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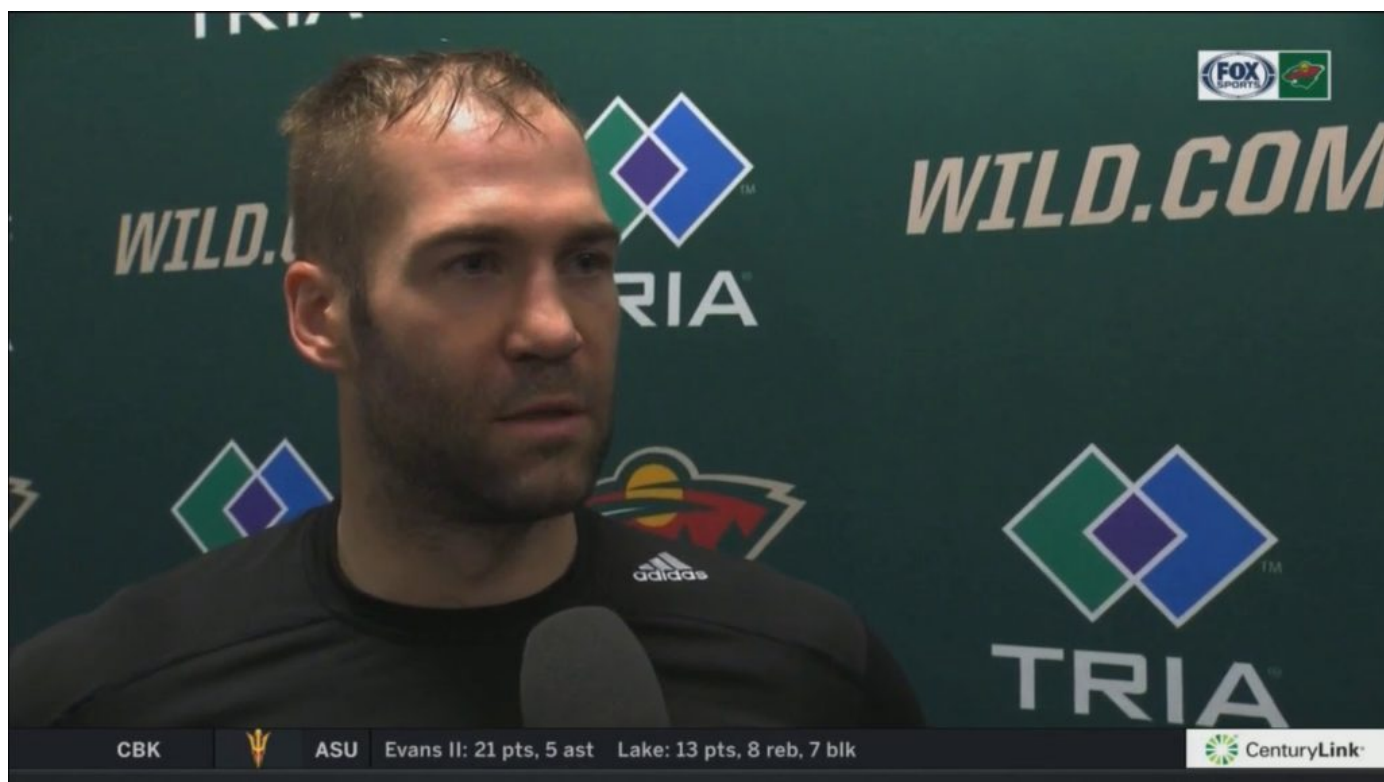
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WILD

RULE: It Looks Like the Letdown Could Win Out for Wild



By [Heather Rule](#) - January 19, 2018

In my [season preview column](#) taking a look at this 2017-18 Minnesota Wild campaign, I pointed to the Wild either repeating their best regular season ever or having a big letdown. As the Wild come out of the bye week, I'm heavily leaning toward letdown.

Please alert the hot-take police on that one.

I didn't just magically reach this conclusion within a few games. It was pretty clear early on that the Wild weren't going to have the same type of success they boasted last year, when they had their most successful season in franchise history before flopping in the first round of the playoffs.

Maybe it was the fact that Zach Parise was out for half the season after surgery. Then again, he's just one player and shouldn't make or break things for a team.

The Wild have made the playoffs five years in a row. No matter how they did it – usually limping in with the eighth seed – that's still a relatively solid accomplishment in a competitive Western Conference and perhaps even more competitive Central Division.

I still can't get this quote from now-former Wild player Erik Haula out of my head after the Wild lost 4-1 to St. Louis in the playoffs last year: "What is this, five years in a row? I'm sick of this," Haula said after the series loss.

Fortunately for him, he's playing for the division-leading Vegas Golden Knights this season. But the Wild still have plenty to prove and monkeys to get off their backs.

The cynical side of me always wondered how the Wild could keep up that success, never mind what happened after they got to the playoffs. The Wild aren't the Detroit Red Wings, a team that made the playoffs for a couple decades. They're not going to make the playoffs every single year.

I think this year, they sit out. As it stands right now, they're out of the playoff picture with their 24-17-5 record and 53 points.

The production from this team just doesn't seem sustainable in order to make a run to the playoffs. Veteran center Mikko Koivu has just six goals in 46 games this season. For perspective, defenseman Matt Dumba has nine goals and Ryan Suter has six.

Forward Charlie Coyle, who missed some time with an injury, has just four goals in 30 games this season and only 19 points. Again for a perspective, Daniel Winnik has five goals and tough-guy, fourth-liner Chris Stewart has eight goals. Coyle and Koivu are supposed to be a couple of scoring machines, in theory.

Mikael Granlund is slowly finding his way, with 13 goals and 23 assists, though maybe not quite the same career-best season he had last year with 69 points. As mentioned, Parise has been hurt, so he has just seven games to his name this season with a lone assist and no goals. Nino Niederreiter has had success on the ice, but he's battled an injury a couple times this season.

And really, where would the Wild be without Eric Staal and his 19 goals and 19 assists?

It's not just the Wild either.

Take a look at the other solid teams in the division competing to get in the playoff picture. As of Friday afternoon, just 10 points separated first and last place in the Central.

Chicago has occupied the division basement at times this season, and now goaltender Corey Crawford is out indefinitely with an injury. Although, it's hard to feel too sorry for the Blackhawks if they're on a downturn, since they already have some recent Stanley Cup championships under their belts.

Colorado, tied with the Wild at 53 points but with one more regulation win, has shown signs of improvement this season. Oh, and they've won eight straight games. They also pounded the Wild into the ice with a 7-2 victory a couple weeks ago.

Dallas is in mid-pack, St. Louis held a place at the top for a while, Winnipeg is no longer a bottom-dwelling team and the defending Western Conference champion Nashville Predators currently occupy the top spot by just a point over the Jets and Blues after winning four straight games.

The Wild can't use injuries as an excuse either, since every team has had their share of setbacks with players missing from the roster.

They have 36 games left in the regular season, starting with a very tough task when they return from the bye week on Saturday night. Hockey Day Minnesota will feature the Wild hosting the best team in the NHL, the Tampa Bay Lightning. It could be a chance for the Wild to showcase what they can do against a top team, or be a very predictable hangover game after players return from their sunny beach vacations.

Either way, the Wild have an uphill battle to climb if they want to make the postseason. They've limped their way there before in the eleventh hour. I just don't know if they have it in them again this year.

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