



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 6, 2024

## The Athletic

### Which NHL broadcasts are the best? 2024 broadcast rankings, rated by fans

By The Athletic NHL Staff

It was a watershed year for regional broadcasts across the NHL.

Memorable, emotional retirements from iconic play-by-play broadcasters punctuated this past NHL season in several major markets.

In Philadelphia, meanwhile, a longtime color commentator — Keith Jones — was hired directly from the broadcast booth and installed atop the Flyers organization as team president.

Let that serve as a reminder that there's a certain authority and appeal attached to a regional broadcast and to the regional broadcasters that populate "the show."

That authority stems from a certain homey familiarity and sense of belonging. It's that ineffable sense of empathy and connection that fans naturally feel when watching their guys call their team's games.

That connection resonates loudly whenever we launch our annual broadcast rankings survey at The Athletic. We ask fans to rate their favorite teams' broadcasts on a scale from 1 to 5 and invite them to rate as many other local broadcasts as they wish.

This year we got roughly 7,000 responses from fans wanting an opportunity to critique and provide feedback.

We then used your grades and input to rank the regional broadcasts of all 32 NHL teams.

In terms of our methodology, we average out the results of the survey to provide each broadcast with a local and national score. Teams are then assigned a national and local rank, which is averaged into a composite score.

This isn't a scientific exercise, especially as some teams and fan bases are more represented than others. The results, however, still provide us with a fascinating snapshot of how fan bases across the NHL view, connect with and rate those calling hockey games.

#### 32. Boston Bruins

The Broadcast: NESN carries Bruins games with Jack Edwards — who retired following this past season — doing play-by-play and Andy Brickley doing color.

Local Ranking: 30

National Ranking: 32

Last Season: 30

The Results: The Bruins regional broadcast on NESN finds itself in last place this year.

The always polarizing broadcast has regularly ranked at the bottom of these survey results and will get a significant

refresh next season with Edwards hanging up his microphone following an iconic 19-year run calling Bruins games.

Edwards' play-by-play call has been impacted in recent years by a speech issue, which he opened up about in February. A number of our respondents noted Edwards' compromised delivery in their feedback about the Bruins broadcast, but make no mistake, the broadcaster also received a ton of support and heartfelt well-wishes from Bruins fans who responded to our survey.

"I have grown up watching Jack and Brick on the Bruins broadcast and I can't imagine watching the Bruins with anybody else on the call," noted one fan.

"Jack Edwards is simply the best," wrote another. "His enthusiasm for the game is unmatched. He will be missed immensely in New England."

In addition to a typical mix of strong opinions on Edwards, Bruins fans in our survey regularly grumbled about technical issues and praised the work of host Sophia Jurksztowicz and the analysis of color commentator Andy Brickley.

Fans also provided strong opinions on some of the fill-in options NESN trialed during a brief holiday break for Edwards this season, most notably former L.A. Kings play-by-play broadcaster Alex Faust.

"When Alex Faust filled in for Jack on several occasions this season, he did a great job," wrote one Bruins fan. "I'd be very happy if he were the permanent replacement."

#### 31. Chicago Blackhawks

The Broadcast: NBC Sports Chicago carries Blackhawks games with Chris Vosters doing play-by-play and Darren Pang doing color.

Local ranking: 32

National ranking: 24

Last season: 32

The results: The 2023-24 season marked the splashy debut of former Blackhawks goalie Darren Pang as a color analyst in Chicago. Across the board, fans had rave reviews for his knowledge, professionalism and experience.

"Bringing in Darren Pang as the analyst was a home run hire," wrote one respondent.

And yet, despite all the respect for Pang's work, the Blackhawks broadcast only moved up one spot after finishing dead last in 2023. The bar is exceptionally high in Chicago because of their former legendary broadcasters, and the overwhelming brunt of criticism was directed at Vosters, who completed his second season as the primary play-by-play caller.



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Many fans said that while Vosters is likable and improving, he struggles to find rhythm with the pace of play, doesn't have great chemistry with Pang and his overall knowledge, background and feel for hockey isn't up to par for an Original Six franchise's broadcast.

"He is not a hockey guy, you can just hear it the way he calls a game," summarized one Blackhawks fan.

### 30. Columbus Blue Jackets

The Broadcast: Bally Sports Ohio carries Blue Jackets games, with Jeff Rimer — who retired following this past season — doing play-by-play and Jody Shelley doing color.

Local Ranking: 29

National Ranking: 28

Last Season: 29

The Results: Among several regional broadcasts toward the bottom end of our list with a retiring play-by-play broadcaster, the Columbus Blue Jackets broadcast checks in at 29th.

Longtime Blue Jackets play-by-play broadcast Rimer, who has been calling NHL games since 1990 and Jackets games since 2004, announced his retirement near the beginning of the 2023-24 campaign and was honored by the club toward the end of the year.

While the majority of Blue Jackets fans expressed appreciation for Rimer's work over the years in our survey, there was a relatively commonplace sense that it was time for change within the broadcast

"Jeff Rimer is a legend," noted one Blue Jackets fan response, "But I think his retirement this year is timed aptly."

Given the business uncertainty around Bally Sports, several of our respondents expressed serious apprehension about how the Blue Jackets will fill their broadcast team for next season. The stakes will be high, especially given the near-universal praise that Blue Jackets fans showered on color commentator Shelley.

"Jody Shelley is a star, and belongs on national telecasts," wrote one Blue Jackets fan. "Replacing the retiring Jeff Rimer will be critical to the status of the broadcast in the future."

One piece of unique, constructive criticism that stood out among Blue Jackets fans in our survey was the widespread suggestion that the tenor of the broadcast didn't really match the high levels of fan frustration in Ohio about the team's poor performance over the past couple of years.

"Tired of watching TV and hearing everything is fine when the team is in the lottery," said one fan in our survey, echoing the commentary of a large handful of fans.

### 29. Toronto Maple Leafs

The Broadcast: Sportsnet carried 14 Maple Leafs games regionally this season, with Chris Cuthbert doing play-by-play and Craig Simpson doing color. TSN carried 26 Leafs games regionally with Gord Miller doing play-by-play and Mike Johnson doing color.

Local Ranking: 31

National Ranking: 12

Last Season: 25

The Results: The Maple Leafs are such big business that the majority of their games this past season (42 of them) were nationally broadcast in Canada.

What remains of the Leafs schedule is split between Sportsnet and TSN and carried regionally, with two different crews staffed by familiar national broadcasters making up Toronto's regional broadcast. It's a unique arrangement relative to most NHL teams and, once again, it's a source of significant frustration for Maple Leafs fans who responded to our survey.

In fact, the gap between how highly Maple Leafs regional broadcasts are regarded by non-Leafs fans and how lowly rated it is by respondents selecting the Maple Leafs as their favorite team is the widest in our data set.

"I don't want a Jack Edwards-level bias, but it would be nice if they were pro-Leafs once in a while," wrote one survey respondent.

While there's praise for the work of the broadcast teams across the board from our respondents, it's evident that not having a regional broadcast with a local feel and slant is a perpetual source of frustration.

"Both the Cuthbert/Simpson team and (the TSN team) are very good and very professional, but are lacking in that hometown flavour that a lot of other teams get," wrote one fan.

A large number of responses feature comments from Leafs fans pining for radio play-by-play broadcaster Joe Bowen to call the games on television.

It's worth noting, too, that Leafs fans in our survey tended to give the TSN broadcast more credit for taking thoughtful steps toward attempting a regional feel to their broadcasts.

"(On Sportsnet) the national and regional broadcasts of Leaf games are virtually indistinguishable," was a representative response from one fan.

### 28. Pittsburgh Penguins

The broadcast: SportsNet Pittsburgh carries Penguins games, with Josh Getzoff doing play-by-play and Phil Bourque, Colby Armstrong and Mike Rupp rotating on color.

Local ranking: 24

National: 29

Last season: 27

The results: Pittsburgh's broadcast underwent seismic changes this season, with both play-by-play caller Steve Mears and analyst Bob Errey departing. Getzoff transitioned from radio to TV, with the analyst role filled by a three-person committee.

The feedback was interesting. Statistically, there wasn't any improvement in the rankings, yet anecdotally, most of the written survey responses included positive reviews for the changes.

"The overall broadcast revamp was needed and has improved every aspect," said one Penguins fan.



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"Getzoff is crisp, professional and getting stronger as the year goes on," added another.

On the color side, Bourque was touted for bringing the most exciting tone; Rupp's games brought more of a neutral, informative view; and Armstrong is a likable figure in Pittsburgh. That said, some fans didn't like having different color commentators throughout the season, preferring one consistent analyst instead.

Overall, this was a solid albeit unspectacular transition year for the Penguins broadcast. Let's see if that translates to better tangible results in Year 2.

### 27. Colorado Avalanche

The Broadcast: Altitude carries Avalanche games, with Marc Moser on play-by-play and Mark Rycroft on color.

Local ranking: 27

National: 27

Last season: 24

The results: A heavily biased, Avs-friendly tone — even relative to the lenient curve of regional broadcasts — defines Altitude's passionate and entertaining game presentation. It's a polarizing approach — some fans (especially out of the market) hate it, while others love it.

"The Altitude broadcast crew are undeniable homers for the Avs and aren't shy about that fact, but it feels like they are fans with us and their passion is just as deep," said one Avs fan. "Does this lead to a sacrifice in objectivity? Absolutely, but I think they lean into their passion and knowledge for the team in an authentic and encouraging way that wants to bring as many people under the tent of not just Avalanche fandom but hockey fandom in the state of Colorado as a whole."

Moser received a lot of props for his play-by-play commentary, especially his dramatic and electric goal calls. Accessibility of Altitude's broadcast remains a challenge that dragged some of the scores down. There were also a few complaints about the broadcast's analysis feeling basic and old school, as well as a lack of high-quality replays on the technical side.

### 26. Arizona Coyotes

The Broadcast: Bally Sports Arizona carries Coyotes games, with Matt McConnell on play-by-play and Tyson Nash on color.

Local ranking: 21

National ranking: 31

Last season: 26

The results: McConnell's understated play-by-play commentary is well-liked by Coyotes fans and even earned some out-of-market recognition.

"I really hope Matt McConnell gets a crack in SLC (Salt Lake City)," wrote a Minnesota Wild fan. "Excellent PxP in Arizona for many years for a less-than-excellent team. He also doesn't get the respect he deserves in these rankings."

Nash's color analysis, on the other hand, is polarizing. A large chunk of out-of-market fans have soured on him,

especially for his old-school takes. This is the second consecutive season in which Arizona's local ranking far exceeds its national ranking.

### 25. Minnesota Wild

The broadcast: Bally Sports North carries Wild games, with Anthony LaPanta on play-by-play. Ryan Carter, Wes Walz and Lou Nanne rotate on color.

Local ranking: 28

National: 18

Last season: 21

The results: This is the fourth time in five years Minnesota's broadcast has ranked in the 20s. Walz's color commentary was frequently criticized for relying on cliches, too many references to his old playing days and lack of smooth delivery — multiple respondents believe he's best suited to a studio analyst role.

Bally's technical difficulties, app and overall service caused some fans to dock points. And with the Wild missing the playoffs for the first time in 2019, there was a sense the broadcasters let the club's performance off the hook too easily.

"Too many excuses and narratives when things are bad. ... I do like the increased use of analytics, but it seems they lean toward stats that show the Wild aren't playing as bad as the eyes tell you they are," said one Minnesota fan.

LaPanta earned mostly solid reviews for his play-by-play work. Meanwhile, Carter is extremely popular as a color analyst, with many advocating for him to take the role over full-time.

"Ryan Carter is the best! Extremely knowledgeable, explains the game well and his enthusiasm is contagious."

### 24. New Jersey Devils

The Broadcast: MSG Sportsnet carries Devils broadcasts, with Bill Spaulding handling play-by-play, Ken Daneyko on color commentary and Bryce Salvador at rinkside during Devils home games.

Local Ranking: 22

National Ranking: 25

Last Season: 17

The Results: It isn't easy to step into the shoes memorably filled by longtime Devils play-by-play broadcasters like Glenn "Chico" Resch and Mike "Doc" Emrick, but in two years behind the microphone on Devils broadcasts, Spaulding has done enough to earn widespread plaudits from a discerning Devils fan base.

"We are still spoiled ... (but) Bill Spaulding is rapidly developing his own style and on-air personality," wrote one Devils fan in our survey.

While Daneyko received mixed reviews in our survey, with several fans noting they wished he'd be more forthright in criticizing mistakes made by a young team in a particularly error-plagued campaign, a large cross-section of Devils fans expressed appreciation for his overall authority and approach.



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"Ken Danyeko plays the lovable 'homer' role really well," commented one fan.

There was a relatively widespread sentiment that host Erika Wachter is an up-and-coming star. Likewise, numerous comments praised Salvador, former Devils captain, for his work explaining the game from an Xs and Os standpoint.

"Bryce Salvador is a tremendous hockey analyst," gushed one respondent.

### 23. Anaheim Ducks

The Broadcast: Bally Sports SoCal carries Ducks games, with John Ahlers doing play-by-play and Brian Hayward doing color.

Local ranking: 15

National ranking: 30

Last season: 31

The results: After 31st-place finishes in 2022 and 2023, the Ducks broadcast shot up eight spots this season. Nearly all of that improvement came from within the market, as they shot up from 30th to 15th in local polling. There's a growing feeling that Ahlers and Hayward have served Ducks fans well during difficult, losing seasons, even if they aren't cream-of-the-crop broadcasters.

"Broadcasting for the Ducks has been an increasing challenge during the Ducks' lean years, and John Ahlers and Brian Hayward have been doing a yeoman job," wrote one Ducks fan. "John is a brilliant play-by-play caller, providing fresh descriptions of each moment while also keeping a natural flow that is easy to listen to. Brian gets accused of being a homer and being too hard on the team, so you can tell he is doing a good job!"

Ahlers and Hayward were also complimented for doing a better job this season of being "even and professional." This is a notable adjustment as Hayward in particular had been criticized for being too strong of a homer in years past.

Anaheim's broadcast still struggles in national polling and respondents believe its analysis isn't particularly insightful or cutting edge, but it took a step in the right direction in 2023-24.

Dan Dunlevy, pictured here in 2019, continues to earn praise from Sabres fans. (Bill Wippert / NHLI via Getty Images)

### 22. Buffalo Sabres

The Broadcast: MSG Western New York carries Sabres broadcasts, with Dan Dunlevy on play-by-play and Rob Ray on color commentary.

Local Ranking: 25

National Ranking: 14

Last Season: 14

The Results: In his second full season as Sabres play-by-play broadcaster, Dunlevy continues to earn widespread praise from Sabres fans. That's impressive, given the impossible task he was thrust into of replacing the late, great Rick Jeanneret.

"Dunleavy had big shoes to fill but has done it well," wrote one Sabres fan.

"Dan Dunleavy is among the best play-by-play guys in hockey today, and in a market where everyone grew up with Rick Jeanneret, it's all the more impressive that he earned the respect of the fans and has been accepted as the new voice of the Sabres," wrote another.

Ray's work is more polarizing among Sabres fans. His critics suggest he leans too much on analyzing the physicality of the game, while his supporters insist the detractors simply don't get it.

"Rob Ray is 'folksy' and some people don't appreciate that style," wrote one Sabres fan, "but I think it creates a good blend with Dan."

The Sabres broadcast regularly scores highly among non-Sabres fans who respond to our survey, and that's the case again this year. National respondents often cited the work of the intermission panels, which prominently feature Martin Biron, in their regard for the regional broadcast.

One New York Islanders fan who participated in the survey, however, focused on the chemistry between Ray and Dunlevy, bridging a gap between Ray's critics and supporters in the process.

"Dunleavy and Ray have a particularly strong chemistry," wrote this fan. "Knowledgeable and entertaining most of the time, but unafraid to let Ray's flights of fancy and oddball nature take over when it serves the broadcast. The call feels like a conversation between the two of them in the best of ways."

### 21. Winnipeg Jets

The broadcast: TSN carries Jets games with Dan Robertson doing play-by-play and Kevin Sawyer doing color.

Local ranking: 26

National: 8

Last season: 23

The results: Ranking top 10 nationally but polling just 26th locally, these results continue an annual theme in which Winnipeg's broadcast performs significantly better out of market.

Robertson continued to establish himself as a stellar play-by-play successor for the legendary Dennis Beyak in Year 2. He's adored both locally and nationally.

"He should be on a shortlist for future national broadcast roles," noted a Canadiens fan. "A natural with a booming voice and a great feel for how to approach any situation he is faced with. We miss him in Montreal."

Sawyer's divisive color analysis is where the Jets broadcast loses points in the local market. Winnipeg fans believe he doesn't provide insight beyond "surface-level observations" and that his perspective is old-school and outdated. One fan gave Sawyer props for being more informative this season, noting he sprinkled in some analytics references, but that wasn't enough in the eyes of most Jets faithful.

### 20. Ottawa Senators



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The Broadcast: TSN carries Senators broadcasts regionally. Gord Miller is the primary play-by-play broadcaster with Jon Abbott filling in for select games and Jamie McLennan is the primary color commentator with Mike Johnson rotating in for select games.

Local Ranking: 19

National Ranking: 26

Last Season: 20

The Results: The Senators regional broadcast garnered mostly positive commentary within our survey, with only a few nitpicks mostly about the interchangeability of personnel and the widespread regard Senators fans have for their radio play-by-play crew of Dean Brown and Gord Wilson.

"No consistency in on-air personnel," wrote one Senators fan.

"We don't get Gord and Noodles (McLennan) enough," wrote another.

Senators fans expressed their support or fondness for each individual, but there was very little commentary on the chemistry of the broadcast as a whole.

There was also a lot of praise for TSN reporters Claire Hanna and Cheryl Pounder's contributions during intermissions and on the broadcast in general.

"Cheryl Pounder might be the best analyst in hockey," wrote one Senators fan about the quality of the intermission panels.

### 19. St. Louis Blues

The Broadcast: Bally Sports Midwest carries Blues games, with John Kelly on play-by-play and Jamie Rivers on color.

Local ranking: 23

National ranking: 15

Last season: 5

The results: After ranking top five in four straight seasons, the St. Louis broadcast tumbled all the way down to 19th. The elephant in the room is Pang's departure to Chicago: Blues fans deeply miss his unique personality, pizzazz and world-class talent.

This decline in the rankings is more about losing Pang than it is a reflection of any shortcomings on new color commentator Rivers' part.

"Jamie Rivers is quite good in a different way," said one Blues fan. "His commentary is more nuts and bolts of the game, which I appreciate but may not be everyone's cup of tea. He is direct, concise and honest. This includes talking about penalties and the Blues. He is mostly agnostic about the calls and play, he is not a homer for the most part, and when the Blues did not play well (and there was plenty of that), he provided honest, fact-based criticism."

Kelly, on the other hand, continues to be well-regarded as the play-by-play caller.

### 18. Carolina Hurricanes

The Broadcast: Bally Sports South carries Hurricanes games, with Mike Maniscalco on play-by-play and Tripp Tracy on color.

Local Ranking: 20

National Ranking: 17

Last Season: 19

The Results: John Forslund still looms large in the minds of Hurricanes fans all these years later.

Even among those fans noting Maniscalco has improved significantly in recent years and has developed excellent chemistry with Tracy, there is a solid cross-section still focused on Forslund's departure and how it happened.

"I still miss John Forslund," wrote another, "but our current team has grown tremendously and has jelled into a first-class broadcast crew."

"I know people still pine for Forslund, and for good reason, because he meant so much to the area and the way he was let go just was — bad," wrote another. "But it's time to give Mike Maniscalco his due. He and Tripp have an insanely good chemistry."

There can be no doubt that Hurricanes fans admire Maniscalco's improvement and are in love with Tracy's vibe, memory and feel for the big moment.

"Tripp Tracy is him," wrote one respondent.

### 17. Nashville Predators

The Broadcast: Bally Sports South carries Predators games, with Willy Daunic on play-by-play and Chris Mason doing color. Hal Gill fills in for select games on color.

Local ranking: 16

National ranking: 19

Last season: 28

The results: Nashville shot up 11 spots this season after finishing 28th, 26th and 30th respectively over the last three years. Several observers — including some respondents who didn't rate the Preds' broadcast very highly — noted Daunic has improved tremendously. He isn't everybody's cup of tea but his passion, improved chemistry and the memorable catchphrases he's developed all landed more positively than in years past.

The Predators broadcast lost points in previous surveys for appearing too biased and team-friendly. That perception has improved

"They used to say only positive things about the team, now they are more realistic and will say if we are sucking during any particular game," said one Preds fan. "They love to have fun and they all seem to enjoy working together."

Mason and Gill are admired as color analysts and the broadcast crew as a whole earned plaudits for being well-informed about opposing teams.

### 16. Calgary Flames

The Broadcast: Sportsnet West carries Flames games, with Rick Ball on play-by-play and Kelly Hrudey on color. Greg Millen fills in for select games on color.



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Local ranking: 17

National ranking: 16

Last season: 18

The results: This is the second consecutive season in which Calgary has finished middle of the pack rather than bottom third in the league — that's solid progress. Ball, with his even-keeled nature, deep, rich voice and knack for picking up details, was highlighted as the broadcast's biggest strength by far.

"Rick Ball is consistently excellent," wrote a Flames fan. "Articulate and has a solid sense of reading the game and anticipating big moments."

"Ball isn't flashy but he does a great job giving consistent and complete commentary with the right proportion of emotional emphasis," added another fan. "He's not a homer, he never misses obvious/interesting occurrences completely, and he helps make big moments feel big."

The reviews for Hrudely's color work were mostly solid but more mixed. Millen, who occasionally fills in for Hrudely, has grown on Flames fans. Host Ryan Leslie is very popular as well.

This was voted a quality broadcast overall, with Ball's play-by-play commentary emerging as the standout feature.

### 15. Los Angeles Kings

The Broadcast: Bally Sports West carries Kings games, with Nick Nickson on play-by-play (Josh Schaefer filling in for select games) and Jim Fox on color. Daryl Evans is an additional on-air personality from ice level.

Local ranking: 14

National ranking: 21

Last season: 12

The results: Alex Faust, who succeeded the legendary Bob Miller as L.A.'s play-by-play caller in 2017, wasn't renewed last summer despite being popular among fans. Nickson, the Kings' longtime radio voice, assumed simulcast duties in Faust's place. Simulcasting radio and TV can be difficult, but the veteran Nickson handled it impressively.

"He's got the classic announcer voice that takes me back to the Bob Miller days," said a Kings fan. His voice seems very natural and he isn't trying too hard like many others around the league."

Nickson is viewed as a treasure, although some fans still miss Faust.

"I know many Kings fans will boo me for saying this, but Nick Nickson was a downgrade this year as compared to Alex Faust," argued another fan. "Alex was getting better and better and I think Nick has slowed down the past few years."

On the color side, Fox is annually regarded as one of the league's best analysts. It's challenging to provide deep, insightful analysis on the fly, but Fox has proven to be one of the best in the business at it.

### 14. Philadelphia Flyers

The Broadcast: NBC Sports Philadelphia carries Flyers games with Jim Jackson on play-by-play and Brian Boucher as the primary color commentator. Scott Hartnell fills in for Boucher for select games.

Local Ranking: 13

National Ranking: 22

Last Season: 22

The Results: The Flyers regional broadcast had the rare task of replacing a color commentator who was promoted last offseason to president of the hockey club.

Bringing in Boucher, who also works nationally for TNT, has put the regional broadcast on solid footing in its first season without Jones.

"Looking forward to watching Bouch work his way up to president of the Flyers," joked one survey respondent.

Because of Boucher's national commitments, the club trialed Hartnell as a color commentator for select games. Hartnell's work received mixed reviews, with some fans noting he seemed to be working through the inevitable growing pains as a rookie broadcaster.

The Year 1 chemistry between Boucher and Jones, however, won universal praise from Flyers fans.

"When JJ and Boucher are on the call it's a 5/5 easy every night," opined one Flyers fan.

"At the beginning of the year I worried that JJ wouldn't develop as much chemistry with whoever the Flyers brought in for Jonesy, but the rapport between him and Boucher has been incredible," said another.

### 13. Montreal Canadiens

The Broadcast: TSN carries Canadiens regional games in English with Bryan Mudryk on play-by-play for most games and Mike Johnson, Craig Button and Frank Corrado rotating on color. RDS carries Canadiens regional games in French with Pierre Houde on play-by-play and Marc Denis as color commentator.

Local Ranking: 18

National Ranking: 6

Last Season: 13

The Results: The Canadiens' English language broadcast on TSN incorporated Corrado more frequently this past season.

While TSN rotates color commentators alongside Mudryk, Corrado's transition from the studio to the broadcast booth was widely hailed as "seamless" by respondents to our survey.

"Frankie Corrado did really well as a rookie analyst," said one Canadiens fan.

Many of our respondents also focused on the chemistry between Mudryk and Johnson.

"Bryan Mudryk brings a lot of energy to every Habs game and Mike Johnson is one of the best analysts in the business," one survey respondent wrote. "Great combo."



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It should be noted that the French RDS broadcasting tandem of Houde and Denis received almost universal acclaim in our survey

"Many have gone as far as saying the improvement of their French can be partially attributed to listening to Houde, who was been the voice of the Habs for the generation of fans in their 30s and 40s," said one respondent.

### 12. San Jose Sharks

The Broadcast: NBC Sports California carries Sharks games, with Randy Hahn on play-by-play and Bret Hedican and Drew Remenda rotating on color.

Local ranking: 6

National ranking: 23

Last season: 15

The results: San Jose's broadcast crew was a major shining light despite the club's miserable season on the ice.

"Randy Hahn, Drew Remenda and Bret Hedican might be the best part of the Sharks and they don't even step on the ice," opined a Sharks fan. "Year in and year out their smooth and entertaining commentary, slight biases (to be expected) and fair criticism give viewers a near-perfect experience watching a hockey game."

Hahn is the broadcast's crown jewel as a timeless, balanced, knowledgeable play-by-play caller.

"Randy Hahn has been a staple with the Sharks through the good and bad days," wrote a Sharks fan. "He is an excellent game caller and provides in-depth knowledge not only of the Sharks, but the other teams as well. He is a straight shooter and has not tried to sugarcoat the Sharks' struggles this year."

"Maybe this is due to the Sharks' recent struggles, but it seems Randy Hahn has become very underrated around the league. Should be considered Top 3 in PXP," added another respondent.

### 11. Florida Panthers

The Broadcast: Bally Sports Florida carries Panthers games, with Steve Goldstein on play-by-play and Randy Moller on color.

Local Ranking: 7

National Ranking: 20

Last Season: 16

The Results: "Let's go home, baby!" "Tkachuk-Tkachung!" "Top shelf where Mrs. Moller keeps the peanut butter!"

The Panthers broadcast is anything but measured, which is just how Panthers fans like it.

"Moller's hockey knowledge, broadcast experience, and over-the-top personality make him an elite color commentator in the NHL," wrote one respondent.

"(Goldie's) 'Let's go home, baby!' call for any overtime or shootout winner has become the thing of legends," added another.

Lots of respondents also spotlighted the work of host and sideline reporter Jessica Blaylock as a standout on Panthers broadcasts.

### 10. Tampa Bay Lightning

The Broadcast: Bally Sports Sun carries Lightning games, with Dave Randorf handling play-by-play and Brian Engblom serving as analyst.

Local Ranking: 9

National Ranking: 10

Last Season: 6

The Results: In his third season as the voice of the Lightning on television, Randorf has established himself as a fan favourite on Florida's Gulf Coast.

"Dave Randorf is amazing," wrote one Lightning fan. "His voice, his even keel and his ability to hype up during big moments."

"Randorf has a big game voice," added another.

Understated and consistent, Randorf and longtime Lightning color commentator Engblom call a relatively neutral game by regional broadcast standards but are heavily appreciated by Lightning fans.

"Randorf and Engblom continue to set the standard in hockey broadcasting with the perfect balance of passion, detail and dynamics," opined one fan.

### 9. Vegas Golden Knights

The Broadcast: Scripps Sports carries Golden Knights games, with Dave Goucher on play-by-play and Shane Hnidy on color. Darren Eliot fills in on color for select games.

Local ranking: 10

National ranking: 9

Last season: 15

The results: Vegas' instant on-ice success as an expansion team is mirrored by its high-end broadcast booth production, which is recognized both regionally and nationally.

"Vegas has the best overall U.S. broadcast and I'm an Anaheim Ducks fan," wrote one respondent.

The Golden Knights broadcast earned praise for striking an impressive balance of entertainment, high-quality yet easy-to-digest analysis and developing a true Vegas feel to the broadcast without stepping into homer territory.

"Dave Goucher has been here from the start and is informative and passionate on his call," wrote one Vegas fan. "Shane Hnidy brings in his intimate knowledge of the sport and breaks it down for easy consumption. They are a great duo, and Las Vegas is very lucky to have had them since the start."

Gary Lawless' intermission segment called "Lawless and Order" earned shoutouts, although some fans noted the pre and postgame analysis has taken a step back without Mike McKenna.

### 8. Washington Capitals



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The Broadcast: Monumental Sports Network carries Capitals games, with Joe Beninati handling play-by-play and Craig Laughlin handling color commentary.

Local Ranking: 5

National Ranking: 13

Last Season: 9

The Results: Beninati and Laughlin, known colloquially to Capitals fans as “Joe B and Locker,” have been a broadcasting tandem for a generation. Literally.

Locked in for over 25 years as a duo, Beninati and Laughlin are an institution; the sound of Capitals games for Capitals fans.

“I went to my first Caps game this season,” wrote one survey respondent. “And I missed them. Weird, right?”

As you’d expect, given their longevity as a partnership, Capitals fans who responded to our survey focused intensely on their personal connection to the Capitals broadcast and the chemistry they have maintained over the years.

### 7. Edmonton Oilers

The broadcast: Sportsnet carries Oilers games, with Jack Michaels on play-by-play and Louie DeBrusk on color.

Local ranking: 12

National: 7

Last season: 8

The results: Michaels has spectacularly turned the Oilers broadcast around.

Edmonton’s crew ranked 26th before Michaels arrived in 2021. Since then, it’s only been up — the Oilers broadcast immediately catapulted from the bottom of the league to the middle of the pack and has now finished top 10 in back-to-back years, with this year’s No. 7 ranking representing its best-ever finish in The Athletic’s polling history.

Fans love Michaels’ electrifying, passionate playcalling that makes every consequential moment seem bigger. He’s developed excellent chemistry and banter with DeBrusk, who has grown in popularity himself.

“DeBrusk has gotten better over the years and deserves his spot as the No. 2 analyst for Rogers’ national broadcasts,” said an Oilers fan.

“My favorite out-of-town broadcast is probably Edmonton,” chimed in a Sabres fan, “Jack Michaels has a great voice and great enthusiasm, and he is perfectly paired with Louie DeBrusk.”

Gene Principe, meanwhile, is an icon for his down-to-earth persona, quirky puns and endless experience as the broadcast’s host. All around, the Oilers have an excellent TV product going.

### 6. New York Islanders

The Broadcast: MSG Network carries Islanders games, with Brendan Burke on play-by-play and Butch Goring on color. Thomas Hickey is between the benches for select games.

Local Ranking: 3

National Ranking: 11

Last Season: 7

The Results: Islanders fans adore Burke.

“There is absolutely no one as good as Brendan Burke,” said one Islanders fan.

The 39-year-old broadcaster has cemented himself as one of the top young play-by-play broadcasters in the sport. Perhaps the only remotely negative comment about his work in our survey is derived from Islanders fans nervous he’ll eventually become a full-time national broadcaster.

Islanders fans also enjoy the quiriness and link to the 1980s glory years provided by Goring, although it doesn’t exactly translate to the national audience, which is a major reason the Islanders regional broadcast scores better among its fan base than it does among general hockey fans.

“Butchie is an icon with great insights and a whacky lovable persona,” said one Islanders fan.

Over the past several seasons, the regional broadcast has also incorporated former Islanders defender Thomas Hickey with increasing frequency. He’s now widely seen by Islanders fans as the heir apparent to Goring and a talented analyst in his own right.

“Adding Thomas Hickey to the broadcast has vastly improved an already strong team,” wrote one Islanders fan.

Rounding out a deep broadcast group, the work of host Shannon Hogan was regularly shouted out by our survey respondents as a standout on the broadcast. “Shannon Hogan is so energetic and fun to watch and has an engaging personality,” wrote one fan.

### 5. New York Rangers

The Broadcast: MSG Network carries Rangers games, with Sam Rosen handling primary play-by-play duties and Joe Micheletti serving as color commentator.

Local Ranking: 11

National Ranking: 5

Last Season: 10

The Results: Legendary Rangers broadcaster Rosen and his longtime partner Michelletti still bring their fastball.

“It’s like inviting two old friends over to watch the game,” wrote one Rangers fan.

Beyond the beloved broadcast duo, a lot of our commentators noted that the MSG team as a whole is incredibly strong. Steven Valiquette, Brian Boyle and Henrik Lundqvist’s work during intermission panels was widely noted by our survey respondents, and the work of fill-in color commentator Dave Maloney drew a wide range of compliments as well.

“Sam Rosen is a legend,” wrote one fan, “plus analysis from Steve Valiquette and Henrik Lundqvist between periods. Unmatched.”

### 4. Vancouver Canucks



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The broadcast: Sportsnet carries Canucks games, with John Shorthouse on play-by-play and Dave Tomlinson on color. Ray Ferraro fills in for select games.

Local ranking: 8

National: 3

Last season: 4

The results: The 2023-24 season marked a massive change for the Sportsnet Canucks broadcast. John “Cheech” Garrett, Vancouver’s affable, adored color commentator since 2002, departed. Garrett’s loss is certainly felt, but the broadcast continues to garner exceptional reviews.

“Definitely missing Cheech but Ray has 100 percent stepped up and Dave has definitely gotten better and more comfortable throughout the season,” said a Canucks fan. “Once (Tomlinson) started to build a little bit of chemistry with the rest of the crew, things felt more natural.”

“Having Ferraro on the call is the NHL equivalent of having Tony Romo in the booth for the NFL — there’s nobody like him at all,” added another respondent.

It took Tomlinson some time to find his rhythm and mesh with Shorthouse’s witty sense of humor, but he clicked more seamlessly as the season progressed. He’s knowledgeable and makes sharp observations of tactics and opposing teams’ stylistic tendencies.

Shorthouse is the constant heartbeat of this top-notch broadcast. He’s revered in Vancouver and continues growing in popularity outside of the market.

“I think John Shorthouse might be the best play-by-play voice in the NHL,” wrote a Kings fan.

“A guy like John Shorthouse would be a dream,” added a Minnesota Wild fan.

Host Dan Murphy and the crew’s technical production earned lots of love, too.

### 3. Dallas Stars

The Broadcast: Bally Sports Southwest carries Stars games with Josh Bogorad on play-by-play and Daryl “Razor” Reaugh on color.

Local ranking: 2

National ranking: 4

Last season: 3

The results: Reaugh’s robust vocabulary, special one-liners/“Razorisms” and depth of knowledge make him a one-of-a-kind superstar. He’s described as having “the magical ability to transform hockey commentary into a symphony of wit and wisdom.” Reaugh has captured the attention of many fans outside of Dallas, too.

“Daryl ‘Razor’ Reaugh singlehandedly made me like the Stars, a team I have no reason to care about,” commented a Flyers fan.

There’s also a ton of substance to back Reaugh’s glitzy command over the English language. Reaugh and Bogorad’s preparation and research for every opponent was applauded, with many Stars fans noting they learn a lot about the NHL’s

other teams because of the tidbits they present. They were also credited for being extremely fair — they take every opportunity to give props to opponents and call it like it is when Dallas struggles.

Everybody loves Reaugh but several commenters also wanted to make sure Bogorad got his flowers.

“Josh Bogorad doesn’t get enough credit for both his play-calling and for leaving space for Reaugh’s color work,” wrote a Stars fan. “His call is engaging and enthusiastic, even when opponents score against Dallas. Together, they bring a wonderful balance of entertainment and insight, with the perfect pinch of homerism to it all.”

### 2. Seattle Kraken

The Broadcast: ROOT Sports carries Kraken games with John Forslund on play-by-play, Eddie Olczyk on color and J.T. Brown between the benches. Olczyk occasionally misses Kraken games while fulfilling his national broadcast commitments for TNT; Forslund and Brown form a two-man booth on those occasions.

Local ranking: 4

National ranking: 2

Last season: 1

The results: Seattle’s crew is like an All-Star team — there’s an embarrassment of broadcast talent and riches. The Kraken production hasn’t ranked lower than second place since arriving in the league, including a No. 1 finish in 2023.

“John Forslund is one of a kind,” explained a Kraken fan. “His phrasing and play-by-play descriptions are very unique and entirely original. He’s easily the least ‘cliched’ announcer in the business. And, he is very funny — again, using humor that’s original and unlike anything you will hear elsewhere.”

“It has to be said: John Forslund is the best caller working the NHL by a wide margin,” added a Sabres fan.

Olczyk, whose sparkling resume speaks for itself, has terrific banter and chemistry with Forslund. Brown brings a wealth of knowledge. Piper Shaw adds a great touch as a host. And analyst Alison Lukan is a rising star for her ability to teach nuanced analytics and provide tactical breakdowns in an easy-to-understand and entertaining format.

“The one thing that separates the Kraken from the rest is Alison,” said a Seattle fan. “I have three daughters and my oldest has commented several times that Alison helps her understand the sport in a way just watching the games can’t teach.”

The accessibility of ROOT Sports’ broadcast, and the expensive cable package it requires, was the only blemish fans pointed to. That will fortunately change next year, as the Kraken are increasing their broadcast and streaming access through partnerships with TEGNA and Prime Video. All locally televised games will be broadcast “for free over the air.” What an excellent cherry on top for next season.

### 1. Detroit Red Wings

The Broadcast: Bally Sports Detroit carries Red Wings games with Ken Daniels calling play-by-play and Mickey Redmond handling most games as the color analyst.



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Local Ranking: 1

National Ranking: 1

Last Season: 2

The Results: While they often rank toward the top end of these rankings, the Red Wings regional broadcast duo of Daniels and Redmond got an opportunity to elevate this past season — for the first time in nearly a decade.

It was an opportunity one of the best regional broadcast teams in the NHL didn't miss.

"The drama in this year's playoff chase has unlocked a level of Ken and Mickey that I didn't know existed," wrote one respondent. "Some incredible late-game drama (Patrick

Kane's OT winner in Chicago, Lucas Raymond's OT winner in Game 81) made even better by the duo on the call."

Both Daniels and Redmond are institutions at this point. One thing that tends to separate Red Wings broadcasts, beyond the usual attributes of all good hockey broadcasters (precision, memorable turns of phrase, great chemistry) is their focus on the opposing team and really selling the game, even beyond the accomplishments of Red Wings players.

"They are obviously rooting for the Wings as a local broadcast, but I really appreciate that you can tell they are just fans of the game itself, too, and will not shy away from talking up opposing teams/players," noted one Red Wings fan.



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## COLUMN: Should I stay or should I go? Part one on the Carolina Hurricanes' upcoming free agents

By Aidan Carlson, Assistant Sports Editor 20 hrs ago

Twelve Carolina Hurricane "regulars" could hit the market this summer either in restricted or unrestricted free agency. Interim General Manager Eric Tulsky and Assistant General Manager Darren Yorke have some big decisions to make this off-season as the 2024-2025 roster could look much different than last year's.

Jake Guentzel, Center/Left Wing

Acquired by the Canes at the trade deadline from the Pittsburgh Penguins, Guentzel will be one of the most coveted free agents this offseason and will command a significant raise from the \$6 million he was paid last season.

The highly skilled Guentzel only played 28 games for Carolina, including the playoffs where he scored nine points in 11 playoff games. Once paired with center Sebastian Aho on the first line, he found instant chemistry, and over the course of the 17 regular season games he played with the team, Guentzel tallied 25 points.

Guentzel is one of the fastest-thinking players on the team with a high motor. He sees plays before they happen, finds himself in the right position to score and sets up his teammates no matter where he plays.

An eight-year extension would keep Guentzel signed until his late 30s, but the way he plays his game shouldn't be slowed down by age. There will be plenty of other teams looking to bring in Guentzel so the Hurricanes will have to pay up if they want to keep him around.

Jordan Martinook, Left Wing

Martinook has been a leader on and off the ice ever since the Canes acquired him via trade following the 2017-2018 season. After one season with the team, Martinook was named an alternate captain to start the 2019 season and has worn the "A" ever since.

He's earned all the opportunities he gets with the team because he works hard on every shift to make a difference. Whether it's killing penalties or taking first-line minutes with Aho when things aren't clicking, Martinook does everything head coach Rod Brind'Amour asks of him.

If you look at just the scoresheet, Martinook's impact is minimal, but a guy like him provides countless intangible benefits for someone who hasn't made above \$2 million in a single season. Turning 32 this offseason, Martinook likely doesn't have many more seasons left in the tank and likely wants to close his career as a Hurricane.

No one has quite embraced Caniac and North Carolina culture as much as Martinook has so don't be surprised if he takes a hometown discount to stay in Raleigh for a couple more runs at the Stanley Cup.

Stefan Noesen, Right Wing

Throughout his NHL career as a journeyman forward, Noesen has played at least a game for six different NHL teams besides the team that drafted him in the first round back in 2011.

In the last two seasons, Noesen has set career-highs in goals and points, reaching the 30-point mark each time. He's carved out a role for himself in front of the net where he excels at working in tight and finding creative ways to get the puck in the net.

Despite averaging just under 12 minutes of ice time per game in the regular season, Noesen only reached double-digit minutes in the playoffs four times in 11 games as he saw his role dramatically decrease in the postseason.

After finding a home in Carolina for the past two years, Noesen's journey will likely continue somewhere else as he has earned himself a payday the Canes probably can't afford in the most anticipated free agency of his career.

Teuvo Teravainen, Left Wing

Teravainen has been nothing short of instrumental in the Hurricanes' making six consecutive trips to the playoffs. He's now been a part of the organization for eight seasons where he has eclipsed the 60-point mark in half of those.

Following a lackluster 2022-2023 season, Teravainen bounced back this year in a major way, recording 53 points and a career-high 25 goals. His placement in the lineup wasn't as consistent as it had been in previous seasons but he made the most of his opportunities.

Turning 30 in September, Teravainen will enter this free agency eyeing to sign what will likely be the last big NHL contract of his career at nothing short of \$6 million AAV. The often quiet and reserved Finn makes it hard to know what his emotions are regarding the team and whether or not he is interested in taking less money to stay in Carolina.

If last season was his last as Carolina Hurricane, he's been a key player every year he has donned a Canes sweater. He and Aho have combined for the most goal combinations by any duo in franchise history, etching his name in the history books and hearts of the Caniacs.



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## The Hockey News

### Is Martin Necas' Time in Carolina Coming to a Close?

By Ryan Henkel

When the clock struck 0:00 and the Carolina Hurricanes were eliminated in Game 6 in the second round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs by the New York Rangers, emotions were running high.

Disappointment, frustration, anger.

All of those feelings were welling up inside the players who had given it their all, yet once again came up short, and especially so being that this group knew things weren't going to be the same next year.

This was the last run for the current core. With so many contracts set to expire, they knew that not everyone could come back even if most everyone wants the chance to run it back.

But it may not be the case that everyone even wants to stay.

In an interview given to Denik Sport, a Czech news outlet, Martin Necas' dad claimed that Necas was essentially unhappy with his usage in Carolina.

Through a translation, the main points boiled down to that Necas' dad claimed that Necas wanted to be on the top line and top power play units, where he played his best, and felt like overall he wasn't allowed to play his game and that he would welcome a move because he would be able to on another team.

His father also stated that he felt other players were getting those opportunities due to the amount of money they make and that the team didn't want Necas to have a big season because his deal was expiring.

Obviously not every parent speaks for their child, but with Necas skipping out on exit interviews in order to play with Czechia at the IIHF World Championships and him refusing to speak about his contract situation there as well, we don't have much else to go off of.

While Necas was in fact moved off of the top power play unit, he still had over two minutes of PP time per game, was the team's top option at 4v4 and at 3v3/overtime and even had the most even strength ice time per game amongst forwards.

It's not like he was without opportunity.

But Necas has also always played second fiddle on the Hurricanes.

He never quite had the same adoration and treatment that say Andrei Svechnikov received and this year, his 'spot' on both the top line and first power play was usurped by Seth Jarvis.

When asked about comments made by Necas' dad at their end of year media availabilities, neither general manager Don Waddell nor head coach Rod Brind'Amour seemed at all worried about them though and in fact more so laughed about the whole thing.

"Every parent thinks their kid should be on the power play, by the way," Brind'Amour said. "They just don't have a microphone to announce it. The only five parents that are happy are the guys that get the first crack and they're all, 'Ayy, I love you coach' and the rest all hate the coach because the kids not on the power play. That's okay."

"First, you're telling me something that I don't know because I could care less what everybody says," Waddell said. "Regardless of age with parents, and I love the parents, but I want to talk to parents about their kids not about their contract. We're gonna deal with this one. He's an exceptionally skilled player that has a lot more to give, in my own opinion — Rod might have a different one — but we'll figure out something with him. ... Say hi to his dad for me."

The responses very much felt like two people not only very much done with the situation but also perhaps the player.

All year in fact, whenever Brind'Amour was asked about Necas' season whether things were going good or bad, he never really effused much.

Other guys got praises or sometimes reprimands, but the responses on Necas always felt subdued and subverted.

Obviously there's two ways this situation can go.

Either Necas is traded or he remains with the team.

But even with option two, staying with Carolina isn't so black and white.

Obviously he and the team could figure something out and sign a longer-term deal. I mean, stranger things have happened, but it's a long shot.

Necas' camp would obviously be looking for a deal over \$7 million per year and with the Canes having to figure out how to fill a majority of their roster still, I'm not sure they'd be wanting to pay him that much.

To be fair, I'm not sure they'd offer him that much regardless because while he's got great talent, he's the square peg in the round hole that is the Hurricanes' systems and style of play.

His high-flying, high-risk style of play where he utilizes his skating and puck handling to generate chances, especially in open ice, doesn't really mesh with the Hurricanes' direct, north-south, low-to-high style of play.

They could also go to arbitration which would only render a short-term deal as an arbitrator can only award a one or two-year deal.

Then there's the option that Necas could simply sit out and refuse to sign a deal like William Nylander in 2018.

Obviously that one worked out in the end for Toronto, but Nylander missed two months of the season and if Necas kept up the holdout through Dec. 1, he would be ineligible for the entire season.



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Nobody wants that option.

But regardless of what tension there may be, the fact of the matter is that he's a talented player and a valuable piece.

Carolina isn't going to move him just to move him.

"I don't have enough toes and fingers to tell you how many players have walked into my office about being traded," Waddell said in his final presser. "We're not opposed always to trading players, but you also have to look at the value of what you're getting back for players. Marty's an exceptionally skilled guy that you're just not going to give up on, that's for sure. So we'll deal with it as the summer progresses."

There's already been plenty of reported interest in Necas with teams such as Vancouver, Columbus and Montreal being just a few of the names out there, but would they be willing to offer up enough in Carolina's eyes?

Necas has been the centerpiece for two blockbuster trade attempts that the Canes have offered, one for Matthew Tkachuk and another for Elias Pettersson.

That's the sort of value they see in Necas.

Carolina isn't trading him for some depth pieces, prospects or picks.

They want high-end talent that can play now because they need someone who could replace his production, i.e. a 20+ goal and 50+ point scorer.

Because again, they don't have to move Necas.

However, all the signs are pointing towards a unfortunate departure from the Hurricanes for Necas and that move may be coming sooner rather than later.

## Former Hurricanes Assistant Coach Out in Toronto

By Ryan Henkel

The Maple Leafs announced a new assistant coach in place of Dean Chynoweth.

The Toronto Maple Leafs announced today that assistant coach Dean Chynoweth would not be returning with the team next season.

The Leafs announced today the hiring of Lane Lambert, the former New York Islander head coach, who will be joining Craig Berube as an assistant and so Chynoweth was the odd-man out.

Chynoweth was previously the assistant coach for the Carolina Hurricanes before joining Toronto in 2021

He joined the Hurricanes in 2018 as one of Rod Brind'Amour's first assistants and he primarily ran the defense and penalty kill.

Over his three years with the team, the Canes had the league's second best regular season penalty kill with a 83.4% success rate and the team scored 25 shorthanded goals. However, the team had just a 74.6% success rate in the playoffs in that same span.

He was one of the primary proponents of the aggressive penalty kill that the Canes use and brought that same style to Toronto.

Chynoweth left after the first contract fiasco with Brind'Amour and his assistants and was promptly hired by Toronto.

Following his departure, Carolina brought in former Hurricanes defenseman Tim Gleason who has been on staff for the last three seasons and has had even better success with the team.

In Toronto, Chynoweth brought that same regular season success for the Maple Leafs' PK but their inability to carry that over into the playoffs more than likely cost him the job.

### TODAY'S LINKS

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## SportScan

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

1314486 Websites

The Athletic / Canada vs. USA: Two fans forced to watch each country's worst 2024 NHL playoff ads

By Sean McIndoe and Sean Gentile

Back in the summer of 2020, I had a terrible idea that felt like a good idea, which wasn't exactly a unique experience at the time. But while you were all experimenting with TikTok dances and sourdough starters, I decided it would be fun to set up an international exchange of terrible playoff commercials.

You know the kind — the ones that seem to show up every single ad break, tormenting you until you know every word, leading to you at least casually considering finding out who worked on it and paying them a visit. I knew there were some awful Canadian ads, but I figured there were probably plenty happening south of the border, and I thought that if we held an exchange then a good time would be held by all.

Then Sean Gentile made me watch Tara Tara Look At Her Go, and I've never fully recovered.

I hit back with the Sportsnet Life Coach in 2021, and after a year off, we were back last year with a heart like a truck. But we were worried because, after that first year, the ads hadn't been quite as bad. They were maybe even getting better. We wondered if we'd have to abandon the gimmick, because the advertising industry had stopped producing annoying garbage.

Well, let's just say our concerns were addressed this year. We'll get to that.

But first, let's take a peek behind the curtain and see what this year's game plan looked like for both sides.

### Pregame Strategy

McIndoe: First of all, this feels like a good place to mention that you've all spent weeks taunting me with the words "What a pro wants," and I'm vaguely terrified of what I'm about to see.

So yeah, my list of bad Canadian ads. This was a tough list to narrow down, so much so that when I put out a call for nominees on X, I was surprised by some of the ads that weren't mentioned. Really, none of you hate that ad with the couple watching a playoff game in off-brand Leafs jerseys who reveal that they also have backups for Edmonton and Vancouver, just in case? Yes, if there's one thing we know about Toronto hockey fans, it's that they're notoriously rational about being open to rooting for more successful teams.

Speaking of the Leafs, it was tough not to go with those insurance ads featuring Morgan Rielly lying facedown on the floor to avoid basic life decisions. They're bad, but I have to give some grudging credit to whichever executive said "It's playoff time, a commercial featuring a Toronto Maple Leaf star being completely overwhelmed and useless will really resonate."

One frequent nominee that I decided against is those financial ads that are part of a running campaign whose theme seems to be "Super annoying people talk down to their friends about investment fees." I didn't use those because Sean would only be seeing that little campfire loser once, and you don't really get the full effect until you've had to hear him say he's better than you roughly a dozen times. Per night.

Most importantly, I ruled out all gambling ads, mainly because they're pretty much universally terrible. Honestly, I could do a top 10 worst gambling ads list and still not have room for some all-timers. It's bad enough that this nascent legal gambling industry is destroying lives and ruining every game broadcast, the least they could do is sprinkle in a watchable ad among the hundreds they force on us every game. But yeah, special shoutout to the one featuring the smug Canadian who insists Americans don't know hockey, which was the runaway leader among your nominations.

OK, let's end with the most important pre-game strategy there can be: Relax, breathe, and have fun with this thing.

Gentile: McIndoe has spent the last couple of months swearing, up and down, that he hasn't watched the "What a pro wants" commercial. Doesn't know who's involved with it. Doesn't know the premise. A few years ago, I'd be skeptical — but we've got a podcast together now. I'm more acutely aware of his particular brand of brain poisoning, and I believe that he's indeed fully in the dark. The only question is when to drop the hammer.

As for the rest of the field? My North American friends, it is robust. At one point, I contemplated including an Actually Good commercial starring an NHL player (thank you, Juuse Saros) strictly for shock value. Alas. I'm also on Team "Let's Just Try To Ignore Gambling Ads," so that specific sign of societal decline will be wholly absent from our exercise. There will be others, obviously — just not that one. Also, the ESPN+ placeholder isn't eligible here. Executive decision.

Ultimately, despite a deeper field than perhaps any we've seen post-pandemic, my top three are fairly cut-and-dry ... especially since both countries got to meet the "Avs breakup" couple. Let's go.

### Commercial No. 1

McIndoe: I'm going to start with a strategic move. Since I figure you've got "What a Pro Wants" hitting cleanup, I'm going to lead off with one of my best options.

And for the record, I know that this won't feel completely new to you, because there are at least two American versions of this ad that came first. I've watched them, and I promise you, this one is worse. So much worse.

Gentile: The main reason this isn't new to me — it's a play on "Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell," a novelty rap song that came out when I was still in college. The music group Das Racist was the opening act at multiple concerts I attended between the years of 2008 and 2011.

What I'm saying is that you can't kill me; I'm already dead.

McIndoe: I'm familiar with that song. It's bad. This is so much worse. And I have more than a few questions. Is this guy supposed to look stoned? What happens early on that makes everyone in the crowd whip their heads around like they have whiplash? Did number 11 get a third-man-in penalty for jumping into the fight?

Gentile: Also, how did Mattias Ekholm get the time off necessary to appear here?

McIndoe: And look, I think we can all agree that the older lady has a fair point when she asks for clarification on him being at the grocery store. But what about the big guy who's confused about him being at a hockey game? My dude, you're at the game too! He's sitting next to you! That's not the part that should be throwing you off.

Gentile: The big fella might be hallucinating. Honestly, I'm wondering if any of the visuals in this one are AI-generated. I feel like that might be a recurring theme. There's an "uncanny valley" situation going on in the stands.



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McIndoe: AI overlords, please comb through all of human creation and use it to generate the most annoying jingle possible.

Gentile: No no, I'm saving that for later. What we've got up first is a classic of the genre — an obnoxious insurance commercial. This one is for Progressive, and it somehow doesn't involve Flo... or worse, the repulsive Jamie. No random, relentlessly recurring characters whose names we've learned against our will. Just a ghost.

McIndoe: He's trying really hard to sound like Will Ferrell, right? Like I'm not imagining that?

Gentile: Affirmative. We might not be far from the actual Will Ferrell showing up in stuff like this. Seriously though, wouldn't it be just SO RANDOM if a ghost showed up in an insurance commercial? This feels like a relic of '00s internet culture — sort of like a parody Twitter account. Which is something neither of us knows anything about.

McIndoe: Haha, of course. (Blinks awkwardly.) So they clearly feel like "You got bamboozled" is the money catch phrase here. How often have you used it so far during the playoffs? Do you turn to your friends during a game and yell it after a bad call? I bet you do. It's probably the new "whazzzup" down there.

Gentile: It's now how I hang up the phone. Here's my main issue — I don't need a constant reminder of how much more expensive stuff is now vs. 200 years ago or whatever, and I definitely don't want it to come from an insurance company that seems to dump 75 percent of peoples' premium into antagonistic, Reddit-flavored commercial campaigns. I hate this one, probably more than the average viewer.

McIndoe: Most annoyingly overlaid ghost in the hockey playoffs since the Montreal Forum shut down, am I right?

Gentile: "You got bamboozled!" — Mitch Marner, as he floats away from another board battle.

McIndoe: Too soon. Ready for ad number two?

Gentile: Not really.

Commercial No. 2

McIndoe: For my second ad, let's go with one that answers the eternal question: What if we combined a product that absolutely nobody asked for with the most unsettling chemistry imaginable?

Gentile: One of my favorite rites of passage for young American hockey writers: excitement over getting to try Tim Hortons, followed quickly by disappointment in Tim Hortons, eventually reaching repulsion by Tim Hortons. I wouldn't eat a donut from that place, let alone a Bacon Everything Pizza.

McIndoe: For any Americans who aren't familiar, Tim Hortons is a Canadian chain that sells coffee. They also have a food menu with roughly nine dozen items, none of which are ever available when you try to order them. You walk in and stand next to a giant sign with a photo of a sandwich, order that exact sandwich, and the staff will look at you like you just called in a bomb threat. I'll believe in a ghost who inspects fireplaces before I believe that there's a Tims out there making pizza quickly and efficiently.

But let's get to the important stuff: Are these two hooking up on the down low, or what?

Gentile: No. If they were, she'd have said, "I could use a coffee too, I'll tag along," and then they'd have had a nice walk. What I'm trying to figure out is how they take opposite turns when they exit the building, then manage to end up at the same place. "That's a necessary conceit for the commercial," you might be saying. That could be true for a commercial we're not forced to watch several hundred times. Not here, though. It needs to hold up to the rigor of the NHL playoff schedule.

McIndoe: I'll go one further: There are more Tim Hortons in Canada than there are actually Canadians. They're everywhere. Without exaggeration, there are three different spots within 10 minutes of my house where there's a Tim Hortons across the street from another Tim Hortons. You don't even need to run to get to a Tims in Canada. Walking about fifteen steps should do it. So I have no idea what's happening here, especially given that the guy somehow arrives after she's had time to order and receive an armful of pizzas.

Gentile: He ran out of the building without any real idea where he was going and figured he'd stumble into a Tims eventually — and he was correct.

McIndoe: By the way, shoutout to this guy for being this year's "Random Canadian actor you haven't seen before who's suddenly in way too many commercials all at once". A tradition like no other. He's definitely the guy who gets face paint mushed on him in a seltzer ad, but the jury is still out on whether he's also the guy who eats a Kit Kat with a snake. That sentence probably didn't make much sense to you.

Gentile: Canada basically has one of everything: one coffee and donut chain, one everything store, one pizza place, one commercial actor ...

McIndoe: One Stanley Cup-worthy team per decade.

Gentile: Possibly zero people who'd eat Tim Hortons flatbread pizza on their own volition. OK, mine has an actual famous person.

McIndoe: Oh cool, I was hoping to have an existential crisis today. Is this the part where I have to show how little pop culture I know by saying I think this is Stifler's mom?

Gentile: It \*is\* Stifler's mom.

McIndoe: Hell yeah! I'm just going to assume she hasn't been in anything else in the last 20 years and keep moving.

Gentile: Jennifer Coolidge was great in the first season of "The White Lotus" — great enough, in fact, for lots of people to think stuff like, "Hey, Jennifer Coolidge should be in everything." I'm not here to pass judgment on how that's worked out, but "everything" definitely has extended to Discover card commercials that play on TV, radio, streaming and podcast ad breaks. There are dozens of these; NHL broadcasts have zeroed in on the robot edition.

The premise, as far as I can tell, is that she's stupid and harasses the customer service staff. Which is ... kind of her character in "The White Lotus," now that I think about it.

McIndoe: We're what, three months away from a national conversation about whether it's offensive to use terms like "you robotos" to AI prompts? This ad won't age well. I'm calling it now.

Gentile: Honestly, I was going to include one of the several commercials that talks about how much better their products have gotten due to AI integration, just because of the amount of dread and dissonance they cause for me, but this is close enough. Also, did you notice the ticking clock in that one? It makes it worse by 20 percent.

McIndoe: Times running out, humanity. Stifler's mom says so. (By the way, I'm very clearly stalling here because I'm filled with an icy fear over what's coming in the next section.)

Gentile: Time is running out ... on you. Next.

Commercial No. 3

McIndoe: For my last Canadian ad, I'm going to present one that I'll admit up front is not terrible. It's not even all that bad. But there's no commercial that's caused more anger up here than this one. Not even close. And you'll see why.

Gentile: So you're not wearing a Fernando Pisani Oilers jersey as we work on this? Is that what you're saying?

McIndoe: Believe it or not, no. And neither is anyone outside of Edmonton. The only thing Canadians hate more than other Canadian teams is being lectured that we should cheer for other Canadian teams.

Gentile: All Canadians know each other, actually. I feel like Boston Pizza almost stuck the landing here, too, which definitely makes it worse. They could've hit us with a record scratch and shown the Canucks fan knocking the Oilers fan's plate off the bar, or cut to Luke Gazdic calling people from Vancouver losers. Something true to life.

McIndoe: Right? They caught a little piece of it. The guy wiping off his glass that the Toronto guy touched was pretty funny. But if you're going to do it, lean in. Have the Montreal fan be an old guy who keeps annoying everyone with boring stories. Have the Ottawa guy be an annoying kid brother who keeps trying to butt into conversations but nobody else remembers he's there. Have the Vancouver fan do



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something funny, at which point everyone else says "Wow, you guys are a riot". Go big!

Gentile: "Come to Boston Pizza and get into a fight. Just close out your tab beforehand."

McIndoe: I'd love to know what the pitch meeting was like for this one. "OK, so first we remind Canadian hockey fans that all their teams keep losing, and how sad that makes them. Then we insinuate that it's their fault because they're doing fandom wrong. Then we take it home by telling them to do the one thing that absolutely no Canadian hockey fan would ever do. Guys, this is brilliant, we're going to make so many loyal new customers."

Gentile: It's the sort of thing you only see from media companies or, like, sports bars. "How can we keep peoples' attention and take more of their money once their team is eliminated? Why, gaslight them into thinking that they actually like the Winnipeg Jets, of course."

McIndoe: Anyway, if the Oilers win the Cup in two weeks, nobody from Canada will be happy about it and this commercial is the reason why. OK, I think that brings this year's post to a close, thanks for reading everyone!

Gentile: \*text message chime\*

McIndoe: (deep sigh) Fine. Here I go.

Gentile: Gotta watch it three times in succession for the full experience.

McIndoe: This... might be even worse than I thought it would be?

Gentile: That's a swerve. I was expecting you to be relatively OK with it — like I was during the NCAA Tournament, when I saw it the first 500 times.

McIndoe: I guess I was expecting some sort of Tara Tara-style ear worm. Instead, this is somehow trying way too hard and also nowhere near hard enough.

Gentile: I've thought about it a lot, and this is where I've landed. Kind of in a similar spot to the Boston Pizza ad, actually. It starts out ... kind of OK? Like, you can track where it's going. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Chet Holmgren initially hit all their marks. They just couldn't land the plane. If those guys go at 75 percent instead of 15, really sell the performance and make me believe that they know a Christina Aguilera song from 25 years ago, the conversation is completely different.

McIndoe: I feel like they spent hours doing multiple takes, trying different things, just a full day or experimenting. And then at the end, when everyone was tired and just wanted to go home, they squeezed in one more against everyone's will, only to realize that they'd accidentally recorded over everything else and they were stuck using that one.

Gentile: Carbon monoxide poisoning from the bus fumes cannot be discounted.

McIndoe: I just rewatched it, because I thought it was weird that they didn't have any background music come in. But they do. It's just ... not the music from the song. It's just vague sound. Again, pick a lane guys!

Gentile: It's because they're singing in a different time signature than the actual song. They turned it into a dirge. Put it on loop and you could use it in a sleep app.

McIndoe: How many times a night did you say this airs?

Gentile: In the first couple rounds, probably six per game. Not kidding. And now, I have a question for you.

McIndoe: Shoot.

Gentile: What does a pro want?

McIndoe: (in a level of enthusiasm that barely registers on scientific instruments): What a pro needs.

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The Athletic / LeBrun: Stanley Cup Final predictions — surveying NHL coaches, execs on Oilers vs. Panthers

Pierre LeBrun

Am I surprised most people are picking the Florida Panthers to beat the Edmonton Oilers in the Stanley Cup Final?

No. They're favored, after all.

But I am surprised for sure that my survey of NHL head coaches and front-office executives was as lopsided toward the Panthers as it was. In all, I heard back from 17 head coaches and 16 team executives. Out of those 33 responses, only four had the Oilers winning the Cup.

Here are their responses, all via text message this week.

(Note: Some responses are edited lightly for clarity.)

Head coach No. 1

I've got the Panthers in seven.

Florida's willingness and effectiveness on the forecheck will constantly apply pressure to Edmonton's D, forcing mistakes.

The other thing that I'll be watching for is Florida defending Edmonton's rush game. Florida is much more aggressive with D gaps in the neutral zone than Dallas. They do such a good job of limiting your space in the neutral zone and don't let you have clean entries. You either have to be willing to dump pucks in and forecheck consistently or they will turn you over and transition the other way.

X-factors in the series:

- Stuart Skinner. Igor Shesterkin was phenomenal against the Panthers. Can Skinner perform close to that level?

- How the games are officiated will be huge. Are we looking at a series with two power plays per game for each team or five?

If it's the latter, Edmonton can obviously excel.

Head coach No. 2

Very excited about this series. I think it's a mismatch. We played Florida before the trade deadline, and I knew it was the best team in the league, with some separation on other top contenders.

Championship-caliber center depth. Best in the league with Aleksander Barkov, Sam Bennett and Anton Lundell. All heavier-type centers, too, which is made for playoffs. They also have got that "swagger" level. No situation rattles them. They expect to win now. Add in the solid D core and Sergei Bobrovsky being back to top echelon and this is a wagon.

You can never count out Edmonton with two of the best players in the world. Skinner could definitely get lightning in a bottle. I didn't have Edmonton beating Dallas, so there you go.

I see Florida winning this series in similar fashion to how they beat the Rangers. Wasn't a blowout, and the Rangers definitely had their chances, but you could see all along Florida was a class ahead of New York. Like any competitive coach ... I will be jealous it's someone else in the end.

But I am rooting for Florida because they nailed the roster. Gustav Forsling off waivers, got Carter Verhaeghe for nothing. Bennett and Tkachuk trades. Along with the home-grown pieces. Built a wagon. Have to tip your hat.

Head coach No. 3

Panthers in six.

Better depth.

Have the ability to check Edmonton's top guys and create havoc on Edmonton's breakouts.

Went through the long layoff before the Final last season and will be better prepared to handle that this time around.

In a nutshell, they're just a more mature team this playoff season.

Head coach No. 4



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Gotta go with Florida. Deep, physical, skilled, as well. Their physical depth will help contain McDavid and Draisaitl. They've been there before, as well, which will help. Plus they have the edge in goaltending.

Head coach No. 5

Florida. Bigger, stronger, faster, deeper. They check all the boxes.

Head coach No. 6

I have Florida. I think forward depth will be the difference. Although, I had Dallas against Edmonton and thought forward depth would be the difference! Also, with Florida's experience losing last year, they have more of an edge this year.

Head coach No. 7

Florida, due to its ability to wear a team down over the course of a series. They make you earn every foot of ice and especially in your own end. Very hard on the defensemen, centers and a goalie over time.

Look at their offensive-zone time possession numbers versus opponents.

Florida does give up odd-man rushes, and the Oilers can finish off the rush really well.

Head coach No. 8

I think this will be a terrific series. Both teams have high-end skill and depth, but I think I will give the nod to Florida. They are playing a great team game right now, they do not give up much at all, and they have the ability to play any style (i.e. nasty when needed). I also think last year's experience in the Final will serve them well.

Head coach No. 9

Well, your guess is as good as mine, but I was really impressed with the Oilers in the Dallas series. If they can play like that, they are going to give themselves a chance. Especially if Florida isn't extremely disciplined. That being said, I think the Panthers get it done. They are relentless and physical through four lines. I think they'll be able to wear down the Oilers and spend enough time in their zone to keep chipping away at scoring chances. I also think with home ice and the better goalie they have the edge.

Head coach No. 10

I think Florida will win. They are deep, hard to play against and last year's experience will help. Also, I think they have the penalty kill, goaltending and players that can match up against Edmonton's top players. Florida is hard to win a series against because they just pound you physically and it seems like teams wear down as series go on.

Head coach No. 11

Panthers in six games.

Florida's depth and willingness to play physical every game will wear down Edmonton's defense. Plus they are really good at getting numbers to the net.

Discipline is a key to the Panthers' success, though. Can't give Edmonton four or five power plays a game.

I think the more physical team wins.

Head coach No. 12

Florida in six.

- Big physical team that doesn't stop coming at you throughout a series.
- Shot volume team that puts extended pressure on your goalie and defensive-zone time.
- Lessons learned from last year's loss.

(On Edmonton's side is their PP, which terrifies every PK coach out there. It was the difference in the last few games against Dallas. Plus they have McDavid.)

Head coach No. 13

Florida. Balanced attack. Strong defense. Solid goaltending. And very good special teams.

Head coach No. 14

Panthers. The pace that Florida plays at and the depth they have throughout the lineup will cause problems in a long series. Consistent goaltending favors Florida.

Head coach No. 15

Florida. They will bully Edmonton. They are hard and they've been there.

It will be a very good Stanley Cup Final.

Florida's PK is real good. They will be a challenge.

Head coach No. 16

Florida. Depth and new-found discipline! They can't let Edmonton on the power play like they did with the Rangers, though — 15 penalties in 6 games, that's pretty good.

Head coach No. 17

I think Edmonton will win. It's time. McDavid looks unstoppable. Their PK is excellent and the goalie is getting better.

Team exec No. 1

Edmonton in seven games.

I really like Florida. No surprise they are back in the Final. No major weaknesses. An excellent "team."

I just can't bet against McDavid. The Oilers have a feel similar to the 2016 Penguins when Sullivan took over midseason.

Team exec No. 2

Florida in six. Their blend of heaviness and skill will be hard to overcome, and they're tested. Going through the run last season will have them better prepared.

Matthew Tkachuk and Barkov are a great complement to each other. Edmonton has the best player in the world, though, and one who isn't too far off, so I'm not 100 percent comfortable in my prediction. McDavid and Draisaitl are hard to pick against. Zach Hyman and Sam Reinhart is an awesome secondary storyline with the parallels of being 50-goal scorers while the big dogs get most of the credit.

Bobrovsky has the edge over Skinner, and their D corps are fairly close. I also don't think Edmonton's PK can keep killing every single penalty, but that's been impressive.

Great matchup overall. But I give the edge to Florida because of experience and the goaltending.

Team exec No. 3

Tough call to make. I will go with Florida because of the goaltending and Barkov, who I believe can make a difference versus the two-headed monsters. But still ... tough call.

Team exec No. 4

Florida. It has the edge at five-on-five, in forward depth, the D-corps and goaltending.

Obviously, special teams goes to Edmonton. Florida will have to be more careful with penalty minutes.

Team exec No. 5

Florida.

Best balanced team. Able to play any type of game. They have more skill than they let on and are more than willing to do whatever is required at the time, including crossing the line.

And they have the goalie, which is different from getting good goaltending.

Team exec No. 6

Florida. I think they win convincingly. They have proven all season long they can beat you any way, and right now they are on top of their game. This is a good matchup for them too. To top it off, they will have learned



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a lot from making it this far last year and will be ready to finish the job this year.

Team exec No. 7

This will be a fast-paced, up-tempo series with a tremendous amount of star power on both sides. Each team has the individual components that typify Stanley Cup champions: superlative skill up front, grinding physical depth forwards, dynamic defensemen and mercurial goaltending.

It's going to be an extremely hard-fought series that will go to six or seven games.

In the end, I believe Florida will prevail. They were there last year and learned that you have to learn to lose before you learn to win. It's their time now ...

Team exec No. 8

Florida in 6. The Panthers' overall physicality will push them over the Oilers. The edge goes to Florida in goaltending, as well. Florida's forwards will wear down Edmonton's defense and will capitalize on the turnovers.

Team exec No. 9

Wow. Like always, two great teams. Both with impressive series wins over the past six weeks. Love Florida. Plays nasty, checks, and scores timely goals. Can play it any way. Has all that plus arguably the best goalie in the business.

But I'm picking Edmonton in a long series. The PK is unreal, and the PP, well, everyone knows about that. Bringing guys in and out of the lineup. Checking with speed. Lots going their way right now.

And McDavid.

Team exec No. 10

Florida, based on experience from last year and overall lineup balance and competitiveness.

Team exec No. 11

Florida.

Too deep. Too heavy. Great goaltending, and they get depth scoring.

But with that said, two words give the Oil a chance:

Connor McDavid.

But Florida in six is my call.

Team exec No. 12

My head wants me to say Florida ... and they will be tough to beat, but McDavid looks like he will not be denied! Oilers in six.

Team exec No. 13

Florida because of its depth at every position and attention to detail.

Team exec No. 14

Florida in seven.

Home ice. Physical style — Dallas was not physical at all. And goaltending.

Team exec No. 15

I'm going to say Florida in six. I have been very impressed with the Panthers' ability to completely commit to their identity and team game on a nightly basis, seemingly regardless of the score. I think their depth up front and their ability to hang on to pucks and wear teams down, particularly an opponent's defense corps, will ultimately be the difference. Moreover, I think they have an advantage in net, though obviously Skinner has played well since coming back in for Edmonton.

I give the Oilers full credit for the run they've put together and wouldn't be surprised at all if McDavid, Draisaitl and Co., were able to push through, but to me Florida has the edge coming into the series.

Team exec No. 16

Florida in six games. Too much depth and more predictable goaltending (which can change from game to game), and they were there last year ...

But, if Evander Kane can play and is anywhere near his level, that can cause problems for Florida, especially for Matthew Tkachuk, as we have seen with the Edmonton and Calgary rivalry.

Bob has been excellent, but like any goalie now, he can throw a stinker out there, as Skinner does — but Skinner's last game was the best of his life, and if he can throw that out there the next two weeks ...

Yet this should be one of the most compelling Finals, just because McDavid represents everything that makes winning the Cup so good. It doesn't happen quickly for most, and that's why it's hard and the hardest trophy to win.

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1314488 Websites

The Athletic / NHL free-agent deep dive: Analyzing the top wingers available on the market

By Dom Luszczyszyn

Free-agency season is upon us, and so it's time to look at the numbers behind the names.

The venerable Chris Johnston went through the top 50 names on the board last week. Now we're going to dig a little deeper into how good each player is projected to be, how he's expected to age, and most importantly, how much he should be paid.

I created a basic guide to how much players should be generally paid based on role earlier in the week, but each case obviously demands more specificity. No two players are equal. That's what these breakdowns are all about, with a look at the top free agents' projected Net Rating and what their salary should be because of it.

Net Rating is far from infallible, but it's a strong starting point for figuring out what to make of this year's free-agency class.

For easier comparison (and comprehension), I've created four lists separated by position. Below you'll find the top wingers available this summer.

Jake Guentzel

If you needed any proof that Jake Guentzel wasn't just a product of Sidney Crosby, you got it after March 8 when he was traded to Carolina. After scoring 22 goals and 52 points with Pittsburgh (36-goal, 85-point pace), Guentzel exploded as a Hurricane with eight goals and 25 points in 17 games (39-goal, 121-point pace). He was a perfect fit — he showed he was one of the league's best wingers in his own right and was especially dominant at five-on-five. Carolina had a 68 percent expected goals rate in his minutes and outscored opponents 14-4.

That slowed down in the playoffs, but he still played essentially to expectations, earning a plus-2.1 Net Rating over 11 games. That equates to a plus-15.7 pace over 82 games.

A plus-16 Net Rating puts Guentzel among the league's top wingers and that makes for a fairly high market value: \$9.9 million on average over the next seven seasons. That's roughly in line with where Evolving Hockey forecasts him with a \$9.6 million estimation on a seven-year deal.

That's a very pricey bet to make, especially for a 29-year-old winger, but it is one Guentzel should live up to. Few players create as many scoring chances as he does and he is a menace in the offensive zone where he thrives off the cycle according to data tracked by Corey Sznajder. He's a savvy player who should age gracefully in his 30s. Pair him with an elite center and watch the pair sing.

Jonathan Marchessault

Vegas' cutthroat lack of loyalty is about to get a big test with Jonathan Marchessault.



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If any player deserves to be an exception to the rule it's the 2023 Conn Smythe winner. He followed that up with a career year, scoring 42 goals and earning a Net Rating of plus-8.6. I expect a drop from that level going forward, but the 33-year-old should still be a safe top-line-forward bet for the next two or three seasons. He should command north of \$6 million, and given what he's done for the franchise, that would be more than fine. He's earned it.

But if Marchessault is indeed looking for \$7 million or more, that would likely be a slight overpayment. That goes against Vegas' entire ethos which is what makes this a difficult decision. It is more than likely a losing hand for the house that always wins, but it's also bad optics walking away from a hand that has given the house so many winners in the past. Marchessault is the soul of the Golden Knights and that's worth a lot more than a small overpayment in the grand scheme of things.

Given how ruthless the team is with their cap otherwise, they should be able to more than make up for that elsewhere. Just pay the man.

Tyler Toffoli

It's always nice when two projections line up. Evolving Hockey has Tyler Toffoli's most likely contract at \$6.1 million on a three-year deal and that's exactly what the model thinks is fair at that term. That feels like both the perfect contract amount and length for a player of Toffoli's caliber — a guy who will clock in and give you 30 goals without issue. That is, if he plays on the top power play.

Toffoli does do a lot of his damage at five-on-five, scoring 1.07 goals per 60, but he's perhaps a little more lethal on the power play, scoring 2.49 goals per 60. That mark ranks 31st, a shade higher than his 40th-ranked rate at five-on-five. Given that, his best fit is a team that needs a lift for their power play and has space to add a high-end shot to their top unit. For a team that has their top unit spoken for, some of his talent may go to waste.

He's still a great five-on-five player, but his ability to drive play did fall a bit last season compared to his career year in Calgary. At 32, he's unlikely to repeat that again, but as long as there's a proper fit with proper expectations, Toffoli should be able to live up to a \$6 million deal.

Jake DeBrusk

Here's how Jake DeBrusk's numbers look over the last three seasons in terms of Offensive, Defensive and Net Rating.

2021-22: +1.2 / +3.0 / +4.2

2022-23: +8.5 / +4.6 / +13.1

2023-24: +0.6 / +2.6 / +3.2

One of those is the clear outlier and it's what makes DeBrusk so frustrating. He's a strong defensive player year over year and the talent is there for him to be so much more offensively — he just doesn't show it consistently enough.

The issue might just be that DeBrusk isn't a driver on his own. He can be a very strong secondary player and showed as much anytime he was with Patrice Bergeron and Brad Marchand, but offense was harder for him to create as a focal point.

That's the kind of situation he needs to be in to thrive and he looks to be a very worthy asset with that potential in mind. Though he isn't elite in one area, he does a lot of things really well. From creating chances through shots and passes, forechecking, entering the zone, exiting the zone, retrieving pucks — DeBrusk was above the 60th percentile across the board last season. He looks like a genuine top-six player. And even when he's not scoring, he's still contributing without the puck. That's worthwhile.

His price tag of \$5 or \$6 million may cause some sticker shock, but he should be worth it. In the right situation, he could be worth well above that. That he's young for a free agent (27) helps his cause, too. Leading the Boston Bruins with five goals and 11 points during the playoffs isn't bad either.

Patrick Kane

There were a lot of questions regarding Patrick Kane's value after a disastrous 2022-23 season. His usual brand of dynamic offense floundered to a point where it couldn't offset his defensive shortcomings.

Hip issues were a valid excuse, but that created a sizeable risk regarding whether he could bounce back.

Kane was only able to earn a one-year deal as a result, but that worked out just fine because he did in fact bounce back.

On a Detroit Red Wings team where he didn't have to be The Guy, Kane scored 20 goals and 47 points in 50 games — a 33-goal, 77-point pace aided further by honest-to-god solid defensive play. For the first time in his career, his team allowed fewer chances with him on the ice compared to off. That led to a Net Rating of plus-5.6, a pace of plus-9.2 which isn't far off from where he was in 2021-22.

That brings us to now where Kane is likely one of the most talented players available, but is also 35 and still only one year removed from an injury-derailed season. The model is conservative because of that, projecting him at plus-5, but that's still enough to be worth \$6 million over the next two seasons. If he can replicate what he did last year that deal might even be a bargain.

Outside of the injury, Kane doing well in Detroit shouldn't be a huge surprise. Some of his struggles in Chicago can be primarily chalked up to his being the team's lone focal point and not having a whole lot to work with. He's a player who looked a lot better after I finally made proper adjustments for teammate and competition quality, and he showed as much with the Red Wings, making a bigger impact in a smaller role. Kane can still be a difference-maker.

Viktor Arvidsson

I was a bit surprised to see Viktor Arvidsson left off of Johnston's list, but I understand the reservation given his injury concerns. When healthy though, Arvidsson is still a strong five-on-five player that can fit reasonably well in a lot of top sixes.

In each of the last four seasons, Arvidsson's teams have done better with him on the ice compared to off. Whether that's goals or expected goals, he earns strong offensive results. He's really great at entering the zone with control and creates a lot off the rush.

With Arvidsson being a bit of an afterthought, it feels like he can be added at a bargain price in the \$4 to \$5 million range. That would be solid work for a player of his ability if he can stay healthy.

Jonathan Drouin

Everyone loves a redemption story and there were few better than Jonathan Drouin last season. Finally, he looked like the player many expected when he was drafted, scoring a career-high 56 points in 79 games. Most of those came in the season's second half when he was put on the top line where his chemistry with junior teammate Nathan MacKinnon was reborn. From that point on, Drouin had 42 points in 47 games, a 73-point pace.

That's where the conundrum with Drouin lies. Did he finally figure it out or was he just a product of his environment?

As usual, it's a little bit of both. Among forwards, Drouin had the third-highest offensive teammate quality in the league, but even after accounting for that, he still ended up with a plus-7.2 Net Rating. That Drouin showed a proper commitment to defense, including being very active and efficient in getting pucks out of his own zone, is the biggest reason for optimism that his breakout was no fluke.

After years of poor play without the puck, Drouin's attention to detail with Colorado toward doing the little things allowed him to be trusted in a role at the top of the lineup. That's where his skill level thrives — he was just never a player that earned the right to stay there. Drouin obviously wouldn't have scored the way he did without MacKinnon, but earning a spot and holding his own without being a liability is impressive growth.

There does need to be some caution exercised with Drouin given his history. But last season felt like a turning point — he belongs in a top six and can make great things happen with his playmaking.

Tyler Bertuzzi

It's always tricky to evaluate the Third Guy on Toronto's top line. In the past, models have tended to give too much credit while fans tended to not give enough credit. Zach Hyman and Michael Bunting obviously benefitted from playing with Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner and their



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numbers should've been taken with some grain of salt — but not an entire salt rock.

That's the lesson to be taken with Tyler Bertuzzi, who was lauded as an upgrade over Bunting but mostly ended up with comparable numbers. Bertuzzi scored 1.88 points per 60 at five-on-five and earned 56 percent of the goals and expected goals. A strong season for a second-liner, but perhaps a bit below expectations going in. Especially since he didn't quite mesh on that top line.

Bertuzzi is a very capable play-driver and the Maple Leafs' expected goals rate was 0.38 higher per 60 with him on the ice last season. He turns shots into chances well and is an effective forechecker, though footspeed is a definite issue.

He would be a great asset to any team's top six at the right price and it does feel like he has more to give than last season, too. Evolving Hockey's projection of \$4.7 million on a three-year deal is perfect, with some potential for Bertuzzi to outplay that money with the right fit.

Teuvo Teravainen

A few years ago it might've been defensible to give Teuvo Teravainen a deal north of \$6.5 million. At that price, you're looking for a top-line-caliber player who can provide seven goals of value and that's certainly what Teravainen used to be. At 29, those days may be over.

Teravainen is a fantastic defensive winger, but over the last three seasons, he's posted five-on-five points-per-60 rates of 1.64, 1.45 and 1.48. The individual offense isn't there anymore and it showed last year with below-average scoring-chance contribution rates according to Sznajder's tracking. That's despite his most frequent linemate being Sebastian Aho every season, who has shown over the last two years he does better without Teravainen, especially offensively. Teravainen's offensive teammate quality is among the highest in the league and he doesn't deliver what's expected of him given his help.

It's Aho who drives the bus and that's clear looking at Teravainen's involvement in creating quality last season. He wasn't very involved in exits or entries and didn't do either with control often. He pressures pucks but rarely recovers them. He creates shots but not chances.

Some of the issue is that aside from Aho, Carolina's center options were very weak with the puck. Still — I would be very nervous giving top-line money to someone who can't really drive much top-line offense on his own. Something closer to \$5 million is much more palatable.

Anthony Duclair

San Jose is no place to properly judge the efficacy of a player. Anthony Duclair looked like he was in hell trying to do it all on his own and obviously struggled as one of the team's only focal points. Given his prior work as a support piece in Florida, Duclair felt like a solid bet to find his game elsewhere. That's exactly what happened with Tampa Bay where he scored eight goals and 15 points in 17 games while earning elite impacts at five-on-five. Duclair was back.

That was until the playoffs where Duclair struggled — again. Duclair has always had issues surrounding his ability off the puck and those questions are only magnified in the playoffs. In 33 playoff games over the last three years, Duclair has been on the ice for 3.36 expected goals against per 60, 0.48 worse than his teammates.

Duclair is a very effective second-line scorer whose speed makes him an asset off the rush, but giving him too much term is tough considering his shortcomings.

Anthony Mantha

I was really high on Anthony Mantha at the deadline and he proved me right ... during the regular season. With Vegas, he was as effective as expected, scoring 2.34 points per 60 at five-on-five while earning 59 percent of the expected goals and 62 percent of the actual goals. Relative to teammates, Mantha's impact was almost as high as it was in Washington: 0.54 more expected goals per 60 and 1.03 more goals per 60. He was really good, earning an average Game Score of 0.95. Only Jack Eichel and William Karlsson were higher.

If you're wondering why Mantha was a healthy scratch for four of seven games in the playoffs given those numbers, it's because that version did not show up for the playoffs. He had zero points and was badly outplayed, earning just 28 percent of the expected goals while being

outscored 1-0. He was a detriment and on a team as deep as Vegas it's no shock he couldn't keep a lineup spot. In 14 career playoff games, Mantha has zero goals and six assists while being outscored 8-3.

As effective as Mantha is during the season, his shortcomings do seem to get exposed when it matters. His compete level is often put into question and it's hard to argue given his playoff resume.

In the right situation with the right motivator, there's a very strong top-six player somewhere in Mantha. For now, he seems content cooking at a medium heat — and that's a tough sell at \$5 million.

Vladimir Tarasenko

While Vladimir Tarasenko may still be a strong offensive player, what he gives back the other way makes it difficult to justify a deal north of \$5 million. He's not that guy anymore. In each of the last three seasons, he's been on the ice for over 0.3 more expected goals against per 60 than his teammates. While he was better in Florida (0.2) than Ottawa (0.61) this season, the fact remains that Tarasenko is a liability.

That can be mitigated in the right situation with help. His offensive instincts are worth the trouble and at 32, he's still a solid bet for 50-60 points. It's just best not to overpay for what he offers.

Warren Foegele

No Oilers forward has been outscored more in the playoffs than Warren Foegele at 11-3. That's likely a big factor in why he's been a recent healthy scratch for Edmonton and might mean he comes in cheaper than expected.

While it's fair to expect Foegele not to live up to his expected goals rate, there's a good degree of bad luck there. What's worth paying attention to is Foegele having the third highest expected goals rate among forwards at 59 percent behind only Zach Hyman, Connor McDavid and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins. He's a driver who fits well in a middle six, whether that's on a checking line that keeps the puck up ice or on a scoring line as the guy who does the dirty work.

That's Foegele's forte and over the last two years, he has 59 percent of the expected goals and a points per 60 above 2 in both seasons. The playoff issues are a concern — and aren't novel to this season — but in the right situation, he's an asset.

Jack Roslovic

Behold, the league's most average forward.

That basically says it all. Roslovic is A Guy, a versatile one who can slot in anywhere in any position in the top nine and do fine. He'll do some impressive things here and there, he'll go through quiet stretches where you don't notice him, but most of the time he'll just be there chugging along.

To Roslovic's credit, he is great at bringing the puck through the neutral zone with control. He could be a good add to a team missing that element.

There are worse ways to spend \$4 million, but also more inspiring ways, too.

Danton Heinen

It's still hard to believe Danton Heinen went all summer without receiving a contract last year. He showed exactly how silly that was with a strong year in Boston, earning 60 percent of the goals and chipping in 1.99 points per 60.

Some of that success came by way of earning ice next to David Pastrnak, but Heinen even being trusted to play in the top six and hold his own next to a superstar is impressive in and of itself.

Heinen is a solid third-liner who should earn a contract much sooner this summer. Data tracked by Sznajder shows just how much of a hidden gem he is in the offensive zone with an elite chance assist rate and very strong forechecking numbers. That's consistent with what he showed in Pittsburgh in 2022-23, too. Couple that with his defensive upside and Heinen looks like a savvy middle-six add that won't break the bank.

Dakota Joshua

In past years, Dakota Joshua would've been one of those sneaky good pickups that teams kick themselves for not making. He scored 1.1 goals



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per 60 at five-on-five this season and had some excellent underlying numbers, earning 55 percent of the expected goals and 65 percent of the actual goals. The model has his value at \$3.5 million over three years. That's \$1 million above Evolving Hockey's projection which uses past precedent of similar player signings to judge expected value. A player like Joshua usually goes for less.

Dakota Mania has made that feel unlikely though, as the pendulum has arguably struck too far the other way. Joshua is a nice player who finally broke out, but it's unlikely he'll be a steal for any teams with rumors swirling around \$4 million. That puts him in typical overpaid free-agent territory.

Not by a lot, and not by enough that he can't reach that level — his Net Rating of plus-3.1 last season suggests there is some top-six upside. But it does create some risk if last season, a year in which he scored on 20 percent of his shots at five-on-five, can't be replicated. His tracked data doesn't look very impressive outside of his ability to earn high-danger chances and it's worth noting his on-ice numbers away from Conor Garland were awful.

I like Joshua a fair bit and he should fit well in a lot of situations, but we should slow down the hype train a little bit.

Max Domi

Whatever Max Domi gives a team on offense, he likely gives right back on defense. That's been his calling card at every stop of his NHL career and it's partly why he's laced up for seven teams in nine seasons.

Domi has some legitimate offensive qualities and is an incredible playmaker. His 4.6 chance assists per 60 landed in the 90th percentile last season and his 1.43 primary assists per 60 last season was second behind only Connor McDavid. That skill set is enough to overlook his lack of goal scoring.

It's not enough to pay him top-six money though, not unless he's going to be used there. That's where the defensive issues come into play and it's what makes Domi a tough fit on a lot of teams. The Leafs found a genuinely great one next to Matthews where Domi didn't look out of place, but that speaks more to the genius of Matthews. Domi shouldn't get an extra \$1.5 million and term because he meshed well with a superstar — especially if he stops playing with one, whether that's on the Leafs or team No. 8.

Some may view that as inconsistent with what was said about Drouin, but the difference is Drouin's offensive ability looks slightly stronger and he silenced some of the questions surrounding his defense.

Jordan Martinook

There might not be a better third-line grinder on the market than Jordan Martinook, who checks a lot of boxes for that role. He's consistently been one of the league's premier forecheckers in each of the last three seasons, rating well into the 90th percentile for both pressures and puck recoveries. That leads to a lot of time spent in the offensive zone, giving Martinook elite defensive numbers year after year. Over the last two seasons, the Hurricanes have earned 60 percent of the expected goals with Martinook on the ice and allowed only 2.1 expected goals against per 60 — both above team average.

The other plus is Martinook's penalty-killing ability. The Hurricanes are routinely among the league's absolute best penalty-killing teams and Martinook plays a big role in that. That helps push his projected Defensive Rating up to plus-3, one of the highest marks in the league among forwards.

Daniel Sprong

There's a reason Daniel Sprong can score the way he does but isn't trusted to play higher in the lineup. His defensive ability is graded as among the league's worst which makes him a liability. His above-average Offensive Rating despite only playing 12 minutes per night is impressive, but the defensive drawbacks he possesses make him a difficult bottom-six fit for a lot of lineups.

That might be a tough sell at \$3 million for many, but for the right team, he's worth the price. Goals are hard to come by in this league and Sprong's ability to score shouldn't be taken for granted. Over the last two seasons, he's ninth in goals per 60 at five-on-five. The team that finds a way to maximize his talent will be a happy one.

William Carrier

He didn't often see much ice time in Vegas thanks to the team's depth, but in a limited role, William Carrier has shown he has top-nine potential. He's an excellent forechecker with strong defensive zone smarts that allow him to crush sheltered minutes. Over the last three years, he's earned 59 percent of the goals and expected goals and the second-best relative impact in the league.

That needs to be taken with a massive grain of salt considering his usage — he's likely not a top-six-caliber player — but those numbers do suggest he has untapped potential for a third-line role. That's where the model slots him after accounting for his usage and his play style certainly fits the bill for a checking role.

At an expected salary of roughly \$2 million, Carrier looks like a savvy bet.

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1314489 Websites

The Athletic / Why the Oilers are not 'Canada's team' in the Stanley Cup Final

Ian Mendes

In the aftermath of the Edmonton Oilers clinching their spot in the Stanley Cup Final, the question to Connor McDavid on the podium was predictable.

Winnipeg, Vancouver and Toronto also had Stanley Cup aspirations this spring, but Edmonton is the last Canadian team standing. And so the question to the Oilers superstar was somewhat inevitable, as Edmonton is on the precipice of wiping out a Canadian Stanley Cup drought that has lasted more than three decades.

"Can you talk about being Canada's team?" a reporter asked McDavid on Sunday evening. "Everybody coast to coast is cheering for the Oilers. Any added pressure with that?"

McDavid seamlessly stick-handled the question.

"We're a Canadian team and we've got great Canadian fans," responded McDavid. "And it feels good to maybe unite the country a little bit and bring people together."

It's a nice, easy narrative, isn't it?

A hockey-obsessed nation that is starving for its championship trophy to rightfully be returned north of the border.

It's a storyline repeatedly pushed by a Boston Pizza commercial that seems to play during every single TV timeout and intermission in these playoffs. The commercial opens by relaying the heartbreak of several Canadian teams since Montreal's magical run to a Stanley Cup title in 1993.

Somebody has punched through drywall after Vancouver lost Game 7 to the Rangers in 1994.

A Toronto fan has thrown a plate through their television screen after losing to Carolina in the conference final.

An Oilers fan repeatedly runs over their flat-screen TV with a pickup truck following a second-round loss to Anaheim in 2017.

And a bitter Montreal fan tosses their AM radio to the ground after the Canadiens lost to Tampa in the Stanley Cup Final in 2021.

(The Flames' and Senators' runs to the Stanley Cup Final in 2004 and 2007 respectively were omitted from the commercial. But hey, there is only so much Canadian misery you can shoehorn into a 30-second spot.)

The message of the commercial is simple: Canadian NHL fans have only known bitter disappointment over the last 30 years. It's time for hockey fans in this country to put aside their deep-rooted, historical rivalries and pull in the same direction.



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As the commercial draws to a close, fans are gathered inside a Boston Pizza sports bar clad in merchandise that is just generic enough to skirt a trademark infringement suit from the NHL. But it's clearly meant to show a Canucks fan and a Flames fan high-fiving at the bar. A Senators fan and a Canadiens fan standing side by side. An Oilers fan and a Leafs fan clinking full beer glasses together.

"A Canadian team hasn't won the Stanley Cup in 30 years. Maybe it's time to try something different," the commercial urges. "This year, let's team up with the fans we've always cheered against."

This commercial and the reporter's question to McDavid, however, are rooted in pure fantasy — not reality.

Will some casual hockey fans in Canada be pulling for the Oilers over the Panthers?

Absolutely.

Will some big NHL fans in this country be hoping that McDavid — the absolute best player of his generation — winds up with a Stanley Cup ring?

You bet.

But will the majority of die-hard hockey fans in this country be actively rooting for the Oilers as if they were cheering on their own team?

Forget it.

Sure, most Canadians want the Stanley Cup drought to end, but with a very important caveat: only if it happens for their favourite team. Otherwise, it's just like watching your neighbour win the lottery. I suppose it's nice for them, but what does it do for you?

Consider this social media poll from Sportsnet 650 in Vancouver after the two Stanley Cup Finalists were determined. Of the 1,531 people who cast a vote, more than 70 percent of them said they would be cheering for the Panthers. Only 16.4 percent said they would be actively rooting for Edmonton, while almost the same number (12.9 percent) said they would remain completely neutral.

And yes, Vancouver fans — who would have made up the vast majority of that poll — might be bitter because Edmonton did eliminate them in the second round.

But that's the whole point.

You cannot simply ask a Vancouver fan to temporarily suspend their hatred of an Edmonton team that just bounced them from the playoffs. Nor can you ask a Calgary fan to ignore decades of hatred and bitterness in the Battle of Alberta to suddenly pull for their provincial rival. In fact, Calgary fans have full permission to sit out this entire Stanley Cup Final.

The trifecta of Montreal-Toronto-Ottawa will never cheer for one another, and while Winnipeg always seems like the most likeable Canadian team, it's not like they have forged a national identity of any kind.

It's a ridiculous question we wrestle with each time a Canadian team is still alive after Victoria Day. Should we embrace the last Canadian team standing for the sake of national pride?

But the answer is always in plain sight.

Consider the backlash in Toronto when the CN Tower — the city's most iconic building — was lit up in red, white and blue in the summer of 2021 to commemorate the Montreal Canadiens reaching the Stanley Cup Final.

That felt awkward and it created such a stir that a spokesperson for the CN Tower had to release a statement explaining, "It is a federally owned and operated property that belongs to all Canadians."

When the Canucks were the last Canadian team standing in the COVID-19 bubble in the summer of 2020, our James Mirtle and Sean McIndoe had a fun and spirited debate over the idea of Vancouver being Canada's team.

But to definitively settle this argument, we should compare the Oilers' run to what the Toronto Raptors accomplished five years ago. When the Raptors went on their magical run to the NBA title in the summer of 2019, it felt like the entire country was galvanized. There were massive viewing parties being held all across Canada.

In Abbotsford, B.C., more than 1,500 fans turned up to watch Game 5 of the Raptors-Warriors series inside the Abbotsford Centre. At the opposite end of the country in the Maritimes, there were massive viewing parties for Raptors games in places like Halifax and Moncton.

That summer, Cineplex Odeon opened up 33 movie theatres across the country to show Raptors games on the big screen.

"Canadian fans are invited to unite and rally behind the Raptors as they face-off against the Golden State Warriors, live on the big screen," their press release stated.

Surely, they must be doing the same for Canada's team — the Edmonton Oilers — here in 2024, right?

Alas, a Cineplex Odeon spokesperson told The Athletic this week, "Currently, we are not scheduled to show the Stanley Cup Final series in theatres as cinema rights haven't been granted."

And maybe that's a technicality on the "cinema rights" point, but it doesn't feel like the Oilers would have the nationwide appeal of viewing parties in every major city.

We do that for massive Olympic events. The FIFA World Cup. And yes the Raptors and Toronto Blue Jays, because they are the only professional teams based in Canada in their respective sports.

But if there are massive outdoor viewing parties planned for Oilers games in Ottawa, Winnipeg and Toronto this month, I certainly haven't heard of them.

So to our American friends who think we're obsessed with getting our trophy back, please know that we haven't put the country on pause waiting to see if the Oilers bring home the title. Not everybody on this side of the border is on pins and needles. We're not like England waiting for a FIFA World Cup.

The only time we're all definitively pulling on the same rope is when we're cheering for Team Canada in national competitions. The Olympics matter to us and on that front, this country has accomplished a lot since 1993. A trio of Olympic gold medals on the men's side is a pretty nice consolation prize during a prolonged Stanley Cup drought.

(And we're not pointing any fingers, but we do know of a certain country to our south that hasn't won a gold medal on the men's side since 1980. Forty-four years is a pretty good drought too, FYI.)

An Oilers championship — while erasing a 31-year drought for a Canadian-based team — does nothing for any other fan base in this country. Cities like Ottawa, Vancouver and Winnipeg, who have never hoisted a Stanley Cup, don't receive partial credit for an Oilers championship. And if anything, an Edmonton Stanley Cup championship will only further enrage Toronto fans, who are closing in on six decades without a title.

But if there is one reason we should be collectively pulling in Canada for an Oilers Stanley Cup this month, it would be to end this ridiculous notion that we're all waiting for the Stanley Cup to come home.

And maybe if the Oilers win a Stanley Cup in June, we can put this whole "Canada's Team" narrative to bed once and for all.

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1314490 Websites

The Athletic / NHL Mock Draft: Celebrini at No. 1 and Levshunov at No. 2 lead Corey Pronman's list

Corey Pronman

It's NHL combine week, which means we are a few weeks away now from San Jose being on the clock. Today I'm making my second attempt at trying to project how the first round of the 2024 NHL Draft will play out. The most critical decision point will be Chicago with the second overall pick. What they decide could impact how the rest of the top picks play out.



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1. San Jose Sharks: Macklin Celebrini, C, Boston University (NCAA (H-EAST))

The presumed No. 1 pick is extremely likely to be the pick here. We can move on.

2. Chicago Blackhawks: Artyom Levshunov, D, Michigan State (NCAA (BIG10))

This may be the biggest decision point in the draft. Most NHL sources believe Levshunov, Ivan Demidov, Cayden Lindstrom (with a clean bill of health) and Anton Silayev are the likeliest top-five picks. If it's down to Levshunov versus one of the players in Russia in Ivan Demidov or Anton Silayev, I think a lot of NHL teams will lean toward the big defenseman they've seen live a bunch and who has played at a high level for two years, unless they think the Russian is clearly superior. I don't think the league views this case as one where those alternatives are clearly superior and for that reason, I'm projecting Levshunov to be the second pick. If Lindstrom gets great reviews at the NHL combine the picture could change a little as well.

3. Anaheim Ducks: Anton Silayev, D, Nizhny Novgorod (RUSSIA)

Most in the league think Anaheim will want a big defenseman. That would put Levshunov or Silayev in play, as well as Sam Dickinson or Carter Yakemchuk. There's never a safe money play when it comes to players on KHL deals, but Silayev is very much a Pat Verbeek style of player due to his length and mean streak on top of being able to move a puck.

4. Columbus Blue Jackets: Cayden Lindstrom, C, Medicine Hat (WHL)

Projecting Lindstrom's position is difficult due to some teams' concerns about his back injury, which ended the second half of his season. We'll know more about that issue after the combine, but most teams are assuming he will make a recovery even if they need to be convinced. If so, he is highly appealing as a 6-3 center who can fly, score and lay the body. Columbus would have to choose between getting bigger in someone like Lindstrom or Silayev or adding skill in Demidov.

5. Montreal Canadiens: Ivan Demidov, RW, Ska St. Petersburg Jr. (RUSSIA-JR.)

I think Montreal would be very happy if Demidov got to this spot; he would add the elite skill they lack in their organization. If he didn't it gets more interesting. In that case, you're likely debating between Lindstrom, Beckett Sennecke or Tij Iginla.

6. Utah: Sam Dickinson, D, London (OHL)

Utah has a great group of young forwards they're building around, and after picking Dmitri Simashev with the sixth pick last year they use the sixth pick this year on another highly athletic defenseman with offense in Dickinson.

7. Ottawa Senators: Carter Yakemchuk, D, Calgary (WHL)

In a survey of teams leading up to the draft, I get the sense that Yakemchuk has a better than 50 percent chance to go in the top 10. He's big, highly skilled and plays hard, and as a right-handed defenseman, he would fit in very nicely in what the Senators lack on their depth chart while providing plenty of upside.

8. Seattle Kraken: Zeev Buium, D, Denver (NCAA (NCHC))

After adding a lot of forwards with their first high picks in the franchise's history, it feels likely in a defense-heavy draft that Seattle will add a defenseman. Whether it's Dickinson, Yakemchuk, Buium or Zayne Parekh, this feels like an ideal spot to add a premier defense prospect the team will likely be high on.

9. Calgary Flames: Berkly Catton, C, Spokane (WHL)

Many think there's a strong chance that the Flames add Iginla here, but my bet would be more likely they draft one of the talented centers (Catton, Konsta Helenius) or defensemen available at this pick.

10. New Jersey Devils: Beckett Sennecke, RW, Oshawa (OHL)

Sennecke's stock is on the rise sharply upwards, and there's a solid chance he's going to be a top 10 pick on draft day due to his elite skill, on top of being 6-foot-2 and a good skater. In an ideal world, many believe New Jersey would prefer a center or defenseman with size here, but the

way the board played out Sennecke becomes the clear best option for them.

11. Buffalo Sabres: Tij Iginla, C, Kelowna (WHL)

Some may say Buffalo can't take another scoring winger, but you could have said the same thing about their approach last season and the Zach Benson pick has looked good for them so far. Iginla is a highly competitive and skilled winger who can score and would complement the group Buffalo is building. Several NHL team sources think Buffalo is a strong candidate to trade their pick.

12. Philadelphia Flyers: Konsta Helenius, C, Jukurit (FINLAND)

Philadelphia will have an opportunity to draft a highly skilled player, be it Catton, Iginla, Helenius or a defenseman like Parekh/Buium if they slide a bit. The Flyers' system is craving a premium young center talent and Helenius can be that for them.

Konsta Helenius, a premium young center talent, is an appealing choice for the Flyers. (Mikko Kankainen / Jukurit)

13. Minnesota Wild: Zayne Parekh, D, Saginaw (OHL)

Parekh slides a bit in this mock from his expected top 10 draft slot. There are 12-14 players people are convinced are top 10 picks, though. In this scenario, Minnesota jumps at Parekh's elite hockey sense even with his defending concerns.

14. San Jose Sharks: Adam Jiricek, D, Plzen (CZECHIA)

Jiricek's season ended months ago due to injury, but I still sense he's well thought of in the league despite a so-so year plus the injury. He's tall, mobile and can move pucks well and the Sharks are craving that type of profile on their blue line.

15. Detroit Red Wings: Michael Brandsegg-Nygaard, RW, Mora (SWEDEN-2)

To say Brandsegg-Nygaard screams Detroit prospect may be an overstatement. He's highly competitive and plays in Sweden — what more can you want?! He also fits a pressing need for them of addressing a scoring winger.

16. St. Louis Blues: Stian Solberg, D, Valerenga (NORWAY)

Solberg is going to be a slightly contentious player in team meetings. He was lights-out good at the World Championships, but he played in a league in Norway that has no track record of developing NHL players. Still, I think teams will be very attracted to his size, skating and physicality and would be the kind of defenseman the Blues have lacked in their system for a while.

17. Washington Capitals: Cole Eiserman, LW, USA U-18 (NTDP)

Eiserman will be a highly debated prospect in the weeks to come, and I expect he will go a lot later than some expected six months ago, but at some point, enough is enough. He is still a goal/game winger with dynamic traits, and 17 to Washington ends up being a good fit for him.

18. Chicago Blackhawks: Igor Chernyshov, LW, Dynamo Moscow (RUSSIA)

Chernyshov is highly thought of in the league and I think there's a strong chance he goes in the teens. He's skilled, can skate and is competitive, and would add a size dimension that Chicago lacks among most of their top forward prospects.

19. Vegas Golden Knights: Trevor Connelly, LW, Tri-City (USHL)

Vegas is an organization that could take the swing on Connelly. They do have a barren farm system, and his dynamic speed and skill would become something they lack among their prospects.

20. New York Islanders: Jett Luchanko, C, Guelph (OHL)

Luchanko's stock is on the rise with NHL teams and I expect him to go around the 20th spot. He's an excellent skater and competitor who may remind some of Islanders veteran Jean-Gabriel Pageau.

21. Los Angeles Kings: Michael Hage, C, Chicago (USHL)

Hage's stock is on the rise after an excellent second half to the season. He's got a ton of skill and speed and his improved consistency could persuade teams to pick him even higher than here.



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### 22. Nashville Predators: Cole Beaudoin, C, Barrie (OHL)

Beaudoin would mesh very well with all the skill Nashville has picked up lately. He's a high-end compete center with size who was excellent at the recent U18s for Canada.

### 23. Toronto Maple Leafs: Sacha Boisvert, C, Muskegon (USHL)

Boisvert is well-liked in the league due to his well-rounded play. He's a center with size who has good pace in his game and legit offensive touch too even though he's not dynamic. He'd become a potential middle-six center for the Leafs.

### 24. Colorado Avalanche: Egor Surin, C, Yaroslavl Jr. (RUSSIA-JR.)

Surin's stock is on the rise after a great postseason in Russia, and it wouldn't surprise me if he went higher than this. He has tremendous compete and good natural talent as well. He's an easy player to like and Colorado has shown they're not afraid to take shots on talented Russians.

### 25. Ottawa Senators: Liam Greentree, RW, Windsor (OHL)

Greentree's stock got dinged a bit after a so-so U18 Worlds, but he still had a great OHL season and teams will be highly enticed by his skill and size combination. He has a lot of similarities to Quentin Musty, who went around this range last year. He'd be a great dice roll by Ottawa with their other first-round pick.

### 26. Montreal Canadiens: Julius Miettinen, C, Everett (WHL)

After taking elite skill with Demidov, Miettinen would provide Montreal with a much-needed big center in their system, someone with legit offensive tools who can skate as well.

### 27. Carolina Hurricanes: Nikita Artamonov, LW, Nizhny Novgorod (RUSSIA)

Carolina has not shied away recently from drafting Russians, and they look to Russia again, taking the highly skilled and creative Artamonov with the 27th pick.

### 28. Calgary Flames: Eric (EJ) Emery, D, USA U-18 (NTDP)

Emery had a very good U18s and has the look of a future NHL defenseman as a premium athlete who plays hard. His offense is a minor question, but at No. 28 if Calgary thinks they can get a career shutdown NHL defenseman it's hard to ask for too much offense.

### 29. Dallas Stars: Leo Sahlin Wallenius, D, Vaxjo Jr. (SWEDEN-JR.)

This is one of the worst crops of Swedes I can remember in a long time, and we wait until the very end of the first round for the first Swede to go off the board. Sahlin Wallenius is an excellent skater who can make plays but due to his 6-0 frame, he creeps in right at the end of the round.

### 30. New York Rangers: Sam O'Reilly, RW, London (OHL)

O'Reilly is a well-rounded center who played a notable role on an elite London team this season. He's a competitive center with skill who skates well and can play the way the Rangers want.

### 31. Philadelphia Flyers: Dean Letourneau, C, St. Andrew's College (HIGH-ON)

There were so many scouts going in to watch Letourneau this season that it feels almost inevitable he's going to be a late first-round pick. He's a big gamble, because while a big man who can skate, he played at such a low level that scouts have a lot of questions about how much offense he truly has. It makes for an ideal risk for a Flyers team with multiple high picks.

### 32. Anaheim Ducks: Charlie Elick, D, Brandon (WHL)

Elick didn't end the year on the best note with his U18s performance, but I know there's still notable NHL interest because he's a 6-3 defenseman who is an excellent skater and plays with some bite. At No. 32 he can be a decent pick and plays a Verbeek brand of hockey.

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The Athletic / NHL rumblings: Devils goalie search, Zegras, Marnier, Necas, Gibson, Saros and more from the combine

By Pierre LeBrun

**BUFFALO, N.Y.** — The New Jersey Devils made a splash with the Sheldon Keefe hire as head coach. Now it's time to address roster needs.

The search for a No. 1 goalie tops the list. That work continues here this week at the NHL scouting combine.

"It's talking to the market and getting the pulse of where people are at with their goaltenders and what they want to do," Devils general manager Tom Fitzgerald told The Athletic on Tuesday. "When you have good goaltending, it's tough to let go, and it's tough to pry out of people.

"But there are situations ... I've got the pulse of what's going on. There are a few guys that I'm in on."

While Fitzgerald wouldn't get into names, other league sources said he continues to show interest in Jacob Markstrom from the Calgary Flames, whom he tried hard to acquire before the March 8 trade deadline, as well as Linus Ullmark from the Boston Bruins. There are other possibilities, too, but those two names would top New Jersey's list.

My understanding is that Markstrom would waive his full no-move clause to go to New Jersey. But there are a few other teams with interest in Markstrom, as well.

The Devils have other roster needs, too, so depending on the sequence of events this offseason, a goalie acquisition could be affected by other moves.

"At the end of the day, it's a big part of what we want to do elsewhere," Fitzgerald said. "All of a sudden, (the No. 10 draft pick, owned by the Devils) comes into play, and we're moving it for Player X, who is a forward, and that guy costs X, and there's a domino effect on the goaltender."

So, yes, the Devils are indeed willing to listen on No. 10.

"Yeah, for sure," Fitzgerald said. "I'm more than willing to move the pick for the right asset. One that we control, one that's probably in the same demographic as our team — maybe not 23, 24 years old but somebody we control for a few years.

"Nothing's come my way yet, though."

The Devils would like to add a little more size, edge and physicality at forward.

"We're a little too vanilla up front," Fitzgerald said.

And perhaps another piece on the blue line.

"I'm looking on the back end, as well, for something," he added.

I wonder if pending unrestricted free agent Brenden Dillon wouldn't be a fit for the Devils.

Regardless, a busy offseason lies ahead for New Jersey.

**Predators in no rush on Saros**

Speaking of goalies, Nashville Predators GM Barry Trotz hopes to take Juuse Saros' name out of the trade rumors by signing him to an extension this summer. He can do that as of July 1, and the plan is to meet with Saros' agent, Kevin Epp, this week in Buffalo. Saros will be a UFA in July 2025.

"Yeah, we're talking to Juice and talking to his representative," Trotz told The Athletic. "I think they want to get something done. I would like to get something done. So we're going to work toward that. I haven't been in any hurry because I don't think there's any reason why I won't get it done."

Of course, until it gets done, trade rumors will persist.



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In the meantime, Trotz has roster additions he's looking to make. For one, he would like to upgrade the blue line after trading Ryan McDonagh to the Tampa Bay Lightning.

UFA defenseman Brett Pesce is likely among Nashville's targets come July 1, but of course there are other options.

Up front, the Predators hope to add an offensive piece, too.

"I'm going to look at all options," Trotz said. "I thought we got really good production out of the bottom end of our roster last year. I'd like to continue to build the top nine so we can get multiple threats on every line. You see that depth is everything in the playoffs.

"We relied heavily on one line last year, the Ryan O'Reilly line. They all had career years on that line. But I'm looking for more scoring. I'm looking at the trade market. I'm looking at free agency. And some options internally."

I don't think you'll see Nashville enter the sweepstakes for a UFA like Jake Guentzel, but perhaps more of a second-layer type UFA forward.

Ducks listening on Gibson, Zegras

The Anaheim Ducks hold the No. 3 pick in this month's draft. If all goes to plan, they won't be picking that high for a while after this year.

The hope is the team takes a tangible step next season.

"I think if you look at last year, it was a learning curve not only for our younger players but our older players, just kind of coming in for a different coaching style and accountability standard," Ducks GM Pat Verbeek told The Athletic, referring to first-year coach Greg Cronin. "I think that was a huge culture shock for the majority of the players. But looking into next season, I think they got through it and now they understand.

"So I think there's going to be a different mindset, a different approach and a lot better understanding of what's expected. So it'll be different from that aspect. The learning curve is going to be lesser.

"So yeah, I'm expecting us to take a step."

To help in that process, Verbeek is eyeing some roster upgrades.

"I'd like to add a couple more veteran pieces to the group," he said. "I'd like to find a top-six winger, and I'd like to find a top-four defenseman. You know, 31 other teams could say the same thing, right?"

He smiled as he said that. But those are nevertheless the hopeful additions.

"I'm trying to make our lineup deeper while having the younger kids gain more experience, learn from veteran players and not have to bear the burden of producing offensively," Verbeek said.

The idea is to better insulate his younger core, which could come via the trade market or free agency.

"I'm exploring all of it," Verbeek said.

Speaking of the trade market, I did ask the Ducks GM about John Gibson's future. Gibson, who turns 31 next month, has three years left on his contract at a \$6.4 million average annual value.

"John's still a really good goalie," Verbeek said. "Obviously there's a market for goalies out there."

The Ducks GM didn't want to comment further, but my sense is that Anaheim still values Gibson and would be fine keeping him but will continue to take calls, too.

And finally, Trevor Zegras trade chatter has resurfaced. Verbeek would not comment on that, but other league sources suggest the Ducks are listening on him and would consider moving him in the right deal. They're obviously deeper up front, which is why they could afford to move him.

Listening to trade offers and deciding to pull the trigger are two different things. I would say TBD on that one ...

Canadiens looking to take another swing

The playoffs are most likely still out of reach for the retooling Montreal Canadiens next season, but a tangible step up the standings — perhaps

playing meaningful hockey into March — is a legitimate target for the franchise.

"I think so, yeah," Habs GM Kent Hughes told The Athletic. "We've acknowledged that it's important we take a step. I guess the size of that step is something that plays out over the course of the year and is to a certain degree predicated on whether we do more this summer. We will try. We'll explore our opportunities to improve our team.

"But with the continued condition that it has to be improving our team without compromising what we're trying to do here."

Hughes since becoming GM has taken swings around draft week, trading for the likes of Kirby Dach and Alex Newhook. That's the kind of thing he's looking at again.

"I think so. If we can get a player, if we can trade up in the draft, we have to look at any way that we can improve this team," Hughes said. "We won't be limited to something that has to make us better next season. But if it does, call that icing on the cake."

Hughes obviously can't comment on players from other teams as per the NHL's tampering rules, but other league sources suggest Montreal has inquired with the Carolina Hurricanes on Martin Necas, as have half the teams in the NHL. I also believe Anaheim and Montreal have re-connected on Zegras, however, I'm not convinced that's a path the Habs will ultimately pursue aggressively.

The Canadiens hold the No. 5 pick. Whether they would consider moving it depends on what happens at Picks 2, 3 and 4 before them — which means probably a decision right there in the moment in Vegas on June 28.

"I suspect it's more an in-the-moment (decision) this year," Hughes said. "Because I think the draft is less predictable. Whereas I think last year we got a lot of inquiries (ahead of time) at No. 5 because everybody kind of felt they knew what the first four picks were going to be — maybe not the order but who the first four were going to be was assumed. I don't think that's the case this year."

Hughes wouldn't spell it out, but an obvious scenario in which Montreal would consider trading down is if there's a run of forwards ahead of them, given how deep the organization is on defense.

As it stands at the moment, though, Hughes said it's more likely than not they keep the pick and draft at No. 5.

Flyers 'don't expect much movement'

The Philadelphia Flyers aren't expecting to make big waves this offseason.

"It's a little bit of a weird offseason for us," Flyers GM Daniel Briere told The Athletic. "We have a lot of dead money going into next year. Part of it is our fault. We did that to position ourselves better for the future. But it's kind of tied our hands this summer as far as free agency goes."

The dead money on the Flyers' cap next season includes a \$1.66 million buyout cap charge for Tony DeAngelo, \$3.57 million in retained salary on Kevin Hayes, \$6.25 million on LTIR for Ryan Ellis plus one final year of Cal Petersen at \$5 million.

So, yeah.

"I would say don't expect much movement from us, as far as free agency," Briere added. "But you know, we're always open to hockey trades if there's something that makes sense to help our team, both in the future but also in the short term if it fits our timeline."

According to league sources, the Flyers are among the multitude of teams who have inquired with Carolina on Martin Necas. But I'm not sure there's a real fit there considering the apple-to-apple type trade the Hurricanes would require to make that deal.

Meanwhile, those cap limitations make it unlikely the Flyers could try to bring Sean Walker back in free agency.

"Yeah, because of the cap, because of the guys we have to try and resign, it makes it tough," Briere said. "Obviously we think very highly of him.

"It hurt losing him down the stretch, there's no doubt about that. But where we're at — how we're positioned with our cap situation — it kind of



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makes it tough where we realize he's going to command probably more money than we have available this summer."

Signing Travis Konecny to an extension will be important. He's got one year left on his deal.

"One thing is, we're not going to negotiate through the media, and we agreed with his group that we wouldn't do that," Briere said. "The one thing I can tell you is that we love him. We love him as a player. He knows that. His agency knows that. He's an important part of our team.

"And we hope that we have Travis Konecny with the Flyers for a very long time. But we'll see what happens in the future with that."

And finally, is there any chance Matvei Michkov could leave Russia and play for the Flyers next season? There have been rumors and media reports out of Russia delivering mixed messages.

"We follow what's going on through the media mostly," Briere said. "There's some ups and downs there, back and forth, it seems. It just seems to change on a daily basis. We're hopeful. But at the same time, when we drafted him, we knew it would be three years.

"That's kind of what I keep in the back of my mind. He's going to be away for three years before he can come over. If things change, I'll be ecstatic and we'd be really excited to welcome him. But I'm not trying to get caught up in the excitement of it for now. If it happens, it happens. We don't have any news at this moment as far as how reliable the sources are that are popping over the internet."

### Leafs' priorities and Marnier

Toronto Maple Leafs GM Brad Treliving had a packed Tuesday, his first day at the combine. It was meeting after meeting after meeting — some with player agents, some with other GMs, and obviously some with draft hopefuls.

"You've been talking to teams since the season ended, so met a few of them here," Treliving told The Athletic on Tuesday. "And we've got several unrestricted and restricted free agents, so you're meeting with agents on them and seeing if there's a path to a deal. In some cases, the path is smoother than others.

"It's early in some of the processes. So you're meeting on that. And obviously the bulk of your time here is meeting with the kids for the combine."

Treliving reiterated he remains interested in re-signing pending UFAs Max Domi and Tyler Bertuzzi if possible.

"But it's got to work for them and it's got to work for us," he said. "We've got, certainly, some issues that we have to address on the roster. There's a pie and there's only so much to go around.

"We've got a few guys who are up. And part of this is getting better, too. It's not just being the same. You're trying to get better in the process, as well. So we'll see."

Mitch Marnier's future has been the most-talked-about subject in the Toronto market. He's got a year left on his deal and a full no-move clause. Treliving and Marnier's agent, Darren Ferris, as one would expect, met Tuesday.

"The thing I would say is, be very, very careful of what you read out there," Treliving said when asked about Marnier speculation. "Mitch is a hell of a player. He's going into the last year of his contract. We're not going to comment on any players. Any business that we conduct, we'll do that between Darren Ferris and us. We're not going to do play-by-play on it. We've got to look at every possible way for our team to be better.

"Mitch controls a lot of this whole thing (with the no-trade). If there's a way to make our team better, we're going to do it. But we're certainly not going to make a trade just so we can pound our chest and say, 'Look, we're different.'"

But as Treliving reiterated, they will explore any meaningful way to make the team better. That's his job as GM.

Reading between the lines, all options on Marnier remain on the table:

1. He stays in Toronto and plays out his contract next season.
2. The Leafs look to extend him eventually.

3. Toronto gets a trade offer it feels makes too much sense and brings it to Marnier's camp (and no team would trade for Marnier without an extension in place).

"We're not scared to be bold and do things," Treliving said. "But there's got to be things to do out there.

"So we'll see. But for me, we've got a really good player in Mitch Marnier. That's a good thing. We'll just keep plugging away on it."

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ESPN / NHL playoff buzz: What are the secrets to success for Oilers and Panthers? - ESPN

Emily Kaplan

Forget the distance -- this year's Stanley Cup Final is as electric as they come. Two fantastic teams hitting their stride when it matters most, with incredible stories to tell.

Here's a look inside how both teams got here and lessons on what makes them special.

When the Florida Panthers lost to the Vegas Golden Knights in Game 5 of the Stanley Cup Final last spring, their emotional leader, Matthew Tkachuk, went around the locker room and repeated three words to his teammates: "We'll be back."

The road to the 2023 Final was both emotionally and physically taxing for the Panthers, who sneaked into the playoffs as the last seed and then shocked everybody -- except themselves. Our broadcast crew will never forget our pregame chat last year with coach Paul Maurice ahead of Game 5 of the first round in Boston, with the Cats trailing the series 3-1. "We'll see you back here in Boston," he said calmly, before walking away.

Florida's list of players fighting through significant injuries last playoffs was as ugly as it gets. Tkachuk, who suffered a broken sternum in the finals, needed his brother, Brady, to help him get out of bed after a pregame nap before Game 4. Teammates helped him put pads on and tied his skates.

Sam Bennett had two separate injuries; Radko Gudas played through a high ankle sprain. Top defenseman Aaron Ekblad played with a broken foot since the first round -- plus two separate shoulder dislocations and a torn oblique. Ekblad and fellow defenseman Brandon Montour (torn labrum) missed the first month of the 2023-24 season recovering from offseason surgeries.

About two weeks after the season ended, a few players, including Carter Verhaeghe, rented ice in Florida. When GM Bill Zito returned from the NHL draft and saw the players skating, he was incredulous. "What are you guys doing?" he asked. They wanted to get back to work.

Several players, including captain Aleksander Barkov and leading scorer Sam Reinhart, returned to training camp in even better shape. Defenseman Dmitry Kulikov credited the team's conditioning for why they've been able to wear down teams in the third period. And, as Ekblad told me after eliminating the New York Rangers, they are far healthier this time around.

The Panthers are built mostly from trade acquisitions, free agents and waiver pickups. And each player Florida brought in was targeted for a reason: they're ultracompetitive, and have no problem playing Maurice's aggressive style that's constantly applying pressure.

Maurice built a clear identity of how this team should play -- it is relentless. Tkachuk told me the reason it works is because there is "total buy-in." I asked him after the Eastern Conference finals how hard it is to play in the Panthers' system. "It is pretty hard," he admitted, then let out a huge smile: "But we think it's pretty hard to play against."

Last year, Maurice said every round felt like an achievement because nobody expected them to be there. This postseason, he said the celebrations after every win and every round have been more muted. In



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fact, Maurice said the loudest postgame locker room moment so far was when Niko Mikkola awarded the game puck to Jonah Gadjovich, who rejoined the team after his wife gave birth to twins. Gadjovich hasn't played in one game these playoffs, but it's just another testament to how close this team is.

They know who they are, and most importantly, they now know what it takes to go all the way.

Oilers stars Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl haven't shied away from the pressures their team faces, especially in a highly scrutinized Canadian market. After also being eliminated by the Golden Knights last spring, they both declared: Cup or Bust in 2024.

And then, it was a horrific start to the season. They began 2-9-1, tied for last place in the league. That led management to fire coach Jay Woodcroft to try to get things going. Enter Kris Knoblauch, who has a calming demeanor. Knoblauch, who spent five years running the New York Rangers' minor league affiliate, is known for his communication style in empowering players. One of his former AHL players told me that when he was struggling, Knoblauch prepared a mixtape of his best highlights -- to remind him that he was a great player. Another example of Knoblauch's relationship skills: Rangers forward Jonny Brodzinski, who was Knoblauch's AHL captain, told me in December that his old coach texted him five times since taking the job, just to check in.

Knoblauch was also McDavid's junior coach. And even though McDavid is the best player in the world and could command preferential treatment, he never wants to be treated differently than anybody. I'm told that McDavid hated the narrative that he was behind the coaching change -- especially since McDavid's former agent, Jeff Jackson, took over as CEO of hockey operations for the Oilers last summer.

McDavid fought through an injury early in the season. And as Jackson told me in December, when the team began turning things around, it was McDavid's work ethic that led the way.

"Connor is our leader and our hardest-working player," Jackson said. "He's dogging on pucks, creating turnovers on the backcheck. He gives it every single night, and we take his lead. He is relentless."

That, perhaps, foreshadowed these playoffs. I'm told that McDavid is once again playing through something -- which perhaps explains why he barely wanted to shoot the puck in early rounds. He overcompensated with work ethic, and has looked more comfortable, and more his dazzling self, as these playoffs have continued.

The Oilers, too, have remained resilient. They overcame three series deficits against Vancouver, and trailed 2-1 in the series and 2-0 on the scoreboard in Game 4 of the Western Conference finals before completely shutting the Stars down.

Defensive structure is the biggest noticeable difference for Edmonton, as it enters the Cup Final allowing just 25.1 shots per game, third fewest among playoff teams. The Oilers also haven't given up a power-play goal in two of the three series they've played so far.

Hall of Famer Paul Coffey runs the defense and joined the bench staff during the early-season shake-up. Jackson told me it worked because Coffey had been around the organization (as a senior adviser) and already had a relationship with many of the defensemen, who trusted him and knew him. Jackson asked Coffey if he was willing to upend his life (he and his wife were living in Toronto) to join the team full time. It's a move that paved the way to this postseason run.

Coffey comes to the rink every day and says the same thing: "How are we going to get better today?"

With incremental improvements, the Oilers have peaked at exactly the right time.

In commissioner Gary Bettman's NHL, parity rules all. He wants all 32 teams to be treated equally, with each given a fair chance to win. Hence, the hard salary cap. However, a big topic surrounding the Stanley Cup Final is the perceived advantages teams have in states without an income tax, such as Florida.

Compare that to Edmonton -- or any of the seven Canadian cities with teams -- where provincial tax rates are significantly higher, and you realize not all teams are playing with the same set of financial rules. California and New York also have high tax rates.

Even though every team has the same amount to spend (\$83.5 million this season), the athlete's dollar goes much further in Sunrise, Florida -- or Vegas (last year's Cup winner), Dallas (Western Conference finalists in each of the past two seasons), Tampa (two Stanley Cups since 2020), Nashville or Seattle. The two Florida-based teams have appeared in the Stanley Cup Final in each of the past five seasons.

These figures don't factor in cost of living, which fluctuates across the league. Or the potential for endorsement deals, which are often more flush in Canadian markets. But consider these figures, courtesy of Cap Friendly: A \$1 million base salary in Florida has a net income of \$624,103 -- versus \$553,447 in Edmonton. It encourages players to take less money to play on teams like Florida, knowing they're still coming out ahead.

One potential solution to allow for flexibility would be to introduce a luxury tax, similar to what the NBA has. Teams have the ability to spend more than the cap, but are taxed -- and that money is allocated in revenue share to teams who aren't going over the threshold. This could help grow the league's financial health overall, and improve players' salaries, which have remained somewhat stagnant.

That potential change would need to be approved by the league's board of governors. I checked in with a few sources in the NHL league office and BOG, and came to this conclusion: There is virtually no appetite to change the salary cap system -- with very little interest from owners in introducing a luxury tax. I was told the issue has been raised on occasion, but never garnered much interest or support.

That's because the league sees way too many variables to factor in what makes certain markets attractive to certain players. What's more, we can cherry-pick examples of lesser-taxed teams being successful (as I did above for effect), but consider: Florida has been in the league for three decades and has never won the Stanley Cup. For years, it was considered one of the most dysfunctional franchises. Success isn't as much about manipulating the system as it is putting good systems in place in terms of strong leadership, roster management, drafting, support staff, etc.

I think even the league would agree the current rules are imperfect. But it's working just fine, and unlikely to change any time soon.

A more relevant story to explore during the playoffs is spending outside of the salary cap. There's no limit on how much a team can invest in staffing and resources. It's a race that's been going on behind the scenes for years. In the NHL, there's a widening gulf between the haves and have-nots in terms of what they are willing to spend to gain a competitive advantage.

Edmonton and Florida are both teams on the "haves" list -- though that's a new place for Florida to be. My understanding is that owner Vinnie Viola basically told Zito there's a blank check for anything that can help the team win (within reason, of course). That has allowed Florida to do what many higher-end teams have done for years, such as spending extra nights at a hotel after a game if it means giving the players more rest. That's a swing of tens of thousands of dollars, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars, every season.

The Panthers have a four-person goaltending excellence department; a reminder that there are no guidelines to how many coaches or front office members a team can employ. They promoted their team psychologist from part-time to full-time two years ago.

One of Zito's biggest recent hires was Chris McLellan as VP of sports performance. McLellan, an Australian, holds a PhD, was previously a professor and has worked in the National Rugby League. Zito told me that McLellan has no biases from being a hockey lifer -- he asks questions, and doesn't feel beholden to do things a certain way just because that's the way they've always been done. It has allowed the Panthers to try some creative things which they think have helped players immensely.

Edmonton owner Daryl Katz is equally generous. The Oilers have perhaps the nicest home locker room in the league, rivaled only by Detroit. Edmonton had been known for sometimes being stuck in old-school ways, but a series of recent hires progressed the team forward. Jackson is modernizing their analytics department, bringing in Michael Parkatti in September to oversee the group.

This week, Edmonton announced Kalle Larsson was joining as senior director of player development. Larsson spent 11 years with the USHL



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Dubuque Fighting Saints, and I'm told he had several opportunities to go to the NHL sooner but chose the Oilers.

Most notably, the Oilers brought in George Mumford --- a world-renowned mindfulness expert and sports psychologist, who worked with NBA legends Kobe Bryant and Michael Jordan -- as a consultant this year. Stuart Skinner was benched earlier in the playoffs. The goalie proved over the past three games of the Dallas series (.947 save percentage) he's someone the team can trust.

In the celebration on the ice after the win, Mumford hugged Skinner, saying: "My man."

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ESPN / Conn Smythe WATCH: Who leads for Stanley Cup playoffs MVP? - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

After three grueling and very entertaining rounds, the Florida Panthers or the Edmonton Oilers will raise the Stanley Cup as the NHL's champion.

The Conn Smythe Trophy field for playoff MVP offers a far greater number of potential winners.

We asked nearly two dozen potential voters and hockey media members who have covered the playoffs for their top three players for postseason MVP. Those ballots were compiled to create this ranking. We attempted to have an equal number of Eastern and Western conference media personnel in the survey.

Here's a look at where the Conn Smythe race stands ahead of Game 1 of the Stanley Cup Final on Saturday (8 p.m. ET, ABC/ESPN+). Keep in mind that the winner is determined for his entire body of postseason work and not just what happens in this final round.

10. Stuart Skinner

G, Edmonton Oilers

Everyone likes a comeback story. Skinner had a save percentage under .900 in six of his first eight playoff games. That's when coach Kris Knoblauch benched his starting goalie, replacing him with Calvin Pickard in Games 4 and 5 against the Vancouver Canucks. Skinner returned to win Games 6 and 7. In his past eight playoff games, Skinner is 6-2 with a 1.91 goals-against average and a .919 save percentage. Knoblauch praised him as the difference-maker in Edmonton's important Game 5 win at Dallas.

In full disclosure, Skinner didn't receive a top-three vote from our panelists, but a few mentioned he was at least on their radars.

9. Carter Verhaeghe

F, Florida Panthers

One of the Panthers' most clutch scorers, Verhaeghe had three goals and three assists against the New York Rangers in the conference finals -- although he had only one goal in the final three games of the series. He leads Florida with nine goals and is tied for second in points with 17.

His only vote was a third-place one, but you can never count out a player who has five overtime goals and nine winners in his past 62 playoff games to make another splash.

8. Zach Hyman

F, Edmonton Oilers

At first glance, it's hard to believe that a player who leads the Stanley Cup playoffs with 14 goals could muster just one third-place vote on a ballot. But when you consider how many of those goals were created by players ahead of Hyman on this list, that starts to make more sense.

One bit of history that Hyman is chasing in the playoffs: His combined 68 goals between the regular season (where he scored a career-high 54

times) and the playoffs is tied for the fourth most by a left wing in NHL history. He's within reach of Luc Robitaille's 1992-93 record of 72 goals.

7. Matthew Tkachuk

F, Florida Panthers

With 19 points in 17 games, Tkachuk is the leading scorer on the Panthers through three rounds. He doesn't have the spotlight moments like he did last postseason, but it's not exactly easy to live up to heroics like that Game 5 overtime goal in Boston or his three winners in the conference finals against Carolina in 2023. Tkachuk appeared in third place on one ballot. That could change in a hurry if he puts his stamp on the Stanley Cup Final.

Keep two things in mind here: Tkachuk broke his sternum in Game 3 against Vegas last season and feels he has unfinished business, and he was public enemy No. 1 in Edmonton while a member of the Calgary Flames. Tkachuk has 26 points in 32 career games vs. the Oilers.

play

1:08

Panthers GM tells McAfee how much Tkachuk means to the Panthers

Panthers general manager Bill Zito explains why Matthew Tkachuk has been so important to the team's success.

6. Evan Bouchard

D, Edmonton Oilers

It's been a star-making performance for the Oilers defenseman. He has 27 points in 18 games, including six goals and 21 assists. The majority of those points (15) have come at even strength. He's averaging 24:33 in ice time per game, tops on the Oilers.

He has a couple of records in sight in the final. He trails Edmonton assistant coach Paul Coffey (25 in 1985) for the most assists in a single postseason by a defenseman, which would also give Bouchard the most ever for an Oilers defenseman. Bouchard was third in three ballots and second on one of them, by a voter who had him right behind Connor McDavid.

Keep in mind that defensemen have won the Conn Smythe twice in the past four seasons.

5. Gustav Forsling

D, Florida Panthers

There's a 16-point difference between Bouchard and Forsling, and yet it's the Panthers defenseman who slots into the top 5 for the Conn Smythe.

Forsling appeared on one more ballot than Bouchard did, but his placement in the ranking is thanks to one voter putting Forsling atop their ballot -- yes, ahead of McDavid.

The Gus supporters will tell you he's been a rock on defense for the Panthers, skating 23:18 per game. Florida has a goals-against per 60 minutes of 1.87 at 5-on-5 with Forsling on the ice.

He has had some MVP moments, too: His winning goal in Game 6 at Boston to close out that series, and his goal to tie Game 5 against the Rangers before Florida won that critical game. Will enough voters get on the Gus Bus in the Final to make him a serious MVP contender?

4. Leon Draisaitl

F, Edmonton Oilers

Draisaitl led the Conn Smythe Watch ahead of the conference finals, having led the Oilers with 24 points and getting kudos for playing a 200-foot game. His scoring quieted down a bit against the Dallas Stars (two goals, two assists in six games), which in turn turned down the volume on his candidacy. But Draisaitl was still the first choice on one ballot and second on three others.

He's three points in back of McDavid for the playoff scoring lead -- and ready to carry the load offensively if the Panthers figure out a way to slow McDavid down.

Draisaitl has been focused on the Cup since the last postseason ended.



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"There were a lot of painful years that we've gone through and lots of learning along the way," Draisaitl said after eliminating Dallas. "We have bigger dreams and goals right now."

3. Sergei Bobrovsky

G, Florida Panthers

If you want to know how good "Playoff Bob" has been, just ask his close friend Artemi Panarin.

The Rangers star pumped 16 pucks on Bobrovsky in the conference finals. The Panthers goalie stopped all but one. "He's my friend, but I was a better friend than him this series," Panarin joked Tuesday. "I told him 'good luck.' I wish he wins [the Cup]. He deserves it."

Bobrovsky has a .908 save percentage and a 2.20 goals-against average in 17 games. He has gotten better as the playoffs have progressed, adjusting from last postseason's high shot volume to having to remain locked in behind a shot-suppressing Panthers defense.

He's been there when they've needed him, which is the very definition of Playoff Bob.

2. Aleksander Barkov

F, Florida Panthers

Barkov appeared first on five ballots as the clear No. 1 choice for the Conn Smythe among Panthers players. He has 17 points in 17 games, including six goals. But, as usual, it's not just about the offensive output for the winner of the 2023-24 Selke Trophy. Barkov shut down Rangers center Mika Zibanejad in the conference finals. He dominated anyone the Bruins matched against him in the second round.

It could be Barkov vs. McDavid for good portions of the Stanley Cup Final. If Florida wins and McDavid doesn't run wild, it could be Barkov's MVP award to lose. Clearly, the voters are ready to support him, with him having appeared on 48% of our ballots in a crowded field.

But there's another player who appeared on 100% of our ballots.

1. Connor McDavid

F, Edmonton Oilers

Sometimes, all it takes is one moment to crystalize an MVP campaign. When McDavid sliced through the Stars defense -- apparently disconnecting Miro Heiskanen's video game controller in the process -- to open the scoring in Game 6 of the conference finals, the highlight immediately entered the pantheon of his greatest goals.

As Draisaitl said: "There's one player in the world that can make things like that happen."

But it was also an example of McDavid willing his team to victory, as he assisted on Hyman's power-play goal to build a 2-0 lead at home in an elimination game.

McDavid has points in 14 of 18 games this postseason for the Oilers. He's within range of Wayne Gretzky's NHL record for most assists in a single postseason: McDavid has 26 helpers, and Gretzky holds the record with 31 assists in 1988.

While all of this might make it seem as if McDavid is an inevitable MVP, please note that despite appearing on all of the ballots, he was first on only 38% of them. That means the door is ajar for his teammates if the Oilers win.

And if they don't, and McDavid still has the series of his life, please note there hasn't been a player who has won the Conn Smythe in a losing effort since Anaheim goalie Jean-Sebastien Giguere in 2003. It has happened only five times since 1965.

"There's no J-S Giguere this year," one voter said, "so it totally depends on who wins the Cup."

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1314494 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Why Oilers have Canucks partially to thank for Stanley Cup Final berth

Mark Spector

EDMONTON — The Vancouver Canucks may never have won a Stanley Cup, but in 2024 they could just be a surrogate parent to one.

As the Edmonton Oilers pack their bags for the flight to Florida on Thursday, every one of them will acknowledge the fact that a 2-9-1 start to their season was the first ingredient in a recipe that has taken them this far.

Of course, that start began with an 8-1 opening-night loss in Vancouver. It was a shellacking so thorough, that when the cameras and microphones arrived in Edmonton's dressing room post-game, the only word defenceman Brett Kulak could find to describe it was, "S-----."

"There are a lot of things wrong with what we just saw out there," said then-head coach Jay Woodcroft, who would last another month at the helm. "You saw it. Our players saw it. The coaches saw it. Our managers saw it. Not good enough.

"We laid an egg."

That's OK. They'd get the Canucks three nights later, for sure.

Right ... ?

Well, that home opener ended in a 4-3 loss to Casey DeSmith and the Canucks, and the Oilers were well on their way to the worst opening 12 games of any National Hockey League team ever to find itself in a Stanley Cup Final.

"You go into the year with the expectation that you're one of the best teams in the league and you're going to go to the Stanley Cup Final," said Oilers winger Zach Hyman. "Then, all of a sudden, you're 12 games into the season, you're second-last in the league and it's like, 'What happened? What's going on?'"

"To be able to battle back from that spot, you build character. You build strength mentally, to be able to handle situations later in the year — whether you think at the time it will or not. It does.

"This year has felt like 10 years, to be honest."

Thanks, Vancouver.

It's one thing to trip and fall, then right yourself and go on your way. But when you're falling flat on your face from as high a height as Edmonton did, it leaves a mark.

Right around that time, this clip caught on a Sportsnet broadcast during yet another ugly loss became a bit of a theme for what the Oilers were going through.

"(That start) has a lot to do with why we're here right now," said Oilers defenceman Mattias Ekholm, who took us back to the 2023 trade deadline when he arrived in Edmonton from Nashville. "We went on a run to finish the regular season and we didn't really hit any adversity. When we hit adversity in the playoffs, it was like, 'Oh, what's this? We haven't seen this for months.'"

"This year, I truly feel like being down in the trenches — to hit rock bottom — you learn a lot about your teammates. You learn a lot about yourself and your team, lessons we've been able to apply.

"We've done a really good job at not being fragile in playoff series'," Ekholm surmised. "We had an emotional, tough loss in Game 1 against Vancouver, but we didn't let that linger. Those early lessons in the year help you with that."

The Canucks steeled these Oilers, who were down 3-2 and forced by Vancouver to discover their best selves in Games 6 and 7. That Edmonton won Game 6 by a 5-1 score, and took a 3-0 lead into the final 10 minutes of Game 7 is testament to the fact they found its A game, and won five of the last six periods of that series to vanquish the pesky Canucks.

"Playing Vancouver in the second round, with all that hype, all that pressure — all the stuff going on, whether it was here or in Vancouver," said Ekholm. "Winning a series like that calms everything down. That is pretty much as intense as it can get.



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"I'm sure it's going to get even more intense in the Final ... but I do think we've built a calmness after that (Canucks series)."

The way Edmonton had to play to beat the Canucks translated to a Dallas series where, just like everyone is picking Florida to win this Final, very few in the hockey world thought the Oilers could conquer the deep and talented Stars.

"Everyone was talking about how (the Stars) had the better goaltending and they have the better depth," Hyman said. "Well, the reason we won is because we had the better goaltending in the series, and we had the better depth.

"I think people underestimate the guys outside of the guys who everybody thinks are the superstars."

Because two guys can't win anything alone, and it takes a series like that Canucks series — where Connor McDavid went pointless in three of seven games, including Game 7 — to prove it to everyone outside the Oilers dressing room.

And perhaps, everyone inside it as well.

"Every playoff series you play, you gain experience," said Hyman. "And then you're able to play in moments like (Game 6 vs. Dallas), when we're getting absolutely shelled, and it's 2-1 with 10 minutes left.

"Maybe another year we crack and they score. But not this year.

"These are the games that we hadn't win won in the past."

Thanks, Vancouver.

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Sportsnet.ca / By The Numbers: A look at the stats behind Oilers-Panthers Cup Final

Emily Sadler

The Edmonton Oilers and Florida Panthers are all set to square off starting Saturday with the Stanley Cup on the line.

From Cup droughts and outstanding stats to spectacular special teams and players on pace for history, here's a by-the-numbers look at this Stanley Cup Final and the storylines that are about to play out in this best-of-seven series.

1.81: Stuart Skinner's season — and playoff run — has been anything but smooth, but he really hit his stride as the Oilers closed out the Canucks and defeated the Stars. He's playing his best hockey right now, his 1.81 goals-against average and .920 save percentage over the past eight games two of the biggest reasons the Oilers emerged as the best team in the Western Conference.

2.20: Sergei Bobrovsky's path to the Cup Final has seen him suit up opposite three of the best goalies in the league in Andrei Vasilevskiy, Jeremy Swayman, and Igor Shesterkin and come out on top. His 2.20 goals-against average through the post-season marks his best playoff run yet, and ranks him higher in the category than every goalie with double-digit starts this spring not named Swayman.

2-9-1: The Oilers' dismal record to open the season had the team in need of a spark. Despite an overall 76-32-12 record under Jay Woodcroft, the club fired the head coach in early November and hired Kris Knoblauch, who's overseen the team's resurgence and run to (and through!) the playoffs, including an eight-game win streak early on in his tenure to get the team back on track.

3: This is Florida's third trip to the Stanley Cup Final, and second consecutive appearance after losing to Vegas in Game 5 of the Cup Final last year. The franchise's first-ever playoff run, in just their third year of existence, took them all the way to the 1996 Final, where they were swept by the Colorado Avalanche. Edmonton has previously been in seven Stanley Cup Finals.

3: This matchup features three first-overall draft picks (Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, 2011; Aaron Ekblad, 2014; Connor McDavid, 2015).

4: The top of the class of 2014 is well-represented in this Cup Final, with the first four picks of that year's draft — Aaron Ekblad, Sam Reinhart, Leon Draisaitl, and Sam Bennett — all hitting the ice.

4-0-3: In seven visits to Edmonton's Rogers Place, the Panthers have never lost in regulation, posting a 4-0-3 record.

5: The past five Stanley Cup Finals have all featured a team from the Sunshine State — Tampa Bay won back-to-back Cups in 2020 and 2021 before falling in their attempt for a third against Colorado in 2022, while the Panthers are now back in the Final for the second straight season after losing to Vegas last June.

5: The Oilers have won five Stanley Cups through their franchise's history, with all five coming in a seven-year span from 1984 to 1990. That ties them with the Pittsburgh Penguins for fifth-most Cup wins all-time. Another trophy this year would see them jump up to a three-team tie with the Boston Bruins and Chicago Blackhawks.

5: When Corey Perry suits up for the Oilers, it'll mark the fifth different team he's represented in a Cup Final — that's a league record. Since winning a championship with the Anaheim Ducks in 2007, he's appeared in the Final with Dallas, Montreal, and Tampa Bay and lost each time.

8: There's something about that mid-season coaching change that can really jump-start a team in trouble:

10-4: Florida and Edmonton met twice in the regular season this year, with the Panthers winning both by a combined score of 10-4.

11: Of the 32 teams in the NHL, 11 have never won the Stanley Cup — including Florida. Victory for the Panthers would see the NHL crown a first-time champ for the second straight season. The last time that happened was in 2019, when the Blues won their first Cup a year after Washington finally got their own.

13: Of all the players suiting up in the Cup Final, Oilers forward Ryan Nugent-Hopkins is the longest-tenured member of either team, with 13 years in Oilers orange since he was drafted first overall in 2011. Aleksander Barkov, drafted second overall in 2013, is the longest-tenured Panther. Both have seen some lean years before finally making it to the height of the hockey world.

14: Oilers winger Zach Hyman leads his peers in playoff goals this spring, and it isn't particularly close. His 14 markers through 18 games are four more than second-place Wyatt Johnston of the Stars and Oilers teammate Leon Draisaitl.

15: If the Panthers are victorious in claiming the Cup, they'll be the first team in 15 years to win it all after losing in the Final the year before. The last team to do that was the 2009 Pittsburgh Penguins, who defeated the Detroit Red Wings in seven games after losing to the same foes in six in the 2008 Final.

16: The Oilers and Panthers both have a plus-16 goal differential this post-season.

16: Through three rounds, Edmonton has had 16 different goal-scorers. The Panthers have 14.

18: It's been 18 years since Edmonton last made the Stanley Cup Final, a series that went all the way to Game 7 and ended in heartbreak against the Carolina Hurricanes.

19: There's no shortage of first-round talent in this matchup, with a total of 19 first-round picks suiting up in this Cup Final. While Florida has 10 first-rounders on its roster, only two have been with the Panthers from the start. Of Edmonton's nine first-rounders, six were actually Oilers picks.

19: Matthew Tkachuk leads Florida in playoff points, with 19. It's his second straight year leading his team to the Cup Final.

21: All 21 skaters who've suited up for the Oilers this post-season have registered at least one point. All but two Panthers have done the same.

23: The Oilers know how to start strong. They lead all playoff teams in first-period goals, with 23, and are 10-4 when they score first this spring. They're also 5-3 when leading after the first frame. They'll need to finish strong against the Panthers, though, because...



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24: Florida's ability to surge ahead from behind is underscored by their league-leading 24 third-period goals this spring to close out games. They're 5-3 when trailing first, and 4-2 when trailing after the first period.

27: If there were any questions about Evan Bouchard's ability to reach elite 1D status, he's more than answered them this spring. Bouchard's playmaking from the blue line has driven much of Edmonton's post-season success. He ranks third in playoff points league-wide (27) and leads all rearguards in goals (six), assists (21), and points by a wide margin.

31: Connor McDavid leads the league in playoff points this spring with 31 — that's a 1.72 points-per-game pace through 18 matchups. He leads everyone in assists, too, with 26.

37.3: Edmonton's special teams have been sensational this spring, tops in both power play (37.3 per cent success rate) and penalty kill.

93.9: The Oilers' penalty kill has been stifling this post-season, operating at a 93.9 per cent success rate and going nearly an entire month without allowing a PP goal. Florida boasts the second best PK of the playoffs, at 88.2 per cent.

739: As bruised up as many of the Panthers must be, you should see the other guys. Florida's physicality has been on full display this spring, with the team racking up a whopping (and league-leading) 739 hits in the playoffs.

1993: The Montreal Canadiens' 1993 championship marks the last time a Canadian team hoisted the Stanley Cup. A victory for Edmonton would erase a 31-year national drought. Montreal is also the most recent Canadian club to make the Cup Final — they sprinted all the way to the final series in 2021.

4,089: Travel is poised to play a big role in this Cup Final, with 4,089 kilometres separating Florida and Edmonton by air — that's the longest distance between championship opponents the league's ever had.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks prioritize special teams with coaching staff changes

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER – Promoting skills coach Yogi Svejkovsky to take the place of senior assistant Mike Yeo, the Vancouver Canucks are replacing a coach with two decades of National Hockey League bench experience with one who has been on staff for two years.

Svejkovsky, 47, is actually a good hire. He is a talented, innovative coach who has earned the trust of Canuck players and head coach Rick Tocchet. And in terms of actual coaching chops, the former minor-hockey director and youth academy coach has more years instructing skaters than anyone else on Tocchet's staff.

But Yeo, who turned down the Canucks' offer of a one-year extension and signed a longer deal closer to home to join Travis Green's staff with the Ottawa Senators, is a two-time NHL head coach who has worked in professional hockey since his minor-league playing career ended 24 years ago.

Tocchet also confirmed in a Zoom call on Wednesday that Hall-of-Fame players Henrik and Daniel Sedin, part of the Canucks' player-development staff, will take increased coaching roles next season. One or the other will be on road trips, Tocchet said, and the Sedins will be more involved in Vancouver's power play.

Tocchet, of course, is the newly-minted NHL coach-of-the-year after guiding the Canucks to a 50-win, 109-point regular season and the Stanley Cup quarterfinals, where Vancouver lost two weeks ago in Game 7 to the Edmonton Oilers. Tocchet also appeared to hit home runs when he insisted upon his arrival in Vancouver 17 months ago that Adam Foote and Sergei Gonchar be part of his staff.

Tocchet's contract runs for two more seasons, although 2025-26 is a team option.

What his talented and respected staff lacks is much NHL coaching experience. Yeo's departure follows by one summer the dismissal of assistant coach Jason King. So in just over a year, the Canucks have lost their penalty-kill coach (Yeo) and power-play coach (King).

"Mike Yeo was a great asset for me," Tocchet told reporters after the Canucks announced the coaching changes Wednesday morning. "He wanted a little bit more security, wanted to be a little bit closer to home. I would be lying (if I denied) he's a big loss. I'm happy for him that he's hooked on with Greeny's team. So, you know, it's bittersweet. But I'm also happy for him."

On his reconfigured staff, Tocchet said: "The twins, I mean, they're getting another year of experience as... coaches. Sergei, he's been a coach here (in the NHL) for six, seven years. I think Footy has come leaps and bounds. I know it's only really his second year technically, but the way he handled this year... he's a veteran. He's been a captain. Obviously, (goaltending coach) Ian Clark is huge on our staff. Yogi is a guy that is going to bring enthusiasm to our staff. So I'm not concerned about the experience. It's up to me to make us gel together."

Tocchet said the team will hire another skills coach who will be available to work with injured players in Vancouver when the Canucks are on road trips next season.

He also told Sportsnet that he had contact with several "veteran" NHL coaches but hockey operations president Jim Rutherford believes in promoting from within the organization and that everyone involved agreed Svejkovsky was the best candidate to replace Yeo.

"After exploring all of our options, it became clear very quickly that the best candidate was already in our organization," general manager Patrik Allvin said in a press release. "The ability to promote from within will help us in the transition, as Yogi has a great understanding of our systems and the way we want to play. Including the Sedins more in our day-to-day coaching duties will be hugely beneficial to our group both on and off the ice."

Canuck special teams will be an area of focus next season.

Vancouver's penalty-killing climbed to 17th this season from last in the league the previous year and needs to continue that trend.

The power play finished tied for 10th in the regular season. But after peaking at 33.3 per cent efficiency on Nov. 16, it was only 20th in the NHL the rest of the season. It went 5-for-36 (13.9 per cent) in the playoffs and was 0-for-14 as the Canucks lost three of their final four games against the Oilers.

In Vancouver's 3-2 loss in Game 7, the power play failed to generate a shot on goal during a four-minute advantage late in the first period.

Tocchet has taken ownership for the power play after trying a coaching-by-committee approach in the wake of King's departure.

It sounded Wednesday like there will be another committee next season, but with Svejkovsky playing a key role alongside the Sedins.

"To me, it really comes (down to) . . . being more connected," Tocchet said of the power play. "I don't really believe it's about plays. I think we have to teach it a little different way. I think we're going to have to be a little bit more strict on discipline — retrievals, more of a downhill approach, being willing to play in a different spot at times. I think these are things that we've got to improve on. It's on me to make these guys connected. I think adding Yogi, who's very enthusiastic and has a lot of great ideas, with the twins and, obviously, with Sergei's knowledge helping me run (the power play) in Pittsburgh, I think we have a lot of hands-on deck."

Tocchet said he was eyeing a greater role for Svejkovsky even before Yeo left.

"I watch the players around him," he said. "Like, they go by my office and they're looking, and I'm: 'Do you need me?' And they're like, 'No, we don't need you, we're looking for Yogi.' So that impresses me. They've got his trust."



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With Edmonton now in the Final, having a chance to bring the Stanley Cup back to Canada for the first time since 1993, Tocchet has had a hard time watching the playoffs since the Canucks were eliminated.

"I have a lot of mixed emotions," Tocchet said. "You play the what-if game. Could I have done something different? Should I have skated (the team) maybe one of those days we didn't? I tried to watch the last two games. . . and just tried to enjoy the game. It's hard, I'll be honest with you. I wish we had a better first period (in Game 7) and maybe things would have been different. But that's the way it works."

"I've got to give Edmonton a lot of credit. They had a hard series against us, I thought. And they went into Dallas and really played very well (to win the Western Conference Final in six games). I heard some of their players say they learned a lot from our series. Hopefully our players. . . it motivates them even harder. We know it's going to get harder and harder. I know it's going to be harder, and I have to come up with something different (to prepare them). But to answer your question, I get mixed emotions watching the series. You're always like, what if we did this or what if we did that? You've got to be careful because it can torment your mind."

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Sportsnet.ca / How aggressive do Maple Leafs want to push Mitch Marner trade?

Luke Fox

TORONTO — It's not so much what Brad Treliving said about Mitch Marner's future with the Toronto Maple Leafs this week.

It's what he didn't say.

Let's flash back to June 2023, when Treliving took his post as general manager of this talent-rich, results-poor outfit.

Cornerstones Auston Matthews and William Nylander were on the verge of extension eligibility, the way Marner is now.

The bullish tone surrounding those star forwards' futures was markedly different than the tempo around No. 16.

Treliving made no bones that summer "priority No. 1" was locking up Matthews. Similar assurances were made about Nylander. Even as the trickier negotiation stretched deep into the regular season, management may have wavered from its price but never its public messaging: We want to re-sign the player. The player wants to re-sign with us. We'll keep chipping away until pen meets paper.

Marner's ultimate-hammer control in his contract year is the same as Matthews' (full no-movement clause). And (so far) his willingness to bet on himself and skate into training camp — and beyond — without an extension in place aligns with Nylander's approach.

What is strikingly different, and where things could get interesting, is the club's position.

"Mitch controls a lot of this whole thing," Treliving told The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun Tuesday, on the heels of a meeting with Marner's agent, Darren Ferris, at the Buffalo combine.

"If there's a way to make our team better, we're going to do it. But we're certainly not going to make a trade just so we can pound our chest and say, 'Look, we're different.'"

Treliving also said: "Mitch is a hell of a player. He's going into the last year of his contract. We're not going to comment on any players. Any business that we conduct, we'll do that between Darren Ferris and us. We're not going to do play-by-play on it. We've got to look at every possible way for our team to be better."

Sure, these are boilerplate hockey-executive quotes. (The job is always to find ways to improve the team, is it not?)

But not once since the Maple Leafs' first-round exit — their seventh led by Marner & Co. in eight years — has Treliving said anything along the lines of wanting to prioritize an extension for one of the sport's most dazzling winger or envisioning Marner a Maple Leaf long term.

"We're not scared to be bold and do things," Treliving said. "But there's got to be things to do out there."

"So, we'll see. But for me, we've got a really good player in Mitch Marner. That's a good thing. We'll just keep plugging away on it."

One needn't squint too hard at the tea leaves to read that Treliving is open to change and ready for business.

Yet the GM has minimal leverage if the organization has already decided that paying three forwards with so little post-season success — great as they are — roughly \$36.5 million annually is the proper financial recipe for a Stanley Cup contender. (That figure is based on captain John Tavares coming off the books in 2025-26 and Marner accepting a little more money than Nylander.)

And so, as Treliving explores reasonable rates to retain some of his own desirable UFAs, such as Max Domi and Tyler Bertuzzi, weighs the value of raises for Toronto's restricted free agents and preps for the looming draft and free agency, the elephant in the room awaits.

Marner is shielded by a no-move negotiated in good faith and has no reason to rush. Further, he has already proven once — as Ferris has multiple times, and as is their right — a willingness to press management with the shrinkage of time.

On July 1, Marner will cash a juicy \$7.25-million signing bonus from his team of employ. A scant \$775,000 in base salary will remain owing over the course of the coming season.

That should make Marner, a rare talent who could switch sweaters in his prime, even more attractive to potential suitors. Because, hey, it's never a bad idea to save your owner money.

Just spit-balling here: Does an opportunistic competing front office get ahead of this situation by proposing a good deal to the Maple Leafs and Marner's camp, instead of waiting for them to make the first move?

While some have drawn a comparable here to Treliving's bold but necessary trade of Matthew Tkachuk out of Calgary, a delicate blockbuster that yielded the Flames a reasonable return and didn't take place until July 22, 2022, the parallel is imperfect.

In Tkachuk's case, the player wanted out.

We don't know how Marner truly wants this all to shake out. Publicly, he's always reinforced his boyhood loyalty to the blue and white. And once he answers a round of contract questions at camp, the story would likely drift into the background until fresh news arrives.

The Maple Leafs have jammed themselves into a corner.

They can a) give Marner another raise, fork over tens more millions and stubbornly keep betting on a program that has proven inadequate in clutch time.

That's the most unlikely scenario this summer, as a Marner extension would go over about as well as surprise Bank of Canada interest rate hike.

They can b) run the core all back in October, keep a "hell of a player" for one more year and cross their fingers that ring-bearing coach Craig Berube and whatever other off-season tweaks they make are enough to get them over hump.

You could talk yourself into the value of a 99-point penalty killer. But the risk here is twofold: Marner could get injured in-season, which degrades any trade value and/or his effectiveness to help Toronto in the near term. Further, letting such a valuable piece leave as an "own rental" is horrendous asset management.

Or c), Treliving can lean into his only lever to force a trade. Be it through hard public negotiations, leaked info to insiders, or some extreme measure like chopping Marner's power-play minutes or offensive opportunities in his strike-it-rich campaign, the Maple Leafs theoretically could attempt to flip more heat onto the player instead of themselves.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Thing is, that's not Treliving's style. He loathes airing dirty laundry or, as he reminded Tuesday, giving a "play-by-play" on the state of negotiations. He's an approachable peacemaker by nature, a seeker of solutions.

That would be bold, indeed. A sharp heel turn that would inject an element of internal discomfort foreign to Leafs stars.

Unless Marnier changes his mind, however, it's difficult to envision an easy one to this situation.

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Sportsnet.ca / Tkachuk trade rumours will only intensify if Senators can't get it right next year

Wayne Scanlan

OTTAWA -- You'd do well to recall the old saying that "idle hands are the devil's workshop."

And who has more time on their hands than the fans of teams that are not Edmonton or Florida right about now?

We say this as a runup to the rumours that have been circulating about Ottawa Senators captain Brady Tkachuk being on the trade market. The Sens haven't played a game for nearly two months, and haven't played a playoff game in seven years.

So, if you are outside of the Ottawa market and want to stir up a little road dust, why not start or feed a rumour about the Senators captain being up for grabs?

The mill needs grist. Podcasts have air time to fill, and can't just talk about Connor McDavid all day (although the Oilers captain has earned the privilege).

Columnists have thumb-suckers to write.

What armchair GM wouldn't find a spot for Tkachuk in an off-season lineup, from Toronto to Jersey to the west coast of Los Angeles?

Poor Senators GM Steve Staios. He can't kill this chatter with a sledge hammer. In a chat with Pierre LeBrun of The Athletic, Staios used the term "complete B.S." to describe the trade rumours.

"We are building this team around Brady," Staios said. "His leadership and unique skill set are rare. There is absolutely no validity to it."

Certainly not. At least from where Staios sits.

That didn't stop a New Jersey Devils podcast from airing a piece titled "Brady Tkachuk trade rumours won't go away!"

Or prevent Bleacher Report from posting "Five dream trade landing spots for Senators captain Brady Tkachuk."

Remarkably, Florida wasn't one of the cited trade destinations for Brady, the Panthers being the home of his brother Matthew, thriving in all these playoff games under the brightest of lights.

Of course, the trade chatter is endlessly annoying for Senators fans who want nothing more than for their team to be a winner, with No. 7 Tkachuk as the driving force.

But they also have more than enough awareness to understand that it is this long and agonizing push to be a playoff contender that has fuelled the Tkachuk rumours.

Tkachuk will turn 25 in September. Still young, but hockey careers pass quickly and he is beyond desperate to be in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

He has spent six full seasons in Ottawa, played 440 NHL games – nearly halfway to 1,000 games! – and he has yet to have a sniff of the post-season.

This is why an analyst like Ryan Whitney would toss out a nugget like he did in February, that Tkachuk could be moved at the trade deadline.

Preposterous, right?

Sure. From the viewpoint of anyone buying Senators tickets or employed by the organization.

But an ex-player like Whitney knows what drives a competitor like Tkachuk. The young man wants to win. He is sick of the losing.

And he's not alone. Did you note the facial expression of Claude Giroux late in the season, watching another year go by without a shot at the Stanley Cup?

When reporters gathered around and told Giroux we had voted him as Ottawa's Masterton Trophy nominee, it was all he could do to put on a brave face. That's how crushed he was at the grim reality of missing the playoffs again, as he had in his first season with the Sens the year before.

Giroux is 36 and doesn't have the luxury of time afforded to the 24-year-old captain.

But don't underestimate the fiery concoction that is comprised of A) Tkachuk's desire to win and B) His frustration with this team's progress.

Of course there is nothing imminent as far as moving Tkachuk or him demanding a trade.

Only a fool would be complacent, though.

I give it a year. No more.

If the Senators are not a playoff team in the spring of 2025, would you blame Tkachuk for wanting to move to a contender? Oh, how he must be living vicariously through his brother's experience into a Stanley Cup Final for a second straight season.

You know Tkachuk will do his part to lead the Senators where they need to go. He is coming off a season in which he scored a career-high 37 goals, with as many assists – for 74 points in 81 games played.

I would be shocked if he doesn't score 40 or more next season, on a contract that pays him a team-friendly \$8.2 million (AAV) through the 2027-28 season. Tkachuk was the fourth-overall pick in the 2018 NHL Draft.

He carries this club with his physical play and has to be watching the playoffs and salivating at the prospect of wreaking havoc in the four-round dance that is the prelude to the Cup.

Tkachuk can't do it alone, though. Nor with just Jake Sanderson, Tim Stützle and a few others.

It will take a revamped group, with better goaltending than the Senators had last season.

This Tkachuk trade talk may be "B.S." as Staios says, but it is another pressure point for management as it tries to take a massive step forward from a difficult first season for Staios and his boss, new Senators owner Michael Andlauer.

The Sens have to get it right this summer. Priorities include:

- Adding a big piece on the blueline in the form of a right-shot defenceman who can play in the top four.
- Bolstering the goaltending position.
- Bringing in veteran help for the bottom-six forward group.

When Whitney tossed out that stink bomb about a potential Tkachuk trade at the March deadline, Staios reacted then, as well.

He said at the time, as now, that the Sens are building around Tkachuk and his leadership.

"He means everything to the organization," Staios said. "And he brings it every night along with our core group of players.

"It's a matter of time and a matter of nurturing this group."

Time is running out. Tkachuk and the core need to be part of a thriving team next season or things could spiral in a lot of different directions very quickly.

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# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 6, 2024

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Sportsnet.ca / Evaluating what everyone in the 'trade Marner' debate might want

Justin Bourne

With all the technological advancements hockey has welcomed, from AI to increased data analysis and beyond, you can be forgiven for forgetting that the NHL is still a fundamentally human endeavour. It's a team sport, but it's still full of individuals with individual motivations striving to meet their individual goals first, and that extends beyond the players. The assistant equipment manager wants to be the head guy one day, same as the healthy scratch wants a crack at the first line.

It's with that in mind that I wanted to talk about the Mitchell Marner quagmire, which has been so heavily covered over the past few weeks. We all know who the major players are in the direction-altering decision the Leafs face here, and the individual motivations of those people are going to determine how this plays out. Yes, it's Marner himself, but it's also Brendan Shanahan, Brad Treliving, and now Craig Berube and Keith Pelley, too. We'll keep it focused on those names, even though there's obviously more, such as Marner's agent, Darren Ferris, and the cottage industry of locals around the player.

So, let's evaluate what the motivations of the five main names above might be, and at the end, take some guesses about what it all means for how this will shake out.

First up, the most important name of the bunch, the man himself, Mitch Marner.

What would Mitch Marner want?

The best case scenario for Marner is, unequivocally, that he stays in Toronto and wins a Stanley Cup as the hometown hero who persevered through the hard times when everybody said he couldn't do it.

By staying and chasing that goal, any outcome would suit him beautifully. He either succeeds and is a lifelong legend in Toronto (and gets paid to stay), or he fails and is walked right to UFA, where he'd handpick a new team in the prime of his career while getting a massive contract.

The only way it would make sense to do anything other than chase this scenario is if he gets to go exactly where he would've chosen anyway immediately, in a trade and with the extension he wants. That way he wouldn't have to endure a hellish year under the microscope in Toronto and get his "vindication tour" started a skosh earlier.

But hard as it might be, make no mistake: the motto in Team Marner's head is "stay and play and go UFA."

Up next:

What would Brendan Shanahan want?

Keeping Marner puts the crosshairs squarely on Shanahan, which he can't like, but it's kind of there anyway. He's taken heat for being the man behind several previous iterations of the "run it back" plan, as he's been outward in his belief in the Leafs' talent eventually breaking through. He was the one who immediately called the core to let them know all was well post-breakup with Kyle Dubas after their 2023 playoff loss. He's built around that core, and he's been their protector.

Most people thought this summer could've been it for Shanahan (some might say it should have been), but him sticking around makes sense for new boss Keith Pelley.

But one more "run it back" with Marner, and that would likely be the end of Shanahan. A Marner trade might at least open up the possibility for a new plan, which might buy Shanahan more time to see it through.

But all that said: Shanahan's ultimate vindication is the same as Marner's, and that matters here. If he keeps Marner, and some iteration of the Leafs succeeds, Shanahan will be a forever hero for his show of determined patience.

What would Brad Treliving want?

Brad Treliving knows how important stars are, knows how hard they are to acquire, and had to deal with the mess of trading Matthew Tkachuk out of Calgary. He traded a prime-aged star and it didn't work out great because it's almost impossible for it to end any other way, and here he is faced with a similar situation.

If Treliving trades Marner, it will move the crosshairs from others on to his own profile. The move will get dissected, it will get publicly crucified because the average fan wouldn't understand the value of cap space or the complications of Marner's short contract term, or the leverage the player and the other team would have with the no-move clause.

Treliving's been here for just one year and Marner was one of the reasons the Leafs fell a goal short in the 2024 playoffs, but not the only one. You could excuse Treliving for thinking he'd prefer to keep the prime-aged, near 100-point player and recent Selke finalist and try to make the rest of the team one per cent better rather than to further tie his own legacy to forced star trades that end up looking lopsided against him.

On the other hand, I would imagine walking a superstar to UFA and losing him wouldn't appeal a ton either, so Treliving's probably conflicted. What's available in return really will matter.

What would Craig Berube want?

As a coach, all you want are tools. You can't win if you don't have the talent, so you'd rather have it and figure out how to deploy it than to go into battle without any weapons of significance. Make no mistake, Marner can be a weapon, the gun has just jammed in the playoffs.

All Berube would want is the best players he could possibly get, so if you told him you could do better than Marner, he'd support it in a heartbeat. But you almost certainly can't -- unless maybe Juuse Saros is that for you- and so I'm willing to bet Berube would rather hang on to the player.

It would also give him the chance to be the goat whisperer (old-fashioned negative connotation of "goat" here), where he comes in and gets Marner to find his game in the biggest moments and it helps them over the hump.

And finally...

What would Keith Pelley want?

The simplest answer is that he likely doesn't care what they do with the players so long as they win. They could trade Marner to the moon or play him 60 minutes a night, Pelley would just want the Leafs to win.

But only one team out of 32 wins it all, and I'm guessing Pelley doesn't want the Leafs to be a sideshow on their way to the next playoff attempt. And if the reputation has been for their stars to soak up all the cap space and not lead the team to many second round playoff gates, I'm guessing he wouldn't be thrilled about the prospect of extending one of those players for eight more years. Losing Marner for nothing to UFA wouldn't sound like great business either. So Pelley may have some reason to feel a trade makes sense, unlike just about everyone else.

So what does all this mean?

If you've been listening to Canada's hockey insiders the past couple days, it's clear Camp Marner has started to spread the word of what they'd like to see happen: he wants to "Stay and play to go UFA," and so they're now floating those trial balloons to the public through myriad channels to get people to warm up to the idea.

And I can't shake the reality in the words above that one vision lines up cleanly with the interests of most parties involved. That's the version of this story where Marner's best case scenario is to stay with the Leafs and have great team success next season. In that scenario Pelley would get what he wants, Shanahan would be vindicated, Berube would look like a hero, and maybe they'd even extend and keep a player in Marner who fans suddenly say "Oh, he can produce in the playoffs, yes let's keep this guy I can't believe we almost traded him."

Too many of the principal individuals win in that fantasy for them not to consider pursuing it.

To me, those questions about individual motivations are what's going to matter this summer more than just "What's the best thing for the team next season and beyond?" As I started off with in this column, NHL hockey is a team game full of individuals with individual motivations.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 6, 2024

I'm not sure "Keep Mamer" is the answer to the question of "What's best" for the Leafs and their fans. But it just may be what's best for those people who have to make the decision, which should point us to what the eventual outcome might be.

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TSN.CA / Oilers' top line scoring playoff goals at a rate we haven't seen before

Travis Yost

Do the Edmonton Oilers have the best attacking top line in the modern era of hockey?

While doing some research and preparation for the Stanley Cup Final, I was again drawn to Edmonton's top line – anchored by the venerable Connor McDavid, joined on the wing by Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Zach Hyman – and how strikingly productive they have been this postseason.

The individual numbers speak for themselves: the triumvirate of attackers in Edmonton have already accounted for a staggering 30 goals, and that's ignoring the damage being done from the Evan Bouchard defensive pairing behind them.

We know McDavid is what makes much of this tick. Already one of the most dominant skaters in NHL history, Florida Panthers head coach Paul Maurice acknowledged earlier in the week how difficult it is to defend a player with that degree of top-end speed and skill:

"You can't play a 1-on-1 game with [McDavid and Draisaitl]. Too fast. Too strong. Too skilled. It's a 5-man defensive game... We have to be mindful, but we can't be passive."

McDavid is a challenge in and of himself, but full credit goes to the Oilers front office and coaching staff for finding perhaps the best complementary forward he's played with over the years in Hyman.

Hyman is a puck magnet of the highest order in the low slot, and the exact type of forward you would create in a laboratory as a havoc creator and finisher to enjoin to McDavid. Bring a reliable two-way forward like Nugent-Hopkins into the fold, and you have a line where the sum of the parts appears greater than the whole.

If nothing else, it goes to show even the best player in the world can benefit from the teammates (and the environment) around him. That shouldn't be lost on Oilers fans. Recall that in McDavid's first three playoff appearances, the Oilers on-ice goal differential with McDavid on the ice was just +2 (19-17); hardly the type of dominance you need from your top line to win a Stanley Cup.

The Oilers are already eight goals better than their opponents this postseason in all of the McDavid minutes; much of that advantage has been created playing specifically with Hyman and Nugent-Hopkins, a line head coach Kris Knoblauch leaned on heavily in the third round against Vancouver.

It made me curious how this line would compare to other regular lines (at least 15 games together) we have seen during deep Stanley Cup runs in their respective years. Compare how this trio is scoring relative to some of the best lines ever assembled:

They are scoring postseason goals at a rate we haven't seen before – whether that's in comparison to other regular playoff lines we have seen in the modern era, or in comparison to league averages.

Recall that teams scored about 2.6 goals per 60 minutes at even strength this season. That would put the McDavid, Hyman, and Nugent-Hopkins line a staggering 123 per cent ahead of this year's baseline. Couple that with the most electric power play in the league, and you have a whale of a challenge for the Panthers defence. (Though, if any team has the structure and personnel to slow down Edmonton's attack, it may well be Florida.)

You need both persistent on-ice dominance and some degree of puck luck to score at these rates, even for a line with McDavid on it. And while

the laws of regression always apply, the Oilers are merely four wins away from a Stanley Cup. Keeping this heater together for just two more weeks may be the difference between ending a 36-year championship drought in Edmonton, and not.

Lastly? Oilers in six. The pick back in October remains the pick here.

Enjoy the Stanley Cup Final.

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