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A Hockey Team With a Turbocharger

How the Tampa Bay Lightning's New 'Puck Pursuit' Formation Is Shaking Up a Conservative Sport

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By TOM PERROTTA

Hockey, meet the hurry-up offense.

The Tampa Bay Lightning, winners of four of their first five games this NHL season, have a new motto: Shoot. The. Puck. The team has rejected hockey's conservative norms for an up-tempo style in which players swarm the puck and pepper goalies with wrist shots. Under new coach Guy Boucher, Tampa Bay has scored an impressive 17 goals in its four wins.

The secret to the team's surge is a cast of faster skaters and a change in tactics. Instead of a traditional 1-2-2 formation, where one forechecker is trailed by two forwards and two defensemen, the Lightning use a 1-3-1 set, which moves one defenseman up to the second layer of the attack. The team wants to dictate play and shoot the puck 40 times a game while limiting its opponents to 20.



Getty Images

Martin St. Louis (No. 26) and his Tampa Bay Lightning teammates celebrate a goal against the Philadelphia Flyers last week.

The 1-3-1 is hardly novel. The formation has been used before in the National Hockey League, though inconsistently, and at the Olympic level. In the NFL, where plays, packages and formations are in constant flux, the idea of reassigning one player would be too minor of a tweak to mention. But in hockey, a sport where change comes glacially and uniformity has long held sway over innovation, it passes as radical.

Mr. Boucher, the architect of the new system, became a sensation in minor-league hockey last year when he guided the Hamilton Bulldogs, an affiliate of the Montreal Canadiens, to one of the league's top records. The 39-year-old, first-time NHL coach has received so many inquiries about the formation that he no longer wants to discuss it. Lightning players described it as a 1-3-1, but Mr. Boucher said through a team spokesman that the term is misleading. He prefers to call it "puck pursuit."

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it is just being aggressive, five guys on the puck all the time, don't even let the other guys get

Steven Stamkos, the 20-year-old Lightning center who scored 51 goals last season, tied for most in the league with Pittsburgh's Sidney Crosby, explained: "The main idea of

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a chance to set up."

"Before, we were sitting back," said Ryan Malone, a veteran forward. "Now, the trailing guy slings the puck up the ice as fast as he can. Coach would rather have us make a mistake going forward."

The result is a fast-skating brand of hockey that often looks like an all-out blitz and can produce offense in an instant. In their first game, the Lightning raced to a 4-0 lead in 25 minutes. Monday evening against Dallas, which had been undefeated, the Lightning outshot the Stars 44-19 in a 5-4 win.

"When you see it work," Mr. Stamkos said, "you wonder, 'Why hasn't anyone done it before?'"

Those who think innovation comes too slowly to hockey can largely blame the game and its dimensions. An NHL rink is 85 feet by 200 feet—a decidedly small place for 10 skaters (an international rink is slightly larger). The sport has few breaks, and possession changes rapidly, so there's no time to set up or call plays.

"Hockey is a flowing game," said Steve Yzerman, the former Detroit Red Wings star and now Tampa Bay's general manager. "You have systems, but they are loosely defined."

Tom Renney, a veteran coach who now leads the Edmonton Oilers, proposed another theory. "By and large it's a Canadian game, and I think as a society Canadians are fairly conservative," he said. "We're not particularly entrepreneurial in our thinking—I've got to be careful how I say that. We're pragmatic."

Hockey's last great invention was certainly that. The neutral-zone trap, which the New Jersey Devils popularized in the mid-1990s, was easy to implement and so effective that the rest of the league copied it. Teams that trap flood the center third of the ice to stall the opposition's top offensive talent. It was as dull as it was good. Jeremy Roenick, who scored more than 500 goals in his career, recalled days when he was loath to lace up his skates.

"I would've rather stayed home and played tiddlywinks sometimes," he said. "I wouldn't watch teams because they were so boring. I'd watch Oprah."

After the 2004-05 lockout, the NHL took steps to become faster and flashier. Now that passes across two lines are legal and obstruction penalties are strictly enforced, there's less holding and hooking and more reason to take chances. The goals-per-game average during the past five years is up 7.6% from the five years before the lockout, according to Stats Inc.

Tampa Bay is the first team to adopt a new style with an eye toward a higher-scoring future. "The biggest change in the game today is that you just can't sit on a lead anymore," Mr. Yzerman said. "You have to continue to attack."

So, will there be a time when hockey returns to the 1980s, when teams combined for 7.7 goals a game, compared with 5.7 in the past five years? There's no chance, Mr. Renney said, unless the game becomes a four-on-four or three-on-three sport, with a lot more room to skate.

"That's where I'm a Canadian," he said. "I would refuse to coach under those circumstances." Say what you will about the importance of invention, the game still has to be hockey.

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