

Flyers-Penguins Preview

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(AP) -- Evgeni Malkin is filling in nicely for the injured Sidney Crosby. The Russian has helped the Pittsburgh Penguins into sole possession of first place in the Atlantic Division for the first time this season.

They look to create some breathing room in the division race Sunday when they face the Philadelphia Flyers, one of their closest pursuers and a team to which they have lost four straight meetings.

Malkin, last season's Calder Trophy winner and among the league leaders with 28 goals and 66 points, has seven goals and 10 assists in nine games since Jan. 18, when Crosby injured his right ankle in a 3-0 loss to Tampa Bay. His scoring burst has also come while playing center - his natural position - after playing out of position on a wing with Crosby, the NHL's reigning scoring champion and MVP.

"I'm just trying to be the best player I can and I try to score as much as I can," Malkin said through an interpreter. "I don't focus on the fact that Sidney isn't here. I'm just spending more time on the ice."

Malkin, who also replaced Crosby in the NHL All-Star game on Jan. 27, had his fourth consecutive multi-point game Saturday, netting two goals and assisting on another in a 4-2 win over Los Angeles to help the Penguins (31-19-5) improve to 5-2-2 without their superstar center.

"Sid gets a lot of attention. Now that Geno's under the microscope, everybody is seeing how talented he is," said linemate Ryan Malone, who scored on Malkin's assist against the Kings. "He's right up there with all the best players in the league. He's just proving it now. We all knew that before, but I think everyone else is realizing that as well."

Crosby has returned to practice, but is still several weeks away from returning. Malkin, meanwhile, has the Pens alone atop the crowded Atlantic. They are one point ahead of second-place New Jersey and two in front of the Flyers (30-19-5), who fell out of first with a 2-0 home loss to the New York Rangers on Saturday in a game marred by eight fighting majors.

Pittsburgh, though, has lost all four meetings to Philadelphia this season - including a 4-3 defeat on Jan. 24 in the last matchup - after sweeping all eight contests in 2006-07. Malkin has two goals and three assists in the four contests against the Flyers, who are hoping to avoid losing a third consecutive game overall.

"(Sunday) is that much more important," Flyers goaltender Martin Biron told the team's official Web site. "The back-to-back games against division opponents can go either way, and we have to look at (Sunday) as a big challenge for us to get back on the winning track."

Biron has been key against Pittsburgh, winning all four games with a 2.00 goals-against average. However, he has struggled of late, losing his last two starts with a 3.08 GAA. He made 31 saves against New York but received no help from his offense.

Daniel Briere, third on the Flyers with 20 goals and second with 52 points, has been held without a goal for seven consecutive games. The center endured a season-high eight-game drought from Oct. 13-Nov. 1.

Despite his goal-scoring slump, Briere has posted seven points in his nine games, including an assist against Pittsburgh on Jan. 24 to give him 15 points in his last nine games against the Penguins.

Philadelphia is expected to be without Braydon Coburn, who is second on the team among defensemen with 24 points, due to a lower body injury suffered Saturday.