



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 6, 2024



Hurricanes' Frederik Andersen epitomizes perseverance

The goalie is Carolina's nominee for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy

By Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — Frederik Andersen has noticed he bruises more easily, the pucks that he used stop without repercussions sometimes leaving a reminder of what he's gone through the past five months.

"I guess you could call it an obstacle that I'm proud of the way I handled throughout the process," said Andersen, the Professional Hockey Writers Association Carolina chapter's nominee for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, which is given annually to the NHL player "best exemplifying perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey."

In November, Andersen was listed as out indefinitely with a blood-clotting issue which was later revealed to be deep-vein thrombosis resulting in pulmonary embolisms.

"I was dealing with some pain low in the lungs," he said of initially noticing something wasn't right, "and that's what kind of hindered me breathing. ... I was playing through a game with a little bit of pain, and I was like, 'Oh, this is not great,' but I felt like it was not the worst I've played through. And all of a sudden we're being told you can't be on the ice."

Andersen's first step once he was diagnosed was learning as much as he could about the condition — "I think I've been very curious as a person," he said — and then working with his doctors, trainers and the Hurricanes to come up with a treatment plan and, eventually, a roadmap to getting back on the ice.

"It was a minimum of three months on a heavy dose of blood thinners," he said, "and that, obviously, would limit my access to be on the ice. And that was probably the biggest shock, to be honest."

With an expected timetable of three to six months for his condition to clear up, Andersen was able to move past the initial scare of the diagnosis and focus on resuming a career that had been in jeopardy.

"Once I knew that, I was like, 'OK, well, we can treat it as an offseason almost,'" he said. "And that's where my trainer, Scot (Prohaska), and Billy (Burniston, the Hurricanes' head strength and conditioning coach) in the room here kind of collaborated a little bit just to come up with a plan. ... It took some weeks and months to kind of ramp up to full speed and being able to do what I would normally do in an offseason in terms of (the intensity level of) exercise."

On Jan. 31, the Hurricanes revealed Andersen's diagnosis to the public and also announced he had been cleared to resume on-ice conditioning. On March 7, he made his first start in more than four months, stopping 24 of 25 shots in a 4-1 home win over the Montreal Canadiens.

He won all seven of his starts in March, not allowing more than two goals in any of those games, and is 11-2-0 with a .927 save percentage, 1.97 goals-against average and two shutouts after a loss Thursday to the visiting Bruins — his first defeat since his final start before his diagnosis.

"I've been happy to be just getting back in the locker room," Andersen said. "It's been so much fun, and I think this room has been great and supported me as well. And they've been out there competing every time I've been in the net, and it's been really fun to be able to be back with them."

It's not, however, just a feel-good story. Andersen has made a case to be the Hurricanes' starter come the start of the playoffs in two weeks, though rookie Pyotr Kochetkov is also staking a claim to that role. The two have alternated starts since Andersen's return, and coach Rod Brind'Amour will have a tough but enviable decision to make for Game 1 of the first round.

"One's great," he said of having a reliable goalie. "Two's even better."

And Brind'Amour also hopes Andersen's season becomes about more than him overcoming life-threatening adversity.

"I think the story is not quite done yet with him," Brind'Amour said. "Hopefully it ends with something better."

A Stanley Cup would certainly be that — and it would make all those new bruises worth it.



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Hurricanes score 4 straight, beat Capitals

Jake Guentzel scored twice to help lift Carolina to a 4-2 win

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes erased a two-goal lead, scoring four unanswered goals to beat the visiting Capitals 4-2. Jake Guentzel scored twice, and Martin Necas and Sebastian Aho also scored for Carolina.

Alex Ovechkin had both Washington goals.

Three observations

1. There have been many nights in the Rod Brind'Amour coaching era when the Hurricanes "didn't get what they deserved."

On Friday, Carolina did.

The Hurricanes outshot the Capitals 44-16 but still found themselves down 2-0 as time wound down in the second period. But Carolina finally broke through with just over five minutes left in the middle frame.

Jacob Slavin's attempted stretch pass was deflected in the air and popped over Washington defenseman Trevor van Riemsdyk and Rasmus Sandin. Guentzel pounced, splitting the defenders and reaching to push the puck past Darcy Kuemper (41 saves) to get Carolina on the board.

2. The Hurricanes outshot the Capitals 18-6 in the first period but still trailed 2-0 thanks to two net-front goals by Ovechkin, his 850th and 851st of his career. It was the second straight night Carolina dug itself a hole in the opening 20 minutes after handing Boston a 3-0 lead on Thursday.

"We were playing great," Brind'Amour said. "It was just a couple bad breaks is really what happened. I thought if we won the game or not, I just liked the way we were going about our business for the most part."

After Guentzel broke the ice, Carolina's power play got to work. First, Necas did a little tribute to Ovechkin, ripping a one-timer from the left circle to tie the game with 8:20 left in regulation.

"He used to be my favorite player," Necas said of Ovechkin. "That shot that he has from his spot is like no one else, and I'm just trying to get close to him."

Then the Hurricanes got another power play, and Aho banged in a rebound from next to the net for his 34th goal of the season with 1:51 left in the game.

"The bounce was a little lucky," Aho said, "you know, I get an empty cage. But still, I think we did a pretty good job overall on the power play tonight and got two goals."

3. Andrei Svechnikov was a late scratch with an illness, which meant Jesperi Kotkaniemi got back in the lineup after missing his first game of the season the night before. Kotkaniemi responded with a solid performance, finishing with a 76.47% Corsi For, and had two hits as Carolina's fourth line buried the Capitals' bottom line.

As for Svechnikov, Brind'Amour said the team was playing it safe.

"He just didn't feel right," Brind'Amour said. "We've talked about this a lot: There (isn't) really any reason to put guys in that aren't 100%."

Number to know

0 — Shots on goal for Seth Jarvis, the second straight game he has been held without one. It's the third time this season Jarvis has gone without a shot in two straight games. The previous two times, he scored the next game.

Plus

Pyotr Kochetkov, Hurricanes goalie — Neither of Ovechkin's first period goals were Kochetkov's fault, and his two saves on the Capitals captain and Connor McMichael in succession — the first a breakaway stop on Ovechkin, the second a dazzling glove save — kept Washington's lead at two. Forty-five seconds later, Guentzel scored to start the Hurricanes' comeback.

"The turning point for me was really the 2-nothing when we're still trying to get into it, and we give them a breakaway and then another Grade-A right after," Brind'Amour said. "And so now, the game's not out of reach."

Minus

Hurricanes' net-front defense — Both of Ovechkin's goals came as a result of failed attempts to tie up the Capitals superstar in front of the net. On his first goal, Ovechkin shook loose from Slavin and collected a rebound in front for goal No. 850. On his second of the first period, Ovechkin kept Brett Pesce from tying up his stick and was able to redirect a point shot past Pyotr Kochetkov (14 saves).

They said it

"Man, he's a special player. I'll be happy to see him be done, to be honest with you. ... He's just a special player, and I've seen way too much of him."

— *Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour on Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin.*



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The Athletic

NHL players we want to see more of in the last two weeks: A pick for each team

By The Athletic NHL Staff

The NHL's regular season is winding down, with some fan bases now squarely focused on playoff matchups ahead of the postseason kicking off April 20 and others on positioning for the June 28 and 29 draft.

But with teams having between five and seven games remaining, there's plenty of reason to keep an eye on what's happening on the ice as well as in the standings.

Whether it's a prospect getting an NHL look or increased minutes to see where he's at heading into the offseason or a veteran trying to shore up a spot in a playoff rotation, here is the player for each team who should be getting a good look over the final two weeks.

Anaheim Ducks

Olen Zellweger: Lukáš Dostál is already getting a long look, having received the bulk of starts in goal over the past few weeks. And we'd say Cutter Gauthier except he's still trying to win an NCAA title with Boston College and isn't signed yet. So the answer here is Zellweger, who was focused on his defensive game when he was brought up from AHL San Diego for good and is now diving into the offensive side that made him so dynamic at lower levels. The 20-year-old followed up scoring his first NHL goal by having a three-assist night this week against Calgary in a return to his hometown. Let's see if Greg Cronin will give him (and the other youngsters) some first-unit duty on the power play. Zellweger and Pavel Mintyukov are showing that they are the future of the Anaheim defense. — Eric Stephens

Arizona Coyotes

Josh Doan: After he scored 46 points in 62 games for AHL Tucson, the Coyotes promoted Doan near the end of March. He made a splashy NHL debut: two goals, including the winner, in a 6-2 victory over the Blue Jackets. He followed that up with a two-assist performance against the Predators, had an assist in Game 3 against the Rangers and then finally came up dry in Game 4 against the Canucks. The Coyotes are managing Doan's NHL transition carefully — he played 14 AHL games last season after completing his sophomore year at Arizona State — but he's 22, physically maturing, and looks capable of playing more than the third-line minutes he's getting now (13:31 per game through Thursday) as the Coyotes play out the string. — Eric Duhatschek

Boston Bruins

James van Riemsdyk: There's no questioning van Riemsdyk's touch around the net, especially on the power play. Coaches like to have veterans like the 34-year-old in the lineup during the playoffs. But van Riemsdyk has struggled to keep up with the pace of play. There's no sense in keeping him in the lineup if he can't get to where he needs to be. The stretch run will determine whether he can get his timing right for Game 1. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres

Zach Benson: The Sabres have already promoted JJ Peterka to the top line, so they're getting a look at what he could be as their top left wing. Another look worth experimenting with more is Benson on the power play. He's been a consistent middle-six presence all season and has the instincts to impact the game away from the puck. Benson has gotten more power play time and that should continue so he can keep building his scoring confidence. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames

Matthew Coronato: If the young forward is going to be with the Flames until the AHL playoffs, it makes sense to give him top-six opportunities. Coronato's shot is his strongest asset, but he's still working at being better on the puck and playing an all-around game. He got top-line billing on Thursday against Winnipeg, so that's already a step in the right direction. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes

Scott Morrow: The Hurricanes plan to give the newly signed Morrow, a second-round pick who just finished his third year at UMass, a look down the stretch. As a team without an AHL affiliate, Carolina will need to know if it can rely on Morrow in a pinch during the postseason if injuries begin to mount. The offensive-minded defenseman refined his 200-foot game in college and is seen as a future important piece on the Hurricanes' blue line, and his upcoming early graduation gave him leverage in contract negotiations to join the team this season rather than play in the minors. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks

Lukas Reichel: Reichel's sophomore season has been a disaster. Expected to entrench himself as a top-six forward for years to come, Reichel instead has taken a significant step back and spent more than a month with AHL Rockford as a result. He did score his first NHL goal since Dec. 19 last Saturday, and it would be a huge benefit for both Reichel and the Blackhawks if he closed the season strong. That won't happen if he's playing 11 minutes a night in a bottom-six role. With little else to play for, the Blackhawks would be wise to increase his role these last two weeks. — Mark Lazerus

Colorado Avalanche

Sean Walker: This one is tough. Walker has been good — three goals and a pair of assists in 12 games through Thursday playing on Colorado's bottom pair — since coming over from the Flyers at the trade deadline, earning more minutes. But there's not a lot of room for upward movement on the Avalanche blue line. For now, he's deservedly behind Cale Makar, Devon Toews and Samuel Girard in the pecking order, but featuring Walker down the stretch of the



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regular season wouldn't be a bad idea, in case he's asked to play a bigger role at any point in the postseason. — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets

David Jiricek: The Blue Jackets are plenty beat up as another losing season winds down, and it's forced coach Pascal Vincent to throw big minutes at young forwards Cole Sillinger and Dmitri Voronkov, among others. Now it's time to turn the page on the back end. Jiricek, the No. 6 pick in 2022, has spent most of his first two pro seasons in the AHL. He has plenty of work to do before he's a bona fide NHLer, but let's put these final games to use by giving him a solid look. — Aaron Portzline

Dallas Stars

Mavrik Bourque: Bourque, currently the AHL's leading scorer, is the Stars' top prospect and holds a lot of intrigue and excitement, but his call-up Friday was a bit of a surprise, because Dallas is second in the league in scoring and already deep at forward. However, the Stars are managing injury situations, particularly with Tyler Seguin. Bourque appears to be skating in a prime position, with Logan Stankoven and Jamie Benn, meaning he has a great opportunity to capture a spot during the home stretch of the regular season. It'll be interesting to see how he does with it. — Saad Yousof

Detroit Red Wings

Simon Edvinsson: Obviously, the Red Wings will (and should) exercise some caution with a 21-year-old defenseman in the midst of a playoff race. But Edvinsson has made a difference for them already down the stretch, playing on the second defense pair and using his reach and size to kill plays defensively and keep them alive in the offensive zone. Most nights, that's translated to a workload of around 18 or 19 minutes, but the number crept up above 20 in a recent win at Tampa Bay. Long term, Edvinsson will be logging an even bigger workload, but getting those 20-minute games in down the stretch is huge to give him a taste of what challenges the workload presents with managing his shifts — and, more importantly, it also just might give the Red Wings their best chance to win. — Max Bultman

Edmonton Oilers

Philip Broberg: Oilers general manager Ken Holland said as far back as before the trade deadline that Broberg would be recalled from AHL Bakersfield and play NHL games. Well, time is running out. Everyone in the organization has been raving about how well Broberg has played in the minors. That's not the big leagues, though. The Oilers are one injury away from possibly using someone who hasn't played for the team since November as a regular defenseman in a playoff contest. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

Florida Panthers

Anthony Stolarz: There's no obvious answer for the Panthers here. They're already getting a look at their lineup without Aaron Ekblad and Carter Verhaeghe. It might be worth working Stolarz into an extra game or two down the stretch, though. His save percentage (.922) is nine points higher than Sergei Bobrovsky's, and Bobrovsky has already started 55 games. Keeping him fresh, and Stolarz ready for whatever, would be smart. — Sean Gentile

Los Angeles Kings

Alex Laferriere: As much as Alex Turcotte deserves to be in this space, the former No. 5 overall pick is on long-term injured reserve with an upper-body injury. It's a shame because it looked like the injury-plagued forward was finally gaining some traction. With that in mind, Laferriere is the pick. The 22-year-old out of Harvard won a job in training camp and has stuck with Los Angeles all season, becoming a surprise in his rookie season. It helped that Viktor Arvidsson was out much of the year, but the opportunity presented itself and Laferriere took it with strong skating and forechecking while chipping in 11 goals. His minutes have gone down recently, but he will likely be in the playoff lineup so the Kings ought to see if he can be a contributor. Let's also give a shout-out to Akil Thomas, who's battled through multiple shoulder surgeries to earn his first call-up. The 24-year-old hasn't played much in two games, but he had his first big NHL moment when he scored in Thursday's win at San Jose. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild

Jesper Wallstedt: The Wild have to make decisions on their goalie tandem for next season, especially if Marc-Andre Fleury returning is a possibility. It makes sense then to see if the team's goalie of the future, Jesper Wallstedt, is ready for the present. The Swede had a rocky NHL debut in January but has learned a lot and rebounded nicely with AHL Iowa. Giving him a start or two down the stretch — assuming the Wild don't make the miraculous run to the playoffs — would go a long way toward seeing what they have in him. — Joe Smith

Montreal Canadiens

Cayden Primeau: Honestly, I feel the Canadiens are already doing this with Primeau; he started his fifth game since the trade deadline on Thursday, compared to seven for Sam Montembeault. But I had to pick someone. They've already elevated Jesse Ylönen off the fourth line, Jordan Harris and Jayden Struble are playing regularly ahead of Johnathan Kovacevic, and Tanner Pearson is regularly out of the lineup. This is fine. — Arpon Basu

Nashville Predators

Luke Evangelista: Evangelista's line with Tommy Novak and Mark Jankowski has been a driver of opportunity, one of many factors in a franchise-record point streak of 18 games, and Evangelista on Thursday was placed on the first power-play unit — and promptly created a chance in front of the net that led to the Preds' second power-play goal of the night against St. Louis. He's a surging player who's about to get his first taste of the postseason, and the Preds would love to see him carry momentum into it. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils

Alexander Holtz: This comes with a caveat: Holtz has to earn his playing time. Both interim coach Travis Green and now-fired Lindy Ruff have benched him within games this season, and general manager Tom Fitzgerald publicly said he hasn't had a good season. But the 2020 No. 7 pick still has 16 goals, and with the season dwindling, now might be the time to give him more than the 11:36 of ice time a night he's averaged so far. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders



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Simon Holmstrom: Holmstrom was a healthy scratch for four of five games before returning on Tuesday and scoring the crucial winner to beat the Hawks and keep the Isles' iffy playoff hopes alive. With Holmstrom out, the youngest Islander forward in the lineup was ... 26-year-old Mathew Barzal. Holmstrom, 22, could use a real look to see if this team can even try to get younger up front. — Arthur Staple

New York Rangers

Zac Jones: There admittedly isn't a great answer for the Rangers. Most of Peter Laviolette's lineup is set going into the playoffs, and there aren't any prospects who need to be playing at the NHL level right now. Jones likely won't be one of the six defensemen in the Game 1 playoff lineup, but it wouldn't hurt to get him, as well as Chad Ruhwedel, to get a few games in down the stretch. That way they will be fresh if there is an injury or two and they need to come into the lineup when games matter most. It would also give the other Rangers defensemen rest and recovery for any lingering bumps and bruises. — Peter Baugh

Ottawa Senators

Tyler Kleven: The Senators certainly have some questions to answer about how their blue line will be configured next season. Kleven is a 22-year-old prospect who might be ready to knock on the door for a full-time NHL job next fall. With Ottawa well out of the playoff picture, it would be wise to let Kleven have as much time against NHL competition as possible. Kleven has the potential to bring a physical and nasty element to Ottawa's back end for years to come. The organization should use these final two weeks to determine if his body and game have matured to the point where he could thrive on a regular basis in the NHL — or if he still requires more seasoning in the AHL. — Ian Mendes

Philadelphia Flyers

Ivan Fedotov: After suddenly arriving from Russia following his military service and another season in the KHL, Fedotov unexpectedly made his first career start in relief of Sam Ersson on Monday and was solid. He should get at least one or two more games down the stretch. Considering he will probably be on the NHL roster next season, it will be a good chance for team brass to see what they have in the 6-foot-7 netminder. And Ersson has struggled lately, so Fedotov could even play a key role in the Flyers' playoff push. — Kevin Kurz

Pittsburgh Penguins

Jack St. Ivany: Since his recall from the AHL, St. Ivany has impressed. He plays big. He moves the puck well. He is confident. He takes what's given. He hasn't been caught out of position. Should his role increase? Perhaps. But not too much. Maybe he can play more on the penalty kill, which has been a lot better for the Penguins of late. But St. Ivany has stabilized a third pairing that wasn't very dependable for the Penguins, and he's become a player that should stay in the lineup, if not get more reps in an unexpected playoff push. — Rob Rossi

San Jose Sharks

Klim Kostin: It makes sense for the Sharks to get a good look at their youngsters the rest of the way, and Thomas Bordeleau has already had some nice moments following his promotion while William Eklund has been in the NHL all

season. At 24, Kostin is not necessarily "young" by current NHL standards, but the Russian power forward has shown in his 13 games with San Jose that he could be part of the plans for 2024-25 (he's signed through next season). A first-round pick by St. Louis in 2017, Kostin has bounced around, with additional stops in Edmonton and Detroit. It didn't work with the Red Wings this season, and Sharks general manager Mike Grier picked him up off the scrap heap. Kostin has scored five times in 13 games and is up to playing around 16 minutes per game. Top defense prospect Shakir Mukhamadullin was another candidate here but is likely done for the rest of his AHL season due to an upper-body injury. Another player to look out for is Filip Bystedt, the Sharks' top pick in 2022. The 20-year-old center had an outstanding debut for the San Jose Barracuda, scoring twice and assisting on a goal. — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken

Shane Wright: The Kraken just haven't been able to manufacture enough offense in their third season. Part of what's missing is star power. Matty Beniers will bounce back after a challenging sophomore campaign, but the Kraken need more contributions from blue-chip, potential superstar-level talent. And Wright, the 2022 No. 4 pick, is the club's likeliest bet to jump over that high bar. At the tail end of an impressive age 20 season in the AHL, Wright was called up earlier this week and is playing a significant role, including getting a look on Seattle's second power-play unit. He'll likely return to Coachella for a Calder Cup run, but for the balance of this NHL season, it would behoove the Kraken to stick with what they're already doing. Wright needs NHL reps, and the club needs to get a firm grasp on what he can offer them next year. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues

Zack Bolduc: The Blues were planning to keep Bolduc in AHL Springfield for the entire 2023-24 season, but with the offense sputtering, the team's 2021 first-round pick was called up in February. He scored his first NHL goal in Detroit on Feb. 24, which was his 21st birthday. Six weeks later, he is approaching 20 games in his rookie season, and there have been glimpses of great skill. He's also had turnovers that led to healthy scratches, but he's made progress, which is a plus considering that few expected him to see much NHL action this season. — Jeremy Rutherford

Tampa Bay Lightning

Emil Martinsen Lilleberg: The Lightning's top pair of Victor Hedman and Darren Raddysh is thriving, but they need to find a way to balance out their bottom four. The decision likely comes down to whether Lilleberg, Nick Perbix or Calvin de Haan should be in the lineup. Lilleberg's play started to trend in the wrong direction in March, but it has ticked back up over the past few games. Now the question is whether he can maintain that in a playoff environment. That's something the coaches should get a better sense of down the stretch as they mix and match the bottom four to find the best pair options. — Shayna Goldman

Toronto Maple Leafs

Simon Benoit: Benoit has been maybe the biggest surprise of the season for the Leafs. This is a guy who wasn't even on the team to begin the year but who got a chance and parlayed it into a regular opportunity and, eventually, a three-



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year contract extension. The outstanding question is whether he'll be a part of the team's playoff lineup. In the aftermath of trades for Ilya Lyubushkin and Joel Edmundson, Benoit was briefly the odd man out. But now, amid injuries, he's continuing to do what he has done all season — play solid defense — and is making one last push to be in the Game 1 lineup. — Jonas Siegel

Vancouver Canucks

Pius Suter: The Canucks need more offense from Suter, who hasn't scored in 30 games and was a healthy scratch Wednesday. They also need to give him more minutes. He might not be a top-six-caliber point producer, but he contributes in a ton of subtle ways to outscoring the opposition at even strength and can play just about anywhere in their lineup. The fourth line isn't where Vancouver needs Suter; they need to get back to trusting him to help their big guns stack up heavy shifts. In fact, he's arguably Vancouver's best bet to complement Brock Boeser and J.T. Miller on the top line — Thomas Drance

Vegas Golden Knights

Pavel Dorofeyev: The 23-year-old winger is proving himself as an every-night NHL player this season for the Golden Knights, scoring seven goals over his past 15 games heading into Friday night, with most coming from right in front of the net. Dorofeyev has averaged only 13 minutes of ice

time per game through Thursday but could see that go up with his recent form. His 2.39 points per 60 minutes of even-strength ice time before Friday were fourth on the team behind only Jack Eichel, Jonathan Marchessault and William Karlsson. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals

Darcy Kuemper: Kuemper is back from what seems to have been a minor injury, and it might be time to rely on him over Charlie Lindgren — and not just on the Caps' two remaining back-to-backs. The Caps wouldn't be in the playoff hunt without Lindgren, but in eight games heading into Friday's, he had put up an .878 save percentage and nearly four goals allowed above expected. That's not going to work, especially now that Washington has less of a firm grip on a playoff spot. — Sean Gentile

Winnipeg Jets

Nikolaj Ehlers: Winnipeg's top line with Mark Scheifele, Ehlers and Gabriel Vilardi win their minutes like top lines on Stanley Cup contenders do. Without Ehlers, the line gets hemmed in its own zone, like we saw in the second period against Calgary this week. The results are night and day, but Ehlers appears to frustrate his head coach just enough to be Rick Bowness' first demotion when the going gets tough. — Murat Ates

NHL Power Rankings: Surges and slides cause late-season chaos

Sean Gentile and Dom Luszczyzyn

Another week means another Power Rankings from your favorite Power Rankers. This is a perfect list of teams in perfect order.

We're two weeks from the finish line, and that means the questions around the NHL are piling up. Who will win the scoring race? Does anyone want a wild-card spot in the East? How much lower can the Calgary Flames sink? We don't have all the answers, but we can talk about it the same way we always do — snarkily, with some math sprinkled in. That's the Rankings Boys guarantee.

Enjoy this one, because before you know it, your Friday mornings will be filled with sunshine instead of random hockey thoughts from us. Who wants that?

1. Dallas Stars, 48-19-9

Last week: 2

Sean's ranking: 1

Dom's ranking: 1

That's now eight straight wins for Our Dallas Stars with the last one being the most impressive — a 5-0 romp over the Edmonton Oilers. The Stars quietly lead the league in goal differential and are really starting to look like the class of the West with a real shot at the Presidents' Trophy.

The big story, though, is that Jake Oettinger is starting to heat up at the right time. After being pulled against the Devils in mid-March, Oettinger has posted six straight games with an above-.900 save percentage. That's his longest streak all season, and he allowed just seven goals in those six games thanks to a .955 save percentage. Back-to-back shutouts this week certainly help with that.

The Stars have been elite all season, but it's no shock they look at their best now with Oettinger looking at his best. If this is what Dallas can expect from him in the playoffs, the Stars may just be the team to beat.

2. New York Rangers, 51-21-4

Last week: 3

Sean's ranking: 2

Dom's ranking: 2

"Team-building exercise" aside, it's been a status quo week for the Rangers. They stomped out the Devils' playoff hopes a few days after failing to do the same against Pittsburgh, and they're still first in the league in points. Friday's game against Detroit might determine whether they stay put.

In the meantime, were you aware that Adam Fox is ninth in points since the All-Star break with 19? Because he is. That's more than Roman Josi, Quinn Hughes and every other defenseman in the league. Two of them came against the Devils in 29:49 of ice time. Standard stuff from Fox, who's fifth among defensemen in points/60 overall.

3. Colorado Avalanche, 48-22-6

Last week: 4

Sean's ranking: 3

Dom's ranking: 3

Not to spark a goalie controversy for one of the league's best teams a few weeks before the playoffs start, but ...

This season, Alexandar Georgiev has a .901 save percentage and has saved 0.1 goals above expected per game. Justus Annunen, on the other hand, has a .928 save percentage and has saved 0.8 goals above expected per



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game. We're not saying anything here, and it's not exactly an apples-to-apples comparison given workloads and opponents faced.

But!

That's a much larger-than-expected chasm between starter and backup, one that should make Avalanche fans just a little nervous. Annunen was brilliant against the Wild on Thursday night, stopping 44 of 46 shots, only adding to the disparity.

4. Boston Bruins, 45-17-15

Last week: 7

Sean's ranking: 4

Dom's ranking: 5

It's tough not to like Boston's goalies. This week, Linus Ullmark and Jeremy Swayman have both posted huge wins (Ullmark's shutout against Nashville, Swayman's 28-save game against Carolina). The playoff net still feels like it'll be Ullmark's to lose — he's fourth in the league in save percentage since the trade deadline (.950) and fifth in GSAX — but Swayman's last couple of starts were a welcome return to form.

Most importantly, Ullmark pulled into a tie with Swayman in the scoring race. Both have one assist.

5. Carolina Hurricanes, 47-22-7

Last week: 1

Sean's ranking: 5

Dom's ranking: 4

It might be time for some light concern over Andrei Svechnikov. Since March 12, he has three points in 12 games and the worst expected goals share on the Hurricanes (40 percent), and Carolina has been outscored 8-1 with him on the ice. Is it worth reuniting him with Sebastian Aho at the cost of Aho's chemistry with Jake Guentzel? We'll see.

The cherry on top: In that 12-game span, Svechnikov is tied with Darnell Nurse for the league lead in penalties with eight, including a double-minor in an ugly Thursday night loss to Boston.

6. Vancouver Canucks, 47-21-8

Last week: 8

Sean's ranking: 6

Dom's ranking: 6

It's been nice to see Conor Garland get a chance in Vancouver's top six over the last few weeks — first with Elias Pettersson and now with J.T. Miller. Over that stretch, Garland has been on the ice for 64 percent of the expected goals, outscoring teams 7-2. Both are among the team leaders.

Garland has been a strong play-driver going back to his days in Arizona, so it's been odd seeing him often relegated to the middle six since joining the Canucks. Or worse, being offered up as trade bait. He's been excellent this season, and it's great to see him rewarded for that.

7. Edmonton Oilers, 45-24-5

Last week: 5

Sean's ranking: 7

Dom's ranking: 7

The last time Connor McDavid didn't have a point in a game, he followed up with three. The time before that, he followed up with six. In other words, Colorado should probably expect to have him hit the 100-assist mark against them on Saturday night. It's simple math. He's at 97 on the season, by the way. It's a big deal, as Sean McIndoe covered.

8. Florida Panthers, 48-24-5

Last week: 6

Sean's ranking: 8

Dom's ranking: 8

Turn off the concern-o-meter, the Panthers are going to be OK. Sometimes all it takes is a date with one of the league's worst teams to get things back in motion. The Panthers ran over the Senators on Thursday to the tune of a 6-0 scoreline, the kind of decisive win that can get a team back on track.

That was an especially big game for Sergei Bobrovsky — a nice bounce-back shutout after getting pulled in his last game against the Leafs. He's been ice-cold lately, which only exacerbated the issues in front of him.

9. Tampa Bay Lightning, 43-26-7

Last week: 12

Sean's ranking: 9

Dom's ranking: 9

Remember when it seriously looked like the Lightning might miss the playoffs? These days, they're looking like a first-round nightmare. Tampa Bay is 24-9-2 over its last 35 games, good for the fourth-best points percentage in the league during the timeframe. Spooky!

One thing to note: Matt Dumba hasn't looked a whole lot better on a stronger team in a reduced role. In 11 games, his 42 percent expected goal rate is five percentage points worse than what it was with the Coyotes and he's also been outscored by a 7-3 margin. The rest of the team might be cooking, but his addition on the blue line has been a net negative.

One other thing to note — this time on the positive side: Nikita Kucherov had another multi-point night (shocker) to add to his scoring lead, and the two assists he had gave him 90 on the season. He could feasibly hit 100 assists himself. After not happening in over three decades, it might happen twice in the same season. Wild.

10. Toronto Maple Leafs, 43-23-9

Last week: 9

Sean's ranking: 11

Dom's ranking: 10

A light week plus a loss to the team chasing them has put the Leafs a little closer to a wild-card spot. Mitch Marner's return for the stretch run will help, though it's worth wondering whether he should immediately link back up with Auston Matthews.

Matthews, as you'd expect from an MVP-caliber player, has worked well with Max Domi and Tyler Bertuzzi. Keeping



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Domi on Matthews' left wing, though, would open up a hole at 3C ... unless Sheldon Keefe does something wild.

11. Vegas Golden Knights, 42-25-8

Last week: 11
Sean's ranking: 10
Dom's ranking: 11

Jonathan Marchessault has scored in his last two games, giving him 41 goals on the season and nine since the All-Star break, tied for 10th in the league. His production is part of the reason they can afford to wait on Tomáš Hertl, who won't play on Friday despite some mid-week rumblings. When he does make his debut, it's hard to imagine it coming at the cost of the Ivan Barbashev–Jack Eichel–Marchessault line.

12. Winnipeg Jets, 46-24-6

Last week: 13
Sean's ranking: 13
Dom's ranking: 12

The Jets seem to have put the train back on the tracks, winning twice after a six-game skid and clinching a playoff spot on Thursday. The funny part about the losing streak is that it probably had zero effect on Connor Hellebuyck's Vezina stranglehold. He still leads full-time starters in save percentage (.920) with the fifth-most GSAX in five seasons (35.9), and his workload is as impressive as ever; four starts in Winnipeg's last six will put him at 60.

13. Nashville Predators, 44-28-4

Last week: 10
Sean's ranking: 12
Dom's ranking: 13

We were preparing to plan a U2 concert to cancel for the Predators. Things were looking rough after three straight losses, but a 6-3 win against the Blues is enough to set things straight.

That lets us focus back on the underlying trend: These Predators are still a wagon. Since the trade deadline, they're the league's best five-on-five team, earning 60 percent of the expected goals and 62 percent of the actual goals. Go back further to the All-Star break, and Nashville is still top five. We've said it before and we'll say it again — Andrew Brunette deserves all the credit in the world for how this season is going. This team is significantly better than anyone could have imagined.

14. Los Angeles Kings, 40-25-11

Last week: 14
Sean's ranking: 14
Dom's ranking: 14

Is Pierre-Luc Dubois finally starting to come around? His three-assist performance against Seattle on Wednesday was his first three-point game all season and gives him nine points in his last 10 games. The Kings' path to contention goes through their immense depth, and Dubois was supposed to be the big piece. If he figures things out in time, the Kings are going to be a daunting first-round opponent.

15. St. Louis Blues, 40-32-4

Last week: 15
Sean's ranking: 15
Dom's ranking: 15

A 6-3 loss to Nashville on Thursday feels like one last bucket of water on the Blues' playoff hopes. Before that, they'd been on an 8-2-1 run. One bit of good news for St. Louis: Jordan Kyrou has now posted seven straight positive Game Scores (eight points, 80 percent goal share, 61 percent expected goal share). A strong, consistent finish to his season would be huge.

16. New York Islanders, 34-27-15

Last week: 21
Sean's ranking: 16
Dom's ranking: 16

They're probably not getting as much pub as some of their competition in the East, but the Islanders are effectively going about their business. They scored the final two goals against Columbus on Thursday, winning 4-2 — their fifth victory in seven games — and putting themselves in the second wild-card spot.

On March 21, of course, they'd lost six straight. In a normal season, in a normal division, that would've been enough to take them out of the picture. Now, though, thanks to timely production from their best players (Bo Horvat, Mathew Barzal, Noah Dobson) and some solid goaltending, they're in the driver's seat.

17. Pittsburgh Penguins, 35-30-11

Last week: 22
Sean's ranking: 17
Dom's ranking: 17

Just when everybody decided to give up on the Penguins for good, they sucked us back in. Thursday's win in Washington gives the Penguins points in seven straight games, five of those being wins.

Just imagine if they didn't lose 10 of their previous 13 games. Or if they spent any time fixing their power play. Or if they added any scoring to a bottom six full of cardio merchants. Or if they were able to hold even a few of the multitude of multi-goal leads they blew in third periods. Hell, imagine if they didn't have to trade Jake Guentzel because of all that. Woof. Thanks to how bad everyone else is, they still have a shot. And boy, would it be something to see them have to face off against Guentzel's Canes in the first round. Still, it's hard not to have a feeling that we know what happens next — exactly what's happened to this team all season.

18. Philadelphia Flyers, 36-29-11

Last week: 17
Sean's ranking: 19
Dom's ranking: 19

In their last five games, all losses, the Flyers have been outscored 23-11 and are dead last in goals percentage (34.12). There's stuff to like about their five-on-five play — they're sixth in expected goals share in that span — but the actual goals aren't coming in any capacity, the goaltending has been shaky and they're on the verge of slipping out of a playoff spot.



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You also may be wondering which players are currently annoying John Tortorella. In an overtime loss to the Islanders on Thursday, according to Kevin Kurz, "Travis Konecny was benched for the first seven minutes of the third period, while Joel Farabee, who started on the fourth line, sat for a long stretch in the second." Plan accordingly.

19. Washington Capitals, 36-29-10

Last week: 16
Sean's ranking: 18
Dom's ranking: 20

Just when we were ready to believe that a team as bad as the Capitals might make the playoffs, they went ahead and showed that they might be as bad as we thought. That's four straight losses now, three decisively so, and the last against the rival Penguins chasing them in the standings. The vibes right now simply could not be worse. But if we've learned anything about the East playoff race, we know the door is still wide open. The Capitals' four-game losing streak will probably be someone else's next week.

20. Detroit Red Wings, 37-30-8

Last week: 20
Sean's ranking: 20
Dom's ranking: 18

The Red Wings are playing meaningful games in April. That in and of itself marks this season as one they can build on — no matter what happens next. They're still hanging in the playoff race and have as good a shot as any of the other teams competing for a spot.

The Red Wings just need more efforts like the one they had in Tampa Bay. At five-on-five, it was the first time they won the expected goal battle against a playoff team since doing so against Tampa Bay on Jan. 21, a streak of 13 straight games.

21. Minnesota Wild, 36-30-9

Last week: 19
Sean's ranking: 21
Dom's ranking: 21

When the Wild's playoff hopes meet their mathematical end, it'll be for a fairly simple reason: They can't beat teams that are actually good. Thursday's loss to Colorado was their ninth in their last 10 games against teams ahead of them in the standings (via Michael Russo). If you're expecting to make up ground under those conditions, good luck. Bright side? If they drop two more spots, they'll have a shot at winning the No. 1 pick.

22. New Jersey Devils, 36-36-4

Last week: 18
Sean's ranking: 22
Dom's ranking: 22

Whatever shot the Devils had is completely gone now. Blowing a 3-1 third-period lead to the Penguins and getting completely dominated by the Rangers will do that.

It's a depressing end for the season's most disappointing team — one that nearly everyone in the hockey world seemed to think was next up in the contender's circle. Instead, they delivered an absolute dud and really only have

themselves to blame. With some internal growth, the return of Dougie Hamilton and maybe even a new coach, the team can get right back on track. But that doesn't change what an incredible missed opportunity this season was. Even the best cores only get so many chances to contend, and the Devils just wasted one.

23. Buffalo Sabres, 36-35-5

Last week: 23
Sean's ranking: 23
Dom's ranking: 23

With three big-time left-handed defenders, the Sabres have some long-term decisions to make regarding how best to deploy Rasmus Dahlin, Owen Power and Bowen Byram. Getting all three their minutes means someone likely playing on their off-side. That started with a Dahlin-Byram pairing, but the Sabres have since shifted to Dahlin-Power. And folks, it looks pretty damn good. The Sabres experimented with the idea a bit last season, but the depth behind them wasn't there. Byram changes that. It's only three games, but in that time, Dahlin and Power have earned 70 percent of the expected goals.

24. Seattle Kraken, 31-31-13

Last week: 24
Sean's ranking: 25
Dom's ranking: 24

The Kraken were eliminated from playoff contention on Wednesday night. That's not much of a surprise; some amount of regression from last season was inevitable. Still, it's worth noting just how hard they've been hit. Jared McCann (19 shooting percentage to 14), Matty Beniers (16.2 to 10.7), Eeli Tolvanen (16.5 to 10.9) and Andrei Burakovsky (12.4 to 7.9) have all gotten burned particularly bad.

25. Montreal Canadiens, 29-34-12

Last week: 27
Sean's ranking: 24
Dom's ranking: 25

With 13 points in his last 12 games, Juraj Slafkovsky is blossoming into the impact player Montreal expected. He's been excellent in the season's second half and an even bigger breakout is possible next season.

Slafkovsky is eligible for an extension on July 1, and while the Jack Hughes deal (\$64 million over eight years) may seem outlandish to some, it's not far off where his current market value lies during the timeframe. He's not an \$8 million player yet, but he's only going to get better, and the cap is only going to rise.

26. Calgary Flames, 34-36-5

Last week: 25
Sean's ranking: 26
Dom's ranking: 26

The Flames have lost 10 of 13, but their great tank battle is about to hit some speed bumps. Calgary closes the season with two games against the Sharks, one against the Ducks and one against the Coyotes. If they keep falling down the standings, they'll have earned it.

27. Ottawa Senators, 33-38-4



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Last week: 26
Sean's ranking: 27
Dom's ranking: 27

Dom and Shayna just went deep on the Sens' problems, so there's no need to belabor the point, but it must be noted that Joonas Korpisalo has struck again. He's the single biggest reason Ottawa has fallen so dramatically short of expectations, and he turned in another stinker on Thursday night. Florida scored four times on their 13 shots, and Korpisalo didn't make it out of the first period. He'll be at 20 goals allowed above expected before long.

28. Arizona Coyotes, 31-39-5

Last week: 28
Sean's ranking: 28
Dom's ranking: 28

The Coyotes have gone 12-25-3 since the calendar flipped. You're excused if you've stopped paying attention — and you've also missed some strong play from Dylan Guenther in his return to the NHL. The No. 9 pick in 2021, recalled on Jan. 6, has 25 points (13G, 12A) in his first 38 games and is hovering around the 50 percent mark in both actual and expected goal share. He turns 21 next week.

29. Columbus Blue Jackets, 25-39-12

Last week: 29
Sean's ranking: 29
Dom's ranking: 29

With an assist on Thursday night, Zach Werenski hit a career-high with his 49th point, one away from 50. That's a nice milestone for a great defenseman, one he would've hit a few times already if not for injuries always getting in the way. It's a real shame the Blue Jackets have had such a difficult time finding success over the past few years because they have a really good one back there in Werenski. Who knows what his point peak could be with some actual talent around him?

30. Anaheim Ducks, 25-47-4

Last week: 30
Sean's ranking: 30
Dom's ranking: 30

There haven't been many reasons for optimism this year in Anaheim, but Olen Zellweger putting up a three-point night earlier this week certainly qualifies. Anaheim's biggest problem for the past few seasons has been its back end, and while Zellweger doesn't immediately solve things, his being a difference-maker would certainly help. That game against Calgary offered a small glimmer of hope that things might get better next season. "Small" and "might" are the key words there.

31. Chicago Blackhawks, 22-48-5

Last week: 31
Sean's ranking: 31
Dom's ranking: 31

In these parts, we rarely talk about Blackhawks other than Connor Bedard. That's by design — but it's probably time to point out the production they're getting from Philipp Kurashev. It comes with some asterisks: Somebody has to play with Bedard, and their defensive impacts together have been generally horrific. Still, offensive chemistry with the franchise player (50 points, 18 in his last 15) counts for something.

32. San Jose Sharks, 17-50-8

Last week: 32
Sean's ranking: 32
Dom's ranking: 32

If you're curious about what San Jose's top line is looking like these days, it's Mikael Granlund centering Fabian Zetterlund and Klim Kostin. It doesn't get grimmer than that, but to their credit, they are putting up numbers since the trade deadline. Granlund has 13 points in 12 games, Zetterlund has nine and Kostin has eight. It's an especially nice story for Kostin considering he had only four points in his previous 33 games with the Red Wings.



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Three-Goal Third Propels Canes Past Capitals

Aho scores the game-winner with 1:51 to go in regulation

By Walt Ruff

RALEIGH, NC. - The Carolina Hurricanes battled from behind on Friday night, taking a 4-2 victory from the Washington Capitals.

Another Suboptimal Start...

24 hours after allowing three first period goals to the Bruins, things got started on the wrong foot for Canes once again.

Just 3:31 in, Alex Ovechkin beat Jacob Slavin to a rebound in front and put it back behind Pyotr Kochetkov, who was playing in his team-leading 40th game of the season.

Carolina was able to get things going in the right direction afterward, registering the game's next 11 shots, but before they could get to the break the game's greatest goal-scorer doubled the advantage for the visitors.

Redirecting a shot from the point after an offensive zone faceoff win, the Canes went back to the locker room trailing by a pair.

Second Straight For Jake...

Although Rod Brind'Amour's group produced 18 shots in the first period, not many appeared to be tough tests for Darcy Kuemper, in net for Washington.

In the second though, the Canes broke through.

Dictating almost the entire 20-minute stretch, a turning point came when Kochetkov came up with a breakaway stop on Tom Wilson, and then a subsequent chance from Sonny Milano.

Moments after he snared both, Jake Guentzel got the scoring started for Carolina.

A stretch pass from Jacob Slavin sent #59 in all alone and he whacked the bouncing puck home to bring his group within one.

Completing The Comeback...

With momentum trending all in the favor of the home team at the end of two, it felt like if Carolina could continue the way that they played in the second, an equalizer would soon come.

And it took some time, but it eventually did.

Inside the final 10 minutes, and on the man advantage, Martin Necas wired home a one-time setup from Brady Skjei to make it a 2-2 contest.

At that point, the Canes rolling too hot for Washington to stop.

Given another power play inside the final three minutes, Sebastian Aho scored the game-deciding goal, putting back the rebound of a Brent Burns shot from the point.

Guentzel would hit the empty net to close out his three-point night, capping off a 4-2 victory for his squad.

They Said It...

Sebastian Aho on the team's mentality after failing behind two early...

"Score-wise, we were obviously down two at the end of the first, but that's one of the best goal-scorers of all-time and he gets two goals there. We were down two, but I don't think we played that badly. That's hockey though and sometimes that happens. The way we just battled our way back into this game shows a lot of good things about our group."

Jake Guentzel discussing the important pair of saves in the second period from Kochetkov...

"That's part of the game, sometimes you're going to need a big save and he did phenomenal again tonight. A lot of credit goes to him for keeping us in there. I'm glad we got it done for him."

Rod Brind'Amour on Guentzel's impact since joining the team...

"He's done a nice job, obviously. He's fit in wherever we put him and whoever we put him with, he's made them better. That's what a great player does."

What's Next?

The Canes are scheduled to be off on Saturday but will then return to practice on Sunday against the Columbus Blue Jackets.



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Hurricanes rally to hand Capitals 5th loss in row

Aho breaks tie with 1:51 left; Ovechkin scores 2 for Washington, which fails to gain in East

By Kurt Dusterberg

RALEIGH, N.C. -- Sebastian Aho broke a tie on the power play with 1:51 remaining, and the Carolina Hurricanes rallied to defeat the Washington Capitals 4-2 at PNC Arena on Friday.

Aho made it 3-2 when he scored into an open net from low in the left face-off circle on the rebound of a shot by Brent Burns.

"That bounce was a little lucky, I get an empty cage," Aho said. "But still, I thought we did a pretty good job on the power play tonight and got two goals."

Jake Guentzel scored an empty-net goal with six seconds left for the 4-2 final.

Guentzel had two goals and an assist, Jaccob Slavin had two assists, and Pyotr Kochetkov made 14 saves for the Hurricanes (48-22-7), who are 9-2-1 in their past 12 games. Carolina trailed 2-0 after the first period.

The Hurricanes remained five points behind the New York Rangers for first place in the Metropolitan Division. New York defeated the Detroit Red Wings 4-3 on Friday.

"Whether we won the game or not, I liked how we were going about our business," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "It's not necessarily how you draw it up, but I thought it was a solid 60 minutes."

Alex Ovechkin scored two goals, including the 850th of his NHL career, and Dylan Strome had two assists for the Capitals (36-30-10), who are 0-4-1 in their past five. Darcy Kuemper made 42 saves.

The Capitals, who are tied with the Red Wings, remained one point behind the Philadelphia Flyers for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Eastern Conference.

"Guys were giving it all. That's why it hurts at the end," Washington forward Tom Wilson said. "It's tough, but you see the care in this room, the pride."

Each team completed a back-to-back Friday. The Capitals lost to the Pittsburgh Penguins 4-1 at home Thursday, and the Hurricanes lost 4-1 to the Boston Bruins here that night.

"Obviously, we're under siege for large portions of that game, but I thought our guys battled and tried to protect the lead," Washington coach Spencer Carbery said. "We started to have some decent shifts where we were controlling a little bit of play, but disappointing results."

Ovechkin put the Capitals ahead 1-0 at 3:31 of the first period. Kochetkov stopped Trevor van Riemsdyk's shot through traffic, but Ovechkin put in the rebound at the top of the crease for No. 850.

Ovechkin then tipped John Carlson's shot in the low slot to make it 2-0 with 45 seconds remaining in the period.

Kochetkov wasn't tested regularly, but a pair of saves in the second period proved important. He made a right-pad save against Wilson on a breakaway at 13:40, before making a point-blank glove save on Connor McMichael six seconds later.

"The turning point for me was at 2-0 when we're still trying to get into it," Brind'Amour said. "We give them a breakaway and another Grade A (chance) right after, so now the game is not out of reach."

Carolina cut it to 2-1 at 14:30 of the second period when Guentzel tracked down a stretch pass from Slavin and chipped the puck over Kuemper's glove.

Guentzel has 20 points in 13 games (five goals, 15 assists) since he was acquired in a trade with the Pittsburgh Penguins on March 7.

"I'm playing with good players, and [I'm] just getting the bounces right now," Guentzel said. "You've got to be fortunate and take them as they come. I'm just trying to adjust to a new team. It's been going good so far."

Martin Necas tied it 2-2 with a power-play goal at 11:40 of the third when he one-timed a pass from Brady Skjei off the right post and into the net.

"I feel like you've got to shoot a little bit to break them down," Necas said. "I'm confident in that shot, and if I get it there, I will keep shooting. Sometimes it goes post-in [or] post-out. Today it went in."

NOTES: Ovechkin's second goal was his 50th against the Hurricanes, giving him 104 points (54 assists) in 90 games. The 38-year-old forward has 11 goals in the past 11 games. ... Hurricanes forward Andrei Svechnikov missed the game with an illness. ... Carolina has held opponents to 20 or fewer shots 14 times this season.



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Hurricanes support North Carolina State basketball teams in Final Four

NHL squad shouts out local college hoops teams who enjoy tremendous runs

By Dan O'Leary

It is April on the calendar now but March is still very much the vibes in North Carolina.

The Carolina Hurricanes showed up to PNC Arena to face the Washington Capitals decked out in North Carolina State University basketball gear.

The NC State men's basketball team is on a Cinderella run as a No. 11 seed. They are slated to take on top-seeded Purdue Saturday in Glendale, Arizona with a berth in the NCAA championship game on the line.

The NC State women's team won its region as a No. 3 seed before falling to top-seeded South Carolina 78-59 on Friday.

The Hurricanes and Wolfpack already have a special relationship. You may remember that in February of 2023, the Hurricanes played the Capitals in the Stadium Series at Carter-Finley Stadium, home of the Wolfpack football team.

AP ASSOCIATED PRESS

Hurricanes rally for 4-2 victory over slumping Caps. Ovechkin scores both goals for Washington.

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Sebastian Aho scored a tiebreaking power-play goal with 1:51 remaining and the Carolina Hurricanes overcame a two-goal deficit to beat the Washington Capitals 4-2 on Friday night.

Jake Guentzel had two goals, including an empty-netter, and an assist and Martin Necas also scored for Carolina. Jaccob Slavin had two assists and Pyotr Kochetkov made 14 saves.

"The way we just battled our way back into this game," Aho said. "It shows a lot of good things about our team."

Washington's Alex Ovechkin scored two first-period goals and Darcy Kuemper made 41 saves. The Capitals have lost five in a row (0-4-1).

"I thought we fought," Capitals coach Spencer Carbery said. "We obviously were under siege for large portions of that game, but I thought the guys battled and tried to protect that lead."

Ovechkin scored two goals in a game for the fourth time in less than three weeks, a span of 10 games with 10 total goals. Of his 851 career goals, 50 have come against the Hurricanes.

Looking to recover after Thursday night's 4-1 loss to the Boston Bruins, it took time for the Hurricanes to get their offense going. They were in danger of dropping consecutive games in regulation for the first time since a four-game skid in December.

"Sometimes it goes that way," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "Not necessarily how you draw it up, but I thought it was a solid 60 minutes."

Carolina held an 18-6 edge in first-period shots.

"We have to keep shooting there," Necas said.

Necas tied the game on a power play with 8:20 to play. Aho's team-leading 34th goal came on the next power play.

The Hurricanes scored more than one power-play goal in a game for the first time in 10 games.

Carbery was frustrated about the hooking call that Aho drew on Rasmus Sandin that led to Carolina's final power play.

"It's not Sandin," Carbery said. "It's Kuemper and the puck is there and he goes to swipe at the puck and that's what gets Aho's skates. So it's the wrong call."

Ovechkin scored his first goal of the game at 3:31 of the first period on a rebound. His 29th goal of the season came with 45 seconds left in the period, tipping in a shot from John Carlson. Carlson's shot from inside the blue line came after the Capitals controlled an offensive zone faceoff.

Guentzel scored with 5:30 left in the second. He collected a long stretch pass from Slavin and converted. Guentzel has scored in back-to-back games and now has five goals in 13 games with Carolina and 27 goals overall this season.

"Just trying to adjust to the new team," Guentzel said. "It has been going good so far."

Aho said: "I wasn't really worried about him. The guy can score."

Hurricanes forward Andrei Svechnikov missed the game with what the team announced as an illness.

UP NEXT

Capitals: host Ottawa on Sunday.

Hurricanes: host Columbus on Sunday.



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The Hockey News

Sebastian Aho, Jake Guentzel, Martin Necas and Rod Brind'Amour on Comeback Win: 'It's not necessarily how you draw it up, but it was a solid 60 minutes'

The Canes defeated the Caps 4-2.

By Ryan Henkel

The Carolina Hurricanes rallied from a two-goal deficit to defeat the Washington Capitals 4-2 Friday night at PNC Arena.

It took until their 31st shot on goal and over halfway through the game to break through, but once they did, the Canes didn't look back.

Jake Guentzel kicked off the scoring (and capped it off with the empty netter) and Martin Necas and Sebastian Aho followed suit with a power play goal each.

Pyotr Kochetkov made 14 saves in the win.

After the game, Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour along with Aho, Guentzel and Necas spoke with the media. Here's what they had to say:

Rod Brind'Amour

On the comeback: We were playing great, it was just a couple of bad breaks is really what happened. I thought... if we won the game or not, I liked how we were going about our business for the most part. Sometimes that happens. You get one and then the flood gates can kind of open up. Not that that happened, but we were able to get one and then the power play came through. It's not necessarily how you draw it up, but it was a solid 60 minutes.

On Martin Necas' shot: His game this year has been pretty solid all the way. That's what they were giving you, so you got to take it. Find a way to get through the block. Obviously it was a great shot. Post and in. Interesting game, I would say.

On Jack Guentzel's seamless transition: He's been really good obviously. I don't know. It's hard to think about who [has had a better set of games since joining a team at the deadline] at this point. I mean, at the end of the day, we didn't bring him in for these 15 games. But he's done a nice job fitting in wherever we put him and whoever we put him has made them better. That's what a great player does.

On Pyotr Kochetkov: He didn't have a lot of work and you can't fault him on the first two, just bad breaks really. Good plays by them. But the turning point for me was really when it was 2-0 and we were still trying to get into it and we gave them a breakaway and then another grade-A right after it. So the game wasn't out of reach. Obviously when we tied it up, we gave the best player again the puck on his stick. Obviously not the way you want to do it, but got to get those saves and we did.

On the penalty kill: They did... I mean, Ovie again gets the one off and it's off the bar. Man. I mean, he's a special player, but I'll be happy to see him be done, to be honest with you. Because it's on his stick and no matter what... I mean that was a wrist shot from inside the blueline and it

was a blast. It was right off the bar and out. He's just a special player and I've just seen way too much of him.

On Teuvo Teravainen's zone entry on the tying goal: It was a good entry. He made a real nice play on the entry and that was why we were able to get the shot off. That was the reason we were able to get the goal, get the lucky rebound that lands on our stick. You have to get something before that and the entry, he was a big part of that.

On Andrei Svechnikov's status: He just didn't feel right. We've talked about this a lot. There's just not any reason to put guys in that aren't 100%.

On the intentional offsides call on Jesper Fast before Washington's second goal: It was a weird night that way. I had a hard time with it because [Fast] isn't the guy that's going to go in there intentionally. If he knew it was offsides he wasn't going to keep doing it. And they didn't even give him a lot of time to get out. Then with a minute to go. That's what can happen. Nothing going on and then it kind of influences how the games going. Those are the kinds of things that drive a coach crazy. But we don't have to talk about that.

Sebastian Aho

On the game: Scorewise, we were down two after the first. That's one of the greatest goal scorers of all time and he gets two there. We were down two but I don't think we played that bad to be down two, but that's hockey. That happens sometimes. The way we just battled our way back into the game shows a lot of good things about our team.

On the team's mentality to stick with their game: You just try to block everything and just keep trying to build your game. You just believe that it will happen sooner or later and obviously it did. It doesn't matter if you're up or down or if it's an even game. You just try to kind of do the same thing always and that's what we did a good job of tonight.

On his goal: We tried to end the game there and we were able to do that. The bounce was a little lucky. I had an empty cage, but I still think we did a pretty good job overall on the power play tonight and got two goals.

On special teams: This time of year, 5v5 is pretty even. Some nights you may get an edge there or whatever, but special teams are huge. Obviously [Kochetkov] in the net again had an unbelievable effort and gave us a chance to win.

On Jake Guentzel finally starting to get his goals: Wasn't really worried about him. Guy can score.

On Guentzel's seamless fit: First off, both guys we picked up are good people. They bring good, positive vibes in the locker room and I think it all starts from that. Both of them are great players and they really helped us tonight and I know they'll help us even more coming down the stretch.



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He's an unbelievable player. He's done it his whole career. So it's not anything new for him.

Jake Guentzel

On Jaccob Slavin: He's just an unbelievable player and fun to watch him firsthand. You know, playing against him is tough out there.

On his seamless transition: I'm playing with good players and just getting the bounces. Just have to take them as they come. Just trying to adjust to a new team and it's been going good so far, so hopefully it keeps going.

On staying patient: You just have to keep pushing. You can't get frustrated. It's hopefully going to come like it did tonight. We just have to make sure we stuck to it. It didn't matter how long it was going to take, we just have to keep pushing.

On Pyotr Kochetkov: That's part of the game, sometimes you need a big save and I thought he was phenomenal again tonight. A lot of credit goes to him for keeping us in there. Glad we got the win for him.

On being able to produce consistently: That's kind of what you hope for. As a player, you don't want to mess anything up on a good team and you kind of just hope you come in here and make it as easy as possible. The guys have been great for me, especially the two guys I've been playing with. It's been fun.

Frederik Andersen Named Carolina Hurricanes' Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy Nominee

The 34-year-old netminder battled through blood-clotting issues earlier in the season and has not only returned to play, but has dominated since.

By Ryan Henkel

Across the NHL this morning, all 32 teams had a player nominated for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy.

Selected by each city's chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers Association, players are nominated based on those who "best exemplify the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship, and dedication to hockey."

For the Carolina chapter, the nominee this season was goaltender Frederik Andersen.

Andersen was diagnosed with a blood-clotting issue, later revealed as deep-vein thrombosis with subsequent pulmonary embolisms in early November of this season.

"It was a scary time," Andersen said.

During those first few days, there were a lot of doubts and fears swirling in the veteran goalie's mind about his health and if he would ever even be able to lace up his skates again.

But after many meetings and consultations with various doctors and medical experts and a positive response to his medication, a path opened up.

Andersen slowly began to build back into shape. He recalled how he treated that time like it was the offseason and approached his workouts as such.

"I knew it was going to be a few months and I just tried to stay as ready as possible even though I wasn't on the ice as

Martin Necas

On staying patient: We had quite a few chances. Their goalie played good obviously. They got the two bounces in the first and then they got the chances and they scored on them. I felt like we didn't play a bad game. We played pretty good. Had a lot of chances. Stuck with our game, got a power play and special teams are huge.

On the confidence in his shot: I just have to keep shooting there. When we get into the zone, you have to shoot a bit to break them down. I'm confident with that shot and if I get it there I'll keep shooting. Sometimes it goes post-in, sometimes it goes post-out. But today it went in and I was happy to see it.

On scoring from Ovechkin's spot: We kind of exchanged roles today, right? Today he scored two goals in front where he's really strong. I've been watching him since I was a little kid on that spot. He used to be my favorite player. Obviously that shot that he has from that spot is like no one else. Just trying to get close to [how he does it].

On who his favorite player is now: Sebastian Aho.

On Pyotr Kochetkov: They've both been great. Really all three of them have been great. It's getting close to the playoffs and you need every little thing that's out there. Goalie's are huge and they've really been clicking.

much," Andersen said. "The second I got the go-ahead to be on the ice, I was out there trying to get my feet back under me again."

After three months, Andersen was cleared to return to the ice and within a month of on-ice practices, Andersen was back under the lights at PNC Arena, listening to the crowd cheer his name once again.

"It was awesome," Andersen said about that moment. "[The fans] didn't disappoint."

In his eight games since returning, Andersen is 7-1-0 with a 0.949 save percentage, a 1.375 goals against average and he has two shutouts.

It's been an absolutely dominant run for the Danish netminder and it went from a question mark to almost a guarantee that he'll be called upon in the playoffs this year.

Andersen's commitment to the game and his desire to return has fueled not only himself but his team as well.

"It's just... You know, it's Freddie," said Sebastian Aho when asked if he was surprised by how good his goaltender had been. "I've seen him do this stuff over and over and the whole team obviously trusts him a lot, but you never know. You were almost a little nervous for him. After that long of an injury you hope to see him have a good start, which he obviously had and ever since then, he hasn't looked back. He's looked very calm as always actually. It's huge for us. He's one of the best goalies in the world, so happy to have him."

"I know that if what he was going through happened to me, it would be really tough to go through," said Brady Skjei. "The fact that he's back playing and playing solid... we're



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just obviously really happy that he's part of the team and back at full health."

The perseverance Andersen's shown in the face of a truly terrifying situation is inspiring. His condition is something he'll never truly be rid of and he'll carry it with him for the

rest of his life, but he's is not hiding from it. Andersen's chosen to march onward despite it.

"You can never predict what can happen, but I can be happy about being back," Andersen said. "Just taking it one day at a time."

Outside Looking In: Has Jesperi Kotkaniemi Fallen Out of Favor in Carolina

The 23-year-old forward has seen his ice time drop and he's now been relegated to healthy scratch status when the roster is fully healthy.

By Ryan Henkel

The Jesperi Kotkaniemi 2021 offer sheet fiasco was one of the most drama filled acquisitions of a player in recent NHL history.

Partly seen as revenge for the Sebastian Aho offer sheet one year earlier, but more so the Carolina Hurricanes leveraging the tools at their disposal for a player they wanted to acquire, either way it ended up with the Canes acquiring Kotkaniemi from the Montreal Canadiens.

But ever since he was acquired, Kotkaniemi has been a hot and cold player.

The Canes first tried to form a Finnish trio with 'KK' on the wing with Sebastian Aho and Teuvo Teravainen, but it just didn't take off and he was subsequently moved down to 4C.

But in year two in Carolina, Kotkaniemi got the chance at 2C.

His line with Andrei Svechnikov and Martin Necas took off, but his points didn't show as he had just seven goals and 14 points in 41 games.

But his linemates were pacing themselves for career years, so he had to be doing something right.

However, in the second half of the season, Kotkaniemi's numbers finally caught up with the impacts as he had 11 goals and 29 points in the next 41 games.

He looked to have finally figured it out and seemed poised to take another step heading into this season.

And by all accounts, that looked to be happening as the Finnish forward kept that ball rolling into 2023-24 with eight goals and 15 points in his first 21 games, but then things just sort of just fell off.

Kotkaniemi has had just three goals and 10 points in his next 54 games and has once again been relegated to the fourth line or even the press box.

A lot of Kotkaniemi's early success came when he was going to the net, as six of his goals were scored from in front and it feels like he got away from that.

His physicality has also dropped as he had 20 hits in those first 21 games and now has just 33 in his last 54.

Last year he had 105 hits and this year he's on pace for less than 60.

I've always felt that Kotkaniemi is at his best when he's utilizing his size along the boards to win battles and create space but it seems that for some reason, that's gone away.

Confidence is a hell of a drug and perhaps that's something that's dried up for someone who, in all senses, is still a young kid.

Analytics

It's weird because Kotkaniemi hasn't even been bad based on the underlying numbers. He has a 58.68 CF% (12th on the team), 50% GF (15th) and a 54.99 xGF% (14th).

He's 50.8% in the faceoff dot, but is shooting at just 9.2%.

On the one hand though, his defensive impacts have gone a bit to the wayside this season after having tremendous numbers last year.

And perhaps that right there is the answer to this dilemma because Rod Brind'Amour is a coach that wants his players to be defensively responsible.

But while the defense has taken a hit, offensively, Kotkaniemi has been generating at a good rate.

In fact, the microstats tracked by Corey Sznajder of All Three Zones suggests that Kotkaniemi has been one of the better passers in the league this season.

I've said multiple times that Kotkaniemi should have at least 10 more assists this season and the underlying numbers seem to suggest as much.

I think he's a player that's had some real tough luck, but it's the NHL and at the end of the day, you have to produce and Kotkaniemi hasn't done that which perhaps makes the defensive hit standout worse.

Brind'Amour hasn't offered too much insight into what specifically in the Finnish center's game has him on the fringes of the roster, but it's clear he isn't satisfied with his play as he would have been healthy scratched for the second straight game on Friday if not for Svechnikov being ruled out with a last minute illness.

Kotkaniemi has six years remaining on his \$4.82 million AAV contract so either the Canes need to figure out a better way to get the most out of the young center or this may be trending towards an early separation.



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SportScan

Articles from outlets covering the Hurricanes' upcoming opponents and league-wide news

1306581 Carolina Hurricanes

Carolina Hurricanes rally in the third period, power past Washington Capitals

Staff and wire reports

4-4 minutes 4/5/2024

The Carolina Hurricanes' top line, stymied in a loss to Boston on Thursday, scored at the most opportune time Friday.

On a late-game power play, Sebastian Aho buried a rebound from the left circle to complete the Canes' come-from-behind win, and Jake Guentzel added an empty-netter — his second strike of the game — lifting Carolina to a 4-2 win over the Washington Capitals at PNC Arena.

The Hurricanes trailed 2-0 after the first period, but chipped away throughout the game, unleashing a barrage of 46 shots on Capitals keeper Darcy Kuemper.

Alex Ovechkin started the scoring for the Capitals — something he's done many times in his career — when he tucked a bouncing rebound off Pyotr Kochetkov's left pad past the Canes goalie just 3:31 into the game.

The goal was Ovechkin's 28th of the season. He added his 29th in the final minute of the first on a contested tip in front of Kochetkov. Off an offensive-zone faceoff, the puck found its way to the point, where John Carlson forced a shot toward the net that Ovechkin caught with his stick to redirect it into the cage.

He's pushing to reach 30 goals for the 18th time in 18 complete NHL seasons. He had 24 goals in 45 games during the Covid-shortened 2020-21 campaign. Ovechkin is also chasing Wayne Gretzky's all-time NHL scoring mark of 894 regular-season goals. After Friday's pair, he's at 851.

It took a pair of spectacular saves at one end and a bit of puck luck at the other to jog the Canes' offense into action. Just past the midway point of the second period, at the tail end of a Carolina power play, the Caps' Tom Wilson broke free for a breakaway. Kochetkov shut him down, and then snared a subsequent chance alone in front for Connor McMichael with his glove as he slid from his right to left.

Moments later, the puck deflected high into the air and toward Kuemper. Guentzel outraced two Washington defenders and flipped the on-edge puck over Kuemper's glove to cut the Canes' deficit to one.

Martin Necas cashed in on the Canes' third power play of the game at 11:40 of the third period, scoring a goal on a one-timer from the top of the left circle — a location often called Ovechkin's office, given the number of goals he's scored from that location over the years.

The Hurricanes have one more home game remaining — Sunday at 5 p.m. against Columbus. The Canes finish the season with four games on the road — one each in Boston, St. Louis, Chicago and Columbus.

News Observer LOADED: 04.06.2024

1306582 Carolina Hurricanes

Carolina Hurricanes goalie Frederik Andersen is the team's Masterton Trophy nominee

Justin Pelletier

8-10 minutes 4/5/2024

Raleigh

Something felt off to Frederik Andersen in the early going of the 2023-24 NHL season.

On the ice, he was doing just fine: He lost one game in his first six starts, allowed two or fewer goals in the the last four of those games and was easily the steadiest keeper the Carolina Hurricanes had during a tough defensive stretch to start the year.

Off the ice, though, was a different story.

"I was feeling some pain low, in the lungs," Andersen said. "That kind of hindered me breathing. As I was going through in the moment, I was probably not as worried about it as I was after I learned about what could have happened."



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Andersen's pain turned out to be a pulmonary embolism — a blood clot was stuck in an artery in one of his lungs. More testing revealed that Andersen, an 11-year NHL veteran, had a blood clotting issue. His season, perhaps his career, was in jeopardy.

"It came out of nowhere," Andersen said. "There were some symptoms, and that initiated the check-ups and stuff. I went in to get checked out."

His last game before being shut down was Nov. 2.

More than 40 games after being "checked out," on March 7, Andersen returned to game action, allowing one goal on 26 shots in a win over Montreal.

"I guess you could call it an obstacle," Andersen said. "I'm proud of the way I handled it throughout the process until now, and I've had a really good support system around me that's helped me to battle through this."

The Canes' organization stuck by him the whole way.

"For him to know the organization was behind at every step, getting healthy was the top priority, that's how we handled it, that's how we should," Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour said.

For his perseverance in coming back from a potentially career-ending setback, and for his dedication to the game both as he worked to return and since he's resumed playing, Andersen is this year's Carolina Hurricanes nominee for the NHL's Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, awarded each season to the player who "best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to the game," as voted on by the Professional Hockey Writers Association.

Each of the PWHA's 32 local chapters submit one nominee for the award each season, and after a national vote, the top three are selected as finalists. The Masterton Trophy winner is announced during the Stanley Cup Finals, along with the NHL's other major awards.

Last year's nominee from the Hurricanes was Jordan Martinook.

But awards — and hockey in general — took a back seat in Andersen's life in November.

"I was more curious about what I was dealing with," Andersen recalled. "I didn't know about it at first. I think that was maybe almost like a blessing, that I didn't know much about it at the start. You go in and you try to learn from the doctors in here, and all the research you can do on your own without cluttering the message."

After learning more about what was wrong, Andersen then started looking at his options.

"I think the first few days I was definitely trying to learn, because it's important to know enough to know what kind of decisions you're making," he said. "At the end of the day, your doctors are there to support you and give you advice. It's not as cut and dry as people think, always, in the medical world. You've got to weigh different things, and at the end of the day it's your call, and you're your own doctor."

The course of action Andersen chose was a three-month "heavy dose" of blood thinners, which limited his access to the ice.

"That was probably the biggest shock, to be honest," he said.

"It's been difficult mentally," Andersen added, "and something that you have to step back and realize it's something that's more than hockey, and something that could have ... you never know what consequence it has down the road."

Carolina Hurricanes goaltender Frederik Andersen (31) looks on before the game against the Calgary Flames at PNC Arena.

Carolina Hurricanes goaltender Frederik Andersen (31) looks on before the game against the Calgary Flames at PNC Arena. James Guillory
James Guillory-USA TODAY Sports

With fewer than 10 games remaining in the regular season, Andersen has resumed his position as the Hurricanes' top goalie, fitting back into a rotation with Pyotr Kochetkov. Including the game on March 7, Andersen has started seven games since his return. He's won all seven, allowing

just eight goals on 187 shots — a save percentage of .959 — while posting two shutouts.

Next up? Finishing the regular season healthy.

And then?

"I think the story's not quite done yet with him," Brind'Amour said. "Hopefully it ends with even something better. But just the fact that he came back ... You take the worst-case scenario out of it, which is he wouldn't be able to play again, I think that was the worst case that everyone was worried about. So it's a win, either way."

News Observer LOADED: 04.06.2024

1306583 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes score 4 straight, beat Capitals

April 5, 2024

Cory Lavalette Article, NHL, Sports

RALEIGH — The Hurricanes erased a two-goal lead, scoring four unanswered goals to beat the visiting Capitals 4-2. Jake Guentzel scored twice, and Martin Necas and Sebastian Aho also scored for Carolina.

Alex Ovechkin had both Washington goals.

Three observations

1. There have been many nights in the Rod Brind'Amour coaching era when the Hurricanes "didn't get what they deserved."

On Friday, Carolina did.

The Hurricanes outshot the Capitals 44-16 but still found themselves down 2-0 as time wound down in the second period. But Carolina finally broke through with just over five minutes left in the middle frame.

Jacob Slavin's attempted stretch pass was deflected in the air and popped over Washington defenseman Trevor van Riemsdyk and Rasmus Sandin. Guentzel pounced, splitting the defenders and reaching to push the puck past Darcy Kuemper (41 saves) to get Carolina on the board.

2. The Hurricanes outshot the Capitals 18-6 in the first period but still trailed 2-0 thanks to two net-front goals by Ovechkin, his 850th and 851st of his career. It was the second straight night Carolina dug itself a hole in the opening 20 minutes after handing Boston a 3-0 lead on Thursday.

"We were playing great," Brind'Amour said. "It was just a couple bad breaks is really what happened. I thought if we won the game or not, I just liked the way we were going about our business for the most part."

After Guentzel broke the ice, Carolina's power play got to work. First, Necas did a little tribute to Ovechkin, ripping a one-timer from the left circle to tie the game with 8:20 left in regulation.

"He used to be my favorite player," Necas said of Ovechkin. "That shot that he has from his spot is like no one else, and I'm just trying to get close to him."

Then the Hurricanes got another power play, and Aho banged in a rebound from next to the net for his 34th goal of the season with 1:51 left in the game.

"The bounce was a little lucky," Aho said, "you know, I get an empty cage. But still, I think we did a pretty good job overall on the power play tonight and got two goals."



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3. Andrei Svechnikov was a late scratch with an illness, which meant Jesperi Kotkaniemi got back in the lineup after missing his first game of the season the night before. Kotkaniemi responded with a solid performance, finishing with a 76.47% Corsi For, and had two hits as Carolina's fourth line buried the Capitals' bottom line.

As for Svechnikov, Brind'Amour said the team was playing it safe.

"He just didn't feel right," Brind'Amour said. "We've talked about this a lot: There (isn't) really any reason to put guys in that aren't 100%.

Number to know

0 — Shots on goal for Seth Jarvis, the second straight game he has been held without one. It's the third time this season Jarvis has gone without a shot in two straight games. The previous two times, he scored the next game.

Plus

Pyotr Kochetkov, Hurricanes goalie — Neither of Ovechkin's first period goals were Kochetkov's fault, and his two saves on the Capitals captain and Connor McMichael in succession — the first a breakaway stop on Ovechkin, the second a dazzling glove save — kept Washington's lead at two. Forty-five seconds later, Guentzel scored to start the Hurricanes' comeback.

"The turning point for me was really the 2-nothing when we're still trying to get into it, and we give them a breakaway and then another Grade-A right after," Brind'Amour said. "And so now, the game's not out of reach.

Minus

Hurricanes' net-front defense — Both of Ovechkin's goals came as a result of failed attempts to tie up the Capitals superstar in front of the net. On his first goal, Ovechkin shook loose from Slavin and collected a rebound in front for goal No. 850. On his second of the first period, Ovechkin kept Brett Pesce from tying up his stick and was able to redirect a point shot past Pyotr Kochetkov (14 saves).

They said it

"Man, he's a special player. I'll be happy to see him be done, to be honest with you. ... He's just a special player, and I've seen way too much of him."

— Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour on Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin.

North State Journal LOADED: 04.06.2024

1306568 Boston Bruins

For his perseverance, Danton Heinen is Bruins' nominee for Masterton Trophy

By Conor Ryan Boston.com Staff

Updated April 5, 2024

Danton Heinen is not one to speak highly of his own accomplishments.

Granted, if you ask his former collegiate coach and current bench boss Jim Montgomery, the steady Bruins forward is usually not inclined to speak much at all.

"Heino is not a guy that stays in touch," said Montgomery, who coached Heinen at the University of Denver. "He's not a networking person."

Rather, the 28-year-old Heinen has let his play do the talking.

Once mired in hockey purgatory as a proven NHLer without a contract to his name, Heinen has gone from a training camp tryout to a key cog in the Bruins' forward corps in a few months.

For his efforts in fighting for a roster spot and thriving in his second chance with the Bruins, Heinen was voted the team's nominee for the 2024 Bill Masterton Trophy, awarded annually to the NHL player who best exemplifies perseverance, sportsmanship, and dedication. The nomination comes from the Boston chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers Association.

"It is mentally grinding at points," Heinen said. "It's hockey adversity. You kind of got to take a step back and have some perspective there, where it's a game we play.

"Yeah, it is your life and stuff, but at the end of the day, we're lucky to do it. There are a lot worse problems out there than trying to make a hockey team. Saying that, I'm grateful to be here and it's a fun group to be a part of."

Heinen's humble comments may not come as a surprise, but his ascension as a top-six weapon is a development few saw coming.

Following a disappointing 2022-23 season in Pittsburgh, Heinen trudged through the summer without putting pen to paper on a new contract with any team.

Even though the Bruins extended a professional tryout contract, Heinen faced an uphill climb, earning that tryout more than two weeks after they gave a similar PTO to veteran Alex Chiasson.

Heinen outlasted Chiasson following several preseason games, but still had to play the waiting game once the season began.

It wasn't until Oct. 30 — eight games in — that the Bruins finally handed Heinen a one-year, \$775,000 contract. He has been one of the best bargains in the league, collecting 16 goals and 34 points over 69 games.

Among players with standard NHL contracts, Heinen ranks fourth in cost per point at \$22,794, per CapFriendly.

He has been utilized as a Swiss Army knife by Montgomery but seems to have found his calling on a top-six unit next to David Pastrnak and Pavel Zacha. With Heinen's steady, two-way acumen, the Bruins have found a winning combination.

In the 140:31 of five-on-five reps that the line has logged, the Bruins have outscored opponents, 14-4. Both Heinen and Pastrnak lit the lamp in the 4-1 win over Carolina Thursday.

Though Heinen may not fit the profile of a top-six stalwart, Zacha believes that his linemate's overlooked skill set has helped him elevate his game.

"I think he's very good with forechecking the puck and getting pucks back," Zacha noted. "But also, I think people don't see that much that he's a very skilled player. He can make plays, he can score goals. And I think he's getting more and more comfortable with us.

"He's really easy to play with. He's always going to be working really hard, and I think that he's a really good piece."

Heinen's longtime coach believes that his achievements do not go unnoticed by his teammates.

"It takes a lot of the mental side of being strong, the mental side of wanting it," Montgomery said. "It's a good story, and it's good for everybody else around in our locker room to see that.

"Good on him for battling through it and earning it. Because he earned it."

Prepping for Panthers

Ahead of a home matchup against the Panthers Saturday, captain Brad Marchand was the lone Bruin who did not skate Friday at Warrior Ice Arena. Montgomery termed it a maintenance day. "Got his 400th goal, came in, and was like, 'I'm done. See you tomorrow,'" the coach said with a laugh ... Montgomery had no update on Justin Brazeau, who flew to Boston Thursday to undergo further testing on his upper-body injury.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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"Still week to week," said Montgomery. "We don't have any definitive information, unfortunately." ... Montgomery said he was very happy with the reshuffled D-corps during Thursday's win — with Parker Wotherspoon skating with Brandon Carlo, and Matt Grzelcyk shuffled to the third pairing next to Andrew Peeke. The coach did not commit to sticking with this six-man grouping once the playoffs begin, but the overall D-zone structure has improved with Charlie McAvoy and Hampus Lindholm anchoring the top pair ... In honor of his 23rd birthday, Johnny Beecher took a surprise shaving cream pie to the face at the end of practice from Mason Lohrei.

Boston Globe LOADED: 04.06.2024

1306569 Boston Bruins

Bruins notebook: Marquee matchup vs. Panthers on tap

Steve Conroy

6-7 minutes 4/5/2024

No, the Stanley Cup playoffs do not begin on Saturday afternoon at the Garden. But if you're looking for a reasonable facsimile of a post-season environment, you could do worse than the nationally televised Bruins-Panthers showdown on Causeway Street (3:30 p.m., ABC).

The B's hold a four-point lead over the Panthers for the Atlantic Division crown and home-ice advantage for at least the first two rounds of the playoffs. A Bruins' win would give them a formidable six-point lead with four games left in the regular season. A Panthers' win would cut the lead to two points and, with Florida in possession of the tie-breaker (regulation wins), the race would probably go down to the wire.

Florida native Andrew Peeke, obtained at the deadline from Columbus, will get his first taste of the playoffs in a couple of weeks. But Saturday's game will be nice appetizer.

"It's awesome," said the defenseman. "It raises the stakes. Everyone's juiced up, they know what's at stake and that's the best part of it."

For coach Jim Montgomery, the focus remains on his own team, but there's no denying the importance of Saturday's game.

"First place is on the line," said Montgomery. "Besides that, we just want to continue what we're doing, especially these last two games (tough wins in Nashville and Carolina in which they allowed just one 5-on-3 goal). We really care about our play heading into the playoffs. We feel our play is in a good place and what better way to test than to play against Florida (Saturday) at home?"

And you can expect the Panthers to come in hot, for reasons beyond the standings. They've yet to beat the B's in three tries, despite their attempts to bully them with their perceived advantage in the physicality department. And before dispatching the also-ran Ottawa Senators on Thursday, the Panthers were on a 2-7-1 skid that included last week's 4-3 loss to the B's in Florida.

From the B's perspective, there is of course the lingering stench of the Panthers ending their dream season in the first round last year. All three games this season have had a certain buzz and nastiness, from the first one back on Oct. 30. That was a 3-2 overtime win for the B's at the Garden, when Charlie McAvoy nailed Oliver Ekman-Larson with a high hit for which he was suspended four games. Then came the return match in Florida (a 3-1 Bruin win) in which Nick Cousins took a message-sending run at McAvoy, though he thought better of actually dropping the gloves with McAvoy. And finally, we saw last week's contest in Florida that featured a couple of tussles and three blown leads by the Panthers in the B's 4-3 win.

The Panthers are not at full strength. Defenseman Aaron Ekblad and sniper Carter Verhaeghe are both expected to remain out of the lineup. But good teams like the Panthers tend to get more dangerous — at least in the short-term — when they're facing internal challenges like that.

"These are the games that you want to be a part of," said Danton Heinen. "We've had some good games lately where they've felt like playoff games and it's going to be another one on (Saturday). Those are fun games to be a part of and easy to get up for."

Humble Heinen

Heinen is the Bruins' nominee for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, voted on by the Boston chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers Association. He is one of the 32 nominees representing each team from across the league, with the winner to be named in June.

The award is given to player who "best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey."

Heinen accepted the nomination in his typically understated, deflective manner.

"I guess they didn't have many options," he said with wry grin. "Yeah, it is what it is. You don't want to put yourself in a position where you have to come back from something. For me, there's other guys that go through real stuff, but it is what it is."

But there was no guarantee he'd even be in an NHL uniform this year.

After not being re-signed in Pittsburgh, Heinen was brought back to Boston on a tryout agreement for training camp. Despite clearly earning a job, he was not signed until two weeks into the season on Oct. 30 because of salary cap reasons.

Since then, he's been an integral part of the Bruins' surprising run to the top of the Atlantic Division standings, whether he was skating on the fourth line or in his current role as a top line winger with David Pastrnak and Pavel Zacha. Despite missing the first couple of weeks, Heinen has 16-18-34 totals, two goals shy of his career best.

"I think it's deserved," said Montgomery, who coached Heinen at the University of Denver. "He had to fight through a lot. When you go through a whole summer not knowing if you're going to have a contract or not, if you're going to play again in the NHL, it's a lot of uncertainty you have to deal with mentally. The perseverance mentally he had to come in here with, have a real good camp and stay here because of his commitment to wanting to be a Boston Bruin again and then getting the opportunity and flourishing — in any role. He started on the fourth line, I think he went to the third line. We introduced him to the penalty kill. He didn't penalty kill when he was here before. He's done everything we could ask of him."

Loose pucks

Montgomery had no further update on Justin Brazeau, reiterating that he's week-to-week with the upper body injury he suffered in Nashville....

Brad Marchand did not practice on Friday, taking a maintenance day.

"He got his 400th goal (on Thursday), he came in and said, 'I'm done,'" joked Montgomery.

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1306570 Boston Bruins

Danton Heinen Nominated For Masterton Trophy

Published 12 hours ago on April 5, 2024

By Jimmy Murphy



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 6, 2024

The Boston chapter of the Professional Hockey Writer's Association (PHWA) has nominated winger Danton Heinen as the Boston Bruins 2024 Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy nominee.

The Masterton Trophy is given to the player who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship, and dedication to hockey.

Danton Heinen went almost the whole offseason before eventually signing an amateur tryout with the Boston Bruins on Sept. 5. Heinen had a terrific training camp and preseason, but thanks to the Bruins' salary cap constraints entering the 2023-24 regular season, the team was unable to officially sign Heinen until Oct. 30 and eight games into the season. Since then, Heinen has become a useful, versatile two-way forward for his former head coach at the University of Denver and current Boston Bruins head coach, Jim Montgomery.

"I think it's deserved," Montgomery said of the Masterton nomination after practice on Friday. "He had to fight through a lot. When you go through a whole summer not knowing if you're going to have a contract or not, if you're going to play again in the NHL, it's a lot of uncertainty you have to deal with mentally. The perseverance mentally he had to come in here with, have a real good camp and stay here because of his commitment to wanting to be a Boston Bruin again and then getting the opportunity and flourishing in any role. He started on the fourth line, and I think he went to the third line. We introduced him to the penalty kill. He didn't penalty kill when he was here before. He's done everything we could ask of him."

One could easily argue that Heinen has done more than he's been asked to do by the Bruins, as he now finds himself playing as the two-way, high forward on the Bruins' high-octane second line with Pavel Zacha and David Pastrnak. Heinen had a goal and an assist in a 4-1 win over the Carolina Hurricanes on Thursday night and now has 16 goals and 18 assists in 69 games this season.

Heinen was drafted by the Boston Bruins in the fourth round (116th overall) of the 2014 NHL Entry Draft. The 6-foot-1, 188-pound winger played eight games for the Bruins as a late-season call-up for the team at the end of the 2016-17 season. From there, he went on to play 212 games with the Bruins for just under three seasons before being traded to the Anaheim Ducks for winger Nick Ritchie at the 2020 NHL Trade Deadline.

Heinen's best season with the Bruins was his rookie campaign in 2017-18, when he scored 16 goals and 31 assists in 77 games. Heinen followed that up with 11 goals and 23 assists the following season and then seven goals and 15 assists in 58 games during the 2019-20 season before being traded to the Ducks.

Danton Heinen had three goals and an assist in his first nine games with the Ducks after the trade. He then had seven goals and seven assists in 43 games during the 56-game shortened 2021 season, his last with the Ducks before signing with the Pittsburgh Penguins during the 2021 offseason. Heinen scored 18 goals to go with 15 assists in 76 games for the Penguins in the 2021-22 season and then eight goals and 14 assists in 65 games last season.

Heinen now has 86 goals and 124 assists for 210 points in 482 career NHL games.

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1306571 Boston Bruins

Why Didn't The Bruins Push Hard To Sign Collin Graf?

Published 16 hours ago on April 5, 2024

By Jimmy Murphy

As reported here more than once over the last two weeks (and before any other established news outlet did), the Boston Bruins were never in on highly-touted NCAA free agent Collin Graf.

On Thursday, the 21-year-old Lincoln, MA native and now-former Quinnipiac forward signed a three-year entry-level contract with the San Jose Sharks that carries a \$941,667 salary cap hit.

From the second that Graf and Quinnipiac lost a 5-4 overtime heartbreaker to Boston College in the Providence NCAA Regional Final, numerous so-called NHL insiders continued to say the Bruins were front-runners for Graf because he was from Massachusetts and played for the Boston Junior Bruins (who, by the way, have no affiliation to the Boston Bruins) and that if the Bruins didn't sign Graf, an Eastern Conference team would. However, prior to the Providence Regionals beginning last Friday, Boston Hockey Now reported that was not the case and confirmed that once again this past Tuesday.

"I don't know where people are getting this information. It just seems like they're making it up," a source close to the situation told Boston Hockey Now on Tuesday morning.

Well, in the latest 32 Thoughts Podcast, Sportsnet NHL Insider Elliott Friedman shed some light on why the Boston Bruins weren't going all in on Graf and why Graf wasn't exactly Bruins or bust. Friedman began by pointing out that – as also reported first by Boston Hockey Now – the Bruins were frontrunners for Graf's teammate Jacob Quillan, who ultimately signed with the Bruins' Atlantic Division and Original 6 rival, the Toronto Maple Leafs.

"Toronto and Boston went hard at Quillan," Friedman told co-host Jeff Marek. "That was an Atlantic Division rivalry on the ice and off. The Bruins really liked him; Toronto got him."

After explaining how 90 percent of the league had spoken to him at 'one time or another,' Friedman gave his take on why the highly-coveted prospect chose the Sharks.

"They have a lot of good prospects, but there's a chance for him to step in and play right away," Friedman said of the last-place Sharks, who are the favorites to win the NHL Draft Lottery next month. "Basically, they traded for Henry Thrun from Anaheim a year ago because Anaheim was so loaded on defense, San Jose could say, 'Hey, we got a spot for you,' and basically, the same thing happened here.

heard the same rumors that the East seemed to be preferable, but he definitely talked to Minnesota, and he definitely talked to Colorado and obviously San Jose – where someone said to me the night before, 'If you're talking about teams where he could be going, don't leave out the Sharks' – and ultimately he slept on it Wednesday night and chose them."

But why the seeming lack of interest in each other between Graf and the Bruins?

"One of the interesting things here is that there were reports that Boston wasn't really that interested," Friedman pointed out. "I was kind of surprised at that, and I kind of looked into it. I don't know if it was that Boston wasn't interested; I just think that Boston went hard after Quillan, so he was their preference, and also, someone said to me where Graf would be successful [with the Bruins] are kind of the roles that [David] Pastrnak is in, like on the powerplay and stuff like that, and as good as this young man might be, he ain't wrestling David Pastrnak out of a spot on the powerplay. So, someone explained it to me that way. It just wasn't the right fit, and I think the Bruins knew it, too, and they had a preference for Quillan."

Boston Hockey Now LOADED: 04.06.2024

1306572 Boston Bruins



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 6, 2024

Bruins Daily: Causing Chaos; Marchand 400; Lightning Strike

Published 20 hours ago on April 5, 2024

By Jimmy Murphy

The Boston Bruins continued to round into playoff form with a 4-1 win over the Hurricanes, and the Lightning stayed hot in Montreal.

Here's your Boston Hockey Now Bruins Daily:

BOSTON BRUINS

Boston Hockey Now: The Boston Bruins beat the Carolina Hurricanes 4-1 behind a great game from the line of Danton Heinen-Pavel Zacha-David Pastrnak.

Boston Hockey Now: The ten-game goalless streak is over, and that means 400 goals for Boston Bruins captain Brad Marchand.

Boston Hockey Now: Speaking of Marchand, the contract extension he signed in Sept. 2016, and the one David Pastrnak signed just over a year later may be the best contracts done by Bruins general manager Don Sweeney.

Boston Hockey Now: It's week-to-week for injured Bruins winger Justin Brazeau.

Boston Hockey Now: With new Boston Bruins winger Pat Maroon closing in on a return but Brazeau being out long-term, what does that mean for Bruins veteran winger James van Riemsdyk?

Boston Hockey Now: Since the March 8 NHL Trade Deadline, has there been a better NHL goalie than Bruins goalie Linus Ullmark?

Patriots Football Now: For the latest on the New England Patriots, check out our sister NFL site, Patriots Football Now!

ATLANTIC DIVISION

Montreal Hockey Now: With tons of salary cap space and ready to take the next step in their rebuild, a team to watch on the NHL trade market this offseason will be the Montreal Canadiens.

Detroit Hockey Now: If they don't make the 2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs, could former St. Louis Blues and Stanley Cup-winning head coach Craig Berube become the next head coach of the Detroit Red Wings?

Florida Hockey Now: Defenseman Aaron Ekblad will miss the rest of the regular season for the Florida Panthers.

Sportsnet: The Tampa Bay Lightning are en fuego and are now just two points behind the third-place Toronto Maple Leafs.

NHL

New Jersey Hockey Now: We got the much-anticipated fight between Matt Rempe and Kurtis MacDermid, but we also got a line brawl to start the game Wednesday night between the New York Rangers and the New Jersey Devils.

Philly Hockey Now: The Philadelphia Flyers are reportedly working on a 'longer-term' contract extension with 6-foot-7 goalie Ivan Fedotov.

Chicago Hockey Now: After drafting Connor Bedard first overall at the 2023 NHL Entry Draft, could they do the same with Boston University star freshman center Macklin Celebrini?

Colorado Hockey Now: Congrats to former Bruins winger Chris Wagner, who signed a one-year, \$775,000 contract extension with the Colorado Avalanche.

San Jose Hockey Now: My Eye Test Podcast co-host Pierre McGuire and I joined SJHN writers Sheng Peng and Keegan McNally to discuss the rebuild of the San Jose Sharks.

NCAA Hockey

USCHO: Boston University, Boston College, Michigan, and Denver have advanced to the Frozen Four in the 2024 NCAA Hockey Championship tournament.

Pro Hockey Rumors: Plenty of NHL prospects have entered the NCAA Hockey Transfer Portal.

Boston Hockey Now LOADED: 04.06.2024

1306674 St Louis Blues

Looking back: The night the Blues celebrated with the President's Trophy

Dave Luecking

On April 5, 2000, the St. Louis Blues wrapped up the best record in the NHL and celebrated with the President's Trophy. The team would lose to the San Jose Sharks in the first round of the playoffs that season.

Here is our original coverage:

In an atypical performance, the Blues won an atypical prize Wednesday night at Kiel Center.

For the first time in their 33-year history, the Blues, a team renowned for its mediocrity, clinched the NHL's regular-season championship, winning the Presidents' Trophy by beating the Calgary Flames 6-5. Captain Chris Pronger called the Blues' weak defensive performance an "aberration." It was only the fourth time all season, and the first since Dec. 27, that the stingy Blues had allowed five goals. That is more than double their league-best goals-against average of 1.91.

Their defensive lapses didn't bother the Blues' largest crowd of the season, 20,361, which reveled in the thrilling come-from-behind victory and reveled in the Blues' first title of any kind in the last 13 years, since they won the Norris Division title in 1987.

Captain Chris Pronger, with alternate captains Pierre Turgeon and Al MacInnis as well as coach Joel Quenneville, accepted the Presidents' Trophy from NHL vice president Claude Loiselle. Then, the Blues posed for a team picture.

They didn't take the Presidents' Trophy for a skate. Pronger set it back on a table at center ice.

"I didn't want to carry it off; it might get broke," Pronger said. "It has a lot of parts that can break. I don't think that big tin one can break too bad. You can dent it pretty good."

That big tin one would be the Stanley Cup, which is the big prize. As Pronger noted, the Presidents' Trophy is "for the regular season. We have a bigger thing to go after."

The regular-season title, which the Blues wrapped up with two games remaining, is just a step in that direction.

"It's a nice achievement," Quenneville said, "but there's bigger and better things down the road. It'll be a great challenge to get there."

FLAMES BLUES

The Flames, who were playing to stay alive for a playoff berth, presented a pretty good challenge on Wednesday night, playing with the fierceness and intensity that is the trademark of coach Brian Sutter, the former Blues player and coach.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Led by Marc Savard's career-best four-goal game, the Flames challenged the Blues for every puck and at every turn, twice overcoming one-goal deficits to take a 4-3 lead going into the third period.

After being outshot 17-5 and outscored 2-1 in the second period, the Blues got a rare tongue-lashing from Quenneville during intermission.

"He wasn't too happy," winger Scott Pellerin said.

Quenneville said "it looked like the ice was tilted in their favor in the second period. If I didn't say something, somebody would have."

The Blues' No. 1 line of Turgeon, Pellerin and Scott Young did its speaking on the ice in the third period, scoring three goals.

Pellerin, the game's No. 2 star, set up Young's tying goal at 3 minutes 56 seconds, then sprung Turgeon for a breakaway and the go-ahead goal at 10:43. After Savard tied the score 5-5 with his fourth goal of the night, on a power-play at 12:56, Pellerin scored the winner at 14:50.

Pellerin went hard to the net and inadvertently kicked the puck between the pads of Calgary goalie Freddie Brathwaite on Turgeon's rebound. Referees Kevin Maguire and Dan Marouelli called for a video review, but the goal stood because Brathwaite actually had pushed the rebound into Pellerin's skate as the Blues skated hard to the net.

"I didn't give a motion to kick it," Pellerin said. "I just kind of stopped, but I knew it went off my foot. I was waiting to see how they would call it. I could have gone either way, I guess. But I didn't kick it on purpose."

Pellerin, the game's second star, finished with a goal and two assists, all in the third period. Turgeon had two goals, and an assist on the winner. Young, who left the game with a shoulder injury, finished with a goal and two assists.

Pronger had a goal and three assists. Jamal Mayers, playing in place of scratched Lubos Bartecko on the Slovak line with Michal Handzus and Ladislav Nagy, scored the Blues' other goal, his first goal in 23 games.

In addition to No. 1 star Savard, Jeff Shantz scored the other goal for Calgary, which fell to 31-39-10-5 for 77 points.

The Blues improved to 51-18-11-0 for 113 points, a franchise record in the atypical year.

St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 04.06.2024

1306675 St Louis Blues

Blues strong showing at 5 on 5 not enough to overcome Juuse Saros' 44 saves in loss to Predators

Matthew DeFranks

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The Blues were used to seeing games like Thursday night's 6-3 loss in Nashville.

They were used to a goaltender stealing a game from a deserved opponent, and a hot power play that masked deficiencies at 5 on 5. Across the second half of the season, they were accustomed to those views. It just normally happened the other way around.

The Predators rode strong special teams and 44 saves from Juuse Saros to beat the Blues, damaging further their already thin playoff dreams.

"I thought we were the better team for most of the night," Blues forward Robert Thomas said. "It's a frustrating result obviously. I think we did a lot of really good things and just couldn't find a way to bury on our chances."

St. Louis is now seven points behind the Kings for the last wild card spot in the Western Conference after Los Angeles beat the Sharks on

Thursday night. Now, any combination of six points lost by the Blues or gained by the Kings would eliminate St. Louis from postseason contention. That could happen as soon as Sunday with two more Blues losses and one Kings win.

Filip Forsberg scored twice for the Predators, who pulled away late thanks to two empty-net goals after Jordan Kyrrou's 6-on-4 goal with 2:15 left in the game brought St. Louis within one goal at 4-3. Brandon Saad scored for the sixth time in seven games, and Jake Neighbours potted his 27th of the season on the rush.

"I don't think there was guys that didn't come to compete here tonight," Blues interim coach Drew Bannister said. "I thought our guys came and they put a good effort in, but at the end of the day, it wasn't good enough."

The Blues were the better team at 5 on 5 on Thursday night.

They outshot Nashville 31-21 at 5 on 5, and 47-31 overall. According to Natural Stat Trick, the Blues accumulated 3.08 expected goals at 5 on 5, which was the second-most this season. In the first period, the Blues pumped 20 shots on goal, the most of any first period for them this season. Analytics site MoneyPuck calculated that the Blues would win this game two-thirds of the time given the quality of chances both produced and surrendered.

"I think we were on the puck a lot," Thomas said. "We created a lot of chances off turnovers, and our forecheck was good. Transition was good. O-zone play was good. You get that amount of looks every night, you're going to win a lot of games. That's all I really got."

On the other end, Jordan Binnington made 25 saves, but likely would have wanted a mulligan on a few goals Thursday night.

Roman Josi's goal just 31 seconds into the game snuck through his pads on the rush. Forsberg's power-play goal early in the second period beat him five-hole, though the puck might have been deflected by Thomas' stick upon release. Michael McCarron's third-period goal after a Torey Krug turnover slipped underneath Binnington's right arm, and that goal turned out to be the game-winner.

Binnington's play is one of the main reasons the Blues are even this close in the postseason chase to begin with. Entering Thursday, he had a .924 save percentage in 28 games since Christmas. He's among the league leaders in goals saved above expected, and could even receive down-ballot votes from general managers in Vezina Trophy voting.

Saros, meanwhile, has also picked it up as the Predators became one of the hottest teams in the league across the last month and a half. In his last 17 games, including his shining performance on Thursday, Saros has a .924 save percentage and 2.28 goals against average.

"The last two games, I thought everyone came ready to go," Blues defenseman Justin Faulk said. "The group played well. We know where we're at, and we know what we have to do. By no means are we not going to continue on and go into every game we're going to expect to win, and try and put ourselves in a position to get two points every night."

Saros came up big in the first period on a goal-mouth scramble that included Sammy Blais, Kevin Hayes and Nick Leddy. His most impressive save was in the second period, denying Alexey Toropchenko's bid on the backdoor with a lunging right arm save.

The 47 shots faced, and 44 saves were both season-highs for Saros.

"We just came out faster, trying to generate," Faulk said. "We have it in the o-zone, create some chances. They got a few things off the rush, little minor breakdowns. I don't think they were able to get a ton on us there. I thought we controlled the game more at 5 on 5. That's what you need to do in a situation like this."

Bannister: "I thought physically, especially on the forecheck in the offensive zone, we were able to do some good things and create offense from it."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Moral victories are hollow at this point in the season for the Blues with their hopes dangling precariously after three losses in the last five games that followed a 6-1-0 stretch.

"Special teams didn't go our way," Faulk said. "I was pleased with our effort, giving ourselves a chance. It's tough right now. It's two points we thought we needed."

St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 04.06.2024

1306703 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Power Rankings: Surges and slides cause late-season chaos

Sean Gentile and Dom Luszczyszyn

Apr 5, 2024

Another week means another Power Rankings from your favorite Power Rankers. This is a perfect list of teams in perfect order.

We're two weeks from the finish line, and that means the questions around the NHL are piling up. Who will win the scoring race? Does anyone want a wild-card spot in the East? How much lower can the Calgary Flames sink? We don't have all the answers, but we can talk about it the same way we always do — snarkily, with some math sprinkled in. That's the Rankings Boys guarantee.

Enjoy this one, because before you know it, your Friday mornings will be filled with sunshine instead of random hockey thoughts from us. Who wants that?

1. Dallas Stars, 48-19-9

Last week: 2

Sean's ranking: 1

Dom's ranking: 1

That's now eight straight wins for Our Dallas Stars with the last one being the most impressive — a 5-0 romp over the Edmonton Oilers. The Stars quietly lead the league in goal differential and are really starting to look like the class of the West with a real shot at the Presidents' Trophy.

The big story, though, is that Jake Oettinger is starting to heat up at the right time. After being pulled against the Devils in mid-March, Oettinger has posted six straight games with an above-.900 save percentage. That's his longest streak all season, and he allowed just seven goals in those six games thanks to a .955 save percentage. Back-to-back shutouts this week certainly help with that.

The Stars have been elite all season, but it's no shock they look at their best now with Oettinger looking at his best. If this is what Dallas can expect from him in the playoffs, the Stars may just be the team to beat.

2. New York Rangers, 51-21-4

Last week: 3

Sean's ranking: 2

Dom's ranking: 2

"Team-building exercise" aside, it's been a status quo week for the Rangers. They stomped out the Devils' playoff hopes a few days after failing to do the same against Pittsburgh, and they're still first in the league in points. Friday's game against Detroit might determine whether they stay put.

In the meantime, were you aware that Adam Fox is ninth in points since the All-Star break with 19? Because he is. That's more than Roman Josi, Quinn Hughes and every other defenseman in the league. Two of them came against the Devils in 29:49 of ice time. Standard stuff from Fox, who's fifth among defensemen in points/60 overall.

3. Colorado Avalanche, 48-22-6

Last week: 4

Sean's ranking: 3

Dom's ranking: 3

Not to spark a goalie controversy for one of the league's best teams a few weeks before the playoffs start, but ...

This season, Alexandar Georgiev has a .901 save percentage and has saved 0.1 goals above expected per game. Justus Annunen, on the other hand, has a .928 save percentage and has saved 0.8 goals above expected per game. We're not saying anything here, and it's not exactly an apples-to-apples comparison given workloads and opponents faced.

But!

That's a much larger-than-expected chasm between starter and backup, one that should make Avalanche fans just a little nervous. Annunen was brilliant against the Wild on Thursday night, stopping 44 of 46 shots, only adding to the disparity.

4. Boston Bruins, 45-17-15

Last week: 7

Sean's ranking: 4

Dom's ranking: 5

It's tough not to like Boston's goalies. This week, Linus Ullmark and Jeremy Swayman have both posted huge wins (Ullmark's shutout against Nashville, Swayman's 28-save game against Carolina). The playoff net still feels like it'll be Ullmark's to lose — he's fourth in the league in save percentage since the trade deadline (.950) and fifth in GSAX — but Swayman's last couple of starts were a welcome return to form.

Most importantly, Ullmark pulled into a tie with Swayman in the scoring race. Both have one assist.

5. Carolina Hurricanes, 47-22-7

Last week: 1

Sean's ranking: 5

Dom's ranking: 4

It might be time for some light concern over Andrei Svechnikov. Since March 12, he has three points in 12 games and the worst expected goals share on the Hurricanes (40 percent), and Carolina has been outscored 8-1 with him on the ice. Is it worth reuniting him with Sebastian Aho at the cost of Aho's chemistry with Jake Guentzel? We'll see.

The cherry on top: In that 12-game span, Svechnikov is tied with Darnell Nurse for the league lead in penalties with eight, including a double-minor in an ugly Thursday night loss to Boston.

6. Vancouver Canucks, 47-21-8

Last week: 8

Sean's ranking: 6

Dom's ranking: 6

It's been nice to see Conor Garland get a chance in Vancouver's top six over the last few weeks — first with Elias Pettersson and now with J.T. Miller. Over that stretch, Garland has been on the ice for 64 percent of the expected goals, outscoring teams 7-2. Both are among the team leaders.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Garland has been a strong play-driver going back to his days in Arizona, so it's been odd seeing him often relegated to the middle six since joining the Canucks. Or worse, being offered up as trade bait. He's been excellent this season, and it's great to see him rewarded for that.

7. Edmonton Oilers, 45-24-5

Last week: 5

Sean's ranking: 7

Dom's ranking: 7

The last time Connor McDavid didn't have a point in a game, he followed up with three. The time before that, he followed up with six. In other words, Colorado should probably expect to have him hit the 100-assist mark against them on Friday night. It's simple math. He's at 97 on the season, by the way. It's a big deal, as Sean McIndoe covered.

8. Florida Panthers, 48-24-5

Last week: 6

Sean's ranking: 8

Dom's ranking: 8

Turn off the concern-o-meter, the Panthers are going to be OK. Sometimes all it takes is a date with one of the league's worst teams to get things back in motion. The Panthers ran over the Senators on Thursday to the tune of a 6-0 scoreline, the kind of decisive win that can get a team back on track.

That was an especially big game for Sergei Bobrovsky — a nice bounce-back shutout after getting pulled in his last game against the Leafs. He's been ice-cold lately, which only exacerbated the issues in front of him.

9. Tampa Bay Lightning, 43-26-7

Last week: 12

Sean's ranking: 9

Dom's ranking: 9

Remember when it seriously looked like the Lightning might miss the playoffs? These days, they're looking like a first-round nightmare. Tampa Bay is 24-9-2 over its last 35 games, good for the fourth-best points percentage in the league during the timeframe. Spooky!

One thing to note: Matt Dumba hasn't looked a whole lot better on a stronger team in a reduced role. In 11 games, his 42 percent expected goal rate is five percentage points worse than what it was with the Coyotes and he's also been outscored by a 7-3 margin. The rest of the team might be cooking, but his addition on the blue line has been a net negative.

One other thing to note — this time on the positive side: Nikita Kucherov had another multi-point night (shocker) to add to his scoring lead, and the two assists he had gave him 90 on the season. He could feasibly hit 100 assists himself. After not happening in over three decades, it might happen twice in the same season. Wild.

10. Toronto Maple Leafs, 43-23-9

Last week: 9

Sean's ranking: 11

Dom's ranking: 10

A light week plus a loss to the team chasing them has put the Leafs a little closer to a wild-card spot. Mitch Marner's return for the stretch run will help, though it's worth wondering whether he should immediately link back up with Auston Matthews.

Matthews, as you'd expect from an MVP-caliber player, has worked well with Max Domi and Tyler Bertuzzi. Keeping Domi on Matthews' left wing, though, would open up a hole at 3C ... unless Sheldon Keefe does something wild.

11. Vegas Golden Knights, 42-25-8

Last week: 11

Sean's ranking: 10

Dom's ranking: 11

Jonathan Marchessault has scored in his last two games, giving him 41 goals on the season and nine since the All-Star break, tied for 10th in the league. His production is part of the reason they can afford to wait on Tomáš Hertl, who won't play on Friday despite some mid-week rumblings. When he does make his debut, it's hard to imagine it coming at the cost of the Ivan Barbashev–Jack Eichel–Marchessault line.

The Barbashev–Eichel–Marchessault line is in playoff form.

That's bad news for the rest of the Western Conference.

— Jesse Granger (@JesseGranger_) April 3, 2024

12. Winnipeg Jets, 46-24-6

Last week: 13

Sean's ranking: 13

Dom's ranking: 12

The Jets seem to have put the train back on the tracks, winning twice after a six-game skid and clinching a playoff spot on Thursday. The funny part about the losing streak is that it probably had zero effect on Connor Hellebuyck's Vezina stranglehold. He still leads full-time starters in save percentage (.920) with the fifth-most GSAs in five seasons (35.9), and his workload is as impressive as ever; four starts in Winnipeg's last six will put him at 60.

13. Nashville Predators, 44-28-4

Last week: 10

Sean's ranking: 12

Dom's ranking: 13

We were preparing to plan a U2 concert to cancel for the Predators. Things were looking rough after three straight losses, but a 6-3 win against the Blues is enough to set things straight.

That lets us focus back on the underlying trend: These Predators are still a wagon. Since the trade deadline, they're the league's best five-on-five team, earning 60 percent of the expected goals and 62 percent of the actual goals. Go back further to the All-Star break, and Nashville is still top five. We've said it before and we'll say it again — Andrew Brunette deserves all the credit in the world for how this season is going. This team is significantly better than anyone could have imagined.

14. Los Angeles Kings, 40-25-11

Last week: 14

Sean's ranking: 14

Dom's ranking: 14

Is Pierre-Luc Dubois finally starting to come around? His three-assist performance against Seattle on Wednesday was his first three-point game all season and gives him nine points in his last 10 games. The Kings' path to contention goes through their immense depth, and Dubois was supposed to be the big piece. If he figures things out in time, the Kings are going to be a daunting first-round opponent.

15. St. Louis Blues, 40-32-4

Last week: 15

Sean's ranking: 15

Dom's ranking: 15

A 6-3 loss to Nashville on Thursday feels like one last bucket of water on the Blues' playoff hopes. Before that, they'd been on an 8-2-1 run. One



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bit of good news for St. Louis: Jordan Kyrou has now posted seven straight positive Game Scores (eight points, 80 percent goal share, 61 percent expected goal share). A strong, consistent finish to his season would be huge.

16. New York Islanders, 34-27-15

Last week: 21

Sean's ranking: 16

Dom's ranking: 16

They're probably not getting as much pub as some of their competition in the East, but the Islanders are effectively going about their business. They scored the final two goals against Columbus on Thursday, winning 4-2 — their fifth victory in seven games — and putting themselves in the second wild-card spot.

On March 21, of course, they'd lost six straight. In a normal season, in a normal division, that would've been enough to take them out of the picture. Now, though, thanks to timely production from their best players (Bo Horvat, Mathew Barzal, Noah Dobson) and some solid goaltending, they're in the driver's seat.

17. Pittsburgh Penguins, 35-30-11

Last week: 22

Sean's ranking: 17

Dom's ranking: 17

Just when everybody decided to give up on the Penguins for good, they sucked us back in. Thursday's win in Washington gives the Penguins points in seven straight games, five of those being wins.

Just imagine if they didn't lose 10 of their previous 13 games. Or if they spent any time fixing their power play. Or if they added any scoring to a bottom six full of cardio merchants. Or if they were able to hold even a few of the multitude of multi-goal leads they blew in third periods. Hell, imagine if they didn't have to trade Jake Guentzel because of all that. Woof. Thanks to how bad everyone else is, they still have a shot. And boy, would it be something to see them have to face off against Guentzel's Canes in the first round. Still, it's hard not to have a feeling that we know what happens next — exactly what's happened to this team all season.

18. Philadelphia Flyers, 36-29-11

Last week: 17

Sean's ranking: 19

Dom's ranking: 19

In their last five games, all losses, the Flyers have been outscored 23-11 and are dead last in goals percentage (34.12). There's stuff to like about their five-on-five play — they're sixth in expected goals share in that span — but the actual goals aren't coming in any capacity, the goaltending has been shaky and they're on the verge of slipping out of a playoff spot.

You also may be wondering which players are currently annoying John Tortorella. In an overtime loss to the Islanders on Thursday, according to Kevin Kurz, "Travis Konecny was benched for the first seven minutes of the third period, while Joel Farabee, who started on the fourth line, sat for a long stretch in the second." Plan accordingly.

19. Washington Capitals, 36-29-10

Last week: 16

Sean's ranking: 18

Dom's ranking: 20

Just when we were ready to believe that a team as bad as the Capitals might make the playoffs, they went ahead and showed that they might be as bad as we thought. That's four straight losses now, three decisively so, and the last against the rival Penguins chasing them in the standings.

The vibes right now simply could not be worse. But if we've learned anything about the East playoff race, we know the door is still wide open. The Capitals' four-game losing streak will probably be someone else's next week.

20. Detroit Red Wings, 37-30-8

Last week: 20

Sean's ranking: 20

Dom's ranking: 18

The Red Wings are playing meaningful games in April. That in and of itself marks this season as one they can build on — no matter what happens next. They're still hanging in the playoff race and have as good a shot as any of the other teams competing for a spot.

The Red Wings just need more efforts like the one they had in Tampa Bay. At five-on-five, it was the first time they won the expected goal battle against a playoff team since doing so against Tampa Bay on Jan. 21, a streak of 13 straight games.

21. Minnesota Wild, 36-30-9

Last week: 19

Sean's ranking: 21

Dom's ranking: 21

When the Wild's playoff hopes meet their mathematical end, it'll be for a fairly simple reason: They can't beat teams that are actually good. Thursday's loss to Colorado was their ninth in their last 10 games against teams ahead of them in the standings (via Michael Russo). If you're expecting to make up ground under those conditions, good luck. Bright side? If they drop two more spots, they'll have a shot at winning the No. 1 pick.

22. New Jersey Devils, 36-36-4

Last week: 18

Sean's ranking: 22

Dom's ranking: 22

Whatever shot the Devils had is completely gone now. Blowing a 3-1 third-period lead to the Penguins and getting completely dominated by the Rangers will do that.

It's a depressing end for the season's most disappointing team — one that nearly everyone in the hockey world seemed to think was next up in the contender's circle. Instead, they delivered an absolute dud and really only have themselves to blame. With some internal growth, the return of Dougie Hamilton and maybe even a new coach, the team can get right back on track. But that doesn't change what an incredible missed opportunity this season was. Even the best cores only get so many chances to contend, and the Devils just wasted one.

23. Buffalo Sabres, 36-35-5

Last week: 23

Sean's ranking: 23

Dom's ranking: 23

With three big-time left-handed defenders, the Sabres have some long-term decisions to make regarding how best to deploy Rasmus Dahlin, Owen Power and Bowen Byram. Getting all three their minutes means someone likely playing on their off-side. That started with a Dahlin-Byram pairing, but the Sabres have since shifted to Dahlin-Power. And folks, it looks pretty damn good. The Sabres experimented with the idea a bit last season, but the depth behind them wasn't there. Byram changes that. It's only three games, but in that time, Dahlin and Power have earned 70 percent of the expected goals.

24. Seattle Kraken, 31-31-13



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Last week: 24

Sean's ranking: 25

Dom's ranking: 24

The Kraken were eliminated from playoff contention on Wednesday night. That's not much of a surprise; some amount of regression from last season was inevitable. Still, it's worth noting just how hard they've been hit. Jared McCann (19 shooting percentage to 14), Matty Beniers (16.2 to 10.7), Eeli Tolvanen 16.5 to 10.9) and Andrei Burakovsky (12.4 to 7.9) have all gotten burned particularly bad.

25. Montreal Canadiens, 29-34-12

Last week: 27

Sean's ranking: 24

Dom's ranking: 25

With 13 points in his last 12 games, Juraj Slafkovsky is blossoming into the impact player Montreal expected. He's been excellent in the season's second half and an even bigger breakout is possible next season.

Slafkovsky is eligible for an extension on July 1, and while the Jack Hughes deal (\$64 million over eight years) may seem outlandish to some, it's not far off where his current market value lies during the timeframe. He's not an \$8 million player yet, but he's only going to get better, and the cap is only going to rise.

26. Calgary Flames, 34-36-5

Last week: 25

Sean's ranking: 26

Dom's ranking: 26

The Flames have lost 10 of 13, but their great tank battle is about to hit some speed bumps. Calgary closes the season with two games against the Sharks, one against the Ducks and one against the Coyotes. If they keep falling down the standings, they'll have earned it.

27. Ottawa Senators, 33-38-4

Last week: 26

Sean's ranking: 27

Dom's ranking: 27

Dom and Shayna just went deep on the Sens' problems, so there's no need to belabor the point, but it must be noted that Joonas Korpi has struck again. He's the single biggest reason Ottawa has fallen so dramatically short of expectations, and he turned in another stinker on Thursday night. Florida scored four times on their 13 shots, and Korpi didn't make it out of the first period. He'll be at 20 goals allowed above expected before long.

28. Arizona Coyotes, 31-39-5

Last week: 28

Sean's ranking: 28

Dom's ranking: 28

The Coyotes have gone 12-25-3 since the calendar flipped. You're excused if you've stopped paying attention — and you've also missed some strong play from Dylan Guenther in his return to the NHL. The No. 9 pick in 2021, recalled on Jan. 6, has 25 points (13G, 12A) in his first 38 games and is hovering around the 50 percent mark in both actual and expected goal share. He turns 21 next week.

29. Columbus Blue Jackets, 25-39-12

Last week: 29

Sean's ranking: 29

Dom's ranking: 29

With an assist on Thursday night, Zach Werenski hit a career-high with his 49th point, one away from 50. That's a nice milestone for a great defenseman, one he would've hit a few times already if not for injuries always getting in the way. It's a real shame the Blue Jackets have had such a difficult time finding success over the past few years because they have a really good one back there in Werenski. Who knows what his point peak could be with some actual talent around him?

30. Anaheim Ducks, 25-47-4

Last week: 30

Sean's ranking: 30

Dom's ranking: 30

There haven't been many reasons for optimism this year in Anaheim, but Olen Zellweger putting up a three-point night earlier this week certainly qualifies. Anaheim's biggest problem for the past few seasons has been its back end, and while Zellweger doesn't immediately solve things, his being a difference-maker would certainly help. That game against Calgary offered a small glimmer of hope that things might get better next season. "Small" and "might" are the key words there.

31. Chicago Blackhawks, 22-48-5

Last week: 31

Sean's ranking: 31

Dom's ranking: 31

In these parts, we rarely talk about Blackhawks other than Connor Bedard. That's by design — but it's probably time to point out the production they're getting from Philipp Kurashev. It comes with some asterisks: Somebody has to play with Bedard, and their defensive impacts together have been generally horrific. Still, offensive chemistry with the franchise player (50 points, 18 in his last 15) counts for something.

32. San Jose Sharks, 17-50-8

Last week: 32

Sean's ranking: 32

Dom's ranking: 32

If you're curious about what San Jose's top line is looking like these days, it's Mikael Granlund centering Fabian Zetterlund and Klim Kostin. It doesn't get grimmer than that, but to their credit, they are putting up numbers since the trade deadline. Granlund has 13 points in 12 games, Zetterlund has nine and Kostin has eight. It's an especially nice story for Kostin considering he had only four points in his previous 33 games with the Red Wings.

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The Athletic / LeBrun: NHL on alert with Lightning looking like Cup contenders again — 'They simply know how to win'

By Pierre LeBrun

TORONTO — There's a narrative the Tampa Bay Lightning are eager to squash.

It's that their window to win is closed. Or closing rapidly, at least.



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And, I mean, there's no denying that Father Time is undefeated in the salary-cap era, although the Washington Capitals and Pittsburgh Penguins are going down swinging, that's for sure.

But the Bolts don't feel ready to hand in their penthouse keys after years as one of the NHL's true heavyweights.

An 11-2-1 record since March 1 has solidified the Lightning's playoff positioning, and internally, it's also fortified the preseason belief that they're still among the elite teams in the NHL and aren't done taking swings at deep playoff runs.

Since the midway point of Tampa Bay's season, on Jan. 8, the Bolts have the third-best points percentage in the NHL (.714), behind only the Carolina Hurricanes (.722) and Dallas Stars (.737).

For one, the Big Cat is back. Star goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy struggled after returning from back surgery earlier this season, but he leads the NHL in wins since Jan. 1 (21). Scary.

Nikita Kucherov is having a spectacular, Hart Trophy-worthy season. Brayden Point has gone next level in the second half.

The championship core is doing its thing again.

"They are a team full of championship pedigree from top to bottom," Toronto Maple Leafs general manager Brad Treliving told *The Athletic*. "They have champions' standards and habits and a clear understanding of the level required when the calendar turns to April and beyond. They simply know how to win when it matters most, and that is a powerful trait.

"Besides their immense talent, they have the championship experience of understanding all nuances of each situation. Understanding the ebbs and flows of momentum and an elite knowledge of the gamesmanship required within the game. They have the earned calluses formed from championship runs."

The question mark, for me at least, is whether the Lightning have enough depth underneath that core to go four rounds.

The supporting cast has changed dramatically in the past few years. Gone from that 2019-20 Stanley Cup roster are Ondrej Palat, Yann Gourde, Blake Coleman, Alex Killorn, Barclay Goodrow, Ryan MacDonagh and Luke Schenn, among others.

Lightning head coach Jon Cooper on Wednesday morning remarked that there's a team picture in the team gym from the outdoor game in Nashville in February 2022 and, "Of the 23 guys (in that picture), there's only eight guys left."

"That was two years ago," Cooper said. "There's a good core here, but there's a lot of new guys. You know sometimes it takes a little time for the guys to mesh. But what I do know is that when it got time to get going, these guys have kicked it in.

"We still have work left (to clinch a playoff spot), there's no doubt. But I like what they've done here over the past month."

There's an argument to be made that Cooper is actually doing some of his best coaching ever with this group, meshing all the new faces with the core into a unit now that looks playoff-ready. I doubt he'll garner many Jack Adams Award votes, though. People just take that for granted with him.

But Cooper and his staff have had to coach this team back into gear, especially on the defensive side of the puck.

Our stats expert Dom Luszczyszyn wrote this of the Lightning in his 16 stats column Thursday, noting that offense has been their strength all season while the defense has come on after a tough start:

"The defensive zone has been a major problem all year, one they've done well to clean up lately, allowing just 2.1 expected goals against per 60 at five-on-five. That's the third-best mark in the league. Couple that with a penalty kill that has outscored teams 2-1 since the deadline and the Lightning are looking like a potential defensive force again."

A defensive force again? Yeah, that might make a few Eastern Conference teams nervous.

"We had to clean up some things," captain Steven Stamkos said before Wednesday's 4-1 win over the Maple Leafs. "I think we've played much better away from the puck defensively. It's all the cliches at this time of the year, but it is true — we got away with that a little bit throughout the course of the year, but I think we've really done a great job of focusing on those areas and you see the results.

"And then you gain some confidence and things start clicking. We'd like to continue that."

The perception that the Lightning have become an old team is also not supported by facts.

For one, of their top nine forwards, top four defensemen and goalie, only two are over 30: Steven Stamkos and Victor Hedman.

Kucherov is 30, Vasilevskiy 29, Point 28, Anthony Cirelli 26, Erik Cernak 26 and Mikhail Sergachev 25.

As shown in the graphic below from *Dom*, looking at the average ages for the 19 likeliest playoff teams through Wednesday, the Lightning are younger than some elite teams, a bit older than others, but by and large, sandwiched right in the middle of top rosters, some of whom don't carry the same perception as Tampa Bay does of getting old.

There's also this very simple reality: The Lightning went to three consecutive Stanley Cup finals from 2019-20 through 2021-22. That's a lot of playoff hockey over three years. The most grueling kind.

So when they were knocked out in the opening round of the playoffs last spring by the Maple Leafs, if there was any silver lining at all, it was that the core finally got a so-called "normal" offseason to re-energize their tired bodies.

I asked Cooper if he can see the result of that this year. His answer tells you everything you need to know about the culture of the Lightning.

"I can't sit here and say that," he said. "I think there's an accumulation of games over time, so there was a stretch there where we were getting zero break. But I remember it was devastating when we ended up losing to Toronto. I don't think there was one guy that was sitting in there saying, 'Oh, my God, thank goodness we got a big break.' It was quite the opposite.

"You have to look at it as time in the league. Not everybody is blessed to get to play 15, 20 years. Guys get to play six, seven, eight years, and in that time, you've got to hope you're on a team that makes the playoffs. There's some guys in this league that haven't made the playoffs. And they don't get to have that experience. We've had that experience. But you cherish it, because you just don't know when you get to go back.

"That's a big thing for us: Embrace every time you're going to make the playoffs, because you never know when it's going to happen again."

I suspect it's going to happen at least a few more times yet with this core.

And in the here and now, they might be quite the challenge in the first round as an "underdog" seed.

"Window closing?" said Don Sweeney, GM of the Bruins, one possible first-round Lightning opponent. "That is dangerous for anyone to be saying to that group!"

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The Athletic / Finding positive thoughts for 11 of the NHL's non-playoff teams



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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By Sean McIndoe

It's April, meaning there are three types of teams. The good ones have already locked up their playoff spot, and are playing out the string with an eye on seeding and home ice, waiting to find out who they'll face in the first round. Other teams are still fighting for their invitation, with every game down the stretch feeling like a make-or-break contest where every moment matters.

And then, there are the loser teams.

Sorry, maybe there's a kinder way to put that, but you know who I mean. These teams have no shot at the playoffs, even with weeks left on the schedule. They're out, and in most cases they've been out for a long time. It's a miserable time to be a fan of one of those teams – the lottery is still a month away, the draft is even further, you're not sure if you're even supposed to want your team to win anymore, and everyone else seems to be having way more fun than you are.

It's rough. And I'm here to help. So today, let's try our annual-ish exercise of coming up with some positivity for the truly hopeless teams. Using the playoff odds from Dom's model and MoneyPuck, we can find 11 teams that both models agree have less than a one percent chance at the postseason right now. That's about as low as we can go, and it means we get to pretend that teams like the Penguins, Blues and (just barely) the Wild are still alive. You have to be pretty bad to be completely out of it with weeks left to play. And these teams are indeed quite bad.

Just not so bad that we can't pump their tires a little bit. Let's get positive, as we work through all 11 teams in order, from my picks for the easiest to feel good about down to the most challenging.

11. New Jersey Devils

The negative: In a year where everyone was expecting another step forward and some were even picking them to win the Stanley Cup, the Devils had one of those seasons where everything went wrong. It cost Lindy Ruff his job, and Wednesday's fight-filled loss to the Rangers officially moved them below our "no hope" cutoff.

Positive thought #1: The Devils are going to be easy. They're stacked with good young players, from Jack Hughes up front to Luke Hughes and Simon Nemec on the blue line. There are plenty of playoff-bound teams that would love to swap talent with the Devils. They'll be fine.

Positive thought #2: Injuries are part of hockey, but the Devils had them worse than most. Missing Dougie Hamilton for most of the season was devastating, and they were also without Jack Hughes, Nico Hischier and Timo Meier for long stretches. Give them league-average health and they're at least in the race. As I said, the Devils are almost too easy for this exercise.

Positive thought #3: The big problem all year was the goaltending, and they addressed that at the deadline with... huh, OK, maybe this won't be that easy. Still, even as they whiffed on Jacob Markstrom or Jusse Saros or Jacques Plante or whoever else the armchair GMs thought they should get, Jake Allen's been OK, and they've beaten teams like Dallas, Toronto and Winnipeg with him in net. Imagine what they'll look like when they have a legitimate stud back there after Tom Fitzgerald gets to work this summer.

OK, the Devils were a nice warmup. Let's start ratcheting up the difficulty...

10. Chicago Blackhawks

The negative: Year one of the Connor Bedard era may see them end up even worse than they were last season, which is really something since they spent all last year actively trying to lose.

Positive thought #1: Come on. You have Connor Bedard. Nobody feels sorry for you, and no reasonable Blackhawks fan is sulking right now. Bedard is amazing, he'll be ridiculous in a few more years, and you've already locked in the single toughest piece of a Cup winner to find. We all hate you guys a little bit. Fine, sorry, that was wrong. It's not a little bit.

Positive thought #2: While it's pretty clear that contending wasn't the plan this year, it's worth remembering this team did go out and get Taylor Hall and Corey Perry in the offseason, then lost both early in the year. Maybe all that cost them was a few draft picks at the deadline, but it's worth factoring in. Add a healthy Hall to a veteran core that includes an improved Seth Jones and a surprising Petr Mrazek, and there could be something here to build on.

Positive thought #3: I'm not saying you're going to win the lottery and get Macklin Celebrini, but I'm also not not saying it. But even if you don't, you'll have a top-five pick to pad an already excellent prospect pool. Kyle Davidson knows what he's doing, and while this is the easy part, he's acing it. It just happens that acing it means losing a lot... for now.

9. Montreal Canadiens

The negative: The once-proud Canadiens will miss the playoffs by a mile yet again, and might post their third straight last-place finish in a division they share with constant disasters like Ottawa and Buffalo. And if everything breaks right next year, the upside for this roster is... what, finishing 10 points out of the playoffs instead of 20?

Positive thought #1: Juraj Slafkovsky. That's it, that's all you need to say. After looking like a potential bust in year one, he's made the leap as a sophomore and now looks like the right pick from the murky 2022 draft. His numbers for the year won't be great, but he looks like a legitimate difference-maker.

Positive thought #2: The prospect pool is good, and maybe even very good depending on whether you're a David Reinbacher believer. And they somehow pulled off the trick of turning Sean Monahan into first-round picks in each of the next two drafts, so more is on the way. Mix in another step forward from Nick Suzuki, and the future looks reasonably bright, especially if they can get Cole Caufield going again.

Positive thought #3: Sam Montembeault looks like a real goalie, Cayden Primeau may get there too, and Jacob Fowler is on the way. That doesn't mean any of them are ready to be a star, and certainly doesn't mean that they'll measure up to the iconic goalies who've come before in Montreal. But after years of the position being a weakness, they may go into next year with some confidence for a change. Or at least, not a feeling of impending doom.

8. Anaheim Ducks

The negative: They were extraordinarily bad, and will still need some lottery luck for that to turn into a top-three pick. To make matters worse, the shine is off of Trevor Zegras, Mason McTavish didn't make a big leap, and Leo Carlsson hasn't had the rookie season you were hoping for. It's one thing to be bad, but if your key young players aren't making strides, you're kind of screwed.

Positive thought #1: Let's pump the brakes on worrying about the young guys. That's a good idea most years, but especially so in one where we've seen guys like Quinton Byfield and Alexis Lafrenière finally break through after taking a few years to figure it out. Oh, and the guy who might win the Art Ross and the Hart had his struggles over his first three years. Give it time, the Ducks young core will be fine.

Positive thought #2: Aside from the young guys who are already here, they've also got one of the best prospects lists in the league. They even managed the rare trick of improving it during the season, thanks to adding Cutter Gauthier in a surprise deal with the Flyers. He didn't come cheap, exactly, but he's the sort of player who's almost never available at all. And of course, they'll have another top-five pick this year.

Positive thought #3: The young guys may not have made big leaps, but Frank Vatrano seemed to. That's good news, either because it gives you a 30-goal presence on the wing that you weren't expecting, or because Pat Verbeek can turn him into another future asset over the summer.

7. Arizona Coyotes

The negative: After a solid start, the Coyotes fell apart down the stretch, finishing well outside the playoff race. It's the 11th time in 12 seasons



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that they've missed the playoffs, with the only exception coming in the expanded bubble year.

Positive thought #1: Let's focus on that strong start. It wasn't just a few games early on; they were a very respectable 19-14-2 on New Year's Eve. You can build on that, especially as a young team. There's something here.

Positive thought #2: They've also been finishing well, with five wins in their last nine games. We can't just hand-wave away the awful stretch in the middle, especially the 14-game losing streak that torpedoed their season. Young teams sometimes lose focus and go through prolonged slumps, and this team had a truly awful one. But on either side of it, there was reason for optimism.

Positive thought #3: We've been down this road before, but it sure sounds like we're finally going to get some clarity on the arena situation, one way or another. If it means shovels in the ground, that's great for the Arizona Coyotes. If it means moving, that's awful for the fan base but probably better for the team than another decade of uncertainty. Either way, it should be good news for the long term, depending on how you look at it.

6. Ottawa Senators

The negative: After yet another disastrous season that started with hope and ended without any meaningful late-season hockey, it's time to ask some hard questions about whether this young core is as good as everyone spent the last few years assuming it would be.

Positive thought #1: The sale to Michael Andlauer didn't become official until September, which was too late for new management to do anything but see how the season turned out. That makes this the first offseason for the new boss, one where he can finally crack open his wallet and start building a winner. No team was hurt more by ownership over the years, and now they finally have someone in charge who puts winning ahead of budgets and ego. If it doesn't work under Andlauer then we can worry, but he hasn't had a chance to make an impact yet.

Positive thought #2: Related to the first point, the era of stability as a virtue in Ottawa has to be ending. We heard it from players, and later from Andlauer and Steve Staios, and it made some sense early in the season. But now that DJ Smith and Pierre Dorion are gone and the results still look awful, any platitudes about staying the course won't play. It's time to get to work.

Positive thought #3: While the team was relatively healthy this year, they were missing Shane Pinto for half the season due to that bizarre gambling suspension. They'll also presumably get some immediate help if/when they trade Jakob Chychrun or Thomas Chabot, and Joonas Korpi has shown signs of life over the last few weeks. Mix in a new coach and some aging curve improvement from Tim Stütze and Jake Sanderson, and the path to improvement isn't hard to find here.

5. Seattle Kraken

The negative: In year three, the Kraken have taken a step back after last year's playoff run. And with Shane Wright yet to make an impact and Matty Beniers hitting a sophomore wall, it's fair to ask if the future is all that bright.

Positive thought #1: As far as Wright and (especially) Beniers go, we can just repeat what we said about the Ducks young players above. Don't make me tap the "Quinton Byfield made your hot takes look silly" sign.

Positive thought #2: In Joey Daccord, they've found the greatest goaltender in franchise history. Granted, that's an exceedingly low bar, given how the first two years went. But Daccord is a great story, and he's signed cheap for another year after this one. Kraken fans had to spend the last two years listening to everyone lecture them about the importance of goaltending, even when things were going well. OK, now they've got a goaltender. Let's build on that.

Positive thought #3: The big story with last year's run was their shooting percentage – 11.6 percent in all situations, well above the league average of 10.1 percent – which everyone knew was unsustainably high.

It did indeed come crashing down, but this year it's swung to the other side, all the way down to 9.1 percent. Maybe that's about right for the true talent of this group; it's hard to say with what's still essentially an expansion roster. But it's also possible that this was an over-correction, and we'll see it inch up closer to league average next year. If it does, and the goaltending holds, the Kraken get to right around an even goals differential, which is usually enough to at least be a playoff bubble team.

4. Columbus Blue Jackets

The negative: This. Otherwise, going great.

Positive thought #1: Look, this season was a disaster, but it also probably never had a chance. Once the whole Mike Babcock fiasco played out, it was over. We may never know whether Pascal Vincent would make a good NHL head coach under normal circumstances, but he never had an opportunity in Columbus. Remember, even Jared Bednar was awful when he was a late-offseason hire, and that was on a team with Nathan MacKinnon, Gabriel Landeskog and Mikko Rantanen. Sometimes you just have to burn the tapes, you know?

Positive thought #2: Those three stars from the 2016-17 Avalanche were all under 25. You know who else is? Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger, Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko. None of them had great seasons this year, but as those Avalanche reminded us, sometimes it takes time. The Blue Jackets' pipeline is legitimately stacked. The future is bright.

Positive thought #3: For the first time in over a decade, there will be a new GM in Columbus. Almost certainly a new coach too. Get those hires right, and you've taken the key first steps toward rewriting that well-worn Blue Jackets story of failure.

3. San Jose Sharks

The negative: They're finishing off what will arguably be the worst single-season any team has had in the cap era. Also, they're old, they're stuck with some bad contracts, and they've traded their two best players away for nickels on the dollar in the last year.

Positive thought #1: Those two star trades – Erik Karlsson and Tomas Hertl – were tough for fans to swallow, but necessary because the first step of a true rebuild is getting out from under big contracts. There isn't much Mike Grier can do about deals like Logan Couture and Marc-Édouard Vlasic, but getting assets for Karlsson and Hertl before their contracts became anchors was the right move, and will pay off down the line.

Positive thought #2: Speaking of that Vlasic deal, it's been considered one of the league's worst for years now, but it's only got two more seasons left. Couture has three. But that's about it as far as bad contracts that extend past 2025. With some very good prospects on the way, the runway here is clearer than a lot of us might realize.

Positive thought #3: This is just one guy's opinion so take it for what it's worth, but I think Grier is up to the job here. He's done a good job of being realistic about the team he's inherited and didn't make the common rookie GM mistake of holding out for perfect when "good enough" was on the table. The teardown part of a rebuild is always the easiest, and as fans of other teams on this list could tell you, you never really know what you've got in a front office until it's time to start moving forward again. But based on what we've seen so far, I think the Sharks are in good hands.

2. Calgary Flames

The negative: Last year, they saw their point total plunge, going from Cup contenders to missing the playoffs entirely. A lot of the blame fell on Darryl Sutter, who was shown the door and replaced with the more player-friendly Ryan Huska. Not only did that not reverse the fall, but this year's team will end up even worse. They're older than most teams on this list, are stuck with some bad contracts, and don't have any elite prospects on the way. And while new GM Craig Conroy did eventually get around to trading veterans for future assets, his work got decidedly middling reviews. It's looking more and more like losing Matthew Tkachuk and Johnny Gaudreau in 2022 was a franchise turning point, and not in a remotely good way.



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I got depressed just writing that.

Positive thought #1: Flames fans might not love the returns on some of their sales, but the fact that they were doing it all is a good sign. The hardest part of a rebuild is accepting that one is needed, and denial is a dangerous thing, especially if it's combined with ownership that banks on playoff dates. We can't say for sure where the Flames are at as an organization, but they passed the early test of not clinging to veterans for a longshot playoff chase. Not all teams do.

Positive thought #2: One good news story from this season was Jacob Markstrom, who got back on track after a shaky 2022-23. He was also a target of trade rumors all year, which he did not seem to enjoy, so even the good news in Calgary comes with a bit of an odor. Still, it sure looks like Conroy is going to move his starter over the summer. And if the Devils don't finally decide to pay up, maybe it will be a playoff team that crashes and burns in the first round because of goaltending. Conroy hasn't hit a home run yet in terms of his seller moves, but this one should be a fastball right over the heart of the plate.

Positive thought #3: We mentioned the lack of elite prospects, which is a problem. But the system is reasonably deep with what Scott calls "B-plus" guys, which isn't a bad place to be compared to other teams that start rebuilds with bare cupboards. The Flames have drafted well, they just haven't drafted high. They still won't, unless the lottery gods intervene, but they're in a bit better shape than you might think.

1. Buffalo Sabres

The negative: It's been 13 years since their last playoff game. Four years since the fan base appeared to hit rock bottom. Ten months since they watched the franchise savior who quit on them be rewarded with a Stanley Cup. And most important of all, one year since they finished a 91-point season, their first time finishing over .500 since 2012, to finally signal that better days were ahead and they were ready to contend for the playoffs.

And then... they took a big step backward. Again. Again!

I've been doing this column gimmick since the Grantland days, and the Sabres have been in every single one. In 2019 I wrote, "It could be worse". In 2021 I wrote, "It can't get any worse". In 2017 I wrote "Eventually some super volcano will erupt and none of this will matter", and I'm kind of mad about that because I could sure use that line now.

Honestly, I don't know how you Sabres fans do it.

Positive thought #1: No team in the league has a better young blue line core. Rasmus Dahlin, Owen Power and Bowen Byram should all be studs for the next decade. There are more than a few teams out there that don't have a single defenseman anywhere in the system with the outlook of any of those guys, and the Sabres have all three on the NHL roster. If the old adage about building from the net out still holds, the Sabres should be in great shape.

Positive thought #2: Oh, right, the net. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen has looked good and is only 25, right? And while Devon Levi's season was a major letdown, he's looked sharp in March and just turned 22. The Sabres could re-sign Luukkonen and ride that duo and see where it takes them. Or maybe more enticingly, Kevyn Adams could hold onto one young goalie while moving the other for veteran help, and go into next season without the position looking like a question mark.

Positive thought #3: The future is extremely bright. I realize Sabres fans might be sick of hearing that after over a decade of rebuilds, but they've got lots of young talent at the NHL level, plus Wheeler's top-ranked prospect pool. The torch is being passed, as we saw this week when Jeff Skinner's 1,000th game turned into the JJ Peterka show. There's plenty to work with, for Don Granato or whoever replaces him. The pieces are in place for future success.

It's just not here quite yet. Again.

The Athletic LOADED: 04.06.2024

1306706 Websites

ESPN / NHL playoff standings: Big stakes for Flyers, Sabres Friday - ESPN

ESPN staff

Apr 5, 2024

Reactions

As the chaotic final stretch of the Eastern Conference wild-card race continues, Friday's schedule includes four teams that could occupy the final spot when the Eastern schedule concludes April 17.

The Washington Capitals, fresh off a loss against the Pittsburgh Penguins, are skating against the Carolina Hurricanes (7 p.m. ET, NHL Power Play on ESPN+). Don't feel bad for the Caps; the Canes are also on the second half of a back-to-back as they lost to the Boston Bruins on Thursday night.

Elsewhere, the Detroit Red Wings are hosting the New York Rangers (7 p.m. ET, NHL Power Play on ESPN+). Given the way the winds are currently blowing, the Rangers will be the team taking on whichever club winds up in the final wild-card slot.

Finally, the Buffalo Sabres and Philadelphia Flyers will take the ice (7 p.m. ET, NHL Power Play on ESPN+) in a matchup that will be devastating for the losing team's playoff chances.

Heading into Friday night's action, the Flyers (83 points, 28 regulation wins) hold the No. 3 spot in the Metro Division, the idle New York Islanders (83, 25) have the second wild card, while the Caps (82, 28), Red Wings (82, 26) and Sabres (77, 30) are chasing.

Clinching scenarios

The idle Toronto Maple Leafs will clinch a playoff berth if any of the following occurs on Friday night:

The idle Tampa Bay Lightning will clinch a playoff berth if the Capitals, Red Wings and Flyers all lose in regulation.

Friday's games

Note: All times ET. All games not on TNT or NHL Network are available via NHL Power Play, which is included in an ESPN+ subscription (local blackout restrictions apply).

Race for the No. 1 pick

The NHL uses a draft lottery to determine the order of the first round, so the team that finishes in last place is not guaranteed the No. 1 selection. As of 2021, a team can move up a maximum of 10 spots if it wins the lottery, so only 11 teams are eligible for the draw for the No. 1 pick. Full details on the process can be found here. Sitting No. 1 on the draft board for this summer is Macklin Celebrini, a freshman at Boston University.

ESPN LOADED: 04.06.2024

1306707 Websites

ESPN / NHL Awards WATCH: Gauging the MVP race ahead of the playoffs - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski, ESPN



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Apr 5, 2024, 12:00 PM

Reactions

The final weeks of the NHL season could be absolutely chaotic, from determining playoff seeding to watching teams skate hard until their bubbles burst.

The final NHL Awards Watch of the season reveals similar uncertainty. Some races have razor-thin margins. Others could get there, as potential finalists close their seasons in style. The MVP race has a clear favorite -- but how solid is his support?

Once again, what separates NHL Awards Watch apart is that these are the actual ballots from the actual awards voters. We've polled a wide selection of Professional Hockey Writers Association voters anonymously to get a sense of where the wind is blowing for the current leaders. We've made sure it's a cross section from the entire league, trying to gain as many perspectives as possible.

Bear in mind that the PHWA votes for the Hart, Norris, Calder, Selke and Lady Byng finalists; broadcasters vote for the Jack Adams; and general managers handle the Vezina.

All stats are from Hockey-Reference.com, Natural Stat Trick and Evolving Hockey.

According to our sample, Nathan MacKinnon is going to take home his first NHL most valuable players trophy.

The Avalanche star was first overall on nearly 77% of the ballots we surveyed, thanks to 127 points in 75 games this season. He's likely to finish in the top 5 in goals scored and potentially 30 points better than anyone else on his team.

MacKinnon led the Awards Watch MVP race in January and February before Kucherov stole the lead back last month. But MacKinnon took the momentum back thanks to two epic scoring streaks:

His 35-game home points streak (Oct. 19-March 26) in which he tallied 77 points in that span. It was the second-longest home points streak in NHL history behind Wayne Gretzky's 40-game record set in the 1988-89 season with the Los Angeles Kings.

His 19-game points streak from Feb. 13-March 26 made MacKinnon the first player in NHL history to have two separate point streaks of 19 games within the same season.

"MacKinnon gets the nod here because his consistency has been at a historic level," a voter said. "What MacKinnon has done this year has been unlike anything we've seen from him and something we're used to seeing from the likes of a Sidney Crosby or a McDavid."

It's all there for MacKinnon. The Avalanche are a playoff team. He's set new career standards for goals and points in a season. He has a sizable lead over their second-leading scorer, Mikko Rantanen. He has nine game-winning goals this season, including two in overtime.

"It's just too difficult to ignore MacKinnon on a top-heavy Avs team with Mikko Rantanen and Cale Makar joining MacKinnon as the only Colorado offensive players over the 50-point mark this season," another voter concluded.

The climate was already favorable for a MacKinnon MVP run, given how many voters considered him "due" after finishing second for the Hart twice (2018, 2020) and third once (2021). He's done little to discourage that effusive support -- even if the competition for this award is as fierce as it's been in recent memory.

"McDavid is making this increasingly difficult, but I'm still leaning MacKinnon," another voter said. "Maybe I'm falling into the 'it's his turn' narrative, but he really has been the best non-goalie in hockey all season."

"A big part of me really wanted to give my Hart vote to Artemi Panarin, who isn't getting enough credit for the Rangers' success during a down

year for Mika Zibanejad," one voter revealed. "But Nathan MacKinnon can't be denied."

"Though I feel confident this is the way I'll go, I feel more confident I will literally lose sleep over this vote," another voter said.

MacKinnon's support is emphatic -- again, nearly 77% of the ballots had him on top -- but it's not unwavering. Some voters called the race "ridiculously close," and that their votes could ultimately change.

"As I think about it, honestly, [Connor] Hellebuyck is closer than I think when filling this out," one voter said of the Winnipeg Jets goaltender.

"I'm getting gray hair trying to figure this one out," another said. "I think you could make a great case for any of four guys -- MacKinnon, Kucherov, McDavid and Auston Matthews -- but MacKinnon has the mix of points, goals and importance to team that are going to make it hard not to vote for him. That could shift in the coming weeks."

McDavid has certainly complicated things for some MacKinnon voters. He's likely to lead the league in points-per-game average for the sixth time in his career. He's battling MacKinnon and Kucherov to win his sixth Art Ross Trophy for leading the NHL in points -- and his fourth in a row.

"McDavid is still the best player, but MacKinnon has had a slightly better season," one voter noted.

McDavid had 116 points in the 61 games after the Oilers made their coaching change. As Edmonton turned its season around, he turned heads in the MVP race. McDavid previous won the award last season and in 2021. He's trying to become the first back-to-back MVP since Alex Ovechkin (2007-08 and 2008-09).

"We've talked so much about this being a back-and-forth between Kucherov and MacKinnon for this award," one voter explained. "Now, we're asking: Is he really about to do this? Maybe McDavid does win the Hart after all."

"If Edmonton finds a way to win the division and McDavid keeps picking up a dizzying number of points with what remains of their super difficult, condensed schedule, I'll have to think long and hard about it," another added.

For all of this theoretical support for McDavid, he trailed Kucherov in actual support among our voters. Kucherov was a distant second behind MacKinnon, appearing first on just over 15% of the ballots.

The Lightning star -- and NHL All-Star Game lightning rod -- won the Hart Trophy in 2018-19 and will surpass his goals and points from that MVP campaign. Through 73 games, there was a 45-point gap between Kucherov and the next highest scorer on Tampa Bay (Brayden Point).

The Lightning have faced their share of adversity this season, from injuries to average goaltending to a diminished supporting cast. Kucherov has been the constant in leading the team to what should be a seventh straight playoff appearance.

"He has contributed to 49% of the Lightning's goals," one Kucherov voter noted, "and while the other two top candidates both have a teammate in the top 10 and a pair of teammates in the top 20 in league scoring, only Point is in the top 20 in scoring for Tampa Bay."

The only other player to receive a first-place vote has a similar case to Kucherov. David Pastrnak of the Boston Bruins was 40 points ahead of Boston's second leading scorer Brad Marchand through 76 games. The Bruins went through major offseason changes to their offensive group. Pastrnak not only hasn't skipped a beat, but he still has a chance to match his 113-point career best from last season, when he was second for the Hart.

Matthews was third for the Hart in last month's Awards Watch but didn't earn a first-place vote this time. The case for Matthews is a simple one: If the Maple Leafs star becomes the first NHL player to break the 70-goal mark since Teemu Selanne and Alex Mogilny both did it in 1992-93, who could deny him the Hart Trophy?

"Matthews is likely going to fall short of 70, but if he does get it, he would jump ahead of McDavid," one voter argued.



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Of course, that voter had MacKinnon ahead of both of them. For now.

Norris Trophy (top defenseman)

Leader: Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks

Finalists: Roman Josi, Nashville Predators; Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche

The Predators' decision to cancel their players' trip to see U2 at The Sphere in Las Vegas is the stuff of hockey legend by now, leading to a 16-0-2 run that catapulted Nashville into a playoff seed. Running parallel to that streak was a run of dominance by defenseman Roman Josi that has put him squarely in the Norris Trophy conversation at exactly the right time.

Josi has 27 points, including eight goals, in his last 21 games for the Predators. That gave him 76 points in 75 games this season, tying him for third among all defensemen in scoring with Edmonton's Evan Bouchard entering Wednesday night. Josi was also tied with Makar for the league lead in goals among defensemen, with 19.

It's also put him squarely on the radar for voters, as Josi tied Makar behind Hughes, the current leader for the Norris with around 54% of the first-place votes.

"Roman Josi can still steal this," one voter declared.

"Roman Josi is giving me serious pause here, but still leaning towards Hughes," one Hughes backer noted.

"Maybe it's the goals. Maybe it's recency bias," one Josi voter explained. "Josi does the most with the smallest supporting cast."

"He might end up on a potential Hart ballot for me," another Josi voter said.

Josi previously won the Norris in 2019-20. Makar won it in 2021-22, and like Josi is making a strong bid to add another one to the mantle.

Makar had 81 points in 70 games, including 19 goals. His time on ice is actually down from the previous two seasons (24:54 per game), but it's not impossible that he could win the scoring race for defensemen despite playing fewer game than Hughes.

"Makar and Hughes are neck and neck," one voter noted. "I give the nod to Makar on the strength of his 19 goals."

Another voter was adamant that Maker playing in all situations was the biggest point of demarcation.

"The biggest difference between the three? Makar averages over 2:30 of penalty kill time per game for Colorado while Hughes and Josi barely average 30 seconds per game on the PK," they explained. "Call me a traditionalist, but I still like to award defensemen that actually, you know, defend as a big part of their job."

"Makar has more than double the short-handed minutes than Hughes, which could be factored into how some people vote," another voter added.

"Makar is the still the best defenseman, but Hughes has had a slightly better season," a Hughes backer argued.

There have been six versions of Awards Watch this season. Quinn Hughes has now topped five of them for the Norris Trophy, including three months in a row. But his leading margin has dropped from 78% in March to 57% in the final edition, thanks in no small part to Josi's emergence.

He led all defensemen in points with 84 points in 75 games, and was a plus-38 in that span. He's been a major driver of play for a Canucks team that's stunned the NHL by challenging for a division title.

"Quinn Hughes should win, and it shouldn't be close," one voter declared. "Makar has closed the gap in points sufficiently that he could realistically challenge Hughes on reputation. Reputation is the only case to be made this season though."

No other defensemen received a first-place vote besides these three. Among the other blueliners that earned a mention were Bouchard, Victor Hedman of the Tampa Bay Lightning, Noah Dobson of the New York Islanders and Gustav Forsling of the Florida Panthers.

Calder Trophy (top rookie)

Leader: Brock Faber, Minnesota Wild

Finalists: Connor Bedard, Chicago Blackhawks; Luke Hughes, New Jersey Devils

What makes the Calder Trophy race so fun this season is the philosophical debate between the Connor Bedard voters and the Brock Faber voters.

The Bedard voters will say their guy has 58 points in 61 games, despite missing a chunk of the season to a broken jaw. As of Wednesday night, he led all rookies in points and goals. His 0.95 points-per-game average puts him among the top 50 scorers. He did all of this on a terrible Chicago team, which explains why he's a minus-38. He did all of this as an 18-year-old, having spent three years in Canadian junior hockey, rather than having three seasons of NCAA hockey experience and entering the NHL as a 21-year-old like Faber.

The Faber voters will say he is sixth in the NHL in average time on ice with 25 minutes per game through 74 games. Not for rookies, not for defensemen, but for all NHL players. His 41 points ranks him third among all first-year players. He's stepped in and played a vital role for the Wild, exceeding expectations and having a remarkable rookie season for a defenseman. Bedard, while clearly destined for superstardom, didn't meet them to have the kind of transcendent rookie season his first overall pick status portended.

Faber tied Bedard in the February NHL Awards Watch, grabbing the spotlight while the Blackhawks phenom was injured. He nudged ahead of him last month. Now, in the season's final weeks, Faber collected 54% of the first-place votes to Bedard's 46% to lead the Calder race.

"The award is for 'most proficient' rookie. When healthy, Bedard has been the class's most proficient offensive player," one voter explained. "Yet, Faber's overall body of work is outstanding, and in my mind at this moment, more proficient on aggregate."

Some Faber voters simply said his exceptional season can't be ignored.

"What Connor Bedard is doing is rare, but a rookie finishing top-10 in the NHL in ice time is even more rare," one Faber voter noted.

"I thought Connor Bedard would be a lock if he returned to good health. He's had his moments as a close to point-per-game player. But he's a minus-39. Whether you value the stat or not, that's indicative of some real issues playing a two-way game," another voter argued. "It was going to take a very strong rookie season to wrest the Calder away from Bedard, and Faber may have just done that with a truly impressive first NHL season."

Some Bedard voters are starting to believe it might be the other guy's time.

"I'm starting to accept it could be Faber," one voter said.

"Bedard is the clear leader, but both Hughes and Faber have been remarkable," another allowed.

Hughes didn't receive a first-place vote, but was prominently mentioned by several voters as a runner-up. He's second among all rookies with 43 points in 76 games, with 27 points scored running New Jersey's power play after Dougie Hamilton was lost for the season to injury. He's a minus-24, but has given the Devils 21:24 of ice time per game, and has showed flashes of the offensive star the team believes he can be on the back end.

Other rookies mentioned by voters included Wild center Marco Rossi, who could end up first in rookie goals; Carolina goalie Pyotr Kochetkov; Flyers forward Tyson Foerster; and defenseman Pavel Mintyukov of the Anaheim Ducks.



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But it's a two-player race. And some Bedard voters are still convinced that when the votes are counted, it'll be the phenom over the minutes-eater.

"Bedard with a bullet," one voter opined.

"The prophecy will be fulfilled," another quipped.

VeZina Trophy (top goaltender)

Note: The NHL's general managers vote for this award

Leader: Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

Finalists: Sergei Bobrovsky, Florida Panthers; Thatcher Demko, Vancouver Canucks

As stated above, the PHWA does not vote on the VeZina Trophy. The general managers do. Hopefully they have a different view of the race for top goalie this season, because if it were up the writers, Hellebuyck would win this thing in an absolute rout.

The Jets goalie was the unanimous choice for the writers we surveyed this month. Every single one had Hellebuyck, who won the VeZina in 2019-20, first overall on their ballots.

"Winnipeg has been a playoff team all season thanks in large part to defense and the goaltending of Connor Hellebuyck," one voter declared.

"Hellebuyck has remained the constant for the Jets at times when they've looked like a really strong favorite to win the West, and when they've struggled for consistency," another explained. "What he's done has led to questions about if this is not only the best year of his career, but if this could be the year that he takes the Jets to a conference final."

Hellebuyck has a .919 save percentage in 55 appearances. According to StatSheet, he leads the NHL in goals saved above expected (18.57). Like the Jets, his numbers took a downturn in the last month, but the voters believe it could have been much worse for Winnipeg were it not for Hellebuyck.

"Hellebuyck is holding on in spite of the Jets recent swoon," one voter said.

"A pedestrian March doesn't change this," another concluded.

Demko was mentioned the most as a runner-up. An injury in early March impacted his candidacy and increased Hellebuyck's lead for the award. But before that, Demko had a .917 save percentage in 49 games, helping Vancouver to the top of the Pacific.

"Demko is definitely in the conversation as well, but it feels like Hellebuyck was key to everything that the Jets accomplished this season," one voter noted.

The next goalie most prominently mentioned? Bobrovsky, who has 33 wins, a .912 save percentage and four shutouts. He's not an analytics darling, with only 3.15 goals saved above expected, but enough of our voters liked what they say from Bob to mention him.

Selke Trophy (best defensive forward)

Leader: Aleksander Barkov, Florida Panthers

Finalists: Anze Kopitar, Los Angeles Kings; Jordan Staal, Carolina Hurricanes

Barkov has led this race for five straight months and ends the final NHL Awards Watch for 2023-24 with 73% of the vote.

The Panthers have a 1.54 goals-against average per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 when Barkov is on the ice. They average 59% of the shot attempts. He's second on his team in takeaways and wins over 57% of his faceoffs. Barkov last won the Selke in 2020-21.

"There are a few awards where it is nearly impossible to choose from the top contenders. This is the opposite of that," one voter noted.

"Best two-way forward on best defensive team. He's still underrated, right?" another voter asked, cheekily.

Staal had the next highest number of first-place votes. He anchors different incarnations of the Hurricanes' checking line, winning 58% of his faceoffs. He's a vital part of the league's best penalty kill as well. He has a strong analytics case, with a 1.75 expected goals against per 60 minutes.

The question: Can a player win the Selke with a minus-14?

Staal has never won the Selke. Kopitar has won the award twice. He was next up in support for our voters. Kopitar has a 2.25 expected goals against average per 60 minutes. He wins faceoffs, kills penalties and continues to be one of the NHL's top two-way centers.

Other players to receive first-place selections from our voters: Vegas Golden Knights center William Karlsson and Minnesota Wild center Joel Eriksson Ek.

"Good on faceoffs, strong all-around season for the Wild and tops among the best candidates in penalty kill ice time," the Eriksson Ek voter argued. "This could be a wide-open category with players like J.T. Miller and Aleksander Barkov in the mix, but Eriksson Ek seems to check a lot of the boxes among a field of Selke candidates that is truly missing Patrice Bergeron this season."

Lady Byng Trophy (gentlemanly play)

This is the part where I mention that the Lady Byng Trophy for gentlemanly play should be voted on by the league's on-ice officials or by the NHL Players' Association.

Generally, this winds up being awarded to the player with a lot of points and few penalty minutes. Through Wednesday, Vancouver's Elias Pettersson was 15th in scoring, with 10 penalty minutes this season. Take that as you will.

Jack Adams Award (best coach)

Note: The NHL Broadcasters' Association votes on this award.

Leader: Rick Tocchet, Vancouver Canucks

Finalists: Andrew Brunette, Nashville Predators; John Tortorella, Philadelphia Flyers

Tocchet has led this category from the moment it was clear the Canucks would challenge for the division championship. He challenged his players early in the season and got results. His systems had a demonstrable impact on Vancouver's team defense, as the Canucks remain a top-5 team in goals-against average (2.68) this season.

"Tocchet is the clear leader with the job he has done shoring up the Canucks defensively and staying in first without Demko," one voter said.

"Tocchet took a team that faced questions about a lack of cohesion and turned it into a full-on juggernaut that's about to enter the playoffs as one of the more fascinating situations in the NHL," another voter added.

"John Tortorella deserves some Jack Adams credit for what's happening with the Flyers as well, but it feels like Tocchet is the overwhelming favorite here," another concluded.

Torts was tied for the second-most first-place votes with Brunette. The Flyers bench boss is currently pulling out every trick from his coaching bag to get Philadelphia into the playoffs, from scratching players to calling them out after losses to questioning if they understand what it takes to make the postseason.

"I'm gonna zag and not pick Tocchet for Jack Adams. He's done a great job, but it's pretty astounding that the Flyers are about to make the playoffs with this roster," one voter explained. "They've had injuries, lost their starting goalie, were sellers at the deadline and somehow are still going to make the playoffs. If they get in, Torts has my imaginary vote."

In his first season with the Predators, Brunette had his players competing in an aggressive, speed-centric system. But his candidacy for the Jack Adams was bolstered by what's become a hockey fable: That Brunette (and GM Barry Trotz) punished his underperforming players by not



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allowing them to attend a U2 concert at The Sphere in Las Vegas, and that it led to an epic winning streak that's put them in a playoff seed.

That's the stuff Jack Adams Awards are made of.

"The 18-game point streak caught everybody's attention, but the Predators have shown substantial improvement in multiple areas in Brunette's time," one voter noted. "They are perhaps the most surprising playoff team based on preseason expectations."

"Brunette has excelled at two things we see pretty clearly from the outside: tactics/playing style and player buy-in," another added. "What a tremendous second half for the Preds."

Other coaches to receive first-place votes on our ballots included Jim Montgomery of the Boston Bruins, Kris Knoblauch of the Edmonton Oilers and Spencer Carbery of the Washington Capitals.

"What Carbery has accomplished to get the Capitals fighting for a playoff spot cannot be ignored," one voter argued. "Especially when the Capitals moved on from a few players at the trade deadline with the belief they were going to focus on the future."

The Jack Adams voters love a good narrative, which is why our Tocchet backers are a little nervous.

"I have concerns that the broadcasters are particularly prone to narratives and might let the U2 story sway them into voting for Andrew Brunette," one said. "Fortunately, Tocchet is loved by the broadcasters, too. No disrespect to Brunette and Tortorella, but what Tocchet has done from start to finish in one of the hardest places in the league to succeed makes this an easy call."

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ESPN / NHL Power Rankings: 1-32 poll, each team's best rookie – ESPN

Kristen Shilton

26–33 minutes

Reactions

April has begun, and the end of the 2023-24 regular season looms on the 18th. Which teams are heating up at just the right time -- and which are falling off?

Our voters have cast their ballots, with some major shifts yet again as one of the closest Presidents' Trophy races in recent history is unfolding. PLUS: Because it's awards season, we created a hypothetical: If there were a Calder Trophy given out for each team's rookie of the year, who would the 32 winners be? We answer that question this week as well.

How we rank: A panel of ESPN hockey commentators, analysts, reporters and editors sends in a 1-32 poll based on the games through Wednesday, which generates our master list here.

Note: Previous ranking for each team refers to the previous edition,

Published March 29. Points percentages are through Thursday's games.

1. Dallas Stars

Previous ranking: 3

Points percentage: 69.08%

Logan Stankoven was a dominant AHL skater. And he has been more than ready for a big league chance. The 21-year-old found immediate

chemistry with linemates Jamie Benn and Wyatt Johnson upon being added to the Stars roster, and he put up five goals in his first tenure to prove it. If Stankoven only gets better from here? That's a gold rush for Big D.

Next seven days: @ CHI (April 6), @ COL (April 7), vs. BUF (April 9), vs. WPG (April 11)

2. New York Rangers

Previous ranking: 2

Points percentage: 69.74%

Sure, New York has one headline-generating freshman in Matt Rempe. But in terms of on-ice impact, the Rangers' Calder Trophy goes to Will Cuyllé. The 22-year-old winger settled into a fourth-line slot where he pairs a physical, forechecking punch with offensive upside (12 goals in 73 games) to give the Rangers' depth a boost.

Next seven days: @ DET (April 5), vs. MTL (April 7), @ NYI (April 9), vs. PHI (April 11)

3. Carolina Hurricanes

Previous ranking: 7

Points percentage: 66.45%

Carolina has rallied around rookie goaltender Pyotr Kochetkov. When the Hurricanes' veteran netminders were injured (Frederik Andersen) or struggling (Antti Raanta), Kochetkov made his mark. The 24-year-old leads all freshmen goalies with four shutouts, and boasts an impressive 20-13-4 record with a 2.38 goals-against average and .911 save percentage.

Next seven days: vs. WSH (April 5), vs. CBJ (April 7), @ BOS (April 9)

4. Boston Bruins

Previous ranking: 4

Points percentage: 68.18%

Bruins coach Jim Montgomery can put Mason Lohrei anywhere and watch him thrive. Lohrei has taken on top-pairing minutes and penalty kill responsibilities, and averages over 16 minutes per game as an integral piece of Boston's back end. Add to that Lohrei's penchant for shot blocks and well-timed hits, and it's enough to earn him some Calder attention.

Next seven days: vs. FLA (April 6), vs. CAR (April 9)

5. Vancouver Canucks

Previous ranking: 6

Points percentage: 67.11%

The Canucks haven't sent many rookies over the boards this season, but Arshdeep Bains did enough in the minors to intrigue Canucks coach Rick Tocchet. With Vancouver on the cusp of clinching a playoff berth this week, Bains got a call-up to build on his solid seven-game stint earlier this season. What Bains does with his opportunities now is critical.

Next seven days: @ LA (April 6), vs. VGK (April 8), vs. ARI (April 10)

6. Colorado Avalanche

Previous ranking: 1

Points percentage: 67.11%

Scary as it is to imagine, Colorado could (eventually) have a second Cale Makar-type defender in rookie Sam Malinski -- but no pressure, kid. The 25-year-old impressed early this season with three goals and 10 points in 23 games, drawing Makar comparisons along the way. That's enough to earn him the Avalanche's Calder nod.

Next seven days: @ EDM (April 5), vs. DAL (April 7), vs. MIN (April 9)

7. Edmonton Oilers



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Previous ranking: 8

Points percentage: 64.19%

Edmonton knows who to (re)call when filling a gap at the NHL level, and it's often James Hamblin. The rookie forward has weathered the minors-to-majors see-saw with fine results in a fourth-line role. Dependability and versatility are solid qualities to have at any level, and Hamblin has provided it for the Oilers.

Next seven days: vs. COL (April 5), @ CGY (April 6), vs. VGK (April 10)

8. Florida Panthers

Previous ranking: 5

Points percentage: 65.58%

There's a bright future for forward Mackie Samoskevich. While he hasn't collected any points over seven NHL games this season, Samoskevich has dominated in the AHL (45 points in 55 games), and it's only a matter of time before he translates that to a significant role with the big club.

Next seven days: @ BOS (April 6), vs. OTT (April 9), vs. CBJ (April 11)

9. Toronto Maple Leafs

Previous ranking: 10

Points percentage: 63.33%

It's scary to fathom what would have befallen Toronto without Joseph Woll stepping up in the crease. When starter Ilya Samsonov struggled, it was the rookie Woll providing steady coverage and confidence back there. And even on a Leafs' team that has been inconsistent defensively, Woll's stats (2.87 GAA, .910 SV%) have stayed solid.

Next seven days: @ MTL (April 6), vs. PIT (April 8), @ NJ (April 9), vs. NJ (April 11)

10. Vegas Golden Knights

Previous ranking: 14

Points percentage: 61.33%

Vegas got key contributions from rookie Pavel Dorofeyev during a recent surge that cemented his status as the Golden Knights' Calder pick. Dorofeyev is a play-driving forward with incredible offensive skill who has turned up the heat lately with near-nightly goal scoring. He's everything Vegas could want.

Next seven days: @ ARI (April 5), @ VAN (April 8), @ EDM (April 10)

11. Tampa Bay Lightning

Previous ranking: 12

Points percentage: 61.18%

Defenseman Emil Lilleberg stood out from the pack of impressive first-year pros in Tampa Bay. Lilleberg debuted in January on a Lightning blue line decimated by injury and had an immediate impact infusing some youthful energy -- and hard-hitting play.

Next seven days: @ PIT (April 6), vs. CBJ (April 9), vs. OTT (April 11)

12. Nashville Predators

Previous ranking: 11

Points percentage: 60.53%

Nashville saw something special in Luke Evangelista last season, and the forward has proved himself further in his official rookie campaign. The winger shows up consistently on the scoresheet (15 goals and 33 points in 72 games), produces on special teams and has evolved into an all-around performer.

Next seven days: @ NYI (April 6), @ NJ (April 7), vs. WPG (April 9)

13. Winnipeg Jets

Previous ranking: 9

Points percentage: 64.47%

Winnipeg has one candidate to qualify for this discussion, and it's Declan Chisholm. The defenseman was plucked off waivers from Minnesota in January, though Winnipeg has used him in only two games since. But Chisholm did net an assist in that stretch, and that'll earn you trophy consideration in these parts.

Next seven days: @ MIN (April 6), @ NSH (April 9), @ DAL (April 11)

14. Los Angeles Kings

Previous ranking: 13

Points percentage: 59.87%

The Kings have leaned heavily on Alex Laferriere -- and for good reason. The 22-year-old is one of a dozen rookies around the league to appear in more than 60 games, and he has become one of the Kings' most productive players at 5-on-5 while generating 11 goals and 22 points through 72 games.

Next seven days: vs. VAN (April 6), @ ANA (April 9), vs. CGY (April 11)

15. Washington Capitals

Previous ranking: 16

Points percentage: 54.67%

Washington slotted rookie Hendrix Lapierre into a top-line center spot earlier this season and watched the 22-year-old become one of the Capitals' top performers. That's the power of Lapierre. He has gathered eight goals and 18 points through 42 games, helping Washington in its playoff push.

Next seven days: @ CAR (April 5), vs. OTT (April 7), @ DET (April 9), @ BUF (April 11)

16. St. Louis Blues

Previous ranking: 19

Points percentage: 55.26%

First-year pro Joel Hofer stepped in to support Jordan Binnington and has been serviceable throughout the season (13-12-0, .915 SV%, 2.74 GAA), backstopping an often uneven Blues' team. And that's not easy.

Next seven days: @ SJ (April 6), @ ANA (April 7), vs. CHI (April 10)

17. Minnesota Wild

Previous ranking: 18

Points percentage: 54.00%

Minnesota might see defenseman Brock Faber win the actual Calder Trophy. Faber has excelled for the Wild, taking on top-pairing responsibilities (and tough matchups), averaging over 25 minutes per game while recording seven goals and 41 points through 73 games. Round of applause.

Next seven days: vs. WPG (April 6), @ CHI (April 7), @ COL (April 9)

18. Detroit Red Wings

Previous ranking: 17

Points percentage: 54.67%

Here's to you, Simon Edvinsson, the lone rookie skater for the Red Wings this season. It was Edvinsson getting the nod recently when the Red Wings needed help for their playoff push, and the 6-foot-6 defenseman has not disappointed. Coach Derek Lalonde praised him for bringing "a big boost" to the club.

Next seven days: vs. NYR (April 5), vs. BUF (April 7), vs. WSH (April 9), @ PIT (April 11)



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19. Philadelphia Flyers

Previous ranking: 15

Points percentage: 54.61%

Philadelphia has leaned on rookie netminder Samuel Ersson, and he has answered the bell. Ersson leads all freshmen goalies in starts (43) and has a 21-16-7 record with 2.79 GAA. It wasn't the Flyers' plan to have Ersson manning the cage so often, but he has grown with the Flyers through their surprisingly strong season.

Next seven days: @ BUF (April 5), @ CBJ (April 6), @ MTL (April 9), @ NYR (April 11)

20. New York Islanders

Previous ranking: 21

Points percentage: 54.61%

The Isles gave Kyle MacLean a six-game audition to start. That lit a fire under the rookie to earn himself another recall -- and he's not looking back. The Islanders' recent fourth-line center has clearly shown why he's NHL ready, producing three goals and six points through 23 games.

Next seven days: vs. NSH (April 6), vs. NYR (April 9), vs. MTL (April 11)

21. Pittsburgh Penguins

Previous ranking: 23

Points percentage: 53.29%

Valtteri Puustinen will push his way toward a permanent spot next season. The 24-year-old winger capitalized on his NHL chances this season with 18 points in 43 games, and he won't be the odd man out among the Penguins (a team desperate to get younger) for much longer.

Next seven days: vs. TB (April 6), @ TOR (April 8), vs. DET (April 11)

22. New Jersey Devils

Previous ranking: 20

Points percentage: 50.00%

New Jersey can be sure Luke Hughes will be an integral long-term piece of its blue line. The 20-year-old has played beyond his years this season, averaging over 20 minutes and putting up nine goals and 41 points through 74 games. If that's the ground floor for Hughes, then the Devils have every reason to be hopeful about his next steps.

Next seven days: @ OTT (April 6), vs. NSH (April 7), vs. TOR (April 9), @ TOR (April 11)

23. Buffalo Sabres

Previous ranking: 22

Points percentage: 50.66%

Zach Benson has joined Buffalo's top six, and the rookie has elevated his game accordingly. Benson -- still just 18 years old -- skates over 14 minutes per game, and has produced nine goals and 23 points through 64 games. For someone still so early in his development this has been a transformative year for Benson.

Next seven days: vs. PHI (April 5), @ DET (April 7), @ DAL (April 9), vs. WSH (April 11)

24. Seattle Kraken

Previous ranking: 25

Points percentage: 50.00%

Kraken fans caught a glimpse of Tye Kartye in the playoffs last season, and the rookie has translated that taste into a full-blown spread of opportunity this season. Bringing a physical edge and adding offense (with nine goals and 17 points through 68 games) is Kartye's calling card, and Seattle will keep dialing in on what he can offer.

Next seven days: @ ANA (April 5), vs. ARI (April 9), vs. SJ (April 11)

25. Calgary Flames

Previous ranking: 24

Points percentage: 48.67%

Calgary has benefitted from Connor Zary's breakout rookie season that has generated serious league-wide Calder buzz for the top-six forward. Zary rose from a brief AHL stint to start the season into a stalwart among the Flames' forward group -- a position he'll hold well into the future.

Next seven days: vs. EDM (April 6), @ SJ (April 9), @ LA (April 11)

26. Ottawa Senators

Previous ranking: 28

Points percentage: 46.67%

Ottawa has unlocked great potential in Ridly Greig's rookie season. He has been a firecracker up front and is a burgeoning scoring threat with 12 goals and 24 points through 63 games. The Senators are attempting to chart a successful new course and should be glad Greig's along for the ride.

Next seven days: vs. NJ (April 6), @ WSH (April 7), @ FLA (April 9), @ TB (April 11)

27. Montreal Canadiens

Previous ranking: 27

Points percentage: 46.67%

Cayden Primeau just had his best stretch of his rookie campaign in March, with a 3-1-1 record, 1.97 GAA and .939 SV%. The 24-year-old could be a valuable part of the Canadiens' hopeful resurgence in coming seasons.

Next seven days: vs. TOR (April 6), @ NYR (April 7), vs. PHI (April 9), @ NYI (April 11)

28. Arizona Coyotes

Previous ranking: 26

Points percentage: 44.67%

Arizona might be uncertain about its next arena location -- but there's no doubt Logan Cooley could light that place up, too. The freshman has had a dazzling season, producing 17 goals and 39 points through 74 games (and is fresh off his first career hat trick, too). Cooley has been better than advertised for the desert dogs.

Next seven days: vs. VGK (April 5), @ SJ (April 7), @ SEA (April 9), @ VAN (April 10)

29. Columbus Blue Jackets

Previous ranking: 29

Points percentage: 40.79%

Columbus is the NHL home to underrated rookie forward Dmitri Voronkov, and his stats speak for themselves. The durable forward is top 10 in rookie scoring (17 goals and 31 points through 68 games) with an impressive shooting percentage (13.2%), and he's a real asset for the Blue Jackets along the boards. Voronkov could be just scratching the surface of his potential in Columbus, a club that also has top-tier Calder material in 2023 No. 3 pick Adam Fantilli.

Next seven days: vs. PHI (April 6), @ CAR (April 7), @ TB (April 9), @ FLA (April 11)

30. Chicago Blackhawks

Previous ranking: 31

Points percentage: 32.67%



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Not even a fractured jaw could hold Connor Bedard back from being a Calder Trophy front-runner this season. Despite missing time, Bedard paces the rookie scoring field with 21 goals and 57 points through 60 games. And to think this is just the beginning for the newest face of the franchise in Chicago.

Next seven days: vs. DAL (April 6), vs. MIN (April 7), @ STL (April 10)

31. Anaheim Ducks

Previous ranking: 30

Points percentage: 35.53%

Anaheim has one of the league's top rookie blueliners in Pavel Mintyukov, and he should be a perennial bright spot for the Ducks. The 20-year-old has hardly looked out of place leading Anaheim's back end with eye-opening (if under-the-radar) play and production (four goals and 28 points in 63 games). It's hard to stick out in a season that also saw Faber and Hughes debut, but Mintyukov is on track to be an impact player.

Next seven days: vs. SEA (April 5), vs. STL (April 7), vs. LA (April 9)

32. San Jose Sharks

Previous ranking: 32

Points percentage: 28.00%

Henry Thrun was missed greatly when he was hurt in late January. Fortunately the blueliner has healed -- and picked up where he left off with an ever-evolving game that has given the Sharks something to be excited about for their future.

Next seven days: vs. STL (April 6), vs. ARI (April 7), vs. CGY (April 9), @ SEA (April 11)

Reactions

Connor Bedard's remarkable rookie season has been defined by confidence and offensive wizardry. But on Jan. 5, as he tried to knife through the New Jersey Devils' defense while driving to the net, he was flattened by a hit. When the 18-year-old's jaw broke, everything he had been building for was cruelly interrupted.

"It's not fun not to play," Bedard said. "I was dying to get back." One week after surgery to repair his fractured jaw, Bedard convinced trainers to allow him to skate. Solid foods were out, so he drank as many soups, smoothies and supplements as his body would allow, desperate not to lose weight.

The Chicago Blackhawks arranged regularly scheduled CT scans. "I haven't necessarily encountered this with a player before, but he was pushing to get checked by the doctors as often as possible," Blackhawks GM Kyle Davidson said. "It was a lot of, 'Can I get in to see the doctor? Can I go again?'"

At one point Davidson told Bedard: "I'd give you my jaw if I could."

Bedard researched players with similar injuries. He learned that Boston Bruins captain Zdeno Chara didn't miss a game in the 2019 Stanley Cup Final, with two plates, some wires and screws holding his jaw together. Bedard was incredulous that the Blackhawks wouldn't let him do the same. After six agonizing weeks, doctors gave Bedard the news he was waiting for: He was cleared for contact.

Coach Luke Richardson was meeting with Davidson in his office about another matter when Bedard invited himself in -- with talking points. The team initially wanted Bedard to get in a few practices before a game. Bedard believed he should play the next night against Sidney Crosby and the Penguins, and presented his case for why.

They compromised. Bedard would skate the next morning with coaches to see how he felt. Bedard would take checks from Richardson, a former NHL defenseman himself, to test his tolerance.

"Once we gave that green light," Davidson said, "there was a zero percent chance Bedard wasn't going to play that night."

Bedard was anointed as the next face of the league before ever taking a shift, and the fanfare surrounding his NHL arrival has sometimes felt astronomical.

"Everyone is asking everything of him," Blackhawks president Jaime Faulkner said recently. "The league is asking for a lot. We are asking for a lot, the media, sponsors and fans. But he always responds with kindness, even when he doesn't need to. He is referred to as a robot because people only see his intensity. But both can be true. He can be driven and highly competitive, but grounded and gracious at the same time."

Bedard's veteran teammates like Taylor Hall cautioned against overexposure as the season began -- not out of jealousy, but protection for the teenager. "It can be a little much at times," Hall said. "He doesn't say that, but it feels like it is."

But Bedard has handled it all with professionalism, settling in on two to three media sessions a week, mostly in scrum settings. Even though he missed his first All-Star appearance because of his jaw, Bedard showed up in Toronto anyway (and, again successfully, still campaigned to participate, passing pucks to players in the skills competition).

"The number of directions he is pulled in, the attention and spotlight he receives in a new city -- it has to be taxing and exhausting," Davidson said. "But he rarely shows it."

It was full bore ever since he took his opening faceoff against his childhood idol, Crosby.

"Looking back," Bedard told ESPN recently, "it definitely was a lot. Kind of overwhelming, but fun at the same time. I just tried to take it all in and enjoy it."

Bedard has enjoyed individual success -- leading all rookies with 58 points, despite missing 14 games with a broken jaw -- even as his team is in a humbling rebuild. When asked to describe his rookie season, Bedard lamented the constant losing, but called it a year in which he "grew a lot." The Blackhawks were the first team eliminated from playoff contention March 10 with more than a month left in the season. But Bedard has continued to play hard -- and so has his team -- despite the draft lottery paradox. Losing would improve Chicago's odds for the No. 1 pick, and more excitement (and talent) around Bedard.

The coaching staff and players refuse to view these games as meaningless. They have an identity they're trying to build, and it all begins with their star center.

"This is the NHL," Bedard said. "We're not playing for s---s."

There are two truths about Bedard. His desire to be one of the greatest to ever play is rooted in an obsession with the game. And in the context of realizing those goals, he's still really young. With a July birthday, Bedard has another full season as a teenager in the NHL coming in 2024-25.

Early in the season, Bedard curiously rushed home after games claiming he had to watch "his team." Finally veteran Nick Foligno asked what team he was referring to. It was the Regina Pats, Bedard's junior team in Saskatchewan, where many of his buddies still play.

"I was like, 'You know you play for the Chicago Blackhawks, right?'" Foligno said. "But he still has that humbleness where that team meant so much to him. We give him the gears, 'You're in the NHL now, you can let the WHL go.' But that's who he is. He's a fan more than anything."

It's not that hockey is all Bedard cares about -- he's dialed into other sports, following the NBA, NFL and its top athletes -- but nearly every anecdote shared about Bedard begins with his affinity for being at the rink. "It's all pure," says teammate Colin Blackwell. "He truly just loves the game."

The Blackhawks have a hockey shooting range at their practice facility, which they sometimes rent out for birthday parties. Bedard is in there so much, the team simply refers to it as "Connor's room." Davidson joked he would need to lock it to keep him out. It was a bit of fun, until Davidson got a text one Sunday while watching NFL games on his couch. Bedard



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wanted to know why the room was locked, and if Davidson did it intentionally. The innocent error was duly fixed.

Bedard's veteran teammates have warned him about the importance of conserving energy, but some lessons need to be learned the hard way.

On one scheduled optional day, Bedard wanted to skate. Richardson thought Bedard needed rest, so he had the equipment staff hide Bedard's sticks in the coaches' room. Bedard is especially particular about his stick; his Sherwood features a 70 flex, its whippiness helps his signature release. "So he has a choice to make," Richardson said. "Does he get out there with someone else's stick?"

When the story of hidden sticks was relayed back to Bedard, he smiled -- then implied it wasn't an isolated incident.

The most widely shared Bedard stories involve the rookie staying on the ice long after practice. If a staffer tries to pull him off -- for media obligations, the impending threat of a Zamboni or any other reason -- Bedard will reply: "I'm working."

Bedard immediately became Chicago's best player. Put bluntly by an opposing coach: "He's the one guy on their roster that you're really game-planning for."

"First of all, it's amazing an 18-year-old can command respect," Foligno said. "You can see how guys play him differently. Even some of the big hitters are like, 'Do I want to be on a highlight reel for getting dangled or do I want to get a piece of him?'"

Regardless of talent, the ebbs, flow and grind of professional hockey presents challenges. Bedard had a strong preseason, but didn't score until his third exhibition game -- an empty netter.

"He was sitting there, kind of gloomy after the game," Richardson said. "He thought he had a poor game."

Richardson saw it as a teaching moment. He told the rookie: "There are going to be games when you collect points, and we might lose. And there are games you don't love, but we win. So you have to be proud of yourself when you play well. And when you don't play well, your naturally competitive instincts will take over and push you to be better."

In junior hockey, Bedard was used to taking two-minute shifts and sometimes conserving his energy throughout or letting his skill take over. Bedard said his biggest adjustment to the NHL was less frequent breakdowns in opposing defensive systems, so he needed to work harder to find areas and get chances -- some magic he'll inherently create himself.

A crown highlight this season was Bedard's Michigan-style goal against the Blues just before Christmas. Wayne Gretzky just happened to be a spectator in St. Louis that night. "He's been better than we probably anticipated," Gretzky said on the Blues broadcast. "But I couldn't do what he did tonight. This wasn't in my repertoire."

Bedard broke his jaw just over a week later against the Devils. He cut through the Devils zone when defenseman Brendan Smith stepped up and laid out a hit. "In my mind, that's a clean hit," Smith said after. "But it's a big boys' league out there. He's a smart player, he'll learn from it for sure."

Foligno fought Smith in retaliation, though later told reporters he has a lot of respect for Smith, who plays "the right way."

"As the games get more important for us down the road, Connor is going to have to fight through what so many of those star players have had to," Foligno said. "When we're in a playoff run, they're going to target him a little more. Like that hit by Smith -- people are going to try and push him into certain areas and pin him off. It's all learning and part of being a great player. And all the greats have done it, they've learned how to play with a target on their back."

Foligno said Bedard's hockey IQ typically makes him hyperconscious of where he is on the ice, and who is out there against him.

"But the dad in me wants to protect him," Foligno said.

In Blackhawks training camp, the team runs branding exercises with the players -- gauging what companies and philanthropic issues they want to align with.

For some players it's first responders. For others, it's animal shelters. "What came through for Connor is that he truly cares about growing the game," Faulkner said.

The team catered all of his off-ice initiatives such as appearances at the Boys and Girls Club, roller hockey clinics and engaging with mite players at the practice facility. Bedard loves roller hockey, and still plays in the summers in Vancouver.

"When he's around kids, he's very social," Faulkner said. "Talks a ton, jokes a ton, kids just love him."

Bedard is extremely close to his family. His mom, dad and sister have all taken turns visiting him during the season.

"It's really nice having that support system and that normalcy," Bedard said. "But at the same time, I'm trying to be independent."

Bedard is learning how to cook. In September, he admitted a go-to method was FaceTiming his mom, putting the phone on the counter and letting her tell him what to do. He's since improved -- perhaps a new passion. Bedard is very conscious of everything he puts into his body. People close to him aren't sure if he's ever had a cookie.

Off the ice, Bedard seeks a quiet life. He's formed a close bond with teammate Taylor Raddysh and his wife, who live in the same apartment complex. "Sometimes I'll go over and just hang out with their dog," he said. He's also been to the Folignos a handful of times for dinner, where he hangs out equally with his teammate and his teammate's children. The Blackhawks have surrounded Bedard with a mix of trusted veterans and 17 players who are aged 25 or younger.

"When I got here, I really didn't know anyone, outside of camps or whatnot," Bedard said. "Now they're like my brothers."

Bedard loves sushi and also developed an affinity for city walks. The typical protocol is wearing a baseball hat, but even still he gets recognized. "I don't mind if people come say 'Hi, how are you,' that kind of thing," Bedard said. "The fans here have been so supportive."

It's another example of Bedard understanding the bigger picture.

"Wiser and more mature than you'd probably expect -- but also kind of expected with everything he's had to deal with," Foligno said. "I know he has to put his guard up in certain aspects ... But around us, he's really able to be himself, let his guard down, laugh, and you can tell he's most comfortable in that locker room environment with the guys."

And of course, on the ice. That's where the magic of Bedard really shines.

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Sportsnet.ca / In star-studded matchup, Oilers' depth provides the playoff-clinching response

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — As fans are wont to do, the Edmonton market grouched loudly about an Oilers team that "couldn't beat the top teams" after a 5-0 loss at Dallas Wednesday.

But people inside the game, they take a more pragmatic view. They look down from 30,000 feet more often than the emotional fan does.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Always have.

“(That’s) not the team or the game that we are, or we want to show, on a daily basis,” said Leon Draisaitl, who notched career assists No. 500 and reached the 100-point plateau for the fifth time with a two-assist game Friday. “That being said, 82 is a lot of games, and you’re going to have a couple of those a year.

“The most important thing is how you respond, and that’s something over the last couple years — including the playoffs — that this team does really, really well. Respond to poor efforts or bad games.”

It was a playoff spot-clinching response by Edmonton that the Colorado Avalanche, who had played the night before in Minnesota, saw coming from kilometres away.

After a 6-2 loss in Edmonton, in which his team was outshot 46-23 and allowed six even strength Oilers goals, Colorado head coach Jared Bednar — a hockey person through and through — admitted that he had seen this Oilers train coming down the tracks from a distance.

“They got beat up the other night in Dallas,” began Bednar. “We knew we were going to see the best version of them. We may have, but we didn’t give ourselves a chance. We just weren’t good enough.

“It happens every once in a while, it happened tonight. They were twice as good as us, with twice as many shots, more than twice as many goals. It just is what it is.”

The last five games these teams have played against each other went into overtime. But the fact the Avalanche won four of those — and swept Edmonton in a playoff meeting two springs ago — has always left Colorado as the bigger brother in this relationship, a role the Oilers hope one day to claim.

On this night that climb began with a massive hit by big Swede Mattias Ekholm, who stepped up on the unsuspecting, six-foot-four, 215-pound Mikko Rantanen. Rantanen dropped like a loaf of Finnish fish bread, wobbling off the ice never to be seen again on this night.

The score was 2-2 at the time of that hit. Edmonton won the rest of the game by a 4-0 count.

“First of all, I hate to see that he was stumbling in and out of there,” Ekholm said after the game. “I never want to hit someone so that they get hurt or injured.

“But I have seen the hit about 15 times at the intermission and I can not see anything different that I can do. I think it is a shoulder on shoulder. The play happened so fast. I usually just go looking for the puck, I usually don’t hit that much. It just happened that he wasn’t expecting it.”

Bednar didn’t like the hit, but we can tell you this: there is no objectivity in an NHL dressing room.

The true tell here are the referees, who did not call a penalty on Ekholm, and the Department of Player Safety, who we predict will be silent. We fully expect Ekholm to be on the Saddledome ice for a Hockey Night in Canada battle with the Calgary Flames.

This was a matchup of two of the game’s biggest stars in Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon, a battle won on this night by McDavid (two goals, nine shots) over MacKinnon (one assist, three shots). But when teams with two top lines like these meet up the game is most often decided by the rest of the lineups, and this one followed that script.

Edmonton’s third line of Ryan McLeod (two assists) between Evander Kane (two goals) and Corey Perry (goal) were the difference makers on a night where Oilers head coach Kris Knoblauch deployed McDavid and Draisaitl on the same line.

It’s a strategy that hasn’t always worked, but more and more, it’s been helping Edmonton win.

What should that tell us?

“That we’ve got really good depth,” Draisaitl said. “We have four really good lines that you can put out against anybody. Obviously it changes

from game to game — from game plan to game plan. But we’re a really deep team, and a group of guys that that, whatever role they get thrown at them, they embrace it and they do their job well.”

The Oilers got the bounces on Friday that had eluded on a one-point road trip through St. Louis and Dallas earlier in the week. Edmonton had two goals called back in an overtime loss to the Blues, then hit three posts in a 1-0 game in Dallas, before succumbing 5-0 to the Stars.

Against Colorado, Artturi Lehkonen inadvertently kicked a puck through his goalie’s legs and into the net, and then the Oilers won the ensuing goaltender interference challenge. That was more good luck than they’d had in a week, so when Avs goalie Alex Georgiev couldn’t squeeze a relatively easy shot — and the rebound careened into the net off of Evander Kane’s torso with 1.3 seconds left in the second period — you knew the Hockey Gods had shifted their ire away from the Oilers an on to Colorado.

It was a huge goal, sending the teams to the dressing room in a 4-2 game, on a play that wasn’t even a legit scoring chance. The goal snapped a 21-game goalless streak for Kane, the longest in his NHL career, and he would add one more in the third period for 23 on the season.

“It was nice to end the streak tonight. It seemed like that was the only way it was going to go in,” said Kane, who’d missed on breakaways and close-in one-timers, only to score on a puck that never even touched his stick

“You saw it with Brownie (Connor Brown) as well,” he noted. “It goes in off his foot and he gets a little hot for the next five or six games. Usually when things aren’t going your way you’re going to need a bit of a bounce to go your way and that’s what happened.”

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Sportsnet.ca / After slow start with Canucks, Lindholm preparing to play ‘best hockey’ in playoffs

Iain MacIntyre

LOS ANGELES — Having failed to harvest bushels of goals and points that get players paid in free agency, all Elias Lindholm can do now is win. Which is why the Vancouver Canucks acquired him two months ago.

Lindholm’s difficult season got worse when a wrist injury forced the 29-year-old centre out of the lineup five games ago.

Uncertainty about his contract and future beyond this season contributed to the Swede’s slow first half with the Calgary Flames. But after his blockbuster trade to the Canucks on Jan. 31, Lindholm scored even less.

His first six games with the Canucks included a pair of two-goal games, but in the next 16 he had one goal and three assists. Rejoining teammates for practice here Friday, Lindholm has just 14 goals and 41 points in 71 games. He is not expected to play Saturday against the Los Angeles Kings but should play soon.

The Canucks have only six regular-season games remaining before the National Hockey League playoffs open in two weeks.

“My main goal here is to win the Stanley Cup,” Lindholm told Sportsnet after the Canucks practised at the Kings’ training facility in El Segundo. “Whether that is me putting up zero points or putting up (many), I don’t even care, honestly. But I want to be helping the team in the right way. And I think I can help this team by playing my best hockey and help this team take the next step and have a good run in the playoffs.



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"Going into the last year of your contract and I'm a UFA after this season, obviously I put a lot of pressure — even before the season started — on myself. I wanted to produce and be the best version of myself and, obviously, it hasn't really worked out. That's just the way it has been. But then the trade happened and I was excited to be here and be part of this group, and hopefully I can play my best hockey in the playoffs and show the real me."

The real Lindholm is one of the premier two-way centres in the NHL, a Selke Trophy runner-up two seasons ago who scored at a 31-goal, 72-point pace over 82 games during the last five years in Calgary.

The real Lindholm is "a guy who will do anything to win and help the team," Canuck defenceman Nikita Zadorov said. A teammate of Lindholm in Calgary, Zadorov previously compared the centre to Selke legend Patrice Bergeron and said the Flames would not have beaten the Dallas Stars in the playoffs two years ago without Lindholm.

On Friday, Lindholm took turns with a couple of lines during drills. Coach Rick Tocchet has made it clear he believes the Canucks' strongest lineup is built around a spine of J.T. Miller, Elias Pettersson, Lindholm and Teddy Blueger down the middle.

Lindholm left the lineup — ironically, after breaking a 15-game goal-less streak with an empty-netter against the Flames on March 23 — due to the worsening of a wrist injury suffered "a couple of games" before.

"It's been kind of brutal to deal with," he said. "Obviously, you're using it a lot and when I played it wasn't getting better. We're in a pretty good spot (in the standings) so it was a good time to step away and let it heal. I feel pretty good now."

Tocchet was non-committal about which game might be the target for Lindholm's return, but said he wasn't worried about the veteran needing much of a runway to get ready for the playoffs.

"If he only played 200 games (in the NHL), I'd be a little more concerned," Tocchet said. "But he's played 800. He's a veteran guy, he's played in the playoffs before. I bet he'd like to get some warmups in here and get in some games. But I'm not as concerned for a veteran. But yeah, of course, you know, I'm sure he'd like some reps."

"I don't feel like I need reps," Lindholm said. "You know, I'd rather play sooner than later. But at the same time. . . when I come back, I want to be healthy and be the best version of myself."

Besides having time to heal physically, Lindholm's injury allowed him to reset mentally after the constant stress of a challenging contract year.

"When I was younger and sometimes you weren't playing, it was good to sit upstairs and watch the game and see it from a different view," he explained. "I was playing through this (injury) for a couple of games and it wasn't getting better, so it was good for me to put this to rest and heal and hopefully. . . be back playing games soon. I think it was a good refresher, to reset my mind and, obviously, try to come back and then be a better player."

THE MARK OF Z

Zadorov got attention around the NHL, and especially in L.A., last week when he offered Sportsnet this assessment of the Kings' ultra-conservative style: "They don't really make plays; they just rim the puck and sit back all game. I mean, it's their goal to don't play hockey and don't let the other team play hockey, pretty much."

After using their 1-3-1 retreat to frustrate the Canucks in a 3-2 win at Rogers Arena, the Kings moved on to Edmonton, where veteran defenceman Drew Doughty told reporters: "Pretty absurd comments. We've heard the frustration from so many top guys, in-game. Guys yelling at our bench: 'What kind of hockey is this 1-3-1 crap?' and whatnot. It puts a smile on our faces to frustrate them a little bit."

Apart from being one of the NHL's best defencemen, Doughty is a chirper of renown on the ice. So, does Zadorov expect to get a Doughty headache on Saturday?

"No, I've known him a long time," Zadorov smiled. "He's a good guy. I'm not worried about that."

The defenceman said he didn't receive any blowback about his remarks.

"I mean, it's true," he said. "But they're very good at it."

GOALIE UPDATE

Injured star Thatcher Demko did not practise with the Canucks on Friday, but instead had another one-on-one ice session with goaltending coach Ian Clark. Demko is eligible to return from long-term injured reserve on Saturday but won't be playing against the Kings.

Tocchet went so far as to say that minor-league callup Arturs Silovs could get another start, which means Demko may be unavailable until the final three or four games of the regular season. Regular backup Casey DeSmith is the expected starter on Saturday.

"Casey has done it all year for us and he deserves to play," Tocchet said. "But I think Silovs, he could definitely play another game for us."

Silovs has won both of his starts since being recalled when Demko injured his knee on March 9, and in Wednesday's 2-1 road win against the Arizona Coyotes stopped 20 of 21 shots.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Marner set to return, but not alongside Matthews

Luke Fox

MONTREAL — Mitch Marner is back ... but not in his usual spot.

The Toronto Maple Leafs' all-star winger is set to return to action Saturday in Montreal after missing 12 games due to a reported ankle injury, yet he will not be skating alongside 70-goals-hunting Auston Matthews on the top line.

"To have those guys on different lines presents some really good options and spreads out our scoring depth really well. So, we'll give it a look," coach Sheldon Keefe told reporters after Friday's practice.

"We're always going to be a fluid group. It's just the way our group is."

For now, Keefe is sticking with the Tyler Bertuzzi–Matthews–Max Domi unit that outscored the opposition 9-6 in Marner's absence and generated 67.9 per cent of expected goals when thrown over the boards.

Marner will join left wing Bobby McMann on John Tavares' second line, while William Nylander will be expected to drive Toronto's less experienced third line, bumping Nick Robertson to the press box.

Because the Maple Leafs are essentially locked into the Atlantic Division's third seed, Keefe can afford to experiment with his combinations down the stretch.

Marner himself acknowledged that the top line has played "unbelievable" during his recovery. Toronto has gone 7-4-1 during its recent Marner-free stretch.

Keefe cautioned not to read too much into current line combinations, however, as he likes to move his wingers around depending on the situation and to keep the opposition guessing.

TV timeouts and special-teams shifts also play a factor in deployment.



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"When the game's flowing and there's not a lot of whistles, depth is really important," Keefe said. "But a lot of the games, especially regular season, are slow. There's a lot of whistles.

"That's why people move around."

Marnier stressed that it doesn't matter who he plays with. His priority is getting up to game speed over these next two weeks to prepare for the postseason.

"Excited," Marnier said. "Just want to get back, get back in the rhythm of things, and try and contribute to help our team win games."

One-Timers

Ilya Samsonov was nominated by Toronto's chapter of hockey writers for the Masterton Trophy ... Noah Gregor and Robertson appear to be healthy scratches Saturday ... New Leafs signee Jacob Quillan will make his AHL Marlies debut Saturday versus Utica. "Big, strong guy who plays in straight lines. It looks like he has a good knack for the net," Marlies coach John Gruden told reporters. "It'll be exciting." ... Timothy Liljegren (upper body) skated solo Friday, and Joel Edmundson participated in his first full practice since going down to injury. Neither will play Saturday ... Marnier will naturally bump Domi off the top power-play unit.... Can Matthews score seven goals in seven games?

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Sportsnet.ca / How have playoff-bound Canadian teams fared against top opponents?

Justin Bourne

When analyzing not just the quality of a team, but its likelihood of playoff success, I have to remind myself that a shift in thinking is required. Because after a year of talking about the Maple Leafs during the first hour of our radio program, I can get used to the idea of an "average" statistic falling somewhere in the 10-20 range of league-wide ranks.

For example, when it comes to shots on net that come from the slot (against), the Leafs are 13th in the NHL – which is good, better than 19 teams - allowing 12.4 per game.

But when you toggle that thinking to the playoffs, where there's only 16 teams, suddenly if you're 13th in a category you're at best middle of the pack (assuming some non-playoff teams are ahead of you) and at worst near the bottom. In today's reality, the Leafs would be entering playoffs 11th of 16 teams in that particular category.

That's a random statistical example, but the point is that league-wide "good" isn't the same as being better than other playoff teams, which is all that matters in forecasting the coming months.

What becomes important is not how a team ran up numbers against the non-factor teams, but its ability to beat those other good teams.

I wanted to dive in on our four Canadian playoff-bound teams and see which ones have fared best in racking up points against the types of teams they're likely to play in the playoffs.

I bucketed the teams into groups of five, because what's interesting to me is how these teams fare against different levels of playoff opponents (and I also wanted to separate the bottom feeders to see if anyone made all their hay there).

EDMONTON OILERS

Up first is the team that inspired this analysis, thanks to a board shown on Sportsnet this week. The Oilers, who are among the league's strangest teams (in that they can be the best team in the league on any given night, but then have weird lapses of play like their month of October), have struggled against very good teams.

The Oilers are not the same team from the start of the season, yet they still carry with them the stats from that time so it's tough to know what to make of this exactly. But you would think that a team with a ton of raw talent would expose the more under-talented teams even if they played imperfectly some nights, and that a good team could at least slow down Connor McDavid and Co., while taking better advantage of an Oilers D-corps that can make mistakes.

Staring that record in the face, and Vegas as a possible first round matchup, makes for an ominous forecast. That said: I'd never bet against prime McDavid and Leon Draisaitl.

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

The Leafs have come out on the better side of their "top 15" matchups more often than not, but it is worth noting that the success they've had there has mostly not been against the very best teams -- the kind of which they're likely to face in the first round.

The Panthers are struggling right now, but do expect Aaron Ekblad and Carter Verhaeghe back for Game 1 of the playoffs. Florida is probably straddling the "Top 5" and "6-10" categories.

The Leafs can have sleepy nights against teams in the 16-27 range, so these numbers check out. And while their record against bottom-feeding teams is still good, those seven wins compared to the other Canadian teams means that in four of 11 games Toronto let bad teams hang around. (They've also had fewer opportunities against bottom-feeders given the schedule and the glut of bad teams in the West.)

VANCOUVER CANUCKS

Vancouver might be Canada's brightest hope, if you believe there's any meaning to having a good record against good teams.

The Canucks are 12-6-3 against the 10 best teams in the league, which is good because the top of the Western Conference is a murderer's row of contenders, and they're going to need to be able to hang with those teams. (They'll also need Thatcher Demko back doing his thing.)

In 25 games against teams ranked 16th-27th in the league, the Jets won just 13 times. If they were even a little better against pretty humdrum opponents they could've finished first in the Central.

In all, these numbers say the Oilers may be in a bit of trouble, and the Canucks may be better built for the playoffs than we would've guessed.

We're two weeks away from the league chopping off 16 teams of dead wood, leaving just the best of the best. Four Canadian teams all have a chance to be this year's champion, but they won't get there without weathering the toughest storms against the league's best teams.

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TSN.CA / Kylington named Flames nominee for Masterton Trophy

Salim Valji

Calgary Flames blueliner Oliver Kylington is the team's nominee for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, which goes to the player "best exemplifying perseverance, sportsmanship, dedication to hockey."



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The award nominee is voted on by members of the Calgary chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers' Association and will be presented at the NHL Awards in June.

Kylington returned to the Flames lineup in January after a year-and-a-half away to focus on his mental health. The defenceman has five points in 26 games this season, and is back to playing more than 18 minutes most nights.

"Very honoured," he said Monday of the nomination. "I heard the people that have played for the Flames that have been [nominated], and I'm just honoured to be on that list."

Kylington stepped away from the sport shortly after his breakout 2021-22 campaign, where he was a stalwart on a pairing alongside Chris Tanev during the team's run to the Pacific Division title.

His road back was far from linear, and he faced multiple challenges en route to donning an NHL jersey again.

Kylington was set to rejoin the Flames ahead of training camp this season before he experienced a trigger during fitness testing and had to step away.

"He just couldn't do it," Flames general manager Conroy told TSN in January. "He couldn't even come inside and upstairs to do anything. So, unfortunately, we had to take a step back.

"...I'll give Oliver a ton of credit. He didn't want to ever give up. He wanted to talk to some people. He wanted to try. We set him up with some people to talk to."

On Monday, Kylington shed some light on what he went through prior to returning to the team.

"I had to deal with a very narcissistic person, so I learned how to suppress [my feelings]," he said. "I learned how to just shove stuff away. When you do that for too long, it'll come at you. It'll come hunt you. I learned that you can't run away from your problems."

Kylington says he's now in a much better place, contributing to a Flames team that's in the midst of a roster transition. Above all, he feels good – on and off the ice.

"I feel appreciative of hanging out with people that I haven't seen for a long time and just spending time competing with old teammates and new teammates and being back in an environment that I've been away from for a long time," he said. "I'm just appreciative of life, really."

Head coach Ryan Huska, who also coached Kylington in the AHL, said he has seen a big difference in the blueliner's demeanor since he returned.

"For a young guy to go through some of the mental health challenges that he went through and find a way to still persevere and keep himself engaged and in great shape, to be able to step back after a year-and-a-half away from the game says a lot about him as a person and his character," Huska said. "He's free right now...more the way that I saw him as a younger guy...he's got a smile on his face again. He's back to his usual, energetic self."

It's common to see opposing players give Kylington a stick tap and words of encouragement in warmups and during games. He's felt that support across the hockey world and throughout Calgary. Several times, Kylington has praised Flames fans and the organization for their important role in his healing journey.

"I never thought anyone would do that," he said of the outpouring of support. "You feel loved...it's nice to see that they appreciate what I've done for myself."

Kylington hesitated when asked if he views himself as a role model or trailblazer for mental health in the hockey world. Each person's path is their own, he insisted. If they are inspired by his, that's just a bonus.

"If my story can really help people, I'm thankful and grateful," he said. "But if it doesn't, it doesn't...everyone's journey is very personal. You can

take bits and [pieces] of my story and that can maybe help someone, but at the end of the day, as an individual, you have to do the work yourself."

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