Wayne Simmonds tipped a point shot in front. The fourth goal, Max Talbot’s shot bounced off Vokoun’s arm and into the net.

“The fourth one, I didn’t see it. Just went through our defenseman but still you’ve got to make the save, there’s not excuses,” Vokoun said. “It was a bad game by me. I didn’t help the team at all and that’s my job. There’s not really much else I can say.”

In his past six games, Vokoun is 2-4 and has a .897 save percentage having made 158 saves out of 176 shots he’s faced.

Tomas Vokoun didn’t really know what else to say. Four goals on 21 shots, including two soft ones that played a major part in the Washington Capitals’ 5-1 loss Tuesday night to the Philadelphia Flyers.

“It was terrible performance. Certainly not pleasant and it’s unfortunate in a game like that,” he said. “It was a bad performance by me.”

Vokoun allowed one harmless shot from Scott Hartnell to sneak through his pads late in the first period, then gave up a couple of tipped goals before seeing an uncontested shot from Max Talbot go under his arm, off the post and in.

The tips are hard to blame Vokoun for – one off Mathieu Perreault’s stick and another off Flyers forward Wayne Simmonds’.

“But still – you got to make the saves. There’s no excuses,” Vokoun said. “It was a bad game. I didn’t help the team at all, and that’s my job.”

Vokoun’s teammates and coach Dale Hunter understood this wasn’t his night but didn’t go too far trashing his performance.

“We all know he would like a couple back. He knows it and everybody knows it,” Hunter said. “It’s one of them games for Tomas that some nights you’re not where you want to be.”

The first goal Vokoun allowed appeared to be deflating to the Caps, especially as they were coming off an unsuccessful power play that featured a couple quality chances.

“It happens. It happens to your goalies. They play great and make saves they shouldn’t. And if he said it was a soft one that went in, that shouldn’t factor in too much on the bench,” veteran right wing Mike Knuble said. “You should just kind of look through it and keep moving forward and keep sticking with your game plan.”

The Caps struggled with that game plan in most facets of the game, but Vokoun allowing another soft goal later made the deficit four and likely ended any chance of a comeback.

“You don’t blame it on the goalie; you don’t say anything like that,” Knuble said. “You do better the next time.

Capitals come up short in blowout loss to Flyers

By Stephen Whyno-

Whenever any hockey team plays another that’s at or near the top of the standings, the phrase “measuring stick” is inevitably trotted out. Dale Hunter didn’t want to think of the matchup between his Washington Capitals and the Eastern Conference-leading Philadelphia Flyers as any different.

“You pretty much measure it every game,” he said. “You’re measured by it by 11 o’clock tonight how well you did.”

In Tuesday night’s measurement, the Caps came up pretty small thanks to a 5-1 loss to the Flyers at Verizon Center that featured plenty of breakdowns and missed opportunities but mostly shaky goaltending from Tomas Vokoun. All-around, it was a difficult defeat to swallow.

“It’s incredibly disappointing. No one wants to do that, especially at home,” defenseman Karl Alzner said. “You’d like to play a little bit better than this. It’s a tough one for us. We’ve got to go back to the drawing board a little bit and watch some video of the mistakes we made, because they’re pretty obvious to us.”

Vokoun’s goaltending was the most obvious problem, as he allowed admittedly two bad goals before getting yanked after two periods.

“It was terrible performance. Certainly not pleasant and it’s unfortunate in a game like that,” Vokoun said. “But there’s really not much to say. It was a bad performance by me.”

Players didn’t throw Vokoun under the bus after he allowed four goals on 21 shots in one of his worst games with the Caps.

“Voky’s been good for us all year. Sometimes he’s going to have a bad one. That’s when the team needs to pick him up and help him out. But we didn’t help him out,” forward Troy Brouwer said.

Hockey is so often a psychological sport that a couple of the soft goals the veteran gave up just broke the Caps. The first was an easy stop Scott Hartnell shot that sneaked through Vokoun’s pads — less than two minutes after an unsuccessful Washington power play ended.

Vokoun admitted it was a “bad goal,” but Hunter and the Caps said they need to rebound better instead of falling apart.

“If he said it was a soft one that went in, that shouldn’t factor in to much on the bench,” right wing Mike Knuble said. “You don’t blame it on the goalie; you don’t say anything like that.”

A couple tip shots were hard to peg on Vokoun, as the puck went in off Mathieu Perreault’s stick in front on the Flyers’ second goal and then in off Wayne Simmonds in front on the third. But the fourth goal Vokoun surrendered hurt, as he let a Max Talbot wrister go under his arm, off the post and in.

The Caps mounted an attack in the third — and for spurts throughout — but they didn’t get much chance to control the puck, as the Flyers possessed and cycled it much better than they did in the teams’ first meeting in October.

“They obviously were playing a hard, physical game. They’re great down low. Their cycle is really tough to play against,” Alzner said. “I think the ice is tilted one way, it seems like. Every single time we get out there, we’re in our own zone. I don’t know exactly what it is.”

Meanwhile, Philadelphia goalie Ilya Bryzgalov was sharp on his end to stifle any momentum the Caps were trying to develop.

The problem wasn’t all goaltending, as a few deflections in front could be blamed on defensemen not tying up opponents’ sticks. Defensive zone coverage, which looked to be improving as Hunter’s time here grew longer, was a mess all around as the Caps couldn’t prevent the Flyers from getting quality chances in front.

“Every time the puck crossed our blue line, it ended up in our end for 30 seconds at a time,” forward Jeff Halpern said. “We didn’t work hard to get to spots and we never came out with the puck clean out of our own end. It was like D-zone coverage practice, and we weren’t very good at it.”
Caps’ Carlson clicking under Hunter

By Stephen Whyno

When stay-at-home defenseman Karl Alzner finds himself up on the rush, he looks and finds friend and defensive partner John Carlson right there with him.

It’s a product of Washington Capitals coach Dale Hunter’s system that he likes his defensemen to jump up, but it’s also a product of Carlson feeling it with his game.

Carlson struggled early in the season to put up points, but the 21-year-old has heated up lately and is back to his old self on the offensive end.

“He’s getting that offensive flair back,” Alzner said. “He’s getting some good looks, and he’s making good on a lot of those.”

Going into Tuesday night’s game against the Philadelphia Flyers, Carlson put up seven points (one goal and six assists) in the Caps’ previous three. He had eight points in six games since Hunter — his old coach from the London Knights of the Ontario Hockey League — took over for Bruce Boudreau.

Carlson doesn’t necessarily see a connection between Hunter’s arrival and his improvement this season.

“It is familiar for me, but I thought I’ve been playing well all season,” Carlson said. “It’s definitely a comfort factor to have him in here over someone that I would have to get used to a little more than him. It’s been a good transition, I think.”

Carlson’s plus-minus has been consistent, though advanced statistics such as Corsi — a way to determine shots for and against when a player is on the ice — indicated that he was hurting on the defensive end. Missed assignments were a problem for a lot of defensemen, at the time, but Hunter and assistant Jim Johnson’s man-to-man defense has helped.

Paired with Alzner, Carlson has been tasked with being a shutdown defenseman — something which earned his coach’s praise.

“Him and Alzner have a tough job with defending against the top lines, and still he’s played offensively, too,” Hunter said. “So got to give credit to them two guys for closing down the best players on each team and putting up some numbers. So it’s a credit to Johnny.”

But Carlson is counted on to contribute scoring, something he attributes to luck but that teammates know is a combination of that and talent showing through.

“He might’ve struggled a little bit at the start, but I think he’s playing with a lot of confidence right now,” defenseman Dennis Wideman said. “He’s working hard; he’s getting up in the play. He’s there; he’s in the right spots. Usually when you’re in the right spots and working hard, good things happen.”

Good things have been happening for Carlson lately — possibly because he has been shooting the puck frequently. Goals aren’t coming fast and furious but points are as rebounds and smart passes have led to assists.

“Sometimes points, they come and go. Sometimes you feel like you should have some when you don’t and vice versa,” Carlson said. “They come in bunches, and I’m fortunate to have one.”

Carlson shook off any possibility that he might be mired in a sophomore slump with a nice stretch of production, but that’s not the end-all for the impending restricted free agent. "I think that everyone learns as they go in this league," he said. "I hope that I get better in every aspect of my game — not just one."

Flyers marching on despite Claude Giroux’s concussion

By Stephen Whyno

The Philadelphia Flyers’ season has featured plenty of black and blue to go along with their trademark orange. They’ve endured injuries to captain Chris Pronger and top-line forwards Jaromir Jagr and James van Riemsdyk plus a collection of others but are still leading the Eastern Conference going into Tuesday night’s game at the Washington Capitals.

On Tuesday morning, the team announced that leading scorer and likely NHL MVP front-runner Claude Giroux was out indefinitely with a concussion. But just like every other time, the Flyers don’t expect to miss a beat.

“We don’t see here and look for a crutch or a hole and think we’re going to sit back on it,” veteran tough guy Jody Shelley said. “We got guys here that make guys better.”

Giroux is not just the Flyers’ top player but leads the league with 39 points. He seemed a sure bet to make a second straight All-Star Game appearance before taking a knee to the head from teammate Wayne Simmonds in a scary collision Saturday night.

General manager Paul Holmgren kept saying the 23-year-old center would be evaluated each day, but Tuesday brought bad news.

“Claude reported not feeling very good today,” Holmgren said in a text message shown to reporters at Verizon Center. “Over the past few days his symptoms have gradually gotten worse.”

With concussions such a sensitive issue in the NHL today, especially with Sidney Crosby out indefinitely again after feeling symptoms return, it’s no surprise the Flyers are taking a cautious approach with Giroux.

He already didn’t travel with the team to D.C., but now there is no timetable for his return to the lineup. At least for the time being Shelley takes Giroux’s spot in the lineup and rookie Sean Couturier moves up to center the top line. Increased scoring is expected to come from the likes of Jagr, van Riemsdyk, Danny Briere and Scott Hartnell.

“When he goes out we look for the veteran players like Danny to step in and we also look at the young players like Matt Read or Sean Couturier to pick up the slack,” coach Peter Laviolette said.

Pronger hasn’t played since Nov. 19 and he’s out indefinitely with a concussion as well. The big defenseman also had knee surgery last month. The Flyers are missing defensemen Erik Gustafsson (wrist) and Andreas Lilja (high ankle sprain), forcing them to rely on rookies Marc-Andre Bourdon and Kevin Marshall.

Giroux’s loss hurts badly, though, considering what he means to Philadelphia.

“Obviously he’s a guy you can’t replace. It’s gonna take a lot of people to step it up and fill the role that he plays,” van Riemsdyk said. “He does everything for us: penalty kill, power play, scores big goals, makes big hits, blocks shots, does it all. So we’re gonna have to kind of step up our game here. Just let him rest and not have to rush him back.”

No matter the injuries, the Flyers are not worried. Instead, they’ve preached resiliency.

“All teams want to have that. All teams wonder what happens when you’re down, what happens when things are bad, what happens when guys are missing,” Shelley said. “The 20 guys that are wearing the Philadelphia Flyers jerseys are representing the organization, and we play one way and we’re going to do it again tonight.”

Flyers without Claude Giroux for game at Capitals

By Stephen Whyno

The thing Karl Alzner was most excited about when talking about facing the Philadelphia Flyers was the prospect of facing star center Claude Giroux.

"I know he’s having a really good season — a guy that I know pretty well," Alzner said.

A really good season is right — 16 goals, 23 assists for a league-best 39 points. But the Washington Capitals won’t have to deal with shutting him down Tuesday night when the Flyers come to town. Giroux took a knee to the head in a collision with teammate Wayne Simmonds on Saturday night and did not make the trip to the District.

It might be a bit of an easier task for the Caps with Giroux out, but count Alzner among the disappointed that the 23-year-old All-Star won’t be playing.

"That’s too bad," Alzner said.

The dynamic of Caps vs. Flyers changes, but not by much, according to Alzner.

"You’ve got to focus on all the other 10, 11 guys that are deadly out there on the ice instead of just that guy leading the league," he said. "They’ve got a lot of dangerous talent out there."

Giroux has been the center of the Flyers’ offense — five-on-five and on the power play. And he’s a key cog short-handed as the center on the top unit.

"He’s their leading scorer and he kills penalties. He’s pretty much an all-around player," Caps coach Dale Hunter said. "It’s tough on the Flyers losing their best scorer."

Sean Couturier, the No. 8 pick in June’s draft, steps in as the No. 1 center after spending time on Philadelphia’s fourth line. Others — like Scott Hartnell (14 goals, 12 assists), Jaromir Jagr (10 goals, 14 assists) and Danny Briere (nine goals, 14 assists) — will be counted on to fill the void.

The Flyers are already without captain Chris Pronger, who’s suffering from post-concussion symptoms and recovering from knee surgery.

"We missed Chris Pronger for many games," Briere said. "It gave other guys a chance to step up, have more responsibilities, the same way we go about our business."

They’re taking the same approach at the forward position as Jody Shelley will likely slide into the lineup and several players accepting larger roles.

"Yes, Claude is a major part of our offense. We have to play without him, we can’t sit back and feel sorry for ourselves," Briere said. "That’s the last thing that’s going to help us…. We’re known as a team that works hard, skates hard. We have to keep doing the same thing."

Caps not overlooking hurt Flyers

By: Brian McNally

Pronger, Giroux to miss Tuesday’s game

If there is any team in the NHL that cares less about its opponent’s health, it would be the Capitals.

Burned last month in games against both the Toronto Maple Leafs (seven regulars hurt) and the Buffalo Sabres (nine regulars hurt), Washington will avoid looking at the injury list for the Philadelphia Flyers, who visit Verizon Center on Tuesday night.

Star defenseman Chris Pronger remains out of the lineup with both a left knee injury that required surgery last month and concussion symptoms. Then on Saturday, center Claude Giroux, an early candidate for the NHL’s Hart Trophy, took a knee to the head from teammate Wayne Simmonds.

Giroux, 23, led the NHL with 39 points entering play Monday. That total includes 16 goals.

Capitals notes

» Washington defensemen Mike Green left town Sunday to see a specialist about his injured right groin, coach Dale Hunter said.

Matt Hendricks (right knee injury), hurt Dec. 5 against Florida, made it through a second consecutive practice. But his status is still uncertain for Tuesday’s game vs. Philadelphia.

Jay Beagle (concussion) still hasn’t been cleared for contact but skated with his teammates for about 30 minutes early during Monday’s practice at Kettler Iceplex.

Promising rookie center Brayden Schenn (concussion) returned from a long layoff earlier this month, played two games and is back on the shelf. Even goalie Ilya Bryzgalov is nursing a lower-body injury after leaving Saturday’s victory in the second period. But he is expected to play against the Caps.

All that sounds promising for a Washington win. But after getting embarrassed by what amounted to Buffalo’s American Hockey League team on Nov. 26 -- and costing then-coach Bruce Boudreau his job -- it’s unlikely the Caps will take much comfort in Philadelphia’s health issues.

The Flyers (18-7-3, 39 points) lead the Atlantic Division and have the best record in the Eastern Conference. Washington (15-12-1, 31 points), meanwhile, has looked better under new coach Dale Hunter with three wins in its last four games. But the Caps remain the No. 8 seed in the conference playoff chase -- not a spot in which they expected to be one-third of the way through the schedule.

Philadelphia traded two of its top players -- forwards Mike Richards (Los Angeles) and Jeff Carter (Columbus) in the offseason -- yet hasn’t missed a beat. Adding forward Jaromir Jagr, now 39 and back after a three-year stint in Russia’s Kontinental Hockey League -- was a gamble that has worked out. Jagr has 10 goals and 14 points.

“They got rid of two superstars [in the Carter and Richards trades], but they got a lot of good players in return,” Washington forward Troy Brouwer said. “Those guys are playing really well for them. And then they knew with Giroux progressing as a player he was going to turn into a pretty good player. ... [And] I forgot about [Jagr] actually, which is tough to do. He’s always had that skill set that’s made him unbelievable.”

Another ugly loss for Caps

By: Brian McNally

The Capitals made a coaching change last month because general manager George McPhee saw far too many games like this one.

Rested after three days off and playing at home against the top team in the Eastern Conference, Washington instead turned in a performance reminiscent of its final days under former coach Bruce Boudreau. The Philadelphia Flyers out hustled and out muscled the Caps all night in a 5-1 victory at Verizon Center on Tuesday night.

Boudreau was fired in part thanks to embarrassing performances against the Toronto Maple Leafs (7-1 loss), New York Rangers (6-3) and Buffalo Sabres (5-1) in late November. That's not an option with Dale Hunter just two weeks into his tenure. The players themselves will have to figure out why these ugly losses keep cropping up.

"I wouldn't have wanted to pay money to see that hockey game tonight if I was a Caps fan," forward Troy Brouwer said. "It just wasn't good enough."

Five different Flyers scored -- four on Washington's Tomas Vokoun, who stopped just 17 of 21 shots before being pulled for Michal Neuvirth to start the third period. Philadelphia cycled the puck at will in the second period, turning a 1-0 advantage into a 4-0 rout.

Jakub Voracek added the insurance tally in the third period. Ilya Bryzgalov, meanwhile, finished with 31 saves on 32 shots, but the Caps just didn't do enough when it mattered to produce pressure in the offensive end of the ice. Only Jeff Halpern's goal with 6:01 remaining ended Bryzgalov's hopes for a shutout.

After Washington (15-13-1, 31 points) registered just two shots combined on a pair of first-period power plays, the Flyers made them pay 105 seconds after the second man-advantage ended when Scott Hartnell beat Vokoun from the left wing. It was a soft shot without much starch, but slid between the goalie's legs and took some air out of the building as Philadelphia took a 1-0 lead at 16:16.

Things fell apart in the second period. Marc-Andre Bourdon's shot appeared to be tipped by Washington center Mathieu Perreault. That made it 2-0 at 7:23 of the second. Later, defenseman Andrej Meszaros' shot was again deflected past Vokoun. This time Wayne Simmonds caught a piece of the puck for a 3-0 lead.

Just 3:14 after that tally, Vokoun let his teammates down again. Alex Ovechkin was stood up at the blueline by Flyers defenseman Braydon Coburn and the ensuing turnover led to a Max Talbot shot that clipped Vokoun's arm and went in. That made it 4-0 and effectively sealed the game.

"It was terrible performance," Vokoun said. "Certainly not pleasant and it's unfortunate in a game like that. Obviously, you don't like to give up goals like that. It was just all around bad stuff happening and I didn't help it what I was doing out there."

Selanne looks forward to returning to play against first NHL team

By: Tim Campbell

WINNIPEG — It was only a minority of the time in his career, but Teemu Selanne and Winnipeg still go together like puck in net.

Selanne returns to the Manitoba capital on Saturday to play for the first time in almost 16 years -- since he was traded in February 1996. The Anaheim Ducks meet the Winnipeg Jets at the MTS Centre on Saturday.

"That was my first NHL team," Selanne told reporters on a conference call this afternoon. "Starting there, I've always said the hockey was such a big thing. The fans and the whole city makes the players feel so special.

"It was just a dream come true to start a career in Canada. Obviously all the memories I have there, it's just so, so awesome."

During his first season, 1992-93, in Winnipeg, Selanne shattered the NHL rookie record for goals, 76, and points, 132.

He won the Calder Trophy as NHL rookie of the year by polling 50 out of 50 first-place votes. A unanimous selection for any NHL award is nearly unheard of.

Selanne played for the Jets until 1996, when on Feb. 4, he was traded to the Anaheim Ducks, along with Marc Chouinard and a fourth-round pick, for long-forgotten pieces Chad Kilger, Oleg Tverdovsky and a third-round pick.

Selanne, now 41, is in his 19th NHL season. He is Anaheim's career leader in games (803), goals (419), assists (281) and points (900).

Selanne also revealed today that the new Winnipeg Jets inquired about his services as a free agent during the summer.

"Winnipeg called my agent and asked if they could even make an offer," Selanne said today. "But I told Don Baizley, my agent, earlier that the biggest question for me (then) was if I can play, not where I can play."

Selanne was contemplating retirement and did not make up his mind to return to the NHL until late in the summer.

"I have been so long here (Anaheim) and have been so happy with this franchise and this team, there's no way I could leave anymore," he said. "I was very honoured that they called but it's too late to move."

The Winnipeg Jets have bolstered their thinning forward ranks by claiming NHL veteran forward Antti Miettinen off waivers.

Miettinen, 31, is a veteran of 472 NHL games with the Dallas Stars and Minnesota Wild and has 89 career goals and 212 career points. But he won't be in Winnipeg in time for Tuesday's game against the Wild as he is in Finland and the Jets are working to arrange travel for him and his family.

"We're working on getting him here right now," said GM Kevin Cheveldayoff. "Since the waiver-claim was successful we've had several contacts with him trying to get flights and everything like that for him and his family. It gives (head coach) Claude (Noel) a lot of versatility. He's someone who has played a lot on the power play, he's played penalty kill minutes and he's an experienced NHL player that can come into the lineup and can fit in a lot of different places.

"He's shown a lot of versatility in his game. He competes hard, and the homework we did on him behind the scenes said he was a real good character person that can bring a lot to a dressing room and to a team."

The Finnish left winger had played in 20 games with Kazan Ak-Bars in the KHL this fall – scoring two goals and adding six assists – before getting out of his contract, and on Monday signed as a free-agent with the Tampa Bay Lightning for two years at $1.5 million per year plus a $500,000 signing bonus and a no-move clause. But the Jets claimed him before the 11 a.m. deadline this morning.

Last year with the Minnesota Wild he had 16 goals and 35 points.

Meanwhile, some other news from the Jets' injury front: defenceman Ron Hainsey is good to go and has been activated from injured reserve. That move meant Arturs Kulda was placed on waivers and the team hopes to send him back to the St. John's IceCaps. But Nik Antropov, Eric Fehr and now Alex Burmistrov, who injured himself at practice this week, won't be in the lineup. That will likely mean the team goes with an extra defenceman against Minnesota.
Excited hockey fans snap up first 10,000 Jets plates

By: Staff Writer

Fifteen years after Verna Wiebe bought her husband Roy a split-window Chevrolet Corvette, she found the perfect accessory: a Winnipeg Jets licence plate.

But not just any licence plate.

Verna found "the needle in the haystack" -- WJ1963 -- the year his Corvette was made.

"I can't even explain it to her," said Roy. "She's not a car girl or a Jets fan, but it's the coolest thing to me that the number of the plate matches the car."

After dialing different insurance companies, Verna was at the Autopac broker Monday at 7:45 a.m. The dealership opened at 9 a.m.

Verna was one of many Winnipeg Jets fans lined up outside Autopac dealers across the province Monday, hoping to be among the first to get the new Jets plates that are flying off the shelves.

So far, Autopac has blown through the first 10,000-plate run.

"This is an early Christmas present for myself," said Sal Garofoli, one of the first customers to pick up a Jets plate Monday morning at Saper Agencies Autopac Insurance. "I pre-ordered the plate and have been waiting for this for a month."

He's not alone.

Zivan Saper, manager of the McPhillips Street Autopac location, said close to 80 people are on the waiting list to get their Jets plates and he expects even more will walk in.

"They were waiting outside the door for me this morning at 9 a.m.," he said. "We hit (our order of) 50 right away.

"When it was first announced and people got wind of it Nov. 15, I got texts at home saying, 'Put me on the list.'"

With 20,000 vanity licence plates being produced, customers who aren't on the waiting list should be covered, though the plates have already sold out at many locations across the province.

"We sold out in under 30 minutes and had to put in another order this morning," said Jennifer Serra, an Autopac broker at One Insurance on Main Street. "Everyone's desperate for them. If we had more, we would have sold them easily."

Serra added that 11 other branches she spoke with all sold out within two hours.

According to Manitoba Public Insurance, Winnipeg Autopac brokers received an initial shipment of 50 plates, brokers outside the city received 40 and rural locations got 10.

Late Monday, at least 100 brokers had already ordered a second shipment.

Fans can purchase the licence plates at any Autopac agent for $70, with $30 going toward the Winnipeg Jets True North Foundation, the NHL team's charity.

Although regular passenger vehicles qualify for the plates, commercial trucks, motorcycles, mopeds and all other non-passerger vehicles do not.

For Jets fan Joel Greenberg, a commercial fisherman and season-ticket holder from Gimli, these restrictions were a huge disappointment when he visited his insurance agent early Monday morning. Although he was on the waiting list, Greenberg was told upon arrival he didn't qualify.

It was the first he heard of the restrictions, but he bought the plates anyway.

"I was depressed. I felt like a fool because I went in there with all my Jets gear and walked out unable to put the plate on my truck."

According to Autopac spokesman Brian Smiley, specialized licence plates are reserved for passenger vehicles only and the rule falls under the Highway Traffic Act. It was stated in the news release and well advertised, he said.

But Greenberg claimed he wasn't told about the restrictions when he called his insurance agent originally and feels MPI "dropped the ball."

"I don't understand why I would be excluded from supporting my hockey team," he said, adding he's negotiating with his vehicle insurance agent. "I'll try to get through to them. If not, I'll have to drive the wife's car as much as I can, because she's got the plates.

"As it stands, I paid $70 to put the licence up on my wall."

So popular is the coveted car accessory that when the Winnipeg Blue Bombers issued their vanity plates last June, petty theft was an issue. Jets plates may also be a target.

Peter Rolsky, a manager at Fountain Tire on McPhillips Street, suggests installing tamper-proof nuts to deter possible theft.

"They have a centre-locking pin inside and are a flat head, so you can't grab it with anything," he said. "You need a special key, so you can't just grab them with a pair of pliers or anything. These should deter (thieves) a bit."

Two packages of two bolts will cost about $10, Rolsky said.

Jets claim Miettinen off waivers

By KEN WIEBE,

Steal The Deal

The Winnipeg Jets added winger Antti Miettinen off waivers from the Tampa Bay Lightning on Tuesday.

Miettinen, 31, started the season with Kazan Ak-Bars of the Kontinental Hockey League, picking up two goals and eight points in 20 games before he asked for his release.

During his seven seasons in the NHL, Miettinen has 89 goals and 212 points in 472 games with the Dallas Stars and Minnesota Wild.

"It gives Claude (Noel) a lot of versatility," said Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff. "He's played a lot on the power play, he's played penalty kill minutes. He's an experienced NHL player who can come into the lineup and fit in a lot of different places."

The Jets are working on the logistics of getting Miettinen here "as soon as possible," but it will likely be a few days before he's able to make the trip from Finland. There's an outside chance Miettinen could arrive for Thursday's game against the Washington Capitals but he's a more likely option for Saturday's tilt against the Anaheim Ducks.

Miettinen had 16 goals and 35 points in 73 games with the Wild last season and signed a two-year deal for $3 million on Monday with the Tampa Bay Lightning, but was subject to waivers because he started the season in Europe.

The Jets (13-12-4) are in action on Tuesday, opening a six-game homestand against the Wild, who are first overall in the NHL with a record of 20-7-3.

"The keys to our success was right from the start and from Day 1, the attitude that the guys brought to camp," said first-year Wild head coach Mike Yeo. "The commitment they had, the determination they had to really set things right here. It's been very enjoyable for us as a staff to come to the rink and work with these guys.

"We've pushed them hard, there's no question, but they've responded. They've pushed each other and they've pushed themselves and it's a group that cares very much about each other and is trying to build something here."

Meanwhile, the Jets are looking to rebound from a 7-1 drubbing at the hands of the Detroit Red Wings.

"I'm not looking at it as a response type of thing," said Jets head coach Claude Noel. "In the second and third period (against the Red Wings), we weren't good, for whatever reason. We just need to get back to playing.

"For us, we've moved past that game and for me, this isn't a response game. Let's just play the way we know how to play. We know what we have, we know what we are. We're going to have to be ready to go. This Wild team is organized and they play a rigid game. They don't beat themselves."

Jets forwards Alex Burmistrov (undisclosed), Nik Antropov (undisclosed) and Eric Fehr (shoulder) won't be in the lineup, but Ron Hainsey (who has been out with an ankle problem) will return.

In order to activate Hainsey from injured reserve, the Jets placed defenceman Arturs Kulda on waivers.

That means the Jets will dress 11 forwards and seven defencemen.

Ondrej Pavelec gets the call in goal for the Jets, while the Wild respond with Niklas Backstrom.

The Wild will be without centre Matt Cullen (flu) but get winger Guillaume Latendresse (post-concussion syndrome) back in their lineup.

Puck drop is 7:35 p.m. at the downtown arena (TSN Jets, TSN 1290).

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 12.14.2011
Jets prove their mettle

By KIRK PENTON.

WINNIPEG - The Jets showed plenty of pluck after getting spanked on Saturday night, and they proved they are a force to be reckoned with at home.

With Clayton Stoner just getting out of the penalty box after shooting the puck over the glass, the Jets caught a bit of a break when Bryan Little was on the receiving end of a Dustin Byfuglien shot attempt that went awry.

Byfuglien was even laughing a little more than normal as the Jets celebrated Little’s goal, which we can presume was because he badly missed the net with his shot and it ended up beating the best team in the league.

That’s five in a row for the Jets at home and eight of nine overall. The Wild presented a tough challenge, hardly giving the Jets room to breathe, but the hosts stuck with it, survived a few bad turnovers, and kept firing on Niklas Backstrom until enough rubber went between the pipes.

Simply put, it was another grind-it-out victory over the league’s hottest team, just like last week’s 2-1 win over Boston. You can’t say Saturday’s loss to the Wings was a blip, because the Detroit Red Wings owned them, but snuffing out Minnesota’s seven-game winning streak gets them back on track.

NO FIRST-MINUTE GOAL?

No goal in the first minute for the Jets? What’s wrong with them? They had accomplished that feat in their last two games, and if they had done it on Tuesday they would’ve been the first team since Colorado did it in 2000, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. … It’s not every day the Jets start the energy line, but Claude Noel was probably sending a message to his team that it was going to be that kind of night against the Wild … Eric Fehr, who was a surprise starter, made a great defensive play early in the game, coming back hard on a Wild 2-on-1 and putting a dent in Minnesota’s scoring plans … Blake Wheeler made a superb pass to Evander Kane, who rifled the puck off the post. Kane then had another great scoring chance on the top line’s next shift. The other lines need to start generating more scoring chances … Ondrej Pavelec showed early on he had forgotten all about the disaster in Detroit, making a save on Pierre-Marc Bouchard while on his stomach … Jets fans made Dany Heatley their booing target on Tuesday night, which seems about right. I wasn’t there, but apparently there was a two-second pause in questioning during his scrum with the media on Tuesday morning and Heatley used that opportunity to exit stage left. He didn’t even say goodbye … Jets defenceman Zach Bogosian came oh so close to scoring his first goal of the season late in the first period, his blast from the point bouncing of a Wild player and off the cross bar. His patience would be rewarded later … It was evident during saves on Kyle Wellwood, Andrew Ladd and Fehr in succession why Niklas Backstrom has one of the league’s lowest goals-against averages … Sorry, but Byfuglien deserved that penalty for slugging Marco Scandella late in the first period. A few booing fans changed their minds after seeing the replay on the scoreboard.

MIETTINEN A GOOD PICKUP

The Antti Miettinen pickup looks like it won’t hurt the Jets, as long as he can play a solid defensive game. He has shown he can score between 10 and 20 goals, and rack up between 35 and 45 points in a season. Adding that without giving up anything can only be seen as a positive … Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff said during an intermission interview on the scoreboard that one of the keys to the NHL is not getting too high or get too low. If that’s the case, why do players act like losing a hockey game was the worst possible thing that could have happened to them in their lives after a dropping a regular-season hockey game? Just curious. Is it part of the code to act like your dog just got run over? … Not sure why Pavelec had to sprawl on Minnesota’s only goal, which came on a 5-on-3 … Little will be having nightmares about sliding that puck through the crease with the wide-open net. … Great play by Johnny Oduya in the second period, who, instead of icing the puck, shot it right on Backstrom, who tried to clear it but had the puck go through his legs and almost into the net when it hit Jim Slater’s swinging stick. It was a fine example of Oduya not taking the easy way out and it turning into a great scoring chance … It looked like the Jets were going to be snakebitten all night long when Tim Stapleton’s wraparound attempt was oh so close to going in but was deflected up into the air … Winnipeg finally got rewarded for its hard work when Bogosian ended his scoring drought with a massive blast from the point. The hockey gods owed the Jets that one after those all those glorious chances failed to end up in the back of the net. Bogosian sure looked happy, and why not? He scored nine in his rookie season, 10 as a sophomore and five last year. He had to have been more than a little concerned that Christmas was coming and he was still looking for his first tally … Judging by the loud cheer after Tanner Glass’s fight with Clayton Stoner, everybody still loves a good old-fashioned hockey fight.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

The Jets were playing with fire early in the third period, turning the puck over way too much. To be fair, the Wild don’t give the opposition much room to breathe … Mark Chipman’s daughter was on the Magnum Smooth Cam in the third period. Somebody’s looking for work today … Wheeler had a chance to make a power move in the Wild zone, but instead of driving to the net he shot the puck from well out … The way he tries to catch the puck, let’s just just say Backstrom will never play first base for the Twins … I asked this question the other night on Twitter and got a split response. So I’ll ask again. At 14-12-4, are the Jets two games over .500 or two games under .500? … Bogosian will surely be having a chat with Brendan Shanahan for his hit on Pierre-Marc Bouchard, who was in a defenceless position when he got smoked … Pavelec could have been the game’s first star for his last-minute save on Kyle Brodziak alone.

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 12.14.2011
By Scott Burnside and Pierre LeBrun

Scott Burnside and Pierre LeBrun discuss Brad Richards’ influence on the Rangers’ success, the Stars’ depth and the slowly improving Capitals.

Burnside: Good day, my friend. Interesting night in the NHL with the L.A. Kings playing in Boston without Terry Murray, but perhaps the game with the most emotional oompf will be the Rangers hosting the Stars. Yes, I know, interconference, but it’s still a homecoming of sorts for the Rangers’ top center, Brad Richards, who declined to sign in Dallas when he became a free agent last summer. It’s a decision that has worked out remarkably well for the Rangers, who have won 14 of 18 and have to be considered one of the top teams in the league as we head into the holiday season.

Richards has been as advertised, a stabilizing force who is tied with sometimes inname Marian Gaborik for the team lead with 25 points in 27 games. He has 11 power-play points to lead the team, and given his longtime association with head coach John Tortorella dating back to their shared time in Tampa, he appears to have stepped seamlessly into a key role for the Rangers. I spoke to Richards a couple of weeks back when the team was really starting to cook, and he said that he felt he could play better and that he had expected the transition to a team and market like New York to take some time. Looks like mission accomplished, and watching the Rangers, you have to wonder just how far they might travel next spring.

SportsNation
Who is the biggest reason for the Rangers’ success?
14% Ryan Callahan
8% Marian Gaborik
17% Dan Girardi
39% Henrik Lundqvist
22% Brad Richards

Discuss (Total votes: 623)

LeBrun: Yes, I had the Rangers all the way up to second overall in our Power Rankings last week until you dropped them to fourth Monday, Scotty. That’s how impressed I’ve been with the Blueshirts. The way in which they’ve overcome Marc Staal’s absence has been stunning. Dan Girardi, in particular, is playing the best hockey of his career and leading the entire NHL in ice time at 27:41 per game. Impressive. But yes, Tuesday night is all about Richards against the Stars. You mentioned that he decided not to sign with them this past summer. That decision was made way before then. He was out the door in Dallas before the end of the regular season – the big reasons being that the Stars were ownerless and that he had been dealt out of Tampa by the Oren Koules-Len Barrie ownership group. Richards told me several times last season that he craved finding a more traditional hockey market with stable ownership. He hit the jackpot, obviously, in New York. All along, the Rangers were my bet for Richards based on the aforementioned criteria but with the cherry on top of being a chance to be reunited with Tortorella. And to me, the coach showed he has faith in his star center when Tortorella took Richards away from Gaborik fairly early in the season and paired him with Ryan Callahan. That might have been perceived as a snub by some players, but Richards understood what the coach was doing. The Richards-Callahan pairing – mostly filled out as a line with Ruslan Fedotenko -- has been the heart of the offensive engine for the Rangers this season.

Burnside: Well, you are nothing if not a visionary. The other side of the game’s equation, though, is the Stars, and you have to be impressed with rookie head coach Glen Gulutzan and how he’s managed to stabilize the Stars after a period in mid-November saw them lose five straight. The Stars are 5-3-1 since that slide threatened to undo all the good work they did blazing out of the gate. They did. Andrew Raycroft has been holding most of the goaltending duties with Kari Lehtonen out of action with injury – Lehtonen’s durability, something that has plagued him throughout his career, again is being called into question -- although Richard Bachman got the win in Los Angeles on Saturday and looks to get the start Tuesday night against the Rangers. Eric Nystrom is having a terrific season with 10 goals, which have him tied for the team lead, and was a shrewd pickup by GM (and new Hall of Famer) Joe Nieuwendyk, who essentially needed Nystrom to get to the salary-cap floor when Sean Avery was sent to the minors. The Stars lead the suddenly sad-sack Pacific Division. A playoff berth is by no means assured. Still, you know the Stars aren’t complaining about their lot in life one-third of the way through this campaign.

LeBrun: The loss of Richards this past summer enabled the Stars to add seven players with that same salary he left behind, led by the likes of Sheldon Souray, Vern Fiddler et al. Nieuwendyk told me in training camp he was convinced that adding all that depth would be the difference this season if and when injuries struck. Last season, without that depth, the Stars plummeted down the standings when the injuries hit in January. This time, however, Nieuwendyk has been proven right so far with his team hanging in there despite a rash of injuries. And to the Stars’ credit, from Nieuwendyk down to the players, all of them insisted in camp that they would be way better than people thought. I think they took it personally when the loss of Richards made many experts count them out in the preseason. Nothing against Richards -- the Stars players enjoyed having him on board -- but there’s a collective chip on the shoulder of the Stars this season, no question about it. It’s a reminder, just like the surprising success of both the Florida Panthers and Minnesota Wild, that it’s a team sport and it’s not just about big-name players. If all 23 players are pulling in the same direction, some surprising things can happen.

Burnside: The other game that I’ll keep an eye on Tuesday night will be the Philadelphia Flyers’ visit to Washington, where the beleaguered Caps are enjoying a modest two-game win streak, their first such streak under new head coach Dale Hunter. The Caps have won three of four and edged back into the top eight in the tightly packed nether regions of the Eastern Conference. You knew they weren’t as bad as their record had shown before and immediately after Bruce Boudreau was fired and replaced by Hunter. But how good can they be? This is a good test, as the Flyers own the top spot in terms of points in the Eastern Conference. Of course, it’s also a test of sorts for the Flyers, who will be without emerging Hart Trophy candidate Claude Giroux. The star forward is out indefinitely with a concussion, according to GM Paul Holmgren, after taking a hard hit to the head courtesy of the knee of teammate Wayne Simmonds. The Flyers are also without captain Chris Pronger indefinitely, as he will be visiting concussion doctors in Pittsburgh this week to see about his own concussion symptoms. Still, it’s a good test for both teams moving forward.

LeBrun: It doesn’t sound as though Pronger will be back any time soon, and we wish him all the best in his recovery, but the Flyers must learn to play without him for a while. For Giroux, it’s getting a little more disconcerting. He’s been the most dynamic offensive force in the NHL this season, so it’s a huge loss for the Flyers. My sense is that the Flyers need to play a more defensive game Tuesday night. Maybe 1-3-1? Just kidding, Coach Laviolette. But certainly without Giroux, it makes no sense to get into a game of trading chances with the suddenly re-energized Caps. We’ll see how it plays out, my friend.

The bizarre world of NHL All-Star fan balloting brought us more madness Tuesday, when the updated poll revealed that James Reimer was still leading all netminders with 308,025 votes.

That would the same Reimer who sports a 2.96 goals-against average and .926 save percentage — numbers that don’t rank him among the top 30 starters in the league as of Tuesday morning.

Hey, it’s not his fault; he’s a good kid. But Maple Leafs fans obviously have fallen on their heads with this voting thing. And the game isn’t even in Toronto!

Reigning Conn Smythe and Vezina Trophy winner Tim Thomas of Boston remained second in votes with 295,815, followed by Marc-Andre Fleury of Pittsburgh at 290,840. Carey Price (172,920) of Montreal and Pekka Rinne (131,808) of Nashville rounded out the top five.

1. James Reimer 308,025
2. Tim Thomas 295,815
3. Marc-Andre Fleury 290,840
4. Carey Price 172,920
5. Pekka Rinne 131,808
6. Henrik Lundqvist 128,759
7. Ilya Bryzgalov 123,945
8. Jimmy Howard 118,405
9. Nikolai Khabibulin 115,636
10. Roberto Luongo 91,314
11. Jonathan Quick 90,160
12. Corey Crawford 73,685
13. Kari Lehtonen 69,053
14. Ryan Miller 68,857
15. Martin Brodeur 57,218

Defense
Erik Karlsson of All-Star host Ottawa continues to lead all blueliners with 421,343 votes ahead of Toronto’s Dion Phaneuf, who remained second with 395,082 votes.

Pittsburgh’s Kris Letang was third with 335,142 votes, followed by the great Nicklas Lidstrom in fourth place with 304,977.

Somehow, Norris Trophy runner-up Shea Weber was only ninth with 173,898 votes.

1. Erik Karlsson 421,343
2. Dion Phaneuf 395,082
3. Kris Letang 335,142
4. Nicklas Lidstrom 304,977
5. Zdeno Chara 289,213
6. John-Michael Liles 254,031
7. Sergei Gonchar 253,387
8. Duncan Keith 194,113
10. P.K. Subban 162,471
11. Brent Seabrook 152,953
12. Chris Pronger 145,240
13. Kimmo Timonen 139,979
14. Niklas Kronwall 130,674
15. Alexander Edler 111,588
16. Dustin Byfuglien 89,872
17. Drew Doughty 87,043
18. Dan Boyle 85,391
19. Brent Burns 74,121
20. Sheldon Souray 68,944

Forwards
Phil Kessel was able to hold off Sidney Crosby again. The Toronto Maple Leafs winger still leads the All-Star votes among forwards with 464,714 votes.

Crosby, sidelined with concussion-related symptoms, was second for another week with 404,429 votes.

Not getting nearly enough traction was NHL leading scorer Claude Giroux of the Philadelphia Flyers. Giroux, now sidelined with a concussion, was seventh with 251,064. Similarly, early-season Hart Trophy candidate Jonathan Toews was eighth with 215,886 votes.

1. Phil Kessel 464,714
2. Sidney Crosby 404,429
3. Daniel Alfredsson 384,050
4. Jason Spezza 342,184
5. Joffrey Lupul 326,939
6. Milan Michalek 314,851
7. Claude Giroux 251,064
8. Jonathan Toews 215,886
9. Pavel Datsyuk 203,365
10. Evgeni Malkin 195,070
11. Jaromir Jagr 186,808
12. Patrick Kane 169,815
13. James Neal 156,759
14. Henrik Zetterberg 134,140
15. Marian Hossa 133,665
16. Alex Ovechkin 128,315
17. Daniel Sedin 116,347
18. Jordan Staal 113,558
19. Steven Stamkos 112,762
20. Danny Briere 106,795
21. Henrik Sedin 102,315
22. Patrick Sharp 100,518
23. Ryan Kesler 97,517
24. Tyler Seguin 94,365
25. Patrice Bergeron 90,482
26. Jordan Eberle 89,392
27. Marian Gaborik 88,725
28. Thomas Vanek 82,130
29. Milan Lucic 79,769
30. Anze Kopitar

fabianhennings: The newly proposed conference realignment for 2012 shows the type of progressive and out-of-the-box thinking by the NHL brass that has benefited everyone since the lockout -- my biggest gripe rewarding bad teams. They should award 4 playoff spots for the conferences that have 8 teams. Then award 3 playoff spots for the ones with 7 playoff teams. Lastly, the final 2 spots should go to the teams with best record regardless of the conference they’re in. This is truly the best way to ensure the playoffs contain the best teams and doesn’t penalize teams simply for their geographical location.

My take: Your concerns about lesser teams making the playoffs are valid. It was the same in the 1980s with divisional playoffs. The fourth-place team in the Norris Division was often far inferior in points than the last-place teams in the other three divisions. But the NHL is sticking to this. The top four teams in each conference will make the playoffs and that’s it. The league, from Gary Bettman on down, won’t tinker with that part. All that GMs have been asked to figure out at the March GMs meeting is what to do with the third round (final four) -- ensure East/West or reseed based on points.

jtcodile: Pierre, you will have to forgive us Wild fans. It seems that we (or our parents, and it became hereditary) watched too many “Hee Haw” episodes, and “gloom, despair, and agony” got in our blood. It makes us notice that virtually every league-wide media outlet on the net has had at least one feature article on the Wild over the past two weeks. After all, the 11th Commandment of many Minnesotans is “Thou shalt not let facts interfere with a good ‘woe is me’ moment.” Therapy helps for some of us, but then a bit of success comes along, and Wham! a relapse. Time may help, but, as they say in Wadena, “You know, you never know.”

My take: This wasn’t a rant, but I loved it. Two weeks ago, Wild fans were filling my Twitter feed with complaints that the Wild weren’t garnering national attention. Well, now they can’t get enough, right? If you keep winning in this league, people will notice. Now Mr. Wild fan, let’s focus on the glass half full, please!

atrmabrey: Pierre, wrote in a couple of weeks ago asking you to sell me on the Columbus Blue Jackets for next year’s season tickets. You sold me that a new goaltender would improve the team. The play of Sanford has helped of late, but it looks like this team needs to learn how to win. Lost on Thursday with two goals in 1:36 at the end of the third. Gave up two goals in the last 1:34 of the first period on Saturday. Does this franchise need to sign Charlie Sheen to learn about “winning”?

My take: Hey, they’re sort of playing better of late, right? OK, 4-4-2 in their past 10 isn’t much to write home about, but it’s a step up from their dismal October. What I find encouraging for the Jackets is that I see hustle and desire despite what is obviously already a lost season. That tells me there are still enough players on that team who want to stick around and who care.

127 Tarings: : How much longer until Canadians have body contact eradicated from the game?

Canadians seem far too interested in having their national game match Canadian values -- if you wouldn’t do it on the street why would you do it on the ice.

With the new politically correct headshot ban, players will learn to ensure they keep themselves in a vulnerable position so they can’t be hit or at least a chance to draw a penalty by diving/faking an injury. Worse yet is players are increasing the chances they will sustain an injury. Other players and coaches are soon going to adapt and not bother with contact at all. Watching this morph into a no-hitter is painful.

My take: Well, there’s always one head-scratcher every week, and we found him here. A rant that makes absolutely zero sense. Oh by the way, Penguins GM Ray Shero was the leading proponent at the GMs meeting the last few years in the lobbying to eradicate head shots. Oh yeah, he’s American.

harold442: : Pierre, I’m officially calling for both Joe Sacco and Greg Sherman’s heads in Colorado. The team is pathetic right now and they haven’t changed a thing. The price paid for Varlamov was extremely high and now it’s about to burn the Avs in the worst way if they don’t change course soon. The team has been at the cap floor for the past few seasons and the ownership shows no sign of caring. Can someone make Stan Kroenke sell the team to someone who cares?

My take: I don’t blame Avs fans for feeling this way. The Erik Johnson deal in particular is really haunting them. That Washington has Colorado’s first-round pick next June for Semyon Varlamov? Ouch. What’s dangerous is that if most Denver fans think like you, the marketplace could be lost. This

Angry bunch this week, aren’t we? More than 800 posts. Wowzers! Let’s take a look at a few select:

Kaleta3600: Was the fire of Terry Murray really necessary? He’s one of the better coaches in the NHL, and it’s unfair how the blame for the Kings’ recent futility falls squarely on him!

prashanthiyer: Actually, a significant amount of blame should fall on Murray. It was his style of play that did him in. When Murray had guys like Ryan Smyth, Wayne Simmonds and Michael Handzus, he could afford to play his system of dump and chase because that’s what those guys were best suited for. However, when you drop those 2 and add significantly skilled players such as Mike Richards and Simon Gagne to go with a couple of excellent puck movers on the back end and Anze Kopitar, your style of play HAS to adopt a more puck possession style because those skilled players are best when they have the puck on their stick, not trying to chase and retrieve it. Murray refused to adopt his style and it got him the can.

My take: Well, I think you’re both right. Murray is indeed a terrific coach, especially a great teacher. But as a player inside the Kings room revealed to me Monday night via text message, he felt they needed a coaching change. “We were dead,” the player said. It’s the oldest fact in hockey that coaches have a shelf life. After 3-4 years, generally, your message gets stale. Barry Trotz and Lindy Ruff have bucked that trend, but generally that’s the case.

pfanzler: Why on earth is Kris Versteeg not on the All-Star ballot? All he has done is carry the Panthers to the division lead. His 13 goals are good for the team best and top 10 in the league. He’s also in the NHL’s top 10 in +/- and points and is one of a handful of players averaging better than a point per game. He’s been a monster. The only Panthers forward on the ballot is Tomas Fleischmann, who’s having a nearly identical statistical season. There is not a single forward having a season like Steeger’s among the obscure and ridiculous 15 combined ballot entries from the Ducks, Sharks, Bruins and Penguins. I’m sick and tired of the NHL brass pretending like there are only 6 or 8 teams and only 2 players -- and then wondering why their league lags behind the more popular, less dynamic NBA. Promoting players like Versteeg in markets like Florida would go a long way toward growing the sport, and the refusal of the league to support certain expansion franchises with greater exposure is asinine considering the resources they’ve blown keeping a team in Glendale. But I’ll leave that for another rant.

My take: First of all, who cares about the All-Star Game. But yes, Versteeg should be on it, just like Jimmy Howard and Tyler Seguin and other snubs. It’s hard to get everyone on there, though, otherwise the ballot is too long. The league’s hockey operations staff comes up with the ballot, in case that’s what you were wondering.

CBR Bob: Ilya KovalSuck will be the death of the NJ Devils. He may score 50 a year (doubtful in N.J., since they aren’t a “superstar” centered team), but he will make bad plays and turn the puck over so much he will be responsible for 80 opposition goals. Is it possible that if the Devils file bankruptcy, they can break his 100 million $ contract and trade him to, let’s say the rangers or islanders so he can do some damage to them? Then they can afford to KEEP the person who busts his butt every game for them, their captain Parise.

My take: From day one, I’ve been on record saying I didn’t like this fit. And you know who is breathing a sigh of relief right now? The Los Angeles Kings. Despite L.A.’s struggles, I can assure you the belief in the Kings front office is: Thank god we didn’t sign him. Here’s what could save New Jersey if GM Lou Lamoriello does determine that it was a mistake to sign him. He may not agree with you and me, Bob. But if Lamoriello comes to that conclusion next summer, there’s a possibly the next CBA could help him. In August 2005, after the last lockout ended, there was a one-time provision for teams to buy out one player without it counting against the salary cap. Should this provision somehow appear again (and the players will have a big say in that), then the Devils have a big decision to make: get him off the books or not.
was once an automatic sellout. Now they can't give tickets away. That's what is really scary.

The Los Angeles Kings have officially sought permission from Calgary to speak with Darryl Sutter as they look for a new coach, a source told ESPN.com Tuesday.

Sutter is still under contract with the Flames after being let go as general manager last season. The Kings asked for permission Sunday, a day before firing Terry Murray.

More On The Kings

John Stevens was named interim coach, but general manager Dean Lombardi made it clear on his media call Monday that he was looking at other options.

Lombardi had Sutter as his coach in San Jose, and the two have remained friends.

The Kings started 5-1-1 but had gone 8-11-3 since entering Tuesday, dropping to 12th in the conference standings.

"In every franchise there are different levels of expectations," Lombardi said. "This team came into the season with high expectations." After the Kings lost their fourth straight game Saturday, a listless 2-1 effort against the visiting Dallas Stars, Lombardi decided the following day to make the change. He flew to Boston on Monday morning and went straight to Murray's hotel room to deliver the news.

"The last homestand was kind of like the end of it," Lombardi said. "There was no one glaring moment, it just builds up."

Pierre LeBrun covers the NHL for ESPN.com. Information from ESPNLosAngeles.com's Dan Arritt and The Associated Press was used in this report.
ESPN / Daily Debate: Rangers hit the jackpot with Brad Richards

By Scott Burnside and Pierre LeBrun

Scott Burnside and Pierre LeBrun discuss Brad Richards’ influence on the Rangers’ success, the Stars’ depth and the slowly improving Capitals.

Burnside: Good day, my friend. Interesting night in the NHL with the L.A. Kings playing in Boston without Terry Murray, but perhaps the game with the most emotional oompf will be the Rangers hosting the Stars. Yes, I know, interconference, but it’s still a homecoming of sorts for the Rangers’ top center, Brad Richards, who declined to sign in Dallas when he became a free agent last summer. It’s a decision that has worked out remarkably well for the Rangers, who have won 14 of 18 and have to be considered one of the top teams in the league as we head into the holiday season. Richards has been as advertised, a stabilizing force who is tied with sometimes inane Marian Gaborik for the team lead with 25 points in 27 games. He has 11 power-play points to lead the team, and given his longtime association with head coach John Tortorella dating back to their shared time in Tampa, he appears to have stepped seamlessly into a key role for the Rangers. I spoke to Richards a couple of weeks back when the team was really starting to cook, and he said that he felt he could play better and that he had expected the transition to a team and market like New York to take some time. Looks like mission accomplished, and watching the Rangers, you have to wonder just how far they might travel next spring.

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22% Brad Richards

Discuss (Total votes: 623)

LeBrun: Yes, I had the Rangers all the way up to second overall in our Power Rankings last week until you dropped them to fourth Monday, Scotty. That’s how impressed I’ve been with the Blueshirts. The way in which they’ve overcome Marc Staal’s absence has been stunning. Dan Girardi, in particular, is playing the best hockey of his career and leading the entire NHL in ice time at 27:41 per game. Impressive. But yes, Tuesday night is all about Richards against the Stars. You mentioned that he decided not to sign with them this past summer. That decision was made way before then. He was out the door in Dallas before the end of the regular season -- the big reasons being that the Stars were ownerless and that he had been dealt out of Tampa by the Oren Koules-Len Barrie ownership group. Richards told me several times last season that he craved finding a more traditional hockey market with stable ownership. He hit the jackpot, obviously, in New York. All along, the Rangers were my bet for Richards based on the aforementioned criteria but with the cherry on top of being a chance to be reunited with Tortorella. And to me, the coach showed he has faith in his star center when Tortorella took Richards away from Gaborik fairly early in the season and paired him with Ryan Callahan. That might have been perceived as a snub by some players, but Richards understood what the coach was doing. The Richards-Callahan pairing -- mostly filled out as a line with Ruslan Fedotenko -- has been the heart of the offensive engine for the Rangers this season.

Burnside: Well, you are nothing if not a visionary. The other side of the game’s equation, though, is the Stars, and you have to be impressed with rookie head coach Glen Gulutzan and how he’s managed to stabilize the Stars after a period in mid-November saw them lose five straight. The Stars are 5-3-1 since that slide threatened to undo all the good work they did blazing out of the gate the way they did. Andrew Raycroft has handled most of the goaltending duties with Kari Lehtonen out of action with injury -- Lehtonen’s durability, something that has plagued him throughout his career, again is being called into question -- although Richard Bachman got the win in Los Angeles on Saturday and looks to get the start Tuesday night against the Rangers. Eric Nystrom is having a terrific season with 10 goals, which have him tied for the team lead, and was a shrewd pickup by GM (and new Hall of Famer) Joe Nieuwendyk, who essentially needed Nystrom to get to the salary-cap floor when Sean Avery was sent to the minors. The Stars lead the suddenly sad-sack Pacific Division. A playoff berth is by no means assured. Still, you know the Stars aren’t complaining about their lot in life one-third of the way through this campaign.

LeBrun: The loss of Richards this past summer enabled the Stars to add seven players with that same salary he left behind, led by the likes of Sheldon Souray, Vern Fiddler et al. Nieuwendyk told me in training camp he was convinced that adding all that depth would be the difference this season if and when injuries struck. Last season, without that depth, the Stars plummeted down the standings when the injuries hit in January. This time, however, Nieuwendyk has been proven right so far with his team hanging in there despite a rash of injuries. And to the Stars’ credit, from Nieuwendyk down to the players, all of them insisted in camp that they would be way better than people thought. I think they took it personally when the loss of Richards made many experts count them out in the preseason. Nothing against Richards -- the Stars players enjoyed having him on board -- but there’s a collective chip on the shoulder of the Stars this season, no question about it. It’s a reminder, just like the surprising success of both the Florida Panthers and Minnesota Wild, that it’s a team sport and it’s not just about big-name players. If all 23 players are pulling in the same direction, some surprising things can happen.

Burnside: The other game that I’ll keep an eye on Tuesday night will be the Philadelphia Flyers’ visit to Washington, where the beleaguered Caps are enjoying a modest two-game win streak, their first such streak under new head coach Dale Hunter. The Caps have won three of four and edged back into the top eight in the tightly packed nether regions of the Eastern Conference. You knew they weren’t as bad as their record had shown before and immediately after Bruce Boudreau was fired and replaced by Hunter. But how good can they be? This is a good test, as the Flyers own the top spot in terms of points in the Eastern Conference. Of course, it’s also a test of sorts for the Flyers, who will be without emerging Hart Trophy candidate Claude Giroux. The star forward is out indefinitely with a concussion, according to GM Paul Holmgren, after taking a hard hit to the head courtesy of the knee of teammate Wayne Simmonds. The Flyers are also without captain Chris Pronger indefinitely, as he will be visiting concussion doctors in Pittsburgh this week to see about his own concussion symptoms. Still, it’s a good test for both teams moving forward.

LeBrun: It doesn’t sound as though Pronger will be back any time soon, and we wish him all the best in his recovery, but the Flyers must learn to play without him for a while. For Giroux, it’s getting a little more disconcerting. He’s been the most dynamic offensive force in the NHL this season, so it’s a huge loss for the Flyers. My sense is that the Flyers need to play a more defensive game Tuesday night. Maybe 1-3-1? Just kidding, Coach Laviolette. But certainly without Giroux, it makes no sense to get into a game of trading chances with the suddenly re-energized Caps. We’ll see how it plays out, my friend.

Right when Penguins fans thought the injury worries couldn't get worse, they do.

Pens star center Evgeni Malkin was held out of practice today and according to Pittsburgh Post-Gazette’s Shelly Anderson, Malkin will be a game time decision to play tonight against Detroit. Dan Bylsma wouldn’t elaborate further as to what’s bothering Malkin. Bylsma also says that Jordan Staal will be a game time decision to play as well.

Malkin joins Staal, Sidney Crosby, Kris Letang, and Zbynek Michalek as star players dealing with different injuries. Injuries are nothing new for the Penguins, but potentially being without all three of Crosby, Malkin, and Staal is unheard of even for them. What was supposed to be a marquee match-up against Detroit tonight with a bevy of stars in what’s been a heated rivalry now shapes up to be more like a game between the Red Wings and the Penguins’ farm team.
The Kings are going to hire Darryl Sutter, aren’t they?

Joe Yerdon

John Stevens shouldn’t get too cozy as interim head coach in Los Angeles.

Rich Hammond of L.A. Kings Insider reports that the Kings have asked the Calgary Flames’ permission to speak with Darryl Sutter about the head coaching job. ESPN’s Pierre LeBrun confirms Hammond’s story.

Sutter is the former Flames coach and GM who took Calgary to the Stanley Cup final in 2004. He’s a tough character and a smart hockey mind, as well as a good friend of Kings GM Dean Lombardi.

After hearing Lombardi’s take on what it was like to let his good friend Terry Murray go as head coach, bringing in another close confidant is a curious move. A GM is going to be personally invested in how a team does no matter what; bringing your friends in to manage the team can make it a lot more personal when players don’t respond.

TSN’s Darren Dreger reported that Lombardi tore the team apart in a meeting after firing Murray, putting the blame on the players for having to let go of his friend.

Steve Downie is at least an honest guy when it comes to breaking news.

Last night Downie said that he was going to be fined for leaving the bench on a legal line change to start a fight against the Rangers last week and it turns out he was right.

The NHL fined Downie the maximum allowable amount under the current CBA of $2,500 for his part in causing a dust up after Artem Anisimov made everyone on Tampa Bay upset with his “sniper” goal celebration.

Even though Downie has a history of suspensions, his altercation this time around was mostly legal in that he left the bench on a legal line change. Had he left the bench wantonly he would’ve been suspended 10-games automatically.

The Lightning can’t afford to be without anyone for any amount of time, so Downie being fined works out well for them. Perhaps next time someone celebrates a goal in ridiculous fashion against Tampa Bay, Downie will make sure to just shake his fist angrily from the bench.
Theo Fleury isn’t about to let a columnist keep his crusade against Graham James down.

Fleury wasn’t about to let Montreal columnist Pat Hickey take potshots at him saying he “enabled” James by not speaking up sooner.

Fleury posted on his website a simple message firing back at Hickey’s ludicrous accusations. Fleury says that Hickey “is more interested in attempting to pit the abused against one another, than in demanding justice.”

Fleury also says that Hickey’s column “makes pedophiles rub their hands together in glee” that the story has been distorted like this. Fleury ultimately wants to see Hickey fired for taking this position.

Hickey’s victim-blaming piece is startling and offensive given what victims of abuse go through both mentally and physically because of their abusers. Pat Hickey’s piece deserves all the blow back it is getting from the public and taking such an irresponsible stand on the James situation in the light of what’s happened at Penn State and potentially at Syracuse University as well is just unbelievable.

What Fleury did to help finally get James put away is worthy of commendation, not ridicule or shame.
Jaromir Jagr isn’t a big fan of Verizon Center

Joe Yerdon

Jaromir Jagr is doing a pretty good job of taking jabs at teams he used to play for.

With the Flyers set to take on the Capitals tonight in Washington, D.C. Jagr was asked by Dave Isaac of Philly Sports Daily about his memories of playing at Verizon Center as a member of the Caps. Jagr didn’t waste any time in discussing what he didn’t like about it.

“I don’t like that arena much,” said Jagr. “I’ve not really had luck there. It’s a tough place to play, even if I was in Pittsburgh and New York. It was always tough. But hopefully we can stay on winning.”

That’s about as good of a backhanded compliment as you’re going to find. Jagr spent two and a half years with the Capitals all performing below what were his normal standards from his days in Pittsburgh. The Jagr era in D.C., to say the least, is not a warmly remembered one.

His memories of the place may not improve much with Philly though as he’ll be without his usual center Claude Giroux. Instead he’ll have rookie Sean Couturier playing pivot on his line with Scott Hartnell and hoping not to miss a beat. Against an improving Capitals team, Jagr could be due to have more bad memories playing in Washington.

Tonight’s battle between the Sharks and Avalanche in Denver (9 p.m. ET on Versus) is the front end of a home-and-home set between the two and one that sees both teams looking to snap a losing streak.

The Sharks have lost two in a row and six of their last eight games. They’ve shaken up the lines to get Patrick Marleau focused and have bounced between Antti Niemi and Thomas Greiss in goal but consistency eludes them. Going from scoring goals in bunches to not scoring at all is frustrating and something that the skating Joes (Joe Thornton and Joe Pavelski) hope to fix.

The Avalanche’s problems have been hanging around all season. They roll into tonight’s game losers of three in a row. With this current losing streak coming on the heels of a three game win streak, “frustration” is the most obvious word to use here and bag skating the team isn’t yielding results.

Semyon Varlamov has flip-flopped from playing brilliantly to getting lit up. Meanwhile, the bulk of the scoring falls on captain Milan Hejduk’s shoulders while other leaders Matt Duchene and Paul Stastny have struggled this season.

On the upside for Colorado, Stastny is due to return from injury tonight and the Avs are hoping he’s brought his old play making ways with him.

Rookie to watch: Gabriel Landeskog is about as good as it gets for Colorado and the 2011 draft’s second overall pick is showing that he’s worth all the hype. While playing on Colorado’s third line he’s picked up five goals and eight assists and on a team that doesn’t score a ton, he’s looked good.
Joe Yerdon

PHT's Morning Skate takes a look around the world of hockey to see what's happening and what we'll be talking about around the NHL world and beyond.

Wondering if the Leafs' latest losing ways are something to worry about? Yeah, so are we and so is James Mirtle. (Globe And Mail)

Brad Richards has another reunion with an old team coming up against the Stars and he's eager to get it on. (ESPN New York)

Jaroslav Spacek said he expected Montreal to trade him. I wonder if Jacques Martin expects to be fired then? (Montreal Gazette)

Dater reports that Paul Stastny will be back in action tonight. They hope the Paul Stastny of old shows up instead of the guy who's been around lately. (All Things Avs)

Islanders draft pick and current Boston University stand out Corey Trivino is in a lot of trouble after being arrested and kicked off the team. (The Prospect Park)

Blues chairman Dave Checketts might have new duties to fulfill with the team when Matthew Hulsizer buys the team. (Post-Dispatch)

Daniel Alfredsson is still going strong in Ottawa at nearly 40 years-old. (Ottawa Sun)

The Predators' power play of late is winning friends in Nashville and influencing victory. (Tennessean)

Ryan Kesler going back to the state of Ohio is always a fun thing for him after his days playing hockey at Ohio State. (Canucks)

Did you miss the best plays of the week? The guys on NHL Overtime didn't so here they are for you to check out.

There was another good sign on Marc Staal’s road to recovery today as the Rangers defenseman skated with his teammates and participated in drills.

“I decided to jump on the ice for the morning skate for a little bit,” Staal told NHL.com. “I wanted to get involved a little bit. The workouts have gone well. I’m progressing pretty well. The next step was to jump on the ice with the guys. I skated just as hard on my own, but today I did some drills. It was nice.”

Staal was wearing an orange non-contact jersey and still has no timetable for his return, but this development is another in a recent string of positives. In addition to resuming off-ice workouts and traveling with the team, Staal has remained optimistic he’ll return to the Rangers lineup this season.

“I think [given] the rate of improvement the last month or so, I feel that I’ll be back,” Staal told the New York Daily News back on Dec. 1. “That’s the plan. It’s just [to] make sure I’m healthy, get back and start playing.”

NBCSports.com / Sounds like Dan Girardi will be the "24/7? breakout star

Mike Halford

HBO’s 24/7 Flyers/Rangers: Road to the NHL Winter Classic debuts tomorrow night and based on early reviews from his teammates, New York Rangers defenseman Dan Girardi could be in line for an Emmy.

"I think he’s first star, for sure," said Michael Del Zotto, Girardi’s dressing room neighbor. "I think ‘G’ gets the Broadway hat for HBO."

[Note: The Broadway Hat is a black fedora the Rangers brought back from the NHL Premiere series in Europe, awarded to the standout performer after every victory. It’s kind of like the hard hat Washington awarded last season...only less red. And hard. That’s what she said.]

Goalie Henrik Lundqvist also picked Girardi to be a breakout star.

"If I had to pick one guy to follow, he’s it," Lundqvist said. "I don’t know how many interesting things he does, but he says a lot of funny things."

Girardi acknowledged he could be 24/7’s scene stealer.

"I like to do drive-by chirps and little comments here and there, just to keep guys honest," Girardi told the New York Daily News. "I don’t know how much [fans] are going to see of that. I don’t know how much is clean and how much is dirty, so I don’t know how the hell that’s gonna go.

"But it’s just part of who I am. I get that from my dad – he’s the king of one-liners at home. I had to keep it going in the family."

Add Girardi to the list of compelling characters. Aside from the obvious guys — Sean Avery, Chris Pronger, John Tortorella, Ilya Bryzgalov — you’ve also got stories that came out of nowhere, like Artem "Shooter" Anisimov and Brandon Prust, who’s suddenly one of the NHL’s most active fighters. (Which I’m sure has nothing to do with HBO cameras being present. Nothing at all…)

You’ve also got the rambunctious Philly youngsters (Zac Rinaldo, Wayne Simmonds), the emergence of Claude Giroux, Jaromir Jagr’s stirring comeback season, the Marc Staal situation and the Brandon Dubinsky-Jody Shelley war of words.

In conclusion, I am looking forward to tomorrow night.


While Brown has experience with coaches getting turfed — he’s played under five different bench bosses in L.A. — he did say it was difficult to see Murray go.

“It’s not an easy thing to go through,” Brown said. “It’s really hard to kind of put into words how you feel, as a group of guys in here, when something like this happens. I think the best thing we can do, as players, is come together and work through it. It’s part of being a professional athlete, going through days like this.”

If the Kings are going to work through their issues, Brown will have to lead the charge. He’s been a major disappointment this year with just five goals through 29 games (on pace for 14) — a far cry from his 2007-08 season, when he finished 19th in league scoring with 33 goals.

When asked if drastic changes were needed, Brown offered some pointed remarks.

“Regardless of how we play the game, I think it’s more about our attitude, honestly,” he said. “We have to have a better, more hungry attitude. We weren’t a hungry team. We’ve got to get back to getting on the puck and having that attitude, that swagger.”

Brown’s comments are interesting given rumors that Darryl Sutter will be L.A.’s next head coach. Sutter’s most memorable coaching performance was taking a workmanlike Calgary Flames squad within a game of the 2004 Stanley Cup. That squad was defined by its hard-hat mentality (leaning heavily on grinders like Shean Donovan, Martin Gelinas, Stephane Yelle, Chris Simon and Chris Clark) and you’d have to think Sutter would try to instill the same mentality in the Kings.
Every Monday, we’ll highlight (lowlight?) three of the NHL’s biggest duds from the past week.

1st Dud: Corey Crawford, G, Chicago Blackhawks
Key stats: 3.00 GAA, .897 save percentage.

For some weird reason, the backup goalie always seems to thrive in Chicago. Antti Niemi wrestled the starting gig away from Cristobal Huet two seasons ago; last season, Corey Crawford took it from Marty Turco.

This year, it looks like history’s repeating itself.

Ray Emery is making a serious charge for Crawford’s No. 1 gig, though Crawford’s doing all he can to lose it. After a strong start, Crawford fell off a cliff in November and has now lost five of his last eight starts (and allowed seven goals on 33 shots in losses in Calgary and Edmonton, which seems to have shaken him mentally).

As such, Emery will start his fifth consecutive game Wednesday against Minnesota, an opportunity to build on his stellar December numbers: 3-0-1 with a .943 save percentage, allowing just six goals in four games.

When asked about his goaltending situation, Chicago head coach Joel Quenneville didn’t exactly offer a ringing endorsement of Crawford’s play—or his ability to hang onto the No. 1 gig.

“I think he’s [Crawford’s] been fine,” Quenneville told the Chicago Sun-Times. “He’s working on his game. He’s just waiting for his chance to get back into the net. I think his approach has been fine. We’ll measure a little bit more of that when he gets back in.”

2nd Dud: Cam Fowler, D, Anaheim Ducks
Key stat: 1G-0A-1PT in last six GP.

It might seem harsh labeling the 20-year-old sophomore a dud, so let’s carve Bruce Boudreau a bit first. Anaheim’s new head coach has ridden Fowler hard since coming aboard (there’s gotta be a better way to say that) — with no Lubomir Visnovsky in the lineup, most of the defensive lifting has fallen on Fowler’s shoulders. He played at least 26:14 in each of Boudreau’s first three games, a workload he just didn’t seem ready for.

Fowler’s now at minus-13 on the season and on pace for fewer points than his rookie campaign.

3rd Dud: Dustin Brown, LW, LA Kings
Key stat: 1G-1A-2PTS in last eight GP.

The dismissal of Terry Murray has Brown’s fingerprints all over it. The Kings captain has embodied his team’s scoring woes — with just 5G-10A-15PTS, he’s on pace for the worst statistical output since his sophomore season. That’s unacceptable from a guy that’s averaged 27 goals and 56 points over the last four years.
Mike Halford

There’s plenty of buzz coming from Canada’s world junior selection camp after Tampa Bay rookie Brett Connolly took out Florida Panthers prospect Quinton Howden during an intra-squad scrimmage. (Watch the hit here.)

Howden was crushed along the boards midway through the second period of Monday night’s game and struggled to leave the ice. He went to the dressing room and did not return — Hockey Canada later said Howden has an upper-body injury and will be re-evaluated today.

“It’s a tough play,” Connolly said. “I’m just trying to finish my check and he’s kind of in a vulnerable position. I mean, if I was to go back maybe I would have held up a little bit, but I’m just trying to be intense and finish my checks and obviously I feel bad now. Hopefully he’s not hurt too bad, but definitely could have held up a little bit.”

The hit has come under fire from pundits.

“I didn’t like the hit at all,” said TSN’s Ray Ferraro. “I thought it was a hit that didn’t belong in a scrimmage at all. In particular, a hit on an opponent that’s going to be a teammate of yours in a couple of days.”

Ferraro’s TSN cohort, Bob McKenzie, echoed those sentiments.

“I thought it was an unnecessary hit as well,” he said. “More importantly, it would be a hit that if you were in the World Junior Championship quite likely would’ve resulted in a five-minute major.”

Connolly was loaned to Canada’s junior team after posting 4G-4A-8pTS in 28 games with the Lightning this season. Howden, taken 25th overall by Florida at the 2010 NHL Entry Draft, has 29 points in 20 games for the WHL’s Moose Jaw Warriors.
Remember when Antti Miettinen was a member of the Tampa Bay Lightning?
Yeah, me neither.

It's been announced the Winnipeg Jets claimed the 31-year-old Finnish forward off waivers, one day after he signed a two-year, $3-million deal with the Tampa Bay Lightning. Miettinen had started the year with AK Bars Kazan of the KHL and was required to pass through waivers to return to the NHL, which has been a controversial procedure over the last two seasons.
(Well, controversial for the St. Louis Blues.)

Last year, the Blues signed forward Marek Svatos after he was released by Avangard Omsk — only to watch him get snagged off waivers by the Nashville Predators. Later that season they inked Kyle Wellwood after he left Atlant Moscow Oblast — only to watch him get claimed by San Jose.

As for the Jets, not a huge shock they'd take a flier on Miettinen. They've got one of the league's weakest bottom-six forward groups and RW Eric Fehr is out with a shoulder injury.
Keith Primeau — 14-year NHLer and outspoken advocate for concussion prevention — is praising Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby for displaying courage and foresight in the face of his latest concussion setback.

“Crosby is an ambassador for people who have brain injuries and who have endured head trauma,” Primeau told the Tribune-Review. “People are looking up to his courage as we speak.”

Primeau was forced into retirement at age 34 after suffering a series of concussions (four of them documented). Now 39, Primeau still struggles daily with the after-effects — he told the Canadian Press in November that exertion and exercise makes him lightheaded.

As such, Primeau is now the driving force behind stopconcussions.com, a website he co-founded. It’s designed to heighten awareness about baseline testing, post-concussion syndrome, CTE and more.

In speaking about Crosby, Primeau appreciated the patience and caution shown by No. 87 when he didn’t feel well following Monday’s loss to Boston. Professional athletes don’t always put their health first, according to Primeau.

“For me and my quest, seeing Sidney do the right thing is special,” he said. “The culture we’re brought up in with the hockey world just tells us to play through injuries. That may seem like courage, but it really isn’t.

“This is an injury that can be debilitating. The fact is, Sidney had the courage to speak up when something wasn’t right. Good for him. Maybe people don’t realize it, but that’s a true sign of courage. It really is.”
We’ve discussed doing NHL power rankings on PHT, but they take a lot of work, so every once in a while we’ll link to someone else’s power rankings and comment on those instead.

A few thoughts:
— Agree with the Rangers at the top. After a two-game hiccup versus the Leafs and Lightning, New York destroyed Buffalo and Florida, 4-1 and 6-1, respectively. Everyone knew the Rangers could play defense, but now they’re starting to put the puck in the net. In their last nine games, they’ve scored at least four goals in six of them.
— Canucks all the way up to No. 2, inching ahead of the Bruins. It’s pretty much a coin toss between Vancouver, Boston and Detroit. All three are playing great hockey and outscoring their opposition by a wide margin. Cullen dropped the B’s to No. 3 because Zdeno Chara is injured. Fair enough. He’s good.
— Wild fans: furious. First overall in the standings, No. 8 in the rankings. To be fair to Cullen, his methodology is statistically based, and Minnesota’s goal differential (plus-15) is only seventh best in the NHL. Still deserve to be higher though.
— I’d put the Wild ahead of the Panthers. Florida’s a pretty pedestrian 5-3-2 in its last 10 and, as mentioned, just got blown out by the Rangers.
— I’d put the Blues ahead of the Panthers, too. St. Louis has at least a point in 14 of the 16 games its played under coach Ken Hitchcock. Last week, the Blues beat Detroit and San Jose.
— Absolutely no way the Oilers (No. 15) should be that high. They’re 5-10-1 in their last 18. They lost at home to Carolina last week. Edmonton’s not a good team.
— Nashville at No. 12 is generous. The Preds are 4-6-1 in their last 11. True, they’ve won two in a row, but they needed a miracle finish to beat the Blue Jackets Thursday and barely got by Anaheim Saturday.
The NHL’s leading scorer, Claude Giroux, is out indefinitely with a concussion.

Philadelphia Flyers general manager Paul Holmgren announced the news this morning on the team’s website.

"Claude reported not feeling very good today," said Holmgren. "Over the past few days, his symptoms have gradually gotten worse. He will be out indefinitely with a concussion."

Giroux suffered the injury Saturday when he was accidentally kneed in the head by teammate Wayne Simmonds in a game against the Lightning.

Philadelphia is also minus defenseman Chris Pronger, who’s out indefinitely with "concussion-like symptoms."

Winners of five straight, the Flyers play tonight in Washington, Thursday in Montreal and return home Saturday for a game against the Bruins.

Losing Giroux will hurt, but Philly’s got enough talent up front to get by without him in the short term. Hopefully the short term is all they’ll need to worry about.
NBCSports.com / Foster goes to New Jersey in four-player trade

Jason Brough

The Anaheim Ducks have sent defenseman Kurtis Foster and goalie Timo Pielmeier to the New Jersey Devils for forwards Rod Pelley and defenseman Mark Fraser. Also headed to Anaheim is a seventh-round pick in 2012.

The biggest name in the deal is Foster, who the Devils are hoping will help one of the worst power plays in the NHL.

“He’s a right-handed shot and really a power play specialist,” general manager Lou Lamoriello said, as per the Star-Ledger. “His shot is what intrigues you. Also, he played under Jacques Lemaire in Minnesota and he was in Tampa Bay when Adam Oates was here.

“There were power play people ahead of him. He hasn’t played much this year but we know enough about him. We were looking for someone who can handle the puck and the point.”

Steve Mason will be back in goal for the Blue Jackets when they host the high-scoring Canucks tomorrow at Nationwide Arena.

The Jackets have ridden backup Curtis Sanford for the past 12 games, compiling a 5-4-3 record over the stretch. However, the 32-year-old has struggled in his past two outings, allowing nine goals on 51 shots (.824 SV%) in losses to Nashville and Boston.

Tuesday will mark Mason’s first start since Nov. 15, which means he’s spent almost a month sitting, watching and trying to figure out where it all went wrong.

“I think the longest I went without starting was four (games) in a row,” Mason said, as per the Columbus Dispatch. “But it gave me a lot of time to work. Hopefully I’ll get back in and things will go well. I’m looking forward to it.”
Encouraging news for Bruins fans – Zdeno Chara might not miss as much time as expected with a suspected left knee injury.

How’s the big defenseman feeling today?

“Good, good, better than I expected,” said Chara, as reported by the Boston Herald. “The plan is to take it a day at a time. You can’t really put a time frame on it. It’s about how it feels, and it feels better than I expected. And then we go from there, see how it is tomorrow. You really know when you sleep on it, (see how it) the next day. So far, it’s been really good. It’s something I’m pleased with. There’s no time frame on when I might be back. Most likely I won’t be playing tomorrow, but that’s all I can tell you right now."

The B’s host Los Angeles tomorrow, then hit the road for two games against Ottawa (Wednesday) and Philadelphia (Saturday).
Every year someone gets slighted in the All-Star process. Even players who make the final draw face being snubbed under the NHL's recent pond-hockey in prime-time select-a-team format. Just ask Phil Kessel who, as the last player taken at the event last season, endured the ribbing that goes along with the age old playground diss. But Kessel handled the situation well. Deservedly, he will be there once more for the game in Ottawa on Jan. 29 and if the captains have a punk'd mentality, they will make sure that Kessel is the last player taken again. Now, that would be funny.

Less amusing, but hardly earthshattering, is the All-Star vote itself. It's great to have the fans involved and let the popularity contest begin. Still, while far be it for me to say that any of the goaltending brethren don't belong on the ballot, Jimmy Howard's exclusion raises the debate. I mean, Howard leads the NHL in wins, ranks second in goalsagainst and has been the most consistent of all starters thus far. And unlike Brian Elliott and his otherworldly season to date, this is Howard's third consecutive season posting big numbers for Detroit. In St. Louis, the thought was that Elliott, hopefully, could back up Jaroslav Halak who, by the way, is on the All-Star ballot.

Which is kind of the point.

Nothing against Halak, but he isn't even the top performer on his team. His last two seasons as a starter didn't yield 30 wins, or playoff appearances. Meanwhile, Howard has two-straight 37-win campaigns on which he is building.

It is the perfect scenario to at least get ballot recognition. I know, body of work goes a long way in these fan-voting events, thus the inclusion of Nik Khabibulin of Edmonton, Miikka Kiprusoff or Calgary and Tomas Vokoun or Washington. None of these guys have been truly relevant in ages. They play a lot and have served as legitimate number one netminders for a long time. Got it.

But, how then do you explain James Reimer of the Maple Leafs?

Injured most of the current season, Reimer's body of work remains a nice half-season showing for an out of contention team. Good start to his NHL career and good for the Leafs to have found hope in goal, but All-Star? Yes, you will find Reimer's name on the All-Star ballot, but not Howard's.

Again, nothing against James Reimer, or the trio of vets that I mentioned above. This is about Jimmy Howard's omission. What does it stem from? Well, it probably has little to do with Howard and more to do with his being the starter for the Red Wings. It is a tough position in the scope of Detroit sports. Ask Chris Osgood. He won Stanley Cups and posted 401 career wins and still people will say his winning had more to do with his teams being strong than his excellence.

Howard inherits that hard-to-please mantle in Motown as the Red Wings' go-to goaltender. He has handled the job remarkably well. That local perspective may have impacted the larger view, specifically his All-Star ballot inclusion. The best part is that the "snub" has had a galvanizing impact on the fan base with a local drive time host on the iconic WRIF -- "the riff" -- organizing a grass roots write-in campaign on Howard's behalf.

At the very least, Howard not being on the ballot has sparked more positive talk about his outstanding play than usual. And that is a good thing.

After all, recognition, even if it comes grudgingly, has to begin at home.

Darren Eliot
The Wild’s resilience and sharp goaltending have taken them to the top at last
Sidney Crosby’s indefinite absence is bad news for the Penguins and the NHL
Their coach canned, the mystifying, winless Kings continued to sink to 22
PRINT EMAIL RSS There was a lot of news in the NHL, but too much of it was bad. Sidney Crosby out with concussion symptoms again? Terrible for everyone who follows the game, and it was sad to see a classy man and good coach like Terry Murray be let go in Los Angeles on Monday. Nonetheless the SI.com NHL power rankings must carry on.

A DISCLAIMER (of sorts): These rankings are based not just on each team’s record at the moment, but on empirically tested formula based on a) realistic near-term future expectations; b) consensus talent level and payroll considerations and; c) whatever the Magic 8-Ball I’ve had since I was seven years old tells me will happen. And one more thing: Rest assured, I don’t have it in for your team. OK, so once hated the Philadelphia Flyers with a passion bordering on the psychotic, but that was thirty-something years ago and Dave Schultz has long since retired. I welcome your emails to the link attached to my name here, and I always respond — even to the ones that start with “Dear Idiot?”

NHL Power Rankings
1 Minnesota Wild
Last Week: 5

Minnesota Wild (20-7-3)
OK, OK. I give in. For this week, at least. I’d love to see this team outshoot an opponent for a change — the Wild average 25.8 shots per game, but face 32.1 coming the other way. Yet, their record can’t be ignored any longer. The Wild has proven resilient (.667 winning percentage when trailing after one period) and their goaltending has been tremendous. Rookie Matt Hackett rightly earned the NHL’s Second Star of the Week honors, giving Minnesota a three-headed goalie “controversy” for the moment. One word of caution, Wild fans: You hectored me all week to make your lads No. 1, and so you must now accept what comes with it.

That means my semi-legendary power of reverse-jinxing. So don’t blame me if things go bad from here. Last week: 3-0-0

2 Philadelphia Flyers
Last Week: 8

Philadelphia Flyers (18-7-3)
Claude Giroux is out indefinitely with whiplash/concussion symptoms, which is bad news. But the kind of depth that has allowed Philly to withstand other injuries (Chris Pronger, James Van Riemsdyk, Jaromir Jagr) should help get through his absence. Rookie Sean Couturier will take Giroux’s place at center on a line with Jagr and Scott Hartnell. “Just based on the way he finished the game (subbing for Giroux vs. Tampa Bay on Saturday night), we thought he did a good job, so we put him there in practice,” coach Peter Laviolette told Philly reporters on Monday. Last week: 3-0-0

3 Boston Bruins
Last Week: 1

Boston Bruins (18-9-1)
If you Googled “Tyler Seguin” last week, “oversleeping” unfortunately came up with it. Otherwise, “tremendous” remains the more frequent adjective for the sophomore Bs forward. But there’s no question that his mysterious missed morning skate/benching in Winnipeg was an unwelcome distraction for what had been the Good Ship Lollipop to that point. The B’s 15-game unbeaten streak is over, but things remain solid in the Hub. “[Seguin] missed a game, paid his dues. He’s 19 years old and he’s fine with the organization. He’s a good professional. The page is turned and we move on,” coach Claude Julien told reporters. Last week: 1-2-0

4 New York Rangers
Last Week: 6

New York Rangers (17-6-4)
The Blueshirts have the fewest regulation losses in the league and points in 16 of their last 19 games (14-3-2) while outscoring their opponents 67-42 in that span. Their 6-1 home win over Florida during the weekend was most impressive. Defenseman Michael Del Zotto is quietly having a terrific season, (14 points, +15 in his first 27 games). If Marc Staal comes back at some point, this team may have an honest-to-goodness shot at something big. Last week: 2-0-1

5 Detroit Red Wings
Last Week: 3

Detroit Red Wings (18-9-1)
Nick Lidstrom continues to defy explanation. Folks, he’ll be 42 YEARS OLD in April. He had 20 points and was plus-12 in his first 28 games. He’s got to be the smoothest player in league history from the blue line. Some guys were faster, had bigger shots and were tougher to play against physically. But when you combine everything, Lidstrom is in the pantheon of all-time greats and STILL among the very best. Consider: he ranks 51st on the all-time NHL scoring list (1,128 points). Last week: 2-1-0

6 Vancouver Canucks
Last Week: 7

Vancouver Canucks (18-10-1)
They still sleepwalk through a period or two, but having won 11 of their last 14 games, things are getting back to where they should be for this talented squad. What it still lacks, though, is a big, All-Star caliber defenceman. But that’s what the trade deadline is for. Nice to see forward Mason Raymond back from a serious neck/back injury suffered in the Cup final against Boston. Raymond scored a goal and added two assists in his first four games. Last week: 3-0-0

7 Chicago Blackhawks
Last Week: 9

Chicago Blackhawks (18-8-4)
After stumbling a little bit, they had a good week and appear to be in good shape again. Question is: when will goalie Corey Crawford be back in coach Joel Quenneville’s good graces? Ray Emery has started three of Chicago’s last four games, including a 35-save effort in their 3-2 overtime win over San Jose on Sunday night. Quenneville, a notorious Captain Hook with goalies, is likely to go back to Crawford at some point. No matter who is in net, he will be well-supported offensively. Entering Tuesday’s action, the Hawks led the Western Conference in goals (89). Last week: 2-0-0

8 Pittsburgh Penguins
Last Week: 2

Pittsburgh Penguins (17-9-4)
The Sid Watch is back. On Monday, it was announced that Crosby is suffering from post-concussion symptoms, possibly due to an elbow to the head from Boston’s David Krejci, and will be out indefinitely. “After talking with everyone, I just figured it was better to be cautious here and not take any chances,” Crosby told a media mob. A lot of people were skeptical when the Pens said he’d miss two games after Boston with a leg ailment
caused by a collision with teammate Chris Kunitz. Let's hope this absence isn't anywhere near as long as the last one. Last week: 1-1-0
9 St. Louis Blues
Last Week: 10

St. Louis Blues (17-9-3)
It remains probably the biggest masterstroke by any team this season, the decision to bring in Ken Hitchcock as coach early on. His philosophy is to push everything off to the side, create a turnover and go quickly the other way. If mistakes are made defensively, better to make them away from the more dangerous middle of the ice. It's a fairly easy system for players to grasp, and why more teams don't embrace it, I have no idea. Right now, the Blues aren't making many defensive mistakes anywhere. Their 62 goals-against as of this writing are tied with Detroit for fewest in the Western Conference. Last week: 3-0-0
10 Florida Panthers
Last Week: 4

Florida Panthers (16-9-5)
An ugly loss to the Rangers dulled some of the fervor, yet the fact that we're talking about a top-10 team in Sunrise remains one of the more amazing statements of the season. Former Hart Trophy-winner Jose Theodore is quietly having a good season in net. Before the tough outing against New York, he posted his 32nd career shutout with a 40-save gem over Boston. The recent return of forward Mikael Samuelsson will be a boon. Last week: 1-1-1
11 San Jose Sharks
Last Week: 11

San Jose Sharks (15-10-2)
Martin Havlat has only one goal in his first 23 games while this vastly talented team continues to sort of hang around the periphery, yet almost everyone believes it will make a big run in the second half or sooner. "They see the light at the end of the tunnel which is starting to approach, and they just dial it up," Blues coach Ken Hitchcock told Comcast Sports Bay Area. "They have the ability to do it, the skill, the personnel. The rest of us are just trying to catch up and [keep] pace here." Last week: 1-2-1
12 Toronto Maple Leafs
Last Week: 13

Toronto Maple Leafs (15-11-3)
Goaltending remains the worry in Hogtown, with James Reimer 0-2-1 since returning from concussion-like symptoms. Coach Ron Wilson is now in that "We'll go with whichever guy wasn't terrible last game" predicament. Jonas Gustavsson is the other alternative, not a comfort to Leafs fans. Wilson was asked the other day if he's cognizant of the team's slippage in the standings. "Of course I'm cognizant - jeez, I coach the team," he told Toronto reporters. "We've still got two-thirds of the season left and it's going to be, I think, a battle all the way." Last week: 0-1-1
13 Washington Capitals
Last Week: 23

Washington Capitals (15-12-1)
A couple wins in a row for Dale Hunter's squad dispelled some of the gathering gloom, though a test with the Flyers on Tuesday night figured to tell whether there is some real momentum here. Defenseman John Carlson certainly has some: eight points in his last four games, good enough to earn the NHL's Third Star of the Week laurels. Last week: 2-0-0
14 Dallas Stars
Last Week: 14

Dallas Stars (16-11-1)
Not many believe they are for real, though they keep grinding out break-even or winning weeks. When/if captain Brenden Morrow gets some offensive touch back, the Stars might gain a few converts. Morrow had just four goals (11 points) in his first 22 games after potting 33 last year. In fairness, he's been dinged up, including a recent stint on IR with an upper-body injury. Goalie Kari Lehtonen (knee) probably won't be back until after Christmas. Last week: 1-1-0
15 Buffalo Sabres
Last Week: 15

Buffalo Sabres (15-12-2)
They've unquestionably been one of the league's more disappointing squads so far, after all that money spent over the summer by new owner Terry Pegula. But defenseman Mike Weber was slated to return from injury Tuesday against Ottawa, and blueliner Tyler Myers (broken wrist) has resumed skating and could be back in a couple weeks. Talented young forward Tyler Ennis (22 goals last year, a strong playoffs) needs to get going. He's been back from injury for a couple weeks now, but has yet to find his scoring touch. Last week: 1-1-1
16 Calgary Flames
Last Week: 24

Calgary Flames (14-13-2)
Every time it looks like these guys are about to implode, they go on a little run and renew the hopes of the faithful. Give credit to coach Brent Sutter and his crew, Who are 6-3-1 in their last 10. Jarome Iginla has started to really heat up. After a two-goal performance in a 3-0 win over Edmonton on Saturday, the NHL's First Star of the Week stood at 495 for his splendid career. "Sometimes, it just clicks. I think a big part is when you have the team success, everybody does feel better. It's lighter on everybody, and it just rolls from there," Iginla told Calgary reporters. Last week: 3-0-0
17 Nashville Predators
Last Week: 17

Nashville Predators (14-11-4)
After a semi-miraculous win over Columbus last week -- in overtime after trailing 3-1 with under two minutes left -- coach Barry Trotz believes his team got the kick start it needs for a good rest of the way. "That's a game that can catapult you in a lot of ways," he said after the game. "Tonight we found a way to get it done. That's more like the Predators I know." Last week: 2-1-0
18 Phoenix Coyotes
Last Week: 12

Phoenix Coyotes (15-11-3)
They're starting to fade a bit, but not veteran Ray Whitney, who has quietly turned into one of the NHL's better stories. He'll be 40 next May, but continues to put up close a point per game. He's just 49 away from 1,000 in a career that began in 1991 with San Jose. Last week: 1-2-0
19 Edmonton Oilers
Last Week: 19

Edmonton Oilers (14-13-3)
Defenseman Andy Sutton was suspended for another eight games by Brendan Shanahan and certainly took Shanny's words to heart after a previous five-game ban a few weeks before didn't help? The Oilers are in win-one, lose-one mode now. They just don't have enough defensive depth to handle teams consistently, and goalie Nikolai Khabibulin has seen his
play slip. But Ryan Nugent-Hopkins is doing just fine. His 32 points are already like 52 in 1982 "dollars." Last week: 1-2-0

20 Montreal Canadiens

Last Week: 21

Montreal Canadiens (12-11-7)

They've been mediocre, but mediocrity is OK as long as it comes early in the season and leaves plenty of time for a good second half. Defensemen P.K. Subban is playing a more controlled game. Last season, he fell in love with end-to-end rushes that, while pretty to watch, sometimes resulted in costly vacancies in the defensive end. "For my team, you look at the amount of minutes I'm playing, they don't need me rushing the puck every shift or extending my shifts or leading the cycle in the offensive zone," Subban, who is plus-4 (minus-8 last season), told the Montreal Gazette. "The offense will come. I know I can jump in the rush and create more, but it's picking your spots." Last week: 1-0-2

21 Winnipeg Jets

Last Week: 22

Winnipeg Jets (13-12-4)

Coach Claude Noel, a man who has a very apt name for this time of year, got some early Christmas presents from his team, which is 6-3-1 in its last 10 outings. Still, the Jets have allowed 10 more goals than they've scored so far (82-92). More consistent goaltending would be a good thing because these guys do have some offensive weapons. Third-year forward Evander Kane continues to shine, with 15 goals and points in seven of his last eight games. Last week: 2-1-0

22 Los Angeles Kings

Last Week: 16

Los Angeles Kings (13-12-4)

The NHL's most puzzling team is now in the hands of interim coach John Stevens, the former Philly bench boss, though the Los Angeles Times reported Tuesday that signs point to Darryl Sutter taking over soon. Sutter and GM Dean Lombardi built the San Jose organization before going their separate ways. The Kings' performance has been one of the league's deeper mysteries. Many players on other teams had them pegged as a top-two or three club in the conference, perhaps in the league. It never coalesced that way under coach Terry Murray, who was axed Monday. Murray made the Kings better during his tenure, as Lombardi pointed out, but things regressed too much this season. Last week: 0-3-0

23 New Jersey Devils

Last Week: 26

New Jersey Devils (15-13-1)

Thank goodness for the shootout, otherwise these guys' record would look a lot worse. The Devils are 6-1 so far in the best-of-three tie-breaking format. Otherwise, they are minus-8 in overall goal differential, and aren't as good as their record indicates. Last week: 3-1-0

24 Ottawa Senators

Last Week: 18

Ottawa Senators (13-13-4)

The slow fade in Canada's capital has begun. Coach Paul MacLean's team is 3-4-3 in its last 10. Having veteran defensemen Sergei Gonchar and Filip Kuba would help turn things the other way, but each remains out a few more days with injuries. It would also help if Craig Anderson who signed a pretty expensive four-year deal last year? could get his saves percentage over 90 percent and goals-against under 3.40. Last week: 0-2-1

25 Colorado Avalanche

Last Week: 20

Colorado Avalanche (13-16-1)

Speaking of slow fade, the Avs had some momentum going into a three-game Western Canadian road swing last week -- then went out and lost all three by a combined 13-3 score. They just aren't scoring enough. Erik Johnson is still looking for his first goal of the season. "I know I need to produce more offensively," said the prime piece of the Avs' blockbuster trade with St. Louis last season -- the one that Peter Stastny, father of Paul, said "destroyed the team" on a St. Louis radio show a couple days after it was done. Good times. Last week: 0-3-0

26 New York Islanders

Last Week: 27

New York Islanders (9-12-6)

At least these guys are battling again, after the franchise's heart was questioned following ghastly losses to Boston and Pittsburgh, the latter coming on Sid Returns Night. The Isles continue to get good showings from Matt Moulson (points in six of his last seven game) and goalie Al Montoya. If they can get back to .500 somehow, then maybe we can start talkin' about something goin' on here around again. Last week: 1-1-1

27 Tampa Bay Lightning

Last Week: 25

Tampa Bay Lightning (12-16-2)

One lousy goal and these guys would have been the ones battling Vancouver for the Stanley Cup last spring. The fall from such lofty heights has been hard for Guy Boucher's team, which found a way to lose another one -- on Monday to the Devils, the Versus game of the night. And now, they have to carry on without team leader Martin St. Louis, who took a stick to the eye from teammate Dominic Moore's errant shot follow-through. "I couldn't wait to see him, I felt so bad," Moore told the St. Pete Times. "I gave him a hug and he gave me a hug. I'm grateful he's been forgiving. He's a class act." Last week: 1-3-0

28 Columbus Blue Jackets

Last Week: 28

Columbus Blue Jackets (8-17-4)

OK, so it's probably not too soon to start poring over those early lottery draft list projections for next spring, when the Jackets figure to get a top pick -- possibly the top one. But the current on-ice product has remained respectable, despite completely blowing a game to Nashville last week. Last week: 1-1-0

29 Anaheim Ducks

Last Week: 29

Anaheim Ducks (8-16-5)

Bruce Boudreau continues in his honeymoon period as coach, though there haven't been much in the way of good tidings. The Ducks lost two in a row, but did get a nice win at Los Angeles last week. These guys can still get red hot, so we're not counting them out of a playoff run just yet. But the sooner they get started on one, the better. Last week: 1-2-0

30 Carolina Hurricanes

Last Week: 30

Carolina Hurricanes (9-18-4)

At least new coach Kirk Muller finally got his first win, in Edmonton last week. Otherwise, things have been no better than they were under Paul Maurice. Usually, teams get something of a dead-cat bounce after a
coaching change. So far, this dead cat in Raleigh just refuses to bounce.
Last week: 1-2-0

Eskimos GM Eric Tillman is selling a stock he sees as in decline. Ray is an ageing, immobile quarterback with an average arm, who has taken a pounding behind a brutal O-line in Edmonton.

Yes, he can throw for 4,500 yards. But in many ways, he's like that NHL goalie who they describe as "just good enough to get you beat." He lacks the arm strength to get a ball into a tight window downfield like Anthony Calvillo, and he can't escape pressure. So as 32 years in age becomes 33 and 34, the hits and injuries - will mount.

Steven Jyles, on his fourth club in as many years, is not the answer. But as long as the respected veteran Ray was in their backfield, Edmonton couldn't change the culture at QB.

Can Toronto win in the CFL with a pocket-passer who has average arm strength? We doubt it, but it would be much fun if they could.


Mark Spector

This is the great fear, when it comes to Sidney Crosby. The X-Factor that separates concussions from all other types of injuries.

So made him it back, and looked great immediately upon his return. But how many games did he last? Eight games is the answer.

Have your say: Have an opinion on the news of the day? Better yet, want to join the Fan Fuel blog network? Visit the Fan Fuel page for more | Is Crosby still No. 1?

Is this how it's going to be for Crosby from here on in? A couple of hits and a month on the shelf?

Can he alter his game at this point, playing the perimeter more and avoiding body contact? Ask yourself this: How many power pitchers have come back from arm injuries to reinvent themselves as breaking ball guys, or knuckle ballers? Not many.

Should the Penguins sit Crosby down until next season? You know they would, if there was a promise that would solve everything.

Yes, there are plenty of questions yet few answers, as hockey world forms a second take on the state of the game's best player.

"There's no timetable," Crosby said.

"Sid knows his body better than anybody else," Penguins head coach Dan Bylsma added. "He's not feeling 100 percent. He'll return to practice and playing when he is feeling 100 percent."

We await his return. But even that doesn't seem exciting anymore.

Meanwhile, two of the game's best young players -- Claude Giroux (concussion) and Jeff Skinner (suspected concussion) -- were both inactive Tuesday. Giroux was clobbered by a teammate's knee, and Skinner felled on a clean bodycheck by Andy Sutton. Another, Cody Hodgson, emerged from a clean check on to dizzy street Saturday, yet was expected to start Tuesday night for Vancouver.

Short of banning every stitch of contact in the game -- coming soon for some -- there are no answers for injuries like those.

Kings Rancid

Take note, Ottawa Senators and Edmonton Oilers: Just because you are ready to suffer the pain of a traditional rebuild, there is no guarantee that the pot of gold will waiting at the end of the line. The Los Angeles Kings, after decades of impatient quick-fixes that have never brought a Stanley Cup to L.A., Kings ownership finally green-lighted a traditional rebuild back in about 2006.

Well, it's nearly 2012 now. The Kings are almost capped out and kicking around below the playoff line in the West. The future superstar goalie, Jonathan Bernier, hasn't panned out. In as the game gets faster, GM Dean Lombardi has built one of the slower lineups out West.

This rebuild has stalled. As such, coach Terry Murray took the fall.

"We're at the stage of the franchise where you're going to be judged on wins and losses and playoff rounds," Lombardi told the L.A. Times. "And that's where you strive to be. It's a lot easier when there are no expectations and with every win you can get a parade. We're not there right now."

This should provide Darryl Sutter's re-entry point into the National Hockey League. A team that has under achieved, perhaps suffering from what Lombardi once described as the "sandals and Starbucks culture" of playing hockey in So Cal, could dearly use some Sutter-izing.

We'd love to see it -- if only to get Sutter's take on Dustin Penner.

Ray of Life

One scribe's take on a lopsided CFL trade.
COLUMBUS, Ohio – Not good. Less than seven minutes remained in regulation in a tie game Tuesday night, and goaltender Steve Mason lay on his stomach after stretching to make a save. He was in obvious pain – pounding his glove onto the ice, grabbing at his right leg.

It looked bad, really bad. It looked like another setback in Mason’s still young career, another disaster in the Columbus Blue Jackets’ disappointing season. After the trainers tended to him, Mason slowly glided off the ice, hunched over.

But little more than three minutes later, Mason was back. Cramps. That’s all it was. That’s what happens sometimes when you haven’t played in almost a month.

And in the end, after James Wisniewski scored in the shootout to seal a 2-1 victory over the Vancouver Canucks, Mason pumped his glove as he came out of the net to celebrate. Hey, he had made 30 saves, he was the game’s first star and this was one of the happiest moments of a largely sad season. He deserved to celebrate.

It didn’t matter that he was drained.

“I need an IV in me,” he said.

It seemed curious that Mason was in net in the first place. After the morning skate, coach Scott Arniel was asked why he chose this game, of all games, to start Mason for the first time since mid-November.

“Why not?” Arniel responded.

Um, I could think of a few reasons. The Canucks came within a game of winning the Stanley Cup last season and had regained their form on a 9-1-0 run. They had the West’s best offense and some of the NHL’s best special teams. They had two of the league’s top scorers – the Sedin twins, Daniel and Henrik – and a red-hot Ryan Kesler.

And Mason … well, his goals-against average (3.63) ranked third-worst in the league, his save percentage (.875) second-worst. For more than two seasons, he has been trying to regain the level he reached in 2008-09, when he won the Calder Trophy as the NHL’s rookie of the year. He was blitzed early this season, then took a Rick Nash shot in the mask during warm-ups one night, then watched Curtis Sanford shine in his place. He sat out 12 straight games. His confidence has been an issue, and this did not seem like a night when it would be bolstered.

“Hopefully he’s in a good place,” Arniel said in the morning, “and he’s feeling good about himself tonight.”

No one has had much to feel good about in Columbus.

The Blue Jackets made a splash in the off-season, trading for center Jeff Carter, then trading for the rights to Wisniewski and signing him to a huge free-agent contract. The team had made the playoffs only once in its 10-season history, and the feeling was that it was time – or maybe that it was about time. The Jackets’ payroll pushed toward the salary cap.

But then Wisniewski had to open the season by serving an eight-game suspension for a post-whistle incident in a preseason game, and then Carter suffered a foot injury after playing only five games. The Jackets started 0-7-1, or 1-9-1, or 2-12-1, depending on where you want to draw the line. They were awful, unorganized, and they helped make Mason look awful.

The win over the Canucks gave Columbus a brief respite in what has been a rocky season from Day 1.

“We were giving up, like, 12 odd-man rushes against,” Wisniewski said. “I mean, that’s ridiculous.”

Other teams have made coaching changes – the St. Louis Blues, Washington Capitals, Carolina Hurricanes, Anaheim Ducks, Los Angeles Kings. The Blues even hired Ken Hitchcock, the guy the Jackets fired in February of 2010, just months after he led them to their only playoff appearance. Hitch promptly got the Blues rolling on an 8-1-2 run.

The Jackets, however, stood pat. General manager Scott Howson acquired center Mark Letestu from the Pittsburgh Penguins for a fourth-round pick. That’s about it.

“We have a lot of confidence in Scott and the staff,” Howson said. “The team was so disjointed early on, it just wasn’t a fair evaluation of anybody here, I didn’t think, including the players. I wanted to see – once we got a semblance of our team back and some more people healthy – what we could do.”

Carter and Wisniewski played together for the first time Nov. 12. Since then, the Jackets have gone 7-5-3. They have competed harder and played with more structure – in front of Sanford, for the most part.

Arniel made it sound as if Mason were a computer that had crashed, saying the break gave him a chance to “reboot himself.” Mason said he went back to “Goaltending 101,” working with goalie coach Ian Clark one-on-one, focusing on the basics, not overanalyzing anything. He saw his teammates work, too.

“I’ve obviously had a lot of time to watch them and analyze them and see the improvements they’ve made in their games,” Mason said. “I’ve been pretty impressed with it.”

Mason said he was nervous early Tuesday night. But the Jackets helped him ease into the first period. Carter gave the Jackets a 1-0 lead on the power play, and they limited the Canucks to only five shots. Mason made some sharp saves in the second (and got some help from a goal post). And though he gave up a goal in the third to Max Lapierre, the Jackets didn’t fold as they have when coughing up leads in the past. They stuck with it and won. They held the Canucks’ potent power play 0-for-4.

“This is great that we can prove that we can pull these wins out,” Wisniewski said. “Close enough’s not good enough anymore. We’re paid a lot of money to win games, not to come out and give our best effort.”

Let’s not get carried away. The Canucks were flat as could be Tuesday night, and the main reason the Jackets feel so much better about themselves is because they had sunk so low. A 7-5-3 stretch does not equal success for a team with a high payroll and high aspirations.

Wisniewski can insist that the Jackets are “not out of it yet,” but they only climbed out of the league’s basement with Tuesday night’s victory, no more. He’s new. Nash has been around since 2002-03. He knows.

“When you’re in a hole, it’s easy to look ahead and say, ‘We’ve still got a chance,’” Nash said. “But in here, we’re looking at the short terms.”

The Jackets still need their offensive players to produce more. They still need to play 60-minute games. Barring a miracle run to the playoffs, they still need to take a hard look at their organization from top to bottom and decide what pieces they really have and how they want to proceed.

Even Mason was level-headed Tuesday night.

“Beating a team like Vancouver, it’s a big step,” Mason said. “We just have to treat it with caution, not get too high on ourselves.”

But not getting too high is a nice problem to have for a change, and make no mistake, when you’re measuring in baby steps, this was a big one – especially for Mason.

Remember, he is only 23. He was 20 the season he won the Calder. Detroit Red Wings goaltender Jimmy Howard was runner-up for the Calder the next season. Unlike Mason, Howard had a veteran mentor in Chris Osgood and he’s only now hitting his stride at 27. These things take time.

As Howson said: “This is going to be a process with Steve.” Mason is still a talented kid with a 6-foot-4 frame, trying to figure it out while his team tries to figure it out, too.

“Moreso for the mental side of things, I think for Steve that was a big, big game,” Arniel said. “I think that hopefully he wakes up tomorrow and he’s feeling real good about himself and uses that as a stepping stone going forward.”