

Washington Capitals

POSTGAME NOTEBOOK: Penguins 4, Capitals 3, OT

Mike Vogel - WashingtonCaps.com Senior Writer

Making A Point – After the first 20 minutes of Sunday’s game between the Caps and Penguins in Pittsburgh, most wouldn’t have bet on the visitors to come away with a standings point.

Down 2-0 and without a single scoring chance in the period according the NBC observers, the Caps were also without centers Nicklas Backstrom and Marcus Johansson, the first time the two have been sidelined in the same game since the start of Johansson’s career last season.

Not only did the Caps come back, they led for almost six minutes in the third period. But when it was all said and done, Washington suffered its first loss in Pittsburgh in more than four years, a 4-3 overtime setback.

“I think the first period was terrible,” says Caps captain Alex Ovechkin. “We didn’t even play in their zone. I don’t know why, when we had the opportunity to attack we just put the puck in their zone and gave it away. In the second period, we were moving.”

Even after failing to convert on a power play chance at the start of the second, the Caps kept it together. They chipped away and managed to even up the score by the end of the second period, getting goals from Brooks Laich and Alexander Semin.

Ovechkin’s 20th goal of the season enabled Washington to grab a 3-2 lead early in the third, but in the end – and in the beginning and in the middle – the Caps could not contain Pittsburgh’s Evgeni Malkin.

Malkin netted the game-winner in overtime – notching his third point of the afternoon in the process – to send the Caps home from their three-game road trip with a 1-1-1 mark.

Caps coach Dale Hunter usually matched the unit of Matt Hendricks, Brooks Laich and Troy Brouwer against Malkin and linemates James Neal and Chris Kunitz. The Malkin line has proven to be a handful for the rest of the league for the last several weeks, but Washington managed to contain the Pittsburgh pivot and his wings in a 1-0 win in the District on Jan. 11.

Today, Malkin and his mates accounted for all three of Pittsburgh’s even-strength tallies, and the three Penguins forwards combined to fire a whopping total of 30 shots toward the Washington net, getting 13 of them on Caps goalie Michal Neuvirth and three of those past him.

“I think we put Brooks’ line against their line,” says Ovechkin. “We gave them too much attention. Obviously, they played great today. It’s good for us that we bounced back and almost won the game. They’re very good players and they know how to play.”

A point shot came off the backboard and right to Malkin at 1:31 of the extra session, and he tucked it up and behind a sprawling Neuvirth to put an end to the contest.

“Obviously it’s a frustrating loss,” says Neuvirth, “but I think it was a good game. We battled hard. They got a lucky bounce at the end ... it hit the boards and went right on [Malkin’s] stick. It was an easy goal for him.”

The league’s leading scorer with 58 points (26 goals, 32 assists), Malkin extended his goal-scoring streak to six games, the same length as Pittsburgh’s winning streak. The half-dozen-game streak with a goal matches the longest of his NHL career.

Since Penguins captain Sidney Crosby hit the sidelines again with a recurrence of his nagging concussion symptoms, Malkin has been a beast. He has 17 goals and 34 points in his last 20 games after starting the season with nine goals and 24 points in his first 21 contests. Malkin has nine multiple-point games in his last 20.

“He played great,” says Ovechkin of Malkin. “I think he controls the game so well right now. He knows without Crosby now this team is good but it’s not that good. He is handling it pretty well.”

Laich skated a single-game career high 28:48 – the most ice he has logged in more than five years and a full 3:15 over his previous single-game high.

Hendricks also skated a single-game career high, skating 16:32 on the night. Brouwer skated 19:33 in the game, his third-highest ice time total of the season. He might have logged more ice time, but he picked up seven minutes worth of penalties, too.

Brouwer narrowly missed winning this one for Washington in regulation. His blast from the right wing glanced off the crossbar behind Penguins goalie Marc-Andre Fleury with just seconds remaining in the third period.

“The guys battled,” says Caps coach Dale Hunter. “We came back and we took the lead, actually. We had a breakdown; they tied it up. We battled, and we had our chances just like they did. Malkin slips away for a second on the backboards, not a pass, just a shot. He’s a good player and good players score on that.”

Netting Them vs. Neuvirth – When Pittsburgh’s Kris Letang blasted a power play goal past Neuvirth at 4:51 of the first period, it marked the first goal Pittsburgh scored against Neuvirth in 144 minutes and 34 seconds of play, dating back to Dec. 23, 2010.

Streak Stopped – Prior to Sunday’s setback, the Caps hadn’t lost in Pittsburgh since Dec. 27, 2007 when they also dropped a 4-3 overtime decision to the Pens at the old Mellon Arena.

Washington had gone 8-0 in its previous eight regular season visits to Pittsburgh, winning games in three different venues during that span.

The Capitals’ last regulation loss in Pittsburgh came on Feb. 18, 2007.

The 500 Club – Caps defenseman Dennis Wideman played in the 500th game of his NHL career on Sunday in Pittsburgh.

Originally Buffalo's eighth-round draft choice (241st overall) in the 2002 NHL Entry Draft, Wideman never signed with the Sabres. He inked a free-agent deal with St. Louis in the summer of 2004 and made his NHL debut with the Blues against the Columbus Blue Jackets on Nov. 9, 2005.

Wideman picked up an assist in game No. 500. He has totaled 64 goals and 174 assists for 238 points in his NHL career.

Afterwards, Wideman was able to put today's game in perspective.

"We've got some guys out of the lineup right now," he says. "That team [Pittsburgh] does too; that team has been playing short in the lineup all year. For us to hang in there and play as hard as we did, I think that was good. We showed some emotion, we got in there and mixed it up a little bit. That's good for our team to get in and stand up for each other."

Down On The Farm – The AHL Hershey Bears finished off a busy – but ultimately fruitless – weekend with a 4-2 loss on home ice to the Manchester Monarchs. The Bears lost all three games of a three-games-in-three-nights weekend for the first time since their current affiliation began with the Capitals in the 2005-06 season.

Keith Aucoin and Julien Brouillette scored for Hershey while Braden Holtby made 15 saves in a losing effort in net.

Aucoin pushed his scoring streak to 16 straight games (five goals, 24 assists).

The 24-11-4-3 Bears are now sharing first place in the AHL's East Division with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton.

Down a level, the ECHL South Carolina Stingrays beat the Florida Everblades at North Charleston Coliseum, 3-1. The win pushed the Stingrays' winning streak to nine straight.

Joe Pereira, Matt Scherer and Mike Hamilton scored in support of Philipp Grubauer's 29-save performance in the South Carolina nets.

In his first pro season, Grubauer is now 16-7-1-1 with a 2.15 GAA and a .923 save pct.

The victory vaults the 24-16-1-1 Stingrays into a tie for first place in the ECHL's South Division with Gwinnett.

By The Numbers – The Pens have scored first in 20 of their last 24 home games against the Caps ... Ovechkin notched his first three-point game of the season ... Laich took 38 shifts, six more than any other Capital and eight more than any Penguin ... Laich took 39 of the game's 60 face-offs, winning 17. He and Jeff Halpern combined to take 48 of the 60 draws (80%) ... Laich and Jason Chimera led the Caps with four shots on goal each ... John Carlson paced the Caps with five blocked shots ... Neal was on the

ice for all 5:17 of Pittsburgh's power play ice time today ... Letang led the Pens with four blocked shots ...
Nine different players from each side took at least one face-off.

Three star selections

1st: EVGENI MALKIN

2nd: JAMES NEAL

3rd: ALEX OVECHKIN

Winning Goaltender

Marc-Andre Fleury

Losing Goaltender

Michal Neuvirth

Washington Capitals

Dump 'n Chase

By Mike Vogel

Perreault Makes Most of Top Line Try

Although he has missed Washington's last nine games, Caps center Nicklas Backstrom is still the team's leading scorer with 42 points this season. Fellow Swedish pivot Marcus Johansson has been filling in on the top line for the Capitals during Backstrom's absence; Johansson skated 22:09 in Friday's loss at Carolina, the second-highest single-game ice time total of his career.

On Sunday in Pittsburgh, the Caps were without both Backstrom and Johansson. Washington started Sunday's contest in Pittsburgh with Mathieu Perreault, Brooks Laich, Jeff Halpern and Cody Eakin as its four centers.

Expect no sympathy from the Penguins. Pittsburgh boasts arguably the best trio of centers in the circuit in Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Jordan Staal. But you can count on the fingers of both hands the number of times all three have been available for the same game in Pittsburgh's last 130 regular-season contests.

Perreault has been on the Caps' roster all season, but he has dressed for 29 of the Capitals' 47 games and he entered Sunday's game with an average of just 9:05 per night in ice time.

With Backstrom and Johansson unavailable, Caps coach Dale Hunter elected to insert Perreault as the pivot on the Caps' top line. He skated most of the afternoon with Alex Ovechkin and Alexander Semin.

"Just when I got to the rink this morning," says Perreault, when asked when he found out he'd be manning the middle of Washington's top trio this afternoon. "I didn't even know he was [sick].

"It's a little more pressure, but at the same time it's a good chance for me to show what I can do when I get a little more ice time with the top players."

It was a good chance, and Perreault made the most of it. He logged 16:22 for the afternoon, and he assisted on goals by Semin and Ovechkin

The ice-time total is the most No. 85 has ever had in a single contest of his 85-game NHL career.

"We seemed to generate a lot of speed in the neutral zone today," says Perreault. "We had the goals off the rush, both of them. I think it was a big thing for us."

Perreault scored the game-winning goal in the trip opener at Montreal on Wednesday, so he finished the trip with three points in as many games.

"He played well," says Hunter of Perreault. "He had a good game going, playing lots of minutes and not used to them. Mathieu did a great job."

Washington Capitals

Capitals Voice

Malkin nets game-winner as Pens slip by Caps in OT

Posted on January 22, 2012 by jwalton

Washington rallied and led for a time in the third period, but ultimately fell in overtime 4-3 Sunday afternoon at Consol Energy Center.

Pittsburgh jumped out to a 1-0 lead early by way of the power play, with Kris Letang scoring his fifth goal of the season from center point unassisted at 4:51. Just over a minute later, James Neal made the score 2-0 with a tally from Evgeni Malkin at 5:52. The Penguins put nine shots on goal in the first period, while Washington could muster only four toward Marc-Andre Fleury.

The second period was a different story entirely. Washington picked up 10 shots, and came from two goals down to tie the game. Brooks Laich started the road back with his ninth goal of the season at 11:02 from Dennis Wideman and Alex Ovechkin, and Alexander Semin pounced on a Mathieu Perreault rebound and scored his 12th goal of the season at 14:38. The Capitals also held Pittsburgh to just five second period shots in getting the game tied.

Washington took a lead in the third period when Alex Ovechkin scored his 20th goal of the season but Neal scored his second goal of the night to tie it up at 3-3. Evgeni Malkin, who entered the game with a five-game goal scoring streak scored the game-winning goal in overtime, his 26th tally of the season. The Capitals get a standings point, but fall in Pittsburgh for the first time in nine games.

The Capitals return home to face the defending Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins Tuesday night at Verizon Center. Face-off is at 7:00 p.m. for the final game before the All-Star break. Marcus Johansson was a scratch for the Capitals, only the second game number 90 has missed this season. Johansson missed the game due to illness. Tomas Kundratek and Jeff Schultz were also scratched.

Washington Capitals

Capitals vs. Penguins: Evgeni Malkin's overtime goal vaults Pittsburgh past Washington, 4-3

By Katie Carrera, Sunday, January 22, 4:47 PM

PITTSBURGH — It was an afternoon filled with all the drama, scoring and animosity that the hockey world has come to expect between the Washington Capitals and Pittsburgh Penguins. Although the Capitals managed to obtain a point in a heated contest with their rivals, the mood in the visitors' dressing room was far from content.

Washington erased an early two-goal deficit, snatched a lead early in the third period and benefited from Alex Ovechkin's first three-point game of the season, but fell 4-3 in overtime to the Penguins at Consol Energy Center. Evgeni Malkin, the NHL's leading scorer, recorded the game-winner 1 minute 31 seconds into the extra time to extend his goal-scoring streak to six games.

The Capitals (25-19-3) return home having gone 1-1-1 on their three-game trip with one more game left before the NHL all-star break. An overtime loss to the Penguins (27-17-4) wasn't the way they wanted to close out the trip, but it offered a template of how doggedly the Capitals can play when they're fully engaged.

"We battled back, we hung in and we battled back, I think that's a big point," defenseman Dennis Wideman said. "There's been times in the last little while here that we've been a little unemotional. I think when we're going that hard and playing that way we're a lot better team, a lot harder to handle. .??. We need to play like that every night."

Both teams entered the contest with their share of injuries. Marcus Johansson missed the game with an illness, further depleting Washington's depth at center with Nicklas Backstrom already out indefinitely with a concussion. Pittsburgh, also familiar with injured centers, was without two of its stars in Sidney Crosby (concussion) and Jordan Staal (knee).

Despite those names missing from the lineups, though, the contest didn't lack for firepower or intrigue. Less than six minutes in, the Penguins leaped to a two-goal lead.

On the first power play, Kris Letang fired a point shot that beat a screened Michal Neuvirth (23 saves) to make it 1-0 nearly five minutes into the game.

Sixty-one seconds later, James Neal fired a wrister off a faceoff win by Malkin against Matt Hendricks to make it 2-0. By the end of the period, Washington not only trailed 2-0 on the scoreboard but was being outshot, 9-4, and getting trapped in its own zone.

"The first period was terrible, we don't even play in their zone," Ovechkin said. "I don't know why, but every chance when we have opportunity to go attack we just put puck in their zone and give them away."

Early in the second, however, the Capitals ratcheted up their physical play, led by Ovechkin, who began to hit anyone in a black-and-gold jersey. One of Ovechkin's most noticeable checks came in the corner of the Penguins zone when he left his feet to crunch Zbynek Michalek, who appeared to be falling on the play.

The animosity flowed between the teams as they exchanged more hits and a few post-whistle dust-ups, and Washington gained momentum while the Penguins' offense ran dry. Pittsburgh didn't record a shot on goal in the period until nearly 14 minutes had elapsed.

The Capitals got on the board 11:02 into the second when Wideman fed Brooks Laich in front during four-on-four play. Pittsburgh forward Pascal Dupuis's stick broke earlier on the play, and Laich made the most of the available space on top of the crease to record his first goal in 14 games. With 14:38 gone in the middle period, Alexander Semin knotted the score at 2 on an odd man-rush. Suddenly, the Capitals were the dominant force.

"We seemed to generate a lot of speed in the neutral zone today," said Mathieu Perreault, who recorded two assists while playing frequently with Ovechkin and Semin. "We had our goals off the rush, both of them. That was a big thing for us."

Ovechkin scored on a long one-timer just 68 seconds into the third period to give the Capitals their first lead at 3-2, but the advantage wouldn't last. Just more than seven minutes into the third, Malkin drove the puck into the zone and fought off the Capitals to set up Neal for his second goal of the game to make it 3-3. Pittsburgh continued to push as it outshot the Capitals, 12-6, in the period but would need overtime.

The Capitals had been able to keep track of Malkin for much of the game, but when a point shot by Neal bounced off the end boards and caromed to the right post he was all alone. He only had a split-second before Neuvirth would have been able to stop the puck, but that's all Malkin needed to chip it into the net.

"We had our chances just like they did and Malkin slips away for a second," Capitals Coach Dale Hunter said. "To find that puck coming off the backboard and so quick to get it in, Neuvy was coming hard and he would have been there. Most guys would have took another second and he would have had it."

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Washington Capitals

Capitals are in search of shots as they prepare to visit Pittsburgh

By Katie Carrera, Published: January 21

PITTSBURGH — It has become common in recent weeks to see the Washington Capitals enter the offensive zone with the best of intentions, yet see them exit the same stretch of ice without so much as hinting at a scoring chance or a shot on goal.

Regardless how the possessions are derailed, whether by turnovers or trying to be too cute in pursuit of a highlight-worthy play, they often end the same — with the Capitals retreating into their own end with little to show for their trip across an opponents' blue line.

Heading into Sunday's matinee against the Pittsburgh Penguins, Washington has failed to crack the 25-shot mark in any of the past seven contests. The Capitals have been outshot in 15 of their past 16 games. For a team and core group of players that was once so identified by its offensive prowess and what appeared to be an ability to score at will, it has been quite a shift.

"We had rushes, three-on-one, two-on-one and they made a play and never got a scoring chance out of it," Coach Dale Hunter said. "Definitely got to get more pucks to the net and making the proper decision when you do get a chance. We're blowing some chances, that's what we're doing. There's only so many chances in a game so you've got to get it out there."

To be certain, Hunter emphasizes more of a defensive posture for the Capitals than former coach Bruce Boudreau did when the team was blazing its way to the top of the league in offense. Washington is also coping with the absence of No. 1 center Nicklas Backstrom (concussion) and Mike Green (sports hernia) to injury.

Nevertheless, when Washington cannot escape its own zone to establish puck possession and generate scoring chances it puts additional strain on the defense and the goaltenders. Against a team such as Pittsburgh that is ranked first in the NHL in shots on goal per game (34.5) and has outshot its opponent in 13 consecutive games, that pressure likely will be even greater.

"It's hard on us D always running around down there .??. it's a tough job when you play 40-45 minutes in your own zone and can't get out," defenseman Karl Alzner said. "We're starting to get a little upset about being in our own end and having lots of shots against us, and we've got to go out there and fix it. .??. Everyone's got to do their part and that's it. I have to do my job in the corner, the winger's got to do [his] job at the blue line, move it up and keep it there. We've just got to put all the pieces together."

So on Saturday, in a practice that stretched beyond an hour, the Capitals focused on maintaining possession upon entering the offensive zone, manufacturing opportunities and making sure players focused on driving to the net.

Part of the practice was also used to hammer home the idea that the most effective play may not always be the pretty one, and that cycling the puck, without creating a scoring chance, does little good.

“If you don’t have anything but you throw it off a pad for a rebound, that’s just as good as a pretty backdoor pass,” right wing Troy Brouwer said. “We’ve just got to make sure that pucks and bodies are going to the net — not just one or the other.”

While the lack of shots and offense is a team-wide problem, there’s no question the Capitals would like to see captain Alex Ovechkin start taking more shots that hit the net. In the past 10 games Ovechkin, who has led the NHL in shots on goal in each of his six seasons, has recorded five or more shots just once and he has only posted five or more twice in the past 14.

Asked about his low shot totals, Ovechkin addressed the Capitals’ collective offensive woes.

“You can find some excuses, but you can’t play like that,” Ovechkin said. “You can’t win the game with 14, 16 shots on net in the game [and having to] give all the attention to our goaltending.”

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Washington Capitals

Pittsburgh's Evgeni Malkin sends Capitals home with 4-3 overtime loss

By Katie Carrera

The Washington Capitals managed to keep tabs on Evgeni Malkin for the better part of their matinee against the Pittsburgh Penguins Sunday, but the all-star center showed why even one slip up can be damaging.

James Neal, left, congratulates teammate Evgeni Malkin on his game-winning goal against the Capitals. (JASON COHN - REUTERS) Malkin's game winner in overtime came off a fortuitous bounce as James Neal's shot was tipped by Paul Martin then caromed off the end boards straight to the Penguins' star pivot. Defenseman Roman Hamrlik tried to chase the puck behind the net, but was never close to obtaining it and by the time Brooks Laich saw Malkin open near the right post it was too late for him to scramble over.

For his part, Michal Neuvirth had pushed off to try to get over to the right post but the split second was all Malkin needed to chip the puck in and send the Capitals home with a 4-3 overtime loss.

"Malkin slips away for a second," Coach Dale Hunter said. "He's a good player and good players score them kind. To find that puck coming off the backboard and so quick to get it in, Neuvy was coming hard and he would have been there, most guys would have took another second and he would have had it."

Said Malkin: "I needed to go to the front because [Neal's] a shooter. He always shoots the puck. Lucky bounce off the boards and shot to an empty net."

Malkin recorded three points and improved his league-best scoring totals to 59 points (26 goals, 32 assists) overshadowing Alex Ovechkin's first three-point showing of the year.

"He play great, I think he control the game so well right now," Ovechkin said. "He knows without Crosby this team is good but not that good. .??. Everything goes well for him right now. For Pittsburgh it's very good sign — without Crosby he's a key for their game. Right now Malkin take all the attention and pressure to his shoulders."

While the Capitals earned an important point, it didn't seem to dull the sting of the loss. In what was perhaps the most exciting game this season, though, it offered an example of how well Washington can play when fully engaged and that is something the team hopes to build off of.

"We battled back, we hung in and we battled back, I think that's a big point," Dennis Wideman said. "There's been times in the last little while here that we've been a little unemotional. I think when we're going that hard and playing that way we're a lot better team, a lot harder to handle that's good. We need to play like that every night."

Washington Capitals

Open thread: Capitals at Penguins

By Post Sports Editors

The rival Capitals and Penguins face off today in their final meeting of the 2011-12 regular season. In a notable change to the lineup, Marcus Johansson is not on the ice for warmup and will not face Pittsburgh because of an illness.

Johansson, who took part in practice on Saturday, suffered an apparent left leg/thigh injury late in Washington's win in Montreal earlier this week but skated 22 minutes and 7 seconds against Carolina on Friday and appeared no worse for wear.

Michal Neuvirth will make his second start in three games and his first appearance against Pittsburgh this season, he is 2-0-1 with a .977 save percentage and 0.65 goals-against average against the Penguins in his career. He will be opposed by Marc-Andre Fleury, who will make a 21st consecutive appearance.

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Washington Capitals

Alex Ovechkin: Pittsburgh's Evgeni Malkin 'dominates'

By Katie Carrera

When the Capitals last saw their rivals back on Jan. 11, the Pittsburgh Penguins were in the midst of a six-game slide that saw them score just six goals. Since falling 1-0 in Washington thanks to a 30-save shutout by Tomas Vokoun, though, the Penguins have won five straight while outscoring their opponents 21-10.

Pittsburgh has defenseman Kris Letang back in the fold after he missed 21 games with a concussion and then there is all-star center Evgeni Malkin, who has helped lead the charge during the recent surge.

Heading into Sunday's matinee with the Capitals, Malkin leads the NHL in scoring (55) and has eight goals – many of the eye-popping variety -- in the past five games. Of those tallies, six have come in the third period.

Alex Ovechkin knows his fellow countryman and roommate during the 2006 Olympics is on a roll.

"I think he play great right now," Ovechkin said of Malkin. "Last year when he got hurt he miss hockey a lot. It's good for him and he's top player in the league, one of the top players in the league. When he is out there it's dangerous. Every team have that kind of guy on the team but Malkin, right now, dominates."

Having to monitor and try to minimize the damage Malkin can do is tough enough when the Capitals have the last change, on the road it will add another wrinkle. While Washington will try to make sure it gets advantageous matchups against Malkin, keep an eye out to see if the Penguins manage to shake those efforts as the contest goes on.

Karl Alzner said that the Capitals have to take a page out of their childhoods when trying to cover Malkin – shadow him but that his combination of speed, size, vision and play-making ability stack the deck.

"You've got to start by taking away his speed in the neutral zone," Alzner said. "If you can't do that you try to guard against his shot -- he likes to shoot the puck from pretty much anywhere and he goes to the net he doesn't just shoot and peel off. You notice he gets those little ones in tight because he's got that reach and he's got that vision. You take away the speed and you just have to keep a guy on him – like the shadows that we all used to do in minor hockey."

--Penguins Coach Dan Bylsma told reporters that Marc-Andre Fleury will start in goal this afternoon. It will mark Fleury's 21st consecutive appearance.

Meanwhile, Coach Dale Hunter wouldn't divulge who he plans to give the nod to against Pittsburgh

Tomas Vokoun, who has started 11 of the previous 12 contests, has appeared in each of the three meetings between the rivals this season and stopped 102 of the 106 shots he's faced in those contests for a .962 save percentage and 1.32 goals-against average.

Michal Neuvirth is 2-0-1 in his career against the Penguins with a .977 save percentage and 0.65 goals-against average.

By Katie Carrera | 10:56 AM ET, 01/22/2012

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Washington Capitals

Red-hot Evgeni Malkin puts on a show in Penguins' defeat of Capitals

By Stephen Whyno

PITTSBURGH — Alex Ovechkin was effusive in his praise of countryman Evgeni Malkin the day before the Washington Capitals visited the Pittsburgh Penguins.

“Malkin right now, I think, dominates,” the Capitals' captain said.

True to form, Malkin dominated against the Caps, scoring the Penguins' game-winning goal in overtime and adding a couple of assists to pad his lead (58 points total) as the league's leading scorer. He has seven third-period or overtime goals in his past five games. His 26 goals also slot him at third in the league.

“[He] play great, and I think he control the game so well right now,” Ovechkin said Sunday afternoon. “He knows without [Sidney] Crosby, this team is good but it's not that good. And he handle it pretty well.”

The Penguins might be pretty good anyway, having now won six in a row. But so much of it has to do with Malkin's excellence, which was on display in the 4-3 defeat of the Caps.

In the third period, Malkin carved through the defense and opened up plenty of room for James Neal to score his second of the day and 26th of the season. In overtime, he took a puck that rebounded off the boards and ended the game by beating a hard-sliding Michal Neuvirth.

Painful lesson: Don't give Malkin room to do anything.

“He's obviously got all the tools, all the skills. He can skate. He uses his linemates real well,” defenseman Dennis Wideman said. “He dishes and then jumps into openings. He's tough to play against. He's a big, strong guy. But we let him get in behind us there and kind of get lost on the overtime winner there. He's not going to miss that one.”

On the winner 1:31 into the extra frame, the puck did take a fortuitous Penguins' bounce right onto Malkin's stick, but it took what Caps coach Dale Hunter called “quick hands — real quick” to snap it into the net.

“He's elite player and to find that puck coming off the back boards and he's so quick to get it in,” Hunter said. “Neuvy was coming hard and he would've been there. Most guys would've took another second and he would've had it.”

It was Malkin's NHL-best seventh game-winning goal. And though Penguins coach Dan Bylsma admitted some of those are the second in 5-1 wins, he knows how crucial the center's clutch offense has been lately.

“Those are big goals from a big player,” Bylsma said. “Right now, we’re getting those goals from Geno and that’s a huge thing for our team right now.”

The thing is, Malkin needs to be good given that the Penguins are missing not only Crosby (post-concussion symptoms) but Jordan Staal (knee). The Russian center has 13 points (nine goals, four assists) in his past six games.

“It’s everything goes well for him right now. For Pittsburgh, it’s very good sign,” Ovechkin said. “Right now, Malkin take all the attention and all the pressure.”

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Washington Capitals

Capitals' rally goes to waste in OT loss to Penguins

By Stephen Whyno

PITTSBURGH — Brooks Laich sat at his locker alone in the visiting dressing room at Consol Energy Center, head in his hands.

The Washington Capitals managed to claw back from a devastating start and pick up a point with a 4-3 overtime loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins, but the body language afterward belied the impressive comeback that kept Sunday's game from being a rout.

"It's a depressing loss, but it was a good battle," goaltender Michal Neuvirth said. "We battled hard, and they got the lucky bounce at the end."

The bounce came about a minute-and-a-half into overtime, as the puck ricocheted off the end boards and right to a wide-open Evgeni Malkin. The Penguins superstar, who has seven goals in the third period and overtime in the past five games barely beat Neuvirth to light the lamp.

It was exactly what the Caps knew they couldn't allow against Malkin, who also had a couple of assists.

"He's an elite player, and to find that puck coming off the back boards and he's so quick to get it in," coach Dale Hunter said. "Neuvy was coming hard, and he would've been there. Most guys [other than Malkin] would've took another second and he [Neuvirth] would've had it."

From the outside, just forcing overtime and picking up a point was impressive after the way things started Sunday. Penguins defenseman Kris Letang scored eight seconds into a power play at 4:51 of the first period, and left wing James Neal made it 2-0 just 61 seconds later.

Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin bemoaned Washington's effort in the first period. "Not terrible, but we don't have any opportunity to score goals," Ovechkin said of the Capitals being outshot 9-4. "We don't have hitting. We just give them anything they want to do."

It changed in the second, as the Penguins managed just five shots and the Caps tied the score with goals by Laich and Semin 3:36 apart. Ovechkin assisted on both and scored to give Washington the lead just 1:08 into the third for his first three-point game of the season.

Playing without center Marcus Johansson (illness), the Caps did concede some satisfaction for not folding when facing an early deficit. A penalty-filled second period was full of scrums and was a perfect way for the Caps to get engaged.

"For us to hang in there and play as hard as we did, I think that was good. I know we showed some emotion," defenseman Dennis Wideman said. "We got in there and mixed it up a little bit, and that's good for our team to get in and stand up for each other."

But what Hunter called a “breakdown” allowed the Penguins’ Neal to tie it with 7:06 left and set the stage for Malkin’s heroics in overtime. On the game-winner, it appeared as if defenseman Roman Hamrlik left Malkin open, and Laich was unable to get back to prevent the Caps’ third loss in four games.

“[Malkin is] tough to play against. He’s a big, strong guy,” Wideman said. “But we let him get in behind us there and kind of get lost on the overtime winner there. He’s not going to miss that one.”

Just like that, 61:31 of some of the most entertaining hockey the Caps have played all season meant little. The focus now is on the standings, and picking up one point meant remaining in eighth place in the Eastern Conference and not passing Florida atop the Southeast Division.

Despite the run-and-gun, back-and-forth game that appeared to resemble classic Cap “We played .500,” Hunter said, “But we’ve got to be better than that.”s-Pens games of recent years, it was a sour ending to a 1-1-1 road trip.

Washington Times LOADED: 01.23.2012

Washington Capitals

Capitals down but not really out

By: Brian McNally | 01/22/12 8:05 PM

PITTSBURGH -- Already without star center Nicklas Backstrom, the Capitals appeared in deep trouble Sunday morning when fellow center Marcus Johansson took ill and was scratched.

On the road against the Pittsburgh Penguins, that appeared to be a devastating blow to a team already thin down the middle of its lineup. Yet somehow Washington managed to survive and earn a standings point.

Alex Ovechkin scored just 68 seconds into the third period to put the Caps ahead, but a goal by James Neal midway through the third period and then another by Evgeni Malkin in overtime lifted Pittsburgh to a 4-3 victory at Consol Energy Center.

Washington fell behind 2-0 before the game was six minutes old thanks to goals from defenseman Kris Letang on the power play and from Neal off a faceoff. Things looked dire for the Caps (25-19-3), who had been shut out last week 3-0 by both the Carolina Hurricanes and New York Islanders, two of the worst teams in the Eastern Conference.

So the point was nice. But there was a reason forward Brooks Laich, who was late getting over to Malkin at the right doorstep on the game-winning stuff attempt after a shot rebounded off the end boards, had his head buried in a towel in the locker room after the game.

"It's a frustrating loss, but I think it was a good game," Washington goalie Michal Neuvirth said. "We battle hard, and they got the lucky bounce at the end."

The Caps didn't let the lineup changes affect them. Instead, Washington fired 10 shots at Penguins goalie Marc-Andre Fleury (17 saves) in the second period, Mike Knuble hit a post and Matt Hendricks was denied on a breakaway as he flew out of the penalty box and tried to deke Fleury.

But in between those near misses, defenseman Dennis Wideman fed Laich in front for a goal at 11:02 of the second. Just 3:36 later, Hendricks disrupted Letang in the Pittsburgh offensive zone, and that turnover allowed Alex Ovechkin to push the puck ahead to Mathieu Perreault. His shot was stopped by Fleury, but Alexander Semin was there to convert the rebound and tie the game at 2-2.

Ovechkin, waiting at the left circle, later finished a beautiful cross-ice feed from Semin 1:08 into the third. That play started with a nifty drop pass from Perreault -- on the top line in place of Johansson -- as he and his teammates entered the offensive zone. It was goal No. 20 for Ovechkin and his first three-point game of the year.

"We got some guys out of the lineup right now. And that team does, too," Wideman said. "That team's been playing a short lineup all year. But I think for us to hang in there and play as hard as we did was

good. We showed some emotion. We got in there and mixed it up a little bit, and that's good for our team to get in and stand up for each other."

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Washington Capitals

Malkin scores winner as Penguins nip Capitals 4-3

By: WILL GRAVES | 01/22/12 3:40 PM

Evgeni Malkin pounded home a rebound 1:31 into overtime to lift the streaking Pittsburgh Penguins to a 4-3 victory over the Washington Capitals on Sunday.

Malkin, the NHL's leading scorer, banged a long carom off the end boards past Washington's Michal Neuvirth for his 26th goal of the season. Malkin added two assists to give him a league-leading 58 points on the season.

James Neal scored twice and assisted on the game-winner for Pittsburgh, which has won six straight. Kris Letang scored for the second straight game Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 17 shots for the Penguins, who beat Washington at home in the regular season for the first time in more than four years.

Alex Ovechkin matched Malkin, a fellow Russian, with a goal and two assists. Alexander Semin had a goal and an assist for the Capitals while Brooks Laich added a goal.

The Capitals kept the league's hottest team under wraps most of the game, overcoming an early two-goal deficit to take a 3-2 lead 1:08 into the third period on Ovechkin's 20th goal of the season, a one-timer off a perfect feed from Semin.

Neal drew Pittsburgh even with his second goal of the game, beating Neuvirth with a wrister from the right slot to tie it at 3. The Capitals nearly extended their unbeaten streak at Consol Energy Center to nine games late in the third, but Troy Brouwer's slapshot from the right circle clanged off the far post in the final minute of regulation.

It was all the reprieve the Penguins would need.

Pittsburgh controlled the brief overtime. Neal fired a long shot from the point that sailed wide of the net but caromed off the boards and onto the stick of Malkin on the right post. He had little trouble getting it by Neuvirth as the Penguins beat their rivals at home in the regular season for the first time since Dec. 27, 2007.

Neuvirth overcame a shaky start to finish with 23 saves but couldn't stop the Capitals from losing for the third time in four games. Washington is now 8-12-3 since Dale Hunter took over for Bruce Boudreau in November.

One of those victories was a 1-0 win over Pittsburgh on Jan. 11, a game that changed the Penguins' season.

Though the defeat extended Pittsburgh's losing streak to six games — the franchise's worst stretch in two seasons — Pittsburgh coach Dan Bylsma thought he saw a flicker of improvement in his team's execution and attitude.

He was right. Pittsburgh hasn't lost since, the team's longest winning streak since ripping off 12 straight wins from Nov. 17-Dec. 11, 2010. That team, however, was at full strength. These Penguins are still missing captain Sidney Crosby, who remains sidelined indefinitely with concussion-like symptoms.

At the moment, Pittsburgh is getting by just fine without their superstar.

Having Malkin in top form has certainly helped. Fully healed from the torn ACL in his right knee that cut short his 2010-11 season, Malkin has been arguably the best player in the game over the last two months and has lately shown a flair for the dramatic.

He posted a natural hat trick in the third period of a victory over Tampa Bay last weekend and scored the game-tying goal late in regulation before collecting the shootout winner in a 5-4 victory over Montreal on Friday night.

Pittsburgh didn't look like it would need Malkin to save the day after racing to a quick 2-0 lead. Letang beat Neuvirth on a long slapshot from the point on the power play to put the Penguins on the board 4:51 into the game and Neal doubled Pittsburgh's advantage just over a minute later.

The Capitals responded with three straight goals during a 10-minute stretch spanning the second and third periods, capped by Ovechkin's blast.

Yet it wasn't enough — for once — as Malkin kept Pittsburgh's hot streak going. He has 17 goals and 17 assists — the most in the league — since Crosby went out of the lineup when concussion-like symptoms returned following a Dec. 5 loss to Boston.

NOTES: The Capitals scratched defensemen Tomas Kundratek and Jeff Schultz and center Marcus Johansson. ... Pittsburgh scratched defenseman Ben Lovejoy and forward Arron Asham, who is out indefinitely with a concussion. Asham is the sixth Pittsburgh player this year to be diagnosed with concussion-like symptoms. ... The Capitals host Boston on Tuesday while Pittsburgh travels to St. Louis.

Washington Examiner LOADED: 01.23.2012

Washington Capitals

Report: Ovechkin to have NHL disciplinary hearing Monday

Examiner Staff Writer | Follow him @bmcnally14

Already down centers Nicklas Backstrom and Marcus Johansson – not to mention defenseman Mike Green – the Caps may have to go a game or two without Alex Ovechkin, too.

At 4 minutes, 5 seconds of the second period against Pittsburgh on Sunday afternoon, Ovechkin leveled Penguins defenseman Zbynek Michalek with a hit in Washington's offensive zone. Ovechkin left his feet and made contact with Michalek's head. That's a no-no under Rule 48.1. Ovechkin has a hearing with the NHL's department of player safety on Monday. There was no penalty called on the play, but Pittsburgh wasn't happy.

"I was a little surprised," Michalek said. "To me, when the play happened, [Ovechkin] just went for my head. I've been told that he left his feet. Hit my head. To me, it's a definitely a penalty. They didn't call it. It should have been called for sure."

Penguins coach Dan Bylsma chose his words carefully in his post-game press conference. The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review's Josh Yohe asked if Ovechkin sometimes gets preferential treatment from officials in instances like this.

"Your analysis was that he appeared to leave his feet," Bylsma asked. After a decent pause, Bylsma simply smiled and said "Yes it was."

Washington's next game is Tuesday at home against the Boston Bruins. The team hopes Johansson (undisclosed illness) will be back for that one. But Backstrom (concussion symptoms) won't be. And Green is out until next month (sports hernia surgery). Losing Ovechkin, though, would again leave the lineup short. Ovechkin recorded goal No. 20 in the 4-3 overtime loss to the Penguins and recorded his first three-assist game.

And this isn't the first time he's entered the NHL's wheel of justice. Ovechkin was suspended two games for a March 14, 2009 major boarding penalty on then-Chicago Blackhawks defenseman Brian Campbell. He earned a game misconduct penalty that afternoon after pushing Campbell into the end boards at 12 minutes, 16 seconds of the first period. Campbell suffered a broken collar bone that kept him out the rest of the regular season and didn't return to action until April 22 in Game 4 of a first-round Stanley Cup playoff series vs. Nashville.

Earlier that year on Nov. 30, Ovechkin was also suspended two games after a major penalty for kneeing Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Tim Gleason. That play earned a game misconduct, too, and came just five days after Ovechkin's major boarding penalty on Buffalo forward Patrick Kaleta. That one happened at 3:38 of the third period in a 2-0 win at Verizon Center on Nov. 25. You wonder if the lack of a penalty call Sunday will mitigate things with Brendan Shanahan, NHL vice president of player safety. It also appeared Michalek was falling as Ovechkin leaned in for the hit. Still, Penguins players and fans probably

won't forget the collision with defenseman Sergei Gonchar in the 2009 Stanley Cup playoffs, either. That knee-on-knee hit behind the Pittsburgh net came May 8 in the first period of Game 4. Gonchar missed the next two games, but returned for Game 7.

"It's not the first time he's hit me or somebody else like that," Michalek said. "Some players are more protected than the others. It should be an even field. Next shift I took a penalty. It was a good call. I elbowed the guy. I just told the ref that if he's going to make the call on me he should make it on him too. It should be an even field no matter who makes the hit."

Just to clarify – Ovechkin didn't address the issue after the game. That's the fault of the seven or eight reporters who spoke with him. The hit got lost in what was one of the season's most exciting games. Washington rallied from a 2-0 deficit before losing a 3-2 lead in the third period. Evgeni Malkin scored the game-winner 1:31 in overtime. We'll get reaction from Ovechkin and coach Dale Hunter after Monday's 10:30 a.m. practice.

Ironically, Michalek received an elbow penalty of his own when he hit Caps forward Matt Hendricks at 8:36 of the second period - less than five minutes after Ovechkin's controversial hit. Michalek has a hearing of his own Monday morning. Ovechkin's is set for Monday afternoon.

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Washington Capitals

Pens beat Caps in OT thriller

January 22, 2012, 3:12 pm

PITTSBURGH - Too bad the Capitals and Penguins don't tangle a few more times this season.

In one of the more entertaining games of the season, Evgeni Malkin scored 1:31 into overtime to give the Penguins a 4-3 win over the Capitals Sunday afternoon in front of a wildly enthusiastic crowd at the Consol Energy Center.

Alex Ovechkin had his first three-point game of the season with a goal and two assists, but Malkin would not be denied, scoring the game-winner on a James Neal rebound. Malkin now has six third-period goals and another in overtime during the Penguins' six-game win streak.

Asked if the game reminded Ovechkin of some of his knockdown, drag-out games against Sidney Crosby, the Capitals captain was in no mood for comparisons.

"It reminds me of nothing," Ovechkin said. "It's just a hockey game. (Malkin) played great. He's controlling games right now. He knows that without Crosby this team is good, but not that good and he's handled it very well."

The Capitals rallied from an early 2-0 deficit to take a 3-2 lead, but Malkin set up James Neal for the game-tying goal, then won it in overtime, going from his backhand to his forehand in the blink of an eye.

"The guys battled," Caps coach Dale Hunter said. "We came back and took the lead. Malkin slips away for a second off the backboards. He's a good player and good players score goals like that. Another second and Neuvy (Michal Neuvirth) would have had it. He's got quick hands. Real quick."

It was the Penguins' first win over the Caps in Pittsburgh since 2008, breaking a winless streak of eight games.

Ovechkin gave the Caps their first lead of the game 68 seconds into the third period when he took a cross-ice feed from Alex Semin and snapped a one-timer past Marc-Andre Fleury for his 20th goal of the season.

The goal completed a three-goal comeback from a 2-0 deficit for the Caps, but Malkin was not about to let the Penguins' five-game win streak end without a fight.

Malkin knifed his way through Brooks Laich and Matt Hendricks, then muscled Roman Hamrlik off the puck and quickly centered a pass to Neal, who snapped his second goal of the game and 26th of the season past Neuvirth.

Capitals right wing Troy Brouwer came within inches away from winning the game in regulation when his slapshot rang off the far left post with 18 seconds to play in the third period.

Through the first 20 minutes the Caps looked disinterested, discombobulated and perfectly content to return home with their third loss in four games.

The Capitals learned before the game they'd be without top-line center Marcus Johansson, who woke up with flu-like symptoms and was unable to play.

That meant a short-lived stint on the top line for Mathieu Perreault, who began the game centering Alex Ovechkin and Mike Knuble. The Caps had trouble completing any of their passes in the first period and the Pens took advantage early, grabbing a 2-0 lead in the opening 5:52.

Dennis Wideman gave the Pens their first power-play of the game with a careless cross-checking penalty on Chris Kunitz. Eight seconds later Laich won a faceoff back to Roman Hamrlik, but Hamrlik's clearing attempt was knocked down by Penguins defenseman Kris Letang, who fired a rising slapshot through the screen of Kunitz and over Neuvirth's catching glove.

Sixty-one seconds later the Pens made it 2-0 when Evgeni Malkin cleanly beat Laich on a draw and James Neal snapped another shot over Neuvirth's glove for his 25th goal of the season.

The Caps showed no pushback the rest of the period, managing just four shots, and it looked like a blowout might be in order.

That's when Ovechkin got into the game physically and emotionally.

The Caps came out with some fire in their eyes in the second period and Ovechkin set the tone with a bone-crushing hit on defenseman Milan Michalek. Mike Knuble followed with a bulrush to the net and – voila – goals from Laich and Semin followed to make it 2-2.

"He's our captain and when he hits and plays like that he gets everybody going," Hunter said of Ovechkin. "We were kind of flat up until that."

Wideman agreed.

"There have been times in the last little while we've been unemotional," he said. "When we're hitting like that playing that way we're a lot harder team to handle. We need to play like that every night."

Laich's goal, his ninth of the season, came at the 11:02 mark on a nice feed from Wideman. Penguins forward Pascal Dupuis broke his stick on the play, allowing Wideman time to get the puck to Laich for a one-timer.

With the Pens on their heels the Caps struck again at the 14:38 mark when Semin finished off a rush with Ovechkin and Perreault, calmly backhanding Perreault's rebound inside the right post for his 12th goal of the season.

But this time, the Pens fought back, leaving both teams holding a 2-1-1 season series record and leaving the fans wanting more. Maybe they'll get their wish in April.

Washington Capitals

Malkin wins showdown with Ovi

January 22, 2012, 7:21 pm

PITTSBURGH – Their careers have been compared and contrasted since the day the Capitals took Alex Ovechkin with the first pick of the 2004 NHL draft and the Penguins followed by taking Evgeni Malkin second overall.

On Sunday, the two talented Russians did not disappoint in yet another memorable head-to-head matchup.

Both players scored a goal and assisted on two others as the Penguins prevailed, 4-3, on Malkin's overtime game-winner.

So how have Malkin and Ovechkin fared in their 20 head-to-head matches since entering the NHL?

Ovechkin now has 14 goals to Malkin's eight.

Malkin has 21 assists to Ovechkin's 12.

Malkin has nine multi-point games to Ovechkin's eight.

In total, that gives Malkin a 29-26 advantage in head-to-head points.

As for their career numbers, Ovechkin still holds a significant edge. In 522 career games, he has 321 goals and 332 assists for 653 points and a plus-84 rating. In 393 career games, Malkin has 184 goals and 292 assists for 476 points and a plus-37 rating.

*Mathieu Perreault learned he'd be centering the Capitals' top line when he arrived at the Consol Energy Center Sunday morning and found out Marcus Johansson was too sick to play.

After a rough first period for Perreault and the rest of the Capitals, the 24-year-old center settled in to play a season-high 16:22 and set up goals by linemates Alex Ovechkin and Alex Semin.

"He played well," Capitals coach Dale Hunter said of Perreault, who was a healthy scratch in three of the previous five games. "He had a good game going and he got some minutes. I thought he did a great job."

Perreault said he was happy to get an opportunity to play with two of the NHL's top players.

"It was a good chance for me to show what I can do when I get more ice time and play with good players," he said. "We seemed to get a good amount of speed in the neutral zone and our goals came off the rush."

*Brooks Laich shadowed Malkin nearly the entire game, and his numbers showed it.

Laich took 39 shifts and logged a team-high 27:57 of ice time. He played 4:06 on the power play, 3:06 on the penalty kill and 20:45 at even strength. He also took a game-high 39 faceoffs, winning 17 of them.

*The Caps pretty much got what they deserved on their road trip, finishing their their three-game trip with a 1-1-1 mark.

“We wanted to be better in Carolina,” Hunter said. “We didn’t play as well as we should have. We played .500, and we’ve got to be better than that.”

If not for a sleepy first period that generated just four shots, the Caps might have pulled out a win in Pittsburgh.

“I think the first period was terrible,” Ovechkin said. “We didn’t have any play in their zone. The second period we were finding room in he neutral zone and we fought back to take the lead.”

Washington Capitals

Bylsma: Ovi still dangerous

January 22, 2012, 11:47 am

Include Penguins coach Dan Bylsma among those who believe Alex Ovechkin is just as dangerous today as he has been at any point in his career – despite his un-Ovi-like numbers.

“I am surprised that his numbers aren’t there,” Bylsma said, “because when I watch I don’t see a significant drop in his play or where he gets his shots from or where he is on the ice.”

Through 46 games Ovechkin ranks 18th in the NHL in goals with 19; 105th in assists with 17; 46th in points with 36 and 683rd in plus-minus at minus-7. In fact, he ranks in the top 10 in just two categories – sixth in power-play goals with eight and eighth in shots with 169.

“He’s still very dangerous,” Bylsma said. “(He’s) still doing the a lot of the things that he did when he was the top goal scorer in the league, coming off the (left) wing and making the move to the middle, getting his shot off.”

NHL color analyst Jeremy Roenick says he also sees the same Ovechkin of old and is looking forward to seeing Ovi and Evgeni Malkin go-head-to-head today.

“(Ovechkin) looks energized, he’s working hard, and he's playing with a lot of electricity right now, which is fun to watch,” Roenick said.

It is worth noting the Penguins have been on a five-game win streak since the Capitals blanked them 1-0 on Jan. 11 at the Verizon Center. After that game Penguins general manager Ray Shero made it clear his team was a playoff team.

“Everybody was starting to wonder if the Penguins were going to make the playoffs, and their GM, Ray Shero, comes out and says, ‘We’re making the playoffs,’” Roenick said.

“That’s a bold statement for the GM to make, and I love how he went on the line to put the pressure on his players. But the fact that Evgeni Malkin has raised his game two or three levels since Ray Shero said that speaks volumes to me about his character and talent level.”

Washington Capitals

Malkin leads Pens to 4-3 OT win vs. Caps

Sunday, 01.22.2012 / 5:23 PM

Alan Robinson - NHL.com Correspondent

THREE STAR SELECTIONS

Evgeni Malkin

1st Evgeni Malkin

Center - PIT

GOALS: 1 | PTS: 3 | ASST: 2

SOG: 6 | PLUS/MINUS: 3

James Neal

2nd James Neal

Left Wing - PIT

GOALS: 2 | PTS: 3 | ASST: 1

SOG: 6 | PLUS/MINUS: 3

Alex Ovechkin

3rd Alex Ovechkin

Left Wing - WSH

GOALS: 1 | PTS: 3 | ASST: 2

SOG: 2 | PLUS/MINUS: 3

PITTSBURGH -- Alex Ovechkin's exceptional all-around game reminded everyone in Consol Energy Center why he was widely considered to be hockey's best player not that long ago.

But it still wasn't good enough to top the player that Ovechkin says is now the NHL's best, Evgeni Malkin.

The Russian stars had a goal and two assists each, but it was Malkin's opportunistic goal in overtime and a pair of James Neal goals that he created that rallied the Pittsburgh Penguins past Ovechkin's Washington Capitals 4-3 on Sunday afternoon.

Malkin scored off a rebound of Neal's shot from the left point that deflected off Paul Martin in front and struck the end boards before finding Malkin's stick 1:31 into overtime. Malkin immediately lifted it over a scrambling Michal Neuvirth for his League-leading seventh game-winner.

The Penguins not only won a season-high sixth in a row, they stopped an eight-game home ice losing streak against Washington; no team has beaten them nine straight times in Pittsburgh.

And it's all because there's no stopping Malkin and Neal, who had two goals and an assist as the Penguins extended their longest winning streak since they won 10 in a row early last season. Malkin has 13 points during a run that followed a six-game Pittsburgh losing streak.

"I have great confidence now, you know?," said Malkin, who has nine goals during the winning streak – seven in the third period or overtime. "You win six games, I think everyone has great confidence now. I just am enjoying the game, you know? And having fun."

So did Ovechkin, who also had a big hit in the corner on defenseman Zbynek Michalek that gave the Capitals a mental lift after they fell behind 2-0 in the first.

But, right now, it's difficult to keep up with Malkin in the can-you-top-this department.

"He's an elite player, and to find that puck coming off the back boards so quick to get it in ..." Capitals coach Dale Hunter said. "Neuvy was coming hard. Most guys would have taken an extra second (to shoot) and then he (Neuvirth) would have had it."

Said Neuvirth: "They got a lucky bounce at the end. It hit the boards and, very unexpected, it's a goal for him."

Of course, Ovechkin has seen all this before from Malkin, his former Russian Olympic teammate and longtime NHL adversary.

The only other time Malkin scored in six consecutive games was at the start of his career in 2006.

"He played great and he controls the game so well right now," Ovechkin said of Malkin, who has a NHL-leading 58 points despite missing seven games to injury. "Without (the injured Sidney) Crosby, this team is good, but it's not that good. But he handles it (the pressure) pretty well. Everything goes well for him right now."

Kris Letang and Neal scored in the opening six minutes, but the Capitals -- held to four shots in the first -- surged back to take a 3-2 lead 68 seconds into the third on Ovechkin's 20th goal and his 11th in his last nine games in Pittsburgh.

Ovechkin, the former Art Ross Trophy-winner who began the day in an uncharacteristic 46th place in the League scoring, added two assists during his first three-point game since April 6 against Florida.

But the lead didn't hold up as Malkin, dueling with Ovechkin the way they did while trading off scoring titles only a few years back, carried the puck in heavy traffic from the blue line to beyond the goal line to set up Neal for his 26th goal at 7:06.

"Without Crosby, he's the key to that team," Ovechkin said.

This Capitals-Penguins game lacked the injured Crosby (concussion symptoms), plus the Capitals' Mike Green and Nicklas Backstrom, but it wasn't missing much else. There were numerous scoring chances, given the relatively low number of shots (47 overall, 27 by Pittsburgh), multiple breakaways, excellent goaltending, big hits and an elevated level of on-ice animosity by teams whose rivalry is genuine.

The rivalry between the current generation of Caps and Pens peaked during Pittsburgh's seven-game Eastern Conference Semifinal series win in 2009 and seems to grow greater every year, even though the teams meet only four times a season.

Did it remind Ovechkin of those days?

"It reminded me of nothing," Ovechkin said. "It was just a hockey game."

But certainly not the average game.

"Geno was playing with that fire, creating opportunities in a tough-checking game, and then he finishes it off in overtime," Penguins coach Dan Bylsma said.

Letang, playing his third game since returning from a nearly two-month layoff with a concussion, intercepted a clearing pass along the boards, skated to center point and beat Neuvirth with a slap shot for a power-play goal with 4:51 gone— his second goal in two games.

Neal followed at 5:52 by grabbing the puck after Malkin controlled the faceoff and snapping off a wrist shot from the top of the left circle.

"He's just an unbelievable player right now," Neal said.

Neuvirth, starting even though Tomas Vokoun shut out the Penguins 1-0 only 11 days before, gave up two goals on the Penguins' first four shots after stopping 86 of their previous 88 shots. Neuvirth finished with 23 saves, while Pittsburgh's Marc-Andre Fleury made 17 while winning his sixth in a row.

Only two days after the Penguins rallied from two goals down to beat Montreal 5-4 in a shootout created by Malkin's late tying goal, they couldn't hold a two-goal lead of their own.

With Ovechkin becoming a bigger factor with every shift, he assisted on second-period goals by Brooks Laich and Alexander Semin slightly more than three minutes apart to abruptly halt the momentum Pittsburgh had generated from the start.

Laich beat Fleury, who was playing in his 21st consecutive game, from the edge of the crease off Dennis Wideman's pass at 11:02 with the teams skating 4-on-4. Semin followed at 14:38 by converting off a rebound of Mathieu Perreault's shot from the high slot.

Perreault, moved up to the top line due to Marcus Johansson's illness, had a pair of assists for the Capitals, who are 1-2-1 in their last four with only a Tuesday game against Boston remaining before the All-Star break. The Penguins try to keep their streak going at St. Louis that night.

Washington Capitals

PITTSBURGH -- Evgeni Malkin can't really explain what's going on with the Pittsburgh Penguins. He'd rather just enjoy the ride.

Malkin pounded home a rebound 1:31 into overtime to lift the streaking Penguins to their sixth straight win, a 4-3 triumph over the Washington Capitals on Sunday.

"I have great confidence now, you know?" Malkin said. "You win six games, I think everyone has great confidence now. I just am enjoying the game, you know? And having fun."

Considering the way things have been going for Pittsburgh, it's kind of hard not to.

Malkin has now scored in six straight games, matching the longest streak in the league this year. The Russian added two assists to push his league-leading point total to 58 and give the Penguins their first regular-season home win over the Capitals since Dec. 27, 2007.

James Neal scored twice and assisted on the winner as Pittsburgh's top line once again did most of the heavy lifting.

"They're the big line for us right now and they come up big every night," said Pittsburgh defenseman Kris Letang, who scored for the second straight game. "They've been playing really well, and I don't know what to say about Malkin. He's just playing unbelievable right now. He's playing the best hockey I've seen of him."

Fellow Russian Alex Ovechkin matched Malkin with a goal and two assists for the Capitals. Alexander Semin had a goal and an assist, while Brooks Laich added a goal as Washington rallied from an early two-goal deficit before falling short.

"We battled, we had our chances just like they did," Washington coach Dale Hunter said. "Malkin slips away for a second on the back boards, you know, not a pass or anything, just a shot and he's a good player and good players score like that."

The Capitals kept the league's hottest team under wraps most of the game, taking a 3-2 lead 1:08 into the third period on Ovechkin's 20th goal of the season, a one-timer off a perfect feed from Semin.

Neal drew Pittsburgh even with his second goal of the game, beating Neuvirth with a wrister from the right slot to tie it at 3. The Capitals nearly extended their points streak at Consol Energy Center to nine games late in the third, but Troy Brouwer's slapshot from the right circle clanged off the far post in the final minute of regulation.

It was all the reprieve the Penguins would need.

Pittsburgh controlled the brief overtime. Neal fired a long shot from the point that sailed wide of the net but caromed off the boards and onto the stick of Malkin on the right post. He had little trouble getting it by Neuvirth.

Neuvirth overcame a shaky start to finish with 23 saves but couldn't stop the Capitals from losing for the third time in four games. Washington is now 8-12-3 since Hunter took over for Bruce Boudreau in November.

One of those victories was a 1-0 win over Pittsburgh on Jan. 11 -- a game the Penguins feel changed their fortunes.

Though the defeat extended Pittsburgh's then-losing streak to six games -- the franchise's worst stretch in two seasons -- Penguins coach Dan Bylsma thought he saw a flicker of improvement in his team's execution and attitude.

He was right.

Pittsburgh hasn't lost since and is on its longest winning streak since ripping off 12 straight wins from Nov. 17-Dec. 11, 2010. That team, however, was at full strength. These Penguins are still missing captain Sidney Crosby, who remains sidelined indefinitely with concussion-like symptoms.

At the moment, Pittsburgh is getting by just fine without their superstar.

Having Malkin in top form has certainly helped. Fully healed from the torn ACL in his right knee that cut short his 2010-11 season, Malkin has been arguably the best player in the game over the last two months and has lately shown a flair for the dramatic.

He posted a natural hat trick in the third period of a victory over Tampa Bay last weekend and scored the game-tying goal late in regulation before collecting the shootout winner in a 5-4 victory over Montreal on Friday night.

Pittsburgh didn't look as though it would need Malkin to save the day after racing to a quick 2-0 lead. Letang beat Neuvirth on a long slapshot from the point on the power play to put the Penguins on the board 4:51 into the game and Neal doubled Pittsburgh's advantage just over a minute later.

The Capitals responded with three straight goals during a 10-minute stretch spanning the second and third periods, capped by Ovechkin's blast.

Yet it wasn't enough -- for once -- as Malkin kept Pittsburgh's hot streak going. He has 17 goals and 17 assists -- the most in the league -- since Crosby went out of the lineup when his symptoms returned following a Dec. 5 loss to Boston.

"(Malkin's) controlling the game so well right now," Ovechkin said. "He knows that without Crosby (their) team is good, but not that good. He's handling it well."

Game notes

The Capitals scratched D Tomas Kundratek, D Jeff Schultz and C Marcus Johansson. ... Pittsburgh scratched D Ben Lovejoy and F Arron Asham, who is out indefinitely with a concussion. Asham is the

sixth Pittsburgh player this year to be diagnosed with concussion-like symptoms. ... The Capitals host Boston on Tuesday while Pittsburgh travels to St. Louis.

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Hershey Bears

Monarchs crown Bears in 4-2 loss

Manchester handed Hershey its third-consecutive regulation loss with a 4-2 victory at Giant Center on Sunday night.

By CHRIS FIDLER

Updated: 01/23/2012 12:29:40 AM EST

HERSHEY - When the Bears trimmed Manchester's lead to one goal late in the second on Sunday night, the equalizing tally seemed simply to be a third-period formality.

Momentum, however, can only carry a team so far.

Despite unleashing 15 shots in the final 20 minutes, Hershey never could find goalkeeper Jeff Zatkoff's soft spot. The end result - a disappointing 4-2 setback to the Monarchs in front of 9,611 Giant Center spectators.

Manchester right wing Stefan Legein scored twice - once shorthanded and another on a power play - to go along with Dwight King's fluke redirection and Justin Azevedo's empty-netter. Meanwhile, Zatkoff blocked 29 of the hosts' 31 shots to secure his 11th win of the year.

The loss marks the third-straight regulation defeat for the Bears, something that has not happened since December of 2010. It is also the first time since becoming affiliated with Washington Capitals (2005-06) that Hershey has wrapped up a three-game weekend without earning at least one point in the standings.

Still, the Bears (24-10-4-3, 55 points) remain on top of the AHL's East Division, albeit tied with rival Wilkes-Barre (25-12-14, 55 points).

"We didn't show up to play until about halfway through the second period," Hershey head coach Mark French said. "We seemed to gain some steam and carry it through the third period. But again, they got goaltending, and they were committed to blocking shots. We might have had some zone time, but a lot (of shots) were finding shin pads."

Defenseman Julien Brouillete and center Keith Aucoin both scored for the Bears, who fired a dozen more shots than their New Hampshire-based opponents. In the crease, Braden Holtby turned away 15-of-18 attempts.

Manchester jumped ahead 3:29 into action when King's centering pass from behind Holtby banked in off a skate, 1-0. Justin Johnson and Andrew Campbell were awarded assists on the goal by King, who is the brother of Bears' forward D. J. King. The hosts would finally wake up 10 minutes into the game when Jacob Micflikier and Aucoin registered the first official shots against Zatkoff.

Brouillette eventually tied the game 1-1 on a power play at 15:38 when his unassisted slap shot from the blue line beat Zatkoff under the cross bar. The Monarchs, though, regained the lead late in the stanza on Legein's shorthanded blast from the right of Holtby at 19:11.

"Its hard to describe," Holtby said. "They got a lucky bounce to begin with, those happen. Then I gave up a bad goal at the end of the first, and that was kind of the difference. ... I think my angle must have been off a little bit, I didn't think he had anything. I was just trying to cut down the angle and must have given him a bit shortside."

The visitors (23-19-0-2) pushed the lead to 3-1 in the second period on a tic-tac-toe power play goal from Legein, selected as the games' No. 1 star. Marc-Andre Cliché and Patrick Mullen setup the play with a pair of pretty touch passes at 6:49. At the time, Manchester had three goals on just six shots.

"I think (fatigue) might have affected us more early than late," added French. "I think we made it hard on ourselves this weekend having to try and come from behind and playing emotional games where we expended a lot of energy. I thought early we didn't have the intensity and energy level that's needed."

With 2:51 left in the second, Aucoin extended his league-best point streak to 16 games on a spinning wrist shot from in front of the net to cut the deficit to 3-2. Micflikier picked up the assist after his hustle kept the play alive, including a sprawling poke check that led to the puck caroming to Aucoin in the middle.

From there, though, Zatkoff stood tall, stopping all 15 shots in the third period, and surviving a couple of opportunities from Hershey's top-ranked power play.

"You got to give credit to Zatkoff and the defense," Holtby (14-10-1) added. "They blocked a ton of shots and cleared a ton of rebounds. That was basically the difference, we didn't get that lucky break that they did."

The Bears travel to Norfolk for game's Friday and Saturday before taking a break for the league's all-star festivities on Sunday and Monday at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City. Aucoin, Chris Bourque and Boyd Kane will skate for Eastern Conference. Hershey returns home on Sat., Feb. 4 against the Connecticut.

NOTES: A moment of silence was observed before Sunday night's puck drop in memory of Penn State icon Joe Paterno. The crowd followed with a unified chant of "We are Penn State." ... Graham Mink, Kyle Greentree and Patrick Wellar were scratches for the Bears. ... Hershey is now 11-7-2-2 at Giant Center. ... They are also now 5-3-0-0 on Sundays this season.

Manchester 4, Hershey 2

1st Period: 1, Manchester, King 8 (Johnson, Campbell), 3:29. 2, Hershey, Brouillette 8 15:38. 3, Manchester, Legein 5 (Cliche), 19:11 (SH). Penalties: Paddock Mch (roughing), 4:53; Brouillette Her (hooking), 7:10; Kaunisto Mch (hooking), 13:35; Paddock Mch (tripping), 18:35.

2nd Period: 4, Manchester, Legein 6 (Mullen, Cliche), 6:49 (PP). 5, Hershey, Aucoin 11 (Micflikier, Potulny), 17:09 (PP). Penalties: Nolan Mch (fighting), 2:49; Carroll Her (fighting), 2:49; Pope Her (tripping), 5:21; Watt Mch (boarding), 7:14; Mitchell Her (goaltender interference), 13:29; Hickey Mch (high-sticking), 16:08.

3rd Period: 6, Manchester, Azevedo 7 (King, Cliche), 19:51 (EN). Penalties: Kozun Mch (delay of game), 1:10; Mitchell Her (goaltender interference), 8:11; King Mch (roughing), 9:07.

Shots on Goal: Manchester 4-5-10-19. Hershey 5-11-15-31.

Power Play Opportunities: Manchester 1-for-4; Hershey 1-for-7.

Goalies: Manchester, Zatkoff 11-8-1 (31 shots-29 saves). Hershey, Holtby 14-10-1 (18 shots-15 saves).

Attendance: 9,611.

Referees: Keith Kaval, David Banfield. Linesmen: Bob Goodman, Matt McNulty.

Hershey Bears

Manchester Monarchs beat Hershey Bears 4-2

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TIM LEONE, The Patriot-News By TIM LEONE, The Patriot-News

Erase the score and a look at the stat sheet would indicate that the Hershey Bears defeated the Manchester Monarchs Sunday night at Giant Center.

Hershey, which limited Manchester to nine shots through the first two periods, enjoyed a 31-19 shot advantage and a 7-4 power play edge.

But with shot-blocking prowess, solid goaltending from Jeff Zatkoff (29 saves) and opportunistic special teams, the Monarchs conjured a 4-2 victory.

"You've got to give credit to Zatkoff and their defense," Bears goalie Braden Holtby said. "They blocked a ton of shots and cleared a ton of rebounds."

They also got two goals from Stefan Legein, one short-handed and one on the power play. The short-hander gave Manchester a 2-1 lead with 48.6 seconds left in the first period after Manchester's Dwight King and Hershey's Julien Brouillette traded goals.

"I thought the short-handed goal was really impactful," Bears head coach Mark French said. "When it happened, it certainly turned up big in the game.

"We didn't show up to play until about halfway through the second period. We seemed to gain some steam, and we seemed to carry it through in the third period. Again, they've got good goaltending. They were committed to block shots. We might have had some zone time, but a lot were finding their shin pads."

Legein was set up on the short-hander by Marc-Andre Cliché, who got off a backhand feed despite being in the process of falling. Legein got off a shot from the right circle that eluded Holtby.

"I gave up a bit of a bad goal at the end of the first," Holtby said. "That was kind of the difference.

"My angle must have just been off a little bit. I didn't think he had anything. I was just trying to cut down the angle and must have gave him the short side."

Legein's power-play goal at 6:49 of the second increased the lead to 3-1. Keith Aucoin cut the deficit to 3-2 with a power-play goal late in the second, but the Bears couldn't muster a tying goal and Justin Azevedo's empty-netter late in the third capped the scoring.

The loss was Hershey's third straight in regulation, marking the first time this season it has gone three in a row without recording a point.

It also marked the first time since the affiliation with the Washington Capitals began in 2005-06 that the Bears went through a three-in-three weekend without recording at least one win.

“Hopefully, this weekend is just a blip on the radar screen,” French said. “We’ve got two huge games looming next weekend at Norfolk before the all-star break, and that’s where our focus needs to turn.”

Dwight King, who also recorded an assist, played in a pro game that counted against his brother, Bears winger D.J. King, for the first time.

D.J. King, playing his first game since Dec. 17 and ninth of the season, said they previously played against each other in a Los Angeles Kings-St. Louis Blues exhibition game when he was with the Blues organization.

Manchester’s Saturday win against Hershey meant D.J. King lost a bet with his younger brother.

“I had to pick up the tab last night for the family dinner because my parents are in town, my parents and sister,” D.J. King said. “I lost out last night. It was nice to be in the lineup, so it was good to play against him.

“I had a lot of emotion.”

With D.J. King, a healthy scratch in 13 straight games, inserted into the lineup, fellow exempt veteran Kyle Greentree was scratched.

“With D.J. there was a little bit of uncertainty of how long he would be here,” French said. “Now that we know he’s going to be here, we have to try and get him into the lineup more. He’s a guy who’s committed. He’s been a very good worker. He’s been a very good teammate. He needs an opportunity to play.”

Hershey spent the first two games of the weekend -- Friday at Binghamton and Saturday against Manchester -- digging out of deficits. The Bears rallied to tie both those games in the third period but eventually lost each in regulation.

“We made it hard on ourselves this weekend, having to try and come from behind and play emotional games where we expended a lot of energy,” French said. “I thought early we didn’t have the intensity level and the urgency that’s needed.”

NOTEBOOK

Wilkes-Barre/Scranton moved into a first-place tie with Hershey in the East Division.

Aucoin extended his point streak to 16 games. Darren Haydar set the AHL record (39 games) in 2006-07 with Chicago.

A moment of silence was held before the game in honor of Joe Paterno.

Hershey hadn't lost games on consecutive days at home to the same team since the 2007-08 season, when Manitoba beat it on March 15 and March 16.

Graham Mink was a veteran scratch for the second straight game.