



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 25, 2024

## The Athletic

### Which NHL teams need upgrades on defense? Ranking all 32 teams by current quality

By Dom Luszczyszyn and Sean Gentile

With draft-floor trades and the first day of unrestricted free agency just days away, it's time to break down where each team stands on a position-by-position basis.

That means striking a balance between what each franchise already has in the fold and what it still needs going into the offseason.

Using Net Rating, we looked at how much value each team is currently expected to carry at each position, as well as the holes they have to address. Teams without franchise talent (top-32 forward, top-16 defenseman, top-eight goalie) were penalized further for having a more glaring need. With that as a baseline, we added some subjectivity as a finishing touch.

Here's how we'd rank each team's defensive depth, from best to worst, as the offseason kicks off and the window to improve begins.

Which NHL teams need upgrades at wing? Ranking all 32 teams by current quality

#### 1. Vegas Golden Knights

Current quality: 93rd percentile

Looking for: None

After trading for Noah Hanifin, there's no team with a better situation on the backend than Vegas. He gives the Golden Knights three legitimate top-pair defensemen, all on the higher end of that spectrum. Hanifin and Alex Pietrangolo can handle tough minutes, while Shea Theodore remains one of the best offensive defensemen in the league. It's an embarrassment of riches.

Add a couple of top-four capable guys (Brayden McNabb, Zach Whitecloud) and a strong third-pair option (Nicolas Hague) and you get the best one-to-six group in the league. The Golden Knights have an elite balance of star power and depth, with a strong mix of offense and defense.

#### 2. Dallas Stars

Current quality: 91st percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

The Stars are sitting pretty, even as Chris Tanev heads for unrestricted free agency. If they bring him back or find a suitable replacement on the right side, they'd have an even stronger case for the No. 1 spot. Tanev was exactly what Dallas needed at the deadline, and he's exactly what it needs today.

In the meantime, Miro Heiskanen is an elite, all-situations beast, and Esa Lindell is a competent partner. In his second NHL season, Thomas Harley took another step forward and projects as a high-end first-pair talent. Nils Lundqvist and

Ryan Suter are solid enough a bit down the lineup, too. Fill the Tanev-shaped hole next to Harley and all will be well.

#### 3. Colorado Avalanche

Current quality: 82nd percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman, third-pair defenseman

With all due respect to the best regular-season defenseman (Quinn Hughes) and playoff defenseman (Evan Bouchard), the best defenseman in the league is still Cale Makar. Having him on the roster is more than enough to give Colorado solid standing, even after a down year. Along with Devon Toews, the Avalanche have the best pair in the league.

Their position here is entirely based on that top pair, though, as the rest is lacking. Josh Manson is a capable No. 4, but the recent backslide by Samuel Girard has the team with a sizable hole in the top four. A return to form from Girard would go a long way, but for now, it looks like a big need. Add a missing bottom pair to that, and Colorado's spot feels a little tenuous. The top pair can only take this team so far.

#### 4. Edmonton Oilers

Current quality: 91st percentile

Looking for: None

Edmonton grades out above Colorado based on percentile because of Darnell Nurse; the model likes him more than the Ays' second-pair guys by a solid margin — solid enough to make up for the underwhelming presence of Cody Ceci, Brett Kulak and Philip Broberg. Call us prisoners of the moment, but we're not co-signing. Nurse struggled enough in the postseason to get dropped down a bit.

The Oilers' top pair, of course, is fantastic. Bouchard projects to be one of the few most valuable defensemen in the league, and Mattias Ekholm is his ideal partner. We're just not quite ready to slot them in ahead of Makar and Toews.

#### 5. Vancouver Canucks

Current quality: 83rd percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman, third-pair defensemen

Everything said about Colorado holds true here. The Canucks have one of the best top pairs in the league, highlighted by one of the best defensemen in the world and the chemistry he has with a solid No. 2. They have a dependable defensive defender in the four slot to add to that, but major holes elsewhere.

Those can all be fixed in free agency, but for now, the Canucks are a team with big needs being propped up by a superstar. The difference between the Canucks and Avalanche in that regard narrowed drastically, but we'd still



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take each guy from Colorado over his Vancouver counterpart.

## 6. Carolina Hurricanes

Current quality: 86th percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

The Hurricanes' placement is a testament to their strength as a unit. The five teams ahead of them all have at least one franchise defender, and the five teams behind them do, as well. Carolina makes it work with two high-end first-pair guys in Jaccob Slavin and Brent Burns, the latter of whom still has that designation despite turning 39 in March.

Their presence, along with Dmitry Orlov and Jalen Chatfield — both solid in their own right — makes finding a franchise guy less important for the Hurricanes. Their bigger issue is finding a way to replace Brady Skjei and Brett Pesce, both of whom seem to have priced themselves out of Carolina. Orlov and Chatfield can step in as the new second pair, it'll just be a step down from where the Hurricanes were last season.

Charlie McAvoy remains a franchise-level defenseman.  
(Patrick Smith / Getty Images)

## 7. Boston Bruins

Current quality: 75th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

Having an elite franchise defender goes a long way. We're big fans of Charlie McAvoy, but after last season, it is starting to feel like he's been edged out of the top-five defensemen conversation. That bumps Boston down a bit relative to the competition, especially compared to Colorado and Vancouver, which are in similar situations. All three have an elite franchise guy, a strong No. 2 and a defensive No. 4. In this case, it's the gap in franchise talent pushing the Bruins down.

Boston is in good shape with the talent on the roster, but adding a top-four defender is a definite area of need. We're not particularly high on any of the other options on the team to fill that role.

## 8. Tampa Bay Lightning

Current quality: 62nd percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

Tampa Bay's overall projections are dragged down by 23-year-old Emil Martinen Lilleberg, their No. 7 defenseman. We're not interested in penalizing them all that much — this is a group that seems primed to improve on last season, thanks in large part to the reacquisition of Ryan McDonagh.

With McDonagh back in the fold, everything about the Lightning's lineup makes more sense. Victor Hedman is still at the top, doing Hall of Famer-type stuff. Mikhail Sergachev will be coming off a full offseason's worth of rehab on his leg. And now, the still-outstanding McDonagh is back on the left side behind them, presumably in his shutdown role on a pair with Erik Cernak.

## 9. Pittsburgh Penguins

Current quality: 76th percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

Erik Karlsson and Kris Letang may be ancient, but they're still really effective, and that's enough to push the Penguins into the top 10. Karlsson lost some offensive luster in his first season with the Penguins, though he made up for it with a stronger two-way game and still had franchise-level results. He should be at that level again, especially if the Penguins figure out how to make their power play work.

On top of those two, Marcus Pettersson also grades out very well, giving Pittsburgh a strong trifecta at the top. It's what's after that's worrying. Ryan Graves was supposed to complete the top four but was a complete disaster in his first year. The model projects a bounce-back — we're not nearly as optimistic.

## 10. New York Rangers

Current quality: 68th percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

We came very, very close to bumping New York ahead of Pittsburgh, largely because Adam Fox is far and away the best defenseman on either team. Ultimately, though, the Rangers' relative lack of depth kept them in this spot. That's due mainly to Ryan Lindgren's regression in 2023-24 and the fact that Jacob Trouba is, overall, just OK.

The variable here is K'Andre Miller, whose production hasn't yet met his potential. If he increases his offensive impact — not just in the form of points, either — the Rangers will likely deserve to move farther into the top 10. Miller is good, but the Rangers need more from him.

## 11. New York Islanders

Current quality: 66th percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

The Islanders' biggest strength has long been its backend, and that remains the case after a huge breakout year from Noah Dobson. His emergence toward franchise talent capably pushed Adam Pelech and Ryan Pullock down into more fitting roles. An elevated season from Alex Romanov cements the top four as one that's easily above league average.

If there's one area of need here, it's a decent No. 6 option to play alongside Scott Mayfield. That shouldn't be too hard to find, and even if they don't, Samuel Bolduc can work given the strength elsewhere.

## 12. New Jersey Devils

Current quality: 63rd percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

The Devils are a tough case; if Dougie Hamilton returns from his pectoral injury without missing a step, if Luke Hughes and Simon Nemeč improve in their second full NHL seasons and if John Marino bounces back from a rough 2023-24, New Jersey will have a top four that can compete with the best in the Eastern Conference.

That's a lot of "ifs," though, which puts us in wait-and-see mode. There's tons to like about the Devils — and tons of variables.



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### 13. Ottawa Senators

Current quality: 75th percentile

Looking for: Franchise player, third-pair defenseman

Lucky for Ottawa, the team's biggest need is probably on the roster. Everything that applied to Tim Stützle on our center list applies to Jake Sanderson, too. He's on the precipice of being a franchise talent, and another strong season at both ends of the ice should get him there.

Sanderson reaching that level would allow a lot of things to fall into place for the Senators, who would then boast a very strong top four. Thomas Chabot and Jakob Chychrun still qualify as top pair defensemen, while Artem Zub is an unheralded defensive No. 3. If Erik Brannstrom can take a step toward being an everyday top-four option, the Senators look set.

That last thought might be exactly why the team has been rumored to be dangling Chychrun in a Linus Ullmark deal — a savvy bet to trade from a position of strength to address a major area of weakness.

### 14. Florida Panthers

Current quality: 69th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defensemen, third-pair defenseman

Florida is entering the offseason with several question marks in their defensive lineup — Brandon Montour is a UFA, as are Oliver Ekman-Larsson and Dmitry Kulikov — but they've taken care of the tough stuff. Gustav Forsling is projected to be a top-16 defenseman after his breakout season, and Aaron Ekblad remains first-pair-caliber.

Filling out a roster is a whole lot easier with those pieces in place. Florida's track record of identifying and/or developing contributors on the second and third pairs makes us even more optimistic that they'll figure things out over the summer.

### 15. Buffalo Sabres

Current quality: 45th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

When the margins are thin, the tie goes to high-end talent and pure potential. With Rasmus Dahlin and Owen Power at the top of the lineup, it's hard not to like the Sabres' situation. They've got the hard parts covered. It's the rest of the lineup where there are some warts.

Buffalo's biggest need is a legitimate top-four defenseman. Mattias Samuelsson is a solid defensive No. 4 who can handle tough minutes, but for now, the Sabres don't have a slam dunk option otherwise. That very well could be Bowen Byram, but his first impression with the Sabres lacked some two-way substance. He's the best bet, and a breakout year in line with his skill could vault the Sabres into the top 10. But that's a big if, given what he's shown over the last couple of seasons.

### 16. Minnesota Wild

Current quality: 44th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

The Wild are a testament to the importance of figuring out things at the top of the lineup. Jared Spurgeon still grades out incredibly well, Jonas Brodin is holding steady as a first-pair guy and Brock Faber showed major potential in his first full NHL season. They're not the biggest names, and their games certainly aren't flashy, but they're still more than enough.

Minnesota's issue, though, is the enormous gap in quality between those three and their other options. Bringing in another top-four left shot to play ahead of (or behind) Brodin would drop Jacob Middleton down to a more suitable spot in the lineup.

### 17. Los Angeles Kings

Current quality: 48th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

The likely loss of Matt Roy leaves a large hole in the Kings' top four. They had a pretty strong set-up last season, led by the still franchise-caliber Drew Doughty and two other worthy top-four pieces. But Roy was the No. 2 on the team and he won't be easy to replace.

The hope is that Brandt Clarke can fill that void. He certainly has the pedigree, but his first couple of tastes of NHL action have left a bit to be desired. Clarke has struggled in heavily sheltered minutes, and though he has obvious top-four potential, the Kings need it sooner rather than later.

Morgan Rielly is a first-pair guy but the Maple Leafs need help. (Richard A. Whittaker / Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)

### 18. Toronto Maple Leafs

Current quality: 59th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman, third-pair defenseman

Sometimes, the model requires a bit of a sanity check. In this case, we had to apply it to the projection of Timothy Liljegren. He's a useful player when he's in the lineup, but he isn't nearly good enough to push the Leafs up with teams such as the Lightning.

With that accounted for, the Leafs are dealing with a group that's short on high-end talent and depth but has two solid-enough first-pair guys in Morgan Rielly and Jake McCabe. Could be better, could be worse. A legitimately solid third pair would go a long way.

### 19. Winnipeg Jets

Current quality: 54th percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman, third-pair defenseman

With Dylan DeMelo departing, the Jets have a pretty big hole to fill. The gap between Josh Morrissey and the team's next-best defenseman is a mile wide and it separates the Jets from other teams that have a franchise defender on the roster. Morrissey is fantastic, but he needs help.

The Jets have two defenders who grade out at a top-four rate, but that feels more like a technicality than what a playoff-caliber team should be comfortable with. None of Neal Pionk, Nate Schmidt or Dylan Samberg feel like safe bets to drive a second pair.



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## 20. Seattle Kraken

Current quality: 56th percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman

Vince Dunn adequately followed up his breakout season, but he can't do it by himself. That applies to the Kraken's blue line and the organization overall — someone, at some position, needs to join him in the franchise bucket, or they'll continue to spin their wheels.

It's not that there's a glaring individual issue here, either. Seattle's group, led by Adam Larsson, isn't bad. Too much "not bad," though, can be a real problem. Ryker Evans could help as a second-pair guy after seeing a chunk of time as a 22-year-old last season, though it's no guarantee that his results translate in a non-sheltered role.

## 21. Nashville Predators

Current quality: 56th percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

The Predators have arguably a top-five defenseman in the world in Roman Josi, but that alone can't save them.

After trading Ryan McDonagh, the team's depth chart after Josi feels thinner than their Cup chances do with the current roster. Their options for the No. 2 defenseman on the team are Dante Fabbro, Spencer Stastney, Jeremy Lauzon and Luke Schenn. Maybe one of them can cut it as a No. 4, but that still leaves Nashville without a No. 2 or No. 3. The Predators have their work cut out for them.

## 22. Calgary Flames

Current quality: 50th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-four defenseman

We know the story with the Flames' forwards, and the story with their blue line isn't much different. They've got enough solid pros such as Mackenzie Weegar and Rasmus Andersson to win games, but not many. As long as they're around — to say nothing of forwards like Nazem Kadri, Andrew Mangiapane and Jonathan Huberdeau — Calgary seems ticketed for the mushy middle.

One interesting note: The model is high on Daniil Miromanov, one of the pieces Calgary acquired for Noah Hanifin. He's a right shot who had seven points in 20 games after the trade and seems set to play with Weegar on the first pair.

## 23. Philadelphia Flyers

Current quality: 36th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defenseman

The Flyers have stability, with six NHL-caliber defensemen — they're all just slotted one spot higher than they should be. As usual, what they need more than anything is franchise talent.

That one guy would put Travis Sanheim in the No. 2 spot with Cam York, Nick Seeler, and Rasmus Ristolainen falling behind him. Easier said than done.

Everything hinges on the progression of Jamie Drysdale, who has dealt with severe injury and consistency issues at

the NHL level. For now, he doesn't look like much more than a No. 5, but the 22-year-old has potential for more given his pedigree. A leap from Drysdale would solve a lot of issues.

## 24. Utah HC

Current quality: 39th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

If there are fans in Salt Lake City looking for solid defensive play, they're probably going to be disappointed. Utah has Sean Durzi, who solidified his status as a legit first-pair guy, then ... eh. Juuso Valimaki has the second-best projection in the group, but that's goosed a bit by his power-play time. He's likely a fringe second-pair player and not much else — and behind him, there's another drop.

## 25. Montreal Canadiens

Current quality: 23rd percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defenseman

There's a big gap between what the Canadiens currently have on the roster and what the future has in store for them. Few teams bolster a defender pipeline like the Canadiens, who have David Reinbacher and Lane Hutson waiting to jump onto a blue line that already features Kaiden Guhle playing tough minutes.

That could make the Canadiens a future power from the back end, but until then things are dicey. Mike Matheson is miscast as a No. 1, and the depth after him and Guhle is pretty dicey.

## 26. Washington Capitals

Current quality: 23rd percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defenseman

John Carlson chugs along, projecting to provide first-pair value as a 34-year-old despite a drop in his once-elite power-play production. The Caps are trying to cobble together a playoff-caliber roster, and that's a tough ask, given their depth chart. At least one of Rasmus Sandin or Martin Fehervary needs to show they're capable not just of playing alongside Carlson, but playing well. They're both projected as fringe second-pair guys, though.

## 27. Chicago Blackhawks

Current quality: 14th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-four defenseman

The good news for the Blackhawks is that they're working with an actual top pair. Alex Vlasic and Seth Jones are a terrific start, with Vlasic especially looking like a future defensive stud. If Kevin Korhinski can figure out what to do when the puck is not on his stick, the Blackhawks are working with a solid baseline.

It's the rest — and the fact that neither Vlasic nor Jones are franchise-level — that's holding the team back. To start climbing out of the basement, Chicago needs one of those three guys to turn into a legit star and to add some depth to support them. A true top-four guy should be at the top of this



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summer's wish list. If not, it's going to be another long season.

## 28. Columbus Blue Jackets

Current quality: 14th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defenseman

Zach Werenski is a really good player — but he's not elite, and he's not good enough to drag the rest of the Blue Jackets' blue line any farther than this spot. For example, we both like him more individually than Vlasic and Jones, but if he's part of a pairing with Damon Severson, Chicago's guys have him beat pretty handily.

Ivan Provorov, Adam Boqvist, Jake Bean, and Erik Gudbarnson all carry below-average projections without much reason for optimism, Provorov's early run in Philadelphia aside. Beyond that, David Jiricek has pedigree, but he played just 43 games as a rookie last season.

## 29. St. Louis Blues

Current quality: 19th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defensemen

Collectively, we're getting tired of talking about the Blues' blue-line woes. Between Colton Parayko, Justin Faulk, Torey Krug and Nick Leddy the Blues don't really have a top four problem — they have a star-power problem. None of the four can be seriously counted on as a top-pair threat on a playoff team, and it's hard to move up the ranks given that constraint. Getting a legitimate top-pair defenseman with offensive ability to play with Parayko this season is a big priority.

## 30. Detroit Red Wings

Current quality: 5th percentile

Looking for: Franchise player, top-pair defenseman, top-four defensemen

This isn't meant to be an indictment of Moritz Seider — we believe in him as a future franchise-type defender, even with some so-so projections for this season. It is, however, an indictment of the players Detroit has surrounded him with. There's not a second-pair type in the bunch (Jake Walman probably comes the closest). Seider alone is good enough to give Detroit the edge over, say, Anaheim, but he can't do it all by himself. Despite all the money Detroit has spent over the past few years, the Red Wings are still three top-four defensemen short.

## 31. Anaheim Ducks

Current quality: 8th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defensemen

This time next season, it wouldn't be a shock to see the Ducks as a big-time riser. Between Olen Zellweger and Pavel Mintyukov, the future looks very bright in Anaheim, as there are some clear internal solutions to the franchise's lack of true top-pair defensemen.

Right now, though? That's a tough sell. Cam Fowler and Radko Gudas are probably closer to second-pair caliber, and the depth behind the team's top group isn't helping.

The Ducks need to start seeing some growth across the board. They have good players, but they have a serious lack of great players.

## 32. San Jose Sharks

Current quality: 0th percentile (not a typo)

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defensemen, top-four defenseman

Credit to Ty Emberson, a waiver claim (via the Rangers) who wound up looking like a legit NHL defenseman before a season-ending injury in March. Beyond him, the Sharks have a whole bunch of fringe guys — some of whom played huge minutes this season. Macklin Celebrini is on the way, so mission accomplished, but the less said about this group, the better.

## Panthers open as favorites to win 2025 Stanley Cup Final after beating Oilers

By Dan Santaromita

The Florida Panthers won the franchise's first Stanley Cup on Monday night and open as the favorites to win next year's title. The Panthers are +900 to repeat as champions on BetMGM.

It's normal for a newly crowned champion to open as the favorite the following year, especially one that has made the Stanley Cup Final the past two years like Florida. At +900, the Panthers are far from a clear favorite.

The freshly vanquished Edmonton Oilers are among a trio of teams behind Florida in the odds at +1000. The Dallas Stars, which lost to the Oilers in the conference finals, and the Colorado Avalanche, which won the Stanley Cup two years ago, are also +1000. That group shares the shortest odds to win the Western Conference at +500.

The Carolina Hurricanes are next at +1100 followed by last year's champion Vegas Golden Knights at +1200.

When this season opened, Colorado was the favorite at +800 and Edmonton at +900. Florida was +1800 behind 10 teams in the opening odds.

The futures odds also have a listing for Utah Hockey Club, which represents the first time you can bet on the team in actual play. Utah, which inherited Arizona's roster and will begin playing next season, has +10000 odds. Only five teams have longer odds.

The three teams with the longest odds (+30000) are the Anaheim Ducks, Chicago Blackhawks and San Jose Sharks. Those teams had the worst three records in the league this season.

Full opening 2025 Stanley Cup odds



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## The Carolina Hurricanes and a busy NHL Draft week: What should we expect?

By Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Carolina Hurricanes admittedly have a busy offseason in front of them.

“It’s a challenge, right?” Hurricanes GM Eric Tulsy said at his introductory press conference last week. “This organization has been consistently excellent for several years now. Over the last four years, only one team has more points in the regular season. We have six straight years winning at least one series in the postseason.

“And that’s been outstanding for us. At the same time, nobody is satisfied with that. Nobody goes into the business dreaming of having a lot of regular-season points and winning a round or two. So the goal is to find ways to keep getting better.”

This weekend’s draft offers a great opportunity to do that. Carolina is armed with nine draft picks — all seven of their picks along with two sixth-round selections acquired via trade — and also has one of the hottest assets on the trade market.

Here are five things to watch from the Hurricanes this weekend in Las Vegas.

### Tulsy at the helm

While Assistant GM Darren Yorke will take the point on running Carolina’s draft, the weekend will be Tulsy’s baptism by fire as general manager.

Yes, the Hurricanes make their decisions collaboratively, but there will be plenty for the new GM to do. Other teams are certain to try and test the Hurricanes now that they don’t have Don Waddell, but it’s not as though Tulsy is new at this. He’s had a big voice in the team’s decisions in recent years and will still have the collective front office to lean on before making any big moves.

### Picks on the move

Much of the success Bill Belichick had with the New England Patriots —outside of having Tom Brady at quarterback — was because of his willingness to move down in the draft and accumulate more darts to throw at the draft board.

The Hurricanes have channeled their inner Belichick in recent years. Last year, Carolina moved down 23 spots in the third round and picked up an extra fourth-rounder. In 2021, the Hurricanes made five draft-pick trades that gave them extra selections.

They moved out of the first round for two second-rounders that became Scott Morrow, the team’s No. 2 defensive prospect, and Ville Koivuinen, the top prospect sent to Pittsburgh in the Jake Guentzel trade.

Carolina then gave up its late-second-round selection for a third and fourth. The third was then flipped as the Hurricanes moved down 11 spots for an extra fifth-round pick. Two of the players that came out of those two trades are forward prospects Jackson Blake and Justin Robidas.

The tactic has helped the Hurricanes keep their prospect cupboard relatively full despite picking near the bottom draft in the last five seasons.

“Under Darren’s leadership,” Tulsy said, “the scouting group and the development staff have found and nurtured some outstanding prospects who can keep raising the bar for us.”

### Necas’ future

Martin Necas is perhaps the hottest name heading into draft weekend. The 25-year-old forward is a restricted free agent with arbitration rights, and he seems ready to move on.

Coach Rod Brind’Amour’s defense-first style has helped several young forwards — Sebastian Aho and Seth Jarvis, certainly — blossom into fantastic 200-foot players. Necas and his camp, however, are convinced the No. 12 pick in 2017 can thrive outside of Carolina’s structured system.

Not only does the Czech forward possess elite skating, a dangerous one-timer and passing prowess, but he also believes he can move to center and be even more impactful. That’s not going to happen with the Hurricanes — certainly not with a 34.1 faceoff percentage.

The prospects of the right-handed Necas playing the middle elsewhere should further up the Hurricanes’ asking price.

So what could a return look like? The Hurricanes are reportedly looking for a hockey trade and not a package of futures. Finding a one-for-one trade that makes sense for the Hurricanes is difficult. Philadelphia’s Travis Konecny would be a great fit, but he has one year remaining on his contract and will then be an unrestricted free agent.

Carolina might have better luck getting the type of package Winnipeg got last year for Pierre-Luc Dubois. That trade wound up being a disaster for the Kings, who gave up Alex Lafallo, Gabe Vilardi, Rasmus Kupari and a second-round pick only to dump Dubois in a trade this month.

The Hurricanes would be justified in expecting that kind of return given that Necas has a 70-point season on his resume — a threshold Dubois hasn’t reached in his career.

### The goaltender issue

There were some rumors of a Necas-for-Linus Ullmark trade between Carolina and Boston, though that trade doesn’t make sense for the same reason a Konecny deal doesn’t — Ullmark will be a UFA after next season.

Further, is Ullmark an upgrade over Frederik Andersen? Both are proven regular-season performers, but Ullmark’s postseason track record — three straight years with a save percentage under .900 — makes Andersen’s playoff shortcomings more acceptable.

The Hurricanes seem poised to give Pyotr Kochetkov more responsibility next season, but will running back Kochetkov and Andersen — along with Spencer Martin, who will be the No. 3 — lead to better results?

The problem is, the pool of available goalies is shallow. None of the available unrestricted free agents — Cam Talbot and Ilya Samsonov are the only ones with 20-plus wins last year — appear to be an upgrade. Nashville’s Juuse Saros could be had, but he would be costly to acquire and — like Ullmark — is a year from unrestricted free agency.



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The Hurricanes often find creative ways to solve their problems, but this issue may not be big enough to overpay for a solution.

Free agents' last chance?

With free agency set to open next Monday, negotiations with pending UFAs should start to hit a crucial stage at the draft. The Hurricanes have reportedly already considered trading

Guentzel's negotiating rights for a draft pick, and they could do the same with other players they don't believe they'll be able to re-sign.

Any of Brady Skjei, Brett Pesce or Teuvo Teravainen could fetch a pick if negotiations turn south, and bottom-of-the-lineup forwards Jordan Martinook and Stefan Noesen could draw early interest from teams looking to add a veteran presence.



## Panthers favored to win 2025 Stanley Cup; Oilers boast top-3 odds

By Doug Greenberg

It took the Florida Panthers 30 years to win their first Stanley Cup ever. They'll be betting favorites to do it again next year.

At sportsbooks across the nation, the Panthers are consensus favorites to win the NHL's top prize for the 2024-25 season, showing +900 odds at ESPN BET and several other major operations.

The Stanley Cup runner-up Edmonton Oilers are also among the top three choices across the marketplace, with 10-1 odds at ESPN BET.

Florida seeks to become the first repeat champion since the Tampa Bay Lightning (2019-20 and 2020-21), who entered that '20-21 season at +900 -- but not as the favorites.

If that price holds to opening night, it will tie the 2006-07 Ottawa Senators and 2023-24 Colorado Avalanche and Carolina Hurricanes for the longest odds for a preseason favorite since at least 1984, per SportsOddsHistory.com.

That speaks to the overall level of parity on display across the NHL. The Dallas Stars are tied with Florida for the odds lead at +900 at several major books, including ESPN BET, though Florida is the sole leader at FanDuel.

The Hurricanes (10-1) and Avalanche (12-1) are also lurking near the top.

The consensus longest odds to win next year's Cup belong to the San Jose Sharks, who own the No. 1 pick in the upcoming NHL draft and are widely expected to select Macklin Celebrini. They are 400-1 to win it all.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 25, 2024

## The Hockey News

### Multiple Former Hurricanes to Have Names Engraved on Stanley Cup

By Ryan Henkel

The Florida Panthers are the 2024 Stanley Cup champions.

After winning the first three games against the Edmonton Oilers, the Panthers proceeded to lose the next three before grinding out a 2-1 victory in Game 7 to win the franchise's first ever cup.

With their win, yet another former Southeast Division franchise has captured a Cup and helping them along the way was a multitude of former Canes who will get to have their name forever engraved on the Cup.

And the best part is, all of them are first time Cup winners.

Here's the former Hurricanes who will be going on Lord Stanley:

Paul Maurice - Head Coach

The head coach of the Florida Panthers will have his name finally engraved on the Stanley Cup after nearly three decades of coaching.

Maurice, who coached the Hartford Whalers/Hurricanes from 1995 to 2004 and then once again from 2008 to 2011, perfectly sandwiched his Carolina tenure around a Stanley Cup.

He had lost in the Final twice, but now he's forever immortalized.

Steven Lorentz - F

Perhaps one of the nicest and purest souls in the league who battled for everything he ever earned, from being selected in the seventh round (2015) to playing in the ECHL to eventually making an NHL roster.

Lorentz debuted with the Hurricanes in 2020, ended up being traded to San Jose for Brent Burns in 2022 and then wound up with the Panthers last year through now.

So shoutout to Steven Lorentz who never complains, does everything that is asked and does it all with a smile.

Eetu Luostarinen - F

Originally dealt to the Panthers as part of the Vincent Trocheck trade, the Hurricanes' 2017 second-round pick has really carved out a nice role for himself with the Panthers as a vital piece of the team's depth.

Luostarinen missed the final last year due to a broken leg suffered against the Hurricanes, but the Finn managed to appear in every game for Florida this season.

Gustav Forsling - D

While he never played for the Hurricanes in the NHL, Forsling was still a part of the organization for a year before he was claimed off of waivers by Florida.

The rest is history as he's broken out in a big way to be a top defenseman in the league.

Tuomo Ruutu - Assistant Coach

A former fan favorite who played for the Hurricanes from 2008 to 2014, Ruutu has been an assistant coach with the Panthers since Maurice took over as the head coach.

Rick Dudley and Paul Krepelka - Front Office Executives

Both men were part of the Hurricanes' front office for multiple years and then ended up leaving in 2020 to join the new regime in Florida under Bill Zito.

### The 27th Overall Pick: Is History On the Side of the Carolina Hurricanes?

By Ryan Henkel

Despite the Stanley Cup still having been awarded yet, the NHL draft is now less than a week away and is quickly approaching.

The Carolina Hurricanes once again have a late first round pick as the team holds the 27th overall selection in this year's draft.

Here's how that position has done historically.

The Canes have actually selected at 27th before.

Just one other time in 2009, but you probably don't even remember his name.

That year, the Canes selected Quebecois forward Philippe Paradis.

And the reason you may not have even remembered him?

Less than three months after his selection, the Canes traded Paradis' rights to the Toronto Maple Leafs for Czech forward Jiri Tlustý.

Paradis would never make it to the NHL and played just 249 games in the AHL.

At least Tlustý had a good run alongside Eric Staal and Alex Semin.

Fear not though because number 27 has actually done fairly well historically.

While obviously not every player hits, only four players selected 27th overall have failed to play in at least one NHL game.



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In fact, 34 of those 53 players suited up for at least 100 games and 16 of those played over 500.

And there's been some pretty good names selected at 27 too.

Let's take a look at all of the 27's that played in over 1,000 NHL games in their careers:

Tie Domi

Toronto Maple Leafs - 1988

104G, 245Pts, 1,020GP (3,515 PIM)

Arguably one of the feistiest pugilists in NHL history, what Domi lacked for in size and reach he more than made up for with tenacity.

Domi holds the NHL record for fighting majors with 333 over his 16-year career.

Joe Nieuwendyk

Calgary Flames - 1985

564G, 1,126Pts, 1,257GP

One of the NHL's 100 Greatest Players of All-Time, Nieuwendyk is the type of player you dream of drafting outside of the top of the draft.

A three-time Stanley Cup champion (all coming with different teams), Nieuwendyk also won the Calder in his rookie season and took home the Conn Smythe in 1999.

Just a player who was consistently good for a long time.

Scott Mellanby

Philadelphia Flyers - 1984

364G, 840Pts, 1,431GP (2,479 PIM)

Another one of those consistently good players, Mellanby was never by any means the best guy around, but he was a solid player for many years.

Mellanby is also the father of the Florida Panthers' rat craze as he was said to have killed a rat with his hockey stick in the team's locker room.

Scott Gomez

New Jersey Devils - 1998

181G, 756Pts, 1,079GP

Gomez was never the biggest scorer, breaking the 20-goal barrier just once in his career, but he had over 500 assists in his 1,000+ game career.

Add onto that a resume with two Stanley Cups and a Calder trophy and you have a very valuable player.

John Carlson

Washington Capitals - 2008

151G, 674Pts, 1,009GP

The only active player on this list, Carlson has been one of the most consistent offensive defensemen in the league for years now.

The Washington Capitals' number one blueliner helped the team capture the Stanley Cup in 2018 and is a two-time All-Star.

Steve Staios

St. Louis Blues - 1991

56G, 220Pts, 1,001GP

Before Staios was the general manager and president of hockey operations of the Ottawa Senators, he was defending the blueline for six different NHL teams.

Not a major player by any means, but to play in over a 1,000 NHL games, you have to have done something right.

## TODAY'S LINKS

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## SportScan

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

1315904 Carolina Hurricanes

The Carolina Hurricanes and a busy NHL Draft week: What should we expect?

By Cory Lavalette

6/24/2024

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Carolina Hurricanes admittedly have a busy offseason in front of them.

"It's a challenge, right?" Hurricanes GM Eric Tulsy said at his introductory press conference last week. "This organization has been consistently excellent for several years now. Over the last four years, only one team has more points in the regular season. We have six straight years winning at least one series in the postseason.

"And that's been outstanding for us. At the same time, nobody is satisfied with that. Nobody goes into the business dreaming of having a lot of regular-season points and winning a round or two. So the goal is to find ways to keep getting better."

This weekend's draft offers a great opportunity to do that. Carolina is armed with nine draft picks — all seven of their picks along with two sixth-round selections acquired via trade — and also has one of the hottest assets on the trade market.

Here are five things to watch from the Hurricanes this weekend in Las Vegas.

Tulsy at the helm

While Assistant GM Darren Yorke will take the point on running Carolina's draft, the weekend will be Tulsy's baptism by fire as general manager.

Yes, the Hurricanes make their decisions collaboratively, but there will be plenty for the new GM to do. Other teams are certain to try and test the Hurricanes now that they don't have Don Waddell, but it's not as though Tulsy is new at this. He's had a big voice in the team's decisions in recent years and will still have the collective front office to lean on before making any big moves.

Picks on the move

Much of the success Bill Belichick had with the New England Patriots — outside of having Tom Brady at quarterback — was because of his willingness to move down in the draft and accumulate more darts to throw at the draft board.

The Hurricanes have channeled their inner Belichick in recent years. Last year, Carolina moved down 23 spots in the third round and picked up an extra fourth-rounder. In 2021, the Hurricanes made five draft-pick trades that gave them extra selections.

They moved out of the first round for two second-rounders that became Scott Morrow, the team's No. 2 defensive prospect, and Ville Koivu, the top prospect sent to Pittsburgh in the Jake Guentzel trade.

Carolina then gave up its late-second-round selection for a third and fourth. The third was then flipped as the Hurricanes moved down 11 spots for an extra fifth-round pick. Two of the players that came out of those two trades are forward prospects Jackson Blake and Justin Robidas.

The tactic has helped the Hurricanes keep their prospect cupboard relatively full despite picking near the bottom draft in the last five seasons.

"Under Darren's leadership," Tulsy said, "the scouting group and the development staff have found and nurtured some outstanding prospects who can keep raising the bar for us."

Necas' future

Martin Necas is perhaps the hottest name heading into draft weekend. The 25-year-old forward is a restricted free agent with arbitration rights, and he seems ready to move on.

Coach Rod Brind'Amour's defense-first style has helped several young forwards — Sebastian Aho and Seth Jarvis, certainly — blossom into fantastic 200-foot players. Necas and his camp, however, are convinced the No. 12 pick in 2017 can thrive outside of Carolina's structured system.

Not only does the Czech forward possess elite skating, a dangerous one-timer and passing prowess, but he also believes he can move to center and be even more impactful. That's not going to happen with the Hurricanes — certainly not with a 34.1 faceoff percentage.

The prospects of the right-handed Necas playing the middle elsewhere should further up the Hurricanes' asking price.

So what could a return look like? The Hurricanes are reportedly looking for a hockey trade and not a package of futures. Finding a one-for-one trade that makes sense for the Hurricanes is difficult. Philadelphia's Travis Konecny would be a great fit, but he has one year remaining on his contract and will then be an unrestricted free agent.

Carolina might have better luck getting the type of package Winnipeg got last year for Pierre-Luc Dubois. That trade wound up being a disaster for the Kings, who gave up Alex Lafalo, Gabe Vilardi, Rasmus Kupari and a second-round pick only to dump Dubois in a trade this month.

The Hurricanes would be justified in expecting that kind of return given that Necas has a 70-point season on his resume — a threshold Dubois hasn't reached in his career.

The goaltender issue

There were some rumors of a Necas-for-Linus Ullmark trade between Carolina and Boston, though that trade doesn't make sense for the same reason a Konecny deal doesn't — Ullmark will be a UFA after next season.

Further, is Ullmark an upgrade over Frederik Andersen? Both are proven regular-season performers, but Ullmark's postseason track record — three straight years with a save percentage under .900 — makes Andersen's playoff shortcomings more acceptable.

The Hurricanes seem poised to give Pyotr Kochetkov more responsibility next season, but will running back Kochetkov and Andersen — along with Spencer Martin, who will be the No. 3 — lead to better results?

The problem is, the pool of available goalies is shallow. None of the available unrestricted free agents — Cam Talbot and Ilya Samsonov are the only ones with 20-plus wins last year — appear to be an upgrade. Nashville's Juuse Saros could be had, but he would be costly to acquire and — like Ullmark — is a year from unrestricted free agency.

The Hurricanes often find creative ways to solve their problems, but this issue may not be big enough to overpay for a solution.

Free agents' last chance?

With free agency set to open next Monday, negotiations with pending UFAs should start to hit a crucial stage at the draft. The Hurricanes have



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reportedly already considered trading Guentzel's negotiating rights for a draft pick, and they could do the same with other players they don't believe they'll be able to re-sign.

Any of Brady Skjei, Brett Pesce or Teuvo Teravainen could fetch a pick if negotiations turn south, and bottom-of-the-lineup forwards Jordan Martinook and Stefan Noesen could draw early interest from teams looking to add a veteran presence.

The Athletic LOADED: 06.25.2024

1316013 Websites

The Athletic / Which NHL teams need upgrades on defense? Ranking all 32 teams by current quality

By Dom Luszczyszyn and Sean Gentile

3m ago

With draft-floor trades and the first day of unrestricted free agency just days away, it's time to break down where each team stands on a position-by-position basis.

That means striking a balance between what each franchise already has in the fold and what it still needs going into the offseason.

Using Net Rating, we looked at how much value each team is currently expected to carry at each position, as well as the holes they have to address. Teams without franchise talent (top-32 forward, top-16 defenseman, top-eight goalie) were penalized further for having a more glaring need. With that as a baseline, we added some subjectivity as a finishing touch.

Here's how we'd rank each team's defensive depth, from best to worst, as the offseason kicks off and the window to improve begins.

### 1. Vegas Golden Knights

Current quality: 93rd percentile

Looking for: None

After trading for Noah Hanifin, there's no team with a better situation on the backend than Vegas. He gives the Golden Knights three legitimate top-pair defensemen, all on the higher end of that spectrum. Hanifin and Alex Pietrangolo can handle tough minutes, while Shea Theodore remains one of the best offensive defensemen in the league. It's an embarrassment of riches.

Add a couple of top-four capable guys (Brayden McNabb, Zach Whitecloud) and a strong third-pair option (Nicolas Hague) and you get the best one-to-six group in the league. The Golden Knights have an elite balance of star power and depth, with a strong mix of offense and defense.

### 2. Dallas Stars

Current quality: 91st percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

The Stars are sitting pretty, even as Chris Tanev heads for unrestricted free agency. If they bring him back or find a suitable replacement on the right side, they'd have an even stronger case for the No. 1 spot. Tanev was exactly what Dallas needed at the deadline, and he's exactly what it needs today.

In the meantime, Miro Heiskanen is an elite, all-situations beast, and Esa Lindell is a competent partner. In his second NHL season, Thomas Harley took another step forward and projects as a high-end first-pair talent. Nils Lundqvist and Ryan Suter are solid enough a bit down the lineup, too. Fill the Tanev-shaped hole next to Harley and all will be well.

### 3. Colorado Avalanche

Current quality: 82nd percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman, third-pair defenseman

With all due respect to the best regular-season defenseman (Quinn Hughes) and playoff defenseman (Evan Bouchard), the best defenseman in the league is still Cale Makar. Having him on the roster is more than enough to give Colorado solid standing, even after a down year. Along with Devon Toews, the Avalanche have the best pair in the league.

Their position here is entirely based on that top pair, though, as the rest is lacking. Josh Manson is a capable No. 4, but the recent backslide by Samuel Girard has the team with a sizable hole in the top four. A return to form from Girard would go a long way, but for now, it looks like a big need. Add a missing bottom pair to that, and Colorado's spot feels a little tenuous. The top pair can only take this team so far.

### 4. Edmonton Oilers

Current quality: 91st percentile

Looking for: None

Edmonton grades out above Colorado based on percentile because of Darnell Nurse; the model likes him more than the Avs' second-pair guys by a solid margin — solid enough to make up for the underwhelming presence of Cody Ceci, Brett Kulak and Philip Broberg. Call us prisoners of the moment, but we're not co-signing. Nurse struggled enough in the postseason to get dropped down a bit.

The Oilers' top pair, of course, is fantastic. Bouchard projects to be one of the few most valuable defensemen in the league, and Mattias Ekholm is his ideal partner. We're just not quite ready to slot them in ahead of Makar and Toews.

### 5. Vancouver Canucks

Current quality: 83rd percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman, third-pair defensemen

Everything said about Colorado holds true here. The Canucks have one of the best top pairs in the league, highlighted by one of the best defensemen in the world and the chemistry he has with a solid No. 2. They have a dependable defensive defender in the four slot to add to that, but major holes elsewhere.

Those can all be fixed in free agency, but for now, the Canucks are a team with big needs being propped up by a superstar. The difference between the Canucks and Avalanche in that regard narrowed drastically, but we'd still take each guy from Colorado over his Vancouver counterpart.

### 6. Carolina Hurricanes

Current quality: 86th percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defensemen

The Hurricanes' placement is a testament to their strength as a unit. The five teams ahead of them all have at least one franchise defender, and the five teams behind them do, as well. Carolina makes it work with two high-end first-pair guys in Jaccob Slavin and Brent Burns, the latter of whom still has that designation despite turning 39 in March.

Their presence, along with Dmitry Orlov and Jalen Chatfield — both solid in their own right — makes finding a franchise guy less important for the Hurricanes. Their bigger issue is finding a way to replace Brady Skjei and Brett Pesce, both of whom seem to have priced themselves out of Carolina. Orlov and Chatfield can step in as the new second pair, it'll just be a step down from where the Hurricanes were last season.

### 7. Boston Bruins

Current quality: 75th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

Having an elite franchise defender goes a long way. We're big fans of Charlie McAvoy, but after last season, it is starting to feel like he's been edged out of the top-five defensemen conversation. That bumps Boston down a bit relative to the competition, especially compared to Colorado and Vancouver, which are in similar situations. All three have an elite franchise guy, a strong No. 2 and a defensive No. 4. In this case, it's the gap in franchise talent pushing the Bruins down.



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Boston is in good shape with the talent on the roster, but adding a top-four defender is a definite area of need. We're not particularly high on any of the other options on the team to fill that role.

### 8. Tampa Bay Lightning

Current quality: 62nd percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

Tampa Bay's overall projections are dragged down by 23-year-old Emil Martinen Lilleberg, their No. 7 defenseman. We're not interested in penalizing them all that much — this is a group that seems primed to improve on last season, thanks in large part to the reacquisition of Ryan McDonagh.

With McDonagh back in the fold, everything about the Lightning's lineup makes more sense. Victor Hedman is still at the top, doing Hall of Famer-type stuff. Mikhail Sergachev will be coming off a full offseason's worth of rehab on his leg. And now, the still-outstanding McDonagh is back on the left side behind them, presumably in his shutdown role on a pair with Erik Cernak.

### 9. Pittsburgh Penguins

Current quality: 76th percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

Erik Karlsson and Kris Letang may be ancient, but they're still really effective, and that's enough to push the Penguins into the top 10. Karlsson lost some offensive luster in his first season with the Penguins, though he made up for it with a stronger two-way game and still had franchise-level results. He should be at that level again, especially if the Penguins figure out how to make their power play work.

On top of those two, Marcus Pettersson also grades out very well, giving Pittsburgh a strong trifecta at the top. It's what's after that's worrying. Ryan Graves was supposed to complete the top four but was a complete disaster in his first year. The model projects a bounce-back — we're not nearly as optimistic.

### 10. New York Rangers

Current quality: 68th percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

We came very, very close to bumping New York ahead of Pittsburgh, largely because Adam Fox is far and away the best defenseman on either team. Ultimately, though, the Rangers' relative lack of depth kept them in this spot. That's due mainly to Ryan Lindgren's regression in 2023-24 and the fact that Jacob Trouba is, overall, just OK.

The variable here is K'Andre Miller, whose production hasn't yet met his potential. If he increases his offensive impact — not just in the form of points, either — the Rangers will likely deserve to move farther into the top 10. Miller is good, but the Rangers need more from him.

### 11. New York Islanders

Current quality: 66th percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

The Islanders' biggest strength has long been its backend, and that remains the case after a huge breakout year from Noah Dobson. His emergence toward franchise talent capably pushed Adam Pelech and Ryan Pullock down into more fitting roles. An elevated season from Alex Romanov cements the top four as one that's easily above league average.

If there's one area of need here, it's a decent No. 6 option to play alongside Scott Mayfield. That shouldn't be too hard to find, and even if they don't, Samuel Bolduc can work given the strength elsewhere.

### 12. New Jersey Devils

Current quality: 63rd percentile

Looking for: Third-pair defenseman

The Devils are a tough case; if Dougie Hamilton returns from his pectoral injury without missing a step, if Luke Hughes and Simon Nemec improve in their second full NHL seasons and if John Marino bounces back from a

rough 2023-24, New Jersey will have a top four that can compete with the best in the Eastern Conference.

That's a lot of "ifs," though, which puts us in wait-and-see mode. There's tons to like about the Devils — and tons of variables.

### 13. Ottawa Senators

Current quality: 75th percentile

Looking for: Franchise player, third-pair defenseman

Lucky for Ottawa, the team's biggest need is probably on the roster. Everything that applied to Tim Stütze on our center list applies to Jake Sanderson, too. He's on the precipice of being a franchise talent, and another strong season at both ends of the ice should get him there.

Sanderson reaching that level would allow a lot of things to fall into place for the Senators, who would then boast a very strong top four. Thomas Chabot and Jakob Chychrun still qualify as top pair defensemen, while Artem Zub is an unheralded defensive No. 3. If Erik Brannstrom can take a step toward being an everyday top-four option, the Senators look set.

That last thought might be exactly why the team has been rumored to be dangling Chychrun in a Linus Ullmark deal — a savvy bet to trade from a position of strength to address a major area of weakness.

### 14. Florida Panthers

Current quality: 69th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defensemen, third-pair defenseman

Florida is entering the offseason with several question marks in their defensive lineup — Brandon Montour is a UFA, as are Oliver Ekman-Larsson and Dmitry Kulikov — but they've taken care of the tough stuff. Gustav Forsling is projected to be a top-16 defenseman after his breakout season, and Aaron Ekblad remains first-pair-caliber.

Filling out a roster is a whole lot easier with those pieces in place. Florida's track record of identifying and/or developing contributors on the second and third pairs makes us even more optimistic that they'll figure things out over the summer.

### 15. Buffalo Sabres

Current quality: 45th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

When the margins are thin, the tie goes to high-end talent and pure potential. With Rasmus Dahlin and Owen Power at the top of the lineup, it's hard not to like the Sabres' situation. They've got the hard parts covered. It's the rest of the lineup where there are some warts.

Buffalo's biggest need is a legitimate top-four defenseman. Mattias Samuelsson is a solid defensive No. 4 who can handle tough minutes, but for now, the Sabres don't have a slam dunk option otherwise. That very well could be Bowen Byram, but his first impression with the Sabres lacked some two-way substance. He's the best bet, and a breakout year in line with his skill could vault the Sabres into the top 10. But that's a big if, given what he's shown over the last couple of seasons.

### 16. Minnesota Wild

Current quality: 44th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman

The Wild are a testament to the importance of figuring out things at the top of the lineup. Jared Spurgeon still grades out incredibly well, Jonas Brodin is holding steady as a first-pair guy and Brock Faber showed major potential in his first full NHL season. They're not the biggest names, and their games certainly aren't flashy, but they're still more than enough.

Minnesota's issue, though, is the enormous gap in quality between those three and their other options. Bringing in another top-four left shot to play ahead of (or behind) Brodin would drop Jacob Middleton down to a more suitable spot in the lineup.

### 17. Los Angeles Kings

Current quality: 48th percentile



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Looking for: Top-four defenseman

The likely loss of Matt Roy leaves a large hole in the Kings' top four. They had a pretty strong set-up last season, led by the still franchise-caliber Drew Doughty and two other worthy top-four pieces. But Roy was the No. 2 on the team and he won't be easy to replace.

The hope is that Brandt Clarke can fill that void. He certainly has the pedigree, but his first couple of tastes of NHL action have left a bit to be desired. Clarke has struggled in heavily sheltered minutes, and though he has obvious top-four potential, the Kings need it sooner rather than later.

18. Toronto Maple Leafs

Current quality: 59th percentile

Looking for: Top-four defenseman, third-pair defenseman

Sometimes, the model requires a bit of a sanity check. In this case, we had to apply it to the projection of Timothy Liljegren. He's a useful player when he's in the lineup, but he isn't nearly good enough to push the Leafs up with teams such as the Lightning.

With that accounted for, the Leafs are dealing with a group that's short on high-end talent and depth but has two solid-enough first-pair guys in Morgan Rielly and Jake McCabe. Could be better, could be worse. A legitimately solid third pair would go a long way.

19. Winnipeg Jets

Current quality: 54th percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman, third-pair defenseman

With Dylan DeMelo departing, the Jets have a pretty big hole to fill. The gap between Josh Morrissey and the team's next-best defenseman is a mile wide and it separates the Jets from other teams that have a franchise defender on the roster. Morrissey is fantastic, but he needs help.

The Jets have two defenders who grade out at a top-four rate, but that feels more like a technicality than what a playoff-caliber team should be comfortable with. None of Neal Pionk, Nate Schmidt or Dylan Samberg feel like safe bets to drive a second pair.

20. Seattle Kraken

Current quality: 56th percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman

Vince Dunn adequately followed up his breakout season, but he can't do it by himself. That applies to the Kraken's blue line and the organization overall — someone, at some position, needs to join him in the franchise bucket, or they'll continue to spin their wheels.

It's not that there's a glaring individual issue here, either. Seattle's group, led by Adam Larsson, isn't bad. Too much "not bad," though, can be a real problem. Ryker Evans could help as a second-pair guy after seeing a chunk of time as a 22-year-old last season, though it's no guarantee that his results translate in a non-sheltered role.

21. Nashville Predators

Current quality: 56th percentile

Looking for: Top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

The Predators have arguably a top-five defenseman in the world in Roman Josi, but that alone can't save them.

After trading Ryan McDonagh, the team's depth chart after Josi feels thinner than their Cup chances do with the current roster. Their options for the No. 2 defenseman on the team are Dante Fabbro, Spencer Stastney, Jeremy Lauzon and Luke Schenn. Maybe one of them can cut it as a No. 4, but that still leaves Nashville without a No. 2 or No. 3. The Predators have their work cut out for them.

22. Calgary Flames

Current quality: 50th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-four defenseman

We know the story with the Flames' forwards, and the story with their blue line isn't much different. They've got enough solid pros such as Mackenzie Weegar and Rasmus Andersson to win games, but not many. As long as they're around — to say nothing of forwards like Nazem Kadri, Andrew Mangiapane and Jonathan Huberdeau — Calgary seems ticketed for the mushy middle.

One interesting note: The model is high on Daniil Miromanov, one of the pieces Calgary acquired for Noah Hanifin. He's a right shot who had seven points in 20 games after the trade and seems set to play with Weegar on the first pair.

23. Philadelphia Flyers

Current quality: 36th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defenseman

The Flyers have stability, with six NHL-caliber defensemen — they're all just slotted one spot higher than they should be. As usual, what they need more than anything is franchise talent.

That one guy would put Travis Sanheim in the No. 2 spot with Cam York, Nick Seeler, and Rasmus Ristolainen falling behind him. Easier said than done.

Everything hinges on the progression of Jamie Drysdale, who has dealt with severe injury and consistency issues at the NHL level. For now, he doesn't look like much more than a No. 5, but the 22-year-old has potential for more given his pedigree. A leap from Drysdale would solve a lot of issues.

24. Utah HC

Current quality: 39th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defenseman, top-four defenseman

If there are fans in Salt Lake City looking for solid defensive play, they're probably going to be disappointed. Utah has Sean Durzi, who solidified his status as a legit first-pair guy, then ... eh. Juuso Valimaki has the second-best projection in the group, but that's goosed a bit by his power-play time. He's likely a fringe second-pair player and not much else — and behind him, there's another drop.

25. Montreal Canadiens

Current quality: 23rd percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defenseman

There's a big gap between what the Canadiens currently have on the roster and what the future has in store for them. Few teams bolster a defender pipeline like the Canadiens, who have David Reinbacher and Lane Hutson waiting to jump onto a blue line that already features Kaiden Guhle playing tough minutes.

That could make the Canadiens a future power from the back end, but until then things are dicey. Mike Matheson is miscast as a No. 1, and the depth after him and Guhle is pretty dicey.

26. Washington Capitals

Current quality: 23rd percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defenseman

John Carlson chugs along, projecting to provide first-pair value as a 34-year-old despite a drop in his once-elite power-play production. The Caps are trying to cobble together a playoff-caliber roster, and that's a tough ask, given their depth chart. At least one of Rasmus Sandin or Martin Fehervary needs to show they're capable not just of playing alongside Carlson, but playing well. They're both projected as fringe second-pair guys, though.

27. Chicago Blackhawks

Current quality: 14th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-four defenseman

The good news for the Blackhawks is that they're working with an actual top pair. Alex Vlasic and Seth Jones are a terrific start, with Vlasic especially looking like a future defensive stud. If Kevin Korchiński can



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figure out what to do when the puck is not on his stick, the Blackhawks are working with a solid baseline.

It's the rest — and the fact that neither Vlasic nor Jones are franchise-level — that's holding the team back. To start climbing out of the basement, Chicago needs one of those three guys to turn into a legit star and to add some depth to support them. A true top-four guy should be at the top of this summer's wish list. If not, it's going to be another long season.

### 28. Columbus Blue Jackets

Current quality: 14th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defenseman

Zach Werenski is a really good player — but he's not elite, and he's not good enough to drag the rest of the Blue Jackets' blue line any farther than this spot. For example, we both like him more individually than Vlasic and Jones, but if he's part of a pairing with Damon Severson, Chicago's guys have him beat pretty handily.

Ivan Provorov, Adam Boqvist, Jake Bean, and Erik Gudbarnson all carry below-average projections without much reason for optimism, Provorov's early run in Philadelphia aside. Beyond that, David Jiricek has pedigree, but he played just 43 games as a rookie last season.

### 29. St. Louis Blues

Current quality: 19th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defensemen

Collectively, we're getting tired of talking about the Blues' blue-line woes. Between Colton Parayko, Justin Faulk, Torey Krug and Nick Leddy the Blues don't really have a top four problem — they have a star-power problem. None of the four can be seriously counted on as a top-pair threat on a playoff team, and it's hard to move up the ranks given that constraint. Getting a legitimate top-pair defenseman with offensive ability to play with Parako this season is a big priority.

### 30. Detroit Red Wings

Current quality: 5th percentile

Looking for: Franchise player, top-pair defenseman, top-four defensemen

This isn't meant to be an indictment of Moritz Seider — we believe in him as a future franchise-type defender, even with some so-so projections for this season. It is, however, an indictment of the players Detroit has surrounded him with. There's not a second-pair type in the bunch (Jake Walman probably comes the closest). Seider alone is good enough to give Detroit the edge over, say, Anaheim, but he can't do it all by himself. Despite all the money Detroit has spent over the past few years, the Red Wings are still three top-four defensemen short.

### 31. Anaheim Ducks

Current quality: 8th percentile

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defensemen

This time next season, it wouldn't be a shock to see the Ducks as a big-time riser. Between Olen Zellweger and Pavel Mintyukov, the future looks very bright in Anaheim, as there are some clear internal solutions to the franchise's lack of true top-pair defensemen.

Right now, though? That's a tough sell. Cam Fowler and Radko Gudas are probably closer to second-pair caliber, and the depth behind the team's top group isn't helping.

The Ducks need to start seeing some growth across the board. They have good players, but they have a serious lack of great players.

### 32. San Jose Sharks

Current quality: 0th percentile (not a typo)

Looking for: Franchise talent, top-pair defensemen, top-four defenseman

Credit to Ty Emberson, a waiver claim (via the Rangers) who wound up looking like a legit NHL defenseman before a season-ending injury in March. Beyond him, the Sharks have a whole bunch of fringe guys — some of whom played huge minutes this season. Macklin Celebrini is on

the way, so mission accomplished, but the less said about this group, the better.

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The Athletic / NHL legacies and hockey dads: How Tij Iginla and Byron Ritchie are preparing for the NHL Draft

Thomas Drance

Jun 25, 2024

Byron Ritchie jotted out a quick note on his phone and sent off a text to Jarome Iginla, his former Calgary Flames teammate.

Ritchie's son Ryder was mired in a goal-scoring slump, and Ritchie asked Iginla if he could watch a few of his son's shifts. "Just see if you're seeing something different than I am," Byron asked.

It was one hockey dad asking another for advice, but in truth, less personal versions of this type of exchange are commonplace for Ritchie and Iginla. The two former NHL forwards played together in Calgary for two seasons nearly 20 years ago. They both made their offseason homes in the Okanagan, a picturesque locale in the interior of British Columbia that's popular among NHL players.

In August 2006, following their first year as teammates in Calgary, Ritchie's wife, Maria Johansson, and Jarome's wife, Kara Iginla, both gave birth to sons. Ryder was born on Aug. 3. Tij Iginla arrived the very next day.

Now the two 17-year-olds are top NHL prospects heading into this weekend's NHL Draft in Las Vegas and working through the pressures of draft eligibility together at RINK Hockey Academy in Kelowna. Jarome Iginla coaches the academy's U18 team — including his son Joe, who made his WHL debut as a 15-year-old this season — while Byron Ritchie works with players at all levels as a skills development coach.

So when Iginla watched Ryder's shifts in late November, he came back with a simple suggestion: Turn off your brain.

"As a guy who loves to score and wants to score, it's all you think about when you're not doing it," Ryder says. "Oh, I haven't scored in six games," and then, "Oh no, it's been seven now."

"So I'm sitting at home eating dinner and I can't stop thinking about getting that goal."

Then Iginla called and told Ryder to do something to take his mind off hockey. "Don't think about the game," he told him. "Read. Go for a movie. Just be a kid. Get away from things for a bit."

Though he was a fearsome power forward during his playing days, Iginla takes a patient, measured approach to developing young players — including his sons Joe and Tij, and his daughter, Jade, all high-level hockey prospects.

"It's hard when you're in it as a player," Iginla says. "You want to just work harder, work harder. Just keep pushing, you know, break through. But sometimes the best thing is to find something else. Give your brain a rest."

Iginla and his family settled in Boston after his Hall of Fame playing career concluded in 2017.

With three young children, all ambitious athletes, sports were the primary factor in their decision. Boston had more options for high-level baseball and hockey with easier travel. And just as his children got more into hockey, Jarome found an outlet that helped him adjust to life after the NHL.

"You've heard it lots from retired players, but it's a big adjustment to go from playing and all that comes with it," he says. "Having to be everywhere, getting to enjoy the competition, and the energy of the game and the wins and losses and just being around the game. It was a big adjustment that first year, but being able to coach really helped."



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While Jade played prep hockey and eventually headed to Shattuck St. Mary's in Minnesota, Jarome became a co-coach for Tij and Joe's hockey teams.

In the summers, Iginla will rent ice for his three children: Tij, pictured here with his dad, Joe and Jade. (Courtesy of Jarome Iginla)

"Every night we had a practice or a game, so that kept me busy and kept me part of it," Iginla says. "I love the game and it was nice to be able to share that, yes with my own kids, but it was also competitive hockey, so it gave me a chance to share it with other kids that want to get better and are into it."

Eventually, the lure of moving back to Western Canada took hold. Jade was being recruited to play Division 1 college hockey. His sons were serious about pursuing an NHL path, and Jarome wanted them to play in Canada's Western Hockey League.

"You know our job as parents is to try and help them," Iginla says, "but also to make sure they keep their options open with their schooling. We believe, though, that if you want it, you work towards it and give it your best shot."

The combination of significant ice time for aspiring athletes and the educational side of it in the Western Canadian Academy system appealed to the Iginlas.

"So I spoke with Byron, and we took the opportunity," Iginla says.

Working together came naturally for the former NHL teammates.

"We go back 30 freaking years," Ritchie says, noting that they had played U17 hockey together.

"You always have that kind of connection with your teammates. And then you have kids one day apart, right? ... We just kept in touch."

The Iginlas enrolled all three kids at RINK, and Jarome joined the academy as a youth coach and began working with his former teammate. Meanwhile, Tij joined a U18 team and played on a line with Ryder.

"Byron and Jarome are so in tune with trying to develop the modern hockey player," says RINK executive director Mako Balkovec. "The fact that they have kids here too gives them a vested interest and I think it's why they bring a certain joy in working with other players, too."

"Byron is very intense, similar to the type of player he was. He's into it, very demanding. And it shows in how his teams play. And then for the kids, once they get past the — 'Oh, wow, that's Jarome Iginla' — of it, he's so invested in working with young players. It's just an incredible opportunity."

In the winters, especially when Iginla was still playing in Calgary, he'd come home after games and flood his backyard to maintain a rink for his children.

"It was pretty peaceful," he recalls. "I'd get back at midnight, coming off the road, the stars are out and it's so quiet out there. Then once you start putting the water on, you start to take pride in it. Make sure it's not bumpy, make sure the kids don't complain. It was actually a good stress reliever."

In the summers, and to this day, Jarome will rent ice for himself and his three children. They'll run drills, do some skills work, and then play two-on-two.

The teams are always the same: Jarome and his youngest son, Joe, against Jade and Tij.

"In the winter outdoors, we'd play two-on-two all the time, no goalie, so you have to go bar down, and me and Jade are always a team against Joe and Dad," Tij recalls.

"Usually me and Jade won," Tij adds confidently. "Our record was pretty good."

Tij and Ryder, who were born one day apart in the summer of 2006, share a high-octane pace and highly skilled play style. (Courtesy of Jarome Iginla)

"For a long time, I was able to manipulate who wins, just try a little harder, try a little less, and share the wins around because the kids would get so mad," Iginla says.

"Then ... Jade and Tij started getting better. Near the end there, Tij was 14 and Jade was 16 and I couldn't control it anymore. I wasn't as good in tight spaces anymore. People would say 'What do you mean, you can't beat them?' Well, come on, I couldn't body check them! And Tij and Jade were just too good in those tight spaces."

"I'd start coming in at the end of the day and Joe would be so mad that we hadn't won in a while, and now my wife, Kara, is mad at me, like 'Why aren't you ever winning?' and I'd have to tell her 'I'm trying!'"

What started as a pair of former NHLers and committed hockey dads coaching their own kids has evolved into something more.

Tij and Ryder share a high-octane pace and highly skilled play style. It's partly why Tij, ranked as the ninth-best North American skater by NHL Central Scouting ahead of the draft, is considered a likely top-10 pick. Ryder should hear his name called late in the first round or early in the second.

"Growing up and as you get older, coaches tighten it up a little," Tij says, "but my dad and Byron have a good understanding of development. You might make the odd mistake, but what matters is hustling back when you do."

"That's the thing about my dad. He looks at what's changed in the game. He's not stuck in any old-school ways. He's always on his iPad looking at stuff, looking at new drills and skills."

That's another shared trait between the two dads. Their active group chat with RINK staff includes tons of clips from all levels of hockey, a flowing and constant conversation about the game's evolution, new drills, debating the value of the newest fad in skills development.

Byron, for example, honed his approach as a skills coach in conversation with his CAA colleague Jim Hughes.

In addition to his work at RINK, Byron Ritchie leads recruiting and player development in Western Canada for CAA. (Courtesy of Byron Ritchie)

"I think small-area games, not just two-on-two cross-ice, but there's a lot of different small-area games and competitive small-area games where players have to turn their brains on to find open ice," he says. "Put nets in odd places, crazy things like that, three-on-twos and four-on-threes and the offensive team is outnumbered. Those tweaks, I think, help trigger the brains of skilled players and challenge them to make plays and find space."

Ultimately the impact of the Iginla-Ritchie partnership at RINK Hockey Academy has expanded beyond the development of their own sons. At this point, some of the most intriguing young players on the continent — including probable 2026 first overall pick Gavin McKenna and Wisconsin-bound offensive defender Chloe Primerano, probably the best women's hockey prospect to ever come out of Western Canada — are training at RINK and billeting with the Ritchie family.

"He pushes me, and I love it," says McKenna of the relationship he's built with Ritchie. "He's my agent, he's been my coach, I live here during the summer. He's been through it all himself, so he's helped me understand how hard I need to work, even how I have to eat, to get to where I want to go."

The draft is the culmination of a long-held dream for top hockey players and their families, but it also represents the beginning of the journey.

For Ryder and Tij, and their dads, however, there's also a sense of relief that will come with the start of a new chapter.

"It's a lot of pressure in your draft year and I remember it well," Jarome says. "When you're getting drafted it's a unique thing, because you're constantly getting critiqued and everyone is watching and judging. It's part of the game, but in your draft year, it just feels like everything is magnified."

"Both Ryder and Tij have done a good job at it, but it's nice as a parent to know that they're almost through it."

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The Athletic / Why Ivan Demidov is the 2024 NHL Draft's second-best prospect

By Scott Wheeler

5m ago

Ivan Demidov is the second-best prospect in the 2024 NHL Draft and before the end of this piece, I'm going to convince you, using a combination of video and data, of his case.

Before I jump in, though, let's start with the case against him.

The common arguments against Demidov as the second-best prospect in the draft posit that he's an average-sized winger, he's got an unconventional skating stride, and that his projection is complicated by the fact that he hasn't played pro hockey this year or international hockey since his five-in-five showing as a 15-year-old at the 2021 Hlinka Gretzky Cup. And there's the Russian factor associated specifically with his being signed to SKA.

I think each of those arguments against him stands on varying degrees of shaky ground.

I'll dive in on the skating mechanics in my review of the tape, but I'll quickly touch on the rest here.

For starters, his official NHL Central Scouting listing after they measured him last week at Gold Star's pre-draft showcase, however, placed him at 192 pounds and nearly 6-foot-0.5. Though I wasn't able to attend the camp due to a scheduling conflict, all I heard from the scouts I spoke to who were in attendance was that he looked solid and presented really well. Even before his visit to Fort Lauderdale to meet with NHL clubs, it was becoming a theme in conversations I was having with teams, too, with multiple scouts getting glowing reports from Russia about his work ethic on and off the ice.

We also do have a larger sample size of Demidov against pros than people usually give him credit for. Though Demidov is scoreless on three shots in an average of 7:33 in ice time across six KHL regular-season games the last two seasons, he also outplayed Matvei Michkov in KHL preseason play and at the Sochi Hockey Open (an August tournament that features KHL clubs and the Russian U25 national team) to earn a roster spot on SKA in the fall. He actually registered a point in each KHL preseason and Sochi Hockey Open game he played this season, finishing SKA's exhibition schedule with nine points in a combined seven games while playing a little more than 14 minutes per game. Six of those nine points were primary and across those seven games, he averaged just under five shot attempts and three shots on goal per game. He also finished plus-3 in those seven games. I believe that had he not injured his knee in his first second-tier VHL game of the season, he would have likely played more hockey at the pro level — and I believe he would have been successful there if not for having to return to junior once he got back.

The lack of best-on-best play internationally might be the biggest non-factor of the bunch for me. Anyone who has watched Demidov play for any amount of time should come to the fast conclusion that he would have torched a couple of U18 worlds by now, and would have made a ton of plays against U20 opposition at the world juniors in Gothenburg. I have zero doubt international play would have elevated his cache, not lowered it. Zero.

While there is truth to the struggles some NHL teams have had in dealing with SKA, and Demidov's situation does have the added layer of his brother also playing for the organization, I believe the Russian factor concerns are also overstated. Demidov has told everyone who has asked that he hopes to come to the NHL after his contract expires, his agent Dan Milstein is notorious for getting his guys to North America, and there are still plenty of players who've left SKA for the NHL (Andrei Kuzmenko, Artem Zub, Alexander Barabanov, Kirill Marchenko, Vasily Podkolzin and Marat Khusnutdinov just to name a recent few, with Matvei Michkov and Alexander Nikishin soon expected to follow).

Are wingers at less of a premium than centres and defencemen? Sure, but I'd caution that that's a dangerous starting point to operate from.

Ultimately, if you can live with the above context — and I think teams now can — then I think the tape and the data make the decision for you.

Here's why.

The data

I'll be brief here because the case is pretty definitive. Demidov has one of the strongest pre-draft statistical profiles ever out of Russia. Some will argue that the MHL has watered down as it has added teams over the years, and while that's true, even within the context of more recent history, his back-to-back regular-season MVPs and 60-points-in-30-games year are close to singular (I actually think the fact Michkov was drafted just last year hurts him because if there was more time between them we'd likely be talking about him as a rarer player). The argument that devalues today's MHL also weakens side-by-side the fact that when the league's lower competition was weeded out by the playoffs, his production persisted at a singular level, leading SKA to an MHL championship and leading the playoffs in goals (11), points (28) and plus/minus (+19) despite his postseason being cut short in Game 4 of the final (it was really more like 28 points in 16 playoff games than 17 because he only played 3:05 in the 17th).

In Byron Bader's model, which adjusts for league, he earns a rare "superstar" tag. In the data, he actually presents closer to Celebrini than he does to the top D in the class in Zayne Parekh, Zeev Buium and Artyom Levshunov, players who also had among the best-ever seasons in the OHL and NCAA for players their age.

According to Bader's model, the number of players who've ever looked like Demidov does below is, well, an exclusive list of the best prospects in the sport's history. That's not hyperbole. I messaged Bader before running this to see who the next closest comps were to the five almost impossible-to-believe players listed as his best comps below. The names he said would be next? Connor Bedard, Jack Eichel, Jack Hughes. "Basically a list of straight superstars. (Phil) Kessel is the worst one."

Note: If Kessel is the floor of the statistical profile, we're still talking about a player who leads the 2006 draft class in goals (413) and sits third in points (992).

The tape

Note: Demidov wears No. 11 in all clips.

At the centre of Demidov's game is his handling ability. Any evaluation of him starts there.

He's the most purely-skilled on-puck handler in the draft for me (with Beckett Sennecke and Trevor Connelly as the only two who are even close, and Berkly Catton, Macklin Celebrini and Tij Iginla after them) and one of the best I've ever seen at this age.

He beat more players and goalies one-on-one this year than any other player in the draft and possesses an uncanny ability to make guys miss. His style is a little less head-on than Sennecke, who goes directly at guys and tries to beat them with pure puck skill rather than beating them laterally with pulls and side-steps like Demidov (Sennecke's style will be the harder of the two to replicate up levels).

Here are half a dozen flashes of that brilliant handling ability resulting directly in goals to whet your appetite.

When they don't result in goals, his ability to force opposing players to bite on those lateral moves also results in a ton of drawn penalties. Here are just a few examples:

Demidov is more than just the ultra-talented puck-on-a-string winger, though, too. It sets his ceiling high, but the rest of his tools will help him reach it.

He's got excellent east-west vision and makes a ton of plays across the slot line to the weak side of coverage, whether that's finding the trailer, picking teams apart on the power play, or waiting for a guy to get open backdoor:

He makes a lot of little low-to-high plays from below the goal line like these:

Though he's not an explosive skater or quick twitch accelerator and some wonder if he goes to his heel-to-heel skating mechanic too much, I've argued all season that he's got good speed and I've seen him create enough breakaways, get enough steps out wide and make enough plays



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off the rush like these to be confident in where I've landed on his skating as a whole:

If that montage wasn't enough, here's one more outside-speed moment into a drawn penalty for good measure:

He's creative and will try things like this little play off of his skate atop the line:

Or this inventive little spin off the wall:

His ability to get off the wall and to the middle is elite.

He'll take pucks to the net:

His instincts are to find middle ice instead of drifting to the perimeter:

When he can't beat his guy to the middle with the puck he'll play in give-and-gos and beat his guy off the puck to middle ice:

When he doesn't have a natural lane to that ice himself, he'll draw two guys and then make a soft play into the open space they leave behind:

His shot is accurate, which makes him a threat off the flank on the power play as more than just the crafty handler/passer type.

He's comfortable going to his one-timer, which comes off strong even if he's not Cole Eiserman or Alex Ovechkin from there:

He shoots and scores low a lot, rarely missing the net as a result (here's a good look at that heel-to-heel skating mechanic I mentioned he goes a lot to as well):

His game isn't just about the gift for offence and play creation that he has, either.

I actually quite like Demidov's off-puck play and defensive habits.

He'll win lanes and body positioning off of faceoffs (an important responsibility as a winger):

He's got a great sense of timing and often arrives at pucks exactly when he should. Watch how patient he is to sit back on the two times he arrives at a pass in this sequence (the first one bounces past him but the second time it pays off):

He's got a good stick and disrupts a lot of passes like this:

He fills space and intercepts a lot of pucks like this:

He tracks back consistently and will hustle to lift pucks on back pressure like this:

He wins lost battles on re-takes like this (notice how, after bobbling this puck and losing stick position, he works to regain it and gets his foot in):

His battle level is consistently good (he's not going to dominate that way, but he'll contribute).

His hands are on display in another beautiful finishing moment here but I actually decided to include this clip because I liked the way he got up and re-engaged in the battle at the start of this sequence:

He keeps himself engaged and finishes his routes after he gets rid of a puck, an extremely important detail that is on display here (where many young players straighten up after passing here, he stays on his rail and pushes through to the far post):

He'll take a hit to make a play (and in this case draw a penalty):

He gets on pucks and finds them:

He consistently follows through to get stick on puck. This sequence is particularly telling of his stick detail at an early age. Here, he twice disrupts an attempt to clear and also gets up and under a stick to disrupt a third attempt:

When he tracks forward, he challenges guys head-on instead of blowing by them, another important habit. Here are two different examples of that, the second resulting in a "lucky" goal except for the fact he created his own luck by forcing the turnover at the top of the zone because he met the opposing player head-on:

Over the course of a game, those things drive his offence just as much as his ability to create magic.

That familiar five-hole flank shot is pretty here, sure, but it's his board play in the corner that I like:

Same idea here. We remember the nice finish here but it's his defensive play at the top of the offensive zone that sets it up:

And when a combination of things I've touched on come together, it's a beautiful thing. Here's the handling, the interior approach, and the timing all coming together across different moments in a 10-second span:

I rest my case, your honor.

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The Athletic / Debating Cole Eiserman, Beckett Sennecke and the top forwards of the 2024 NHL Draft

1m ago

By Max Bultman, Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler

The calling card of the 2024 NHL Draft class may be on the blue line, but that doesn't mean this year's class is light on forwards. Between expected top pick Macklin Celebrini, skilled Russian Winger Ivan Demidov and WHL dynamos Berkly Catton and Cayden Lindstrom, there's plenty of potential star power up front.

But that doesn't mean The Athletic's prospect writers, Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler, agree about which forwards belong at the top of the class.

So today, we asked them to debate some of the more divisive forward prospects on their respective lists.

Max Bultman: We already had you two debate Ivan Demidov at length, when you discussed the Blackhawks' decision at No. 2. So let's start this round with a much more divisive scoring winger in this year's class: U.S. NTDP winger Cole Eiserman. Corey has him at No. 16 on his final ranking. Scott, you finished with Eiserman at No. 7.

Scott, what's your pitch for Eiserman as a top-10 pick?

Scott Wheeler: I think any conversation about Cole Eiserman has to start with the fact that he's the best scorer in the draft, and that goals come at a premium. Tij Iginla, Macklin Celebrini, Berkly Catton, Cayden Lindstrom, Michael Brandsegg-Nygard and even Emil Hemming are all guys who can really shoot the puck in this draft. None of them have the goal-scoring arsenal, nor the track record, that Eiserman does. His critics will compare him to NTDP alum Oliver Wahlstrom, who didn't reach his potential because the rest of his game never got there. Wahlstrom scored 72 goals in 125 games at the program. Eiserman scored 127 in 119 games. I think we're talking about a different level of finisher. And while I share some of the concerns people have about his B game, and his play selection, and his defensive habits, I've also seen him impose himself physically and block shots (he's also a better skater than Wahlstrom was at the same age).

He has also done it as an August 29 birthday who is just a little over two weeks away from 2025 eligibility. I expect him to continue to score at BU and score a lot of goals in the NHL.

Bultman: Corey, you're a little bit lower on Eiserman. First, do you agree that he's the best scorer in the draft? And second, what are your hesitations with him?

Corey Pronman: I think he is the best scorer, but I'm not convinced it's by a notable margin. I think Macklin Celebrini and Tij Iginla are just as natural goal scorers while having other great elements in their game. Eiserman may have the best power play one-timer in the draft though. That is where the concerns on his game are for me. He's deadly on the man advantage, but at even strength, he doesn't create enough offense for himself and others. It doesn't mean he doesn't create chances, he is very skilled and skates well and has solid vision, but I don't see him as a premium play-driver. He was in the background for me in too many games.



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Wheeler: I would say that the power play is a big part of deciding hockey games, but also that Eiserman's 33 non-power-play goals in 57 games this season were still tops at the NTDP (one more than James Hagens in one fewer game), so it's not as though he's had trouble scoring there either. He also just happened to outscore the field on his team by nearly five-to-one on the power play as well. I don't think you're drafting Eiserman to be a player driver or at the front of the bus. He's not going to be that. But I think there is room for growth in that area and there is also a long list of great scorers in NHL history who weren't either of those things and did their damage in moments.

Bultman: One more follow-up to you here, Scott: When you say you're not drafting Eiserman to be a play-driver or at the front of the bus, is that a statement that would give you pause for a top-10 pick?

Wheeler: Not necessarily, especially if the defining quality of the player is a game-breaking one. I don't think every player needs to check every box. Matvei Michkov isn't a bus driver but he has the unique offensive execution. Will Smith isn't a bus driver but he has the unique puck skill and craft. The list goes on. Kent Johnson isn't a bus driver. Cole Perfetti isn't a bus driver but he has the IQ piece. Trevor Zegras isn't a bus driver. Evan Bouchard and Luke Hughes weren't bus-driving D. Clayton Keller and Patrik Laine weren't bus drivers. All top-10 picks. Does it keep him out of the top five? Yeah, I think it should. He's not Michkov or Smith level. But I don't think it should preclude him from the top-10 conversation.

Bultman: Onto the next player you two are split on. Beckett Sennecke has been a big riser this summer, finishing at No. 16 for Scott and No. 7 for Corey. Corey, we'll start with you here. Why did Sennecke end up so high on your list?

Pronman: I would disagree that some of those players above aren't bus drivers! In particular Michkov, Hughes and Smith.

I think if you look at why Oshawa won so many games down the stretch, a lot of it was due to Colorado pick Calum Ritchie, but a lot of it also was due to Sennecke. He was so dynamic, especially in the playoffs. He has a rare combination of size, speed and elite puck skills. He's a highlight-reel machine. I also thought he was much more competitive and consistent as the year went on. His regular season production is a bit scary, but in context of the talent, playoffs and great 16-year-old season I'm not that concerned. I think he has the potential to be a legit top-line wing in the NHL.

Bultman: Scott, what's your read on Sennecke? Obviously you still have him ranked fairly high, but what keeps him out of that top-10 range?

Wheeler: I think it has more to do with the players in my top 10 than it does with a lack of belief in Sennecke's skill. He's one of the most talented players in the draft and his physical potential is nowhere near tapped out. That's exciting. He's right there with Tj Iginla and Co. for me even if they're slightly in front of him on my board, and I think those debates would come down to fit.

As far as top 10 goes, though, I just love the top five D on my board, and would lean D over winger on each of them. Add in Celebrini, Demidov and Lindstrom and all of a sudden you're at eight players. The other two guys in my top 10 are Catton and Eiserman, who've both just accomplished so much more to this point while also being among the draft's most talented players (just like Sennecke). I do think the glossiness of Sennecke's second half has forgotten some of the struggles/frustrations his one-on-one style created in the first half, too. Wing, some inefficiencies in his game, a statistical profile that doesn't have the same sample size as the others. Those things kept him just outside the top 10 for me, though I understand the case.

Pronman: I think Sennecke belongs in the grouping with Demidov. Demidov has more puck play, he's more skilled and smarter, but Sennecke is notably bigger and faster and has elite skill as well. To me he clears the boundary to be considered a premium wing prospect and merit a top-10 pick.

Bultman: Let's move into a player a little bit further down your lists, but who might be one of the most interesting profiles in this class. Dean Letourneau is a 6-6 right-shot center committed to Boston College, but he hasn't yet faced much high-level competition. Corey, you have him in your first-round range, though, ranked at No. 28. What do you see in Letourneau?

Pronman: The toolkit is rather unique. He's 6-foot-6, skates very well for his size and has offensive skill. How much offensive skill? Well, it's tough to gauge given he played prep hockey this season. You compare him to a lot of the recent high picks from St. Andrew's College and he compares very favorably. He's better than Jonathan Castagna, for example, who was a third-round pick by then-Arizona and looked good as a freshman in college. I could be wrong, but I saw him dominate enough even considering the level that he has a real chance to translate offense up levels. He has a chance to be a middle-six forward.

Bultman: Scott you've got him ranked a good bit lower, more in the mid-second round at No. 45. What's your read on Letourneau?

Wheeler: I certainly see the appeal of Letourneau. He's huge. He's a center. He has really very impressive finesse/handling/passing/shooting skills. He's a great athlete and a positive skater. There's a belief out there, though, too, that he's much too passive both offensively and defensively and frankly the multiple times I saw him live at SAC this year that was very evident. He doesn't impose himself or work to get pucks back like you'd like and there's a lot of standing around. He's definitely not your prototypical big man. I'm quite high on the offensive upside (I think it's real and he's the most talented player I've watched at SAC dating all the way back to Warren Foegele) but I also totally get some of the frustrations and questions people have not just about the level but also his style/drive on the ice. That was enough to slot him in the 40s instead of the 20s/30s for me (though he was in the 30s earlier in the year, a return viewing dropped him).

Bultman: Let's shift gears to a player who generated some buzz coming out of the U18 worlds. Corey, you rank Jett Luchanko up at 19. Scott, you have him at 31. Corey, what would be your pitch for Luchanko in the top 20 at a draft table?

Pronman: He has clear NHL speed, work ethic and his puck game is better than his stats suggest. On Guelph and Canada's U18 team, he was a play-driver and true playmaker. He can win a lot of battles, he is great in transition, he has hard area skill, and he can create for his teammates off the perimeter. Frank Nazar went top 20 and this guy is just as good, and I'd argue he may have more offense when it's all said and done.

Bultman: Scott, what kept Luchanko a bit lower for you?

Wheeler: I saw Luchanko play live a lot this year and always liked him but was never wowed by him. The skating, work ethic, athleticism, and playmaking instincts are all good. The skating is really strong in particular. He's a winning player type that teams like for good reason.

My hiccup with him was the lack of finishing and shot creation. He actually plays in the middle third and creates a lot of entries through the middle. But he's a very deferential player, often making the early pass and rarely holding pucks to create his own looks. At the OHL level, I wanted to see more of that. Is he going to be able to score more than 15-20 goals was a question I often asked myself when watching him. And while he's got those natural playmaking instincts, I wouldn't call him one of the most creative players in the draft or anything. He's going to have a good career as a middle-sixer in the NHL, though.

Bultman: Corey, going back to you here to finish. Would the goal scoring make you nervous for Luchanko? He had 20 in 68 OHL games this season.

Pronman: Mildly yes, but I think his playmaking is excellent. You watch how he creates off the perimeter in the OHL and for Team Canada at the U18s and he clearly has the touch and brain to make NHL plays. I don't think he's a natural finisher and may limit his offense a bit in the NHL but I do expect he's going to be a top OHL scorer next season and put any skill questions to rest.

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The Athletic / Ten overpriced NHL contracts teams could trade this offseason

By Harman Dayal



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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6h ago

Every offseason, teams are motivated to clear salary off the books or give one or two players a fresh start.

Many times it's because a club is in a cap crunch and can't address critical offseason needs until it creates flexibility. Or a player just may not be a fit for the team anymore, with both parties benefitting from a potential change of scenery.

This summer is no different — there are plenty of contracts teams will shop around. We covered a big chunk of those names last week in our list of buyout candidates, which included the likes of Conor Sheary, Jean-Gabriel Pageau, Jack Campbell, Cal Petersen, Jacob Trouba, Cam Atkinson, Justin Holl, Nate Schmidt, Joonas Korpi and Philipp Grubauer. Teams will scour the trade market for exit options on these types of players before considering the buyout route. Chris Johnston's trade board highlighted some other undesirable contracts that could get traded, including Jeff Skinner, Ilya Mikheyev, Reilly Smith, Torey Krug, Filip Gustavsson and Tanner Jeannot.

But there are more players on overpriced deals — closer to being a "slight overpay" than on an "albatross/anchor" of a contract — that teams could consider jettisoning this offseason. Here are 10 of those to keep an eye on.

Cody Ceci, Edmonton Oilers

Even though the Oilers have made it to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final, the right side of their blue line is a concern. Cody Ceci has handled a top-four role for large chunks of these playoffs and struggled mightily — Edmonton has controlled just 39.6 percent of five-on-five scoring chances and been outscored 18-12 during his minutes. It got so bad that he was a healthy scratch for Game 2 of the final.

There's no way the Oilers can roll into next season with Ceci playing next to Darnell Nurse. Edmonton should push to acquire a bona fide top-four righty this offseason and if that player is on a sizable contract, it'd make sense to clear some room by shipping out the final year of Ceci's deal, which carries a \$3.25 million cap hit. As it stands now, the Oilers are only projected to have around \$10 million in cap space with seven forwards, five defenders and two goalies signed for next season. Ceci's name was already swirling the rumor mill back in March when the club was considering a top-four upgrade.

It shouldn't be too challenging for the Oilers to find a suitor for Ceci because of his handedness, size and middle-of-the-lineup playing experience.

Radek Faksa, Dallas Stars

In a perfect world where the salary cap didn't exist, the Stars would keep Radek Faksa. The veteran 30-year-old forward is excellent defensively, plays a physical, gritty style, is a quality penalty killer and is an ace in the faceoff circle.

He may be a luxury that Dallas can't afford, however.

The Stars have around \$16.2 million in cap space but with only nine forwards, three defenders and a starting goaltender signed. A big chunk of that cash will need to be reserved for Thomas Harley, who's in line for a huge raise as an RFA after a monster breakout year. Extending Chris Tanev or finding a right-handed top-four shutdown replacement should be a top priority, too. There are also holes up front with Joe Pavelski retiring and Matt Duchene potentially walking as a UFA.

This is where shedding the final year of Faksa's \$3.25 million cap hit could do wonders. Paying a fourth-liner that type of money isn't the best use of capital given Dallas' needs further up the lineup.

Tristan Jarry, Pittsburgh Penguins

By the end of the season, Alex Nedeljkovic had wrested control of the starter's crease in Pittsburgh. Nedeljkovic played in 19 games from March until the end of the season compared to Tristan Jarry's 11. And because the Penguins made a surprising post-trade deadline push for the playoffs, these weren't meaningless, garbage-time games either. The stakes were massive. Jarry briefly missed time in early April due to illness, but Mike Sullivan continued rolling with Nedeljkovic as the No. 1 even when Jarry was healthy.

Do the Penguins have any buyer's remorse about the five-year, \$5.375 million AAV extension they signed him to last summer? This isn't the first time Jarry has faded down the stretch and his durability has historically been a concern. Last year's goalie market was very weak so there's a chance Jarry's original extension was partially motivated by the lack of alternative options and the pressure to make the playoffs in 2023-24 with their aging star core.

If Pittsburgh is concerned about how Jarry's contract will age, now would be the time to find an exit. The 29-year-old's long-term track record (four straight seasons of a .909 save percentage or better before 2023-24) is still strong enough that there'd likely be interest in him on the trade market. Plus, some of those cap savings could be used to address other roster needs, whether it's beefing up the top-six forward group or adding a shutdown top-four defender.

Rickard Rakell, Pittsburgh Penguins

It's wild how much things can change in a year.

In 2022-23, Rakell was the Penguins' second-best winger behind Jake Guentzel, piling up 28 goals and 60 points. This season, he fell to 15 goals and 37 points in 70 games. He was a big part of the Penguins' secondary scoring problem this year and wasn't driving play or contributing in other areas when he wasn't producing. Rakell's down year was the result of a horrible start where he mustered one goal in his first 20 games. He bounced back down the stretch with 10 goals and 19 points in 32 games but it was too little, too late.

Rakell is 31 and has four years left at \$5 million annually; it's a dicey contract.

On the other hand, maybe the Penguins believe Rakell can bounce back next season. The late-season surge he had coincided with some chemistry he built with newcomer Michael Bunting — Rakell, Bunting and Evgeni Malkin had dominant underlying numbers as a line down the stretch and outscored opponents 15-9 at five-on-five.

But ultimately, unless GM Kyle Dubas has full conviction that Rakell will bounce back, testing the market on him is a no-brainer.

Jesperi Kotkaniemi, Carolina Hurricanes

How much longer can the Hurricanes keep waiting for Jesperi Kotkaniemi to break out?

The talented, rangy Finnish center has yet to prove himself as a quality, everyday middle-six center over three years in Carolina. He appeared to be turning a corner in 2022-23 when he scored a career-high 18 goals and 43 points, but that was followed up by arguably the worst season of his NHL career where he picked up 27 points in 79 games. Kotkaniemi averaged just 11:01 per game in the playoffs, scoring one point in 11 games.

Carolina could preach patience if he was on an affordable contract, but the problem is he's already paid like an impact player at \$4.82 million for the next six seasons. Every dollar matters for Cup-contending teams — especially this offseason, when the Canes have a ton of expiring contracts — and Kotkaniemi simply isn't delivering enough value right now.

Kotkaniemi turns 24 in July, has the pedigree of being a top-five pick and is still only a year removed from a 43-point campaign, so even though his cap hit looks steep now, it could become fair value if he takes a step (or two) forward. The Canes have to quickly decide if they believe that breakout can happen on their team, otherwise, they're best served flipping the contract to a buyer who still believes in Kotkaniemi's upside. Because if he struggles again next season, this contract will likely become a lot more difficult to trade.

Andrew Mangiapane, Calgary Flames

Timing is often everything. Andrew Mangiapane was coming off a career-high 35-goal season in 2021-22 when he inked a three-year, \$5.8 million AAV extension. It proved to be a clear outlier as the 28-year-old winger hasn't hit the 20-goal mark since then and is now entering the final year of his contract.

Mangiapane produces five-on-five points like a bona fide top-six player but his overall point totals suffer because he can't produce on the power play (just seven power-play points combined over the last two seasons). He's an above-average play driver and can contribute on the penalty kill,



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too. Mangiapane doesn't produce enough to live up to his cap hit, but he's still a very useful player.

It seems unlikely that Mangiapane is part of the Flames' long-term plans, meaning he's a potential trade candidate from now until next year's deadline.

Ville Husso, Detroit Red Wings

Ville Husso's future hinges on whether the Red Wings — who were partially sunk by bad goaltending this past season — can land an upgrade in net. The 29-year-old was streaky during his first season in Detroit, rocking an .896 save percentage in 56 games. He was limited to just 19 games because of injuries this year.

GM Steve Yzerman said he "will look at the goalie market," and the Red Wings are reportedly interested in Linus Ullmark. If Detroit lands a starter, you can bet that the final year of Husso's contract at \$4.75 million will immediately be on the trade block, especially because the club has a quality backup in Alex Lyon who only costs \$800,000.

Husso would be an intriguing albeit expensive roll of the dice. A team short on goaltending could talk itself into believing Husso's numbers faded in the second half of 2023-24 because he was overused and that he might bounce back with better health next season.

All that said, there's also a decent chance that Yzerman simply signs a veteran No. 3 goalie instead of a big-name starter. In that case, Husso's highly unlikely to get traded.

Nick Jensen, Washington Capitals

At his best, Nick Jensen can definitely live up to his \$4.05 million cap hit. He's typically been a rock-solid two-way driver on Washington's second pair. The 33-year-old right-shot defender's play fell off hard this year, though.

Jensen lost his matchups across the board (in shots, chances and actual goals) by fairly wide margins. Why? One reason he looked so off may be that his skating — which is typically one of his best assets — declined in 2023-24. NHL Edge data shows that his speed bursts over 20 miles per hour and top speed fell compared to the year prior.

Washington's acquisition of PL Dubois signals that the club is likely going to be aggressive this offseason to keep the roster playoff competitive. The Caps currently have \$12.9 million in cap space (which could go up if T.J. Oshie lands on LTIR). One way to clear cap room to chase more high-end talent would be to move a right-shot defender since Washington already has John Carlson, Trevor van Riemsdyk, Jensen, Vincent Iorio and Ethan Bear under contract for next season.

Moving Jensen, who has two years left on his deal, or van Riemsdyk (\$3 million) could be a sensible option.

Cody Glass, Nashville Predators

Cody Glass broke out with 14 goals and 35 points in 72 games during his first full NHL season in 2022-23. It was a dream campaign for a player who'd been through tons of adversity since being drafted No. 6 by Vegas in 2017 and he was rewarded with a two-year, \$2.5 million AAV extension last summer.

This year, Glass battled multiple injuries and had an underwhelming 13 points in 41 games. He was a healthy scratch at times and sat for the Predators' entire first-round playoff series against the Vancouver Canucks. It's fair to wonder if he's a stylistic fit with Andrew Brunette's uptempo, speed-based system. Combine that with Barry Trotz's potential desire to acquire high-end scoring talent this summer and Philip Tomasino's expected full-time arrival next season and all of a sudden, Glass may be on the outside looking in for a 2024-25 lineup spot.

The Predators don't need to trade Glass for cap purposes, but depending on their forward plans this summer, they could explore moving him to provide both sides with a fresh start.

Marcus Johansson, Minnesota Wild

With just one year left at a \$2 million cap hit, Marcus Johansson's contract is pretty modest. The Wild don't have any margin for error with their spending because of the nearly \$15 million in dead cap charges they have as a result of Zach Parise and Ryan Suter's buyouts, however, and Johansson didn't live up to expectations this season.

The speedy winger only contributed 30 points despite being fed consistent top-six minutes. He didn't noticeably drive play or help the team aside from his underwhelming production. Minnesota is tight against the cap so if it can find a way to offload Johansson's \$2 million, that could immediately go toward finding a top-six upgrade.

Johansson is only a year removed from scoring 46 points, so the Wild should garner interest if they shop him. The 33-year-old has a full no-trade clause, though, meaning a potential move could take some convincing.

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The Athletic / Ranking every Stanley Cup Final in the cap era, and why Oilers-Panthers is already No. 1

Chris Johnston

Jun 24, 2024

SUNRISE, Fla. — Champions may walk together forever, but not every Stanley Cup Final remains in our collective memory for quite that long.

With an all-time Game 7 on tap between the Edmonton Oilers and Florida Panthers on Monday night, it's a good time to look back on the current era of championship series in the NHL.

Incredibly, there hasn't been a sweep in the Stanley Cup Final since the salary cap was introduced in 2005, and we've now had as many of those series go to a Game 7 as those that ended with a Game 5.

So, at the risk of disrespecting your most treasured Cup winner, here's a completely subjective ranking of every Stanley Cup Final in the NHL's salary cap era.

Having covered 18 of these 19 series, the rankings are based on my impression of the buzz at the time, the quality of teams, the quality of hockey played, the historical significance of the outcome and how much fun the series ended up being. Feel free to disagree and post your own favorite memories or even rankings in the comments section.

No. 19

2023: Vegas Golden Knights 4, Florida Panthers 1

Cup lifted: June 13, 2023, after Vegas won 9-3 in Game 5

Conn Smythe: Jonathan Marchessault

CJ's lasting impression: Not only was the outcome of this series never in doubt, it wasn't even close. The Golden Knights outscored the Panthers 26-12 on aggregate. While the celebration inside T-Mobile Arena popped throughout a clinching game in which Vegas piled on the goals, it lacked the drama and tension that tends to separate the Stanley Cup playoffs from other sporting events.

No. 18

2007: Anaheim Ducks 4, Ottawa Senators 1

Cup lifted: June 6, 2007, after Anaheim won 6-2 in Game 5

Conn Smythe: Scott Niedermayer

CJ's lasting impression: Another Final where the outcome was never really in question. Ottawa endured a lengthy wait for the start of the series after defeating Buffalo in the Eastern Conference final and never got back up to speed. It marked the first and only Stanley Cup victory for the Ducks organization.

No. 17

2021: Tampa Bay Lightning 4, Montreal Canadiens 1

Cup lifted: July 7, 2021, after Tampa Bay won 1-0 in Game 5

Conn Smythe: Andrei Vasilevskiy



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CJ's lasting impression: This was a truly weird series as the world was still emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, with games played before sellout crowds in Tampa and only a few thousand fans in Montreal because of government-imposed restrictions in Quebec. The Lightning were the much stronger team and got to celebrate a Cup victory along with family and friends inside a rocking Amalie Arena after winning the previous year by themselves inside the Edmonton bubble.

No. 16

2020: Tampa Bay Lightning 4, Dallas Stars 2

Cup lifted: Sept. 28, 2020, after Tampa Bay won 2-0 in Game 6

Conn Smythe: Victor Hedman

CJ's lasting impression: The most memorable moment of the COVID-19 Stanley Cup came when Steven Stamkos dramatically scored during one of the five shifts he was healthy enough to take inside the bubble. Even without fans, that popped inside the building! However, most of us would rather forget that tournament altogether. A serious grind for players and staff who had to live behind fences and go through daily COVID-19 tests, it's safe to assume most fans don't remember too much about a crammed championship series that saw six games played in 10 days so that they could get it over with as soon as possible.

No. 15

2012: Los Angeles Kings 4, New Jersey Devils 2

Cup lifted: June 11, 2012, after Los Angeles won 6-1 in Game 6

Conn Smythe: Jonathan Quick

CJ's lasting impression: The Kings had to wait a little longer for their first Stanley Cup win after going up 3-0 ... and then losing two games to New Jersey, prompting two more cross-continent trips. But it never felt in much doubt. Quick was virtually unbeatable that spring and kept the Devils to two goals or less in five of the six games played in that Final.

No. 14

2017: Pittsburgh Penguins 4, Nashville Predators 2

Cup lifted: June 11, 2017, after Pittsburgh won 2-0 in Game 6

Conn Smythe: Sidney Crosby

CJ's lasting impression: The third Stanley Cup of the Crosby/Evgeni Malkin era featured a lot of lopsided scores: 4-1, 5-1, 4-1, 6-0. The clincher was close, with Patric Hornqvist silencing Bridgestone Arena with the game's opening goal in the 58th minute, but most of the details from this series will be lost to time. The highlight was the incredible scene on Broadway, where thousands of fans gathered before and during every game played in Nashville to celebrate the organization's first and only appearance in a Stanley Cup Final.

No. 13

2016: Pittsburgh Penguins 4, San Jose Sharks 2

Cup lifted: June 12, 2016, after Pittsburgh won 3-1 in Game 6

Conn Smythe: Sidney Crosby

CJ's lasting impression: The long-awaited second Stanley Cup celebration for Crosby and Malkin came at the expense of the only appearance in the Final by Joe Thornton's Sharks. The series featured close games, but still it felt like the Penguins were largely in control throughout. This was also Phil Kessel's first Cup victory and saw one of the closest Conn Smythe votes ever with Crosby narrowly defeating his teammate.

No. 12

2018: Washington Capitals 4, Vegas Golden Knights 1

Cup lifted: June 7, 2018, after Washington won 4-3 in Game 5

Conn Smythe: Alex Ovechkin

CJ's lasting impression: The storylines sizzled as the expansion Golden Knights improbably reached the Cup Final in their first season while Ovechkin, Nicklas Backstrom and Co., finally broke through in their 13th after enduring so many heartbreaks before it. The joy on Ovechkin's face

when he finally got to hoist the trophy is easily recalled to this day. Washington reeled off four straight wins after dropping the series opener and promptly took the Stanley Cup to the nearby Las Vegas Strip to kick off a celebration unlike any we've seen since.

No. 11

2014: Los Angeles Kings 4, New York Rangers 1

Cup lifted: June 13, 2014, after Los Angeles won 3-2 in Game 5

Conn Smythe: Justin Williams

CJ's lasting impression: The biggest shame about this series is that it only lasted five games. Los Angeles captured three of those in overtime, including the clincher on an Alec Martinez goal in double overtime. That followed an overtime period featuring some of the most exciting back-and-forth hockey seen in any Cup Final game in recent memory. Electric stuff. This wound up being the only chance Rangers goaltender Henrik Lundqvist had to play for a championship and I'll always remember the look of disbelief on his face as he slowly removed his pads before speaking with reporters following an overtime loss in Game 2.

No. 10

2008: Detroit Red Wings 4, Pittsburgh Penguins 2

Cup lifted: June 4, 2008, after Detroit won 3-2 in Game 6

Conn Smythe: Henrik Zetterberg

CJ's lasting impression: The fourth Stanley Cup win for the heavily favored Red Wings in 12 years saw them overcome the disappointment of a triple overtime loss in Game 5 on a night where Joe Louis Arena was ready to celebrate. They got the job done two nights later at the old Igloo in Pittsburgh. This series saw Crosby compete in his first Stanley Cup Final at the end of his third NHL season, and he hung a photo of the dejected Penguins bench from the final buzzer in his gym that summer for extra motivation.

No. 9

2013: Chicago Blackhawks 4, Boston Bruins 2

Cup lifted: June 24, 2013, after Chicago won 3-2 in Game 6

Conn Smythe: Patrick Kane

CJ's lasting impression: Goals 17 seconds apart by Bryan Bickell and Dave Bolland stunned TD Garden and helped the Blackhawks claim another Stanley Cup. A series featuring two Original Six teams also included three overtime games and probably deserved the Game 7 it was heading toward before those quick strikes by the depth forwards from Chicago. Notably, Bruins forward Patrice Bergeron played Game 6 of this series with a partially collapsed lung, broken rib and torn cartilage and muscle tissue, plus a separated shoulder.

No. 8

2019: St. Louis Blues 4, Boston Bruins 3

Cup lifted: June 12, 2019, after St. Louis won 4-1 in Game 7

Conn Smythe: Ryan O'Reilly

CJ's lasting impression: The first Stanley Cup victory in Blues history required a gutsy Game 7 performance in Boston after they missed out on closing the deal on home ice in Game 6. It also came after the team sat in last place overall some 30 games into the regular season before catching fire. The back-and-forth Final saw O'Reilly score goals in each of the last four games while claiming the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP.

No. 7

2010: Chicago Blackhawks 4, Philadelphia Flyers 2

Cup lifted: June 9, 2010, after Chicago won 4-3 in Game 6

Conn Smythe: Jonathan Toews

CJ's lasting impression: Kane ended the NHL's longest active Cup drought at the time by scoring an overtime goal that only he and a handful of others initially realized was in the net. That stopped a Cinderella run by that Flyers team a couple of games short of a



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championship. It was a colorful, high-scoring series that saw Chris Pronger stealing game pucks after Chicago's first two victories and helped propel Toews into the "Triple Gold Club" at age 22. There will likely be at least four Hockey Hall of Famers from that Blackhawks roster when all is said and done.

No. 6

2015: Chicago Blackhawks 4, Tampa Bay Lightning 2

Cup lifted: June 15, 2015, after Chicago won 2-0 in Game 6

Conn Smythe: Duncan Keith

CJ's lasting impression: Led by the "Triplets Line," the Lightning were the new kids on the block and held their own against Toews, Kane and Co. In fact, the first five games of the series were each decided by a goal. It wound up being the first Stanley Cup won by the Blackhawks on home ice at United Center, and that electric night will be remembered for a huge storm in the area that delayed the arrival of the Stanley Cup for presentation by about 15 minutes. That resulted in a change of protocol that now sees the trophy arrive early for any potential clinching game.

No. 5

2006: Carolina Hurricanes 4, Edmonton Oilers 3

Cup lifted: June 19, 2006, after Carolina won 3-1 in Game 7

Conn Smythe: Cam Ward

CJ's lasting impression: The Hurricanes were on absolutely no one's radar as a Cup contender when the lockout ended, and they wound up ushering in a new style of up tempo play that suited rule changes at that time. The series featured a three-goal Hurricanes comeback in Game 1, a short-handed Fernando Pisani goal in overtime of Game 5 to keep Edmonton alive and saw Ward become the first rookie goalie since Patrick Roy in 1986 to lead his team to a Stanley Cup win.

No. 4

2022: Colorado Avalanche 4, Tampa Bay Lightning 2

Cup lifted: June 26, 2022, after Colorado won 2-1 in Game 6

Conn Smythe: Cale Makar

CJ's lasting impression: Tampa Bay's third straight appearance in the Final ended with the first championship for Avalanche stars Nathan MacKinnon, Makar and Gabriel Landeskog. Leaving aside a lopsided victory for each team, this series was tight and tense. The difference was two overtime wins by Colorado, including one in Game 4 where Nazem Kadri froze the clock in extra time while playing in his first game back from a broken thumb.

No. 3

2011: Boston Bruins 4, Vancouver Canucks 3

Cup lifted: June 15, 2011, after Boston won 4-0 in Game 7

Conn Smythe: Tim Thomas

CJ's lasting impression: This one is remembered more for the storylines than the quality of competition: Alex Burrows' bite, Thomas' refusal to pump Roberto Luongo's tires, the Aaron Rome suspension, Brad Marchand punching Daniel Sedin ... and so much more. It was nasty from the outset and ended with fans in Vancouver rioting in the streets. A lot of that shouldn't be celebrated, of course, but it also won't soon be forgotten. This also stands as the only Cup win for a Bruins core that was among the NHL's best for a decade.

No. 2

2009: Pittsburgh Penguins 4, Detroit Red Wings 3

Cup lifted: June 12, 2009, after Pittsburgh won 2-1 in Game 7

Conn Smythe: Evgeni Malkin

CJ's lasting impression: This was Crosby's first Stanley Cup and the end of an era for a Red Wings team stocked with Hall of Famers. It was also one hell of a series. In fact, it wasn't truly decided until Marc-Andre Fleury's diving save on Nicklas Lidstrom from the left faceoff circle in the

dying seconds. The Penguins dropped the first two games of the series and were outscored 17-14 on aggregate. That's how close it was.

No. 1

2024: Edmonton Oilers 3, Florida Panthers 3

Cup lifted: June 24, 2024

Conn Smythe: TBD

CJ's lasting impression: Is there some recency bias at play here? Possibly. But this first Final for Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl has made for a captivating two weeks in June, especially with the quality of McDavid's play and Edmonton's historic rally from an 0-3 hole in the series. With the Panthers trying to avoid losing a second straight Stanley Cup Final, history is at hand one way or another. Bring on Game 7!

The Athletic LOADED: 06.25.2024

1316019 Websites

ESPN / Panthers' journey from NHL punch line to Stanley Cup champs – ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

20–25 minutes

Jun 25, 2024, 04:20 AM

SUNRISE, Fla. -- Aleksander Barkov didn't just lift the Stanley Cup after defeating the Oilers in Game 7.

He lifted close to three decades of failures, embarrassments and frustration off the shoulders of the players, the fans and this franchise.

The Florida Panthers are Stanley Cup champions. Not a punch line. Not being mocked for meager attendance. Not wallowing in mediocrity, on and off the ice, as the team went 25 years between playoff series victories.

Oh, there could have been more embarrassment. Like, the most embarrassment. Florida nearly fumbled the bag against Edmonton, becoming just the third team in NHL history to blow a 3-0 Stanley Cup Final series lead to force a Game 7. They could have been the Atlanta Falcons in Super Bowl LI or Greg Norman in the 1996 Masters or the 1942 Detroit Red Wings, the only team in NHL history to lose the Stanley Cup Final after winning the first three games.

It would have been very "Florida Panthers" to have done that. But that's not who this franchise is anymore. They're not a joke. They're Stanley Cup champions.

It's wholly appropriate that Florida won the Stanley Cup against a Canadian team -- a nation that thought of the Panthers as either relocation bait or a team situated in a warmer climate in which to watch their own teams at significantly lower ticket costs; and that they eliminated the NHL-leading New York Rangers in the conference finals, the kind of esteemed Original Six team that is handed the respect the Panthers have clawed to earn.

Those teams came close to championships. The Panthers are the ones who finished the story, becoming just the third team in the past 40 years to win the Stanley Cup after losing in the Final in the previous postseason.

But perhaps most incredibly: The Florida Panthers -- the Florida Panthers! -- are now a prestige franchise in the NHL.

"It's pretty freakin' cool," defenseman Aaron Ekblad, who is second to Barkov in career games played as a Panther, said. "It wasn't easy those first few years. There was a lot of learning and growing. New GMs, new coaches ... that revolving door was tough, right? The fact that we're at this point now, where the expectation is to make the playoffs, and the expectation is to challenge for a championship, that's a really cool thing. I'm so happy to have been through it all with this franchise."



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Barkov stuck with them. Ekblad stuck with them. And more South Florida fans than you'd realize stuck with them, from the rat-tossing mid-1990s to their Stanley Cup parade this season.

WHEN FLORIDA WINGER Evan Rodrigues was growing up in Toronto, the media covered only Canadian teams and winning teams.

"So I would say I probably wasn't focused on the Panthers too much," the 30-year-old said.

Fellow Ontario native Ryan Lomberg, 29, remembered how the Panthers were covered on social media.

"I remember seeing pictures of the empty arena. Seeing all the red seats and seeing maybe a couple thousand fans. Being a kid from Toronto, I remember not really understanding how the contrast [with other teams] was so extreme," he said. "It doesn't even make sense to me how it was back then. The second I got here four years ago, the fans have been amazing. We have a strong following."

Florida's attendance woes were a league-wide punch line, and the franchise did nothing to discourage it.

"In 2004, while I was at college in Orlando, I met a guy who was a Lightning fan while I was watching the finals at a bar," Panthers fan David Roth said. "I told him I was a Panthers fan, and he looked at me with a look of absolute bewilderment and just said, 'Why?' As if it were so foreign a concept to be a fan of a team in Florida other than the Lightning."

In 2006, the Panthers were averaging over 4,100 free tickets handed out for each home game. In 2008, the team introduced the "First Timer" program, in which anyone with a valid Florida driver's license could get two free tickets to a game.

In 2010, after LeBron James made his decision to take his talents to South Beach, the Panthers responded by offering season tickets in the upper deck for \$6 per game, ostensibly in honor of his new uniform number with the Heat. Even that price point didn't generate enough sales -- the team announced that summer that it was going to tarp off 2,000 upper deck seats for most home games.

"When you go 25 years between playoff series wins, and then only make the playoffs a couple of times during that span, you lose a couple of generations of fans," Florida CEO Matthew Caldwell said.

Caldwell ascended to his position in 2016, having worked with owner Vinny Viola for several years.

Viola, who purchased the team in 2013, is one of a handful of majority owners during the team's turbulent history. They were founded as an expansion team by billionaire Wayne Huizenga, who initially wanted to name them the "Block Busters" in honor of his video rental chain.

He sold the franchise to pharmaceutical businessman Alan Cohen and former NFL quarterback Bernie Kosar in 2001. Cliff Viner became general partner in 2010, and made two moves that would set up Florida for later success: Hiring former Chicago Blackhawks GM Dale Tallon as head of hockey operations, and tasking him with rebuilding through the draft.

When Viola took over, the real work began to repair the Panthers' reputation. It started with the way they ticketed games.

"There was a lot of comp tickets. Just all these gimmicks to get people into the arena," Caldwell said. "That doesn't work in the long term. It really angers your season-ticket holders when you're giving out all these freebies and promotions to people off the streets."

With the team's attendance struggles came constant relocation speculation.

"There were all these rumors that we should be moved," Caldwell said. "That this new ownership group was fixing it up and trying to relocate to Quebec at the time. Those were the headwinds we had to deal with."

The chatter got so loud that owners Viola and Doug Cifu wrote a letter to fans in 2014 to assure them the Panthers weren't relocating. "Our plan is to build an organization that makes South Florida proud and to win the Stanley Cup in South Florida," they said.

But even the Panthers' own municipality was fueling relocation speculation. Broward County did a full analysis of the Panthers franchise,

and more broadly on whether or not there should be a hockey team in South Florida.

Apparently, the County found enough reasons to commit to the Panthers, agreeing to a new arena lease that put Viola's team on solid financial footing.

"It felt like a miracle at the time," Caldwell said. "But I think the county looked at it like, 'Hey, this is our last shot to see if the sport works here.'"

While the team was getting its financial house in order, Caldwell's next task was trying to energize a fan base that had sunk into malaise.

"When there's a fan base that's mad and angry and looking for a savior, that's actually a little encouraging. At least you know, they're out there and if you do the right thing, they're going to come back," he said. "The problem is that our fan base had become indifferent. There was still like 3,000 or so season-ticket holders that were loyal and wanted to see this happen. But a lot of the casual fans, former season-ticket holders, had given up."

Going 24 seasons between playoff wins will do that to a franchise. But Caldwell said getting their house in order off the ice was important for what would happen on the ice over the next decade.

WHEN THE COLORADO AVALANCHE celebrated their Stanley Cup Final sweep of the Panthers in 1996, they skated through an ever-increasing pile of plastic rats.

The rat-tossing stems from a legendary moment in 1995-96 when forward Scott Mellanby used his stick to exterminate a rat in the locker room before a game. He then used the same stick to score two goals that night -- accomplishing what his teammates called "a rat trick." To this day, rubber rats are available for purchase in the official Florida team store for \$5 each, with the store selling upward of 150 on game days.

The plastic rats were symbolic of what the franchise had created in its third NHL season: tradition. The Cinderella run bonded hockey fans and minted new ones. A few days after the 1996 Final, the Panthers hosted 15,000 fans at Miami Arena for a celebration of that season's success.

The hopes were high that this was the start of something special for the franchise -- then they didn't win another playoff series until 25 seasons later.

"It was brutal. There were so many years in the wilderness," Panthers fan Scott Kandell said. "We always seemed to have one or two good players with promise -- like Nathan Horton, Stephen Weiss and Olli Jokinen -- but ownership's answer was always to bring in older players past their prime to try to create depth getting over the hump. And it was always with terrible results."

From 1996 to 2022, the Panthers had the 25th-best regular-season points percentage (.513) and the worst playoff record (13-29) in the NHL. There were exhilarating highlights during that otherwise moribund run -- Pavel Bure's back-to-back goal-scoring titles, Roberto Luongo's Hall of Fame goaltending -- but also draft busts, young players traded too soon and a string of underwhelming teams.

"It wasn't fun being the butt of attendance jokes (you know, when those jokes were actually legitimate), never seeing a playoff series, owners literally handing tickets out for free," Panthers fan Max Horowitz said. "It was all a huge bummer to see considering the beginning of the franchise had such immediate results and promise going for it."

When Viola purchased the team, Jonathan Huberdeau (No. 3 overall, 2011), and Barkov (No. 2, 2013) had been drafted. Ekblad (No. 1) would join them in 2014.

But success didn't follow right away. There were five coaching changes. There was an internal struggle between Tallon and the "Computer Boys" -- the moniker given to the data-driven front office by some members of the Canadian media -- that bred an inconsistent philosophy and bad decisions, like letting Jonathan Marchessault slip away in the Vegas expansion draft.

At one point, Tallon was demoted as GM in 2016, then reinstated in 2017.

But it was Tallon's presence in 2019 that helped the Panthers achieve an important turning point in their path to success: luring Joel Quenneville to



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coach the team. Tallon had previously hired him to coach the Blackhawks.

After Chicago fired Quenneville, the Panthers swooped in with a significant financial offer and the chance to work with Tallon again. He accepted.

"He was obviously a hot commodity at the time coming out of Chicago," Caldwell said. "When we were able to land him, I think a lot of people said, 'Wow, you know, Joel can go anywhere and he picks Florida.' We certainly offered a good contract, but other big franchises wanted him, too. And then we signed Bob."

Florida handed two-time Vezina Trophy winner and free agent goalie Sergei Bobrovsky of the Columbus Blue Jackets a seven-year deal, with an annual average value of \$10 million, in summer 2019. In the past, the franchise struggled to attract free agents. Now, one of the top ones had chosen them.

Tallon was fired in 2020 after 10 seasons with the team.

"When we purchased the Panthers in 2013, we did so with a singular goal: to win a Stanley Cup. We have not seen our efforts come to fruition," Viola said at the time.

Florida had 23 interviews for the general manager job. Caldwell said they "scoured the Earth" to find the right candidate. They found him in Columbus: assistant GM Bill Zito, a former agent, was brought on to run the Panthers.

The team showed improvement under Quenneville, although they still couldn't advance past the first round.

And then, on Oct. 28, 2021, the Quenneville Era ended.

Quenneville resigned as head coach of the Panthers following a meeting with NHL commissioner Gary Bettman about his involvement in the Blackhawks' sexual abuse case.

An investigation by the law firm Jenner & Block looked into the allegations that former video coach Brad Aldrich sexually assaulted and harassed player Kyle Beach during the team's 2010 Stanley Cup run. The investigation revealed that Quenneville was aware of the situation and took part in at least one meeting regarding the allegations during the 2010 postseason.

Quenneville had previously said he only learned of the allegations in the summer of 2021 "through the media."

Caldwell said the Panthers' forward momentum as an organization could have been "100% derailed" by Quenneville's resignation, as he had two additional seasons worth over \$15 million total left on his contract.

"We had this great coach and we were blindsided by all of it. We started the season 7-0 and then the news broke," Caldwell said.

Associate coach Andrew Brunette stepped in as interim coach, and led the Panthers to their first Presidents' Trophy with the league's best record. He also coached them to their first playoff series victory since 1996, over the Washington Capitals. But after the Panthers were swept out by the Tampa Bay Lightning in the second round, Brunette wasn't retained.

### ENTER PAUL MAURICE.

He had resigned as coach of the Winnipeg Jets in December 2021, suggesting the team needed a different voice. He wasn't sure if he'd get another head-coaching job and was content with that.

Maurice was in the midst of "four phenomenal days of fishing" when Zito called him. They started talking hockey, and immediately connected.

"I was good, right? I had given all that I thought I had to give, certainly been fortunate in the game and received far more than I gave," Maurice said. "But there's just these strange little things that meant Florida was right, that it was where I was supposed to be next."

The Panthers hired Maurice on June 22, 2022. By this time, Zito was deep into shaping a championship roster.

His first move as general manager was a stabilizing one: trading for Penguins forward Patric Hornqvist, a Stanley Cup champion who ended up being a culture-developer for Florida.

Then came banger after banger: signing Carter Verhaeghe as a free agent; trading for defenseman Brandon Montour and winger Sam Reinhart from Buffalo; getting center Sam Bennett from Calgary; snagging defenseman Gustav Forsling off waivers, a player who Maurice recently said is "the best in the world" in the style that he plays.

Then came the big swing, one month after hiring Maurice: trading Huberdeau and defenseman MacKenzie Weegar to Calgary for star forward Matthew Tkachuk, whom Zito called a "generational talent" after the deal.

"Our build was gradual, and then when Bill got here, it's been like a turbo boost," Caldwell said.

It wasn't just that Tkachuk would be a star player for the Panthers -- carrying them to the Stanley Cup Final last season and playing a vital role in their success in this run -- but that he committed to the Panthers with a contract that runs through 2029-30.

"I think we are all very proud to be a part of that culture shift. It used to be that players would come and kind of fade away and end their career here," Lomberg said. "Now it's where the big dogs like Matt Tkachuk want to come and want to establish themselves and build that legacy. So we're exceptionally lucky to be a part of the Florida Panthers and extremely proud to be where we're at."

For years, a laughingstock. Then suddenly a destination. Now, finally, a champion.

ZITO REMEMBERED THE FEELING after the 2023 Stanley Cup Final.

The Panthers had a miraculous run through the Eastern Conference: shocking the Bruins, rolling through the Maple Leafs and then sweeping the Hurricanes. But injuries and ineffectiveness had them fall short to the Golden Knights, losing in five games.

"I can tell you how rotten it felt going home empty-handed. How everyone had that feeling in their stomach," Zito said.

That dissatisfaction was reflected in training camp. "Paul's camps are really intense and a lot of hard work. You can't quit at any time," Barkov said.

Tkachuk's one-word assessment: "Brutal."

But Maurice said that it was about the players coming to camp with an all-business attitude. It was no longer about hoping to make a Stanley Cup Final -- it was expected to be there again, and just about figuring out the best path to get there.

"We have that bitter taste in our mouth still, and our mindset this year is completely different than last year, when it was a little bit 'happy to be there and enjoy the experience,'" Bennett said. "This year, it's all business. We have one goal in mind, and we're not going to be satisfied until we accomplish that."

One critical change in their mindset came because of injury: Ekblad and Montour missed the start of the season after surgery. That encouraged the team's leadership to rededicate the Panthers defensively. They went from 21st in the league last season in goals-against average (3.32) to tied for first this season (2.41).

The work they did in the playoffs against star opponents reflected that commitment. Through Game 3 of the Stanley Cup Final, the Panthers didn't give up a 5-on-5 goal to McDavid, Leon Draisaitl, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins or Zach Hyman; nor did they give up one in prior playoff series to Artemi Panarin, Chris Kreider, Mika Zibanejad, David Pastrnak or Nikita Kucherov.

"For as many offensive guys we have on the team, we're a defense-first team," Tkachuk said.

The constant in their defensive effort was Bobrovsky.

"It's phenomenal just to watch him work every day. He makes all these saves, and he's always in the right position it seems like during the games, and that's not by accident. It's because of how dialed in he is in his preparation," trade deadline acquisition Kyle Okposo said. "I think that's been the most fun part for me: just watching him every day and how it's translating to the games."



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There was a time when Bobrovsky was seen as an overhyped, overpaid netminder who was crushed by the weight of his contract. Now, he's Playoff Bob.

Perceptions change. Just ask the Florida Panthers.

ZITO STARTED TO NOTICE the increased interest in the Panthers after last season.

"When I walked the dog the first couple years, no one said a word to me," he said during a media availability with Maurice. "Now the neighbor sort of knows who I am."

"They stopped calling the cops on you?" the coach asked, deadpan.

"Yeah," Zito said, laughing. "And you're starting to see more and more Panthers stuff. It's wonderful. It's really exciting for the game."

This is the moment for which Viola, Caldwell and the Panthers' ownership team have been aiming. This is the moment toward which Zito has been building. Florida winning the Stanley Cup is the culmination of their work to change the perception, vibe, personnel and success of this team.

"It's really nothing short of ... well, 'thrilling' is probably a little too much," Zito said. "But as someone who grew up loving the game and never having played in the NHL, to see the fans and to hear from your friends -- 'Oh, I went there and I couldn't get in because it was packed' -- is amazing."

Barkov has waited his entire career for it.

"It's the best time of my life right now. I'm enjoying every single day and making these playoff runs," he said.

The Panthers were 29-45-8 in Barkov's first season. They had two different coaches. Their leading scorer was Nick Bjugstad.

A decade later, they're Stanley Cup champions.

"There's a cycle in the NHL. That's true of the great franchises, too. We used to go into Chicago and there's 5,200 people in that building. Detroit for a while had to give away a car a game to get people to the game," he said. "Some of these phenomenal franchises. But they have to be built, and then I guess they have to be maintained. We're hopeful we're building it now."

Cup in hand, the Panthers are now faced with an equally challenging task: sustaining success.

"In sports, everything's about consistency," Caldwell said. "If you just have one good season, it's great. But the market's smart. They want to make sure that you're going to be good for a couple of years, you know?"

Panthers fan Jeffrey Alterman agrees.

"You know South Florida's sports reputation," he said. "We are a winning town. If you're winning, we are coming. So they have to keep winning."

Rodrigues feels the franchise has turned the corner. It's now a destination for players and will continue to be one.

"I think if you get the right people involved, and you build a place where people want to come, they'll come," he said. "Look at our new practice facility. It's state-of-the-art. If you're between a couple places and you come down here and look at our facility and then you're in South Florida, it's hard to say no to. I've really enjoyed it this year, and I won't take away, though, that winning is probably the biggest thing."

The Panthers have seen how fleeting success can be in the NHL, going 25 years between the rat-tossing euphoria of their 1996 Stanley Cup Final run to their next playoff victory. In between, they squandered momentum, wasted good faith and alienated generations of fans.

But they say it'll be different this time.

"Winning it is the pinnacle of everything we've been talking about over the last 10 years. I think we've already established a lot of credibility, but winning the actual Cup the first time in franchise history is the icing on the cake on everything that we've been building here," Caldwell said. "We've always been very clear that we won't stop until we bring a Stanley Cup to our fans. And we're not going to stop after that, either."

ESPN LOADED: 06.25.2024

1316020 Websites

ESPN / Offseason keys for NHL teams, including draft, free agency – ESPN

Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton

81–103 minutes

The 2023-24 NHL regular season was an entertaining one, with races for playoff position, point and goal leaders, and major trophies all coming down to the bitter end.

But not every fan base got to enjoy all of it so much.

With the postseason over, it's time to look ahead to the offseason. Clubs that didn't quite hit the mark this season will use the draft, free agency and trades in an effort to be more competitive in 2024-25.

Read on for a look at what went wrong for each eliminated team, along with a breakdown of its biggest keys this offseason and realistic expectations for next season. Note that more teams will be added to this story as they are eliminated.

Note: Profiles for the Atlantic and Metro teams were written by Kristen Shilton, while Ryan S. Clark analyzed the Central and Pacific teams. Stats are collected from sites such as Natural Stat Trick, Hockey Reference and Evolving Hockey. Projected cap space per Cap Friendly. Dates listed with each team are when the entry was published.

Jump to a team:

ANA | ARI | BOS | BUF

CGY | CAR | CHI | COL

CBJ | DAL | DET | EDM

FLA | LA | MIN | MTL

NSH | NJ | NYI | NYR

OTT | PHI | PIT | SJ

SEA | STL | TB | TOR

VAN | VGK | WSH | WPG

Stanley Cup Final

June 24: Florida Panthers

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$20,666,666

2024 draft picks: 3rd, 5th, 5th (PHI), 6th

What went right?

Florida pulled off the rare feat of going from Stanley Cup runner-up last season to Stanley Cup winner in this one. And the Panthers (almost) made it look easy. Florida arrived at the Cup Final having fully committed to every facet of their game -- the Panthers' defensive play was suffocating, their offensive depth was off the charts, Sergei Bobrovsky's goaltending was spectacular and special teams were a consistent asset. Florida's ability to adjust and expose every opponent they faced in the postseason was masterful. The Panthers repeatedly showed what a truly complete team looks like and it brought them a championship in the process.

Now, was blowing a 3-0 lead to Edmonton in the Cup Final reflective of Florida's best work? Clearly not.

But what was impressive was the way Florida never panicked. To go through a long playoffs while rarely ever appearing rattled by anything was one of the Panthers' super powers. It's like they just understood inherently that after reaching that Cup Final as underdogs one year ago, getting back there (as top dogs) was simply inevitable. That confidence carried this team all the way into the franchise's history books.

Keys to the offseason:



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Much of the Panthers' core is locked in, but they have 11 pending unrestricted free agents. Reinhart will be a priority. His 57-goal regular season likely upped the asking price on an extension, and that could explain why Florida hasn't put pen to paper with him yet. The talented forward would have many suitors in free agency, and the Panthers would be wise not to let him get there.

Brandon Montour is near the top of the list of importance here, too. He's become an integral part of Florida's blue line, and keeping him long term has to be the Panthers' goal.

From there, Florida will figure out what tweaks to make to maximize its Cup chances next season. GM Bill Zito was able to make shrewd signings, trades and waiver wire claims to find both core and complementary players. Now is not the time to rest on the proverbial laurels.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

It's got to be another run at the Cup, right? Florida's got some personnel decisions to make and contracts to get signed first, of course. But the foundation and culture these Panthers have cultivated over the past two years should put Florida in good standing to compete for back-to-back titles.

June 24: Edmonton Oilers

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$9,833,333

2024 draft picks: 2nd, 5th, 6th, 6th (NSH), 7th (ANA), 7th (BOS).

What went wrong?

After they struggled to establish some sense of consistency in the first three games, the Oilers found a way to force Game 7. It's just that trying to fully overcome a 3-0 series deficit and become only the second team in NHL history to pull off that accomplishment proved to be a bit too much.

Much of that originates from how the Oilers fell into such an early hole. A team known for being one of the most prolific in the league scored only once in its first two games. Plus, the defensive identity that allowed it to either win or remain within striking distance in numerous one-goal games also faced issues as Edmonton gave up 11 goals through the first three games of the series.

Keys to the offseason:

As is the case with teams in a championship window, the Oilers will again use the summer to supplement their roster with players on team-friendly deals. Warren Foegele, Adam Henrique and Mattias Janmark are among the seven forwards who are slated to be pending unrestricted free agents for a team that is going to have less than \$10 million in cap space. Will Edmonton make an upgrade in net? Skinner rallied to play quite well in the Western Conference finals and Cup Final, but was certainly shaky earlier.

Having a pair of Hart Trophy winners in Draisaitl and McDavid means there are going to be amplified expectations for what the Oilers can do. But with Draisaitl entering the final year of his contract, expect the club to do everything it can to turn its promise into a Stanley Cup.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

For as long as they have Draisaitl and McDavid, the Oilers have to be considered serious Cup contenders. But there will be challenges. Draisaitl's contract situation is one of them, as is the rest of the Western Conference landscape. In the time since the Oilers reached the conference final in 2022, they've seen a shift. Cup winners Colorado and Vegas have been joined by serious title challengers such as the Canucks and the Dallas Stars. It's possible 2024-25 could be the most pivotal season in the Draisaitl-McDavid era.

Conference finals

June 2: Dallas Stars

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$15,946,259

2024 draft picks: 1st, 5th, 7th

What went wrong?

After going up 2-1 on the Edmonton Oilers in the Western Conference finals, the Stars should have been in a position of strength. Instead, it became more of a position of calamity.

They went from scoring five goals in Game 3 to scoring a total of three goals in Games 4 and 5, and allowing eight goals in that time. Game 5 was particularly bad, as the Stars looked listless, a complete turnaround from earlier dominance.

It led to the Stars being a game away from elimination for the second time this postseason. But unlike their first-round series against the Vegas Golden Knights, the Stars couldn't find a way back into winning in seven games, and they'll have a little extra time this summer to figure out how it all went wrong.

Keys to the offseason:

Like any team in a championship window, the Stars have several decisions ahead but only so much cap space to address their needs.

Matt Duchene and Joe Pavelski are the team's most prominent unrestricted free agent forwards. They have become part of the forward depth that has allowed Dallas to challenge other top contenders. Both were critical members of this group and should be back if the cap hit can work.

There's a decision to be made with trade deadline acquisition Chris Tanev, who is one of five defensemen in need of a new contract; Jani Hakanpaa and Derrick Pouliot are also UFAs. But it's another defenseman, Thomas Harley, who may generate the most discussion: The pending restricted free agent scored 47 points this season and turns 23 in August.

The one area the Stars don't need to worry about much is in goal: Jake Oettinger looked every bit the franchise goaltender in this postseason run, and he won't hit restricted free agency until after 2024-25.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

It's the Stanley Cup or nothing. Executives often lay out a blueprint for what it takes to become a long-term Cup contender that can eventually win it all. They talk about building a homegrown core and supplementing those players with experience. The Stars have all of those attributes, and they've also found ways to seamlessly fit new players into their setup. This has set the Stars up to be a legitimate championship contender, but at some point, that promise must turn into results.

June 1: New York Rangers

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$12,465,976

2024 draft picks: 1st, 4th, 5th, 6th

What went wrong?

The Rangers seemed to stop trusting themselves. And once that happened, there was no going back.

The Presidents' Trophy-winning Rangers showed faith and fortitude throughout a 114-point regular season. New York's stars showed up during the campaign and again early in the postseason. But by the Eastern Conference finals against the Florida Panthers, the Rangers got dwindling contributions from Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad -- yet coach Peter Laviolette continued riding his top players to the tune of 20-plus minutes per game.

Laviolette's lack of confidence in his bench put increased wear and tear on players who weren't producing. The power play -- one of New York's greatest strengths all season -- faded in the conference finals too, going 1-for-14. The Rangers often looked panicked and unsure; that led to hesitancy and frustration.

The one Ranger showing up all series cool and collected was Igor Shesterkin, a goalie so brilliant there aren't enough superlatives for his performances. New York's swagger sagged, along with its hopes of reaching a Stanley Cup Final. The Rangers have plenty of time ahead now to reflect on why.

Keys to the offseason:

New York's first priority should be making Shesterkin the NHL's highest-paid goalie. The Rangers netminder is one year away from being a UFA, and negotiations on his next contract can get underway this summer. If



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Shesterkin's overall career total (and accolades) haven't underscored his excellence enough, then the way he single-handedly won games for New York throughout the playoffs (especially against Florida) leaves no doubt about what he deserves in a new deal.

Then the Rangers have to dissect why they can't get over the proverbial hump. New York shows its playoff mettle every spring but continues to stall at critical moments. What's behind the team's inability to finish the job? What's missing from the lineup that can be the difference-maker next season? The Rangers changed coaches. They've acquired high-end players and have been patient with young skaters like Alexis Lafreniere (who broke out this postseason).

There's so much that the Rangers have done right. This offseason is about identifying where they've gone wrong and how to fix it once and for all.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

New York isn't likely to make significant changes or undergo a massive overhaul in personnel. The Rangers project to be top contenders in the Eastern Conference again -- assuming Shesterkin stays as dominant as he has been and the Rangers' top-tier skaters rediscover their previous form. Of course, New York doesn't have unlimited runway to reach that elusive Cup finals, so the focus will be on adding around the edges once again.

Second round

May 20: Vancouver Canucks

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$25,528,333

2024 draft picks: 3rd, 4th, 6th, 6th (SJ), 7th

What went wrong?

The Canucks had two chances to advance to their first Western Conference finals in more than a decade. But they fell short. Even though they pushed the series to seven games, what happened to the Canucks? Part of it had to do with their ability to consistently generate scoring chances, goals or both at the same time.

In the first round, the Canucks averaged 2.16 goals per game against the Nashville Predators. While the second round saw them average 3.0 goals in the first six games against the Oilers, they were up against a team that averaged more than 3.5 goals per game in the same time frame. What further compounded the Canucks' offensive challenges was that they averaged 21.1 shots per game, the fewest of any team this postseason.

Keys to the offseason:

One of the details that allowed the Canucks to come within a game of the conference finals was how they used last offseason to rebuild their defense. It'll be something Canucks GM Patrik Allvin and his front office staff will have to do again this offseason. Tyler Myers and Nikita Zadorov are two of the four pending UFA defensemen in need of a new deal, while Filip Hronek is a pending RFA.

Then there are the circumstances around their forwards. Elias Lindholm and playoff hero Dakota Joshua are among four UFA forwards who will need new contracts. But whatever the Canucks do this summer comes with the reality that they'll also need an eye on next offseason, when Brock Boeser and Nils Hoglander will need new deals.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Is this the new normal? Or was this a one-off? These are the questions the Canucks must answer heading into next season. Everything they accomplished this season proves they could be the latest Western Conference team that's in a championship window. But what complicates matters is the fact that the Canucks had previously been searching for answers after missing the playoffs for three straight seasons.

May 18: Colorado Avalanche

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$10,487,500

2024 draft picks: 1st, 4th, 5th (ANA), 5th (SEA), 6th, 7th, 7th (NSH)

What went wrong?

Think about what the Avalanche did to win Game 1 against the Dallas Stars in the Western Conference semifinal round. They overcame a three-goal deficit to score four unanswered goals. It looked like a blueprint, and it was -- for the Stars.

The Avs fell behind in the first five games of the series, and if not for that Game 1 comeback and a spirited effort in Game 5, there's a chance they could have been swept.

But it goes beyond the inability to either take a lead or find ways to overcome going into an early hole. There were inconsistencies. Game 3 saw them own possession and launch shots almost at will, while Game 4 saw the opposite in a performance that Avs coach Jared Bednar said was the worst of the series, noting it was "atrocious."

Yet the most bizarre aspect could be how the Avs went from being one of the most prolific teams in the first round -- and scored nine goals combined in Games 1 and 5 -- to one that scored five goals total from Games 2 through 4.

Keys to the offseason:

Supplementing their core appears to once again be the priority. Trading for Casey Mittelstadt gave the Avs their second-line center of the future. Now it's about trying to find a contract that works for both parties, as Mittelstadt is a pending RFA. He's not the only decision facing the Avs; they have nine pending UFAs.

That UFA group includes forwards such as Jonathan Drouin, Andrew Cogliano and Zach Parise, the latter of whom has said he is retiring after this season. Then there are the defensemen such as Jack Johnson and Sean Walker, who could either remain with the team or leave in free agency.

Either way, teams that have found success in recent playoff runs have done so because of their depth, and that's an area the Avs must rebuild.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

It's been two years since they won the Stanley Cup, yet they still remain one of the favorites to win the Cup again. But that comes with the reality that others in the West such as the Vancouver Canucks, Vegas Golden Knights and Stars pose a serious threat. Plus, this will also be the last season of Mikko Rantanen's contract, and his continued presence will be important to keeping the Avs as one of the West's top contenders.

May 17: Boston Bruins

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$21,559,166

2024 draft picks: 4th, 5th, 6th

What went wrong?

Boston did, in many ways, beat itself this postseason (and that's noted with no disrespect to the Florida Panthers or how formidable they've been in the playoffs). The Bruins were undeniably in control of their own fate through the second round but squandered key opportunities. Boston blew a two-goal lead in Game 4 that swiftly took it from a renewed best-of-three to a 3-1 deficit it couldn't climb out of again.

Losing Brad Marchand to an upper-body injury after Game 3 didn't help, but it wasn't his absence that truly tanked the Bruins' chances (and no, one goalie interference controversy wasn't the lone culprit, either). There was a collective lack of consistent offense on Boston's side that kept the Bruins from staying on pace with the Panthers' attack.

And perhaps that was the core of Boston's issue: Its top-end talent wasn't driving the bus quite enough. David Pastrnak scored the overtime winner in Game 7 against Toronto but didn't deliver timely scoring in the second round. Marchand was neutralized as the postseason wore on (despite his best efforts to keep causing trouble), and Jake DeBrusk was solid but spotty, too. Coach Jim Montgomery put it succinctly after the Bruins' Game 6 loss in the first round, saying that the club's stars had to be stars and that they just were not aligned all the way to the end.

And so, Boston flamed out. Truthfully, the Bruins might not have been built for a long run, either. GM Don Sweeney didn't add aggressively at the trade deadline like he has in years past, and Boston wasn't as deep because of it. There's plenty of blame to go around for why the Bruins' season wrapped up early again.

Keys to the offseason:



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Boston has some significant personnel decisions to sift through. Several Bruins are approaching free agency, including DeBrusk, Danton Heinen, Derek Forbort and -- most critically -- Jeremy Swayman. He'll be an RFA with arbitration rights (again). And after one fraught negotiation last year landed Swayman his current one-year deal, what will Sweeney do to lock up Boston's best goaltender for the long term? There's no doubt Swayman has earned a proper payday, and the Bruins should have space to make it happen.

Once the internal items get sorted, Boston can look at other ways to improve. Some of that will be determined by where the Bruins stand with their prospects and projecting who could be NHL-ready by the fall. Boston should be active in the free agent market if it intends to keep its window open, though, particularly on the defensive side. The Bruins have four veteran NHL blueliners signed through next season, and targeting reinforcements there would provide some insurance as they strive to be Atlantic Division contenders again.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

The Bruins are approaching a crossroads. Whatever formula makes them into an excellent regular-season team simply isn't translating to the playoffs. Unless Sweeney can identify more complementary players to boost Boston's lineup and give the team longevity down the stretch, it'll be more of the same next season. Realistically, changes should be made (and certain key players re-signed). If they are, then Boston should be among the Atlantic Division's top teams again.

May 16: Carolina Hurricanes

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$27,927,500

2024 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 6th (OTT), 6th (TOR), 7th

What went wrong?

Carolina's season ended in familiar fashion, with the Hurricanes squandering an excellent regular season (and rightful Stanley Cup aspirations) in a playoff loss unbecoming of their overall talent.

Last year, Carolina was swept out of the Eastern Conference finals in four straight one-goal losses. The Hurricanes were downed in the second round this time around, again through a pileup of one-goal defeats against the (juggernaut) New York Rangers. Despite all of Carolina's scoring talent -- including Jake Guentzel, Sebastian Aho and Andrei Svechnikov -- the Hurricanes couldn't quite find twine when it counted most at 5-on-5. And Carolina's power play? Atrocious. The Hurricanes started 0-for-15 with the extra man before finally hitting pay dirt in a Game 4 win. That is, universally, a tough statistical margin to overcome.

The Canes consistently falling short in the postseason is a pattern they will need to examine in the offseason. At least goaltending wasn't an issue this time. Frederik Andersen was excellent in the first round against the New York Islanders and played well in Games 1, 2, 4 and 5 (the latter of two being wins). In between, rookie Pyotr Kochetkov was strong in his Game 3 appearance. In the end, it was a lack of overall execution that took down Carolina -- again. The Hurricanes were close, but the apparent lack of killer instinct versus a hungrier opponent left them high and dry.

Keys to the offseason:

There's soul-searching to be done in Carolina. Do they have the right mix of players to vanquish those postseason demons next season? Is Rod Brind'Amour going to stay behind the Canes' bench? Does Carolina need a fresh perspective? The Hurricanes are fortunate to have players such as Aho and Svechnikov in place, and they won't want to waste those players' best years. That could mean change is coming.

And speaking of change, what will Carolina do with an impressive pack of pending UFAs?

Guentzel is the most notable among them. The Hurricanes pulled off a blockbuster trade for the former Penguin in March, and have to hope he'll want to stick around long term. Meanwhile, Teuvo Teravainen, Brady Skjei and Brett Pesce are also slated to hit free agency.

The priority should be reaching a new deal with Guentzel, who put up 25 points in 17 regular-season games for Carolina and was a point-per-game producer in the playoffs. He's exactly the kind of player the Canes have needed and is worth a shiny, new (and expensive) deal.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

The Hurricanes have been a strong regular-season team and gotten fine results. If they don't change much, expect them to land in roughly the same position next year -- bowing out early from the playoffs. Bringing Guentzel back and investing in a great goalie -- among other tweaks -- would boost their chances of making a long-awaited appearance in the Stanley Cup Final.

First round

May 5: Vegas Golden Knights

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$1,464,183

2024 draft picks: 1st, 6th, 7th, 7th (CBJ)

What went wrong?

It appeared the Golden Knights would at least return to the second round this postseason before the Stars found an answer and won the decisive Game 7. That leaves the Golden Knights asking a few questions. One concerns their depth, since depth led Vegas to win the Stanley Cup in 2023.

Entering Game 7, the Golden Knights scored 15 goals. All but four of them came from their top-six forwards or top defensive pairing. Of those four remaining goals, two were scored by second-pairing defenseman Brayden McNabb. The inability to receive offensive production from their entire lineup contributed to the early exit.

Keys to the offseason:

Golden Knights GM Kelly McCrimmon is facing a number of decisions. One is figuring out what happens with Jonathan Marchessault and Chandler Stephenson.

Marchessault, who won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP in 2023, is one of the final remaining fixtures from the original Golden Knights and has played a crucial role in shaping the franchise's culture. But he's also a pending UFA who could be in line for another sizable payday given what he's done with the Golden Knights.

Stephenson, who is also a pending UFA, is in a similar situation in that he's proven to be the sort of two-way forward who can anchor a second line and play in every scenario.

It's possible the Golden Knights could look to re-sign at least one of them. But doing that would mean having to clear a significant amount of cap space for two players who could instantly help another team change its top-six dynamics.

Part of the reason for the cap crunch? The Knights took on Tomas Hertl's \$6.75 million annual hit (through 2029-30) and signed Noah Hanifin to a contract extension worth \$7.35 million annually (through 2031-32) after acquiring both ahead of the trade deadline.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Even with a first-round exit, the Golden Knights remain in a championship window. But they're seeking to win a second Stanley Cup at a time in which the Western Conference is filled with top-flight contenders (like Dallas), as well as rising teams trying to make the jump to join that group.

May 4: Toronto Maple Leafs

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$19,205,333

2024 draft picks: 1st, 4th, 5th, 5th (CGY), 5th (VAN), 7th, 7th (OTT)

What went wrong?

The Maple Leafs are markedly consistent -- to their own detriment. Once again, the Leafs could not translate their regular-season success as the league's second-highest-scoring team into the playoffs, failing to generate more than three goals in a game in their first-round loss against Boston.

Toronto's power play was miserable (5.0% compared to 24.0% in the regular season), and star talents such as Mitch Marner and Auston Matthews were not the nightly difference-makers Toronto required; Matthews missed Games 5 and 6 because of a "lingering" illness and injury. Sheldon Keefe got outcoached by Jim Montgomery, and the Leafs'



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back end was average at best. The Bruins forced Toronto into playing a dump-and-chase style of game, and it was swiftly apparent (again) that the Leafs can't thrive there -- or adjust to at least remain more competitive when rush chances dry up.

Toronto's goaltending from Ilya Samsonov was solid considering the blueliners in front of him, and Joseph Woll was great in wins in Game 5 and 6. It just wasn't quite as consistently good as Jeremy Swayman stifling Toronto's top talents -- which is essentially what has happened in each playoff appearance by Toronto in the past eight years.

What went wrong? Nothing the Leafs couldn't have seen coming, given their history and the fact that GM Brad Treliving didn't substantially address the club's issues at the trade deadline.

Keys to the offseason:

Treliving wanted to revamp the Leafs as a more physical team over the past 12 months, targeting players such as Ryan Reaves, Joel Edmundson and Ilya Lyubushkin to do that. The strategy didn't pan out, and Treliving will be back at the drawing board to figure out how, exactly, to push the Leafs forward.

The decision could include moving a key member of the team's core. After nearly a decade of disappointing finishes, it feels like a seismic shift is needed for Toronto to get out of its funk. They've tried operating virtually the same way since Matthews was drafted in 2016. So here Toronto is, having earned the same sort of finish.

Team president Brendan Shanahan must have thought the tide would turn when he replaced former GM Kyle Dubas with Treliving in the offseason. That didn't move the needle (yet, at least). Now there's a question of how Keefe fits. Treliving extended Toronto's coach before the season, but will he keep Keefe after how the Leafs flamed out in the playoffs? And what about the rest of the coaching staff -- specifically, first-year hire Guy Boucher, who was in charge of the power play that went powerless?

Toronto can't expect to forge ahead in the same direction yet again. Something must change.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Toronto will have playoff aspirations again, with Matthews leading the way and complementary players around him. But unless there are significant changes elsewhere, the only expectation for the Leafs feels like more of the same: an early postseason exit.

May 3: Nashville Predators

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$19,095,801

2024 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (TB), 2nd (WPG), 3rd, 3rd (DAL), 4th, 4th (CHI), 4th (EDM)

What went wrong?

The Predators were close to mounting a serious challenge against the Canucks; the losses were close games. But there was enough separation between the two teams in a series where goal prevention was paramount, and ultimately, that was the difference -- even though the Canucks used three different starting goaltenders.

Nashville limited Vancouver to the fewest shots per 60 minutes among playoff teams through the first four games of each series. But the Predators' offense couldn't make good on that suppression, averaging the second-fewest scoring chances per 60, the fourth-fewest shots per 60 and the second-fewest high-danger chances per 60 among 16 playoff teams.

Keys to the offseason:

Decisions will need to be made with pending UFAs such as Anthony Beauvillier, Alexandre Carrier and Jason Zucker. And while the Predators were 10th in goals per game during the regular season, the lack of offensive onslaught during the playoffs could prompt them to find more options who could help next spring.

Then there's the goaltending.

Prized prospect goalie Yaroslav Askarov is going to be a central piece of the Predators' future, and he has been impressive the past two seasons in the AHL. When does his time as the Preds' franchise goalie begin?

Current No. 1 goalie Juuse Saros' deal runs through next season, so perhaps it's a shared crease in 2024-25 before handing the reins to Askarov in 2025-26.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Returning to the playoffs will be the goal in Andrew Brunette's second campaign behind the bench. However, there is a philosophical conversation to be had. Getting to the playoffs hadn't been the issue for the Predators; they made eight consecutive appearances before missing the postseason in 2022-23, but they had lost in the first round for five straight years. Will GM Barry Trotz run a similar group back and hope for better results, or take on more of a serious retool to take steps forward?

May 1: Los Angeles Kings

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$22,550,000

2024 draft picks: 1st, 4th, 6th, 7th

What went wrong?

For a third straight year, they faced the Oilers in the first round. For a third straight year, they were eliminated by the Oilers in the first round. Two years ago, the Kings lost in seven games while last year saw them get knocked out in six games. What made this latest episode against the Oilers so simultaneously different and damning is the fact they were beaten in five games.

Giving up seven goals in a Game 1 loss was followed by an overtime win for L.A. in Game 2. Tying the series, however, is as close as the Kings would get. They surrendered six goals in Game 3 before being shut out in Game 4 and losing narrowly in Game 5.

Yes, they were playing against Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and the Oilers' high-octane power play. But a team that had the second-best penalty kill in the regular season watched a strength erode into a weakness against the Oilers' man-advantage group.

Keys to the offseason:

Whether it was the Oilers or another team, the Kings getting knocked out in the first round for a third straight season could lead to an offseason of change, and the moves this summer must be made to maximize their chances of a longer playoff run next spring.

Viktor Arvidsson, Trevor Lewis and Matt Roy are the pending UFA skaters. There could be massive turnover in goal however, as Pheonix Copley, Aaron Dell, David Rittich and Cam Talbot are all pending UFAs. The Kings have 23-year-old Erik Portillo in the system, but they will likely be in the mix for veterans via free agency and/or trade.

They've built a roster that's blended Stanley Cup-winning, veteran franchise cornerstones -- Anze Kopitar, Drew Doughty -- with homegrown talent -- Adrian Kempe, Quinton Byfield -- that's been supplemented with savvy free agent signings and trades, including Phillip Danault and Kevin Fiala. That's generally a winning formula. GM Rob Blake and his staff must figure out which levers to pull to level this team up to the next tier of contention.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Getting back to the playoffs for a fourth straight season remains the mission. Finding a way to get beyond the first round is the priority. Winning a first-round series for the first time in more than a decade could be the start of something big given all the talent in place. Losing a first-round series for a fourth straight year could also lead to the start of even bigger changes than a goaltending carousel.

April 30: Winnipeg Jets

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$13,927,976

2024 draft picks: 2nd (MTL), 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went wrong?

The regular-season dominance the Jets showed in three wins against the Avalanche (including a 7-0 victory on April 13) was nowhere to be found in the first round. After scoring seven goals in Game 1, they struggled to score five goals total over their next three games. That lack of scoring, combined with Winnipeg allowing five or more goals per game, is ultimately what doomed the Jets.



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Then there's the lack of support in front of Connor Hellebuyck. A front-runner to win his second Vezina Trophy, Hellebuyck watched his support system struggle. In the regular season, the Jets allowed 29.6 shots per game, which was the 11th fewest in the NHL. They also gave up the ninth-fewest scoring chances per 60 minutes during the season.

By Game 4, they allowed the second-most shots per game and the second-most scoring chances per 60 among the 16 teams in the playoffs.

Keys to the offseason:

The biggest challenge for Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff will be maneuvering around his team's salary cap constraints. In-season acquisitions Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli are pending UFAs, and while retaining their services could prove crucial, the Jets must also think about their defense, with Brenden Dillon, Dylan DeMelo and Colin Miller also hitting free agency. They need to find a backup goaltender, while also working out a new deal for pending restricted free agent Cole Perfetti.

The Connor Hellebuyck and Mark Scheifele extensions -- plus the final year of the \$2.75 million Blake Wheeler buyout -- are why the Jets are working with a shade under \$14 million in cap space to fit everything in the prior paragraph. They could look to move contracts out in order to create the space to fully address all their needs, so stay tuned.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Being a playoff team is enough for some franchises. Being a championship contender is the only thing that matters for others. The Jets are somewhere in the middle. The past two years have shown they have enough to reach the playoffs. But facing the Avalanche and Golden Knights in consecutive first rounds has shown they're still trying to figure out what it means to be in a championship window. With the right moves this summer, they could take that next step in 2024-25.

April 30: New York Islanders

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$6,875,000

2024 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 6th

What went wrong?

The Islanders' greatest strength all season was their goaltending, but even that couldn't save them from a swift postseason exit. New York had Semyon Varlamov (who gathered a .919 save percentage in the regular season) and Ilya Sorokin (.909) to choose from, and coach Patrick Roy used both against Carolina. Neither one could get the required momentum, especially after New York's blown three-goal lead in Game 2 seemed to suck the life out of the entire team going forward. The Islanders weren't built to score, and that bit them in the end too, when the Hurricanes capitalized on their own depth that New York just couldn't match.

The Islanders were no playoff lock; they earned that spot the hard way with an admirable, resilient run through the end of their regular season. Perhaps that in and of itself could be considered a victory. After all, GM Lou Lamoriello didn't do much to change the Islanders from what they were a season ago (after a first-round playoff exit), and New York battled through injuries, slumps and a midseason coaching change to still get back in the mix.

But this postseason showed what can happen when a team's success hinges too heavily on one aspect of their game -- and how quickly that house of cards can fall.

Keys to the offseason:

The front office must address its scoring deficiency. That has been true for a number of seasons, but there are too few bona fide skaters the Islanders can count on to put pucks in the net, and that's consistently to their own detriment. New York should have enough cap space to work with so that they can attract a free agent or two who makes a difference, taking some pressure off the Islanders' goaltending and defense to consistently determine their success -- for better, or worse.

There are a few internal free agents for Lamoriello to parse through, including long-tenured skaters Matt Martin and Cal Clutterbuck, and the Isles' GM does tend to favor in-house contracts as opposed to looking elsewhere for help. But the Islanders' postseason dud showed how far they could be from being a true contender without some upgrades.

On the positive side, Roy having an entire offseason to assess the Islanders organization and put more of his own spin on their structure should pay dividends next season. Whatever that looks like, New York will want to pack more of a punch when a new season dawns.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

New York snuck into the playoffs this season. Don't expect that to be the case again unless the Islanders adjust their approach with offseason additions. The Metropolitan is too strong, and the Islanders won't keep up by standing pat -- again.

April 29: Tampa Bay Lightning

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$10,740,000

2024 draft picks: 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (CHI), 7th (MIN)

What went wrong?

The Lightning surged their way through March into April on a season-best run that made the recent back-to-back Stanley Cup winners look to be in full championship form again. And then, the playoffs started.

Nikita Kucherov -- one of the Hart Trophy favorites after his 144-point regular season -- was a ghost in the postseason. Tampa Bay couldn't corral Florida's top skaters, the once-potent power play went relatively mild, and Andrei Vasilevskiy was simply outmatched in net by Sergei Bobrovsky. The identity the club had been building all season appeared snuffed out, leaving the Lightning disconnected, slow and sloppy. That was the catalyst in their second consecutive first-round playoff exit.

There's no doubt Tampa Bay also missed injured defenseman Mikhail Sergachev, who had been absent since fracturing his leg in February before making his return with one assist in the Lightning's Game 4 win. Victor Hedman continued to carry the Lightning's blue line, and Steven Stamkos was resurgent in the playoffs, but it wasn't enough for just the veterans to show up. The depth didn't shine like it has in past playoff runs, despite GM Julien BriseBois making additions at the deadline in Anthony Duclair and Matt Dumba.

The problems Tampa Bay had earlier in the regular season that looked to be licked down the stretch came back all at once, and the Panthers poked hole after hole in their attack until the Lightning run came to an end.

Keys to the offseason:

What is the next direction? That's the question. And an answer could be revealed in how Tampa Bay handles the Stamkos situation.

The Lightning captain is a pending free agent at age 34, and the two sides haven't worked out a new deal. It's a familiar narrative for the Lightning, where the club's limited cap space has forced important pieces of their lineup out the door. The situation with Stamkos is complicated and could be determined by several factors, including where Tampa Bay sees itself heading in the next two to three seasons. One way or another, a Stamkos decision will be made, and it will reveal plenty about the path ahead.

The Lightning should also be looking at their back end and for ways to improve the group overall. Sergachev projects to be fully healthy when next season begins, but the Lightning experienced how his loss left them flailing at times. Securing their defensive future with a veteran boost -- to give young skaters like Nick Perbix and Emil Lilleberg time to continue developing at a reasonable pace -- will benefit Tampa Bay in the short and long term.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

It's difficult to see this team as an Atlantic Division contender next season. But again, will the Lightning seek to be in that conversation? Or will they take a pause and pivot toward small-scale retooling? As always with this franchise, expect the unexpected.

April 28: Washington Capitals

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$6,110,000

2024 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (VGK), 3rd, 3rd (BOS), 3rd (NYI), 4th, 5th, 6th

What went wrong?



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The Caps were an underdog all season. But they still reached the playoffs thanks to a valiant push through the final leg of the regular season. That they were swept out of a first-round series against the Rangers -- one of the league's potent, premier teams -- wasn't entirely surprising.

The problem was the Capitals' lack of a solid identity (beyond Alex Ovechkin scoring a lot of goals). That's been a theme for Washington, where they were stymied by an apparent lack of chemistry and cohesiveness that showed up strongly at the worst of times. Hurting the Caps come playoff time was that Ovechkin didn't show up quite enough with the scoring (or, really at all).

Consistency wasn't the Capitals' only issue. Washington saw Nicklas Backstrom bow out of this season for injury reasons, and then cycled through injuries to top skaters such as T.J. Oshie and Tom Wilson (who also sat out a six-game suspension). The lineup shuffling under first-year NHL head coach Spencer Carbery did a number on the Capitals.

Washington was hardly an offensive powerhouse this season, ranking 28th overall in that category and averaging just 26 shots on net per game (31st overall). The middling penalty kill (18th overall) was another sore spot.

Darcy Kuemper's play (.890 save percentage and 3.31 goals-against average) didn't complement starter Charlie Lindgren's strong season either, and that raises some questions on goal-suppression strategy for the future.

Keys to the offseason:

The Capitals were fortunate to see some young stars emerge in Aliaksei Protas and Connor McMichael. Dylan Strome busting out as Washington's leading scorer bodes well for the future, too. What GM Brian MacLellan has to look at over the summer is who else still fits into where the Capitals are right now.

Should Washington embrace a full-scale rebuild at this point? MacLellan has been toeing that line the past two seasons. He gave Washington a chance to stay in the playoff hunt -- will he keep the band together again going into next season? Or will he trade more players in an effort to stock up on prospects? It's an interesting decision with significant implications.

Either way, the Capitals should prioritize building up their scoring depth and adding on the back end. Washington was 12th in shots against and 20th in goals against on the season, and some blue-line help to complement the core there -- helmed by John Carlson -- would lead to improved outcomes next season.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Washington feels, coincidentally, like a figurative wild card. The outlook hinges on whether the team leans into a youth movement, or still prioritizes getting the most out of what time its veterans -- namely Ovechkin -- have left. But right now it seems far-fetched to think Washington could be a true contender without some serious tweaks.

Non-playoff teams

April 15: Anaheim Ducks

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$33,755,833

2024 draft picks: 1st, 1st (EDM), 2nd, 2nd (BOS), 3rd, 3rd (PIT), 3rd (SJ), 4th, 6th

What went wrong?

Young teams are going to lose games. What hindered the Ducks is that their defeats came in bunches. An eight-game losing streak in November set the stage for a five-game losing streak in early December. There was the four-game losing streak to start the new year. They had a pair of three-game skids in January and February before going on a six-game losing streak to start March and then losing five straight to end the month.

Injuries didn't help the Ducks either -- especially when it came to Trevor Zegras. The two-time 60-point scorer sustained a lower-body injury in early November that saw him miss 20 games before he suffered a broken ankle in January that was slated to keep him out of the lineup for six to eight weeks. The day the Ducks announced they'd be without Zegras, they lost rookie defenseman Pavel Mintyukov for six weeks

because of a separated shoulder. Plus, rookie center Leo Carlsson missed time with a sprained knee.

Looking at the stats, the Ducks struggled in both zones. They finished in the bottom five of shots per 60 minutes, fewest goals scored per 60, fewest scoring chances per 60 and fewest high-danger chances per 60. They were also in the top 10 of most shots allowed per 60, most goals allowed per 60 and most high-danger chances allowed per 60.

Keys to the offseason:

Finishing with one of the worst records in the league means the Ducks are among the main entrants in the Macklin Celebrini sweepstakes. Winning the draft lottery would give them their center tandem of the future in Celebrini and Carlsson, whom they selected with the No. 2 pick of the 2023 draft.

They have four picks in the first two rounds and seven through the first three rounds. Drafting Celebrini would be the centerpiece of those plans. But even if the Ducks don't win the lottery, they can still use this draft to add to what's already considered one of the most promising systems in the NHL.

Rookie defenseman Jackson Lacombe is part of a seven-player RFA class, while their major UFA Jakob Silfverberg is retiring. It leaves the Ducks with what Cap Friendly projects to be nearly \$34 million in cap space. Having that much space could allow the Ducks to strengthen their roster with the expectation that they'll see improvement in Year 2 under coach Greg Cronin.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

The Ducks are not a team that's ready to challenge for a playoff spot in the extremely crowded Western Conference. But the progress they saw from a rookie class that featured Carlsson, Lacombe, Mintyukov and Olen Zellweger suggests the next step for the Ducks is to find the consistency that can see them avoid having a third straight season near the bottom of the league standings.

April 15: Arizona Coyotes

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$41,245,357

2024 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (FLA), 2nd (WSH), 3rd, 3rd (COL), 3rd (EDM), 4th, 4th (SJ), 5th, 6th, 6th (DAL), 7th

What went wrong?

Last offseason, some believed this team would be at least on the fringes of contention for a playoff spot. The Coyotes were among the challengers for one of the two Western Conference wild-card positions until Jan. 24. That's the day they lost the first of what would be 14 consecutive games.

That losing streak saw the Coyotes go from being two points behind in the race for the final wild-card spot to being 19 points back by their next victory. The timing of the streak was also such that it all but ensured the front office would be trading players away in exchange for futures.

The season that started with promise due in part to offseason acquisitions such as Matt Dumba and Jason Zucker meant parting with those two players at the trade deadline. It also left the Coyotes to wonder what could have been if not for such a calamitous month of February.

Keys to the offseason:

Beyond their move to Salt Lake City, it appears there are a number of items the Coyotes could address. It starts with finding new contracts for a defensive unit that has all seven of its members in need of a new deal. That includes J.J. Moser, who is one of five RFA defensemen on the roster.

Another item the Coyotes could address is how to further supplement a core that appears to be on the verge of contention. Lawson Crouse hit the 20-goal mark for a third straight season. Clayton Keller had his second straight 30-goal campaign, and Nick Schmaltz also scored 20 for a third season in a row -- setting a new career high in points. Combining what they did with the progress made by Logan Cooley, Josh Doan and Dylan Guenther and Matias Maccelli, one wonders what this core could do with some help.

One of the ways the Coyotes could reach their desired destination could be to replicate what they did in free agency last summer. Part of that was parlaying their cap space into trades with cap-strapped teams, while also



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signing free agents to one-year deals knowing they could move them ahead of the deadline if necessary. They could use that approach to once again to strengthen certain areas of their roster while having one eye on the playoffs and another on attaining more draft capital if it comes to that point.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

If the Coyotes can get the necessary reinforcements, there's a chance they could pose a stronger challenge for a playoff spot in their first season in Utah. If not, then they might once again be stuck in that mushy middle of not quite good enough for a playoff spot and not quite poor enough to be in the running for a top-three pick.

April 15: Buffalo Sabres

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$22,243,930

2024 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 4th (PHI), 6th, 7th, 7th (FLA)

What went wrong?

The Sabres were supposed to end their infamous playoff drought -- the longest current run in North American sports -- by picking up where they left off last season as a confident club on the rise fueled by a particularly potent offensive attack.

And then, the season actually started.

Before that, though, the Sabres learned Jack Quinn would miss half the season with an Achilles tendon injury. That was blow No. 1. Tage Thompson, Alex Tuch, Jordan Greenway and Zemgus Girgensons missing time with various ailments made things worse. But health was hardly Buffalo's largest problem -- the Sabres simply couldn't score at anywhere close to the rate they did a season ago. Outside of Buffalo's top players -- the likes of Thompson, Jeff Skinner, Tuch and a breakout showing from JJ Peterka -- there was no secondary help (and Dylan Cozens all but disappeared), while the Sabres' inconsistent defensive showings made it hard to win games. The power play was naturally impacted by the lack of scoring touch, ranking 28th overall (16.7%).

It also took too long for Buffalo to find its goaltending groove. Devon Levi didn't take control of the crease as expected, and by the time Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen stepped up with a remarkable second half it was too little, too late for Buffalo to rally and make the playoffs. Luukkonen should be a bright spot in the Sabres' future, though, and that's something they can cling to heading into the offseason.

Keys to the offseason:

The Sabres have worked hard to put a strong foundation in place. This offseason will require GM Kevyn Adams to, once again, fit the right complementary players around the team's core. Adams already started on that when he moved Casey Mittelstadt at the trade deadline to acquire Bowen Byram. Buffalo now has one of the most enviable young defense corps (highlighted by Byram, Rasmus Dahlin, Owen Power and others) in the NHL and that should hold the team in good standing going into next season. And as mentioned, Luukkonen should hold the inside track on Buffalo's starting job.

So what else can Adams do at this stage -- having already paid and extended a handful of difference-makers -- to improve the Sabres' prospects? That question will drive his approach -- and it must include assessing whether Don Granato is still the right coach to carry the franchise to its desired destination.

There's a need for veteran depth, though. And consistent players at that. Trading captain Kyle Okposo cost the Sabres a critical voice in their locker room, and deciding who will succeed Okposo with the "C" is another matter potentially addressed over this summer.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Buffalo managed to stay in the playoff hunt for most of this season despite its many flaws and general underperformance. Could that be a good sign? Again, the Sabres' core is strong. It's what's missing around the edges that has held Buffalo back from reaching its full potential. An aggressive offseason by Adams might be the Sabres' ticket out of playoff purgatory. That should be where everyone's sights are set when another new season begins.

April 15: Calgary Flames

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$18,699,167

2024 draft picks: 1st, 1st (VAN), 2nd, 2nd (DAL), 3rd, 3rd (VGK), 4th, 4th (NJ), 6th

What went wrong?

Finishing three points behind the Jets for the final Western Conference wild-card spot last season created the belief the Flames could be a playoff team. But that came with the understanding that getting to the postseason could prove challenging given the uncertainty around their roster.

Uncertainty was also a way to describe this Flames season as a whole. On one hand, they had five sequences in which they won more than three games in a row -- creating questions about whether they could land a playoff spot. On the other hand, they had seven occasions during which they lost more than three games in a row -- which effectively answered the questions about their playoff chances.

Those performances served as a backdrop for a season that saw them trade pending free agents Elias Lindholm, Noah Hanifin and Chris Tanev to Cup contenders, reinforcing the notion that the Flames are more focused on the future.

Keys to the offseason:

The Flames could use the next few months to become the latest team to do a quick retool and get right back to the playoffs next season.

Defenseman Oliver Kylington is their most notable RFA, while goaltender Dustin Wolf leads a four-member RFA class. The Flames have eight players with more than two years remaining on their current contracts, so they do have a core in place.

How should they build around that core? They have eight picks in the first four rounds this year, so that could provide options. It's possible the Flames could use those picks to strengthen their farm system, or they could use them in trade for some veteran help.

If they elect to go the trade route, they'll have to be strategic with their decisions as Cap Friendly projects the Flames with less than \$19 million in cap space.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

It would not be shocking if the Flames returned to the playoffs. It would not be shocking if they took another step back in service of the rebuild. It all depends on how the front office approaches things.

April 15: Chicago Blackhawks

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$38,334,167

2024 draft picks: 1st, 1st (TB), 2nd, 2nd (LA), 2nd (VAN), 3rd, 3rd (OTT), 5th (NSH), 6th

What went wrong?

Being the young team that gradually challenges for a playoff spot could someday be the hope for the Blackhawks. They're just not there yet, and that was the reality of 2023-24. Their current situation meant practically everything about this season was going to be centered around Connor Bedard and where things stood with the franchise's rebuild.

Part of the strategy behind supporting Bedard and the Blackhawks' young core was to surround him with veterans such as Nick Foligno, Taylor Hall and Corey Perry. Hall sustained a right knee injury that required season-ending surgery, while Perry was released after an investigation into misconduct.

Even with all that, Bedard used this season to show he could handle the demands of being a top-line center. He led the Blackhawks in goals, assists and points, and also led all forwards in ice time at nearly 20 minutes per game. His performances -- along with the contributions of Jason Dickinson, Kevin Korhonski, Philipp Kurashov and Alex Vlasic -- saw the Hawks take a step toward their next contention window.

Keys to the offseason:

Can they win the draft lottery for a consecutive season and get Boston University center Macklin Celebrini? Winning the lottery would give the Blackhawks two cornerstone centers in Bedard and Celebrini, which



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would create even more expectations about what the Blackhawks could look like in the years to come.

Even if they don't win the lottery, the Blackhawks still have the draft capital to help strengthen what they believe to be a bright future. They have five picks in the first two rounds, and seven picks in the first three rounds. It's the sort of stockpile they can use to either draft more high-level talent or trade to get a player who can help them right now.

As for their current roster, Cap Friendly projects the Blackhawks will have more than \$38 million in cap space. That can be used to address a RFA class that includes Vlasic, in addition to strengthening a defense that has three pending UFAs in Jaycob Megna, Jarred Tinordi and Nikita Zaitsev. Plus, the Blackhawks could also sign a few players on cheap contracts they could move ahead of the 2024-25 trade deadline to gain more draft capital if they remain outside the playoff mix.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

The development of their high-level young players is the mission for the Blackhawks. Winning the lottery, drafting Celebrini and getting him to leave BU after one season would be a massive step forward in their future plans. Even then, it would come with the understanding that the Blackhawks need more time before taking the next step as a team trying to challenge for the playoffs.

April 15: Columbus Blue Jackets

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$20,792,500

2024 draft picks: 1st, 3rd, 3rd (LA), 4th, 5th, 6th

What went wrong?

There was hope this season might be different, but Columbus is missing the playoffs for a fourth straight season. The team got off to an inauspicious start before even playing its first game, thanks to Mike Babcock's quick exit, leading to first-time NHL head coach Pascal Vincent taking over. Then Columbus' real problems began.

The new season opened with Columbus winning three of its first five tilts -- and then losing 13 of the next 14. Johnny Gaudreau, that highly prized free agent the Blue Jackets pegged as a savior, had arguably the worst season of his career with 11 goals and 58 points in 77 games. But he was still, bafflingly, Columbus' leading scorer (the Blue Jackets' second most productive forward? Kirill Marchenko, with 39 points). The Blue Jackets landed near the bottom of the league in every offensive, defensive and special teams category. Plus, two of the three goalies Columbus primarily used (with a minimum of five starts) have a sub-.900 save percentage. It's a recipe for disaster.

Granted, Columbus dealt with staggeringly poor health across the board. The Blue Jackets racked up approximately 250 man games lost to injury, including to 2023 No. 3 overall pick Adam Fantilli (leg), forward Sean Kuraly (lower body), Justin Danforth (concussion) and defenseman Adam Boqvist (upper body). Patrik Laine also missed time early in the season with a broken clavicle prior to entering the NHL/NHL Player Assistance Program in January. Columbus tried to make the most of who it had in the lineup, but, as in years past, the sheer volume of injuries (among other problems) was once again insurmountable.

Keys to the offseason:

The Blue Jackets must do an internal review on how and why they are among the NHL's most injured teams every season. It's uncanny how many of Columbus' most important, impactful players wind up missing large stretches of the season. If there's a way the club can reduce that through new training protocols or regimens it would go a long way in making the Blue Jackets competitive again.

That said, Columbus' search for a new general manager is a top priority. Longtime GM Jarmo Kekalainen was fired in February and president of hockey operations John Davidson has been filling in temporarily. He will eventually spearhead the Blue Jackets' efforts in identifying and hiring the right person to put the club back on a winning track. What exactly that looks like for Columbus is the critical question.

Will the Blue Jackets pursue a full-scale rebuild or attempt to capitalize on their core of young talents -- namely Fantilli, Dmitri Voronkov, Marchenko, Cole Sillinger, David Jiricek and others -- to push their way into an immediately brighter future? Then there's Elvis Merzlikins. The Blue Jackets starter has three seasons left on his contract at \$5.4 million

per year and won't be easy to trade with a full no-movement clause. But a fresh start for him outside Columbus might be best for both player and team. Keep an eye on how that situation potentially plays out in the coming months.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

It seems unlikely Columbus can go from bottom-dweller to playoff contender in a single season. But at least putting themselves in the mix would be a massive boost for the Blue Jackets and the confidence of their array of burgeoning players. They need to know the organization has a plan. Whatever that ultimately is should be decided quickly and executed by a management team installed for the long haul.

April 17: Detroit Red Wings

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$27,973,193

2024 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th (DAL), 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (NJ)

What went wrong?

Detroit made a valiant push to the end of the regular season and hung in the fight for a wild-card playoff berth until Game No. 82. Based on what GM Steve Yzerman said going into this season -- that it wasn't a "playoffs or bust" mentality for Detroit but rather they would "try" and get back there -- perhaps this campaign could be deemed (mostly) a success.

Still, the Red Wings' inconsistency throughout the season is why they couldn't squeeze into the postseason field. Detroit paired excellent stretches with excruciatingly poor ones, none more damaging than the 1-7-0 run the Red Wings limped through in March. That's when playoff teams become their most powerful; Detroit couldn't have looked worse. Had the Red Wings stopped the bleeding sooner, they projected to have an inside track on securing that final Eastern Conference slot.

Some of Detroit's more glaring issues stemmed from their defense and goaltending. Defenseman Justin Holl -- who signed a three-year, \$10.2 million contract over the summer -- has been a bust, while projected No. 1 goalie Ville Husso tanked and was replaced with a tandem of Alex Lyon and James Reimer. The Red Wings pledged to generate stronger team defense this season but couldn't do it often enough, leaving Detroit as one of the league's leakier clubs (allowing 3.32 goals per game, ninth worst overall). That's an area coach Derek Lalonde must find ways to improve next season.

Keys to the offseason:

Yzerman stood pat at the deadline because he believes in the Red Wings' farm system. And there are an enviable number of prospects for Detroit to choose from going forward. The question is: Who will make the cut? That's the starting point for Yzerman & Co.

After that, Detroit can assess other obvious needs, especially in the crease. Husso has one year left on his deal (at \$4.75 million) and so does Lyon (at \$900,000). Would Yzerman try trading Husso and targeting someone else to work with Lyon?

Detroit also has a number of UFAs to sift through, including Patrick Kane, David Perron and Shayne Gostisbehere. Each has played a decent role for the Red Wings this season, but where do the veterans fit with respect to elevating Detroit's up-and-coming skaters?

Given how close the Red Wings came to reaching the postseason, getting in must be a priority -- and not just a hope -- going into next season. Yzerman's focus should be on constructing the roster with that goal at the forefront.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Detroit has the talent to be a playoff team. If the Red Wings can learn from their mistakes, and commit to a strong defensive structure from the start of next season, they should land squarely in the playoff mix.

April 15: Minnesota Wild

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$7,724,746

2024 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 5th (BUF), 6th

What went wrong?

There were early hints that the 2023-24 season was going to be a challenging one for the Wild. Turns out it was. They opened the season



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by losing 14 of their first 19 games. That led to them firing Dean Evason and hiring John Hynes. Even though the coach switch led them to get back into the wild-card race, they could not overcome a series of injury issues.

Look no further than what happened to them in January. At one point, they were without Jonas Brodin, Marcus Foligno, Filip Gustavsson, Kirill Kaprizov, Jared Spurgeon and Mats Zuccarello. Everyone but Spurgeon would return, with the Wild captain being ruled out for the rest of the season in mid-January.

All those challenges were further compounded by an inability to consistently score goals. The Wild were in the bottom third in shots per 60 minutes in 5-on-5 play, goals per 60 at 5-on-5 and scoring chances per 60 at 5-on-5.

Keys to the offseason:

Figuring out numerous ways to be creative with cap space has been one of the hallmarks of Bill Guerin's time as the Wild's general manager. It appears that could be the case this offseason with Cap Friendly projecting the Wild will have a little more than \$7.7 million in cap space, even with veterans such as Alex Goligoski and Marc-Andre Fleury becoming UFAs.

What helps is that players such as Brock Faber, Marco Rossi and Jesper Wallstedt, who could be used in tandem with Filip Gustavsson to replace Fleury next season, are all on their entry-level contracts.

Maximizing those savings could allow the Wild to get the help they need knowing that Faber, Rossi and Wallstedt will need new contracts at the same time the club gets most of the \$14.743 million off its books from the combined Zach Parise and Ryan Suter buyouts following 2024-25.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Is a return to the playoffs following a one-year hiatus realistic? Yes. But there is a ton of competition in the West. Seeing what this team looks like -- and if it can maintain some of the bouts of success it had once Hynes took over -- will be fascinating in the fall.

April 15: Montreal Canadiens

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$9,183,750

2024 draft picks: 1st, 1st (WPG), 2nd (COL), 3rd, 3rd (MIN), 4th, 5th, 5th (SJ), 6th, 7th, 7th (EDM), 7th (WSH)

What went wrong?

Montreal was cooked practically from the start. That's what happens when a top-line center like Kirby Dach suffers a season-ending knee injury in the first period of his team's second game. It was a bad omen for the Canadiens, who would be repeatedly derailed by health woes. After Dach went down, it was Alex Newhook -- acquired in the offseason to bolster Montreal's forward depth -- landing on IR with a high ankle sprain. Christian Dvorak followed with a torn pectoral. Montreal languished without three of its centers, and the club's overall offense suffered accordingly.

How badly? Well, the Canadiens wound up averaging just 2.72 goals per game, putting them 27th overall, and their power play was poor (17%, 26th overall). Nick Suzuki was the Canadiens' only consistent scoring threat and paced the team with 33 goals and 74 points in 77 games; after that was a steep drop-off in output that doomed Montreal time and again. Collectively, the Canadiens scored the sixth-fewest goals at 5-on-5 and never truly found a rhythm up front to sustain them for any stretch.

Montreal's three-goalie strategy also didn't pan out. That is, until GM Kent Hughes finally shipped Jake Allen to New Jersey at the deadline and allowed Cayden Primeau and Sam Montembeault to finally settle in as a twosome. Montreal's porous defense (allowing the third-most shots on goal and seventh-most goals) didn't help its netminders thrive, either. Add to it all a misfiring penalty kill (at 76.4%) and there weren't many positive takeaways for Montreal in a season that felt more like standing still instead of stepping forward.

Keys to the offseason:

Montreal's work begins at the NHL draft. The Canadiens are fortunate to have plenty of capital -- including two first-round picks among their 12 total selections -- so there's an opportunity there to either continue

stocking up on top prospects or use the picks in trades for players in an immediate position to contribute.

Montreal does have a deep pool of prospects already waiting for their NHL shot. Skaters like Lane Hutson and Filip Mesar are waiting in the wings to shepherd the Canadiens into their next era. Plus, there's Juraj Slafkovsky's continued development to consider. Montreal's first overall pick in 2022 put an injury-riddled rookie season behind him to be a top-line player with Suzuki and Cole Caufield in his sophomore year. If that trajectory continues then the Canadiens should have a potent unit to lean on next season. And if Montreal has to part with veterans like Brendan Gallagher to make room in the lineup? Hughes can't hesitate to explore those options.

Beyond that, Montreal's priority should be defining what success looks like at this stage of its rebuild. The Canadiens have their coach in Martin St. Louis, a collection of young talent eager for more responsibility and a solid management team in place. But it's time, at last, to start moving the needle and pushing up the standings.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

The Canadiens don't feel too far away. Montreal's whole season might have been different had Dach and Newhook remained healthy. It's conceivable Montreal is in the playoff mix next season if, as mentioned, Hughes can construct a roster groomed and ready with an expectation to win now. Is that what the Canadiens want, though? By now, it should be.

April 15: New Jersey Devils

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$21,312,500

2024 draft picks: 1st, 3rd, 3rd (WPG), 5th, 5th (COL), 6th

What went wrong?

New Jersey imploded in most every respect -- and entirely crumbled under the heightened expectations.

The Devils were last season's darlings, exceeding expectations in the regular season and advancing to a second-round playoff series. That should have set New Jersey up for another strong season, but the Devils were a shadow of their former selves. New Jersey's defense was lost without Damon Severson and Ryan Graves, then a long-term injury to Dougie Hamilton sank the group even further. Those blue-line deficiencies only spotlighted New Jersey's poor goaltending as Vitek Vanecek severely regressed and neither Nico Dawes nor Akira Schmid provided any sustainable relief.

The Devils were porous no matter what combinations coach Lindy Ruff rolled out, and eventually that cost Ruff his job. But New Jersey took too long replacing Ruff with Travis Green; the season was already over.

It wasn't only New Jersey's back end causing issues. The Devils weren't scoring like they did a season ago, either. Jesper Bratt was good with 79 points in 78 games and Jack Hughes -- when healthy -- produced top-tier totals (74 points in 62 games). But Nico Hischier and Timo Meier were often too average (and both dealt with injuries) while the Devils' rush attack was muted. There wasn't close to enough complementary scoring to mask the team's overall defensive deficiencies. If it weren't for New Jersey's eye-popping power play carrying it through the first half, the Devils might have fallen faster than they did down the standings.

Keys to the offseason:

New Jersey will likely want to burn the tape on this season and believe it was a one-off that can be remedied by smart decision-making in the offseason.

The Devils' first order of business will be either removing the interim head coach tag from Green or selecting someone else for the job. Identifying the right voice who projects to stick around and guide the Devils' core from here is a top priority.

New Jersey's other major need is finding its next starting goaltender. GM Tom Fitzgerald grabbed Jake Allen at the deadline (and got rid of Vanecek in the process), but Allen isn't going to be the solution there. There must be a wide search for someone with veteran pedigree. How Fitzgerald fills that void could make or break another season for the Devils.



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After that, though, New Jersey should be looking inward and asking why the team -- and too many of its key skaters -- took steps back. Getting Hughes healthy after he ended the season with an injury will be crucial.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

New Jersey essentially let this season slip away all on its own. If that disappointment doesn't light a fire under the Devils to push back into being a postseason contender next season, nothing will. New Jersey is too stacked with talent not to be among the Metropolitan's best.

April 15: Ottawa Senators

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$12,815,953

2024 draft picks: 1st, 1st (BOS), 2nd, 4th, 4th (DET), 4th (FLA), 4th (TB), 5th

What went wrong?

What didn't go wrong for Ottawa this season? Because of all the up-and-coming Eastern Conference clubs projected to make hay in 2023-24, it was the Senators falling, perhaps, most spectacularly short of the mark in nearly all respects.

Ottawa has made offseason signings that simply aren't panning out as expected. Vladimir Tarasenko was the outlier there; he came in this season to put up 17 goals and 41 points in 57 games before being traded to Florida. Totally fine. Dominik Kubalik's sophomore season with the Senators was awful, though -- 15 points in 72 games? Ouch -- and Joonas Korpisalo wasn't very good (with an .890 save percentage and 3.27 goals-against average) after signing a five-year deal in the summer. Even Jakob Chychrun was a defensive liability this season, to the point that his offensive gains couldn't even mask it.

That spoke to a larger issue for Ottawa too, in that the Senators' collective defensive efforts (highlighted by Thomas Chabot's struggles) were shoddy at best (ranking the team top five in goals allowed) and led to such a dismal first half of the season it forced coach DJ Smith out the door (to be replaced by Jacques Martin). Abysmal special teams -- both the Senators' power play and penalty kill ranked among the league's bottom 10 all season -- were another glaring issue.

Despite Ottawa's continuous attempts to stop the bleeding (which truly began with general manager Pierre Dorion being ousted in November), there was no coming back. Tim Stutzle failed to progress as expected up front, Josh Norris wasn't the hoped-for difference-maker he's capable of being and Shane Pinto's gambling-related 41-game suspension was another punch to the gut. That the Senators' new ownership cleaned house with a new coach, general manager (in Steve Staios) and pool of front office executives speaks to the organization's desperation to separate itself from the losing ways.

Keys to the offseason:

Ottawa, to its credit, made adjustments. Staios is in place to steer the Senators in a new direction. One of his first decisions will be Ottawa's next head coach. Martin was a stop-gap fill-in for Smith; the Senators need a long-term solution behind the bench. Finding the right person for that role will be a defining part of Staios' tenure.

Another looming choice is what to do with Korpisalo. His lackluster performance this season -- coupled with equally poor play from backup Anton Forsberg -- will force Staios to analyze Ottawa's goaltending depth and determine what steps to take. If Korpisalo is unmovable, then the Senators at least need a more consistent backup.

Then it's time for Staios to weed out players who aren't pulling their weight and replace them with other options. Whether that's internally with prospects or by working the trade and free agent market, it's a top priority for Ottawa to reel in players who fit in its systems. There might be hard choices ahead: Do the Senators explore trading Chabot or Chychrun? Ottawa can't afford to endure another disappointing season.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

Staios must have an aggressive offseason planned. If he can execute on a lengthy to-do list and the moves pay off as planned, then Ottawa could finally bloom as we've all expected. The Senators, with a few tweaks (and massively improved goaltending), could easily be a playoff team. Has enough frustration piled up that Staios & Co. can do what's necessary to make that vision a reality?

April 17: Philadelphia Flyers

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$2,186,072

2024 draft picks: 1st, 1st (FLA), 2nd (compensatory), 2nd (CBJ), 3rd, 5th (LA), 5th (VGK), 6th, 6th (STL), 7th

What went wrong?

Philadelphia ran out of gas.

That's the best way to describe how the Flyers looked by mid-March. The offense dried up and the defense appeared downright exhausted. Philadelphia hit the skids on a seven-game losing streak where they were outscored 33-15, pushing the team further away from the postseason berth that had seemed likely for most of a surprisingly successful season.

The season wasn't without challenges. Philadelphia scrambled for a new goaltender after dismissing starter Carter Hart, and Samuel Ersson did his best, unexpectedly sliding into the No. 1 role. The Flyers were tight defensively in front of Ersson -- they allowed the second fewest shots this season -- but when Philadelphia couldn't match that with enough goals up front, it began to lose steam.

That was especially obvious when it came to the power play. The Flyers managed fine scoring at 5-on-5, but their league-worst man advantage (12.7%) was a consistent momentum-killer (the penalty kill, though, was top five, at 83.5%). It was just that sort of season for the Flyers, where things went right until slowly the inherent cracks began to show.

Philadelphia carried almost no expectations into this season given their ongoing rebuild, but coach John Tortorella seemed to pull something special out of his group from the start. It simply wasn't enough to carry them all the way over the line. And trading the team's best defenseman (Sean Walker) at the deadline didn't help matters down the stretch.

There was other drama of course -- including the Cutter Gauthier trade and Tortorella making captain Sean Couturier a healthy scratch -- but overall Philadelphia didn't appear rattled by the distractions.

Keys to the offseason:

GM Danny Briere has put the Flyers on a path and he's sticking to it. With Hart gone indefinitely, Briere will be looking to address the goaltending position this summer.

Philadelphia doesn't have any major free agents to re-sign, nor is there ample cap space available, so Briere's improvements will largely come from within. There's an impressive depth of prospect talent in the Flyers' system that deserves a shot in the NHL. That's part and parcel with a rebuild, though.

The Flyers do need more consistent offense if they expect to take another step forward. If Briere wants to see Philadelphia back as a postseason contender quickly, then he'll up the ante on making moves to ensure what felled the Flyers down the stretch this season won't be a problem again.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

If Philadelphia could sit in a playoff spot most of this season there's no reason to think it won't be the case again next season. The Flyers should only improve with the type of players available in their prospect pool. If Briere can properly deal with the long-term goaltending situation, then Philadelphia should be primed for another fun season staying in the playoff mix.

April 17: Pittsburgh Penguins

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$12,745,658

2024 draft picks: 2nd, 2nd (PHI), 4th, 6th, 7th, 7th (NYR)

What went wrong?

Pittsburgh cycled through too many problems throughout the season -- and in the end, every single one came back to thwart the Penguins' admirable push toward a playoff spot. When Pittsburgh needed its depth to shine, the bottom-six was terrible. When the Penguins had to produce consistent defense, it never materialized. And when Pittsburgh was desperate for great goaltending, their savior in net (Alex Nedeljkovic, taking over for the mediocre Tristan Jarry with 11 straight starts toward



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the finish line) simply ran out of steam. Well, him and most everyone else in the Penguins' lineup.

It wasn't supposed to end this way for Pittsburgh. Not after acquiring Erik Karlsson over the summer (in a trade that hasn't rewarded the Penguins as planned), not after the front office adjustments (adding Kyle Dubas as GM) and certainly not with the sting of having missed the playoffs last season still lingering.

All credit to Sidney Crosby; he put himself in the Hart Trophy race this season by practically willing Pittsburgh to stay in the playoff chase. Crosby alone could not get that done. The Penguins were frequently too slow and too lost off the rush to hold the league's faster teams at bay. Pittsburgh's top skaters didn't get enough help from their third- and fourth-line counterparts. And Pittsburgh's power play was abysmal (14.6%, 31st overall), something Karlsson was supposed to elevate upon arrival. As it is, Dubas will be back to the drawing board this summer to figure out how to fix Pittsburgh's trajectory for next season.

Keys to the offseason:

It seems inevitable the Penguins will consider a coaching change. Pittsburgh hasn't missed the postseason in consecutive years since a four-year drought from 2001-02 to 2005-06. Mike Sullivan has guided the Penguins to two Stanley Cup championships since he took over for Mike Johnston in 2015-16, but it could be time for Pittsburgh to have a new voice in the room -- perhaps to go along with their new direction.

On the ice, Pittsburgh has no choice but to try to get younger. The league is fueled by quick, powerful skaters and offense is always at a premium. Dubas should be aggressive in adding players who can make the Penguins dangerous throughout the lineup and provide the depth they didn't have for too much of this season.

Then there's the goaltending. Dubas already extended Jarry through 2027-28 at \$5.375 million per season. Meanwhile, Nedeljkovic is a pending UFA. What will Dubas do when it comes to Pittsburgh's next tandem? Nedeljkovic proved how imperative a reliable backup is with his terrific play over the past several weeks. But if Jarry is being paid as the starter, he needs to step up. Pittsburgh's hopes of bouncing back in 2024-25 could hang in the balance.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

The Penguins will need a transformative offseason to be contenders again. It appeared almost like they were playing with house money since March given how the team was essentially written off before that. But they need a changing of the guard. That's not to say a rebuild, but without serious alterations expect Pittsburgh to be on the outside looking in next April, too.

April 15: San Jose Sharks

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$37,970,833

2024 draft picks: 1st, 1st (PIT), 2nd, 2nd (NJ), 3rd (TB), 4th (VGK), 5th (CHI), 5th (PIT), 7th

What went wrong?

The Sharks had the second-fewest shots per 60 minutes while allowing the most. They scored the second-fewest goals per 60 while allowing the most. They mustered the third-fewest scoring chances per 60 while allowing the most. It's easy to see why they finished with the NHL's worst record.

Of course, the Sharks are trying to build what they believe can be a long-term winner. That means using the draft to attain and then develop the talent they believe can help them in the future.

They'll have a pick in the top seven for the third time in four years. This is their strongest chance to win the draft lottery, critical for the franchise now and coincidentally something that's never happened for San Jose (though it has had the No. 2 pick three times throughout its history).

Keys to the offseason:

Winning the draft lottery is the goal for any team that's in the Sharks' situation. But what makes this particular draft lottery so alluring for the Sharks is that the player atop the draft board is Macklin Celebrini.

Celebrini's father, Rick, is the director of sports medicine and performance for the Golden State Warriors, though Macklin was born in

North Vancouver and plays for Canada internationally. The Celebrini moved to the Bay Area for Rick's work, where Celebrini played for the Jr. Sharks. Drafting Celebrini would not only give the club a franchise center, but one who already has ties to the area.

The Sharks have four picks in the first two rounds, and nine total in this year's draft. So beyond whomever they get early in Round 1, this provides them ample opportunity to build their farm system with players who can help in the coming seasons.

Having nearly \$38 million in cap space could allow the Sharks to address their weak points. But they're still in a rebuild, and it could remain that way for quite some time. So while they might not be in the mix for topflight free agents, they could add some veterans on one-year deals that could be flipped for futures at the trade deadline -- as they did with Anthony Duclair in 2023-24.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

At one point this season, we were talking about the Sharks being in historically bad company. Next season's edition shouldn't be that bad -- especially with the addition of an NHL-ready player with their top draft pick. But making a serious playoff run is probably stretching it.

April 15: Seattle Kraken

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$22,026,667

2024 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (NYR), 3rd, 3rd (TOR), 4th, 6th, 7th, 7th (CGY)

What went wrong?

Scoring goals at a frantic pace allowed the Kraken to go from a lottery team in 2021-22 to one that nearly made the Western Conference finals in 2022-23. An inability to regain that scoring touch was among the issues that caused them to miss the playoffs for the second time in three seasons.

The Kraken's 11.6% shooting percentage in 2022-23 (second overall) fell to 29th, at 9.1%. It proved to be the sort of decline that added to the woes of a team that could never quite find sustained consistency.

Perhaps the strongest example of the Kraken's frustrations came after the Winter Classic they hosted at T-Mobile Park. Winning the Winter Classic was part of a stretch that saw them win nine straight and get points in 11 consecutive games -- only to then lose four in a row. They would alternate wins and losses before an eight-game losing streak in March ended their chances at a playoff berth.

Keys to the offseason:

There are two items the Kraken will seek to address. The first is a new contract for Matty Beniers, while the second is generally strengthening their roster.

Part of what makes figuring out a new deal for Beniers complicated is his sophomore season regression. The reigning Calder Trophy winner went from 24 goals and 57 points to 14 goals and 36 points through 73 games.

Beniers' new deal will impact how much remaining cap space the Kraken have to address their other issues. It's possible that the Kraken could use those funds to strengthen an attack that finished in the bottom third in shots per 60 minutes -- and had the fifth-fewest goals per 60 -- despite being in the top half of scoring chances per 60.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

The Kraken could get back into the playoff discussion depending on how they approach the offseason. They have been in this position before, using the offseason after their inaugural campaign to strengthen specific areas while providing more minutes to their younger players, which led to their success in 2022-23. They should use a similar formula to get back into next postseason's picture.

April 15: St. Louis Blues

Projected 2024-25 cap space: \$12,926,905

2024 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (TOR), 3rd, 3rd (NYR), 4th, 5th, 7th, 7th (NYI)

What went wrong?



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This happens every season. There's always at least one team that ends the regular season just a few points shy of making the playoffs. From there, it leads to questions about what ultimately was the difference between it going to the postseason versus having an extended summer vacation.

Was it the defensive zone challenges? Was it the inability to consistently score goals? Or was it something else altogether? Those are the questions facing the Blues, a team that was good enough to remain in the wild-card race until the last weekend of the regular season before it fell short of the playoffs.

There's a reason for all of those questions -- whether they were in the offensive or defensive zone. The Blues recorded the fourth-lowest high-danger scoring chances per 60 minutes, the fifth-lowest scoring chances per 60, the sixth-lowest goals per 60 and the 10th-lowest shots per 60, according to Natural Stat Trick. As for their defensive metrics, they allowed the third-most high-danger chances per 60 at 5-on-5, the fourth-most shots per 60 at 5-on-5 and the sixth-most scoring chances per 60 at 5-on-5.

Keys to the offseason:

Is it about the personnel? Is it about the system? Is it about how the personnel adapts to the system or vice versa? These are among the questions the Blues' front office will try to answer knowing they weren't that far out of the playoff mix this season.

One of the details that limited the Blues last offseason was having four defensemen with no-trade clauses and another with a modified no-trade clause. Marco Scandella, who had the modified no-trade clause, is a pending UFA. Getting his deal off the books will give the Blues what Cap Friendly projects to be a little less than \$13 million in cap space to address their needs.

Then there's also the discussion about if they can get a new deal done for Pavel Buchnevich, who was a candidate to get moved ahead of the trade deadline. Buchnevich, who has averaged 0.96 points per game in his three seasons with the club, has one more year and \$5.8 million left on his deal before he hits unrestricted free agency.

Realistic expectations for 2024-25:

After a season where they came close, the Blues are at a crossroads. Whether they get back to the postseason in 2024-25 depends on if they can find consistency with either their offensive zone play, defensive zone play or both. That will aid a goaltending tandem that is eighth in team save percentage in 5-on-5 play. After all, it's not going to get any easier in the Western Conference next season.

ESPN LOADED: 06.25.2024

1316021 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Desperate Panthers grind out first-ever Stanley Cup: 'I wanted to feel it'

Luke Fox

7-9 minutes

SUNRISE, Fla. — Desire alone wasn't enough.

Desire with a splash desperation, however?

Now, there's a recipe.

Turns out, the Florida Panthers needed to be starring headfirst at an elimination-slash-humiliation game of their own to summon the energy and focus necessary to drive the stake into the heart of an Edmonton Oilers club that left it all out there — blood, sweat, and tears.

Yes, as valiantly as the banged-up, rise-from-the-dead, unshakable-belief Oilers battled to bend and extend the 2024 Stanley Cup Final into a seven-game series, to plant a seed of doubt, and drag 'em back to Alberta, these Panthers were simply too deep and too structured, too scarred and too far ahead, to dismantle completely.

Fitting, then, that a team that lost it all in Vegas one year ago, like a tourist who doesn't realize when to leave their ATM card at home, learned from past failure and smartened up at the last minute.

With a clinical 2-1 decision on home ice in Game 7 Monday, the Cats spun a gutting loss into a triumphant victory.

The first and only Stanley Cup in the organization's 30-year history.

Third time's a charm.

"I don't know if I have the words to put it in perspective," said Aaron Ekblad. The second-longest-serving Panther grew up enchanted by those championship runs by Steve Yzerman and Nicklas Lidstrom. Drafted to a middling franchise playing to half-full arenas, the defenceman wondered if the franchise would ever figure out the formula. "Early on, you start to think it's not even possible."

And once the buzzer sounded, how did Ekblad feel?

"(Expletive) rights. We're champions," he said. "Nobody can take that away from us. I can't (expletive) wait for that 20-year reunion with the boys. It's gonna be incredible."

The longest-serving Panther, Aleksander Barkov, is the poster boy for playing hockey The Right Way, which is precisely how Florida grinded this thing out. Ferocious forechecks. No cheating. Dialed-in goaltending. No let-up off the peddle.

"All the guys who were kind of grinding a little bit in this series that were struggling a little bit were good," noted coach Paul Maurice.

That list begins with backbone Sergei Bobrovsky, who stopped 21 of 22 pucks flung his way and suddenly snapped back to Game 1 form.

It was goalie coach Rob Tallas's idea to have Bobrovsky skip practice Sunday and stay away from the rink, something he is loath to do.

"I changed my mindset," Bobrovsky said. "I went home, played with the daughter. She's my motivation. She's my inspiration. Just relax, reset, come for the morning skate, and ready to go."

Their names, along with those of all their teammates', will soon be engraved in immortality alongside heroes past.

That includes unlikely champ and 17-year veteran Kyle Okposo, who'd won a grand total of one playoff round before his services got rented for this magical run.

Okposo, 36, remembers precisely when the Cup cast its spell. The year was 1996.

"The Panthers were a part of it, and my parents let me stay up for [Game 4]," he smiles. "Uwe Krupp scored from the right point in triple overtime. I watched that whole run, and that's when I really fell in love with the game. I had watched and played for a couple years, but during that run is when I truly fell in love with hockey. That was the first time where I saw people lift the trophy.

"I'm eight years old. I don't really know. I can't comprehend the emotions that they're going through. But when you watch people lift it for 27 years, you can get a pretty good sense of what the emotion is like when those men lift that Cup after what they put themselves through to get there."

Late on a Monday night in Sunrise, as the mercifully vindicated Maurice shook the hands of devastated young men wearing the logo of his teenage idols, the 57-year-old's dream was realized in dramatic fashion.

Maurice thought back to December 2022, when the Panthers were out of the playoff picture, and a fed-up fan held up a sign mocking the team slogan at every whistle: TIME TO HUNT... FOR A NEW COACH.

"It'll be at least one more year before that poster comes out — minimum," Maurice quipped.

"I don't feel like I won a Stanley Cup. I feel like I got a piece of one. Because you got a whole Stanley Cup, nobody's coming to your house. You're by yourself. I got a little piece of it. It was good."

It was nearly bad. Unspeakably bad.

Blowing "three match points," as Barkov put it, and placing themselves on the precipice of an all-time choke job, the Cats scrounged one more life.



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In what was the best and tightest game of the series — one heckuva hard-fought finale — the Panthers struck first on an expert tip by Carter Verhaeghe off an Evan Rodrigues shot.

Edmonton's Mattias Janmark, a stud all series, knotted the score less than three minutes later, making no mistake dekeing Bobrovsky on a breakaway.

Sam Reinhart, who had been relatively quiet this final, sniped short-side on a second-period rush chance to reinstall Florida's lead and dish goalie Stuart Skinner his first loss in any Game 4, 5, 6, or 7 all playoffs.

"I haven't had a drink in (expletive) three months," Reinhart said. "I'll drink anything at this point."

Hockey's best third-period team held that lead like a grudge, draining the clock until the gloves flew, the rats rained, and the happiest of hockey hug-a-thons began.

"Amazing," Barkov said. "Like, it's 20,000 people cheering for you, and you get to lift the Cup in front of them. It's the best feeling."

Yes, the Florida Panthers made history and avoided it all at once as the sun set in Sunrise.

The relief, the joy, the elation is all so blinding, Maurice purposely closed his eyes when he hoisted the Cup. Finally.

"I wanted to feel it. I wanted to feel it, because I'll forget a lot of things — who you were looking at, what you're talking about. Just wanted to feel it," Maurice said.

"I've seen that picture a million times. One of my favourite ones is watching Roddy Brind'Amour (in 2006), because I knew his long career. Never missed a workout. Grinded so hard. And it was the Oilers and it was Carolina, my old team, and Jim Rutherford. And then they keep showing that commercial.

"They got the guys and the Stanley Cup, and you're going: What the hell does that feel like? So, I closed my eyes because I wanted to feel it."

And when the coach eventually opened his eyes and understood the feeling?

"The entire team was smiling at me."

Fox's Fast Five

- Barkov is the first Finnish captain to hoist the Stanley Cup.

"Sasha's one guy we all want to be one day," says teammate and protégé and countryman Anton Lundell.

"You grow up watching his highlights. You go to practice, you want to do them the same way he does them. We all have idols. But I have to say, I think he's the biggest idol in Finland."

- Mr. Game Sven? With his sweet first-period deke, Sweden's Janmark joined teammate Corey Perry as the only active NHLers with four goals in Game 7s. He was a beast all series.

- Perry becomes the first player to lose four finals with four different teams over five seasons. A run that may never be broken. (This despite extending the series by scoring the winner in Game 5.)

- Eleven years ago to the day — June 24, 2013 — a 16-year-old Connor McDavid hit send on this tweet:

- My Conn Smythe ballot: 1. Connor McDavid; 2. Aleksander Barkov; 3. Gustav Forsling.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 06.25.2024

1316022 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Oilers fall just short of one final epic comeback

Mark Spector

5–6 minutes

SUNRISE, Fla. — The Edmonton Oilers were a team that overcame everything it encountered, from a 2-9-1 start, to being buried at Thanksgiving, to multiple playoff deficits. They were going to be the '42 Leafs, the only team ever to come back from a 3-0 deficit to win the Stanley Cup.

Finally however, with spring turned to summer, they ran out of gas.

The sun set on these Oilers, ironically, in Sunrise, a 2-1, Game 7 loss to the Florida Panthers.

"We gave it... Everything," said Zach Hyman.

In their sixth elimination game of these playoffs, the magic simply ran out. Neither Conn Smythe Trophy winner Connor McDavid nor Leon Draisaitl could forge a point in Game 7, and a team that gets to three goals more consistently than any team in hockey somehow stalled at one, a Mattias Janmark breakaway goal just 6:44 into the game.

They were disconsolate afterwards, as hockey players are when they play this hard for this long, and watch someone else hoist big Stanley.

"We knew it was going to be tight — Game 7 for the Cup," said McDavid, who did not emerge from the post-game dressing room to accept the Conn Smythe as the playoff MVP. "We knew it was going to come down to one thing here and there.

"We're an inch away from going ahead 2-1, right before they go ahead 2-1. They did a good job of shutting things down. We had our looks."

After losing control of this series starting with that 8-1 shellacking in Game 4, the Panthers reeled this Final back in on their fourth and final kick at the cat Monday. Florida was the better team in Game 7 and the game was played on their terms.

The things we hadn't seen in three games returned, the pinching Panthers defencemen, the blanket defence, and most importantly, goalie Sergei Bobrovsky's game.

"You can analyze it to death if you want to," defenceman Mattias Ekholm said, "but at the end of the night when somebody beats you in a seven-game series they're the better team. Good for them, but we were darn close and we're going to be back next year."

A season that began as "Cup or bust," a declaration made a year ago by both Draisaitl and McDavid, ends somewhere in between.

You can never define a run that went this far as failure. But in the end, it's not the Cup either.

"It's hard to look at it in black and white," said Hyman, whose incredible season ends with 54 regular-season goals and another 16 in the playoffs. "We come a shot away from sending it to overtime. We battle back from 3-0. We battle back from (down) 3-2 in Vancouver. We battle back from being near the basement in November, 10 points out of a playoff spot. So no, I don't think it's a failure."

"It's devastating," he continued. "You go through an entire year, another 25 games in the playoffs, and you've just battled through everything to get the closest you can ever come. I mean, you're one goal away from sending it overtime. It's heartbreaking.

"I'm really proud of everybody for getting to this point, but it's something that's going to always stick with you."

Back in 2006, the Oilers lost a similar Game 7, losing 3-1 with an empty net goal in Carolina. That team was a one-off, however, not the current club that has played nine playoff series over the past three springs.

This was to be Connor McDavid's entrance to hockey's Mount Rushmore, the final, most important trophy to adorn his trophy case. Alas, he was awarded on Monday, but no kid ever played Game 7 on his driveway in hopes of one day winning a Conn Smythe.

"It's an honour with the names on that trophy," was all McDavid would say about being the sixth player from a losing team — and only the second non-goalie — to win the trophy.

"There's no player in the world that wants to win a Stanley Cup more than him. He does everything right, every single day, just to win it one day," Draisaitl said of his captain. "He's the greatest player to ever play, in my books. So many things that a lot of people don't see that he does, his work ethic.



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"He singlehandedly turned our franchise around. Just love sharing the ice with him. He's just a really, really special person."

A year ago these same Panthers were the ones with red eyes, after a five-game Cup Final loss to Vegas. Today, they were the teachers, not the students.

Somehow, just when you think there aren't any more to be learned, this cruel sport metes out one more painful, heart-breaking lesson.

It's crazy to think that after all they accomplished this season, it wasn't enough. That there had to be one more hard knock for the Oilers to endure.

"Just looking at the big picture," mused Ekholm, "what we've been through, the steps that this group has taken, the maturity level, the compete that we put on in the playoffs..."

"Hopefully, this is a huge stepping stone for a group where we can finally do it next year."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 06.25.2024

1316023 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / How Senators' trade for goaltender Linus Ullmark could become a steal

Wayne Scanlan

5-6 minutes

Leave it to the Ottawa Senators to steal a little thunder and lightning from the biggest hockey game in years.

About half an hour before the puck drop of Game 7 between the Edmonton Oilers and Florida Panthers, the Senators announced a trade they believe will be a salve to their glaring goaltending wounds, acquiring Linus Ullmark from the Boston Bruins in exchange for goalie Joonas Korpisalo, fourth line forward Mark Kastelic and a late first-round draft pick in 2024 (Boston's original pick, No. 25 overall).

What a deal.

What a steal. (If there is a new contract to come).

All Ullmark did in the 2022-23 season was win the Vezina Trophy as the NHL's top goaltender.

Ullmark, 30, has one year left in his contract paying him \$5 million per season. He is also due a \$1-million bonus on July 1. The Senators will certainly pitch an extension to Ullmark to try to keep him in Senators colours for years to come.

Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman said during tonight's broadcast that Ullmark will "play it out" as far as anything in writing past this season. That means the Senators will have to impress their new goalie to convince him to stick around.

As part of the trade, Ottawa retains one-quarter of Korpisalo's remaining salary. Korpisalo was signed to a five-year, \$20-million contract by previous general manager Pierre Dorion prior to last season.

To his credit, first-year GM Steve Staios was able to get out from the weight of Korpisalo's contract without having to buy him out. Paying \$1M per year for four years for the sins of his predecessor is more than admirable.

Staios knew he couldn't run back with this season's tandem of Korpisalo and Anton Forsberg.

In Ullmark, he gets a massive upgrade without giving up a key member of his roster.

As noted by NHL stats guru Mike Kelly, Ullmark was fifth in goals saved above expected last season and he was second the year before.

As a team, the Senators finished dead last in goals saved above expected, with Korpisalo and Forsberg getting the bulk of the starts.

In tandem with Jeremy Swayman, his post-game hugging partner, Ullmark carried a 22-10-7 record with a 2.55 goals-against average and .915 save percentage.

Bruins' Ullmark denies Maple Leafs' Robertson with glove save

Korpisalo was 21-26-4 with a 3.27 goals-against and .890 save percentage.

It needs to be said that in 2023-24, the Bruins were one of the league's better defensive teams while the Senators were one of the worst.

So, Staios will need to bolster more than the blue paint – but also the blueline in front of it.

Consider this move the first salvo in an off-season devoted to retooling the roster from the crease out.

Ullmark is more than just a good goalie off recent career form.

In six of his seven full NHL seasons, Ullmark has a save percentage of .910 or better.

In nine seasons, Korpisalo only reached the .910 mark three times.

As well as being technically sound, Ullmark is known for his easygoing nature and ability to stay even-keeled, a trait that served Craig Anderson well when he was Ottawa's mainstay from 2010 to 2020.

Last spring, after causing a turnover behind his net that led to Florida's overtime winner against the Bruins in Game 5 of their first-round series, Ullmark shrugged off the mistake by invoking Ted Lasso.

"You just have to have the mind of a goldfish," Ullmark said, paraphrasing a Lasso quote from the famous TV series.

Unfortunately for the Bruins, they were unable to shake off the Panthers in that first-round series and they again fell short this season, dropping a second-round series to Florida after beating the Toronto Maple Leafs in the opening round.

The Bruins generally alternated their two goalies, but after Ullmark lost Game 2 of that Toronto series the B's leaned on Swayman the rest of the way.

Those series losses these past two springs pretty much cinched the fact that the Bruins were going to have to do away with the luxury of their top-flight goalie tandem, with Swayman inheriting the No. 1 position.

At season's end, Ullmark repeated what he said at the trade deadline — that he wished to remain a Bruin for at least as long as his contract.

Over time, he came to see the inevitability of moving on. And was clearly impressed by the notion of what the Senators have going on, signing off on this deal, waiving his no-trade clause for Ottawa.

If and when the Sens get him to sign off on a new contract, they will really be in business.

The Athletic has already weighed in with marks for this trade.

The Times assigned Boston a C. And Ottawa an A.

Of course, the marks that count are the grades that come off game action.

And that will not happen for a few months yet.

In the meantime, Senators fans took time away from Game 7 to express their delight over this deal on social media.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 06.25.2024

1316024 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Scout's Analysis: What could Jets get in Rutger McGroarty trade?

Jason Bukala

4-5 minutes



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Rutger McGroarty was the Winnipeg Jets' first-round pick in the 2022 NHL Draft in Montreal. (Ryan Remiorz/CP)

As we enter NHL draft week, followed closely thereafter by free agency on July 1, there is a lot of noise surrounding Winnipeg Jets prospect Rutger McGroarty.

"I'm gonna be really careful here because there are a lot of answers I don't have. His family advisor is not talking and the Jets are not talking but the one thing I can tell you is that I have heard his name has come up in trade discussions," Elliotte Friedman said about McGroarty on the 32 Thoughts podcast Saturday.

"The Jets have discussed trading and other teams have discussed acquiring McGroarty's rights...And again, I'm not gonna guess on anything here, but I'm simply going to say that I've heard his name has come up in trade conversations. So we'll see where this all goes over the next couple of weeks. He's a good player and he would be coveted."

As I run around trying to get organized for my early morning flight to Vegas on Monday, I wanted to drop a quick analysis on what I believe McGroarty's value is in relation to the current draft class. I also feel it's important to provide an example of what I would be looking for in return if I were trading McGroarty to another team.

### THE CUTTER GAUTHIER COMPARISON

Assuming the Jets are taking calls on McGroarty, the immediate comparison to draw upon is the situation the Philadelphia Flyers found themselves in with top prospect Cutter Gauthier.

Gauthier was selected fifth overall in 2022. He and the Flyers had some sort of falling out and Philly decided to move him to the Anaheim Ducks for defenceman Jamie Drysdale and a second-round pick in 2025.

The Jets selected McGroarty 14th overall in the same draft.

Here's how both prospect's stats compare over the course of two seasons since they were drafted:

#### PLAYER

#### REGULAR SEASON NCAA

2023 and 2024 WJC

#### WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

Cutter Gauthier

73GP-54G-48A

14GP-6G-16A

10GP-7G-2A

Rutger McGroarty

75GP-34G-57A

14GP-6G-10A

N/A

On balance there are certainly some similarities between the two players statistically.

They both played top-six roles for their college teams and contributed to Team USA's success at the World Juniors. McGroarty doesn't skate as well as Gauthier, but he extends more plays out front of the net and has shown he can be used in a variety of roles, including the penalty kill.

Gauthier leans natural shooter more than playmaker. His skating is consistently better than McGroarty as well, although McGroarty's agility has definitely improved over the course of two seasons.

#### TRADE VALUE

I'm comfortable trading McGroarty for one of the following players on my 2024 draft list:

- Sam Dickinson
- Beckett Sennecke
- Jett Luchanko

• Carter Yakemchuk

• Konsta Helenius

Since the Jets have invested two years of development in McGroarty and he might end up in the NHL next season, I would also ask for a third-round pick in 2025, a middle-six forward prospect, or a mid-range defence prospect.

Since I have roughly five attainable names on my draft list that I'm really comfortable acquiring in a trade for McGroarty, I'd wait to make the deal on the draft floor. I need to see how my list is falling into place before making the call.

I would make McGroarty available to New Jersey (10), Buffalo (11), Philadelphia (12), Minnesota (13) and San Jose (14), knowing full well that the Flyers are very likely to pass on the player given their recent experience with Gauthier. In my opinion, any pick after San Jose at 14 provides more risk of diminishing return from this draft class. If a deal can't be made, the Jets can wait until next season and have McGroarty return to school for another year to find a more appropriate trade.

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1316025 Websites

TSN.CA / Top defensive prospect Yakemchuk brings skill, sandpaper to NHL draft

Mark Masters

9–12 minutes

While growing up in Calgary, Carter Yakemchuk cheered for the Edmonton Oilers.

"My family's from Fort McMurray, which is in northern Alberta," the Calgary Hitmen defenceman explained. "Both my parents were Oilers fans growing up and I just kind of followed along."

His favourite fan moment growing up?

"When they got Connor McDavid," the 18-year-old said without missing a beat. "That was pretty awesome for the Oilers."

It still is. McDavid has led Edmonton to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final and, despite being on the verge of joining the NHL himself as a projected first-round draft pick, Yakemchuk is still "definitely cheering" for the Oilers.

"It's super cool," he said. "My whole family are pretty big Oilers fans, so they're all getting excited for the Stanley Cup."

Yakemchuk will be in Las Vegas, site of the draft, on Monday night when the final game of the NHL season is finally played. There's no shortage of places to go on the strip, but Yakemchuk is looking for a quiet spot to watch what he believes will be an historic moment.

"I think the Oilers are going to take it," he said confidently.

In fact, Yakemchuk is predicting a 4-2 win with McDavid, who else, netting the game-winning goal. He'll also be keeping a close on Oilers defenceman Evan Bouchard, who he considers his NHL role model.

"I like the way he carries himself in the offensive zone," Yakemchuk notes. "The plays he makes in the O-zone and being able to find his open teammates all the time. He's got great vision from the top with the way he distributes the puck, and then, obviously, his shot is also really good."

Despite that amazing shot, dubbed the "Bouch Bomb," Bouchard never scored 30 goals in his junior career with the London Knights. He topped out at 25 in the 2017-18 season.

Whatever happens in south Florida on Monday night, it will be an exciting start to an exciting week for Yakemchuk, which will culminate on Friday at the Sphere when the first round of the draft is held.

During a conversation with TSN, Yakemchuk chose to highlight his defensive improvements and explained how he piled up 120 penalty



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 25, 2024

minutes. The right-handed blueliner also revealed why he feels his interview with his hometown Flames went well at the scouting combine.

The following is an edited transcript of the interview.

TSN: You're used to cheering for McDavid but, as a defenceman, what would be your approach if you had to try and stop him?

Yakemchuk: Ah, probably just try and stay in the middle and not let him get to the middle, that'd probably be the biggest thing.

TSN: I don't know if anyone has an answer to that right now.

Yakemchuk: Yeah, no idea what I'd do.

TSN: What are you most proud of when it comes to your season?

TSN: You are the first 18-year-old defenceman to score 30 goals in the WHL this century. When did you start thinking it was possible?

Yakemchuk: Closer to the end of the season when I started getting closer. I didn't think from the start I was going to reach that goal, but closer to the end some of the guys were just like, "You're three away from 30, try and get it."

TSN: What were you thinking going into the last game?

Yakemchuk: Well, for our team it kind of sucked. We lost out on the playoffs before the game, so we didn't have much to play for, but I tried to get one and got a bounce. Lots of the guys were pretty pumped up for me, so it was great.

TSN: Where did your game improve the most this season?

Yakemchuk: My defensive side of the game took a big step this year. That was the focus for me coming into the season and I think that was something I improved on throughout the year. I think just with better positioning in the D-zone, being able to find my guys better, like, staying on my guys, staying on top of them and not making it easy to play against me.

TSN: How did you improve?

Yakemchuk: It was lots of video on positioning. Also, my coaches kept telling me to play harder and use my body to my advantage and play hard in the D-zone.

TSN: Considering the 120 penalty minutes this season, it doesn't seem like it was very easy to play against you. You only had 31 penalty minutes the previous season. What got into you?

Yakemchuk: I don't know. There were a couple fights, and then sometimes the emotions ran pretty high, and I took a penalty. But, yeah, it was quite a few.

TSN: Do you take pride in that or is it something you need to get under control?

Yakemchuk: A little bit of both. Gotta rein it in, definitely, for sure. There are probably some undisciplined ones. But I'd say I play the game pretty hard and sometimes it just happens, and you take a penalty.

TSN: You had 16 roughing minors. Where does your grit come from?

Yakemchuk: My dad. He used to play in the junior A league in Alberta and he was a fighter, so I probably get it from him.

TSN: What feedback did you get from him this season?

Yakemchuk: He was telling me not to fight. He didn't want me to do that, but when it happened I don't think he was too mad about it, though.

TSN: You had five fights this season. How comfortable are you when the gloves come off?

Yakemchuk: It's not something I look for in a game, but if it happens I'm not going to shy away from that side. Yeah, if it happens it happens.

TSN: What's the best advice you got from your dad on fighting?

Yakemchuk: [To] protect myself. That was his biggest thing. 'Don't try to start swinging like crazy or else you'll take one on the chin.'

TSN: We talked about your defensive play, penalty minutes and fighting, but the offensive side really stands out. You put up 71 points in 66 games. Where does your creativity come from?

Yakemchuk: It's kind of just something I've always had in my game. I'm not afraid to make some plays in the offensive zone.

TSN: What goal that you scored this season had the greatest degree of difficulty?

Yakemchuk: There was one in Regina where I took it off the wall, I was pretty far out and I took a backhand, and I didn't think it was going to go in and it ended up sneaking in. Happy with that one. I just threw it on net and, honestly, I didn't think it was going to go in. I was so far away. I think the goalie was screened a bit.

TSN: What are you focused on improving this summer?

Yakemchuk: My skating. That's something that I've really been trying to work on, and I'll keep it going throughout the summer. I want to get lower in my stride. I think that's one thing. And then, overall, just increase the power in my legs to get faster.

TSN: You're 6-foot-3, 200 pounds already. Are you still figuring out how to maximize your size?

Yakemchuk: My growth has been kind of steady throughout everything. I don't think there was a major growth spurt I had to work with. So, I'm lucky that I just gradually got taller.

TSN: Are you still growing?

Yakemchuk: I think I definitely can get a little bit taller.

TSN: Teams must've liked hearing that at the combine.

Yakemchuk: Yeah.

TSN: You came in No. 12 on Bob McKenzie's latest consensus ranking of top prospects, but you also got a couple votes from scouts in the top five. Any sense when you'll get picked?

Yakemchuk: I'm not too sure. Whatever happens on the day of the draft will be awesome.

TSN: With the Flames at No. 9, have you thought about what it would be like to get picked by your hometown team?

Yakemchuk: All my friends are Flames fans, so that would be pretty cool.

TSN: How did the interview with the Flames go at the combine?

Yakemchuk: It went really well. One of my Hitmen mental [coaches] Matt Brown was in there and it made me more comfortable. I thought it went really well. He works on the mental side of the game for the Hitmen and Flames. I didn't know he would be there, so it was kind of nice to see a familiar face in the interview.

TSN: How would you describe your personality off the ice?

Yakemchuk: More of a quieter or shy kid. It takes me a little bit to break into my comfort zone, but once I get comfortable I'm a pretty outgoing person.

TSN: Considering that, what was it like at the combine when you had 23 interviews in just a few days?

Yakemchuk: It was pretty nerve-racking, pretty stressful, but all of them went pretty well so I was pretty happy with it.

TSN: What was the toughest question?

Yakemchuk: Colorado asked how I would beat Cale Makar 1-on-1 and how I would defend Nathan MacKinnon.

TSN: What did you say? First on MacKinnon.

Yakemchuk: It would probably be the same as McDavid, I wouldn't really know how, so just try and stay in the middle and hope that works the best. I said on Makar, I would try to keep the puck away from him and take it wide on him.

TSN: The NHL gives prospects the option of selecting a walk-up song for when they get drafted. What did you pick?

Yakemchuk: Ah, I forget what song I picked. I'm a country fan, but I filled it out with a guy from my team and he gave me some ideas. I forget which one I put on there. Hopefully it's good.

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# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • June 25, 2024

1316026 Websites

TSN.CA / History is decisively on the side of the Oilers

Travis Yost

4-5 minutes

What's the one pre-game statistic that may provide comfort for nervous Edmonton Oilers fans as their team enters Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final?

Goal differential.

The series has been wild, and it is perfectly fitting this matchup will be decided by way of a Game 7.

The first half of the series, save for some stretches of Game 1, was dominated by the Florida Panthers. The second half of the series – hallmarked by a ferocious Edmonton rally, winning three consecutive games to force the series the distance – has been all Oilers, all the time.

But though the series appears to be a dead heat on the surface, just about every game has been a lopsided affair in one direction or another.

Six games in, Edmonton has outscored Florida 22-16, carrying an average margin of victory of 1.0 goals per game. That's what happens when you win games in blowout fashion, and although fans can be quick to write off such decisive single-game outcomes, degree of dominance matters.

It wasn't a week ago people were ready to write off Edmonton's 8-1 victory in Game 4 as little more than a desperate team staving off elimination. Just two games later, the Oilers pulled off another commanding victory, winning by four and sending the series back to Sunrise, Fla.

With the series deadlocked three despite the lopsided goal differential, it made me curious if there were any other modern-era comparables and what the likelihood is of a team hoisting the Stanley Cup despite being outscored over the basis of the series

The below table shows every Stanley Cup Final since the 2007-08 series. It goes without saying most of the teams who won the title outscored their opponent over the series (no surprise there), with only two outliers: the 2008-09 Pittsburgh Penguins, and the 2018-2019 St. Louis Blues.

A few thoughts as it relates to this year's matchup and the Oilers, in no particular order:

Edmonton's goal differential in the series (and associated margin of victory) is in line with most teams who ended up winning the title in about five or six games. Notably, the one significant outlier here would be the 2010-11 Boston Bruins, who had to fight through a lengthy series against the Vancouver Canucks despite blitzing them on a nightly basis. It's a good comparable to this series in some respect: Vancouver's wins were on razor-thin margins (1-0; 3-2; 1-0); Boston's wins were always of the multi-goal variety, ending in a Game 7 win.

The 2008-09 Pittsburgh Penguins defeated the Detroit Red Wings while being outscored 17-14 over the course of the series. How did that happen? In Detroit's four losses, the team mustered less than five per cent shooting against the venerable Marc-Andre Fleury.

The 2018-19 St. Louis Blues defeated the Bruins while being outscored 22-18 over the course of the series. How did that happen? By way of a hideous Game 7, in which then-head coach Bruce Cassidy's team managed to implode on both sides of the ice – Tuukka Rask stopping just 16 of 20 shots, and Bruins forwards shooting zero (yes, zero) per cent in the decisive game.

So yes, there's some degree of precedent for teams outplayed over the course of the series finding a way to win.

And in defence of Florida, this has been a tale of two series for them in particular. Games one through three looked very much like the team that steamrolled the Eastern Conference all year, while games four through

six looked a lot more like the team that was rinsed by the Vegas Golden Knights in last year's Stanley Cup Final.

That said, history is decisively on Edmonton's side here. It is awfully difficult to play as well as Edmonton has over the course of this series and lose. Kris Knoblauch's team needs to execute for all 60 minutes if they want to end their 32-year championship drought.

As for my prediction, it remains the same: Oilers in six. Or six-ish!

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