

## **26. Tampa Bay Lightning**

### **Prospect System Rank – 26th (Last Year - 30th)**

#### **GM: Julien BriseBois Hired: September 2018**

#### **COACH: Jon Cooper Hired: March 2013**

The Tampa Bay Lightning, now on an eighth-year playoff run, haven't missed a step despite losing their long-serving captain, Steven Stamkos. Finishing with the NHL's seventh-highest regular season point total, they remain a powerhouse driven by the usual suspects in Nikita Kucherov (31), Victor Hedman (31), Brayden Point (29), Andrei Vasilevskiy (30) and now Jake Guentzel (30).

True to form, GM Julien BriseBois did not help their future's cause, trading their 2025 second-round pick and 2026 and 2027 first-rounders to bolster the middle-six, prioritizing immediate contention over draft capital. Shocker.

As expected, this win-now approach has taken its toll on a depleted prospect pool, which climbs to 26th here at McKeen's but remains thin after Connor Geekie's graduation.

Isaac Howard (McKeen's 61st ranked), the system's cornerstone, is Tampa's only first-round pick in five years. Yet, even he has provided an unsettling circumstance. Developing at Michigan State, it was expected that Howard would officially sign his papers and join the pro ranks. Yet, after some hesitation, things appear shaky on that front. As is the case with the college route, the Lightning are now very much in jeopardy of losing his rights, should they fail to sign him by next summer.

Beyond Howard, the pipeline lacks depth. Prospects such as 2023 second-rounder Ethan Gauthier, who's now with the Syracuse Crunch, to join fellow prospects Dylan Duke and Niko Huuhtanen, continue to improve but fail to offer significant or immediate NHL impact.

The Lightning's limited draft picks—only three slated for the initial six rounds in 2025—further hamstringing their ability to restock. Years of trading high picks and prospects for Cup runs have left the system reliant on late-round gems and external acquisitions. With the core still very much in their prime, however, Tampa's championship window remains wide open. For now, BriseBois is all-in, betting on the core to deliver another Cup.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
1	Isaac Howard	TB	LW	21	5-10/185
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 22(31st)	TB	2022	31	30-Mar-04	USA
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Michigan State (B1G)	37	26	26	52	10

Isaac Howard is easily the most exciting prospect in Tampa's pipeline right now. The smooth-skating winger took a huge step forward this year at Michigan State, jumping from eight goals last season to 26 in 2024/25. He's always had slick hands and great vision, but this year he really leaned into shooting more and it resulted in him being one of the top scorers in college hockey. The Lightning's 2023 first rounder capped off his breakout season by winning the Hobey Baker Award. He's super creative with the puck, constantly finding soft spots in coverage and jumping on loose pucks in dangerous areas. Howard plays with a ton of confidence, especially on the powerplay where he can dictate the pace. He projects as a top six NHL winger who should be a threat on the powerplay as well. Howard has yet to sign his entry level contract and is expected to return to Michigan State for his senior year.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
2	Ethan Gauthier	TB	RW	20	5-11/175
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 23(37th)	TB	2023	37	26-Jan-05	Canada
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Drummondville (QMJHL)	50	25	37	62	26

After improving his stats each year and proving himself as a valuable player in the playoffs, Ethan Gauthier is looking ready to make the jump in the pro. Finishing the year with 62 points in only 50 games, his overall offensive game has become simply better. With quicker hands, driving more plays and making better decisions with the puck, his opponent needs to be careful to not let him too much space. He is an agile skater, with great edge work but not the best explosivity. That aspect of his game could need some refinement if he wishes to establish his playstyle in the NHL. Gauthier is a strong forechecker, always intense on the pressure. He plays a physical game and never turns his back to a battle. Although his main problem is to evade pressure because of the lack of speed and skills, his high level of hard work has always brought his game to the next level. A question remains as if he could still produce if he plays in a lesser role at a higher level. There is no doubt that Gauthier will play in the NHL, surely on the bottom six of a strong team like the Tampa Bay Lightning.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
3	Niko Huuhtanen	TB	RW	21	6-2/205
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 21(224th)	TB	2021	224	26-Jun-03	Finland
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Syracuse (AHL)	51	8	12	20	47

Huuhtanen came into this year with a fair amount of hype after two great years in Liiga with Jukurit. The big power forward was even considered a sneaky candidate to earn a role with the Lightning. However, his first pro season with Syracuse has shown that he's still got some work to do before being NHL ready. There's no question that he still has NHL upside. He drives the net effectively playing a North/South power game. He hits like a truck. He has a heavy shot that could end up being a weapon on the powerplay. However, his pace of play lags behind. Dating back to his draft year, skating has been the knock on Huuhtanen, but he's worked hard to improve it, including those two years in Finland after playing in Everett (WHL). Yet, there's a need to improve it further to be successful in North America.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
4	Max Crozier	TB	D	25	6-1/195
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 19(120th)	TB	2019	120	19-Apr-00	Canada
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Syracuse (AHL)	52	9	25	34	75

It's been a slow burn for Crozier, a fourth round selection out of the USHL in 2019. He played four years at Providence College and has now played two seasons split between the AHL and NHL level. At every stop, he's been a highly effective two-way defender and it seems like only a matter of time before Crozier is patrolling Tampa's blueline permanently. When he's played for the Lightning, he's performed well, but depth has kept him with Syracuse. However, not only is he an RFA this offseason, but Crozier is also no longer exempt from waivers next season. Is he part of their long-term plans still? He should be. Crozier has taken a big step forward offensively in the AHL this year. He's making plays with the puck. He's quarterbacking the powerplay. He's still bringing it physically and operating as a shutdown defender. The big right shot defender has been among the league leaders in ice time this year, averaging over 25 minutes per game. Needless to say, Crozier is NHL ready.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
5	Dylan Duke	TB	LW	22	5-10/180
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 21(126th)	TB	2021	126	4-Mar-03	USA
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Syracuse (AHL)	62	20	20	40	47

A former standout with the U.S. NTDP and at the University of Michigan, there was some concern about Duke's ability to translate his skill set to the pro game. However, he's been excellent for Syracuse as a rookie, leading the Crunch in goal scoring and even earning a brief NHL call-up that saw him score his first NHL goal. Duke's hard-working nature, high IQ, and quick feet have allowed his lack of size to be a relative non-factor in the AHL. He's now put himself in a position to push for a depth spot with the Lightning next year. Duke's upside isn't likely to be extremely high. He probably tops out as a complementary third line winger. However, Tampa has maintained their success through developing similar players extremely well. The focus for Duke will need to be improving his strength on the puck further and then he'll put himself in a position to be that next man up.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
6	Connor Kurth	TB	RW	21	5-11/205
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 22(192nd)	TB	2022	192	30-Jul-03	USA
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Minnesota (B1G)	40	18	21	39	10

2024/25 was a great season for Kurth, a former scoring star in the USHL, as he emerged as a go-to offensive player for Minnesota in his junior year. As a result, the Lightning signed him to an ELC and he has a chance to move fairly quickly if he performs well in a system without a ton of offensive firepower. Kurth is a stocky play driver who is more skill oriented than reliant on power. However, his game did add more truculence to it this year and it was one of the main reasons why he was able to finally break out offensively. The other main reason was improvement to his quickness and pace of play. There's likely to be an adjustment period for Kurth at the pro level, just as there was for him when he moved from the USHL to the NCAA. He's going to need time to adjust to the pace and strength of the pro game. However, as his progress this year has shown, he has the well-rounded game to be a middle six contributor for Tampa Bay down the line.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
7	Jack Finley	TB	C	22	6-6/215
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 20(57th)	TB	2020	57	2-Sep-02	Canada
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Syracuse (AHL)	40	14	14	28	24

Finley got a late start to his third professional season after injuring himself prior to the start of the season. But, since returning in January, Finley has been one of Syracuse's top players. The big pivot has the ability to dominate down low and near the net front. His skating has come a long way as a pro too, to the point where he can be the focal point of offensive attacks. This offseason will be a big one for Finley as he prepares to try to earn a roster spot in Tampa Bay next year. He's out of options, so Tampa Bay will need to make a tough decision if they feel that his game is still not ready. A more likely scenario sees him catch on as Tampa Bay's fourth line center to start the year, so long as he has a good training camp. Finley's NHL upside isn't significant, but there's a chance he could be a very good bottom six player and a secondary powerplay option.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
8	Jayson Shaugabay	TB	RW	19	5-9/155
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 23(115th)	TB	2023	115	4-May-05	USA
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Minnesota Duluth (NCHC)	36	12	14	26	4

While Shaugabay is far from an NHL lock and faces an uphill climb to become an NHL player, there's also no denying that he could have one of the highest upsides of any forward in their system. The highly skilled and creative pivot had a solid freshman year for Minnesota-Duluth this year, finishing near the top of the program's scoring lead. Shaugabay is not big. He's also going to need to upgrade his skating further given his lack of size. However, that's why he took the college route, to help him mature physically; this is probably a three- or four-year college player. If his development goes according to plan, the Lightning could have a potential top six forward on their hands. If not? Shaugabay probably tops out as a tweener or top end European player because his game is not tailored for the bottom six.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
9	Daniil Pylenkov	TB	D	24	6-1/195
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 21(196th)	TB	2021	196	26-Sep-00	Russia
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Dynamo Moskva (KHL)	68	6	25	31	26

Daniil Pylenkov was a nice pick up for the Lightning a few years ago in the seventh round of the draft. He has developed well over the last few seasons into a very serviceable two-way defenseman. He lacks the flash that your typical modern defenseman may possess but makes up for it with patient decision making on both sides of the puck. He has become a valuable distributor on Dynamo Moskva's power play, snapping the puck around well and firing tippable shots from the point. Defensively he is responsible in his positioning and does a good job breaking up plays with an active stick. His contract is up this season which may lead to a possible signing with Tampa this summer. He will likely need some time in Syracuse to continue his growth but may get some looks with the Lightning on their bottom pair at some point in the near future.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
10	Gabriel Szturc	TB	C	21	5-11/185
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
FA(3/24)				24-Sep-03	Czech
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Syracuse (AHL)	54	7	12	19	16

A free agent signing out of Kelowna after a very strong WHL career, Szturc has filled a depth role for Syracuse in his first pro season. Equal parts playmaker and goal scorer, Szturc's shot and ability to work the powerplay might just be his ticket to the NHL eventually. As is, he's still a ways from the NHL and remains a longer shot project. There's a definitive need to upgrade his physical tools to be more effective working through traffic, ensuring that he is not kept to the perimeter. This would also help him be a more consistent two-way player as a pro, which could be critical should his offensive skill set not translate fully. There's a chance that, with patience, Szturc could develop into a middle six piece, however, he's going to need a few more seasons in the AHL before that's a realistic outcome.

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
11	Hagen Burrows	TB	RW	19	6-2/175
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 24(128th)	TB	2024	128	13-Oct-05	USA
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Denver (NCHC)	39	1	8	9	14

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
12	Declan Carlile	TB	D	24	6-2/190
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
FA(3/22)				18-May-00	USA
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Syracuse (AHL)	55	6	10	16	52

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
13	Roman Schmidt	TB	D	22	6-5/210
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 21(96th)	TB	2021	96	27-Feb-03	USA
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Syracuse (AHL)	49	3	2	5	79

RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
14	Dyllan Gill	TB	D	20	6-1/180
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
` 22(223rd)	TB	2022	223	7-Jun-04	Canada
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Moncton (QMJHL)	27	6	18	24	6

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RNK	PLAYER	NHL	POS	AGE	HT/WT
15	Lucas Mercuri	TB	C	23	6-3/190
ACQUIRED	DFT TM	DFT YR	DFT SELECTED	BIRTHDATE	NATIONALITY
T(Car-3/25)	Car	2020	159	7-Mar-02	Canada
TM	GP	G(W)	A(L)	PTS(GAA)	PIM(SPCT)
Massachusetts (HE)	40	10	21	31	24