

NHL Report By Terry Frei, *The Denver Post*

3-on-3 success is no 4-on-4-gone conclusion

Of the 16 games on the first three nights of the NHL regular season, only two went to overtime — the Flyers vs. Lightning at Tampa on Thursday, then the Blackhawks vs. Islanders at Brooklyn on Friday. Significantly, both ended in OT, rather than going to a shootout.

Tampa Bay claimed the 3-2 win when defenseman Jason Garrison scored on a breakaway at 2:17 of OT. And the Blackhawks won by the same score in OT on Patrick Kane's power-play goal at 1:49.

The exhibition season provided hints that the new 3-on-3 format would result in wild, wide-open overtimes that rarely will be scoreless. (Kane's goal was on a 4-on-3, the power-play procedure in OT.) The NHL made sure there would be a decent body of evidence, designating games for which the new format would be used in an OT period — regardless of the score after three periods.

After watching highlights of that Tampa Bay-Philadelphia overtime, my first thought was that there was more non-scoring, yet exciting action from a little over two minutes of OT to show than there sometimes is for an entire NHL game. OK, that's an exaggeration, but maybe not when measured against the days of clutching, grabbing and neutral-zone trap dominance in the years leading up to the 2004 lockout and dark season.

It's always been interesting how the eyes can play tricks. The extra 15 feet of width on the international-sized ice sheets always has seemed to create extra space far out of proportion to the additional square footage. In the NHL, 4-on-4 — including in overtime in recent years — always has made the ice look bigger. I sometimes wished that's the way the game could be played all the time.

And now?

The 3-on-3 makes the ice look like a frozen-over Tampa Bay. If Tampa Bay ever could be frozen over.

At least with this limited body of evidence, I'm inclined to go along with the consensus that 3-on-3 is going to "work," if the

goal is to cut down on or even come close to eliminate games coming down to shootouts after five minutes of scoreless overtime.

But ...

I thought something similar about the 4-on-4 overtime format when it went into effect in 1999. That was six years before shootouts were added and ties eliminated after the scuttled 2004-05 season. Anything was better than the unfulfilling ties.

This change is being made because the 4-on-4 wasn't the answer, either. Of the games tied at the end of regulation in the 2014-15 season, 55.6 percent ended up being decided in a shootout. Yes, the difference between 4-on-4 and 3-on-3 is huge (or in hockey parlance, "yooge"), both visually and because of what you'd think would be its production of quick goals. AHL experimentation seemed to bear that out.

But we'll see.

Throw the skilled players out there, let them decide the extra point in what already is guaranteed to be a three-point game, tell the goalies they're playing in something that looks more like the All-Star Game than conventional 5-on-5 hockey, and all will be fine ... and exciting. If coaches, as they tend to do, overcoach and overstrategize this, especially as time goes on, I'll be among the disappointed.

I'm still of the opinion that if a game gets to a shootout, the format should be five shooters for each team instead of three. Every game should be worth three points — three for a regulation win, two for an overtime or shootout win, one for an overtime or shootout loss — or points could be eliminated completely. You could do that by having a winner and a loser, period, and the standings would be simpler and more conventional with a win column, loss column, percentage and games back.

But if 3-on-3 "works," that might deflect attention from the remaining flaws in the system.



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SPOTLIGHT ON ...

Raffi Torres, LW, Sharks



San Jose's Raffi Torres, who will be out for 41 games, had been suspended five previous times. *Jim McIsaac, Getty Images*

When: On Monday, Torres drew a 41-game suspension from the NHL for his exhibition game blind-side hit to the head of Anaheim's Jakob Silfverberg. It also will cost him \$440,000.

What's up: Torres came across the ice and nailed Silfverberg, who wasn't seriously injured, but could have been.

Background: Torres' repeat-offender status came into play, since he had been suspended five previous times — four times in the regular season and once in the playoffs. He didn't play at all last season because of a knee injury.

Frei's take: Torres didn't appeal the suspension and fine and apologized. The only problem with that was it came in a statement released by the team, and that never is as effective as a player standing in front of microphones and speaking without a script. Sharks GM Doug Wilson deserves credit for not sugar-coating or rationalizing it, saying Torres was wrong. He was not contesting the suspension, either. But this still is a league in which teams' standards (and, frankly, media and fan standards, too) often swing 180 degrees, depending on whose ox is gored. In other instances, as we saw with habitual offender Matt Cooke, NHL teams know what they're getting with these types of players, and organizational claims that a player has turned over a new leaf, or reactions of outrage and surprise, all ring hollow.



Jameer Nelson's leadership with the Nuggets has been evident since he arrived in January in a trade, including hosting a team bonding camp at his Philadelphia home. *Getty Images file*

Nelson's impact hits beyond court

Nuggets' point guard pulls team together

By Christopher Dempsey *The Denver Post*

"Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself." — Jack Welch

The only time Phil Martelli ever kicked Jameer Nelson out of practice, he secretly prayed — hard — that the calculated move wouldn't cost him the best recruit in St. Joseph's history.

"I told him to go home — home home," Martelli said. "Not just his dorm but home."

Then came the longest two hours of Martelli's coaching life. Nelson, then a freshman, had missed a class. So the coach had to make certain Nelson and the team knew there was still order, and none of that changed just because the player walked in with star status.

Martelli checked his phone right after practice. "He had called me three times," Martelli said, "apologetic and telling me that it would never, ever happen again."

It can be argued the Nuggets' top free-agent priority this offseason was retaining the 33-year-old Nelson. It can also be argued he's the most important player in the locker room, though he's a backup to rookie Emmanuel Mudiay.

As effective as he was on the court late last season, the decision to make a strong push to keep the point guard was made because of his locker room impact.

Things changed for the better almost immediately after the Nuggets traded for him in January. He was a stabilizing force who knew just what buttons to push on a fractured team down on its luck and down on itself. Two weeks after his arrival, he invited players and coaches to his house in Philadelphia for some team building. He made himself available to teammates for advice on and off the court. He was never comfortable with how quickly media swarmed him after a game, but there was never any doubt Nelson was the voice of reason in the midst of chaos.

The Nuggets wanted all of that back. Because it was clear to them that a team of individuals who lack professionalism and discipline was just as doomed as one short on talent.

Nelson is a safeguard against that.

Martelli has always known it.

"When I was recruiting him I was amazed, if not blown away, by the care and concern for not just the teammates that he had in high school, but those around the program," Martelli said. "The respect with which he dealt with me, one of the many coaches recruiting him. The mature fashion with which he dealt with the notoriety."

"Leadership is a posture and a choice, not a role that must be bestowed on you. Step up and be a leader when no one is watching or expecting you to do so." — John Izzo and Marshall Goldsmith, *Stepping Up: How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything*

Being on time is about 20-30 minutes too late to Nelson. So each day he strives to get to practice before his teammates.

"To be a leader you have to be uncomfortable," Nelson said. "You have to get extra shots up, you have to be early to be on time. You gotta hold yourself accountable, so then when you hold somebody else accountable they're not looking at you with a side eye. (Instead) they're like, 'He's doing it, he's showing us.'"

Nelson made an immediate impression on new Nuggets coach Michael Malone.

"I have the utmost confidence in Jameer Nelson as a leader," Malone said.

When Nelson joined the Dallas Mavericks in 2014, coach Rick Carlisle gushed to reporters that Nelson was a "natural leader."

Nelson brought back the majority of the Nuggets to his Philadelphia-area house for a summer team-bonding camp, and the impact it had did not go unnoticed.

"Everyone got a chance to know each other," Nuggets forward Darrell Arthur said. "I thought it was a great experience for the team."

"The task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been." — Henry Kissinger

Leaders orbit Mudiay like planets around the sun. It is by design, and it is also why when asked about Nelson, Mudiay lumps others in the leader bucket.

The effect, however, is the same.

"He has the most years, him and Mike Miller," Mudiay said. "They're the face and the leader of the team right now, so their voice matters. I'm just trying to learn from them, from Coach Malone and the staff and it's been doing me good so far."

Nelson returned to the Nuggets for the promise of things to come. He insists he's not close to retirement, but already has an eye on coaching. He's not going to hold Mudiay's hand through every day of his professional career, but does take interest in helping mold a player who has the potential to be great.

Nelson is already playing a winning hand.

"I know this," Martelli said. "If you said to me, I want a leader for my car dealership, I want a leader for my newspaper, I want a leader for my university, I want a leader for my basketball program, it wouldn't take me a lot of names to get to Jameer. He has the most leadership. He does. And I will forever be grateful to the man above that I had that young man in my life. Because he made me a better person."

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