

TOP NEWS

ILLINI FALL TO WISCONSIN

The Illinois men's basketball team loses 71-57 to No. 11 Wisconsin in Big Ten play. **D4**

LOCAL

SPINKS TICKETS

Tickets for Cory Spinks' title fight at Scottrade Center on March 27 go on sale today at 10 a.m. Tickets will be priced at \$200, \$100, \$50 and \$25 and will be available at the Scottrade Center box office, all Ticketmaster locations, by phone at (314) 241-1888 (automated) or (314) 421-4400 or (618) 222-2900, or online at ticketmaster.com. A per-ticket facility fee will be added at all locations. Additional charges will be added by Ticketmaster. Spinks (36-4, 11 knockouts) will be defending his IBF junior welterweight title against former world champ Verno Phillips (41-11-1). Also on the card, dubbed "Pride of St. Louis" by promoter Don King, is another local fighter, Devon Alexander. Alexander (14-0, eight knockouts), the WBC Continental Americas super lightweight titlist, will face Miguel Callist (24-6-1) of Panama, the WBA Fedelatin super lightweight champ, in a championship unification bout. A news conference to announce the fight had been planned for today but has been pushed back to next week.

BY TOM TIMMERMANN

IN BRIEF

LET'S TALK

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell hopes the NFL is close to an agreement that will allow former New England Patriots employee Matt Walsh to tell the league about the tapes he is said to have made of the Rams' walkthrough before

A LOVE AFFAIR REKINDLED



The fans have returned this year in greater numbers to cheer on goalie Manny Legace, who is backstopping the team's bid for the playoffs. Chris Lee | Post-Dispatch

MANNY LEGACE

Since Dec. 20, only Martin Brodeur and Evgeni Nabokov have played more minutes in goal. The Blues don't have a certifiable No. 2 goaltender. Will Legace's trick knee hold up?



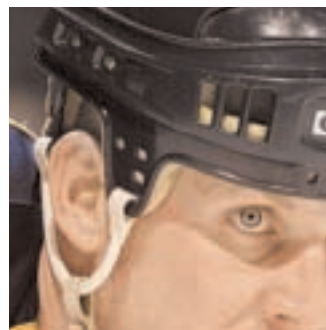
POWER PLAY

The Blues' six PP goals in the last two games have lifted their PP out of the bottom spot and to the No. 29 ranking in the league. If the power play stalls again, it's over.

THE STRETCH RUN

Key areas for the Blues as they battle for a spot in the playoffs

by Bernie Miklasz



ROAD TEST

Of the Blues' final 23 games, 15 are away. On the road, they rank 25th in winning percentage, 24th in goals per game and 27th in most goals allowed per game. That must change in a hurry.

DEFENSE CAN'T REST

Eric Brewer, Barret Jackman (left) and Jay McKee are playing desperate, inspired hockey, and that must continue.



KEITH TKACHUK

In recent games, we've seen what a difference "Walt" (above) can make when he wants to muscle up along the boards and park himself in front of the goal.

BERNIE MIKLASZ

Energized by fans, Blues go on mission

As the Blues soared to Los Angeles on Wednesday to begin a three-game trip, they were seeking to hold steady in the race for a Western Conference playoff spot. If there's turbulence up ahead, the Blues are determined to make their way through it.

Tuesday, in front of the 15th sellout crowd of the season at Scottrade Center, the Blues enjoyed one of the most triumphant hockey nights of the 2007-08 campaign. With crazed fans pushing them on, the Blues won the physical engagements, pounced on power-play opportunities and thrashed rival Chicago 5-1.

The resurgence continued, with the Blues having won four of their last five. And now they were off to Los

Angeles for tonight's game, followed by games at Anaheim and Phoenix. The road hasn't been kind to the Blues. They're 25th among the 30 NHL teams in road winning percentage, and that must improve.

And 15 of the final 23 games will be played away from 14th and Clark, the home of the Blues. Obviously, the Blues still have a long way to go in this quest to return to the postseason for the first time since 2004. And for a franchise that hasn't won a playoff series since 2002, this is an important mission.

"This experience of what we're going through is really healthy for our hockey club," Blues President John Davidson said. "We have a number of young players, and think about how

PLEASE SEE MIKLASZ | D3



MIKLASZ | FROM D1

Reconnecting with fans is huge for Blues

beneficial this will be for them. They're going to learn a lot about what it takes to succeed.

"The players and (coach) Andy Murray and his staff are good people, and they work hard. Last season when we got into a situation where we had to win some games to reach the playoffs, we didn't play very well. And I think that's what Andy was talking about how we needed to change the culture. That's what we've been doing. I think we can handle it better this time."

Even if the Blues fall short in the standings, they are achieving a broader and more important goal this season: They've re-established a strong and meaningful presence in the St. Louis sports culture.

Fifteen is a huge number of sellouts considering that the Blues had only three home sellouts, combined, in the previous two seasons. In 2005-06, the Blues were 27th in the NHL in average home attendance (14,213). The team's on-ice performance improved last season, but the crowds were slow to return. The 2006-07 Blues were last in the NHL in average home attendance (12,250) and sold only 59.6 percent of available tickets.

This season, the Blues are selling 83 percent of their seats, and their average home attendance of 17,456 ranks 13th in the NHL. Tuesday's victory over the Blackhawks had the feel of a homecoming celebration. In the second season of the Dave Checketts regime, the revival is real.

"When you come into a situation like we did, you don't know how long it's going to take to turn it around," Davidson said. "You don't know if the moves you make are the right ones. You're trying to feel your way through it. Even with the best intentions, there are potholes along the way and you try to avoid them. But every once in a while you step in one."

"But as an organization we were so excited (Tuesday). To see all the fans there, it was unbelievable. They're back, and they're great and they make it fun. After the game, our players talked about the adrenaline inside the building. Who knows where this is going to go? I can tell you we're going in the right direction. Everybody had to be a little bit gratified. That was fun to be a part of."

As the Blues headed to LA, they were tied for 10th place in the Western Conference and within reach of the eighth and final playoff spot. That may seem to be a rather modest place. But there is cause for jubilation: After being so down for so long, the Blues are winning back the hearts.

BLUES

'Desperation' fuels improved play

By Jeremy Rutherford
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

LOS ANGELES • Erik Johnson making a sliding play to break up a scoring chance. Barret Jackman blasting away from the point. Lee Stempniak finding the back of the net for an important power-play goal.

The individual efforts by the Blues in Tuesday's 5-1 victory over Chicago, and encompassed in their recent 4-0-2 stretch, have been clear to fans.

"We needed a few guys to raise their individual level," Blues coach Andy Murray said. "We talked about for our team to be better, players had to raise their individual levels. I would agree, I think they have."

Earlier this week, Keith Tkachuk said the reason for the Blues' success of late was "desperation." With 23 games remaining, beginning tonight in Los Angeles, the Blues need about 15 wins to make their first postseason trip since 2003-04.

"The clock's ticking, and it's still really, really tight," Blues captain Eric Brewer said. "No one knows how it's going to pan out. Everyone just understands that their shifts could make a difference. I don't think they've consciously said, 'I have to be better. I have to be better.' I think it's just something that naturally happens."

Blues forward Ryan Johnson



David Backes (42) and Keith Tkachuk (right) show the Blues' work ethic against Columbus. Photo by Anthony Soufflé

said, "I think guys individually have found that desperation in their game, and it's played a huge part in the team success."

Brewer, named captain just prior to the Blues' six-game point streak, said there is much more "positive talk" around the team, and it has been beneficial.

"If guys make good plays, guys know about it on the bench," Brewer said. "They know about it in the room. If guys have a good string of shifts, they get told about it."

"No one wants to be in a negative environment. You don't have to pat guys on the back, but they need to know when something goes well. Tell them, 'Way to skate,' or 'Keep shooting the

puck well.' Those things go a long way."

After Tuesday's win, Murray said rookie defenseman Erik Johnson played his best game as a pro, adding "and I don't throw out too many bouquets."

On Wednesday, Johnson was almost floored to hear about Murray's remark. But that's fine with the coach.

"I think I need to get more out of guys," Murray said. "I expect more of myself and I expect more of the players. I'm not satisfied that I do (get everything out of them), and I don't want our players satisfied that they are (doing everything they can)."

Said Brewer: "It's a fine line between patting guys on the

back and wiping their nose for them."

Jackman had a goal and an assist Tuesday against the Blackhawks. Both came on the power play, as a result of Jackman whistling shots from the blue line.

"I was just trying to tell myself not to pass up any shots and not wait for something better ... just get the puck on net," he said.

While Jackman's points were only his seventh and eighth of the season, Murray has kept him on the power-play unit, and it paid dividends.

"I think guys believe in the types of positions that (Murray) is putting players into," Brewer said. "I think he gives guys lots of responsibility and they like that responsibility. That, in turn, puts the onus on the player to perform, and as an athlete, I don't think there's a better position to be in."

Though Stempniak had not scored in 13 games, he stood at the edge of Chicago's goal crease Tuesday with the Blues clinging to a 2-1 lead and dropped in his 11th goal of the season.

Murray also complimented Stempniak after the game.

"It was nice to see 'Stemper' put the puck in the net," Murray said. "... I just think that every player we've got is capable of playing better, and that's what we've been asking for."

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BLUES AT LOS ANGELES

When: 9:35 tonight (St. Louis time).

Where: Staples Center.

On the air: FSN Midwest, KMOX (1120 AM)

BLUES PREVIEW: They Blues have moved out of the cellar in the NHL's power-play rankings, after converting six of 13 chances in their past two games. The Blues are now 29th (14.4 percent).

KINGS PREVIEW: Since dropping a 4-2 decision to the Blues on Feb. 12 in St. Louis, Los Angeles has gone 1-2 with a victory over the Calgary Flames and back-to-back losses to the Phoenix Coyotes.

WATCH FOR: Defenseman Christian Backman, who is on the trip and could rejoin the Blues soon. Defenseman Jeff Woywitka was re-assigned to the Peoria Rivermen of the American Hockey League on Wednesday.

INJURIES: Blues — D Christian Backman (foot), questionable; RW Mike Johnson (shoulder), out. Kings — D Rob Blake (ankle), LW Ladislav Nagy (neck), out.

BY JEREMY RUTHERFORD



STLtoday.com/blues
Sound off in **Blues Talk** and read the latest on the Note in **Morning Skate**.

NHL



New Jersey goalie Martin Brodeur is shoved by San Jose's Jeremy Roenick as the two exchange words Wednesday night. The Devils defeated the Sharks 3-2. The Associated Press

Khabibulin, 'Hawks shut out Wild

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Nikolai Khabibulin made 38 saves for his first shutout in

sey's three-goal second period, and the Devils took advantage of San Jose's backup goalie, Thomas Greiss, in a victory at

winner 2:35 into overtime, to rally host Buffalo to a win over Tampa Bay.

The Sabres came back from a

NHL CONFERENCE STANDINGS

The top eight teams in each conference make the playoffs, with division leaders seeded first through third. d-division leader

Western conference

	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
d-Detroit	42	15	5	89	199	136
d-Dallas	37	22	5	79	185	158
d-Minnesota	34	22	5	73	169	166
Anaheim	34	23	7	75	159	159
Nashville	32	23	7	71	181	172
San Jose	31	21	8	70	156	149
Calgary	31	22	8	70	177	177
Vancouver	30	22	8	68	160	154

Non-qualifiers

Phoenix	31	26	4	66	169	168
Colorado	30	25	6	66	167	169
Blues	28	22	9	65	157	164
Columbus	27	26	6	63	150	164
Chicago	28	26	6	62	169	169
Edmonton	27	29	5	59	164	183
Los Angeles	25	34	3	53	176	205

Eastern conference

	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
d-Ottawa	35	20	5	75	204	177
d-New Jersey	35	21	5	75	164	145
d-Montreal	33	19	9	75	192	172
d-Carolina	30	28	5	65	183	201
Pittsburgh	34	21	5	73	177	161
NY Rangers	30	24	8	68	157	155
Boston	30	23	6	66	155	160
Philadelphia	30	24	6	66	186	174

Non-qualifiers

Buffalo	29	23	8	66	177	169
NY Islanders	29	25	7	65	153	176
Washington	28	26	7	63	173	188
Atlanta	29	28	4	62	165	195
Florida	27	29	6	60	169	178
Toronto	25	27	9	59	168	194
Tampa Bay	25	28	7	57	174	197

Wednesday's results

Buffalo 4, Tampa Bay 3 (ot)
New Jersey 3, San Jose 2
NY Islanders 3, Washington 2 (so)
Chicago 3, Minnesota 0
Calgary 3, Dallas 2

Tuesday's results

Blues 5, Chicago 1
Boston 3, Carolina 2 (so)
Pittsburgh 3, Florida 2
Montreal 6, NY Rangers 5 (so)
Toronto 3, Columbus 1
Ottawa 3, Philadelphia 2 (so)
Nashville 5, Edmonton 4
Vancouver 3, Minnesota 2 (ot)
Calgary 4, Phoenix 1

Today's games | St. Louis times

Buffalo, Vanek 23 (Connolly, Lydman), 17:39. 6, Buffalo, Vanek 24 (Connolly, D.Roy), 18:15. **Penalties:** Kuba, TB (tripping), 4:21.

Overtime: 7, Buffalo, Vanek 25 (Spacek, Pominville), 2:25 (pp). **Penalties:** Boyle, TB (hooking), 1:26. **Shots on Goal:** Tampa Bay 6-9-10-0-25. Buffalo 11-16-17-2-46. **Power plays:** Tampa Bay 0 of 2; Buffalo 1 of 6. **Goalies:** Tampa Bay, Holmqvist 20-15-6 (46 shots-42 saves). Buffalo, Miller 27-19-6 (25-22). **A:** 18,690. **Referees:** Dan Marouelli, Dennis LaRue. **Linesmen:** Derek Amell, Pierre Racicot.

Islanders 3, Capitals 2

NY Islanders 3, Capitals 2 (0-1-0-0-3)
Washington 2, Capitals 0 (0-0-0-0-2)

• Islanders won shootout 1-0
First Period: 1, Washington, Semin 17 (Pettinger), 2:17. 2, Washington, Laich 10 (Green, Kolzig), 13:37 (pp). **Penalties:** Backstrom, Was (hooking), 7:53; Johnson, NYI (tripping), 12:20. **Second Period:** 3, NY Islanders, Satan 13 (Guerin), 9:37. **Penalty:** Guerin, NYI (slashing), 7:24. **Third Period:** 4, NY Islanders, Vasicek 12, 11:09. **Penalties:** Poti, Was (delay of game), 1:00; Bergeron, NYI (roughing, roughing), 5:42; Semin, Was (roughing, roughing), 5:42; Bergenheim, NYI (hooking), 14:02; Fleischmann, Was (hooking), 14:44; Fata, NYI (tripping), 15:51. **Overtime:** None. **Penalties:** None. **Shootout:** NY Islanders 1 (Park NG, Satan NG, Comrie G), Washington 0 (Kozlov NG, Ovechkin NG, Semin NG). **Shots on Goal:** NY Islanders 8-4-7-0-19. Washington 9-6-12-3-30. **Power plays:** NY Islanders 0 of 2; Washington 1 of 4. **Goalies:** NY Islanders, DiPietro 24-21-7 (30 shots-28 saves). Washington, Kolzig 21-18-6 (19-17). **A:** 17,584. **Referees:** Wes McCauley, Ian Walsh. **Linesmen:** Michel Cormier, Mike Cvik.

Blackhawks 3, Wild 0

Minnesota 0, Blackhawks 3 (0-0-0-0-3)
Chicago 1, Blackhawks 1 (1-1-1-1-3)

First Period: 1, Chicago, Kane 14 (Lang, Hendry), 3:49. **Penalties:** None. **Second Period:** 2, Chicago, Bolland 2 (Bourque, C.Adams), 19:40. **Penalties:** Schultz, Min, major (fighting), :21; Seabrook, Chi, major (fighting), :21; Bourque, Chi (tripping), 2:40; Lang, Chi (hooking), 15:39; Rolston, Min (holding stick), 16:59. **Third Period:** 3, Chicago, Bolland 3 (Keith, Bourque), 5:24. **Penalties:** Keith, Chi (hooking), 14:12; Burish, Chi (high-sticking), 14:59. **Shots on Goal:** Minnesota 10-16-12-38. Chicago 12-10-8-30. **Power plays:** Minnesota 0 of 4; Chicago 0 of 1. **Goalies:** Minnesota, Harding 11-12-1 (30 shots-27 saves). Chicago, Khabibulin 18-18-5 (38-38). **A:** 17,812. **Referees:** Rob Martell, Chris Rooney. **Linesmen:** Dan Schachte, Lyle Seitz.

Flames 3, Stars 2

Calgary 3, Stars 2 (1-0-2-3)
Dallas 0, Calgary 3 (0-1-1-2)

First Period: 1, Calgary, Tanguay 12 (Nolan, Aucoin), 13:29 (pp). **Penalties:** Iginla, Cal, major (fighting), :52; Ott, Dal, major (fighting), :52; Robidas, Dal (tripping),