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BRUINS

Donnelly: The possibility of heartbreaking Game 7 being Patrice Bergeron's final game is the hardest part to stomach

BY PATRICK DONNELLY
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It wasn't supposed to be like this.

There stood the Bruins, stupefied at what had just occurred on TD Garden ice Sunday night. The eighth-seeded Florida Panthers had just sent the best regular season team in league history packing for a long, long summer of 'what if.'

The dogpile – or catpile – around **Carter Verhaeghe** had dispersed. Handshake Alley had closed. The celebration was now on in the visitors' dressing room.

For a brief moment, it felt like time stopped, with the Bruins and remaining fans in attendance stuck in an agonizing trance. But the smattering of faithful left in the stands began to mostly cheer in a salute of their team, even after the historic run came to an all too quick and surprising end.

Then, it was **Patrice Bergeron** doing what Patrice Bergeron does. He led. Skating toward center-ice and leading the Black and Gold in a show of appreciation to the remaining rooters. The captain embraced every Boston skater on their way off the frozen sheet for the final time this season. **David Krejci**, **Jeremy Swayman**, **Charlie McAvoy** and **Jake DeBrusk** were among the longer hugs, far from the jovial high-fives and fistbumps most were accustomed to seeing Bergeron hand out amid the regular season dominance.

The final, and longest, at the end of the receiving line was **Brad Marchand**. After the two linemates of over a decade separated and Marchand trudged down the tunnel, No. 37 did one more twirl, raising his stick to salute the crowd, potentially the final glimpse of him donning a Black and Gold sweater.

Not like this.

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Patrice Bergeron leads the Bruins in saluting the crowd. He hugs every Bruins player as they leave ice before one more salute to the crowd.

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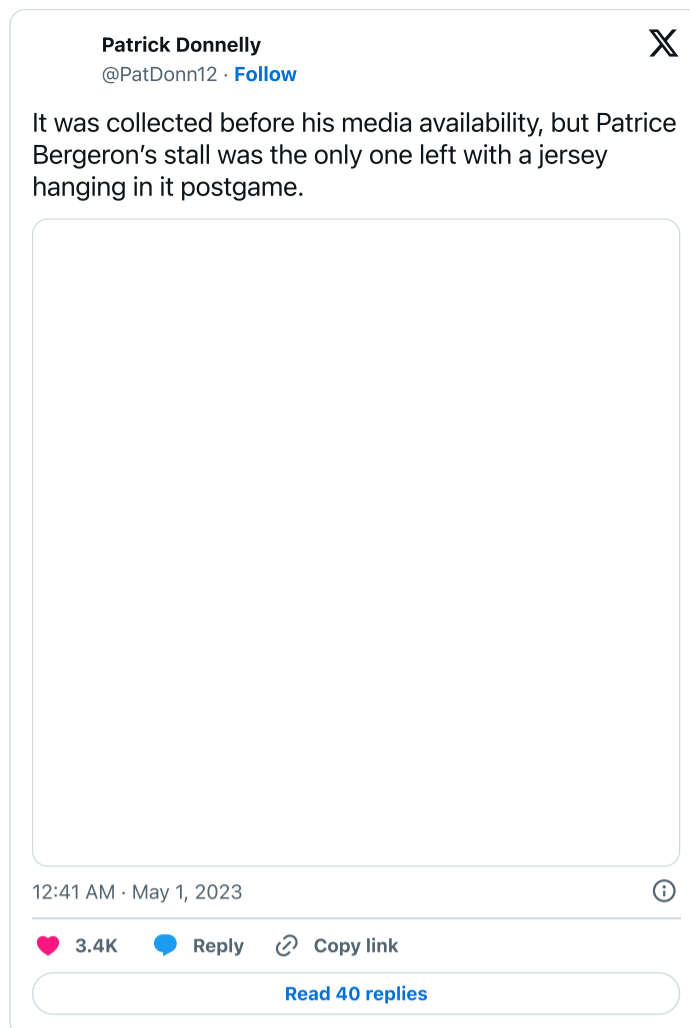
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In the locker room, as media milled about and various players spoke of the disappointment, all but one jersey had made its way to the laundry cart. Bergeron's was still hanging in his stall before eventually being collected ahead of his media availability. Likely a mere coincidence, but yet a somber symbolization of the possibility ahead.

With a throng of reporters, microphones and cameras huddled around his perch, a disheartened Bergeron appeared, struggling to process the heartbreak that had just occurred.





"Really difficult. Obviously, it's not the outcome you want, and we're extremely disappointed. Especially with the team we had. It's not where we want to be," the 37-year-old said. "It hurts. It is what it is. You compete hard. You battle all year for that. It's hard."

Bergeron now finds himself in an identical situation as last season. His contract is expiring and his future as a professional hangs in the balance. He played through injury again.

"I have a herniated disc in my back, so that's kind of why I missed the four games and tried to rush to come back," he said of the injury he sustained in Game 82 on April 13. It will not require surgery, unlike his elbow issue from last spring. "Obviously, it's stiff. I mean, it's definitely not something I'm going to use as an excuse. It is what it is. Everyone battles with a lot of things during playoffs. It's just unfortunate the way that it happened, on a fluke play. ... In the playoffs, you want to come back. You want to come back as quickly as possible."

With the puck in his rink once again, it's up to Bergeron to make his call.

Last offseason, Bergeron re-signed with the Bruins on a one-year deal after a summer of 'will he or won't he.' **David Krejci** came back on a bargain, one-year contract as well after his reprieve in the Czech Republic. The Bruins pushed every chip they had into the middle during the season. By and large, both continued their excellence. Bergeron carded another season worthy of the Selke Trophy, in addition to 27 goals and 58 points. Krejci was largely his typical play-making self with 56 points (40 assists), adding a goal and two helpers in Game 7.



(JOHN TLUMACKI/THE BOSTON GLOBE VIA GETTY IMAGES)

It truly felt like a last dance.

Predictably and understandably, Bergeron didn't have a definitive call on what lies ahead for him with the collapse still fresh. Again, he has options to weigh. With a family to consider, does he want to put his body through the rigor of an NHL season once more? Could the competitive fire in him push another try at running it back? It's all too soon to tell.

"Yeah, I'm going to take some time and talk with the family and go from there. Right now, it's hard to process anything. Obviously, we're shocked and disappointed. So that's it," Bergeron said. "I'm proud of everything we've accomplished with this group. I've said that many times. It's a special group on many levels. The individuals we have... Obviously, it's far from the outcome that we wanted."

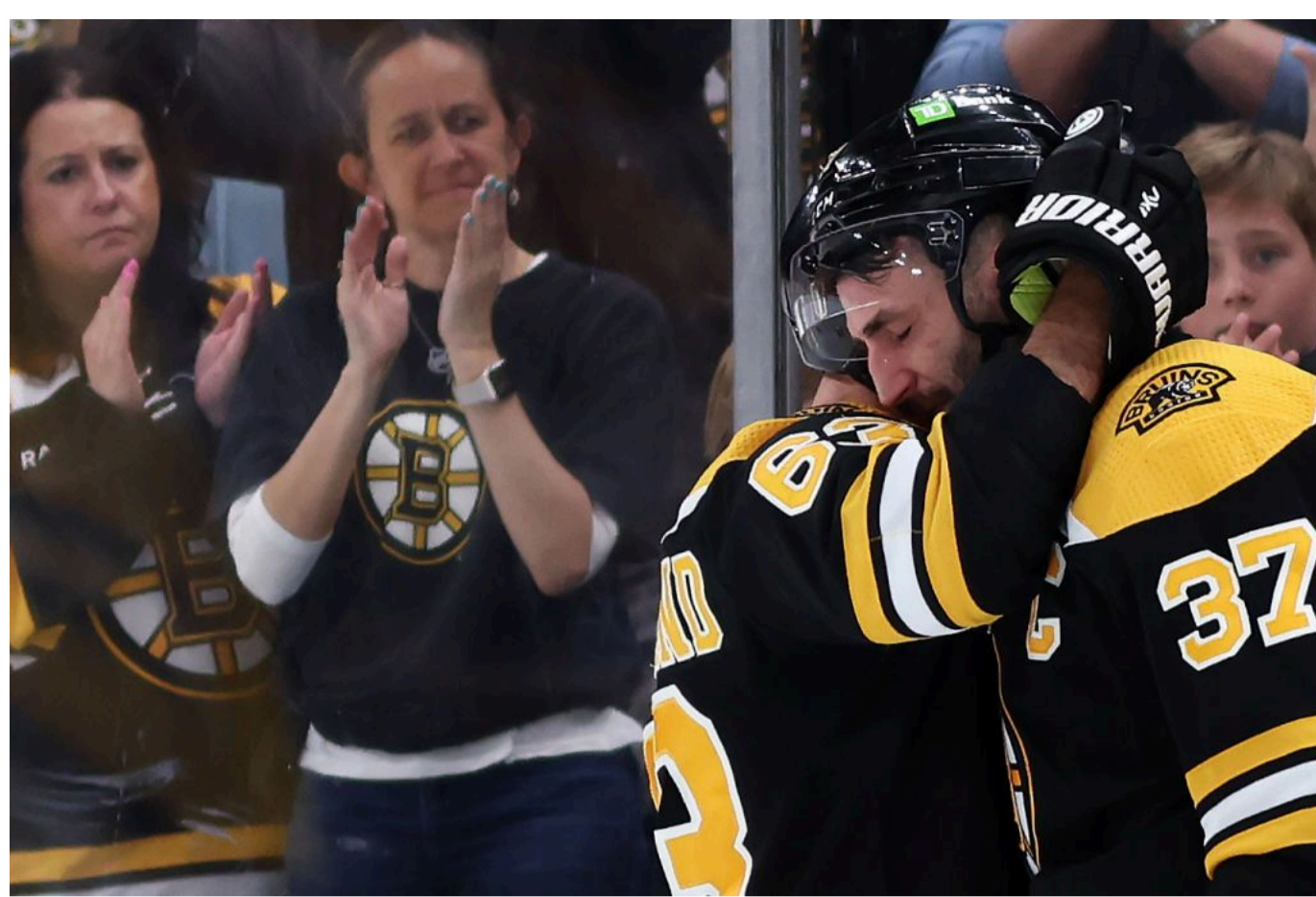
Boston, however, won't be able to ice the same team next year, whether or not both or one of Bergeron and Krejci return. There is a pending salary cap crunch, and there are significant depth pieces they may not be able to afford to keep. The Bruins, who dealt with the woes of self-inflicted errors all throughout that seven-game calamity folks call the first round, feel they let their icons down.

"It's emotional, you don't know about the guy's future," Marchand said. "It's tough, we were hoping to make a good long run here all together, and it's tough for everybody. ... There are obviously too many memories to list, but the friendship that we've built and the relationship that we have has been special. So, hopefully it's not [his last game], but that's up to him to make his decision and do what he decides to do moving forward."

"But regardless of what he decides to do, whether he continues to play again or not, our bond will last a lifetime."

David Pastrnak said, "Obviously, it is very emotional. You never know. You can't stop the time. You obviously think about yourself, as well. The career goes by fast, so this one is definitely going to hurt, and I think as time goes on the next couple of weeks, months, it's going to be more painful. ... I can't say enough. Bergy – I've never seen such a leader leading on and off the ice, ever. I can't thank him enough for everything. And Krech is one of the best teammates I've ever had the chance, so it's been a pleasure. One of my best friends, and I am really thankful for that."

Bergeron set the example again, working his way back from injury and scoring in his debut in Game 5. He compartmentalized the pain he likely felt in his back and his on-ice commitment, competing even if the results weren't there in the end. The gravity of the line of hugs serves as an encapsulation of Bergeron's impact on the organization and his teammates in particular.



(MADDIE MEYER/GETTY IMAGES)

"He's like the perfect person on or off the ice, he's just such an incredible leader and so driven, an incredible family man, great father, great friend, always thinking of everybody else first," Marchand said. "That rubbed off on me a lot, quite a bit. It really changed the way that I approached my day-to-day life and the way I approached the game, and I'll never be able to say enough great things about him. He allowed me to be in this position, play alongside him for a long time, and he's an incredible person and friend, and an incredible teammate. We've been lucky to have him as part of this group for a long time.

"He completely changed the way I live my day-to-day life. I try to be like him and try to follow in his footsteps, try to lead the way he did and lived his life, as good of a pro as the way he approaches everything. I'll forever be grateful for him."

Swayman said, "He's one of the best humans I've ever met, one of the best leaders I've ever met, and I would do anything for that guy, because I know he'd do the same for me, and he'd do the same for a stranger in the street. When you have that feeling for a human being, you want to do whatever you can to make him happy, and I know that he has brought so much happiness to our team, our lives, our families, and I couldn't be more lucky to have been a part of a team with him as our captain."

No. 37 will hang from the rafters one day, joining the pending celebration of No. 33, along with the rest of the Bruins greats. There's a chance No. 46 could join as well. After a Stanley Cup in 2011, a number of other deep playoff runs, individual glory, their fair share of 'what could have been' and countless memories, what might have been their final appearances in the Spoked-B will go down as nothing more than a shame. But if that was it, one can't help but fondly remember the era, as a whole.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.



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